

Running Shoes

*The
Shades
Of
Northwood*



WENDY
MADDOCKS

THE SHADES OF NORTHWOOD 1: RUNNING SHOES

Wendy Maddocks

©2011 by Wendy Maddocks

OBOOKO EDITION

This is a legally distributed free edition from www.obooko.com

Although you do not have to pay for this e-book, the author's intellectual property rights remain fully protected by international Copyright law. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only: it must not be redistributed commercially or offered for sale in any form. We have no affiliation with any other e-book distributors neither do we 'post' books on other websites. If you paid for this edition, or to gain access to it, you have been swindled. We suggest you demand an immediate refund.

CHAPTER ONE

“Giving birth to you was definitely easier than this... and that took 24 hours.”

”Great way to make me feel special, Mom.”

“Oh honey, I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant – “

“It’s okay,” Katie grinned. She held the lid of one box down while her mother suffocated it with parcel tape. “I’m shattered too.” There were piles of boxes filling her bedroom. She stood up and put her hands to her aching lower back. “My back’s killing me. Must be my age catching up with me.”

“You’ll live. I don’t think I can even get up.”

Katie stretched out a hand and pulled her mother up. They put the box on one of the piles and sat down on her bed.

They had both been huddled in this room for the entire weekend boxing up Katie’s entire life so far. 16 and a half years. A handful of clothes were still somewhere in the washing cycle but everything else was neatly packed away in the boxes had finished and randomly thrown into the ones she had done. But everything had been labelled –books – papers – makeup and hair – computer stuff. Both of them looked around without a word. Almost everything was packed away now but Katie had a feeling she would be working into the night unravelling her jumble of jewellery and ironing those last few clothes. Also, there was a final check to make sure she hadn’t left anything important behind.

“I can’t believe how much junk I had.” Three or four black bags peeked around the poster covered door. “And I never even knew I had half of it.”

“We always made you tidy your room but I guess we never made sure you actually threw anything out.”

Katie rolled her eyes and let herself fall back on the bed. It was quite late in the evening and it was all she could do not to just curl up and close her eyes. The alarm had gone off at eight this morning although, after spending the day in this stuffy, little room and in the sticky heat of high summer, the day felt like it had been much longer. The windows had been open all day and a fan had been whirring away on full. But Katie had no intention of complaining – The oh-so-predictable British weather would likely be raining again by the end of the week.

“Tea’s ready!” a voice shouted up the stairs. “Well, in about ten minutes.”

“Thanks Dad!” Hunger had started biting at Katie as soon as tea was mentioned. “No more Dad making tea at the weekend.”

“We’ll visit when you tell us you’re settled. We can make your tea then.”

“I’m going to have to learn how to cook.” Katie jumped off her bed and tore through the open book boxes by the window. “I don’t know how to cook. What am I going to eat?”

“Katie, love. You’ve been helping me cook since you started school. I don’t think you’ll starve.” The older woman got up too and left the room. A door down the hall squeaked.

A setting sun washed the room in an orangey haze. The moon was already shining brightly, just waiting for the sun to go down so it could be the best thing about the night. Katie stood at the window and looked straight in front. If she angled her head up just the right amount, the houses opposite looked like they were miles away rather than just across the road and the park across the road filled her view. Never again would she have this view. Not that she would miss it that much now that a car park had cut through half of it. But still... it was the park she ran through every day and where Dad had taught her to ride a bike. With a sigh, Katie closed the window and grabbed her pumps.

“Brought you something.”

A hand brandished a cookbook under her nose. A student cookbook that looked like it had never been opened.

Katie left her laces undone as she took the book and flicked through it. Half of it was simple food involving pasta, sausage or some kind of casserole. Some were five minute recipes and a handful were desserts or dinner party food. “Thanks Mom.” She hugged her mother.

“Stop that or you’ll make me cry.”

“I know. I’m nearly there too.”

Katie took the book and dropped into a box and taped it shut with a half-laugh. “I’ll put the fire station on standby when I get there.”

“Do your laces before you break your neck and then we can’t rent your room out.”

Katie tied her pumps with fingers so practised she did not need to watch herself then followed the other woman down the bare, wooden stairs. Dad was still banging around in the kitchen so they sat at the table and watched him make a mess. Tea on Sunday was only sandwiches and maybe a slice of quiche but today Dad was making an effort. Sandwiches had been replaced by rolls, quiche by pizza and he had bought a cake too.

“Dan!” Katie shouted. Her little sister came running in and plopped down in the seat next to her. “What are you wearing?” It used to be a yellow sun dress but Dan liked to play in

the mud so it was now a mostly brown smock. “Dad, Mom, you didn’t need to do this. We went out last night so I’m all partied out.”

“This isn’t a party ‘cos there aren’t any people.”

“This is an indoor party.”

“Still, I’d rather just have a last normal, family night tonight.”

“Oh, honey, we just couldn’t help but give you a tiny celebration. A last night just doing ordinary things wouldn’t have been very special.”

“I know. It just makes it harder.” Katie glared at her sister who was trying to steal the mushrooms off her pizza slice. “Dan, pack it in.” The younger girl shrank away from her and Katie was just as surprised as her sister when they both started hugging each other. “It takes me moving out to realise I quite like you, titch. Usually.”

Their parents looked at each other. The two girls did love each other, they could see that, but not even a Nazi interrogation would otherwise get them to admit it. Their father opened the cupboard under the sink and brought out a case of fizzy pop. He opened the case and passed cans out. Katie broke hers open and drained half of it in one go. “So, when me and Mom were dying of thirst up there you never thought to bring these up. Nice.”

He nodded at the basket of clothes in the corner – some crumpled and some freshly ironed.

“Cool. Sleep for me tonight.”

“Katie?” Dan asked. “When you go away will it be forever?”

“I hope not.”

“So, can I have your room if you go for a long time? It’s bigger than mine.”

Mom touched the smaller girls’ hand. “Katie will come back to visit sometimes and she’ll need her own bed to sleep in. So, no, you can’t have her room. Besides, yours is just as big. It’s just a different shape.”

Katie went to the drawer and got out a sharp knife. “Cake?”

Everyone wanted some. When all four of them had a slice of the sponge cake with orange chocolate icing and strawberry cream, and were sat in the front room with the TV chattering away in the corner, Dan opened the drawer in the coffee table and took something out. She was always squirreling things away in every conceivable hiding place so no-one paid any attention. She slid to the floor and crawled over to her parents on the little two-seater settee. “Can we give it to her now?”

“Okay.”

“Remember what we said earlier. Don’t go over the top.”

“Katie. We made this for you.”

It was a red leather photo album with three quarters of the spaces filled in with pictures of Mom and Dad when they were expecting Katie, all her school photos, some from birthdays and Christmases, and a few holidays. Every single one of them brought back such strong and wonderful memories that Katie had trouble not crying. “It’s really pretty.” And it was. Red glitter sparkled at the edges of the cover and gold glitter speckled every page.

“I chose and decorated the album and Mom and Dad chose the pictures. Oh, this was meant to go on to but it kept falling off.” Dan reached back into the drawer and brought out a string of pastelly seashells. They were still curled into the loose spiral they had been meant to be fastened in.

“I’ll keep it safe always. Why are there blank spaces?”

“Because you still have a lot of life left to live.”

Dad could be surprisingly sweet at times.

“I’m going for a walk in the park.” Katie got up and gave all of her family a quick kiss then headed for the front door. There was someone’s hairbrush on the bottom stair which she dragged through her long hair and tied it up in a ponytail, not bothered that it was dirty and straggling everywhere. Then she slung her baseball jacket over her arm, matching cap over the worst of her hair and jogged out the front door. The door swung closed behind her. The evening was not quite dark but the disappearance of the sun had dropped the temperature a few degrees – enough for there to be a chill in the air but not enough to cool Katie enough to put her jacket on. She turned left at the end of her road and headed for the row of shops opposite. There were two newsagents, a betting shop and a local hair salon that had given her that dreaded first haircut at age three. Until then, Mom had trimmed it every few weeks. Katie was glad that the salon was closed for the weekend because Antoine would probably have some kind of seizure if he saw her hair in the state it was in. Behind the shops was a block of flats – commonly known as Heroin Heights due to the fact the local council had set up a rehab group for addicts there. Katie was just glad they had decided to try and help people with their problems rather than just ignore them. Who really cared if they were on the same estate? Next to the block of flats was a small residents car park and lock ups. The good cars usually went into the garages and the beaten up or barely running bangers were left in the car park. Coming through here to get to the park was not high on the list of things Katie would miss but then she couldn’t quite get her head around not doing this again for a very long time. If ever.

Katie jumped the low wall that separated the building from the street and from there walked right up to the park gates. They were half open and she walked in.

Running from one end of the park to the tea rooms a few hundred metres away were low stone bollards. Katie stepped up onto the first one and began hopping the foot or so between each one. About 3 years ago, Dan had lost her balance and fallen off the third post from the end, hitting the ground badly and spraining her ankle. That was a fun Easter Sunday spent in the hospital. Dad had been beside himself with worry in case the X-rays showed a fracture or worse. Katie just remembered being a bit annoyed that they weren't going to be home in time to watch Mary Poppins and a bit bewildered. She'd never been inside a hospital before and only once since.

Thinking about that, Katie dropped from the bollards and decided to go to the tea rooms. It was closed but a woman near the door offered to get her a cold drink and a snack before she locked up for the night.

"What'll be dear?"

"Are you sure? I thought it was against the rules to serve after hours."

"Well, it's a bit naughty but I can't see the harm in a drink and some sweets."

"Orange juice, crisps and a Twix. Or whatever you have."

The older lady scurried away into the building. "Won't be long. I know there's some bits around here some place. Now where'd that stupid boy put the juices?"

"Don't worry if you can't find it."

"No, it's here. I know it." A minute later, a fuzzy grey head backed out of the yellow building and turned to show the kind old woman holding a plastic tray of snacks for Katie. "I put a pack of mints on for you. I always like to have sucky sweets handy in case the urge takes me."

"How much do I owe you?" Katie reached for her wallet.

"Come back tomorrow and we'll settle up then."

"I'm leaving the city tomorrow. I'd hate to go without a clear deck."

"What's a sweet young girl like you doing leaving the city? Moving house I suppose."

The old woman – there were tiny pin holes in her jumper where a name tag had once rested but had obviously been taken off for the night. "Parents always take children away from here. Too much pollution – asthma and allergies. Nonsense, it is."

"I'm moving on my own actually."

"All the more reason not to take your money then. I never rang it up." She leaned in as though she were sharing a great secret. "No-one will ever know."

Katie dug in her wallet and pressed a handful of loose change into the woman's hand.

"Give it to charity then. I'd just go away feeling as though I had a debt to pay." Katie moved to

a seat and put her tray down while she tried to work the zips on the jacket pockets. Dan had gunked them up with God-knows-what again. “Little sisters. Glitter glue.”

“So I see. My own younger sister used to steal my clothes. Of course, they were my big sisters before mine.”

“Yeah, we learned about hand me down culture in history. But it turned out some nice people like you.”

“I’m glad you think so. Well, my kitty won’t wait forever for his dinner so I’ll be off. I treated him to fresh salmon tonight.” She shrugged her handbag into the bend of her elbow and tottered off towards the gate. And then she was gone.

Katie sat and swirled her straw around the clear plastic cup, picking at her crisps, and thinking about what the old lady had said to her a few minutes ago. What actually *was* she doing leaving home at 16? Apart from a week long family holiday every couple of years and some school trips, she had never really left the city. And now she was going to try to make it alone in some town she’d never heard of before. No, this was not the time to get nostalgic and needy. Katie had been looking forward to this change for months and she was going to make the most of it. Of course there were going to be times when she felt homesick... but she would get over that. Just like she would soon forget this night. Her last night at home.

“Don’t you start crying. I’m no good with crying girls.”

“Huh? I’m not crying.” Katie looked up to see a boy – well, maybe a young man, it was hard to tell in the deepening dark. “Who are you?”

“You’re about to cry. I know the signs.”

The newcomer had bright green eyes – Katie could tell that because the moonlight bounced off them and made them shine – so big and round she might have played marbles with them. He sat down before she could see what he was wearing but there was a creak when he moved like leather that hadn’t been fully broken in. A cowboy had dangled from a string over his wrist and he rested his hat on the table and folded his arms on top. “Now you’re starin’ at me. I think I’m uncomfortable with this too.”

“I’m not staring. At least, I don’t mean to be.” The boy just came up and spoke to her without ever seeing her before so Katie reasoned she had good reason to stare. She told him as much.

“I just saw you here and I felt like I wanted to talk to you. Boys get lonely too.”

“I know.” Boy, did she. “You know it’s junkie central round the corner?”

“I can handle myself but you’re just a kid. Why are you here?”

“I’m saying nothing until you tell me who you are and why you’re talking to me.”

The reasons for talking to this girl were many, so many he couldn't think of one.

"Let's keep our secrets secret, okay?" Katie glanced at the boy and nearly swore. It was the eyes. They begged her to look deep into them and tell him everything she refused to admit to even herself. She swung her arms into her jacket, picked her chocolate off the tray and wandered away from the table, leaving her rubbish on the table. A few yards away, she risked a peek back to see if the boy had gotten bored and disappeared but no such luck. He was watching her walk away and making no move to empty her tray into the nearest bin. Maybe she shouldn't have left it – littering was a bit of a pet hate – but she wanted to see what he would do. Katie faced forward to step over a flower bed and when she turned back, the table was empty and he was standing by the bin. Then he started moving slowly towards her. It almost looked as though he was gliding but she could hear, if not see, every footstep. So she started walking forwards. The footsteps kept coming. Walk a bit faster. The steps sped up just a fraction... then a fraction more. Katie turned and started walking backwards, looking behind her every few steps to make sure there was nothing to fall over but never taking more than one eye off the person following her. She didn't like the way he was chasing after her – matching her step for step, copying every minute turn and waver in direction. It was almost as though he were tailgating her. The thought made her turn around again, walk faster and faster, stopping every so often just to see if he would, and then break into a run. She was a good runner and had run cross country for the city but this required sprinting which she was no better at than the average person. Her legs got in a muddle as she heaved herself to the top of the hill overlooking the city below and she fell to the ground hard.

"Bollocks." Katie yelped when she tried to move her legs back into a rising position. She was propped up on her elbows and breathing hard – more panicked than breathless. The man was still coming towards her but slowly now. Evidently, having a girl lying helpless in a deserted park was not exciting enough to hurry himself but he still seemed determined to get to her. Katie even tried to use her arms to scramble away from him. Not that that got her far.

He seemed to be enjoying watching her struggle. Then he was standing right in front of her so Katie did the only thing she could think of. She laughed in his face.

Screaming would do no good because there was no-one close enough to hear – not counting the ducks on the lake. Why she laughed – no idea. It just seemed like the only thing she wanted to do. And suddenly, the green-eyed boy was crumpled on the grass beside her giggling like a loon.

"Why are we laughing?" he managed to get out between fits of laughter. Which only made Katie laugh harder. Maybe it was because she had no answer to his question. Fear and

shrieking was the appropriate thing to do but right now, she didn't feel frightened or even alarmed. She felt like she was giggling over something stupid with a boy she met in the park. She took several deep breaths to stop laughing – the longer she giggled, the harder it would be to stop any time soon. Plus, she was getting a painful stitch. At least she was not on the verge of tears any more. Well she was but these felt like happy tears.

The boy glanced over at the lake and, all in a moment, his laughter dried up. "Why did you run?"

Katie shrugged. The reasoning she'd held when he started following her seemed all a bit too far away. "Habit."

"Sensible habit to have"

"When there's a strange guy following you, you run."

"I heard you talking to that woman. Why are you leaving?"

"You ask a lot of questions for some-one who hasn't even told me his name."

"Jack. Why are you leaving?"

"Don't do well with small talk either, do you?" Katie stretched her legs out and worked her ankle. It was not painful as such. Just a bit sore. Maybe a bruise would start coming out in the morning. "So many reasons. I was –" a tiny voice in the back of her mind reminded her that spilling everything to Jack was a bad idea but she decided to just talk over it. She wanted to tell him why she was leaving. After all, there was no-one else she could, or wanted to, tell. But only the stuff she wanted him to know. Some stuff Katie wasn't ready to say out loud yet. "I was offered a place at some academy because some bloke saw me run. So I'm moving to this town I've never heard of with a group of students at the college."

"You seem quite calm about it."

"I'm happy. It'll give me freedom and I really need to get out of this place. But I'm scared." Leaving her family behind was a massive step. It had to happen sooner or later though. "I want to go. I really do and I'm really looking forward to going away and being a grown woman instead of somebody's kid. A few months ago when I decided to go, there was an age of summer to get ready and then it came on all of a sudden."

"Won't they keep your place for a few weeks until you've had more time to prepare? Return library books and say goodbye to your friends."

"I don't have friends. I hang out with people from school but I can't say I'll miss any of them when I go." Katie got up and bounced on the balls of her feet, mentally plotting a circuit around the open areas of the park which would bring her back to the gates. "I'm going to walk this off before my ankle seizes up." She limped down the mound towards the lake and was

walking normally by the time she reached the waters edge. She was suddenly aware of Jack walking a few steps behind her. The shadow on the ground showed only Katie's stretching off behind but as Jack was behind her too, she couldn't see him without looking back. And that would have informed him that she wanted him to follow.

"You've got me. I'll be your friend."

Katie stopped and let him catch up to her. "You just met me." Those eyes though... there was honesty in them and Katie found herself believing him. "And that means I'll have to say goodbye to you."

"Is that so bad? There'll be at least one person who'll miss you. It's one more than you had before." Jack shrugged.

"Tomorrow morning, my dad takes me to my new house and then I'm on my own. My own cooking and cleaning and paying all my own bills. My parents will help me out until I'm eighteen and then I guess I'll try and get a job. I'm trying to think of it as an adventure but it's a damn scary one."

"I know. When people have taken care of you all your life and then *bam*, you've only got yourself to rely on. But I know you'll do fine out there."

And she believed that too.

"You ran from me – even when you hurt your ankle. You barely spoke to me until you knew my name. Engaging somebody in conversation, knowing their identity, trying to distract them by being beautiful." Katie raised her hand to her bumpy hairstyle and ran her fingers through the ends. "Yes, even though. It's clever, minimises the risk of an attack."

"It's getting late. I should go home."

"Where's home?"

Katie jerked her thumb towards her house. "Just over the road. As long as I'm back soon, we can still hang out."

They carried on walking for a few more minutes, watching the sky get darker and darker. Although Jack was closer to the lake than she was, Katie could almost feel him watching her. It made her want to say something just to fill up the silence. Having no more she wanted to say posed a problem. Stopping for a second and turning her head, Katie found herself looking straight into huge green eyes that nearly swallowed her up. She suddenly felt a flush rise up on her face and she felt quite warm even though the night had cooled her to the point of being chilled. It was horribly embarrassing to be caught staring at someone with no words or reason for gawping. But wait – hadn't Jack been doing the same thing?

"This is... yeah, I'm humiliated."

“Don’t feel bad, Katie.” Jack started walking again. Katie started watching his cowboy hat swing from his arm. Then her eyes dipped to his gorgeous backside. “Snap out of it, girl. You’re never gonna see him again.” She slapped herself lightly and then jogged up beside him.

The tiniest grin crept onto his face. “Stare away. I’m going to.”

“You’re not some weird stalker type are you?”

“I’m only here for the night and you’re leaving tomorrow. You might never see me again so let’s just have a nice, friendly walk.”

“A midnight stroll with a stranger. What could be safer?” Only she did feel safe. They had reached the gates – had they circled the park already? “This is my stop.”

“I’d like to walk you home.”

“It’s not far.” Nothing would happen to her tonight, or nothing that she really feared. Besides, when Jack took her hand with a grip so air-light he was barely touching her, she knew he was taking her home and that he would even chase the shadows away if they scared her.

“I insist.”

CHAPTER TWO

Although Katie had been so bone tired a few hours ago that she could have easily fallen asleep standing up, it was impossible to sleep. The walk in the fresh air must have woken her up a little – cleared the cobwebs, Mom liked to say. Her parents had gone to bed a few minutes ago, she could hear her father cleaning his teeth, and Dan had been in bed for over an hour when she got home. After another minute, faint light from the bathroom blinked out, footsteps clunked across and a door clicked shut. And everything was silent.

Nervous energy buzzed around inside of Katie like a tiny pinball of electricity. It was probably excitement about the move in the morning. The light up dial on her watch – even the digital clock had found its way into a box – told her it was just a couple of minutes shy of midnight. She had not gotten home until ten and the obligatory round of tears and ‘are you sure you’ll be okay?’s had put her appointment with bed back another hour.

The bed she slept in was wrenched away from the wall so her skeletal-looking furniture could be stacked against it. Somehow though, maybe it was being in the middle of the room, maybe it was because the dolphin duvet cover and seascape sheets had been stripped off, but it didn’t feel comfortable any more. It didn’t feel like *hers*. And an uncomfortable bed seemed to mean that sleep was not going to visit its occupant tonight. No problem. Mom had packed away the last of her clothes while she was out, everything she owned and wanted to keep was ready to. Now she could let herself get excited about her new life. There would be a host of new challenges at the academy – new courses to study, friends to make. Everything would change and the only people she wanted to talk to wouldn’t be there.

Katie swung her legs out of bed and found an old book in a box she had not taped fully. It was an old copy of *Romeo and Juliet* that she had used for her GCSEs and wanted to keep in case she needed it again. There were a few blank pages near the back of this study edition, ostensibly for notes but she had written all of hers in the margins or over the text. She and a group of kids in her English class had decided to use each other books as a sort of mini yearbook with little stick figure self portraits and short messages. One page was dotted with stick people bearing cheesy smiles or fake tears and speech bubbles that said, ‘Good luck in your future. I won’t forget you.’ Chances were that most of that crowd already had forgotten her. No big deal. They weren’t worth wasting tears or sadness over.

Something creaked behind her and Katie looked over to see the door of a wardrobe yawned open. Any minute now a bony, dark hand would stretch out of it and curl one finger to her, silently calling her over to it. She would go with it. No hesitating, no moment to think, just follow the hand. The hand would flatten out in front of Katie and she would place hers in that large skeleton palm and then step through the wardrobe door which couldn't be a wardrobe any more - wouldn't she remember putting a creepy corpse hand there? She stepped onto the wooden bottom of the tall cupboard, vaguely wondering if she would get splinters in her feet, and felt cold smooth floor beneath her. Marble. She glanced down and found she was no longer holding on to the bony fingers; only a strange cold outline of a hand signalled there had ever been anything there. All around was dark but light must have been creeping in from somewhere because, as Katie stared into the darkness, her eyes adjusted and she could just make out shadows far away and leaning against what she assumed were the walls to this place. She stepped forward a bit, using her feet to feel the ground at every step just in case it fell away or there was something to trip her. Stepping forward was the only thing to do. It was also crazy as a jack in the box. Something rustled. The dark shapes. They were moving. Katie thrust her hand behind her and pawed the air for the door, a way back to safety, although she knew it had either closed and locked or disappeared totally the moment she had stepped into this place. Forward was the only way to go. She knew that. She willed herself to run in measured, even strides like she had trained to do. But she was frozen. Fear did that and maybe there was a little of that. The shadows were so far away they could be anything from a giant fluffy bunny to a psychotic clown with thoughts of doing her good or harm. But it wasn't the idea that something might hurt her that held her in place – it was knowing they were alive and moving towards her. A footstep clicked down on the hard floor and echoing around like a stacked heel with some weight behind it. Echo... echoes were caused by sound rebounding in an open space like a cave or a canyon. So the noise had to be bouncing off something – walls, she guessed, and walls meant a room which meant there must be a door out of here. That was logical but Katie's legs seemed not to comprehend logic. Then the rustling started up again. Nothing moved when she looked but every black hump and lump seemed a tiny bit closer when she turned. And that was enough for Katie to will her feet into unwilling movement. One step. Two steps. That's all she managed before the footsteps of one of the shapes started again. It was just a little too far away to be within touching distance but Katie certainly was not going to look around to see how much leeway she had. If she did, she knew, the sight would be so terrifying that she would be afraid to move or even breathe. She put her hands to her ears and did her best to step forward calmly but quickly. These blobs of black would doubtless know if she started running but she did, her hands

falling towards her sides and pumping out the rhythm of her strides. There was darkness stretching on forever and no end in sight. And the clicking footsteps were always coming after her and pretty soon they were joined by more and more sets of heels – too many to count. No rustling, no voices, just footfalls that never seemed to run but never seemed to get farther away, no matter whether she walked or ran. For one heart-stopping instant, Katie decided that there was no way out of here. Running put no distance between her and whatever was chasing her – maybe it would be just as well if she halted and let these unformed things catch up to her, grab her, swallow her whole. These splashes of black in the nearly black which had no faces or names. And then, so far away it may have been a trick of the light, such as it was, or the mirage of a frenzied and frightened mind, a thin strip of light opened up. She headed for it knowing that if she slowed then there would be no escape from this nightmare. A nightmare where the monsters were unseen, where there was no light to show the true horrors it contained. Heels clip-clopped after her. The chink of light was growing a touch larger with every step. But it wasn't close enough. The leader of the phantom pack hunting her reached forward with one deeply dark limb and came within inches – maybe centimetres – of her shoulder. Katie felt the air whoosh by her. Too close. Part of her wanted to scream only that would be wasting breath she sorely needed for running. All that running and the crack of light seemed to be almost no closer than earlier. Katie kicked down and pulled on her energy reserves, picking up her pace and trying to keep in a straight line. The steps sounded as though they were merely inches away now. The crack of light was a few inches wide and tall enough to be a door. But the light not only gave Katie something to run towards, it threw light into this dark room. Not much, just enough to tempt a person into looking around too see exactly what was chasing them. The girl willed her feet to run that little bit further, her protesting legs which felt like they had run so far and so hard this night – and then threw herself towards the light with eyes squeezed shut so tightly. She didn't want to see the faces of the things that followed her – if they had faces – or the hand that would reach out for her, grab her and pull her back until she could no longer be seen amid that dark, moving mass.

“Moving time!”

“Wha -?”

Katie whipped her head off her desk where she was slumped over her empty desk and drooling over her old, ratty Romeo and Juliet. Most of the boxes had already been taken away, Dad was carting them downstairs and singing to himself a song with word he had made up and in a tune no-one had ever written. It was mid-morning on a Monday – no-one had the right to be that cheerful. Katie looked over at her sister who was bouncing on the bed.

“I'm gonna miss you, Dan.”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s not like you’re never coming back.”

“No, but it is a long time. I’ll phone and email though.”

Dan rolled her eyes. “Do you have to?”

Katie laughed and pushed her out of her room so she could get dressed. Gone was the twelve year old tomboy who had hugged her and made her a gift and reminded the world she actually had a vulnerable side and back was the moody, hard as nails pre-teen. Katie had been like that not too long ago. She still had moments when her attitude got the better of her and probably always would. How would she cope at the academy with no-one to rein her in?

There was a loose tracksuit draped over her bed which was so old and mucky she was happy to ruin it in today’s move and finally put it out of its’ misery. Katie picked it up and started to cross the landing to the bathroom. The hot jets of water bean to rain down and Katie lifted a leg to hook the hanging shampoo bottle without having to leave this lovely bubble. She tried to bend her foot to snag it with her toes and an explosion sent needles of pain shooting up her leg. What happened? She had no memory of injuring herself. But this had happened before. She had tripped over on a run with school and twisted an ankle. It had felt fine at first and she’d even finished the run. Then, after sitting still for hours in the subsequent exam, she had barely been able to walk. It was stiff and sore but the pain had more or less disappeared when she had walked on it for a while. Katie gave her hair the quickest wash ever, dressed and went downstairs. Mom was buttering toast and there was a bowl of cereal on the table. Katie ignored it for the moment and went to the freezer fashioning a crude ice pack out of ice cubes and a tea towel.

“Are you okay, love?”

“You remember when I twisted my ankle last year? Well, I reckon I just worked it too hard this weekend. It’ll go off in a while like before.”

Mom finished scraping the toast and put it down in front of her, taking over the ice pack duties while she ate. The school nurse had warned them that this might well happen. The ankle was weaker now. It could even break. And then there was Dan, who had fallen from a post and only ended up with a sprain, which was no doubt why Katie always decided to run through the pain because everything would turn out fine. But Dan was at home where they could keep an eye on her and take care of her if anything happened and Katie, the indestructible, take-on-the-world Katie, would be fending for herself. If she got really hurt or...

“Mom, I’ll be fine,” Katie assured her as if she had known exactly what she was thinking. “Don’t worry about me.”

“Oh honey, it’s my job to worry about my baby girl. Going off to college. Growing up. And then one day you might not even need silly old Mom and Dad.”

“If that ever happens you have my permission to slap me. You’re my parents and I’ll always need you for something, probably just for someone to chat to about my day or whatever.”

“I’m just not sure about this. You’re only 16 still and you’ve been through so much this last year.”

Katie took the pack from her mother’s hand and emptied the melting ice into her empty bowl. A trick the athletics team from school had used was to make sure the tea towel, or rag of t-shirt which had been always available then, was properly cold and then just tie it around the ankle, knee, wrist, whatever was hurting.

“Ready?” said Dad. He had loaded all but a few of her belongings into the van he had managed to borrow from his brother-in-law for the day. He leaned down and planted the tiniest kiss on Katie’s head.

She glanced up at him and, all at once, a ridiculous amount of tears blurred her vision. Some of them she managed to force back but some – too many – found their way out and carved a hundred paths down her cheeks. Either the tears were silent or no-one noticed because her parents only seemed to see the smile. “Good to go.”

CHAPTER THREE

It took almost four to get to the tiny town of Northwood. It seemed longer. Dad had gotten Katie and Dan to help cram the last of the boxes into the van, said his goodbyes and started the van up to get a headstart. All the girls would pile into the car and follow him later, meeting up with him at a service station nearly two hours down the road for lunch, when the worst of the traffic was over. Just under half of the drive was motorway and the directions they had said the rest of the journey would be A- and B-roads.

"I'll have a double cheeseburger, fries and lemonade." Katie gave her order to her mother and carted her little sister off to find a table that was relatively clean. "Dad phoned when you were asleep. He's about twenty minutes behind us. Some moron of an Uncle Billy decided to leave us with less petrol in the van than I can spit. Isn't family oh so wonderful?"

"Is this conversation meant to convince me or you?"

"Huh? Of what?"

"That your family's no great loss."

"I'm not. It's just that Uncle Billy really is a prize dick. It's really only fair that the world is warned."

"Not that I'm arguing but some of your relatives are kind and compassionate and basically great people."

"Honestly, I don't know why I ever thought you were delusional."

A minute or two later, their mother came over with a plastic tray of food, being careful to dodge the wrappers and chips that dotted the floor. "Goodness, they really need to employ a cleaner here."

"Mom,"

The older woman sat down and put a finger to her lips before doling lunches out. She was famous for bemoaning the lack of cleanliness in restaurants and cafes. A neat freak by nature, not even eating off a surgically sterilised plate would be completely faultless. Too cold or chemical. The girls dug into their burger meals. Katie would normally have something with a little salad and fruit but today she was ravenous and craving something so covered in grease her arteries were blocking as she ate.

"Why does food just taste better and better the worse it is for you?"

“It’s the law,” Dan said around a mouthful of fries. That girl had the biggest mouth of anyone in the history of always. “So, I always say, why the hell do they even make food that no-one enjoys eating? Fruit and stuff is sweet a lot of the time so I kinda get that but brown bread or carrot cake... it’s a waste of perfectly good cake.”

“Cherish this moment Mom. It’s the most words she’ll say until she grows out of her teens.”

“You’re one to talk. All this smiling and saying you’re okay and crap. Everyone knows you’re just pretending.” Dan stuffed the last few bites in her mouth and gave a wide, beefy grin.

“Gross!”

“Now girls.”

“Dadda!” In the excitement, Dan succeeded in spitting out a shower of crumbs and worms of meat. A commendable achievement really but not one she should consider putting on her CV in a few years. Katie realised she might already be thinking of it, and it likely made her more qualified than the dead-eyed man who had served.

“Couldn’t wait for me to start, I see. I need my dinner though and I hate eating alone so who’s up for ice cream?”

The four of them had poured out of the burger place an hour later, the car and the van both had a quick check over and their petrol tanks filled up and then they were off. Katie found her MP3 player out of the tiny backpack she’d brought along and pushed the earphones in. She swiped a thumb over the touchscreen and found a country radio station. Country music and a handful of blues tunes thrown in were good travelling sounds. She laid her head back on the back of the seat and closed her eyes. For the next hour and a half there was nothing between her and sleep but the music, the feeling of movement and the growing need to sing. Country songs, especially those of the 1970s and early 80s, were invariably about women sticking by husbands that were basically shits or sticking in crappy mind-numbing jobs or staying home to cook and clean and raise kids because it was women’s work, but it held the unwavering sense of going somewhere; of always roaming across wide open plains and making everywhere you go your home. It was amazing that these girls from the sticks could speak to souls that deeply.

Just travelling, sitting here while somebody else did the driving, was tiring but something was keeping Katie from slumber. She opened her eyes a crack and peeked at the grey felt roof of the car then leaned further back to see the bright sky through the back window. Too bright. She pulled her baseball cap from the door pocket and jammed it on her head, yanking it far down over her eyes to block out the light. Her ears were aching from having the earphones in and she had

packed the new cushioned ones away so she turned the music off and put the tiny music box away. Dan and Mom were yabbering away in the front seat about something that had happened at school and Dad was in the van right in front of them. The rocking of the car was lulling her towards, not exactly sleep but a state of half-consciousness where she knew what was going on around her but her mind was powerless to process any of it.

“Wake up, Katie. We’re nearly there.”

A sign welcoming them to Northwood flashed by and then they were driving through the town proper. Not that it could really be called a town. It barely resembled the city she had left behind. Roads were busy with people walking around – few people appeared to drive but Katie had looked on the map – most places were within walking distance of everywhere else. Worn stone buildings crowded the streets. Patches of wasteland festered between buildings. Some of the barren land contained skips or scaffolding and, she craned her neck to see, further building work seemed to be taking place at the backs of buildings. A few streets further into Northwood were more modern buildings; a library, a leisure centre, a few restaurants and shops. There weren’t any shopping centres like there had been at home – none that she could see but maybe there was an out of town one like there used to be years ago.

“Seems like a nice place. At least no danger of you getting run over. Everyone walks!”

“Yeah, Katie. You’re such an alien to exercise.”

“I know I am. Maybe I should get some of those trainers with the wheel in the heel to help me get around. Don’t suppose I can borrow yours?”

“Please! As if I would do something so tragically uncool.” In truth, Dan had not had a pair of wheeled trainers although she had hounded their mother mercilessly for some. She had refused for a long time and then the week she gave in and promised to pick a pair up after work – surprise surprise – Dan didn’t want them any more because they were so last year and the next fad had begun – those little computer pet thingies.

Beyond the few blocks of retail and eateries was a sprawl of houses, mostly quite old but there were a few that seemed to have been built this side of the second world war. It was into this estate that the van grumbled and coughed, sounding distinctly unhealthy. The car seemed to be making some strange noises too. Something must have been up with the petrol they bought at that no-name service station. Been in the pump too long or something. No, Katie was pretty sure there must be laws about petrol pumps in case it exploded. As long as the car had the decency not to turn into a fireball while she was in it. Or any of her family.

The van took a right turn, the car followed. Katie stared out at the passing scenery as the car growled along, twisting and turning. The car eventually braked and idled there, the engine

cooling after two hundred miles of motorway and country road. The three of them unbelted and climbed out onto a short, gravelly drive with a few pushbikes lying on it.

“Healthy way to get to campus.”

“Come on girls, let’s meet the housemates and get a drink before we unpack.”

“Okay. Sounds like a plan.”

Dad took the keys out of the van door and put them in his pocket. They all walked up and down the drive a time or two to stretch their aching legs, Katie’s ankle was stiff and sore again, and then reached up to the front door. They made Katie knock since it was to be her new home. Dan was holding hands with her father and Mom had linked her arm through his. Katie suddenly wished, while she waited for the door to open, that she could trade places with one of them and be the one clinging on to Daddy. What if the door opened into darkness and some shape with only the skeleton of a hand reached out to take her inside? Where had that thought, so real it was like a memory, come from? Just as that thought was creeping by the door was flung wide and a young woman leaned out to gather her in a hug after seeing her for just a couple of seconds. The young woman looked up from the embrace at the rest of the family who were looking a little uncomfortable.

“Hi” she said far too cheerfully for someone who didn’t know them from Adam. “I’m Lainy. Well, Elaine, but that sounds like such an old lady name don’t you think? So... Lainy it is.”

“I’m Katie Cartwright. My family were helping me move all my crap out here.”

“Sure, sure, we understand that. It’s not like you can drive your own stuff out here. Anyway, come on in and rest for a bit first. No-one wants to lug all that around on an empty stomach.” She waved everyone inside and shouted into the house, “Adam, put the kettle on!”

Adam turned out to be the same as Lainy in terms of his friendliness, although, thankfully, a lot less touchy-feely than Lainy. The two of them had known each other since secondary school, had gone to different colleges and then met again here a few years ago when they had both attended the academy for their final years of education, fallen I love, gotten engaged and became house parents. That was more information than Katie could cope with without a decent meal and a good nights sleep.. House parents were, apparently, the people who looked after students.

Teas, juices and sandwiches rapidly disappeared. Most of Dan’s went down her top but Lainy cleaned it up without a harsh word and fetched her a clean top that was far too big for her but clean and dry. While Dan was changing and Her parents were unloading the van with Adam

and Lainy, Katie peeled the now dry and warm rag from her ankle and threw it on the bin. It was beginning to smell funky. Besides, the bruising had all come out now. It didn't look that bad. Maybe a little swollen but four or five days would see it right. She poked it and prodded it.

"Eeww! Must you?"

"It's not like you're eating. This is a foot. You're half-naked and if I have to look at your scrawny little body much longer I may have to bleach my own eyeballs."

"I'm twelve. I'm not old enough to get fat." All the same Dan slid herself into the grungy t-shirt as quick as a particularly self-conscious snake. It hung to her knees.

Katie sent the girl out to help with the boxes and then followed the instructions she had been given. The door straight in front at the top of the stairs was the bathroom if she needed to use it quickly. She didn't. They had said to turn left and her room would be the one at the end. It was the second smallest room, Adam had apologised, but that was fine by her. If there was a bed, a desk and a chest of drawers, it was fine. Functional was the key. She walked up the stairs, noting that two or three of them creaked rather loudly. The bathroom door was decorated in cracked white paint with a yellow and black toxic sign stuck to it. She passed it by but reminded herself she really needed to check it out before her mother did. The neat freak trait had obviously passed Katie by but she had no desire to shower in a bathroom that could give her scabies or something. The door at the end was bare wood and looked freshly sanded – Adam had said something about doing some repairs to the house but Katie had hardly listened. Stripping off the thin shirt she had worn for the drive down, Katie hooked it over the door handle and pushed it open.

The room was a little smaller than her old one but the furniture looked new, if basic and flat-packy, and there was a comfy looking bed. Floorboards creaked under the cheap maroon carpet. Katie bounced on her heels and looked around her. Far from over-whelmed and very, very small, a wave of pride and confidence hit her. This was her domain. A few years of education stretched out but it was an education she was choosing for herself.

Katie spent the next hour flitting from the back of the van to her new room, not carrying boxes but nervously making sure she had not left anything behind. Finally, everything was piled up again and she was saying her last goodbyes.

"Don't be scared to come home if it gets too much. And call if you need us..."

Katie gave her mother for a few seconds and then tried and failed to peel her off. "Of course it'll be too much and of course I'll want to go home but I'll get over it. I'll never be grown up if I don't push myself."

“Speaking of pushing, I noticed a great big cliff thing not too far away.” Dan raised her eyebrows and gave that dark, playful grin that only sisters really understand. She was next for a Katie hug that neither really wanted to pull out of. Then it was Dads turn. Dad the hero. Dad the big cuddly bear.

“Go on, go, before you start me off.”

None of them seemed very eager to leave but long, extremely awkward minutes of staring and not wanting to be the first to show emotion made Dad put an arm around the two he was taking home and start backing away. Oh, Katie wished so hard that she was going with them that she thought she might fall over for a moment. The three of them climbed into the car - it had been decided earlier that they would leave the van here for Uncle Billy to pick up whenever he could be bothered because Dad was not driving another centimetre in that contraption – started up and screeched away a bit too fast for her liking. The Fiesta disappeared until it was a dot at the end of the long road and then it was gone altogether and then it was likely halfway out of town and still Katie stood there, half-focussed on something and nothing on the horizon. And then she collapsed.

The ground rushed up to meet her and then two strong arms grabbed her. She felt the arms scoop her up and into the air just before she expected the cement and gravel ground to send her bones into shock. Were her eyes closed? Had everything in the world suddenly turned black? Her over-worked mind kept trying to absorb the information it was picking up but her body refused point blank to even move. Outside was blue sky, a grey house, only she couldn't see any of it so Katie turned her eyes inward instead. There were tiny parts of her face that stretched and tightened with her breathing. Yes, she was still breathing. Cords and tubes vibrated as if in some semblance of a laugh. Vital signs all present and correct – she traced another, thicker trail up to a mushy looking thing – a brain. Synapses fired and neurons connected. Little impulses shivered off into her body shimmering and shiny like something magical. Ripples of endorphins bulged out and then dripped away, receptors taking what they needed and returning what they didn't.

“Bring her over here Ad. Watch the step.”

Something flared behind her eyes. Katie felt as though she were floating. She tried to drag her eyes open, the total darkness she was seeing was boring and disorienting.

“Here on the sofa.”

“Clear it off then.”

“No, not the chair. It's too small and she'll get all scrunched up. Here.”

“Oh right.”

“I’ll get a cold cloth.”

“Hang on, help me get her feet up. She keeps kicking them off.”

Was she fighting the man keeping her from a very close encounter with the floor? Katie had no connection to her body. It could be flamenco dancing for all she knew.

“Better. Now what?”

Katie tried to make a sound of thanks but it was a waste of effort. Lainy and Adam shuffled out of the room and that was it. The loneliness was so complete but, as she allowed her mind to lose grip on reality and touch the black she felt, if not happy, less alone.

“You awake now?”

Lainy was squeezing a damp cloth over the carpet. It was the spot where Dan had spilled her juice.

The young girl had only been passed out for a few minutes. It probably seemed longer.

“God, I feel stupid. Dumb little girl can’t even be away from her parents without fainting.”

“Don’t feel bad,” Lainy said. “It happens.”

“Some kids come and go straight home because they can’t make it without Mommy and Daddy.”

“Afraid I’m here to stay.”

“I hope you don’t mind but I went through the box for the bathroom in case you needed painkillers or anything. We’re not allowed to buy them for the whole house in case someone’s allergic or what not.”

“You went through my stuff?”

“Sorry. Lainy just thought you might need anything.”

“It’s fine. I just was looking forward to unpacking myself.”

“Everything’s still here. When I couldn’t find anything, I just closed the box and put it in the bathroom.” Lainy dropped the cloth into a bowl and sat on the edge of the sofa with Katie. “We share most things in this house but if you have anything special not in your room then just write on it.”

Katie braced her arms at her sides and pushed up to a sitting position. A grey rag slipped over her face, leaving tepid, moist tracks. She picked off with one hand and tried to scrub her face dry with the other. Lainy tossed the rag in the bowl with the other. “Take that out, will you, Adam?”

The clock told her it was late afternoon, just after five. There would just be enough time to unpack most of her stuff and find homes for it. No. That would have to wait until tomorrow. No way was Katie up to that. “I’m just really tired. I think the heat and the move have just done me in. Sorry about the fainting thing.”

“Katie, stop apologising,” Lainy scolded her. “This is partly your home now and...” She carried on speaking, something about the other housemates, but Katie was stuck on those words *your home now*. However manic the last month or two had been she had never imagined that home would or could be any place other than the house she grew up in with Mom and Dad and Dan.

“How long was I asleep? It felt like forever.”

“Not long.”

“I felt like I was in another world. Not another planet but not quite this one either. It was... I don’t remember really, but it was beautiful. The details are faded, as if some-one tried to rub out my dream, but I couldn’t see anything anyway. I dreamed that... I sound like the resident crazy don’t i?”

“Kinda.”

“Glad to’ve filled that gap.”

“That job already went,” Adam added. “But if there’s a house lacking a certified basket-case...”

“Adam!”

Katie laughed at the couple unsure which one she liked best –Adam for teasing her and making her forget her sadness or Lainy for taking care of her and trying to defend her honour. “You two are definitely marriage material.”

“Hey, Lainy, do they make bridesmaids strait jackets?” That comment earned him cushions thrown at him from two directions.

“Your dream?”

“Oh, I’ve already forgotten him.” Katie stood up and stretched her long legs out. There was a bookcase by the large window. The bottom shelf held a few board games and quiz books. Obviously, the people in this house liked old-fashioned entertainments. There was a TV in the corner with a games console and some video games. Maybe there was more to college life than studying, partying and casual sex the way they portrayed it on TV.

“Why don’t you go have a hot bath and an early night?”

Katie rubbed her hand over her eyes and sat back down, rummaging in her backpack for a pack of cards to add to the game pile. Then she worked an old Monopoly box from the stack and

pushed it across the floor to Adam. “One hour to tire me out. Otherwise I’ll be up at three tomorrow morning which generally means anyone within yelling distance is up at three. I’m the car.”

The long, hot bath had been a nice idea although it only lasted about half an hour in total. About fifteen minutes into it, a loud and urgent bang had come at the door.

“It’s occupied!” Lainy had shouted up the stairs. Whoever it was walked down the stairs again, maybe got a drink or something, and then Katie heard them come back up. The handle rattled but then they got bored and footsteps clipped down to another room. It was the footsteps that alerted her to the person coming back to try the handle again a few minutes later, just as she was letting her eyes slip shut and allowing all her tense and scrunched up muscles relax in the warmth. The door remained tight shut. She gave herself another ten minutes to get clean and relaxed enough to sleep when she finally gave up, dried and dressed herself in the PJs she’d found and padded down to her room. The person rattling the door would have the bathroom to him- or herself now. Just in case Adam’s lunatic was just randomly invading rooms, she closed the door fully and flicked the lock.

There were stacks of boxes piled around the room but they seemed less than they had in her old room. Funny considering it was a smaller room. All of them needed sorting out and emptying but her brain was so tired there was a very real possibility of putting her toothbrush in her pencil case or her trainers in the bedside cabinet. To put her lazily but persistently nagging mind at rest, Katie found herself a scrap of paper and a pencil and wrote herself a to do list, making sure to put *empty boxes* at the top, above even *go for a run*. She always tried to run in the morning but she hadn’t really done it in a while. The academy needed to be checked out and she guessed she could run there.

Lainy had been kind enough, or maybe it was Adam; guys could be domestic too, to dress the bed with a clean sheet over the mattress and then just another sheet in place of a duvet. The duvet would have spent most of the night getting dirty on the floor so Katie had only wanted a sheet. It was with great relief that she crawled under that top sheet and closed her eyes, almost instantly falling into a deep, dark sleep.

She fell hard and fast and so very very far. And all she could recall upon waking was blackness. Shiny eyes deep in shadows and a feeling that something was coming up behind her. In the dark it could have been anything, any one, but she looked at these pools of light and knew that whatever it was would not hurt her. It wanted to, because she was there and for some unknown reason, she shouldn’t be. Then the darkness was bright sunlight, summer rain was

tinkling down on the window and Katie awoke with one hand stretched out, reaching for something that was no longer there. She was smiling too.

When she dressed and went downstairs to join her friends for breakfast she was still smiling. Maybe leaving the big city behind had been just what she needed. The smell of frying bacon called her downstairs to find Lainy and Adam buzzing around the kitchen and another person at the table.

“Morning guys!”

“Some-one’s cheerful this morning.”

“New house, new friends, new life as a student. What’s not to love?”

“The part where it’s still the holidays and it’s morning?” tried Adam.

“It’s summer and there’s bacon for breakfast. There’s joy in the smallest things if you look hard enough.”

“Ah so.” He slid a full English in front of her and bowed like a Japanese guy before he chop-sockied the hell out of someone else.

Was she really expected to eat all this fried and fatty stuff? Not that she would probably leave any of it – Katie was ravenous this morning – but she would have to wait a while before running. Damn. “Not so long ago, I wasn’t sure I’d even be here because stuff went really bad and dark for a while. I couldn’t find anything that made me happy any more but over the last few weeks... it’s strange but little things are starting to make me smile again. And I feel like I have this job to look for the joy in everything in case I get sad again.”

“Leo, take note,” said Lainy. “This is how you have a conversation.”

Over the course of the morning meal, Katie learned through statements from the older couple and the odd affirmative grunt from Leo, that her arrival had been preceded by more than two weeks by this young boy who seemed to be only a few years older than Katie herself. He had spent most of the last fortnight in his room and rarely spoke to any one. Lainy wondered if he was shy or overwhelmed. Katie already decided she didn’t care. There was something about him and the way he hunched himself up that felt almost sinister. Looking at Leo for mere seconds sent a shiver through her.

“I thought I might go checkout the college today, maybe mooch around town.”

“Just make sure you stay this side of Northwood Chase. Don’t go into Millford.”

Okay, that sounded like an ominous warning if ever there was one. “Why not?”

“It’s just real easy to get really lost down there.” Lainy shot a look at Adam – *shut up you shitwit* “Until you know your way around.”

“I need to sort my stuff out first. But you could maybe write me a list of places I might want to go.”

Lainy told her she doubted there was anywhere she wouldn't find on her own – besides it was always more fun to discover things for yourself – but that she would have a think. Leo got roped in to help wash up and Katie headed back to her room. Following the corridor down to her room, she on a whim, turned and tried the handle on the room she had heard open last night. On entering Katie stopped wondering why Leo had been shipped off so early. His parents no doubt just wanted to get rid of him and the sooner the better. She already had sympathy for them. The room was already decorated in a dark mixture of fantasy and religious stuff. Statues, drawings, even a life-size crucifix with chains and ropes for his wrists and a picture of a half-naked woman being lashed while seemingly chained to said cross. Just being in here was making Katie feel increasingly uncomfortable. The room was smaller than hers and the clutter made it seem smaller and darker. The small desk was covered with papers and she started rifling through them. There were drawings in various stages of completion – mostly of creatures from fantasy like dragons and unicorns with twisted and hooked horns.

“What are you doing?”

Katie jumped and whipped her head up to see a shadow filling the doorway. She inched backwards. Light hit half of Leos face. He did not look happy at finding her in his room going through his personal creations. This was his personal, private place and Katie immediately felt a pinch of guilt at invading another persons privacy. “Sorry. Honestly, I'm so sorry.” She played at tidying the papers on the desk. “I'll just scram, shall I?”

“You didn't answer the question. Why re you here?”

“To go to college.”

“Stop playing silly bitches, bitch.”

“You didn't say much over breakfast. I thought I'd find out more about you this way.”

“You never thought to ask.”

“I didn't want to seem rude. Although snooping through your stuff might make it appear otherwise.” She tried to smile and giggle her way out of it but it only made her feel more guilty. Why was Katie protesting her innocence to Leo? Especially if he was who she thought he was. “I'm sorry again. But we both have to live here. We should learn to be friends.” Leo seemed to mirror Katie's intention of doing no such thing. She shuffled from one foot to the other and looked for an opening big enough to bolt through. For one long and terrifying minute, Leo looked as if he was going to come closer to her or, at the very least, not move. He would advance on her until all she could see was his dark bulk and smell the musty smell of his tired-looking

shirt. But he seemed to think the better of it and stepped inside and to the left, letting Katie sneak past and bolt down to her room. Leo watched her as she passed. He didn't see the other young man at the top of the stairs watching her too but he had heard him yelling out, "Don't touch her. You'll smile and talk and let her go but you won't touch her. She's not yours."

As Leo shut his door, all the while believing that those words and thoughts were his own, Katie entered her own room and the boy stood guard until well after noon, listening to her shuffling and clattering and swearing and cursing quite a bit. And all the time, Katie felt as though some-one was watching her. Only she was on the second floor and the door was firmly shut if not locked. Still, she could not shake the notion that she was not entirely alone. The boy with the green eyes vanished as she emerged some time later. Katie looked around for a second. She was positive there had been a person out here but the air was cool and still, the hallway deserted and – not silent. Far away, almost a echo or a memory, she heard footsteps. Boot heels. She stopped and took a deep breath. This was an old house – there were creaks and squeaks everywhere. Something seemed to riffle the air over her face.

"Stop being crazy. There's nothing there. You're just trying to imagine a friend you idiot!" Katie told herself. "Suck it up, girl."

She glanced over at the hall window which was open just a crack with no real idea why she was staring at the frosted glass. It wasn't as if she could see out of it. A sudden chill whispered through the window – like something had been blocking the coolness that should have been surrounding her all day. She wanted the warmth back.

CHAPTER FOUR

After a quick sandwich it was time to head off to the college. The Levenson Academy for Sports and Action was nearer the edge of town than the house but not quite far enough to need to find a bus going there. Not that there seemed to be any buses on the roads. Well, since there were so few cars on the roads either, Katie was hardly surprised.

The academy was a hulking building of steel and cement. It was dark and looked totally empty. A dozen or so young girls and boys – mostly a few years older than her – sat on the grass or wandered around the campus grounds just beyond the chain link fence. The sensible thing to do would be to introduce herself to them all and try to make some allies, some friendly faces when the classes started up. But they seemed so much older and more grown-up than her. Plus they were strangers. A few steps would take her into the college grounds and then she would have to greet them. But what if they were mean to her? Katie left them behind and told herself that she was only exploring and not intending to meet anyone here. Not yet. Her feet had walked her to another part of the academy – one that almost took her breath away.. in front of her was an athletics stadium. It was nowhere near as big as a professional athletics stadium but it was full size and properly kitted out. It was a strange thing that she hadn't noticed it from her bedroom window. For a training ground the arena was amazing and far better than she had ever anticipated for a town this size. Katie shook herself, looked up to the sky wondering if it would rain again – the clouds were certainly thickening nicely – and skipped down to the old man sitting at the hatch.

“Yes, miss. Can I help yer?”

“Um, does this track belong to the college?”

“Partly. The town owns half of it too to hold meets and things. It's open to the public for the holidays if yer wanting to go down?”

“Oh, no, I'm starting at the academy soon. I just wondered.”

“Well, of course it's free for stew-dents. It's pretty busy today though.”

Katie understood why. The last few days, whilst not exactly too hot to run in, had been uncomfortable and exercising in the hot and sticky British sun was not fun. But today the weather was much cooler and the rain of the morning had helped no end. “I can hear them.”

“What sport do you do, miss? I'm too nosey, I know, but humour an old man.”

“I got in on a running scholarship. Cross-country.”

“Oh,” said the old man, sounding honestly interested. His name seemed to be Roy from the letter Katie could just see on his table. “I likes to come see the sport on my nights off with my Bernice.”

“That must be fun,” Katie pretended. She couldn’t see why anyone would want to spend their down time back at work but she had no intention of saying that to Roy and making him worry about his use of free time. “I’ve never seen anyone from here but I hear they’re good.” But she had heard nothing like that. She had never even heard of Northwood let alone the school before she had gotten her place but she supposed any college team had to have a certain degree of quality. Maybe if she was good enough she could be an athlete on the academy team rather than just studying and training here. Somebody must have thought Katie was promising on a college or maybe a county level – sports scholarships for anywhere were few and far between.

“So, you’ll be wanting to go down and take a look at the place. Public property and the public don’t hardly use it. I’ve worked here all my life and there’s some right talent runs down there.”

“Let’s just hope I can keep up.” Katie quickly scribbled her name in his book and noted the entire page was full of students using the track. Then she wandered past him and stopped and stared at a full size running track, complete with field for throwing events, pits for jumps and everything else an athlete might want. So it wasn’t quite as high tech as the ones on TV but it was still good. A few dozen people were practising their chosen events. One or two older people seemed to be coaching their younger charges. As Katie grew closer, she told herself again that she needed to run, just once before term began. It was safe here. There was still a few hours of daylight left, if it was darkened quite a bit by the cloud. There must be close on a hundred people within shouting distance. It was as safe as she was ever likely to get.

She felt the first drop of rainfall on her stubby little nose so she ducked under the sheltered section of the spectator seating and found a bench a few rows up. It gave a good view from here. The rain was coming a drip here and a drip there but no-one seemed to be bothered by it. The teenagers jumping and throwing faded into the background and the runners – the sprinters and hurdler sand distance runners fizzed into sharp focus. They all looked so... happy. Even the ones she had watched running four or five long laps or covering the same hundred metres over and over were still smiling. She watched and asked herself when she would ever run miles across fields and at the sides of roads and be able to smile? The runners faded away, just as their stadium mates had, and the world was just a steady *thump thump* of training shoes on the asphalt track. It had been so long... Katie ached to get the running gear she’d bought new a couple of months ago and join in the training session down there but it was too hard. The new running

outfit had been her Dad's idea when her usual stuff had got torn and stained and then forensically tested. It had been stuffed in her bag when she headed off to the park a few times but it had only ever been through the wash two or three times, completely clean and unworn. No-one had figured it out though Dan had wondered why there was still food in the fridge when she came home – raiding the fridge for the junkiest food possible after a run was Katie's one real vice. Today, she could eat all the rubbish she wanted at home. *Home*. No-one had asked her if she did sports so there was no pressure to do so. But not doing it would end up getting her kicked out of here, sent back home and then her secret would be out. So, just run already. There was nowhere safer, better equipped, more protected than this private oval. And, still, a tiny voice demanded, "What if?"

"It won't."

Katie glimpsed a shadow standing off to her side. She had been so lost in her own thoughts that she had not seen him, even with her eyes wide open but evidently blind to everything, walking up to her although some dark corner of her consciousness recalled footsteps on the ground. She hadn't seen the day turn into a threatening looking evening and all users of the training ground drift off to other places. Now it was just Katie, the growing darkness and this boy with the cowboy hat and fabulous green eyes. "You don't even know what I was talking about."

He shrugged. "Maybe not. But a girl like you shouldn't be thinkin' about what ifs and what nots."

"A girl like me."

"Young, pretty, clever."

"How do you work that out? I mean the no girl's going to argue a compliment like that but you can't tell if I'm smart by looking at me?"

"Look at me."

Katie did for roughly a nano-second but couldn't quite bring herself to meet his gaze in case she got lost into those raw green seas. He put a hand on her cheek, a touch so light and cool she shivered. The boy laughed; a sound like rippling silk. He guided her face and frowned. It took a second or two of holding her there before she locked eyes and then, when Katie finally looked away, she discovered she wanted to keep returning to his face.

"Yeah, you got clever eyes. And something else. You're sad."

"Not me, uh-uh." Overall, Katie thought she was pretty happy. There were so many reasons she should be cheerful but tonight, this boy was right. She had stopped running,

something she had always loved, and let the sadness take over – the loneliness, the fear. “There’s not much to be sad about. I’m a runner and there’s all this on my doorstep.”

“So why aren’t you usin’ it?”

Good question. “No reason, I guess. I should.”

“Is that why you’re sad?”

“I told you, I’m not sad. Maybe a little in shock.”

The boy with the green eyes got up and held a hand out to Katie. She didn’t take it. Couldn’t. While she knew with every inch of her being that this young meant her no harm – how could she know that about a perfect stranger? It was illogical but there it was – she didn’t take it.

“You’re new around here. You got that look like you’re sizin’ everything, taking it all in.”

“Just moved here yesterday. It’s way, way out of my comfort zone and everyone’s older than me and more mature and it’s like they’re also sure of themselves. And I am... I just am.”

“So? Nothing wrong with that?”

“There’s so much wrong with who I am you couldn’t even begin to understand. I’m Katie by the way.” She held her hand out to the boy. He leaned down to shake it and his eyes grabbed hers once more.

“Jack.” He brushed her hand with his and although their fingers barely seemed to touch, a grip circled Katie’s palm and pulled her up. She followed him down the steps and out into the open, where rain was falling in lazy, fat drops. Right at the edge, he turned back to her, bright eyes cutting their own paths through the gloom. “Northwood can be a scary place but you’ll be okay. Brave people, strong ones, that’s what the town’s always needed. There are a few around and you’re one.” Katie raised her eyebrows at him, doubting he would be able to see the movement. There had been nothing brave about taking the place at Levenson Academy or leaving home; it was just about escaping her home city. “Trust me, Katie. You’re here because you’re supposed to be. And there’s no reason to be afraid of any of those things I can see in that pretty little face. Not while I’m around.” And suddenly she realised she was in the middle of the red running track and walking down it at Jack’s side. Alarm bells rang a symphony in her ears. It was almost night time; she was walking along a deserted track with a strange young man whose name was the only thing she knew.

Then all that took a back sea as she noticed that the thick rain was not falling on either of them. She held out a hand and watched rain drops fall onto it, tepid and surprisingly heavy. Jack stretched out his right arm and covered her palm. They stopped and watched together as drop after drop fell *through* them. “You’re not scared?”

“You said I didn’t need to be.”

“I did.”

“Call me insane but I believe you.”

“You’re insane. Nothing can really hurt you here. Nothing you can’t come back from.”

Jack froze for a moment. Katie twisted her hand out of his and tried to find his eyes that were just inches away but it suddenly seemed so incredibly far. “I’m here and you’re safe. I know why you came here. So go.” Jack made a shooing motion with his hands and Katie started walking down the track, adding in a few jogging steps every few yards. It was dark enough now that she could barely see the track in front of her. Tiny footlights set into the edges of the seating threw up just enough of a glow to keep her in a straight line. As she went through her lap, Katie kept glancing back to Jack to make sure he was still there. As she reached the edge of the first bend, he stopped being Jack anymore and started being just a dark shape that was watching her. And then the shape started to move. She saw it move, just slightly, as though it was simply shaking itself, it freaked her out. The movement was familiar and sinister. A moving shape could be totally innocuous. Still... Katie fixed her gaze on the track ahead of her, not quite ready to run, when she heard Jack coming up beside her. Even without looking she knew it was him. Footsteps cracked down like whips on the asphalt – boots – cowboy boots she thought. Something with a bit of a heel. She vaguely wondered about the damage he was doing to both the track and his ankles. Katie wouldn’t dream of even walking fast in heels, but then her own legs were pretty much her meal ticket.

“It’s my first run in a long time.”

“You’re skippin’ more than anything.”

“Jack? Why are you here?”

“Because you needed a friend. I’m a friendly person. Therefore,” he waved a hand between them, “friends.”

“At school, I ran every evening, morning every weekend and trained once a week with the school athletics team. Back then, this was so easy.”

“And now it’s not?”

“And now it’s not. Something changed and suddenly, cross country wasn’t fun any more. Miles and miles of countryside on your own got harder and more like work. I was doing it just to get to the end.” Katie grinned despite herself. She remembered this feeling. Running endless ovals, albeit much smaller ones on the school Astroturf, and circuits of the park, felt good, right, natural. But she knew that the minute this beautiful and gentle Jack went away she would be running scared and running for her life once more. “If – when - they find out I don’t run, it’s all

over for me. I'm doing lots of ordinary classes so I can get the best education I can while I'm still here."

"You'll do great."

Katie wanted to believe that as easily as she had believed everything he told her. "Maybe. I just feel like... I think I'm not ready yet. Everything's changing and I'm trying to keep up with it all the time."

"I think you're doing fine."

As they neared the finishing grids, Katie snatched Jack's Stetson off his head and placed it on hers. It smelt old and well-worn; it fitted perfectly because the material had softened with years of use. It was far too dark to know that that perfectly round mark dead centre of his forehead was anything other than a blemish. She pouted and twirled in front of him. "How'm I looking cowboy?"

Jack laughed at her. Katie was more beautiful and way braver than any of them had imagined. It took a special girl to be so unafraid, so unashamed about doing something most teenage girls would balk at in case it made them look foolish. Katie knew she was being impulsive. Something about this boy with the green eyes made her trust him with her gut actions. Plus, she had grown up in an athlete's world where privacy and self-consciousness were far behind communal showers and drug testing. With parental permission even minors had to do them beyond school level competitions.

"I am a proper Southern lady sir. You should fight for my honour." She had a feeling he would do it if she really asked him to.

"No, no fightin' tonight. But you do look mighty purty, lady." He pretended to tip his hat to her. "Lady Katie. That suits you. Honestly," he said, his face getting serious again and dropping the Deep South accent "You look beautiful."

"Uh-huh. Perhaps I was a cowgirl in a previous life or something. Do you believe in past lives?"

She saw him consider his answer. His eyes flickered for just a split second. Jack only seemed a little older than Katie so maybe he had not quite decided exactly what he believed in either. Only, just like the students she had seen earlier, he seemed so confident and sure of himself with everything else. Why did she just think *everything else*? How much everything else could a man she hardly knew have?

"I believe in one life that just goes on a really long time."

Okay. That was a new one. Not immortality, something she knew man had been trying to achieve for pretty much ever – as if something like living forever would be a good thing. Katie

wanted her eighty to ninety years and then quietly pop off. Having to make friends forever, watch them hurt and die forever – well there was only so much a person could take. But a life that just seemed to go on and on like a train with no brakes? Yeah, she could see the logic in that.

“When the physical body dies, I think people just get up, dust themselves off and ask what’s next. There’s always somethin’ next.” Jack returned his hat to his own head and walked over to sit on the ground in the middle of the track. He beckoned for Katie to come sit next to him. The rain had stopped but there were pools of water on the track and she knew the ground had to be completely soaking.

“I’ll get all mucky!”

Jack got on his knees and mimed begging her to come down which she did but only after warning him that he would be getting a bill for replacement clothes if they got dirty. Jack swiped his hand over the ground by him and when Katie lowered herself, it was bone dry. The grass around her was as dry as it had probably been up until this morning. Putting her hand out to feel the grass a few inches away, it was wet and slimy. She frowned, one hand on the dry ground and one in the mud. Then she remembered seeing the rain falling through their hands a few minutes – hours? – ago. It was easy to lose track of time.

“Come on, Lady Katie. What do you believe in?”

Bad people and things that go thump in the night. Men in the shadows and an escape that might not go anywhere but back to black. “You’re shivering,” she noticed. Katie wondered if he was cold and wished she had brought a jacket to wrap around him, but even the rain had not chilled the air quite enough for one.

“I shuddered. I guess someone just walked over my grave.”

“Very inconsiderate.” Katie grinned. She surprised herself because she didn’t even feel that happy when she thought about it – she just felt like smiling. “Whatever happened to respect for imaginary tombs?”

“Don’t ask me.” And there it was again. That hint of a shadow that fluttered behind green eyes, momentarily dulling their laser brightness in the dark. There was something there, some secret he was not telling or some instant of history that made him hold back. “People aren’t as nice as they used to be, you. But trust me, they ain’t as mean either.”

Katie was not sure she could believe that but she looked at him and tried to smile. For once, it came out as bright and natural as she’d hoped and Jack returned her smile. They sat there for minutes just grinning away at each other, not talking, until Katie realised that the silence was getting uncomfortable and broke it. “Will I see you at the academy or something? Do you study in town?”

“I’m past educatin’, Lady Katie.”

Oh. She had hoped that Jack might be her ally when classes started, a friend to look after her when everything tried to overwhelm her as it surely would. “Nothing’s ever easy, is it? So I’m going to start a new college with new classes and new people in a new town and all on my own.”

“Hey,” Jack said and reached for her hand. Katie froze for a second and pulled away. He left his hand on the dry ground and waited for Katie to relax and come back to him. She put her hand on the ground beside his but couldn’t quite bring herself to touch him. “Remember that. This is all new and it’s okay to be worried but you can make this your time.”

“You’re right. No-one knows me here, no-one has any expectations. My student years could be the best years of my life.”

“But?”

“What if they’re not? This could make me or break me, okay, and what if it breaks me?”

“So don’t let it.”

If only things were that simple. She finger-crawled over his hand. “I’m sorry Jack. I’m not scared of you – I’m not scared *with* you. How do you stop me thinking about bad things?” Fluid phantoms and skeleton hands chased around her mind but for whatever reason they didn’t seem frightening. They were steadfast and certain and she knew they would not leave her thoughts – in fact, they were getting closer with every blink and every breath – but Jack was making her feel safe from them all. “What happens when you go away?” she asked suddenly. “I think it’s drying up. Come on.” She pushed herself up and glanced up. A half moon and a smattering of stars had slipped away from the clouds and fought the light pollution to light the sky. The ground was still wet and muddy and she hopped onto the track before she ruined her trainers. But she wasn’t quick enough to prevent dirty footprints from decorating the ground. They would be washed away pretty quickly if there was any more rain before the morning when some-one - probably Roy – came to hose down the track in the morning. Jack followed her across the track as she headed for the sheltered seating. Katie turned and tried to hurry him up from the dawdle he had fallen into – a perfect opportunity to gaze at her toned backside. As she did, Katie noticed that there were no dirty prints coming from his boot heels. Nor were there any of the dents in the soft grass she expected his heels to leave. Nothing. That was very not natural. Katie backed up a step as he hit the first one. This boy and water – he didn’t leave prints but he had footsteps – proper loud ones – she *heard* them. He was just incredibly light on his feet when he wanted to be. Ballet dancers could be heavy and clomping but have stunning grace in the studio. They went up the stairs a way in this step-for-step fashion. Rain had fallen through their

hands but that must have just been a trick on the light. Jack must have one of those static thingies that bent water. The top of the stairs was almost upon Katie. Jack had patted the soaking ground and it became dry instantly. The boy repelled water. Christ, that was the stuff of films and fairytales.

“You’re not real.”

“I’m as real as any of us.” Jack thrust out an arm and made a fist. He punched one of the wooden seats at his side, causing far more damage to himself than it, then held his arm out for Katie to take and inspect. His knuckles were scratched and cuts were already beginning to open. She could just make out one or two black dots which she assumed were tiny splinters. But the cry of pain sounded real enough and he couldn’t fake these injuries.

He searched out her eyes again and Katie, once again, felt herself right on the edge of falling into them. She let go of her guards and reminded herself she trusted Jack; she had to learn to trust people again. Not everybody was out to hurt her. Even in this tiny town which didn’t even seem to have a police station, strangers were mostly going to be friendly and helpful. Paranoia had crept into her consciousness in the past few months and she could hardly remember the last time she’d been able to out for a walk without looking over her shoulder. Until today. Tonight. “I need to go home.”

“I’ll walk with you.”

Katie let him. He told her a bit about the town and how it was actually really old. When it started to rain again, he slid his hat over to her head to keep her long hair from frizzing up even more. He stopped at the end of her street. Katie was flagging and thoughts of her bed tried to strong-arm their way into her mind. Her watch readjust a few minutes before midnight and she yawned whilst trying to keep at least a fraction of her attention on Jack’s tale of getting into some bar brawl a few years ago. He never got to the part where either he or the other guy won before, “Lady Katie, I need to do somethin’. You’re not gonna like me very much for it.”

“I’ve seen the worst a man can do. You have a lot to live up to.” All the same, Jack could be plotting anything. He might confess to being a psychotic murderer or maybe... maybe he was just going to take the Stetson from her and dangle it from the string. “Go for it.”

He leaned in - coincidentally the pair were exactly the same height - and kissed her. A dim glow seemed to spread behind her brown eyes and she knew the brilliance of Jacks’ green ones were warming her from the stomach outwards. It was soft and gentle and their lips seemed to fit together exactly and know just what to do, as though this were not a new experience for Katie. Maybe she had expected fireworks like the stories always promised, maybe she expected it to be rough and intense like everything turned out to be, but she hadn’t expected this.

“Jack, don’t leave me,” she murmured as he pulled away.

“I wish I didn’t have to,” he whispered back then kissed again before putting his arms on her shoulders to her away.

The warmth in her stomach began to fade away as the arms on hers disappeared. Katie opened her eyes and was sure she saw a pair of bright green eyes staring at her. It was such a brief image that it might have been her imagination so she turned and headed for her house. More importantly her bed.

There was a light on in the house so Katie didn’t feel too bad about sneaking in when it was practically tomorrow. She felt in her pocket for the key Adam had lent her – she had meant to get a copy cut today and not got around to it – and opened the door to quiet squeals and giggling from the kitchen. Intrigued, Katie poked her head through to see the cause of the noise.

“What was it like?” Lainy and Adam were sitting opposite two girls who were laughing away and chatting as though they were old friends. “The Grand Canyon just an hours drive from home... must be amazing.”

“Oh, it is. I’m glad my dad moved out there. Just wish he’d done it ten years ago,” said the one with short brown hair and pale, nearly white skin.

“Katie!” Lainy jumped up and grabbed her to pull her into the kitchen. “These two are Dina and Jade. This is their second year here – apparently they’re sado-masochists.”

Katie made a half-hearted attempt at a finger wave and a smile, but she was so dog tired she thought she might just fall down in a minute. “Nice to... it’s nice.” Words were beginning to fail her.

“Now the house is back together, we’re having a party tomorrow evening. Attendance compulsory.”

“Drinking recommended,” added Dina or Jade.

“Clothing optional,” said the other Dina or Jade.

They dissolved into giggles again and Katie couldn’t stop herself from joining in. Laughter was always infectious to her ears and when she managed to get herself together, Katie pointed out, “I’m 16. Not allowed to do any of that stuff.”

“You’re telling me you’ve never had a drink or streaked?”

Katie had drunk before but never more than a glass of wine on special occasions, maybe a few of those sugary alcopops at parties. Nothing more. And she never thought she’d be wasted enough to strip. “Only a little.”

“She’s underage, Dina.”

“And desperate for bed. Again.” Katie shrugged her apologies and went to the stairs. She took her time going up. Leo must be in bed already but that still meant she was up here alone with him. The idea made her nervous. By the time Katie had figured out why she was dreading sleeping tonight – the others might not come up until it was too late – she had used the bathroom and was getting ready for bed after locking her bedroom door. And then, in her pyjamas and curled on top of her bed, she discovered she could not sleep. The light was off and the curtains closed but the moon shone so brightly now through the thin yellow material that every edge of furniture shone silver and every discarded box stood in thick shadow like a tower that might topple onto her any time. Flattened by a box as she slept – what a story that would be. Then, thinking about how ridiculous that was, she looked at the door, got up, unlatched the door and then climbed back into bed. It was stupid to be afraid of the boy she would likely have to live with for the next year. Some part of her kept reminding her she had to be careful but a slightly bigger part insisted she was going to be fine.

“Don’t laugh!” she shouted and worked through the meson the floor. “I’m wearing my bunny PJs.” Katie loped down the stairs, trying to swing herself over the creaky stairs.

The hallway and stairs had all been in darkness when she came in so she hardly noticed the darkness. Then the silence crept in. And everything downstairs was dark and still. Katie stepped into the cool kitchen which suddenly felt very old and cold, as if it was abandoned a long time ago. She rubbed her arms up and down her arms, feeling exposed, vulnerable, and was sure she felt something – residual warmth? – a physical memory of hands that had been there not too long ago. And deeper still were the outlines of other hands that had held her in not such a gentle way. Hands that had left marks on her that may never fade like a scar.

A tiny click sounded out in the hall and then nothing for one breath-holding minute. Then a shuffle over the welcome mat and another click. The door shutting. Katie let out her breath as slowly and quietly as she could. Had this old house simply been settling in the cooler temperatures? *No!* her mind screamed at her and sent impulse upon freezing impulse through to stay silent. Stay still. *There’s someone there. God only knows who it is or what they want. Maybe they want to hurt you or take you away. Maybe they want to take you back to that dark place and never let you come back to the light. So say the fuck still!* But her body didn’t seem to be paying much, or any really, attention to her brain. She watched her arm skitter over the sideboard and then grab the handle of a drawer. It slide open thankfully without a sound but it was full with a chaotic jumble of pens, elastic bands, carrier bags and other miscellany. Nothing useful in there. Well, she could probably suffocate the intruder with a bag or fire a band into his eyes, but that would be the fool’s way. *You’re still moving*, her mind pointed out. Okay so

stupid things were the order of the day right now but those previous options were insanity. She had to draw the line somewhere. The cupboard beneath it revealed a selection of pot and pans. A second cupboard was full of tinned food and packets of stuff Katie dreaded to think about. She'd have to show this new, temporary family of hers what a healthy home cooked meal was all about. And all the while, she knew, the intruder was getting closer to the kitchen, closer to her. He had to be. She hadn't heard the stairs creak or seen a figure pass by the kitchen door into the front room. The next drawer was cutlery – forks, knives, spoons. She really had to get better acquainted with this kit- knives! And yes, there were some sharp and long steak knives tucked away in the back there. Good for stabbing. But it could so easily be turned and used against her. No matter, Katie told herself that she would just work quicker than they could think. If only her brain would co-operate and come up with a plan. Her hand delved into the drawer but everything rattled, and far too loudly for this peaceful house, and she froze hearing some-one, something, shuffling towards her, pushed the drawer shut quickly, grabbing the last item her fingers touched. A spoon. Great. At least a fork was a reasonable weapon to stab with and, if it did not cause any bodily damage, it would be quite painful. But oh no. it was a spoon... and a silly little tea spoon at that. Katie curled her fist around her utensil like she knew how to use it and turned to see a shadow creep across the floor, centimetres away from the open door where a hulking form would surely appear. And appear it did. It stood there and Katie tried to close her eyes, not wanting to look. But she couldn't not look at this huge, quivering shape. Her breath was coming in sharp, shallow rasps which she tried to keep as deep and quiet as she could. In these states of panic, the brain always instructed the lungs to take in as much oxygen as they could and as quickly as they could because that supply might be cut off at any moment. The oxygen was going to be all around her for a very long time, Katie promised herself. If she stood still, maybe the shadow-man would not see her, would not look for her, would go away and leave her alone. Something inside, though, insisted that to shy away from this confrontation would be unwise. This intruder was already staring at her as she stood here with her spoon. Not facing him down would be like letting her fear of the unknown – and what she *did* know about the world – get the better of her. She had spent too long already being scared of things. Katie flipped the spoon in her hand thinking that the weight of it and her bit of strength behind it might give him a nasty bump on the head. She flicked on the light and ran towards the shadow man, aiming the spoon at his face and not looking at him.

“Jesus Christ!” The man threw an arm up to shield his eyes but not fast enough. On a stroke of impulse, Katie thrust the spoon handle up and jabbed it in his eye. He screamed and swore and Katie let go of the bowl of the spoon. The metal handle was lodged between his eye

and eyelid. She looked at the man before her; tall, chunky and wearing dark clothes about a size too small... and all she saw was the pain and lines of blood on his face. Not a man she knew.

“What a welcome!”

“You nearly gave me a heart attack.”

“You might’ve blinded me.”

He kept a hand slapped to the eye she had stabbed while the skin around it turned red. Katie looked down at her hand, still gripping the spoon, and saw blood speckling the metal handle. She threw it to the floor with a clang, wanting it as far away from her as possible. There seemed to be blood on her hands. Stabbing a man who might yet be completely innocent was unforgiveable.

“You really know how to make a guy feel wanted, don’t ya, Kate?”

“Uncle Billy?”

“The very same.”

“What are you doing here? In my house?”

“I was coming to say hi.”

“At three in the morning? And I thought I was keeping strange hours lately.”

A light snapped on in the hallway. “What’s all the noise for?” mumbled Lainy as she padded into the kitchen, rubbing sleep from her eyes. “Who died?”

“Nearly me,” said Uncle Billy and Katie together.

Lainy rushed over to the bleeding man, and after confirming he was in no life-threatening conditioning, shrugged off her robe and offered it to Katie who was shivering. “Put it on.”

She did and then belted it. The dressing gown was quite a bit bigger than her but it was cosy and warm with body heat. “Why are you here?”

“I came to collect my van.”

“Again, at three in the morning?”

“It’s a long walk. Your dad said he left the keys here and even I’m not stupid enough to knock and wake everyone up.”

“So you thought you’d try a little breaking and entering instead?” Katie stalked out of the room, went upstairs to get the van keys, then stomped back down with them. Lainy was standing with Uncle Billy and trying to pry his fingers away from his face. Katie put the keys on the table and sat down, arms folded. “Lainy, I tried to take his eye out with a spoon.”

“Ow ow ow!” he yelped when Lainy prodded the flesh around his left eye.

“He broke in and tried to snoop around while we were sleeping. You had every right to defend yourself. But if anyone asks,” she turned to Billy, “you did this to yourself.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Billy sat down opposite his niece and waited until she was looking at him before he took his hand away from his face. “Look what you did. I might be permanently scarred.”

“And I wouldn’t know anything about that, would I?” Katie slid the keys over. “Good luck starting that heap of junk.”

Lainy soaked a piece of cotton wool in warm water with a drop of antiseptic and tried to clean the marks around his eyes. Billy took the cotton wool from her and did it himself. “Just let me sleep here ’til morning and then I’ll be gone. Stop fussing, woman.”

“Look,” began Lainy in that voice Katie already knew meant people better shut up and listen because she was in charge. “I think you’ll be fine but I want to take you to the medi centre in case there’s infection.”

“Am I your first housemate to be dodging an ABH charge?” There was a silence that Katie would have said was diplomatic. “Oh, I do feel special.”

“For Gods sake, girl. I am fine.”

The more people insist things were okay, the guiltier Katie felt. She knew that things were not fine. Nothing could excuse or justify such violence. She told herself that she had a reason – that man had not – and while that made her feel a bit less bad about it, it did not make it forgiveable. “Uncle Billy, I didn’t mean to hurt you. I never realised it was only you.”

“Girl, this is barely a scratch.” He let Lainy tape a circle of bandage over his eye and tenderly prodded it. “Oh, your Mom sent this down.” He took a letter from the back of his jeans.

“They sent a spy. Make sure I haven’t slashed my wrists yet. Their faith in me is astounding.” The envelope was a large cream one with her name written on it in curlicue lettering. Inside was a sheet of paper crammed with tiny handwriting. Katie listened, with half an ear, to the conversation going on above her as she skimmed through the page.

“I’ll go if I have to but I’m not hurt. I get worse than this from my dog.”

“I just want to be sure.”

“My van’s outside and I have the keys now. Dope me up and see the doctor in the morning. It’s fine.”

“You are not driving with that eye. You’ve got 50% vision and you’ll crash somewhere along the way. I’m not going to be the last person to see you alive and Katie’ll be worried sick.”

That was a true statement but not for the reasons Lainy thought. Uncle Billy could go jump off the nearest cliff for all she cared; he wasn’t a bad person, just insensitive and annoying – really annoying. The last few lines of Mom’s letter had said how much everyone missed her

already and that she didn't think this could wait until she came back home. Another envelope, smaller and stamped with the police crest.

"Anyone still sleep at night around here?" Adam yawned and dragged into the kitchen. He was wearing grey boxers and yanking a t-shirt down over his awesome chest. It was a sight to behold but Katie barely gave him a second glance. "Get that man to hospital," he said, then stopped as if just realising a man with a bandaged eye was sitting at his table with his fiancée and new young charge in the bunny pyjamas. "Wait, why is there a strange, wounded man in my house? And which of my girls tried to kill him?"

Katie just stared at the envelope in her hand and kept turning it over, not brave enough to open it. "He broke in."

"That's my girl." Adam sounded almost proud. "Anyway, you need medical attention, mate."

"I'm not taking advice from a bunch of kids. Mate."

"Uncle Billy, just move. The sooner you're out of my house, the better!"

"Fine. Let's get this over with. Katie, you're driving."

There was brief discussion where Katie pointed out that she was too young to have a license and had never even watched closely when her parents drove. Uncle Billy couldn't drive the van because he was liable to kill them all. It couldn't be Lainy as she would have to stay in the back to look after him. Adam could drive but didn't want to leave a group of sleeping students alone in the house. During the course of the conversation, Uncle Billy swallowed a couple of painkillers dry and started to moan that his eye was really starting to hurt, Leo stomped down and complained he couldn't sleep through this racket then mentioned he could drive, eventually agreed to drive them to the medical centre, Katie hardly looked down at the police envelope but couldn't quite let go of it.

"Leo and Katie can ride in front and I'll stay with Billy. He doesn't look too good. You'll be okay here with the girls, Ad?"

"I don't think Hell opening in the back garden could wake those two."

"We should go. Billy, are you okay to walk to the van?"

He nodded weakly. He had been planning to drive home half an hour ago and he suddenly looked old and fragile. It was amazing how a little blood loss affected a person. Katie did not see her uncle much but they had never really been the best of friends but, looking like the Salvation Army had just spewed him up, she just couldn't find it in her to hate him. Or even dislike him much.

Between the three of the – Lainy, Billy and herself – and as little help from Leo as he could possibly manage, they all got into the van – a funny looking group on an early hours road trip. Adam waved them all off and hurried back inside. There was nowhere Katie wanted to be less than in the passenger seat of this grungy old Transit, in her night clothes, being driven through the pressing dark by Leo. The thin, greasy-haired and dark Leo.

“What you got there?” he asked and jerked a thumb behind him. “Heard you tried to kill him.”

“I thought he was going to attack me. It was self defence.”

“Save your alibi for the cops. A strange man breaks into my house in the middle of the night... he’s either going to kiss me or kill me. Either way, he’s gonna die trying.”

“Remind me to avoid you. Especially when it’s dark.”

“Just saying.”

“Let’s play the quiet game. First one to not be quiet loses.”

The silence only lasted a few seconds before Uncle Billy started muttering about his face and seeing things and doctors who fixed things. Lainy made soothing noises and pulled more tape off the roll to stop him tugging off the bandage.

“Bitch.” Leo looked distinctly unhappy at having to listen to the whining in the back and knowing that Katie had caused this injury meant she was responsible for his whole night – maybe even his life – being ruined regardless of the fact she had been the one scared to death.

“He’s my uncle. I like to think of it as an accident of birth.”

“I like to think you’re an accident waiting to happen.”

“I’m thrilled you think of me at all.” Only she wasn’t. Being thought of by Leo was an extremely worrying prospect especially considering the choice depictions of women in his room. “How are you Uncle?”

“Nearly having my left eye gouged out put a dampener on things but otherways never better.”

“Okey dokey.” Through the mesh Katie could see him kneeling on the floor between it and Lainy and trying not to show the pain she felt sure he was feeling. Maybe it was really not as bad as she imagined. Honestly Uncle Billy might just be sensitive enough to try to hide it from her but it really only made things worse because there must be something underneath the bravado. “Nearly there.”

“I only tried to show you what you could do when you put your mind to it, Kate. This could have been real bad. Just turn that run away impulse into stay and fight and you can do some damage.”

“Thanks.” She left him in Lainy’s capable hands – well they had been capable so far – and turned to the window. The student medical centre was looming up before them; a grey steel and cement building attached to the back of the main college building. It was large enough to have a small car park. Leo swung the van into a space and turned the engine off. He started fiddling with the keys as Katie got out and opened the back to help her uncle and friend out then looked through the drivers’ side window as they helped the man inside. Leo was leaning back in the seat with one arm dangling out of the open window and lighting up a cigarette. “Coming?”

He said nothing and made no attempt to move.

“Whatever.” Katie shrugged and went inside. Whether Leo came inside or not was really of no concern to her one way or the other. It just would have been nice to have another face there.

The medical centre, as soon as she stepped inside and took in the huge, open reception area and the clinical, authoritative atmosphere of it, made Katie feel very small and shy. Hospitals were a strange thing to her, never having been ill enough to stay in one.

“Now, here’s some excitement,” said the woman on reception. “Don’t see one of these every day.” Katie thought she looked a little like her mother with her tight perm and hoop earrings. The woman pressed a button on her phone. “Dr de Rossa. Patient out front for you.” No, her voice put her a good few years younger than Mom. It was the hair, had to be.

A middle-aged man – balding, short and stocky – came out of one of the doors that led God-knew-where. “Ah, Elaine. So lovely to see you again. You should come by ere more often. We need new nurses.”

“Nice try, Dr de Rossa. I’ll work for you when you apologise for failing me my first year.”

“You should have studied more.”

“You shouldn’t have cancelled all of your lectures.”

“Now now. Not all.”

“Sorry to interrupt the reunion but maybe we can get him patched up first,” Katie suggested. Dr de Rossa – she trusted him a little already – manoeuvred Uncle Billy into a chair, then wheeled him off deeper into the centre with Lainy in tow. The woman at the desk asked Katie questions about Uncle Billy and his medical history, she answered what she could. “Do you know where they took him?”

“Hang on, I’ll check.” The woman started tapping things into her computer. Feeling a bit of a draught blowing through the doors, Katie belted the big robe tighter and shifted her weight from foot to bare foot. “Room 3. Through those doors, turn left and it’s at the end. There’s a

waiting room next to it if you want to get yourself together. No offense but I've seen corpses look more lively than you."

"Great start to campus life, right?" She swung through the doors and headed to the room at the end, just poking her head around to see what was happening – the doctor was injecting something into Uncle Billy's face and Lainy was hovering over a covered tray of medical looking lumps and bumps. "It's not as bad as it looks. It's not as bad as it looks." The chant carried her through the next ten minutes or so of waiting, during which time she heard nothing but dared not go back to Room 3 to look. "Barely 24 hours here and I nearly kill my own uncle because he frightened me." It was pretty ridiculous when you thought about it.

A woman wandered through the door and sat down with a cup of coffee. It obviously was not very good coffee because the woman took a sip, pulled a disgusted face and put it on the floor. "They never rush to tell you anything around here. My son fell out of bed," she told Katie.

It probably made her a bad person or something but Katie couldn't find it in her to care that much. Too busy feeling guilty.

"Just bumped his noggin but I thought I'd better get it checked. Just in case."

"There's no doctors or real hospitals?"

The woman – maybe the same age as Lainy, which meant her son could only be a toddler – blew out her cheeks and waved her hands in front of her. This medical centre, seemingly built for the academy, was it, the first and last lines in medical intervention for Northwood citizens. Not a thought that inspired a whole lot of confidence.

"Miss Cartwright?" Dr de Rossa sat down opposite her. "Your uncle should be fine in a while."

"Did I – I mean, is he really hurt?"

"I think the shock hurt him more than anything. We see a lot of similar injuries – rugby players mainly."

The sun was just a couple of hours away. Had the last hour just been some twisted nightmare that she would wake from in just a few hours? Had she fallen asleep and was actually safe and warm in her own bed instead of freezing out here? True or not, those thoughts were so much easier to contemplate than she had nodded off for an hour or two then woken up to this twisted night time where she turned into the attacker instead of the attacked. "Lainy – Elaine – used to be a nurse?"

"She was my star student," he whispered like it was a secret. "I taught her sports therapy for a few years. She was good, really good, but..." he shrugged.

"Things happen."

“Anyway, she’ll stay for a while. You did the right thing bringing him straight in. Don’t get yourself upset.” The doctor smiled at her and handed her a wad of tissues from the box on the coffee table. A crackle of static sounded from a hidden speaker and asked him to see a patient in the pharmacy. No matter how often Katie repeated how her uncle was fine, it wasn’t her fault, Katie just couldn’t forgive herself. She felt a sudden rush of love for her Uncle Billy. It could have been tiredness talking but mortally wounding some-one and hearing them forgive that made even jerks like him appear loveable. The clock on the wall ticked seconds, then minutes before she felt brave enough to go next door and see him.

She braved herself to see her uncle stripped and squeezed into a rustly hospital gown, lying in a bed surrendered to tubes, monitors, needles and drips. She expected that but what she saw was a man in clothes a size too small, propped against a load of pillows with some bruising around his left eye and playing catch with Lainy and his van keys. Katie took a deep breath and let it out as a huge, shuddering sob.

“Hey, what’s all this for?” Lainy got up and wrapped the girl in a hug. “Relax, girl. Look, he’s okay. Be back annoying you before you know it.”

“What did you tell the doc?”

“He didn’t ask. He knows I’d tell him if I knew. Which I don’t. I didn’t see anything happen.”

The three of them sat in the tiny room until sunrise trying to think of games to play to pass the time and with the nurse checking every so often. Trying to guess the mans pulse each time had provided some amusement. Sad but true. Just after six, Dr de Rossa came and said Uncle Billy could leave. Leo drove the four of them back to the old house and then handed the keys back to Billy.

“Maybe I can get some damn sleep before noon,” he grumbled and slouched off.

Katie wasn’t entirely happy with him driving the four hours home but was just too tired to argue. She half-hugged him goodbye.

“Come on, you can do better than that.”

“Don’t push it.”

When Uncle Billy had promised to tell anyone who asked he had hurt himself in a disagreement with a lamp post, the two girls watched him leave and then collapsed on the sofa for a few hours – not enough energy to navigate stairs.

Something dug into Katie’s side when she sat down. She shoved a hand in the pocket and moved the folded letter until it was not digging in her, brain barely registering what it was. There

was a party to get ready for later and being unconscious until then seemed like a very appealing prospect.

“Everything okay?” came a voice when Katie thought she had barely closed her eyes longer than a blink. Determined to will herself back to sleep she kept her eyes tightly closed and tried not to listen to the conversation between Adam and a far too alert Lainy. “Did you get on okay down there?”

“Fine. Her uncle patched up and gone. Leo still hates everyone and everything. Katie spoke to the doc but he promised he wouldn’t say anything.”

“You’re sure he didn’t?”

“If he did, she wouldn’t...” then, just as the conversation was getting interesting, sleep crept up on Katie and took her under.

CHAPTER FIVE

The party was themed – SAVE ME, the banner hung over the door read. It was all about saving. Jaye and Dina dragged Katie to the Levenson Academy's swimming pool by the leisure centre. There were lifeguard uniforms there.

"I'm not sure we should be in here."

"The door was open." Yes. Yes it had been... after Dina had slipped the lock. She had obviously done this before. The lock was just a simple slip latch, Katie could have flipped it if she had not been so worried about getting caught. She needn't have fretted though because discarded fast food wrappers dotted the floor and some poor soul was walking around with only one flip flop.

"The public pool is in the centre and this is just ours. Kids use it as a hang out."

Jaye opened the door to a closet of floats, foam lane markers and lifeguard outfits.

"Everyone comes here. I'm a guard here so I give you permission to be here."

"That makes me feel better." Katie hung back by the door and let the other two girls start rummaging around for enough stuff to make three outfits. "It just doesn't feel right. I mean, some-one has to come in to clean up, right?"

"You would think so. But not 'til term starts in two weeks. No-one's going to even notice this stuff's missing."

Dina held out a bundle of clothes and shoved her towards the changing room door.

"These should fit."

Katie opened the door and stood in the opening. It was not a huge changing room but it was cool, echoey and banks of lockers split the room in three. The lockers blinded you to the rest of the room. Anything could be in the room and sneaking up on a person before they even saw it. "It's too cold in there. I'll change by the pool." The windows were shuttered just enough to let light in but prying eyes out. Katie hoped it was enough to stop passers-by from seeing her but considering she was not changing completely and so many people had seen most of her body one more wouldn't matter. "I look like I'm drowning in these clothes."

"Don't worry, they have to be loose so you can strip them off easier."

"There's gonna be stripping?"

"Don't stress," Jaye assured her. "You don't have to. It's just what we have to do when we dive in."

Katie changed back into her ordinary clothes, went back into the guard room and added a smaller t-shirt to her pile – she was bound to spill something during the party. The three of them walked back to the old house and dumped their clothes in their rooms. Lainy had laid iced drinks out and the three of them downed them before Katie offered to help Lainy decorate while the other two excused themselves to slink off again. The day was a hot one and it seemed even hotter once she started rushing around. There were precious few decorations to be put up – just the banner over the door and a few streamers and strips of brightly coloured paper. Katie ripped a piece off and scribbled BATHROOM on it in thick black marker. Then she tore another load off and wrote KEEP OUT on them, intending to stick them on all the bedroom doors. After that, she helped Lainy fetch some drinks and set them out with chips and dips. By all accounts, most people had been instructed to bring their own drinks. Then it was time for Katie to go have a shower and get ready for the party. Amazingly, she was looking forward to it. Being in a room with so many people she didn't know should have scared her – would have scared her just a day or two ago, only now Katie was almost excited. Nervously excited because of the uncertainty, but excited nonetheless.

As she was changing into the lifeguard uniform the girls had picked for her,, Katie heard whispering voices and something large and heavy being dragged up the front garden path. It wasn't even dark yet and parties had already arrived. A quick check of her watch said it was only 5 in the afternoon. The party started at seven and no-one ever turned up on time. Coming two hours early was unheard of. That meant someone was creeping around. Again. Having people skulking around outside was getting boring. She decided to ignore it. Let someone else worry about an intruder. There was a party to get ready for and she wanted to have plenty of time to grill her housemates about the people who would be coming. No-one could really tell her anything, though, because it was just pot-lock who had gotten wind of it and decided to come along.

As the sun dipped towards the horizon, Jaye grabbed Katie by the shoulders and propelled her out of the front door. By the front door was a tall lifeguards chair, the like of which she had only seen on TV when guards were keeping watch over a beach. This was what the noise must have been. "Please tell me you're not planning to climb that thing."

"I do it every day." Jaye was half dressed in her shorts and a t-shirt so tight and short it was definitely not regulation uniform. She climbed the rungs to the seat and gazed around. "Your shift starts at eight. One hour, then it's Adam and then me again until midnight. It was meant to be Dina but she's scared of heights."

"You didn't know that?" The pair had given the impression they were best friends.

“She never used to be,” Jaye shrugged. “I think the Grand Canyon did things to her. Maybe I shouldn’t threaten to throw her over.”

“Probably not. We do an hour each, right, so what happens at midnight?”

“It’s a free for all for those who haven’t flaked.”

Jaye gave a short blast on her whistle and ordered Katie inside. She went and not long after, the first few people arrived. Adam stole a few dances with her before her shift on the tower. It was her job to make sure she only let the sober ones in – drunk students tended to wreck the place – but she couldn’t quite keep track of who was going in and out since everyone had also dressed up. There were doctors and nurses, more lifeguards and drowning victims, even a couple of people in suits with a sticker that read GOD. Well, he was the ultimate saviour she supposed. One poor sod had gotten completely the wrong end of the stick and turned up completely kitted out as a piggy bank. At least he was a memorable one.

“Hey, guardy guard. Girl,” some-one hollered up at Katie, slurring words and so well-costumed she couldn’t tell if it was a boy or a girl. “Come down. I’ll buy a drink.”

“I’m fine, thanks.”

“Okay.” Suddenly swept away by a group of friends or maybe other random drunk people, the person wandered happily away.

Drunk people were best happy. Katie spent quite a while just sitting on her tower and watching people whooping and wailing. A party was happening a few streets away too, nearer the academy, she had heard a few people talking about it down at the pool. No doubt there were quite a few students there but there seemed to be plenty here too. Definitely many more than she would remember in the morning.

“Hey. Time to clock off.” Adam was climbing up the wooden slats, squeezing into the guard seat with her and looking suitably idiotic in a Superman costume, complete with underpants on the outside.

“Already? I was kind of enjoying it up here just looking at everything. I guess I felt like I was in charge.”

“Must be the uniform. Scoot over.”

Katie shifted over as far as she could on the platform, breathed in, watched him trying to figure out if he could get into the space without hurting something vital. He couldn’t. “I really don’t think this is made for two.”

“Sure it is.” He moved so quickly that Katie was perched on his lap before she knew what was going on. “See? Perfect fit.”

“Adam!”

“Hey, I’m just being Clark to your Lois and stopping you from falling.”

“I don’t like falling.” Katie peeled his hands from her waist with a smile she prayed would stay there just long enough for her to make her escape. “But ladders I like.” Adam had let go of her easily enough and she knew he had only been messing with her but the experience had shaken her to her roots. Back in the house, a hand held out a plastic cup filled with something fizzy and sweet looking. She downed the drink in three long gulps, concentrating so hard on keeping her happy face on that she did not recognise what the drink was or the person holding it. If she had, a lot of the coming events might have made sense.

Or not.

“She was never told?” the person in front of her was saying as she drank. “Man, I knew after a few weeks but I was older.”

“We can’t say anything yet. Not ‘til she’s old enough,” said her friend.

“It just doesn’t seem right.”

“That’s just the way it is. The orders are to keep shtum and...”

“Really sucks for the new girl.”

“Yeah.”

“I wonder if she’s worked anything out yet.”

Katie scrunched the cup and threw it in the nearest bin and headed for the stairs, pushing past the two girls who were speaking by them. They both had their backs to Katie and she tried to work her way between them. “Sorry,” she apologised as she knocked the dark haired one but the girl seemed not to have felt it or even moved. It was almost as if she had walked through the girl not past her. Apart from a rough line of people stood outside the bathroom the top floor of the house was quiet. Katie kicked a plastic cup off the top step and forced herself to sit down. It was tempting to just carry on down and spend the rest of the night hiding out in her room but that would be like admitting defeat. Plus she was starting to feel funny. Adam grabbing for her had shaken her a bit – she just needed to calm down for a minute. Take some time to breathe. Everything was fine, the party was fun, life was looking good. At least, those were the things Katie kept telling herself to stop from panicking. Something bad had happened a long time ago but that was all over now. And still she couldn’t let herself relax and just enjoy her new life.

“Not exactly a social butterfly are you?”

“More of a moth.”

“Gotcha.” Jaye slotted her titchy backside into the gap between Katie and the wall. “But you’re up for a laugh, I give you that. Last year’s girl wouldn’t get on the tower so yay you.”

“Yay me,” she echoed, not entirely sure what she was cheering for.

“Adam said you pulled a Roadrunner when he got up. I don’t know why – that’s your business – but he’s a good guy. A little crazy but, trust me, that helps around here. He’d never let anything happen to you if he could stop it.”

“I know.” And she really did. “Ad’s a sweetie. I just have this gut reaction when men grab me. Especially if I don’t know them that well.”

“I was in a relationship recently. Maybe last winter. Or autumn. I forget. Anyway, that ended...abruptly. Everything was going great and then suddenly he stopped talking to me. I thought he’d just snap out of it and start loving me but one day I woke up and there was no-one in bed beside me. All his stuff was there but no him. I waited and waited but...”

“He just up and left you there?”

Jaye nodded sadly and Katie saw a hint of shadow cross her face and then it was gone, a moment so brief it might well have been a trick of the light. Katie didn’t think so. Katie thought she had seen that look somewhere before. “I heard a rumour he’s in prison. Point is, I never thought I’d trust a man again.”

“But you don’t run screaming from them.”

“There was screaming? Well, the dirty bugger didn’t tell me that bit,” Jaye said and waggled her eyebrows. “A little bird tells me you copped an eyeful last night.”

It took her a few seconds to send her memory that far back – 24 hours or 24 months. “Oh, yeah. He came into the kitchen with no shirt on.”

“Lucky you. Bet that’ll keep you warm this winter.”

“Jaye!” Katie ran a finger around the collar of her t-shirt. She’d never realised before that the phrase ‘hot under the collar’ was so literal.

“Seriously, there are good men out there. Just don’t go looking for one. He’ll find you when the time’s right.” With that Jaye got up and elbowed her way through the crowd to the bathroom with more strength than seemed quite natural for a girl her size. Lifeguards probably had to do loads of weight training to drag people through water. Maybe she’d go speak to someone about a job guarding the pool. Katie got up and stepped down every step slowly, preparing to lose herself in the crowd. Which she did for over an hour. An hour of dancing, chatting and hollering at Dina to put some clothes on. Dina had decided to go as the person Katie and Jaye should be saving and had plumped for a bikini and wet hair. Strangely she was not getting much attention. After a while, when Adam and Jaye had tagged each other by the front door, he came over to Katie and tried to apologise for scaring her. “It’s not your fault.”

“I feel like I crossed some sort of line.”

“Most girls would say no but since my line is about here...” she drew a finger line in the air between them. “Don’t worry.”

“Dance with me?” When she hesitated, Adam promised “no touching.”

They danced, or something vaguely resembling it, to something repetitive and dull and then he wandered off to find Lainy. Half an hour more of being touched and leered at by guys with breath that could light gas fires was her limit. She finished the drink she’d left on the table as she danced and slapped away a final hand away, which sent her scurrying for the place she now thought of, for some reason, as her happy place.

Her safe place.

CHAPTER SIX

There were things out there.

Standing in the middle of this wasteland, this pre-historic desert, there was nothing to be seen for miles and miles. Sand, rock, dried grasses, stretched out to meet the horizon and then a sky so bright and cloudless it looked white and searing. The sun baked the parched and cracked earth. And Katie stood there. Her feet felt as though they were blistering on the ground. She was barefoot. No protection between her sensitive sole and the heat. The sun set her skin sizzling beneath her clothes. Sun stroke cruelly stayed just out of reach and she was horribly aware of her burning flesh, almost cooking. It hurt to move even an inch. Katie looked down. Thick ropes bound her wrists together at her back. A chain linked the rope to the ground, driven in deep.

She wiggled her hand, knowing somehow that she would not get free of these things holding her still. Each knot or twist in the ropes felt like a knuckle, calloused and unrelenting. Every twist of her wrists carved another angry, red abrasion across her wrist. Tears welled up and a few snuck out of her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. Katie stuck her tongue out and tried to catch those few drops of hot, salty moisture before this terrible heat made them evaporate, knowing she could not afford to waste a single drop of liquid on tears that no-one would see.

Then something yanked on the chain, pulling her unsuspecting arms down and wrenching a hearty scream from her. Then the chains released and Katie resumed her straight and limp pose, using as little energy as she could. Then it pulled her again and let go. Then nothing for a few minutes. Precious time to wonder why she was out here, how she had got here, whether she would get home before the sun fried her.

“HELP ME! SOMEBODY HELP ME.” There was no answer for a very long time. Katie imagined that some-one, even some-one very far away, had heard her cry for help and was springing into action as she waited. But, after a while of nothing but heat and a horizon that hurt to look at, she accepted that help was not coming. Knowing that made it easier to stand here and not try to resist anything else that happened. “Where’s a hero when you need one?” Then she stopped speaking because her mouth was dry and her throat scratchy.

The chain sank deeper into the earth and tugged Katie down towards the ground. He crouched as low to the ground as she could without getting down on the ground, and tried to hold onto the ropes – wrapping her hands around whatever slack there was and pulling. The unseen

hands at the other end – she could tell it was a set of hands pulling her down by the start-stop motion – were stronger. She screamed again as the rough ropes bit into her. “No, you’re not taking me down there,” Katie ground out at the earth. And then the chain disappeared almost completely and stopped pulling. Katie’s wrists were touching the ground but she was being tugged no further, just held there. Katie scrunched herself up into a hot, sticky, sore little ball trying to make herself as small as possible. She kept a careful watch on the chain sure that it would start moving and take her under the moment she took her eyes off it. Watching so carefully that she did not notice a breath of breeze stir up dust behind her. Something – not quite the rough and tight hands of the rope – latched on to her ankles and yanked them from under her, twisting hard enough that she corkscrewed in the air and thudded down on her back, screaming as she felt at least two layers of skin peeling away from her back, with her wrists bound above her head and her feet near immovable and feeling like they weren’t actually hers.

Forget about conserving energy – what would she need energy for anyway – or keeping her wet tears inside a dehydrated body, Katie screamed and cried as long and loud as she could. Tied down and unable to turn her head enough to focus on something solid, the only thing to look at was that shiny sky and the sun like a gold disc reflecting itself down on her over and over again. Katie closed her eyes but the vista had burned itself so indelibly on her retinas that it was just like having open eyes. Her already tight skin was stretched even more – slices and lesions in her skin opened up and the raw flesh beneath started to sizzle and smell. It was a relief when enough slack crept into the shackles to allow Katie to turn her top half over to the hot soil, knowing it would hurt just as much but a different kind of hurt. One that was constant, true, but one which would not happen time and time again whenever a layer of skin was seared right through. And what would happen when there was no skin, no flesh left? Muscle? Bone? Would it end there? But the back... skin there was faster to heal. That could break and burn and yes it would hurt and yes she would scream and cry as she was doing now with the scraps of energy left in the tank, the tiny bit of her that still resisted this death by sun, but it would repair without her breaking it apart with every breath.

Katie watched her tears soak into the hard earth, staining it a darker red. The colour was reminiscent of dried blood. The comparison came unbidden and thoroughly unwanted but so easily. If she stopped crying – it was serving no purpose but tiring her out - stopped turning the ground that awful colour then maybe the thought would go away. But that wasn’t the way it worked. A thought like that was like a scab or a paper cut – once you knew it was there you can’t stop picking at it. And making it worse.

It was in the middle of these thoughts that Katie became aware of the sound. A distant hissing. How long had that sound been there? All the time while she was contorted over here? She opened her mouth to yell for help but found she had to take a deep breath and try to work some saliva into her mouth first. As she concentrated on that, the slices across her body momentarily forgotten in favour of the hope of rescue, the hissing sound seemed to track around her in a wide circle. It was watching. The sharp memory of that blinding sky and a neck so fried it had practically seized up kept her from turning once more to look around her. It really mattered none what might be out there. Katie thought, in some far off part of her mind that was not really hers, that she had seen the human race at its' most depraved and primal and nothing more could frighten her. It was sunstroke talking – had to be. But everything still seemed so real, so present.

And then the hissing got louder, they – it? How many were there? – got closer and morphed seamlessly into whistling. Just a high, thin, constant whistle like Moms old kettle. No. it was getting closer, not whistling but still hissing. The whistling was in her head, she knew – a trick the counsellor had taught her to distract herself, to take herself away from scary situations. Pity that really only worked in her head when the real danger was out here. The technique was probably designed for imagined danger. Externalise. That had been a buzzword. If she sang the rhyme she was silently whistling then maybe she'd scare it away. Very maybe.

“Jack and Jill,” she began and started coughing after those three words. Every breath was dry and dusty, filled with the fetid dirty stench of the ground. It was so much easier to focus on remembering the words to this little rhyme Dad had confused her with until she was 10 and which Dan had suddenly understood just three months ago. It was a shame, Dan should have enjoyed at least a few more years of mud pies and climbing trees before learning that the world could hurt innocent people at every turn but there had really been no choice. Not when she too had seen people suffer for no reason. No. this train of thought was definitely not easier.

“Went up the hill.”

The hissing sound was close. It seemed high up and she sent silent thanks – to who? – that it was not a snake. Then an imaginary hand shot out and snatched them back. Whatever was hissing must be bigger, badder than a snake. Bizarrely, she pictured Leo and the drawings of demons covering his walls. The thing wasn't quite close enough to cast a shadow over Katie.

“Though they knew they shouldn't oughta.”

She bent down as far as she could, feeling the skin on her neck cracking right across and not even feeling it. The heat was so intense and had been pounding down on her for what seemed like so very long that she was numb to any sensation, unable to process it. She pressed her head

to the hot ground for a second and whispered down into a crack that might have gone straight down to hell for all she cared. "Please save me." Above her, the hissing was replaced with the gruesome crunch of bones popping, flesh folding in on itself, muscles ripping and twisting and reforming. A huge shadow fell across her and Katie shivered. Whether it was because she had gotten quite cold or because the outline she could see resembled nothing she knew – human or animal.

"God knows," she managed before a glob of something hot and wet and viscous landed at the top of her spine.

"What they did up there."

This shape hanging over her, slobbering over her like the juiciest chop in the window, was big. It was tall and hulking and had lumps and bumps in places no man should have them. It looked like Predator from that film she'd seen on the school trip last year. It breathed in and out as raspy as if its throat was coated in sandpaper. It just stood there some invisible-to-the-naked-eye laser glare boring holes into her head. And it just stood there. Katie took a deep breath.

"But now they've got a daughter," she spat out and threw herself onto her back all in a rush. The thing, a dark shape against the bright sky, stared at Katie for a long second. Then it flexed its' neck, or the flab of muscle that attached the head to the body, and she grimaced, listening to more unnatural cracks and crunches, but could not look away. Her own curiosity demanded she keep watching this strange figure. And then it leaned down until it was so near her face that she could see dull blue spheres that might be eyes, a ragged slash that dripped and drooled and probably was the most refined mouth such a creature needed. And then it was close enough that she could feel its' warm, sweet breath on her face. Katie blinked her sore eyes, longing to itch them but lacking the energy to move her arm even if it hadn't been tied down, and wondered if she had the will to open them again.

Katie could hear voices, faint and hushed. There was something sharp in her arm and a warmth spread all over her body – one she wanted to just curl up in and refuse to crawl out from.

"Thank God someone found her."

"I wonder what she was doing down there in the first place."

"It's weird but nothing seemed wrong earlier. She looked okay."

"She freaked when you got too handsy right?"

There was a pause. Had anyone got too friendly with her? All Katie remembered was sitting on something really high, then there was music and voices, so many voices, and then things got all blurry. It felt important that she should force herself to remember recent events but

her brain just flat refused to put any detail into the night. If it was still night. It had been dark, and then there had been a bright light so harsh it hurt to look at it.

Katie dreaded having to open her eyes in case she only saw that endless sky and this lovely glow inside turned raw and itchy under her skin but she would have to wake up, rejoin the land of the living. But not yet.

“Maybe we should call her parents. They’d want to know about this.”

“Bad idea, Adam. We can’t risk her leaving town, her education, her new life just because some psycho roofied her. I won’t.”

“I don’t want to either. But she’s just a kid. I’d kill anyone if who didn’t tell me about my daughter.”

“I’ll bear that in mind. You saw her when she came in. Doped out but otherwise fine.”

Katie felt better than fine and probably would until this injection of sedative wore off. She dragged her eyes open a crack. Above was a tiled ceiling with a couple of halogens set into it, turned down to a dim glow. There were curtains drawn around her bed though hers was the only bed in the room that was occupied. Even breathing was an effort. Sitting up, which she desperately wanted to do to stretch her stiff and acid-heavy muscles, would be a big no-no for a few hours at least. There was a person slumped in the chair beside her bed. Being frightened was not even an option, - she had been so scared of so much for so long that some combination of that and the drugs had simply erased the word *fear* from her vocabulary. At least for now. She tried to swivel her head and succeeded in moving a whole millimetre. Instead, she inched a hand across the bed and let it swing down, hoping to touch the figure’s own hand or knee. And then her hand touched another. It did not feel right, as though it were solid but somehow not – Katie thought of candyfloss, fluffy and pink to see and then dissolving into sugar and air as soon as it touched your lips. The figure twined his fingers into hers and they stayed like that for a few minutes, both half-asleep but neither wishing to wake the other. Katie felt sure the hand she was holding should have been scuffed and scarred where it was smooth and soft... and it belonged to a boy, not one she needed to be wary of but not one that she knew either.. That was a paradox if there ever was one.

“Hey,” he murmured. “You’re okay now. This is a safe place.”

She wanted to tell him that she knew that but never got the chance. The next moment chased the words away. The boy lifted his head and leaned forward. Shiny green circles shone out of his shaded face. They were so beautiful that Katie really didn’t want to look away from then – not even when Dr de Rossa came in and inspected some medical equipment she couldn’t

be bothered to look at. None of it mattered. Not the tubes or the injections or this hospital room – she felt safe and wanted and that was the best feeling.

“We must stop meeting this way, Miss Cartwright. People will talk.”

“Let them.”

“Very well. I took blood and it’s being tested but you were so out of it when you were brought in that I’m pretty sure you were slipped Rohypnol at some point. That’s the name for –“

“The date rape drug.” Katie felt tears drowning her eyeballs and turned to the side to let them fall, soaking the pillow but everything seemed to dry up when those striking green eyes found hers. “No-one did anything.”

“I don’t think so but you wouldn’t remember if they did.”

“I just know, okay. Nothing happened, no one tried to screw me.”

“How can you be sure?”

Because it doesn’t feel like it did last time. But she just shrugged.

“Please just rest here and be sure to let Lainy know if you have any headaches or nausea. People use all sorts to make the drug go further,” He left an old magazine on the rolling table and strode out with a smile back at his patient that made the doctor seem like the friendliest medic she’d ever met. The last lot had been all poking and prodding and photographing every mark on her body, new and old. It was doubt and questions and making her feel like a victim who should be ashamed of herself. Or a criminal for daring to make the complaint.

“Sorry.”

“For?” the boy asked. “Somethin’s making you cry. I hope it’s not me.”

“A bit.” Her throat was hurting and the boy loosed his grip just long enough to pour some water and help her sit long enough to sip at it. But Katie found even that tiny movement exhausting and had to lie straight back down. “You’re sitting here with me when everyone else is just out there talking about me.” That was strangely worse than anything else. Worse than people talking to her, telling her what she had been through, what she should be feeling.

“You looked so tiny and young lying here all alone. It feels wrong to leave you.”

“You don’t even know me.”

“Strike one, Lady Katie. I’ve known you for weeks, you just don’t remember me.”

“I remember your eyes.” It must be impossible to forget eyes like that, just like it must be impossible not to remember the round, soft face that surrounded them, or the name that personified them. Impossible but there it was. She had forgotten. Had she ever known? Everything seemed to be getting far-off in her head and she surrendered to a deep, dreamless sleep crashing over her.

Just after noon the following day, after a nice nurse called Sam had sat with her to chat about her new classes and hobbies – though Katie knew she was only making sure she ate something substantial and kept it down – Dr de Rossa fetched in some papers to sign and let Adam walk her home. The day was bright again but there was a bit of a breeze in the air. Not many people had decided to go out but there was the obligatory group of kids kicking a ball around a patch of grass. She watched them for a minute, then looked over at her escort. The journey might have been uncomfortable if they had not been on speaking terms but the pair had kept up a steady stream of inane chatter since leaving the medical centre. Not that Katie even knew half of what she was saying. She was bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet, suddenly full of energy and knowing only one way to get rid of it. Wanting just the one way. “Race you home?”

“Seriously? You want to race?”

“Afraid you can’t keep up?”

“There is no challenge I will not except if it involves competition. But you’ve still got drugs in your system. It’d be taking advantage. I’d win. You’d strop. Lainy’d kill me.” His voice withdrew into itself and his eyes flicked from side to side, clearly weighing up his options. “Worth the risk.” They started running and kept pace with each other for a minute and then Adam went haring off down the street. “Too easy.” And then he disappeared around a corner and left Katie jogging slowly behind him.

If Katie had gauged the distance between her house and the student medical centre well enough from the other nights’ drive well enough, Adam would be out of puff and ready to drop about a third of a mile from home while she was still going strong. This urge to run had been building, almost unnoticeably, for a couple of days and had just spilled over into activity today. The thought of running through a town she hardly knew should have made her wary but she hardly noticed the buildings passing her by; concentrating on the steady thump of her scruffy trainers on the uneven waste ground and smooth tarmac, listening to her own controlled breathing, feeling the jarring impact of the hard ground vibrating up her long legs. It was all so familiar. Changing gear after a few hundred metres was just automatic. Keeping going took a little bit of effort but she grinned, proud of herself, that she had forced herself to keep going. It was only another half-mile home. *Out of practice*. The dregs of sedative in her system filled her still stiff and sore muscles with lactic acid and Katie ached to stop but no. Stopping now would be horrible for who knew when she would feel this way again. Better just to keep running until she crashed through the front door and pray that she would never stop feeling this good. Because

it had been so easy just to decide never to run again I case something bad happened. Better just to keep up the pretence and then run away to a strange town and try to live a normal student life where bad things still happened. There was no one thing that caused people to be so cruel to each other – no single activity that must be avoided in order to be safe. Katie decided firmly, and with just a touch of determination that se had been missing, that she enjoyed running, was good at it and sod anyone who made her think otherwise.

At the end of Newton Street, where the house was, she caught up with Adam who was crouched low and holding a fence post whilst gasping for air. “Don’t... challenge... me again,” he wheezed.

“You took the dare.”

“I’m a bloke. I can’t let... a girl... beat me this... way.”

“Come on. Let’s get you up.” Kate watched him claw his way up to a standing position, jogged on the spot while Adam took a few gulps of air then took his hand and towed him home.

Once through the front door he crumbled to the ground and Katie sat near the bottom of the stairs watching him and struggling not to laugh. “I have a confession.”

“You’re Wonder Woman on steroids.”

“I’m a pro distance runner.”

“Cheater.”

“Not entirely. See, I haven’t run in months... not really, so I thought this would kill me you know. But it was so easy. It just all came back to me.”

“Why did you stop? You seem to enjoy beating the boys.”

She shrugged. “Things happen. I lost an important race and my confidence was shot. Then there was the move out here which just about took forever.”

“Noting but time now.”

“Yeah. I’ll get back into it soon. I guess I just felt like doing not much of anything lately.”

“Well no-one expects you to run as soon as you get here. It’s been too hot anyway. Tell you what, we’ll go down and speak to Roy tomorrow, see if there’s a charity run or something before term starts. That way you can run and just drop out if it’s too much. No harm done.”

“Why wait?” Though she knew really that Adam was not going to let her out of this house today. If she had still been living with her parents Katie was sure she would have thrown the mother of all hissy fits, yelled that they were treating her like a china doll and stormed off upstairs. She smiled at the scene in her head. Today, she was more than happy to do exactly as she was told and be taken care of by her handsome guardian who was definitely *not* too old to be

having delicious fantasies about. Here – in her home, she grinned again – no-one was tiptoeing around her on eggshells, she didn't have to pretend to be over it and fine in case anyone worried.

“So what was this big race” Adam asked, having finally managed to crawl from the front door to the settee in the front room. “I don't know much about ... much.”

Katie chucked a cushion at him and he neatly blocked it with a kung fu move. That made Adams previous statement redundant. They both knew it. “Where's Lainy? The others?”

Adam appeared not to notice the change in subject. “She's introducing them to the supermarket I think. I expect tears and about ten years of therapy so Katie-sitting seemed like the better option.”

Katie got up and pulled another board game from the pile and thrust it at him – Scrabble – one of her favourites, and settled on the floor in front of him with the stereo slowly hissing into life. “Strike one, Adam.” She never made baseball puns – must have heard it somewhere. “I'm very demanding.”

Time passed, CDs changed, she was just counting up the scores on their second game – one all – when the door banged open and Lainy, Leo, Jaye and Dina took it in turns unloading bags from a supermarket van. Well, she assumed it was a delivery van – Adam wouldn't let her go out to help. During their games, Katie had learned they only did the big supermarket shop once every couple of months as most things could be bought from the mini-markets and convenience stores in town. That was good. Having to trek a mile to the bus terminal and then journey another half hour on the top deck next to some weirdo who wore cabbage leaves for shoes strangely lacked much appeal. She was, however, allowed to help put everything away although neither Lainy nor Adam were very happy about it. “Look, even I can't get into much trouble chucking tins in the cupboard and ice cream in the freezer. I'm not that talented.”

“Oh, Katie,” whined Jaye. “I wish we hadn't let you go off alone last night. If something terrible had happened... I feel so guilty.”

Katie opened the door to the fridge and took her time rearranging milk and juice cartons before shutting it and answering without looking at Jaye. “Don't. Don't feel bad for me, don't feel responsible, don't think it could have been different if you'd come with me. Things happen. So don't.”

Jaye glanced at Lainy - a look which told Katie everything she didn't want to know or even think about. They felt sorry for her. Presumably it was about the previous night but sympathy was the one emotion Katie couldn't quite deal with today. It seemed wrong to tell them both to snap out of it but just as the thought was forming, Adam beat her to it.

“If I hear any of those words again today, there will be problems.” He flipped the latch on the window, pushed it as wide open as it would go and relieved Katie of those oh-so-heavy packets of pasta sauce. Jaye bounded off upstairs and slammed the door to the room she shared with Dina. Dina seemed to be a little shier than her friend but there had been moments, like at the pool, when she seemed more confident, more sure of herself. Perhaps she just needed time to warm to the new people in her life. It could be that she just felt bolder with her friend there as back-up. The feeling was alien to Katie. Another feeling swirled at the bottom of her stomach, a tingly sensation she couldn’t quite put her finger on. The claustrophobia that came with it was one she knew all too well. The claustrophobia was not a fully fledged fear of enclosed spaces – which would have been extremely not fun given the hours each day she would soon be spending cooped up in her room – and when she walked over and leaned towards the opening of the window she felt better right away. The older couple had been squabbling about where the furniture polish was meant to be kept when a memory came slamming into her head so fast and sharp that Katie had to voice it.

“Was there someone at the hospital last night? I mean, besides you two?”

“I don’t think so, hon. Why do you ask?”

“Well, I heard you and the doc talking. And he came in for a minute but I’m sure there was somebody at my bedside holding my hand. I think he was there the whole night too.”

“I didn’t see anyone,” Lainy insisted, a touch too quickly, as though that had been an over-learned response. “You, Ad?” Adam shook his head. “Maybe you just remembered someone from the party. Or a hallucination. Those drugs hit you pretty hard.”

“Probably. I don’t remember much anyway, just his eyes and he kept telling me everything was okay now and I believed him.”

“Hang on,” Adam held up his hand. “It was a he? What if it was your attacker.”

Katie shuddered, thinking, for the instant she would allow herself, of dull blue eyes and grabbing hands. “It wasn’t. There’s no rational explanation except I know it wasn’t. I know what danger looks like and that room was the safest place I’ve known.”

“That’s what Rohypnol does. It makes you less aware of risk.”

“No, it makes you less able to process that risk and fight it. I saw a lot of kids brought in all doped up on my placement.”

“That’s not what I heard.”

“How many times, Adam? Watching Casualty is hardly reliable.”

“But they have doctors on the writing staff.”

“Seriously, there’s not even a real place called Tellytubbyland.”

He made a disappointed face. This was what Katie had been missing the last few months. Normality. People discussing such mundane things as TV and not feeling as though they had to make her the centre of every conversation. Then she thought of her family and decided she ought to go up to her room and call them. Maybe tomorrow though. Uncle Billy would have reported back that she was actually managing to feed herself, and she didn't want to call them so soon and give them cause to worry she was not coping on her own.

"Oh, I was going through my washing earlier – found this in my dressing gown." Lainy went to the metal letter rack nailed to the wall and fetched a folded yellow envelope with the police stamp in the corner. "Striving for safer cities," she read.

"Thanks," Katie said and took it. Like before, she sat staring at it.

"Jury duty? Oh, you're not old enough yet."

Katie worked up a wry smile. If only Lainy had any idea how close to the truth she was getting. "Who brought me in then?"

Adam shrugged. "We just took the call from that nurse."

Well, at least some-one had taken pity on a poor, unconscious girl and not advantage. "I just saw these green eyes and I remember thinking I could just drown in them and I wouldn't care. Like you said, you dream all sorts."

"Have you been having some strange dreams?"

"A few. But I've got a strange imagination. Shower monster and leap frogging pigeons strange. Messed up, right?" Lainy shrugged, looking non-committal. "Don't rush to argue," she joked.

"So, anything important?"

Opening the letter here – in the kitchen, in front of these two – seemed almost scary. Katie wanted to be in her room when she read it. A private place where she could scream and shout and cause random destruction only to her own stuff. No matter what it said, surely it was more fitting to be able to sink into her own thoughts. The quiet room seemed like a good place to be alone, to find out what this letter said without the questions and piteous looks. There would be tears and probably days of shock and depression which Katie would hide with a smile when anyone was looking and wallow in it when she could. That was one option. The other was just to get it over with in front of her friends and have everything out in the open. No more secrets, no more wondering why she was so unpredictable around people she hadn't quite figured out.

She sliced the letter open with a knife, took the letter out and skimmed down it. Where were the tears? Where were the waves of emotion which threaten to beat her into oblivion? Where was the bite of reality finally coming good? Where was *anything*? All there was was a

horrible hollow feeling inside. A total lack of feeling. “Before I say anything, I need to apologise for freaking out on you last night, Adam, and running out on you, Lainy. I hope it’ll make sense soon.” Katie held the letter out and spoke quickly before her brain chickened out of the confession. Confession? What did she have to confess to, to feel remorse for? Nothing, tat’s what. But confession felt like the right word. “Four months ago, I was offered a place at the academy which I turned down. A month later, I was raped. I couldn’t run away fast enough. I told everyone I got over it, just went back to my ordinary life, but I didn’t. not even a bit. So I rang admissions and here I am. New start.”

“Okay. Why are you telling us?”

“Because...” Katie stopped and looked at her new friends. The room felt as though it was closing in, the air crushing down. She went back to the window and gulped down lungfuls of still and stale oxygen. Then she bent to the sink and splashed water on her face, already feeling better. Some-one was out there, somewhere, keeping her safe and watching out for her. Some-one who felt so close, maybe close enough to touch, if only see could see them.

She turned back to them and sat on the drainer as they huddled over the letter. Why was she telling them? Being attacked was her problem to deal with; it wasn’t fair to make it theirs.

“The kids come through here are moody, unpredictable and young. But a helll of a lot of fun. You fit right in.”

“I just thought you should know. If I start shutting myself away or do a runner on you in future, it’s just because all the people are just too much. That day was intense.”

“You’ve known us just a few days and you tell us this? That’s brave, Katie. Brave, strong and a little bit insane,” Adam grinned, suddenly joining forces with Lainy to make a Katie sandwich. *Brave, strong, insane* – she had heard that before. Where? Green eyes. “We’ll leave it to you whether you tell the others.”

Did she want to enter that minefield? Did she have to? Jaye would feel sorry for her. Dina was too shy to care. Leo probably thought she deserved it. She shook her head, took her letter back and headed to the door, suddenly tired and wanting to go to bed and sleep for a very long time. Maybe forever. “Sunday morning training run. I went to school the next day.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Now, it just so happens that there’s a race next Saturday to raise money for the baby group. Quite a few of the stew-dents is running. Shall I put your name down?” Roy rummaged through a drawer and pulled out another clipboard. There were so many boards and random papers scattered around this tiny office – little more than a cupboard with a desk really – that it was a wonder he ever kept track of them all.

“As in tomorrow Saturday?” Katie asked.

“No, you doof. As in Wednesday Saturday.” Only Jaye had been invited down this morning. The adults had protested, thought one of them should go with her but it seemed a bit like overkill for an entire gang of them to file down to the athletics ground. Besides, just the three of them – Roy and the two girls – were a tight squeeze. “It’s the Saturday after tomorrow. I did it last year. Damn near killed me.”

“Here. Fill this in and then off you go.” Roy held out his clipboard which Katie scribbled her name on and filled in the entrance form. It was a five kilometre race for the support group for new parents and babies. It seemed like a good cause and she was pretty sure she could drum up a few sponsors. Jaye started the ball rolling straight away by tugging the form away and making her pledge. It was not much but it was a start.

“Hey, I’m a student. I would put more but I think student finances want me to pay my fees.” Jaye shrugged. “They’re funny like that.”

“How about running again – keep me company?” Katie held out another form but Jaye pushed it away with a disdainful look. “So, when and where?”

“Saturday at half nine. We meet by the gates.” Roy saw both girls to the door and Jaye went out first. Katie was about to follow when she turned back to Roy.

“I need a job. I know my friend lifeguards and some of the other students work around campus...” she knew that the Levenson Academy only let people work for them if they were over the age of 18. But she was still a student of theirs and she had to pay the bills somehow. The scholarship covered her tuition and a portion of her academic needs like books and so on but living in Northwood did not come for free.

“I’ll see if I can do anything, miss. I have your details.” Roy waved the paper at her and shooed her out of the office before Katie could think of anything else to ask him.

She met Jaye leaning on the chain link fence separating the athletics stadium from the rest of campus. “I guess you’ll be training all the time now?”

Katie could hardly keep the smile from her face. Her first race in months, the first one she wanted to run and win, just signing up for it had been a huge step and her proud grin was making Jaye give her funny looks. Which only succeeded in making Katie want to laugh. She slapped her hands over her mouth to keep the giggles in but they spilled over the edge and Katie clawed at the fence. Laughter truly was infectious because, with no explanation as to why, Jaye joined in. And there they stood. Two teenage girls, howling away and clinging to each other like they might fall down if they let go. “Oh my god. I can’t believe I just did that.”

“Yeah, you need your head checked.”

Katie checked her phone – reception in town was extremely patchy – and saw that only one signal bar was registering. She tapped out a short message to Dan – SIGNAL BAD IM FINE CALL WHEN I CAN – and sent it off. Reception at the house was better but she was hoping a text would satisfy her family for another few days. If she heard any of their voices, so full of empty empathy and sorrow, Katie was sure she would start crying again. There had been enough of her own private tears last night. “My first college level race. Just hope I can keep up.”

“Ad said you barely broke a sweat yesterday. I don’t think you’ll have much of a problem.”

“Show me some more of the old town and I can train there a bit. Get used to it.” She let Jaye take her arm and tow her through the open campus grounds. The main college was closed off still but, today at least, it looked as if some-one was inside. A few lights were on and there was a figure leaning out of one of the windows and sticking some coloured discs outside. Katie decided not to think about what they were, looking instead at the dozens of students lounging on the grass and chatting. To her eyes, they looked like the same groups that had been there a few days earlier. And then they were out of the campus grounds and walking along the pebbly bank that came out on the main road. If it could really be called a main road. A few people rode along on bike, there was a half-full bus where the destination reel read MILLFORD CENTRAL, children played football or kiss chase down the street making the most of the last few days of summer holiday. She had not yet noticed a school but the town obviously had much more than her first few days out had shown her. As the girls walked along the street, the whole environment seemed to change from the relatively modern college and shops to older but not exactly ancient residential areas to something resembling the gothic. The huge stone and brick buildings so briefly glimpsed on the way in to Northwood suddenly dominated the area.

“It looks kinda freaky round here but it’s fine. There’s a library, a couple of bars and things, a jewellers. Like Roy said, it’s the old part. The council can’t modernise it – heritage and all that.” Jaye turned to the left and started tracking through side streets and patches of waste ground. Katie tried to pick out one or two landmarks to remember, like the tree which looked like a forked snake tongue or the old rusted out motorcycle, knowing full well she would never remember where everything was. As they exited yet another scrubby yard behind a café, Jaye headed towards a dirt track and started to follow it. “Never noticed this before.”

“Don’t follow it.” Katie squinted along it to see where it led but it seemed to trail into nowhere, away from town. “It could go anywhere.”

“Exactly.”

Jaye started walking down the trail. Katie drew a deep breath of dusty air, adjusted her baseball cap and started after her. She did not like this feeling of being on a road that went God-knew-where. Too many late night B-list horrors with Dad made her think of deserts cabins in the middle of nowhere and monsters who dripped goo on her as her skin ripped open. Then, just as terror threatened to grip her and make her cry out to Jaye to *stop! I’m scared* a complete calm washed over her. Katie could feel eyes on her and a hand curled in hers, but when she looked to her side nobody was there. The hand in hers slid away as she tried to wrap her fingers around it. The eyes were far away enough that she could not see them. But they were there,, watching her and Jaye and ready to become real and close if anything should happen. A thought came to Katie’s mind and she remembered following the bus down the road and round the bend.

“I think this road goes down to Millford,” she said. The other girl was too far ahead of her to hear though and Katie had to jog up beside her. “Hey, I said this road goes into Millford. I don’t think it’s far.” Katie took a step further when Jaye put out an arm and gently pulled her back, a resigned but wishful look on her face. “You’ve never been down there either?”

“No. And I’m not about to either”

“Why not?”

“I... We’re just...” a shadow flashed across her pale face. It was a look that had no place on such a pretty girl but a quick smile chased it away. It had been there though. “We’re not supposed to.” The shadow hung behind Kaye’s delicate features, just waiting as though there were secrets that desperately needed to be shared.

“Is this about that moron who ditched you?”

“Sort of. It’s hard to talk about.”

In a silence that was anything but easy, the two girls headed back the way they had come and then to the house on Newton Street. Half of Katie wanted to call it home, for it was were she

belonged and lived with people she already cared about, though the other half of her balked at the suggestion, reminding her that home was a place to feel totally at ease and living would never be easy as long as Leo lived there. The urge to ask Jaye about this reluctance she had to go to Millford was strong. Katie could tell the girl wanted to talk about it almost as much as she wanted to know but she did not really want to pry. “Hey.”

Jaye nodded. She knew Katie was ready when she needed to talk, although it really was not her fault she couldn’t answer the questions hanging between them. The main road was almost right ahead of them now and they followed it almost a mile to the first residential streets. A corner shop at the end of one street had a few seats outside. “Wait here. I’ll get us a drink.”

“Are we okay? I didn’t think you’d mind that I called your ex a moron. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I called him worse.”

“Still...”

“He was an idiot, you know. I just never thought he’d actually leave.” She disappeared into the tiny shop, Katie straddled one end of the bench and waited until Jaye emerged a few minutes later with two cans of pop and a bag of crisps. She was laughing over her shoulder, evidently on good terms with the owner. “Anyway, that’s the old town. You’ll get to know the ins and outs of it all in time. It takes the fun out of it if I show you every little thing.”

“Hmm, I’ll maybe run down there in the week, get used to the ground.” Jaye frowned and asked why she couldn’t just train on the track. Running on track was different from running on road which was different from running on grass and so on. Since she had only really done a few half-hearted circuits of her old park, getting used to hard surfaces again would take a little time. “Practice makes perfect, or so they say.”

“Bet you put all the other runners in the shade.”

“On my first college race? And I haven’t raced all summer.”

“Come on, Katie. Levenson doesn’t give out scholarships lightly. Maybe five or six in the whole student body. And do you know how many under 18s they take? 20. Out of 700 first years. You’re special girl.”

“Right. No pressure.”

Drinks finished and cans neatly crumpled inside crisp bag and then into the bin, they headed home. Katie felt for her key but Adam poked his head over the fence and ordered them straight into the garden. He was setting up a folding table and chairs as a barbecue waited expectantly in the corner. “The girls are making salad, coleslaw, all that healthy crap. Though you’d like to see a real man at work.”

Katie eyed him, topless but with an apron covering most of his muscles and watched his muscles flex as he wrenched seats into position. “Tempting. Very tempting. But alas not.”

“I’m just waiting for this real man to show up.”

Adam grabbed a spatula from the pocket of his apron and chased them both back up the garden and back into the house.

“We could use another pair of hands if there’s any going spare!” called Dina from the kitchen, where she and Lainy were making more noise than the Muppets’ Swedish chef.

“Go ahead,” Katie said, humbly giving up her kitchen expertise for her friend. “Mine are firmly attached to the rest of me.” And the rest of her was determined to go upstairs for a quick shower and a rest before Adam set the fence on fire.

The shower was an ugly old metal spray head which hung over the bath but worked far better than it looked like it should. Katie stepped under the cool water and knelt down to let it rain down on her back. A few minutes more and Katie was wrapped in a towel and padding back to her room. Through the window drifted the squeals of youngsters setting up a night of fun. It didn’t feel like living with other students or having adults taking care of her – though she knew Adam and Lainy were likely paid quite well to do just that – it was more like staying with friends on a really long, hard holiday. She dressed in her thinnest pyjamas that covered her backside and boobs and lay back on her bed, fully intending to go downstairs dressed this way. The room was cooler than it had been all week, the window open and the curtains closed. Katie reached out for her mp3 player and flicked to a dance mix Dan had put on for her. The driving repetitive beats were not her cup of tea but she closed her eyes and let the pounding drums chase away any lingering thoughts of *what if..?* she needed music so loud and boring it would both keep her awake when she honestly wanted nothing more than to curl up and drift off – just walking and seeing new places where ever she turned was exhausting – and would stop her from slipping into that deep well of depression and stress she was so near to. The first she knew of some-one in her room was when an earphone slipped out of her ear and she opened her eyes to look for it. A dark shape stood in her open doorway. Katie sat bolt upright and scrambled back on the bed. Dark blue eyes and grabbing hands, grabbing arms and legs and pulling her this way and that until there was only dirt and depravity, such depravity, raw and animal and basic – want, take, have – filled her mouth.

“Get out!” Just two words, lonely and mild, but ground out with the force of a ten ton truck.

“Nice. I only came to tell you the barbecue will be running soon,” said Leo stepping into her room. Hadn’t he just said running with the tiniest hint of a grin?

“Okay.” She wondered why he was just standing there and looking at her. Katie hugged her knees to her chest, feeling suddenly naked and vulnerable as Leo’s dark eyes roamed over every curve and angle of her body. “I heard.”

“You don’t like me, do you?”

“Give me one reason I should.”

“I have to live here too so let’s just have this out and done with. We’re not friends. We’re not ever likely to be friends but you could at least be civil.”

Civil? It was a matter for debate whether Leo had much concept of socially acceptable behaviour. “How long were you there?”

He shrugged. Katie swung herself off the bed and walked towards Leo, back pedalling until he backed into the door frame before correcting himself and getting through the open door. “I’m way beyond kidding, Leo. Get out.”

“Feisty little bitch, aren’t you?”

“Better a bitch than a sociopath.”

“You want to watch that dirty little mouth of yours. It could get you in trouble one day.”

Katie backed him out of the doorway and slammed it behind him, leaning against it for a moment and spinning the lock. Jaye shouted something up the stairs as Leo thundered down them but Katie was too shaken to pay much attention. “I’ll be down in a while,” Katie called back, deciding she would at least put a wrap over her pyjamas. She also decided that today had been much too good a day to let him destroy it now. A lot had happened in just the few days since the move but none of it had made her want to turn tail and run back to her family. This was her moment to be free and independent and just another teenagers with dreams of academic and sporting success.

She went back to her bed and lay down again,, turning the music up just loud enough to drown out the squeals from the garden, turned herself away from the window and threw her arms over her face to cover herself in darkness. Too much was rushing through her mind right now; nerves, anger, hate, enough to make her whole body vibrate with the strength of it all. Then there was the letter from the police, stabbing Uncle Billy, getting spiked at the party. Leaving her childhood home and knowing, for some inexplicable reason, that going back might never happen. It came as a shock to realise that her body was shaking because all of these things and more were making her cry. Huge shuddering, yet virtually silent, sobs rocked her. She made no attempt to stop weeping, just letting tears pool on the sheets by her head. This was precisely what Katie had not wanted to do, get so over-whelmed by emotion and exhaustion that crying was the automatic

response. And she tried. Tried every trick she knew from distractions to confrontation to actively forgetting. None of it had worked.

“It’s okay now. You don’t need to be frightened any more.” A hand brushed her bare shoulder. Katie rolled over and found herself peering up at a blurry face. The hand moved from her shoulder leaving a sudden cold patch and gentle fingertips wiped at her damp face. “There’s nothing to be scared of.”

Katie turned back over and twisted her hand in his. She was so tired. A memory seeped through her mind – at least it felt like a memory. It could have been a dream, a nightmare, a fantasy she never waned. There was a skeleton wearing a Stetson and when she looked at it, it would hold its arms out to her and she would go to it. “Who are you? Why are you following me?” And why does it feel this good?

“I’m Jack. And you’re safe.”

The way he said that, so patient and tender, made the tears rise up again. No matter how hard she blinked them back, they fell freely down her cheeks. Jack didn’t seem to mind but Katie wanted nothing less than to cry in front of him. But after a minute she forgot that her emotional breakdown was being observed and just clung to him as everything she was worried about streamed out of her. “And I’m damaged, Jack. I’m so, so damaged.”

“You’re doin’ fine.”

The unbridled crying had faded to occasional whimpers and now Katie scrubbed at her face and tried to dab at his shirt where she had wept on it – though it was completely dry already – with a sudden thought. Maybe she looked weak and childish. One look at Jack’s face only told her that he had barely said a word as she cried because he had no idea what to say. And there was nothing really that could be said that would not make her feel worse. “You could have stopped me crying.”

“You looked like you needed it.”

“What I need is not to have any reasons to cry.”

“Can’t help with that one. We all cry sometimes, I guess. And when you do, when you get scared or worried or are in danger, I’ll be standin’ right next to you.”

“You were here – there – earlier. When we found the road to Millford. When Jaye said we shouldn’t go down, I felt a hand in mine. It was like some-one didn’t want me to be on my own. Was it you?”

“If it helps to think so.” It didn’t. Not really. It just raised more questions of how he got there and why she couldn’t see him. Questions like those were... how had he got in? That was another question – one that seemed to take over from all the other. Had she not locked the door

after her altercation with Leo? And yet, with Jack holding her hand, it seemed not very important at all. “Don’t worry, Lady Katie.”

“I’m not.” And she found it was eerily true. Eerie because she thought she had felt this way before although exactly when was a mystery. “It’s just... I’m sixteen. And I feel like I’m a hundred.”

“One day, Katie, I promise you’ll be able to enjoy being young.”

It was nice thing to promise even if it was one she knew he couldn’t keep. She turned to him and stared into his deep green eyes, wondering just what was going on behind them because there was definitely something there. “You sound very sure of yourself.”

“You’ve got time to be a kid, time to forget all of this.”

“I don’t want to forget you. I barely know you, and there are so many things I should be asking you but all I know is I don’t want you to go and I won’t ever forget you because then I’ll be scared again and I don’t think I can take being scared again.” And, boy, was that the longest and most jumbled sentence she had ever uttered. “Breathe. Should really have done that when I started.”

“You will forget and you will be scared but why did you cry?”

“Because I was sad and angry and if it wasn’t tears, it’d be blood.”

“Exactly. You can take anything the world throws at you and then just cry the hurt away.”

“But it doesn’t go away,” she told him. “Not ever. It gets worse and it doesn’t stop. I want it all to go away.” She looked at him – at the fingers of one hand scratching his head and frowning, eyes unfocused as thought considering some otherworldly possibilities, and then his hair brushed backwards and exposed a perfectly round blemish almost dead centre of his forehead, the skin slightly darker than the rest of his face. Katie reached up and brushed her fingers over it, marvelling that his skin felt so cool and dry in the muggy early evening. Then she leaned close and touched his cheek with her lips. It felt like laying a kiss on crepe paper. She pulled back, shocked. “I don’t... I’m not... that wasn’t like me.”

“Everything you do is right, Lady Katie. I wish that mattered more.” He turned to her and moved around until he was kneeling in front of her. “You’re amazing and beautiful and fabulous and-“

Katie held up her hand to stop him. “I think the flattery’s meant to come before I invite you into my room.” She must have invited him up, right? She didn’t remember it but parts of her memory seemed to be fading away with those blade sharp eyes slicing through the brain. “Tell me what happened.”

And there it was. That flicker of uncertainty she had seen on Jaye earlier today only this one... the doubts dancing behind his eyes felt older. Doubts about secrets she may never know could not have feelings attached to them but, one way or another, these did. And Jack, for his part, looked as though he was truly wrestling with the part of him that wanted to talk and the part that knew he really shouldn't. Finally, he gave in.

"You'll forget this anyway." That seemed to cut deep and she thought she saw his bottom lip quiver as though he had his own tears hidden very deep inside. So deep they just could not come out. "Many years ago – when I was just a bit older than you – I lived in America. There were two guys havin' a fight in some bar and then it spilled outside where I was. They pulled guns and I got in the way." He looked up at Katie, wondering if she believed history. "It was a long time ago. But I remember every little thing like it was yesterday and I... I'm sorry." *I'm sorry everything I just told you was a lie. I'm sorry I can't even let you hold on to that little piece of me. I'm sorry no-one ever told you why all this hurt came to you. I'm sorry I can only make you forget one thing. I'm sorry that one thing is me.*

Jack took her hand and then balanced it on his shoulder and held it there. Then, as she watched him, Jack grasped her face and crushed his lips down on hers with such urgency Katie thought her heart might stop. "Jack, stay with me," she murmured against him, managing to get her words out without her lips ever leaving his. It felt like this had all happened before. It felt like another goodbye. Why did she feel like that? Katie opened her mouth and let his tongue explore inside. He was almost shy about it but Katie, on nothing but instinct, went first and tasted his mouth, marvelling of how it could be so urgent and gentle, hot yet cool, familiar yet new and thrilling and all at the same time. Katie had no explanations for letting him go. She knew she didn't want to. She knew he didn't either. But, one moment, she was kissing him, this beautiful boy who she had met just twice – though she felt she had known him for much longer – and the next the pressure on her lips had gone.

Frowning, she opened her eyes and glanced up. A young man in a cowboy hat was staring at her with bright green eyes from opposite where she was sitting on her bed. "Who are you?"

He smiled at her a little bit sadly, stroked her face. Katie grinned back, not quite sure why she was not screaming blue murder, and let her eyes flutter shut. Had she been tired earlier? Somewhere in the frayed edges of her consciousness she felt rather than heard him breathe the words, "remember me, Lady Katie," into her neck and then everything was gone.

Some time later, when it was getting dark but still light enough and just about warm enough to be called evening, Katie opened her eyes wide, as if waking suddenly from a

wonderful dream which had held her tight and snug in its; grasp, and swung her legs off the bed. She recalled touching something before – her hand still held the sensation of skin on skin- and noticed a rumple in the sheets she lay on. Voices were still coming from the garden and she jumped down the stairs.

“You think I’m brilliant at barbecue. Admit it. Go on, there’s no shame in letting a guy be better than you.”

“Except for the actual shame of letting you be better.”

Katie recognised Adam and Lainy squabbling again. But she also heard *I love you really* and *as if you’re better* in their voices.

“Lainy, don’t tell him he’s talented. We can barely get his head through the front door as it is,” laughed Jaye. “Besides, that would be lying.”

“Hey, little white lies are good for my fragile ego.”

“That’s a dirty, great black lie.”

“Hmm... Yeah, I think I’m okay with those too.”

“For God’s sake!” Jaye chucked a wad of napkins at him and flumped down on the edge of the wall. “Oh, hey stranger.”

“The food’s mostly gone but I’m sure there’s some burgers still knocking around the freezer,” Lainy told her, almost apologetically. “But Dina and Leo are on the beer run. I could ask them to pick something up.”

There was a bowl of salad on one of the tables which looked as though it had been hardly touched. She picked up some cutlery and headed for it. “I guess I fell asleep.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

The next couple of days passed relatively smoothly. Katie and Leo tried to stay out of each others' way as much as possible. Lainy and Adam tried to make it easy for her to talk to them, without saying as much, if she wanted. She didn't. Jaye dragged Dina out of the house and down to the track on the pretext of watching Katie train – it later transpired that she had a deep crush on one of the coaches. She found the campus bookshop and bought the course texts she didn't think she could afford to go without. Budgeting was going to be a bit of a challenge without a job. Katie also started jogging through the old town, never straying too far from the main road but always mindful of that lonely dirt track that seemed to go on for miles to Millford, just begging to be run on. She challenged her housemates to a Scrabble tournament but only Lainy and Leo could spare the time to join in and then it didn't seem like that great an idea. The student medical centre registered Katie as their patient and filled out her prescription although it was a week into September – late enough in the year that she probably wouldn't need it. She even threw open her window and door, set her stereo to somewhere around deafening and began to make her room feel more like her own. In fact, Katie did anything she could think of to avoid being alone with her thoughts. It was like trying to outrun a timebomb.

As Sunday night grew late and Katie felt her eyelids drooping, she thought once more about the race she was preparing for. She wanted to come in the first wave of racers but she had no idea what the pace would be like. A few miles back at her old school had always been easy, occasionally too easy, and she had often placed in the top three. Even running for herself or in other races, winning or finishing in the first ten – even against adults – had been an almost constant occurrence. But against new competitors, some of whom were professional athletes, she wasn't so sure. Jaye had told her that scholarships were rare and she knew the scout must have seen some kind of spark in her...

"Why are we watching this crap?" asked Jaye, cradling a textbook she was pretending to study from. She had a pen and paper handy to make notes with but Katie had seen her do little more than doodle. "Anyone?"

Lainy tried not to smile at the girl, did a bad job.

"Please," Jaye went on. "There has to be a reason."

"Now you know Adam likes his medical dramas." Lainy leaned out of his arms and stage whispered, "Thinks they're educational."

“Give me people dying of rare tropical diseases or explosive diarrhoea over a pulled hamstring or broken finger any day.”

“I was hoping you’d grown out of that.” Jaye slammed her book shut and opened her constant companion – cheese puffs. She offered them around but Katie had already grown sick of the smell of them. “I know, I know, everyone’s gotta die somehow but honestly..? It’s never that exciting.”

“You’re telling me dying of some Siberian mega worm that invades your lower intestine wouldn’t be a hell of a way to go?”

“Well, it’d definitely be interesting.”

Lainy turned away from the girls and snuggled up to her fiancé. “I’ll go back to the shops tomorrow.”

“Why?”

“Get you some worming tablets.”

“Nice to be appreciated.”

“Take your shirt off Ad, and I’ll show you appreciation.”

Katie laughed. “I’m agreeing with her.”

“You horny little things only want me for my body.”

“Duh!”

“Lose the six pack, the massive guns, the Superman tat right on the flex of your bicep, I could go on... but I won’t. The ego thing, you know.” Katie glanced over at her friend, suddenly sheepish, not knowing just why. “I’m shy with men, not blind.”

“You noticed? I thought you were so stressed over hurting your uncle that night that you never even noticed me,” Adam said, meaning the night he’d arrived in the kitchen half-dressed.

“It’s weird. I didn’t pay that much attention or anything but I keep remembering things. Just like flashes and stuff. I’m not real sure why.”

Lainy threw an arm out to Katie and waggled her fingers. After a second, she put her hand through hers and let Lainy hold it for a few seconds, squeezing it and rubbing a thumb over her knuckles almost as if holding hands would take her stress away. Katie, before she could stop herself – though she doubted she would have – got up and walked over to sit herself on the floor at the couples’ feet, nestled between two sets of legs. No-one seemed to think it a strange action, though anyone who didn’t know the things Katie had seen might wonder why a grown girl still needed a cuddle.

“I think there’s something wrong with me. I sort of know most stuff, I remember bits here and there but there’s something... I don’t know, missing. And then I try to think about that because I know it’ll come if I try hard enough. But it’s just not there.”

A silence descended for a few minutes, total but for the inane chatter of some TV show no-one was watching any more. All the while, Katie kept a grip of Lainy, noting how she never let go either. Perhaps the older girl needed this contact just as much as she did. A good hand-holding session and a hug in silence did more good than words ever could. The police, the hospital, her parents – they had all thought talking would fix it all. They asked questions, she answered. They told her to externalise, to pour her heart out but how? Did she talk to trusted tutors at her old school – ‘hi, I’m Katie and I was raped. Wanna chat?’ No, of course not. They asked question, she answered. They begged, she didn’t speak. Nobody listened. They heard but never really understood. How could they? But somebody had. Not about the attack, not about that, but about the not talking. Some-one had held her and let her cry and never asked a thing. Katie remembered that. She just didn’t know who it was. Who-ever it was had found a way to chase those teardrops far away because she would surely still be crying in her room if they hadn’t.

Those thoughts were suddenly broken by a thin black coat flying across the room to land on Jaye’s lap. She picked it up and looked at it questioningly, as though it had flown towards her of its’ own volition. Katie covered her mouth with one hand to stifle a giggle. The idea was just absurd enough to take her away from her reality for a moment and into a flash of flying jacket fantasy.

Dina, silent until now, said one word. “Pub.”

“It’s late.”

“It’s not like you need the beauty sleep.” Dina reached out and started pulling on her friend’s pale arm. “Come on, I wanna go get drunk.”

“Guys?” Jaye let Dina drag her over to the door.

“You’re on your own, Little Miss Ego Bruiser,” Adam told her and waved cheerfully.

“Besides, we need to talk,” said Dina. To say there was a conversation behind those four words would have been an understatement. Some unspoken meaning hung heavy in the air for long minutes after the pair had bundled out. The two adults seemed as though they were in on this secret but Lainy covered it up almost too smoothly by ragging on Adam for his choice in shows. It was a mystery – one that Katie would shut away to think about another time. There were too many things that were more important at the moment.

The flickering TV had made her feel quite sleepy. “How can those two go out drinking at...” Katie glanced at her watch, “nearly ten o’clock.”

“This is normal operating hours for most students. You’ll get used to it.”

“Not me. This girl still has a bedtime.”

“This girl still has a teddy bear by her pillow.”

Adam nodded. “It’s true. I get so very lonely at night.”

“Am I meant to be feeling sorry for you?” Lainy asked him. “You know, Mr Tedward doesn’t rob the covers, snore or-“

“Make you breakfast in bed every birthday.”

“Oh, the romance of it all,” Lainy said without much sarcasm. Clearly, she thought it was a little bit sweet. By all accounts, remembering special dates was a cause for celebration for most blokes. “Fine,” she sighed. “But Mr Tedward won’t thank you for kicking him out of bed. Just so’s you know.”

The couple fell into a comfortable stillness, interrupted by Lainy fidgeting and the Adam getting up to make tea. Katie refused one, suspecting that she wouldn’t be able to keep her eyes open long enough. “I’m going to love you and leave you.” She thought about Leo, in the room next to hers, shut away the way he spent almost every night, and decided she couldn’t be bothered to be scared of him – not when he had never done anything to her. She thought he was a freak in need of serious psychotherapy with dangerous fantasies, a man it was risky to know, but he personally was innocent. “I just know the type,” she whispered. His bedroom door was open and popcorn music from a video game was drifting out. In contrast, a bit further down the hall, her door was mostly closed. Hadn’t she left it open to air out after tidying it? Didn’t matter. The wind blowing through windows and doors had been blowing a riot through the old house today.

“You never said anything.” The voice that greeted Katie when she pushed open the door was harsh, rough, accusing. It took her a second to place it – Leo – her thoughts elsewhere. “At all.”

The edges of her vision showed his dark shape holding out the police letter. It was mostly her own fault for leaving the page out on top of her desk. She couldn’t even moan at him for creeping into her room when she had done the same to him a few days ago. “It’s not your problem.” Katie rubbed her hands over her face and went over to draw the curtains. The moon was a few nights away from full. It had been much cooler today, if still not cold, and a few wisps of cloud had dared to tarnish the sky, giving the moon a blurred look and obscuring any stars that might have twinkled. “It’s late and I’ve got another long day tomorrow, so...” She waved her hand at her back, giving Leo the chance to leave. When he didn’t, Katie looked out once more at

the inky sky, wishing for some rescue from the hard conversation that was coming. “God, you really don’t like doing things the easy way, do you? I gave you the chance to leave in blissful ignorance.”

“Why should I get that choice? You didn’t.”

“You read that.” Katie pointed at the paper he held and sat on her bed, preferring to look at her knees rather than him. Those dark blue eyes would be hard and brittle. “All the details in glorious Technicolour.” Katie pushed herself back until she was leaning against the headboard, half aware that she was also putting some distance between them. “You want to know how I got picked off while running in my local park? How I was absolutely terrified this guy would kill me if I didn’t let him take what he wanted? Maybe how the only people to hear me scream were the junkies in Heroin Heights and how I was eventually found by a blind man and his guide dog? But honestly? None of that matters. I wasn’t picked off, I was unlucky. He didn’t threaten to kill me, the man never even spoke. I wasn’t found by a blind man, it was just a guy to stoned to see. There’s no juicy story, no lifelong trauma-“

“But they’re dropping the case. You’ll never get justice,” protested Leo. Funny – he didn’t seem like the caring type.

“I don’t want justice, I want escape. I thought making a complaint might help but there were so many questions and stuff that it was as though the police were just trying to prove it was my own damn fault.”

“What if the same thing happens to another girl?”

“He knows who he is.”

Leo looked down at the letter again. Katie, against her better judgement, shuffled over to him a little. Since he seemed to be in a pleasant mood and, more importantly, hadn’t called her a bitch, she felt a bit silly about hunching into the far wall. “What’s the plan?”

Plan? “Get some sleep and then carry on.”

“I meant to catch this freak?”

“Leo Pointer – moral crusader. Look, I don’t want...” she let the sentence trail off. There were a thousand things she didn’t want in this world, but catching her attacker was not one of them. Katie wanted that very badly. Just not yet. Maybe not ever if it meant going through all that trouble with the police again. “I want it to be over, not to start again. I have a new life now and I’m gonna shop and run and study and be a girl for once this year. Not a victim.”

“Don’t take the help when it’s offered then. Saves me the effort,” he shrugged, definitely back to the grumpy Leo everyone knew and disliked. “Is that why you don’t really care about being spiked the other night?”

“Leo, I was *actually* raped not too long ago. Having some-one only get as far as drugging me and then chickening out...” Katie peeled off into fits of giggles and only laughed harder when she realised he was looking at her like a loon.

“What the hell?!” came a shriek from downstairs. Two sets of feet came thundering up the stairs and Lainy and Adam swung themselves into her room, hovering in the doorway. “Katie?”

“Sorry, sorry, sorry,” she kept apologising, trying, and mostly failing, to stop up her mouth with her sheets. “I shouldn’t really laugh.”

“We thought something horrible was happening up here.”

“She’s gone mad,” Leo offered. “The bitch has flipped.” But he didn’t leave the room. They all noticed that. Maybe he was finally turning into a sociable human being.

“Oh God! We were talking about the first attack and then there was this drugged out hallucination and a chicken and- oh you had to be there.” Katie started laughing again. It was pointless trying to stop because then she had to think about why she was laughing in the first place and that just made everything seem funnier. “Oh man, my ribs actually hurt!”

Lainy, not knowing quite what to do, started folding then re-folding the pyjamas on the bed. She evidently had not been expecting this reaction from the girl who’d been so subdued all night. Adam put his hand on Leo’s shoulder and propelled him out of the room, knowing in that strange way some people had, that his presence really wasn’t wanted. “Come on mate. I think they need some girl time.”

The two girls were silent for a handful of seconds – seconds that seemed like days. Just when Katie was beginning to think her PJs might fall apart at the seams after being stretched and creased so many times, Lainy broke the hush. “So you’re okay?”

“Uh-huh. More than okay, I’m... I’m happy.”

“Even though..?”

“Lainy, you remember that first day when I told you how everything got dark and sad? Well, I’m done with being sad. It’s a pointless emotion for me. It doesn’t get you anywhere.” She sat back and fiddled with the strap of her watch. Not for the first time, she wished for an analogue watch so she could turn back the hands until none of this had ever happened. But no. If none of the bad things had happened... “I’d still be in school with the airheads and the freaks, sitting through mindless lessons, running mindless races.

“Here, I’m just Katie Cartwright, the scholarship girl. And that’s the only person I’m gonna be.”

“You know we all love you no matter who you decide to be.”

Katie made a face. She'd had enough of sharing her feelings for one night – that last comment had just been too saccharine sweet though. There was no doubt that Lainy meant it. "I'm tired now."

"Okay. I'll let you get some rest."

"Wait," she said as the door started to swing shut. "I'm making dinner tomorrow. Any requests?"

"Use your imagination."

And then the room was darkness. Katie slid out of her cargo trousers and vest and pulled on her pyjamas in the muted moonlight. Then she pulled the chair away from her desk, placed it by the window, slid one curtain open and straddled the chair to watch the moon journey across the night dodging and fighting with the breaths of cloud. Unconsciousness threatened to claim her more than once but she resisted the pull. Sleeping would be too easy. Sleep was a sure fire way to miss... miss what? She folded her arms on the back of the chair and leaned her face down. Her muscles were tight under cheek. Her shoulders and neck were hunched together and ached when she moved. It was stress. Truthfully, there was a lot to be anxious about again. A light pressure touched the small of her back, making her jump and bite her lip against the scream that wanted to follow. Suddenly, Katie became aware of every muscle in her body relaxing. The touch trailed up her back and tickled her neck before going down her crossed arms and into her left hand. She uncrossed her arms and held her left arm out, palm up. A weight that felt like no more than a feather rested on top. She curled her own around it, expecting it to crumble into ashes and dust beneath her finger, expecting it to turn into a hand of bone. As she looked around the room for some draft or door left ajar, something began to happen in her hand. The only description was a swirling, changing, moving, whirling sensation and even that many verbs would not be accurate. As she watched, the invisible hand in hers gained colour and shape and then she was holding a real hand with weight and skin and ridges of flesh and blood vessels. Then, from the wrist inwards, the shape of a boy started to appear. Katie was starting to feel light-headed. She was glad that she had remained standing by her chair. What was going on? She tried to form the question but the words just wouldn't come, her mouth working uselessly.

"Shush. Everything's okay now. You're safe," said this figure who was almost a young man in front of her. He had obviously thought that Katie was about to yell or scream that she was in danger. She didn't feel threatened. Just confused and a little bit sick.

Katie grabbed onto the chair back with her free hand and tried to focus on the moon. It was fading and blurring and then jumping back into sharp focus for a moment before the cycle began again. Holding her hand and doggedly refusing to let go, the impossible boy eased her

away from the chair and further towards the window, wrapping his arms around her waist.

“Relax Lady Katie. I won’t take more than I need,” he murmured onto her ear, feeling her start to sag in his arms. “Forgive me for this. I wouldn’t do it if I didn’t have to.”

The voice, the touch, even the warm breath on her neck – it all seemed so familiar. But, in the next instant, as she vaguely decided to turn and see who had invaded her dreams – it had to be a dream, right?? Her real, rational thoughts seemed so very far away – the need to breathe came crashing in on her and Katie realised that part of the reason she could not speak, felt so dizzy, was lack of oxygen. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. It didn’t make anything seem right or normal. Katie reached behind her and stretched out her fingers until they traced a face. She stared down at the hand in hers and brushed over the knuckles. “Something’s wrong,” she found enough of a voice to whisper and turned to face the boy she, all of a sudden, knew was waiting for her with green eyes and leather boots. “You’re wrong.”

“About what?”

No reply. What response could there truly be? Katie had absolutely no idea what was wrong, why things were wrong, who was wrong, anything. All she felt was something... out of place. Her world was – what was that word everyone used – fractured. And she chewed the inside of her lip, wondering if she should do anything. *Don’t*. The word pressed into her mind. *Don’t do anything to spoil this moment*. The advice crept through her consciousness and Katie listened to it, unsure whether they were her words or not. Katie gripped the hand in hers and pressed it to her stomach forcing her breath in and out underneath. There was a tugging sensation in her abdomen now, right underneath, but she thought that, without the contact, she might not have the energy to breathe at all.

“Remember me, Lady Katie,” the boy breathed into her ear, blowing strands of light brown hair this way and that.

“I do,” she replied, still uncertain whether she was lying or not. “I know you. At least, I think I do. I have this funny feeling in my stomach – a bit like but butterflies only bigger. Puppies.”

“Puppies?” he grinned. “We’re gettin’ a puppy?”

“Who needs puppies when they’ve got you?” Katie grabbed his wrist and put it to her lips, speaking against the flesh and kissing it as lightly as she could. “Nervous around you but –“

“Don’t do that or we’re gonna have problems.” Green eyes fluttered and the boy shivered.

Katie giggled. This feeling was familiar. She was in complete control of whatever happened tonight. The feeling was coming back to her and, man, it was good. The ability to

choose for herself, to make others bend to her will for once, had been on a break for a while but now it had moved back in and she felt like... well, like Katie again. "I'm just playing. That's what puppies do."

"Katie, sit down a minute."

Stop. Don't stop. Do whatever you have to to keep this as play. Nothing more. It can't be anything more. The thoughts rushed around the room, seeming so loud it should wake everyone else up only no-one appeared to even have stirred. Not through the noise of their midnight conversation. Not through the squeaks and creaks the floorboards must have made when this boy climbed the stairs. Funny how she didn't remember hearing anything.

She threw his arm away from her face and stomach and rushed over to her door to check the latch. It was still twisted into its' locked position. A hand slammed onto the door inches from her face and Katie turned around to face a young man with green eyes that flashed with emotion. It was hard to be scared of a man who was no taller than you in bare feet but Katie found that she could manage it. But that terror soon dissolved into confused curiosity when she realised that that the shine in those beautiful eyes was just sadness and his own confusion.

"Who are you? How did you get in here? What do you want from me? Why do I feel like I know you? I don't even remember your name."

"I'm Jack. You let me in. And now I have to take you on a little trip."

"That's only three answers. I asked four questions. How come I think I know you and yet I don't remember a thing about you?" Katie repeated.

"I..." something dark zoomed across his whole body and he froze for just a fraction of a second, most would have ignored it but Katie noticed. It was a bit like some dark ice had slid right over him. *I thought I was doing a better job than that.* "We've been seeing each other for a while but you always forget me. I make you forget all about me."

"How? Why?"

Jack reached out to her face and brushed her hair out of her face. "Forgive me, Lady Katie. I never meant this to happen."

"Wh-" was as far as she got before Jack cut her off with a kiss. It started by just brushing their lips together, hardly touching. Suddenly, her body tight with need, just needing to be close to some-one, the kiss turned deep and passionate. *There is darkness so thick Katie can see nothing but more darkness. She is scared to even reach out or take a step forward because anything could be in front of her. Anything or nothing at all. There are voices all around her, whispering, rustling, moving. She holds her breath and tries to pick out one voice in the chaos. So hard is she concentrating that she almost forgets to look around her, already so used to this*

solid blackness. One voice whispering something, shouting some words in a language she does not know. Nonsense sounds. Her eyes must be adjusting to the dark, finding some light source to react to. Silvery glows roll along the thick, storm heavy skies. The still air of just a few moments ago had become the utter calm before a major storm. Katie looked around, trying to find the direction the voice was coming from but the others made it sound ethereal and everywhere. Instead, two green circles stare out at her. She starts to smile, pleased just to have found another person in this place. A sharp bolt of blood red lightning shoots through the sky, accompanied by the crack of a whip and then a scream. Oh God, the storm is starting. She snaps her jaw shut so she could scream no more but she can see that red laser knife down over and over and she can hear the screams each time. It's not her voice. No. green eyes are flinching halfway closed with each crack of the whip but she doesn't want to believe that these shrieks, full of pain and blood and questions, are coming from those green eyes. Those aqua puddles that have not moved from her face. But Katie knows. She stretches out a hand, hoping she could touch some-one, something. If she can touch him, she can help. The half-formed thought was chased away from her mind by something nudging her back and then she is stumbling, tripping, falling through this dark world.

When Katie opened her eyes, a scream was on her lips but so was a boy with green eyes. She pushed him away and then buried her face in her hands, trying not to cry.

"I'm sorry." He let his hand hover over her shoulder. Would Katie ever want him near her again? Jack struggled for an answer he was happy with. It was even less likely that she could want him now that he wasn't finished.. and there was no time to give her a longer break. He guided her to the bed and put his face to hers once more, feeling her tense and fight the images rushing into her mind.

She lands on soft and squashy grass with a bump that almost hurts but not quite. On automatic, Katie curls into a ball and rolls to her feet. A flash of lightning lights up the sky and she sees herself glaring around at a desert she dreamed up once. A disembodied voice whispers "run" and she does, not seeing, not even caring where she is going. There is something dangerous out here and pretty soon, Katie can hear the violent strikes she had fallen away from. And she is running towards them! the next flash illuminates a small village, rickety and ancient. But she needs to get out of this storm before the rain starts cutting her. There is a wide door to a wooden building a little like stables and she heaves it open. It would be dry and warm inside and she can wait there until the rain stops and she can get help in the village. And then she hears a sound she dreaded – the crack of a whip, its' sonic boom leaving a red slash in the air. A second later she registers a quiet scream, bubbling like liquid filling the mouth. A second crack cleaved

through the night and through flesh. Another scream. Another crack. But no scream. Crack. Silence. Crack. Silence. And so it went on for what could have been minutes or more. Frozen to the spot, Katie listened to the whipping get more violent and then laughs started accompanying it. She follows the tail end of the red sparks and finds a glow coming from an old oil lamp around a dark corner. A sensible girl would have stopped and tried to be as quiet as possible but not Katie. Not tonight. The storm is already raging. She edges around the corners and sees just a flash of a man with a whip in one hand, a mean snarl on his lips and pure hate in his deep blue eyes. Then he locks gazes with her and advances on her.

“Fresh meat. Oh, you’re gonna SCREAM.”

She glared at him as he rushed towards her, daring him to do it. And then, just as he reached her, the rage-filled man was gone, leaving a crack of his whip in the air and a sting across her upper arm. She picked up the lamp, held it in front of her so she could see what or who the man had been attacking. There were a few horses around and, although she had a horrible feeling she knew who had been whipped into silence, Katie wished the man had been taking his anger out on one of them. But before her was the body of a boy with green eyes she knew he couldn’t see out of. He wore leather boots and a Stetson and these were the only perfect things that were left on a body decomposing much faster than it should have been. And then the body had become a skeleton. Skeletons didn’t walk or talk or kiss her but this one did and Katie let it. The bones crumbled beneath her fingers and she opened her eyes. Green eyes stared out from the remnants of his skull. Then they blinked out of existence, finally giving up.

And then she is alone. She sits on the bale of straw the boy had been propped against. There is something warm and wet all around her. The lamp light shows it is blood, soaked in but still fresh. At least the sweet, ripe scent of blood and death is mostly hidden by the dry polleny smell of hay and straw although it is now the only thing Katie can smell. The thought has been planted. The oil lamp swings from her arm and she pushes open the door and glances behind her. Nobody else was in the barn but the feeling of being watched will not leave. A rain-battered village stands before her and,, hurrying from one building towards her is a young man with a man chasing him, a whip in his hand and hate on his face, shouting something in a language she does not recognise. The whip arks down and catches the boy across his back. This is how it all started. The angry man is closing the gap and a second crack of the whip sends the boy to his knees, caught somewhere between crying and screaming. Katie wants to run to him, help him up and bundle into the stables, shutting the heavy door behind them. But she doesn’t. Can’t? Won’t? But the boy, Katie knows him – Jack - the name seems to fit even though she has no idea if it is correct, tries to crawl towards her, towards safety. He is not moving fast enough.

“Hurry, Jack! Be quicker!” she calls out.

And then the whip cracks down once more, leaving a thin slash of blood across the back of his checked shirt. Jack stares up, seeing Katie even though she isn’t sure she is real, and fixes his eyes on her brown ones, shadows taking up residence behind them. The angry man catches up to them and picks him up, kicking and shoving the boy towards the dry barn. Katie follows and watches an unconscious young man being beaten until the pain forces him back to consciousness and pulls tired screams from him, resigned to taking the assault, no fight left in him.

At some point during the barrage of images Katie had fainted. Jack desperately wanted to lay her back on the bed and let the girl rest as soon as he felt her go limp in his arms. Wanted to but didn’t. Couldn’t. If he stopped now, Jack knew, he would never again have the courage to show Katie these pictures. These raw, hateful, hurtful memories that he had to think about every day. Because he liked the girl, kept coming back to see her although he shouldn’t, and he needed her to know about him before he fell any further. He grinned down at Katie as she lay in his arms, caught between unconsciousness and a nightmare. *Sleep now, Lady Katie. The nightmare’s over.* She must have heard the command beneath thick layers of fitful sleep because her breathing became deep and regular, and she lay still in his arms, one hand tightly finger laced with his.

And then Jack began worrying. Was she meant to calm this quickly? What if she was not strong enough to handle all the things he had buried in her mind? What if something rose to the surface? He needn’t have worried.

Katie squirmed around and blinked up at him, lazily. “Sorry. I don’t usually sleep on guys I don’t know.” Then she frowned. “But I *do* know you.”

“Yes, we’ve met before.”

“Really? Where?”

“Katie, you have to sleep. I’ll explain everything in the morning.”

She shuffled up the bed and curled up. Jack put an arm across her waist and did not move until late the next morning, content to sleep, or the closest thing he had, right next to her.

It was nearly noon the next day when Katie rolled over and stared into the green digital display on her alarm clock. The late hour panicked her – when had she last gotten up so late? – but not quite so much as seeing the clock at all. For some reason, she was expecting to wake up next to some-one. Not wanting to get out of her cosy bed and shake off the warm glow of a wonderful dream, Katie rolled onto her side and closed her eyes. But the bliss only lasted a fraction of a second as pain lanced through her right upper arm. Katie let out a scream of pain

before she could stop herself and shot out of bed, stopping just before she barrelled into the mirror standing on her desk by the door. She sat down and rubbed her face tiredly. She remembered being up late, talking a good portion of the night away. She was beginning to wonder – she couldn't remember a name – when she saw something smeared over the mirror in her pale peach lipstick. It was too faint to read. An old trick they had used to share answers in her exams that spring had been to write answers on the bathroom mirrors in pale lipstick then spray over them with hairspray so it stood out against the mist. There was a can around here somewhere. Mom had made her pack some "just in case". Just in case what, God only knew. As the spray settled on the shiny surface, Katie rolled up the sleeve of her loose pyjama top and twisted her arm until she could see it. A large area of her upper arm was red and angry-looking. A thin line of blood ran through the middle and broken ribbons of flesh decorated it.

"Honey? Roy phoned." Lainy knocked and pushed the door open just a crack. When she saw that Katie was decent she came a bit further into the room, a sound halfway out of her mouth when she saw the slash on the girl's arm. "What happened?" She glanced up at the mirror and the curiosity in her eyes turned to anger – Katie saw that tiny shadow shoot behind them.

"I wish I could tell you," Katie answered.

Lainy bent down and poked just hard enough to make her flinch, not hard enough to hurt. "Looks like a whip stroke. Kinky."

"I'm wondering how you know that."

"I've seen all sorts. I also know that, if it draws blood, you're doing it wrong."

"A lot of things feel wrong right now." Katie tried to look at the mirror without being too obvious but it just wasn't happening.. She could make out ACK and the top line of a letter that was probably a T. And what the hell did tack mean when it was at home? One more thing to add to the weird list. "You wanted something?"

"Yeah. Roy phoned earlier. I didn't want to wake you so I took a message. Kinda wish I hadn't now..." She shook herself and went on. "They said you can't have a job at the academy. It sucks, right?"

"Great. Now, what do I do for cash?"

"Well, the scholarship gives you a bit of freedom with fees. We'll have a think about it later, okay."

Katie brushed her hair back with her sweaty palms and grabbed some clothes. "Right, I'm off for a shower and then I've gotta buy dinner stuff."

"But--"

"My problems will still be here when I get back."

CHAPTER NINE

By the time Katie had showered, slapped a dressing on her arm and got her bag from her room, the others were banging around downstairs or in the garden. Life went on as normal in the house on Newton Street. Katie only allowed herself a minute to listen to everything before going downstairs, where she drank water and picked at fruit.

“I’m going to the library,” yelled Leo and swung out the door, slamming it behind him. It seemed to be the first time he had left the house since she had got here. Was it really only a week ago that she had said goodbye to her family? It seemed so much longer.

Jaye breezed into the kitchen, her nose buried in a textbook, got a pack of biscuits and headed back to her room without even seeing her. All second year students and above were expected to have kept up some kind of reading during the holidays and, with classes starting next week, it was a pretty good bet that cramming just enough to blag the first lesson was the order of the day. Dina was probably holed up in their room too – she hadn’t heard her. When her admittedly poor excuse for breakfast was over, Katie got a sheet of paper from her bag and scribbled down a few things she needed to get for dinner. It was going to be lasagne with salad and bread rolls. It might not be the most imaginative meal but she found it easy to make and she knew it was tasty. Well nobody had ever died when she made it and that was good enough for Katie. She started writing her list and then her ears latched onto an angry conversation drifting through the closed lounge door.

“What the hell did you do to that poor kid?” Lainy.

“Yeah. Kid. Whatever you’re thinking, mate, she is a child. For the next year, she’s *our* child.” She had never heard Adam sound so angry. Calm and quiet but there was no mistaking that harsh edge of rage in his voice.

“She has a mark, Jack, a whip mark. You’re doing, I’m guessing?”

“Look, I never meant her to get hurt. I just didn’t know what else to do.” Jack? Was that the word smeared on her mirror?

“You didn’t know. That one gets old so fast.”

“I would never intentionally hurt her.”

“You...”

Adam must have made some noise to hush Lainy because she trailed off and he took over. “Before we get to the blame – before, not instead of – tell us what happened to Katie. How did she get that slash?”

Katie glanced down at the bandage on her arm and peeled a corner of it up to look at the ugly cut beneath. It made her shudder. Not because it hurt – it was a pleasantly numb area until she tried to move it – but because she was sure she had gotten the wound in some nightmarish other world. Certainly, there were no memories she could use to pin point it. Just – it was cold and wet and dark and there was screaming and then there wasn’t.

“... deserves to know.” Jack finished. Katie felt guilty that she had missed what he said, then she remembering she really had no right to be hearing this in the first place. “I couldn’t just stand by and watch her stumble into trouble because she’s too young to be told.”

“The rules are there for a reason, Jack. You knew what might happen and now she’s scared, hurt, God knows what else. Does she know why? Forget it, doesn’t matter. It doesn’t change the fact that you did something incredibly stupid last night and you might have made an enemy out of Katie. Well done,” the sarcasm oozed through the door and Lainy began a slow handclap.

“Who even let you in last night? It wasn’t me.”

“Katie did. She didn’t know she was doing it either.” And then Katie had a sudden memory of being awake late last night and sitting by the window when she suddenly felt dizzy and breathless. Then there was a boy standing beside her, holding onto her hand as though he might fall away if he let go. With a start, Katie realised that was absolutely true.

The conversation quieted to a series of mutters she couldn’t quite hear and, whilst she doubted any of them would bat an eyelid if she burst into the living room and started firing questions, she realised that she wasn’t that sure she wanted any answers. Not even if she had had any questions to ask. As it was,, there were important things to be getting on with. Like dinner.

Even though she hadn’t really felt like it, Katie had jogged down to the corner shop she’d sat outside with Jaye, pretty sure they would have everything she needed and ended up with so much stuff that she’d had to take the bus back home. *Home* – it still made her smile. There was precisely one bus that ran in Northwood. It mostly ran along the main road and into a few of the streets where, she guessed, older or disabled people lived. There was another bus that ran down into Millford but it didn’t even stop in Northwood. Most places in town could easily be walked to, but it was handy to have the service when you needed it. There had only been a handful of people on the bus when she got on – she was sure she recognised one as the woman from the

hospital that second night – and gave her a little smile and wave. The woman nodded back. It reminded Katie of another little job she had to do when she off-loaded. One she was not at all looking forward to.

“How’s your son?” Katie asked, sliding into the seat behind her. The woman frowned and Katie tapped the side of her head to remind her.

“From the hospital. Of course. Oh, he’s fine now. Tried to cadge the first day off school though.”

“We all did it,” Katie replied. Dan still tried it every term.

“As soon as he was through the gates he was off playing footy with his little friends.”

“Football star in the making, hey. Maybe he’ll be training here at the academy in a few years.”

“Oh no, I’d never send him to Levenson. Well, not if I didn’t have to. It’s much too... expensive.”

The woman tried to make that last sentence as seamless as possible and managed it pretty well but Katie didn’t miss that fraction of a beat between the last two words. “Why wouldn’t you send him to college here at home?”

“It’s just,” she started, looking nervously out the window and gathering and re-gathering her bags. “It’s just not the right place for him. Not Freddie. They promised.”

“Who promised what and why? That he wasn’t good enough? I’m sure he’ll turn out great at football. If you start young, there’s plenty of time to get good.”

“That’s what I’m hoping for. And that’s why he can never go here.” She finally got her bags together and stood up, yanking the cord that told the driver to halt. “I need him to have that time. I want people to call him Magic Feet Freddie. ‘cos he *is* good. Much too good to have it all be wasted when he’s eighteen.”

“You’ve lost me.”

“This town, the people who live here, we’re all just waiting, you know. And you... I don’t know why they call kids in if they can’t tell them. They never rush to tell you anything.” A question was halfway out of Katie’s mouth when the brakes squealed on – she really wished her mouth had told her brain what it was. “Look, it’s my stop.” And she damn near ran down to the folding doors. Katie sat back and looked out the window as the bus rolled slowly on the one stop to Newton Street. Now, she was glad she had had to catch the bus from the shop. If she had even suspected Northwood was not the average small college town, the woman had more or less confirmed it. There was nothing overtly weird or creepy about the place – it was just this feeling of everything running a little too smoothly, the people being a little too nice.

When Katie got back, she went straight to the kitchen to put her bags down on the table. And walked right into Dina repeating Jaye's actions of the morning step for step. Only she dragged her eyes away from her textbook at the door, registering Katie and the carriers. "Food? Real food?"

Katie nodded and Dina slammed her chemistry book down on the table, looking relieved. "I've been living off burgers all summer. I think that's about all I ate in America. They had a lot of seafood but it made me puke one night."

Katie tried to grin but inside she felt sick herself. She really didn't need to know that. "Thanks for sharing."

"I'm the kind of cook who can get beans on toast wrong but I can help unpack." Dina, with bones sticking out everywhere, was much stronger than she looked. She took a few things out of bags and then, after Katie had tried and failed, she set about getting the heavy pots and dishes out of random cupboards. They seemed random to Katie, anyway, but the housemates had probably developed some intricate system. "What is it, anyway? I'm praying you're not stashing seafood somewhere."

"Lasagne with chicken instead of beef. Lean meat, full of protein. Pasta – carbs. Veg – obvious."

"Well thought out. Actually, it's the first meal we're all getting to eat together." Dina sat on the sideboard and started swinging her legs so the backs of her feet drummed out a higgledy rhythm on a cupboard.

Katie emptied her bag of tomatoes into a colander to wash when feet flew down the stairs and voices started shouting. "Stay the hell out of my room, Leo!" yelled Jaye.

"It wasn't your room."

"Fair enough. But when I'm in the bathroom, it's temporarily mine. Meaning you can't come in."

"That's rich!"

"Oh, for God's sake."

"You're going to hell for that."

In the kitchen, Katie looked over at Dina who was already racing for the door. Katie left the tap running on her tomatoes and dashed to the door just in time to see Jaye giving him the middle finger.

"Screw you and screw your precious fucking God too."

It looked as though Jaye – strong, happy Jaye – was crying, or about to start; her eyes sparkled. The pair were also so lost in their current battle that neither of them noticed they had an audience.

“This was my house before you ever got here.”

“It’s time to share then. I’m here now and I’m going nowhere,” he said, just low enough for it to sound like a threat but loud enough to be full of anger and danger. “Get used to it.”

“You invaded my space!”

“You cursed me and took God’s name in rage.”

“Oooh, come on then big, bad God,” Jaye called up to the ceiling. “Strike me down or something.” Nothing happened. “See? No Lord Al-fucking-mighty. And if there is some beardy dude on a cloud, he obviously doesn’t give a crap about little old me. What happens to us when we’ve had enough?”

“God forgives the good and the rest of *you*–“ he put a bit more emphasis than was strictly necessary on that word “-go to hell for the rest of eternity!”

“Seriously, you need to learn some boundaries.” Jaye was standing as tall, as she could but Leo, Katie estimated, was touching six feet and towered at least seven inches over her. Jaye had managed to twist around until she was on the bottom of the stairs, still up against the wall but closer to his face.

“And you need to back off bitch!”

Katie saw in her head what was going to happen fractions of an instant before it did. Maybe the others did too. More likely, the next few seconds were so predictable that they should have all seen it coming. Shrugging off the tiny, scared voice that always crept into her mind – *don’t do anything stupid, girly. Nothing that’s going to get us a smack in the face, right* – and started forward to stop the argument. Dina laid a hand on her arm and shook her head very slightly though her face looked strained, as though she were having a hard time staying out of it too. Leo, angry, curled his hand into a fist and pulled his arm back. Why did everything descend into violence around Katie? She almost wished she could say that everything happened in slow motion or even so fast she barely saw it, it would just make it easier to watch if she could control it like the speed of a film, but it was normal speed. Aching normal speed and no skipping the gross parts. So she watched as Leo brought his fist thundering towards Jaye’s face. Jaye opened her eyes wide at the side and then closed them again, bracing for impact, unable to get away.

And the fist never connected.

Not with her face anyway.

But it did make a lovely crunch against the wall, shaking plaster loose.

For a second, Katie heard her brain repeating that *Leo just missed, that's all*. Her eyes told a different story, at least for the instant it took Jaye to squirm her head back an inch or two. Leo had punched right through the girl. For some reason, the sight wasn't nearly as surprising as it should have been but she still stood there, mouth hanging open. It was impossible. But it had happened right there. Leo had been ready to hit Jaye, she'd seen the punch coming, and her face had just – melted? – to allow his fist to pass right through.

Dina snapped Katie's jaw shut with a finger. "You're catching flies." She walked up to the pair, who looked in turn just angry and stunned enough to go straight back at it, and pulled them apart. She placed a hand on both of their chests and looked at Leo first. "You. Take a walk, whatever, as long as it's outside. Chill." Her voice had taken on a calm but commanding bass that nobody could seriously want to disagree with. Leo hesitated for a second, the urge to disobey shining bright in his eyes. On impulse, Katie threw a jacket at him, held the front door open and waved him out.

"You heard her. Out. Or do I need to sign it for you?"

He glared at her. Katie pointed at him and then outside and he slunk out after a minute. Dina and Jaye were mounting the top stair and vanishing into their room when Katie closed the door. She sank back against it. God, why had she just stood up to Leo like that? One part of her was oddly proud whilst another was just terrified that he'd stalk back later and decide she caused all the trouble. But, last night, he'd shown that he had some compassion for others. It was a long shot but maybe, just maybe, Leo would even apologise to Jaye later.

And she didn't even have time to process what she had just seen her friend do.

Right, time was getting on.

"Hi Mom."

"Sweetie! How lovely to hear from you! We've all missed..."

Katie let her mother blather on, gushing about how much she was missed, how things just weren't the same without her, and went on layering pasta sheets in a dish, trying to making the right noises at the right times. "I'm glad things haven't fallen to pieces without me."

"You sound distracted."

"Yeah. I'm making dinner." She jammed the phone tighter between her chin and shoulder and went on the hunt for salt and pepper which she eventually found in a bunch of sachets swiped from some café. "It's all pizza and pot noodles round here. I'm campaigning for proper food at least once a week." That was doubtful unless she volunteered to cook once a week. Never.

“You sound happy though?” Mom made the statement a question. She couldn’t know that her daughter had been faking her smiles all summer. Could she? But this grin was genuine. “Did you open your letter? Was it good news?”

That really depended on which side of the fence you were sitting. “They’re dropping the case.”

“Oh honey-“

“It’s better this way really. New start and everything,” she cut her mother off before she could rush into another round of platitudes she had heard a hundred times before. *Last night*. “How’s Uncle Billy? I heard he lost a fight with a lamp post?” Katie phrased the question carefully.

Not quite carefully enough as it tuned out. “He said it was on the way home. How did - ?”

“Small town. Stupidity travels fast.”

“He’s doing fine. Got a black eye to be proud of. Honestly, men can pick fights with anything, can’t they?” Yeah, even 16 year old girls. “Hey, what can I hear back there?”

Katie glanced up at the ceiling where Jaye and Dina sounded like they were thrashing out the row from earlier. “We’re at war,” she sighed. It seemed like she had walked straight from one fight this morning into another with Jaye and Leo and now yet another with the girls upstairs. “Nothing to worry about.”

“Sweetie, I do worry. We all do. You know that.”

“I’ve made some friends. I’ve got a race coming up. Term starts in a week. If the world’s not ending tomorrow, I’m happy with what I’ve got.”

“What a lovely attitude to have. It must be so hard for you. Out there all on your own.” Katie didn’t feel on her own. Okay, once or twice she’d had a wave of homesickness, of wanting to be looked after and wrapped in cotton wool so she never had to grow up, but she hadn’t felt alone. “How are you coping fending for yourself?”

She could hear the worry in Mom’s voice and had to bite her tongue before she blurted everything out. *Well, Mom... I nearly got raped last week, I nearly blinded my uncle, I freaked on my landlord, one of my housemates hates me, the next town is totally off limits, something weird’s going on with the people here but I don’t know what, these dream/nightmare things keep haunting me even when I think I’m awake, there’s a cute boy called Jack who wrote on my mirror this morning. And I think I’m losing my mind.* Katie put her knife down and touched the bandage on her arm, having more or less forgotten about it all day, sending a fresh ripple of sparking pain

down her arm and up into a shoulder. “That can’t have been a dream. Dreams don’t leave marks... at least, not on the outside.”

“Katie, are you okay? If you want us to come up we can.”

“No, I’m fine. Just –“ Oh God, what excuse could she use? Reading aloud? No, she hadn’t done that since she was six. Trying to have another conversation at the same time? The comment was way too random and sudden. Some combination of the two maybe? “Just running lines with a drama student. It’s all busy busy busy.”

“Don’t push yourself too hard sweetie. Remember how much younger you are than most students.”

As if she was likely to forget. “I have to get this in the oven now so send my love to Dad and tell Dan I’ll kill her if she steals any of my old clothes. I don’t care that they’re only marked for charity – they’re for the needy, not the tragic.”

They said their goodbyes quickly, Katie itching to get her mother off the phone as soon as possible because she sounded close to tears. Wasn’t it Katie who should be sad? She snapped the phone shut, aimed in the general direction of the full ironing pile and was pleasantly surprised when she didn’t miss completely. It was a big target though. After the lasagne had been covered in foil and put in the oven for it’s first lot of cooking, Katie decided to set the ironing board up and try to get the pile down. She found her mp3 player and switched it on. The LOW BATTERY message flashed up so she found the mains charger and plugged it in, switching to the playlist of country and western tracks. The constant back and forth and flip and fold of the ironing mixed with the far away simplicity of songs that spoke of open lands and standing by your man took her away from this place. The arguing upstairs was a hundred years and ten thousand miles away. In front of her stood a boy with green eyes and a cowboy hat. He smiled at Katie, traced the bandage on her arm. “It wasn’t meant to happen like this.”

Katie remembered the name written on her mirror – it wasn’t TACK, it was JACK – completely duh! – and put two and two together. This was the boy Adam and Lainy had been arguing with. Questions popped into her brain but all that came out of her mouth was an accusation. “But it did.”

Jack looked sad for a moment and distant expression fell over his face. Katie frowned and wanted to reach out for him. But she didn’t. “This music, it reminds me of home.”

“Where’s home?”

“A long time ago. A long way away.”

“You’re Jack and I’m Lady Katie. We know each other. We like each other but we forget.” For some reason it felt important to say the words.

“I never forget.”

“But I do.”

“Yes. That’s how it’s meant to be.”

“Will I forget this?” Jack looked away from Katie but she moved her face and locked her gaze with his, the way he could do with her. Memories were flaring in the darks of her mind and she would retrieve them, process them when this was over. Answers were more important.

“Rules are there for a reason.”

“No, they’re not. Rules are there because someone thinks they’re God.”

“They stop people gettin’ hurt.”

Katie looked at him for a long moment, long enough for Jack to start feeling uncomfortable, and then she giggled. Jack frowned at the girl. He didn’t understand that Katie had to laugh because she’d cry if she didn’t. But he said nothing. Just stood and watched her.

“Seriously?” Katie asked. “This is too messed up. What rules?”

“The rules I broke by coming back here.”

Katie glanced down and saw the iron in her hand, felt the warm glow coming from the humming oven, heard Johnny Cash growling about walking the line. This was all real, almost frighteningly real, and she had to remind herself that Jack was actually standing next to her. It was easy to pretend this was just a day dream. But nothing was ever easy, was it?

“You got attacked and that wasn’t the plan. So, they sent me to see you. One time only, that was the deal. I tried to keep it. But I couldn’t stay away from you for long. And then all this bad shit kept happenin’ to you and I had to see you more and more. Just to make sure you were still you.”

“Right. My turn. Who are they? What’s this plan? Why were you only supposed to-“ She shook her head and folded up one of Leo’s t-shirts – a yin yang symbol licked with flame – and added it to the growing pile. “Be honest with me, Jack, is this your fault?” She gestured to her injured arm.

“Yes. I’m sorry.” To his credit, Jack looked genuinely guilty. “I tried to show you who I used to be, what happened to me. I knew you might get hurt but... I knew.”

“What’s the time?” A quick check of her player said it was almost five. The lasagne had been in the oven almost an hour. “Staying for dinner, right?” she threw at Jack as she quickly slid the ironing board away and the unsteady pile of clothes onto one arm to be taken upstairs. Without waiting for the dithering boy to answer she dashed off upstairs. Jack had never been invited for a meal in all the years he’d seen and didn’t really know what to say. It wasn’t like Katie had given him much of a choice anyway.

“You’re talking to me about secrets!” Dina yelled inside the room she and Jaye shared.

“What gives you that right? I’m not keeping the biggest secret of her life.”

“And I’m not keeping the damn secret out of some misguided sense of self preservation.”

“It’s the rules, right?”

“Yeah. Look what happened last time we broke that rule.”

“Come on, Jaye. She’s way stronger than he ever was. She can handle this.”

“Whoa, whoa, horsey. This is not about us and the things we can’t say or do. This is about you, what you did.”

“What I did? I didn’t *do* anything.”

“You let her get groped all night, roofied her, then let her run off alone. Anything could have happened out there.”

“But it didn’t.”

“It nearly did.”

“Nearly, not quite. You know better than anyone, Katie is stronger than that. plus, she has Jack looking out for her. And when he’s not here, you’re sniffing around her heels.” Katie had been beginning to feel a bit guilty for listening in on their conversation but, now it seemed to be about her, she felt a little better about it. “like you used to do with me.”

“Is that why you did it? Because...” There was a sudden sobbing from behind the closed door. Bedsprings squeaked and Katie could picture Jaye sitting next to a weeping Dina, holding the girl awkwardly. “Look, you’ve had an entire year to get used to the idea.”

“But it’s all so different now. I know when and where. I’ve seen the place where it’s gonna happen. It makes it more real.”

“Dina.” She drew the name out like parents did when they were pretending to be angry with their kids. “We talked through this last night. She’s new here and we have to protect her from all this for now. But it doesn’t mean I’ll stop looking out for you, babe. You’re meant to be like me you know.”

The sobbing continued but more muffled and less frequent. Katie waited a second before knocking the door. “I’ll leave your clothes out here. Dinner’s ready in fifteen.” She dropped everything in the bathroom and outside everyone else’s rooms before changing her food stained shirt and running back to the kitchen to finish off the dinner.

Katie let her hands work on automatic and went over the things she had just heard upstairs. Dina had drugged her a few nights ago then left her to dash off, vulnerable. It kind of made sense actually. She hadn’t been exactly best friendly this week, unless Jaye had been with them obliging her to be pally, and she was obviously feeling guilty after their little chat last night.

That must have been why she had sat down for a chat earlier. There was also something no-one was telling her. Keeping secrets around here was obviously second nature. If she could just figure out what it was...

Dinner went well. Katie nodded and smiled at the compliments her housemates gave her – see if they say the same thing in an hour – but she barely even tasted her own. Even having Jack there wasn't proving much of a distraction. There was tension crackling between everybody at the table. It hung heavy over the front room like an animal net; inescapable, no matter how hard the struggle.

"What's going on around here?" Adam asked. "I don't think this house has ever been this quiet."

"Leo punched me in the face."

Adam frowned at her face, noted the absence of a bruise, then glanced over at Katie for an instant, hoping she didn't see. Of course, she did and frowned back at him. He knew why Jaye didn't have a bruise but not that Katie also knew. Even if she didn't understand. Jaye stared back at him coolly and then shrugged.

"Why?" he asked then.

Jaye said nothing, perhaps having forgotten what their fight had been about. It didn't seem likely though. He looked at Leo for an answer. It was not forthcoming.

"Look, we're in charge of all you guys and, since we don't want a murder on our hands tonight, you're gonna have to tell us what's wrong."

Lainy put her fork down and rested her folded arms on the edge of the table. Her plate was one step away from being licked clean. She was not fat but she definitely liked her food. "Thank you, Katie, that was lovely. Now, to business. I will not have violence in this house. I will not have fear. And I will not have lies."

For just a second Katie wondered if that particular rule would apply if she asked why they were keeping things from her, and what those things were.

"She was doing her make-up in the bathroom and I went in to get my towel. The door was open." Leo sat back, a grin on his face as if his story was over. "And then she went all psycho-bitch on me. Starts yelling at me about boundaries and all that."

"He told me God would never forgive me and I'd go to hell." She waved her knife between her thumb and fore finger, watching it as if there were more interesting things she could be doing with it. "Sometimes, I think hell might be easier."

Dina put her hand over her friends', stilling the thrumming cutlery.

Katie looked up. "Why did you do that?"

A moments silence fell again, deep and eternal. She wished Kaye would start drumming her knife again, anything to break this horrible deathly hush. It probably wasn't as long or total or awkward as Katie felt. "I'm no threat to you, Dina."

"I don't know what you mean," she said.

Dina sounded honestly confused and Katie wondered if she had simply imagined her and Jaye arguing an hour ago. A lot of things that seemed real were either not real at all, half real or had no right to be real in the first place.

"You..." she could not finish that sentence, could not bring herself to make that accusation. She, instead, started stacking plates to wash. "There's no point. Not tonight. I'm too tired to be angry right now."

She took the plates out and clattered them into the sink, tears threatening to spill over once more. Not the crying again. She didn't see the way Adam nodded at Jack and then after Katie, the way Leo threw his chair back and flopped down in front of the TV, or hear the hushed murmurs of a student house desperately trying to keep itself together. Until Jack walked into the kitchen and felt her stiff body relax into his, Katie was aware of absolutely nothing. Katie turned to him, glad once more she was wearing pumps – she'd tower about three inches over him in heels – and let herself get lost in his eyes, letting them make everything okay for a few minutes. She leaned in to kiss him, to taste him, to breathe him in, because things were just *better* when they were together, and stared at him in surprise when he pushed her back. Maybe with a touch of disappointment. And a whole splodge of rejection.

"It's not that I don't want to. I just can't." Okay, where the hell did he think this was leading? It was kiss, not a dare to jump off a cliff. "I just don't want you to forget me."

Katie nodded like it made perfect sense.

CHAPTER TEN

Tuesday was spent sitting in their back garden in the cooling summer air, fast turning into autumn, and trying to concentrate in one of the few books she had brought with her. It was not difficult to get drawn into the story – a plague of zombies with a warlock controlling them, a young witch trying to kill them all – but Katie couldn't stop her mind drifting back to the previous night. Eventually, when she had read three chapters and found she remembered not a word of it, she got up and went inside, changed into some exercise clothes and went down to the track. Maybe a decent work-out would sort her head out.

“Hey Roy.” Katie leaned through the window and gave him a little wave as she passed.

The old man was ducked down behind a table, his thinning, silver hair sticking up above it, Worzel Gummidge style. He heaved himself up when she spoke. “Why, morning, Miss Katie!” He frowned at the clock on the wall, its face almost invisible behind the dirty glass. It was still morning, but only just. “Must get that thing cleaned. I am sorry I couldn’t get you no work but rules is rules.”

She’d been hearing that a lot lately, it seemed. “Something’ll come up,” she shrugged and reached for the pen and clipboard to sign herself in. “Is it busy down there today?”

“Not too bad. A few stew-dents training for that race on Saturday.”

That was it for Katie. She scribbled a signature and hurried off to the track, eager to check out the competition. Before she entered the stadium proper, she took a second to breathe. She hadn’t even realised she had been holding her breath. She had known the quality of runners back at school and in their local clubs. Not too brilliant but the odd person who could keep pace sometimes. But these were college runners. And at a specialist sports academy at that. Of course they were going to be good. Undoubtedly better than her. When she passed through the arched entrance to the arena though, all she saw was a half dozen young people huddled in a group with another couple sitting down and watching. Katie stood and watched, open-mouthed at what they did next. The handful of students broke apart and lined up on the start line. Some-one yelled out and everyone burst away in a show of unnatural speed. They were better than good, better than better than her. They were brilliant. After the first bend, the leader jogged off the track and left the others to keep running. He was obviously the pace maker, getting them all into a healthy rhythm and pace. But after going down the straight, they all jogged to a halt. Suddenly it all made sense. The older man who had acted like the pacemaker was the coach and they were all practising sprint starts. At least, she hoped that was all it was. It was the kind of coaching she had come to Northwood for. The students were spookily fast, and none of them seemed out of breath from where she was standing, the kind of speed you only saw in professional competition. Of course! At least some of these *had* been in professional competitions.

Feeling a bit depressed now, Katie turned away and jogged over to the opposite side of the track and sat on the pitted grass. From here, where she could only see vague shapes moving around, she could do some stretches and think things through. For starters, what was going on with her and Jack? He seemed to like her, she could tell that much, and she felt warm inside whenever she was near him. She felt safe around him, and that was good, but she felt a bit frightened too, and that was bad. Not frightened of him – God, a world of no - but scared of *something*. Things Katie didn’t know could hurt her. The last few months had pretty much

drilled it into her – don't trust the shadows. And then there was Dina. The shy girl who barely spoken without Jaye there to hold her hand, had drugged her and let her nearly be attacked again. Dina didn't know it had happened before but it made no difference. *Why did she do it?* tugged at her brain like it had last night but the answer didn't seem all that important either. It was done. Nothing terrible had happened. It was over. And yet... who would have thought Dina could be that vindictive.

Lainy walked up to Katie just as she was turning her thoughts to Leo – had a human side but was an insensitive, anti-social git mostly. “Been a few years since I could do that.”

Katie was bent like a hairpin, grasping her feet with her clawed hands, legs locked straight. It wasn't enough just to be good at running; she had to keep as flexible as possible. Generally speaking, athletes were decent gymnasts too. Not great enough to compete but passable. “I'm surprised I can still do it myself to be honest.”

“Uh-huh,” she said doubtfully. “I thought you'd be here. We should talk about last night.” She went quiet. Katie waited, almost able to see the cogs turning in the other girls' head as she ran through things to say. “A lot of things happened yesterday. I'm sorry it was all on your night.”

“I never said I was easy to live with. You've never had a lodger as problematic as me. “Yay! A claim to fame.

“Katie, don't ever think you're a problem. You could never be that,” Lainy scolded her with a frown. There hadn't been a dull moment in the house since Katie arrived it was true. “The things that went on... they were nothing to do with you. Everything's just...” she covered her face with her hand for a second then pushed her short curls back. “Everyone gets stressed this time of year and that tension sometimes turns into aggression. Jaye,” she paused again, trying to find the right words. Nothing seemed quite right. “She wasn't herself yesterday.”

“No kidding. Ever since I met her, she's been nothing but smiles and jokes and then she just broke yesterday. I guess there's only so much happy you can be.” And, boy, didn't Katie know that.

“When she went out with Dina on Sunday, things were said and Dina said, you know, she'd had enough and was thinking of leaving. It really got to Jaye because she started feeling kind of like a failure and she started thinking about some of the crap she's been through –“

“Like that guy who dumped her last year?”

Lainy frowned. “She told you about that?”

Katie decided to push it a bit further. “Can you tell me what I really saw yesterday?”

“I’m not real clear on what went on,” she said. Katie thought she was lying to her even though Lainy sounded sincere, leaving just enough of a pause between question and answer. They had surely discussed it last night. “I know Leo started spouting his stuff about eternal damnation at some point and it just pushed her over the edge.”

This was getting them nowhere. Lainy wasn’t giving up any of the answers to subtle questioning. Katie decided to try a different tack and, this time, get her suspicions confirmed before she asked anything. “Millford,” she began. It was almost funny how Katie could practically see her friend step back and pull heavy metal shutters down. A delicate subject then. “Jaye said we’re not allowed to go down there. True or false?”

“It’s a dangerous place, honey. Bad things happen there. Weird things. It’s just not worth the risk.”

“Are we banned from going though?”

“There’s nothing physically stopping you.” By the horribly familiar shadow that flickered in Lainy’s eyes, Katie got the feeling there was much more to be said after that sentence. More that nearly fell out of her mouth. “We just wouldn’t want you to get hurt.”

“And Jack?”

“I think he’d rather die than see you hurt.” Lainy glanced at the bandage on her arm and then out at the group of students running or jumping along the lanes. She had a dark and distant look about her. “Although I think it might be a bit late for that.”

Katie gave up. “I’ve got training to do.” She ran off, lunging, stretching and jumping along. As she started half running and half jogging and swinging her arms, Katie risked a look back and saw Lainy staring after her. Let her stare. The week had been way too busy. There were too many questions that needed answers. No more riddles and give answers that just sounded like they meant something and were actually really vague. She wanted to run, to get ready for the race on Saturday. It seemed to get more important with every other thing that had happened. Rounding the second bend, Katie managed to stop herself crashing into Lainy as she dashed towards the exit faster than looked plausible with just a bump and a stepped on toe.

“Woah! If ever I need a tackling dummy – what happened?” Katie breathed, seeing the panic turning her friend’s face into a mask of lines and shadows. “I wasn’t being mean. Running’s kinda my escape from everything is all.”

“Come on!” Lainy grabbed her hand tightly and towed her along. “Dina’s in hospital.”

“What?” she spluttered. Not that it was a huge surprise to Katie – a day going by without an emergency was always going to be a long shot.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“No-one’ll tell me what’s going on.”

It had taken a few minutes to get to the med centre with Lainy pedalling her bike like a woman possessed and Kaie riding piggy back. She made a mental note to try and stretch the budget to a bike of her own. The tiny car park had a couple of cars in it, an ambulance and a row of pushbikes chained to the railings. Wheeling the bike into a space and locking it up would have taken a bit of time - mostly because Lainy didn’t even own a bike lock – so she just jumped off and let it clatter into one of the bushes, rushing through the doors and not watching to see if Katie followed. She did. But only after a deep breath and a cautious glance at the building before her. Katie decided that she didn’t like hospitals one little bit.

The inside of the hospital was quite busy. Not as busy as the big one in the city had been but busier than she had so far seen it. All told, probably just under a dozen people filled the small reception area; some looking ill or injured and chatting to the people who must have come in with them. A man got up and walked over to the drinks machine and slotted coins in. They fell through the machines innards and the crash as they landed seemed to cut through the steady buzz of conversation. He pressed some buttons and hot water hissed out of a spout. Katie found herself watching this operation with great interest, vaguely puzzled as to why she could hear all these quiet noises when everything around was so noisy. *You can’t. Not really. But it’s better to pretend to hear that than this.* This being the unforgettable, unforgiveable sound of people in pain. A hand on her back propelled her over to a quieter corner. Arms wrapped themselves tight around her, a warm body pressed against her and the beads of a spirit bangle pressed into her neck. Jaye. Instinctively, Katie hugged her friend back and didn’t say a thing. Jack had done that the other night. Maybe not because he knew she needed to be held like this. It had worked regardless. She knew Jaye was craving the exact same thing – the tight upper body muscles, the spine curved into a rigid S – even if she couldn’t find the words.

“They won’t tell me *anything*,” Jaye sobbed as she stepped away at last. Her face was pulled tight and was whiter than it usually was. “Because I’m not family.”

“They’ll tell me.” Lainy was sure of that. Likely her former medical training meant she could pull a few strings. “I promise you that.” She marched through the swinging double doors, setting them swinging and shouting, “De Rossa!” like she was calling on an old friend. Maybe she was.

“Hey.” Katie found some empty seats and sat down beside her friend. It was incredibly hard to know what to say that didn’t sound like something she herself had been hearing all summer. Telling her everything would be fine sounded so fake and meaningless. The trouble her family must have had trying to find the right things to say suddenly hit home. Katie took the safe option and said nothing. She just let Jaye curl up and lay her head in her lap like a child with its’ mother. Only the steady trickle of people leaving the medical centre gave any clue as to how long they sat there, Katie stoking Jaye’s shoulders. The tension etched into her face faded into the shadow of worry and Jaye sat up, looked around. Still no sign of Lainy. Was that a good sign? Bad?

“I’m sorry. I’m such a wuss.” The comment was meant as a joke but the laugh Jaye tried turned into a choking sob. Dried tears and other gunk had crusted at the corners of her eyes. There was a damp patch on Katie’s tennis dress where Jaye had cried. “I should be looking after you, not the other way round.”

“You’ve done more than enough this week.” The couple on the seats behind them got called through the double doors. “I reckon I’d have cracked already if I hadn’t had a friend like you.”

“The first weeks are always hard.”

“You have no idea,” she said and stretched her own back out. Lainy had dragged her off in the middle of her workout and she should do a warm down. Well, as best as she could manage here. “I seem to just be rushing through the events of my student years in a fortnight. Think that means my actual education will be nice and boring?”

Jaye made a face.

“Where are the boys?” It felt wrong, disrespectful somehow, for one of the house to be in hospital and not have the whole gang together.

Jaye tried, and nearly succeeded at, a thin smile and counted her fingers off as she spoke. “Pub. Football. Strip club.”

“I pray for football.”

“Who do you pray to? I mean, there’s no-one out there so what’s the point? It’s not like it’ll make any difference.” Her voice was rising in both pitch and volume. “She was trying to kill herself you know. I knew she might try and I decided not to take her seriously.”

“What happened?” A pause. “I know you probably don’t want to talk about it but if I’m going to avoid putting my foot in it with Dina in the future, I have to know.” Talking gently was always a good idea with emotionally fragile people, so they said. But it was stupid to avoid the subject altogether.

“We were going to the out-of-town centre. Shopping. I was waiting for her to finish in the bathroom before we went when there was this bit of a crash. She’s always dropping stuff so I thought nothing of it. But then I noticed everything’s gone quiet and I can’t even hear her moving about. I shouted and shouted and then I got the door open and she was just lying there with blood everywhere. The mirror was all bust into shards and there was water in the sink, like she had cut her wrists underwater. It’s meant to take the edge of the pain.”

“God.” It was not impossible to imagine someone being driven so far into despair that suicide seemed like a viable option. What *was* impossible to conceive of was having the courage to do it. Knowing you might never come back...

“I should have kept a closer eye on her. Dina wanted to leave; she told me she wanted to go. I thought she wanted to move out. But she slashed her wrists instead.”

“I won’t tell you it’s not your fault because I know you won’t believe me.” There was nothing to be said that didn’t sound like a sound bite from one of Adams medical dramas. Besides, how could Katie promise that everything would be fine when hospitals, at least for her, echoed with lies and stories? “The worst bit’s over.”

Lainy stood at the double doors, peeling off a pair of latex gloves before coming over to them. “Well,” she began. “She was in surgery a while. We found a load of painkillers in her pockets too. Seems like she had a back-up plan if the bleeding hadn’t worked.”

“Elaine,” Jaye whined.

“Sorry, I’m getting ahead of myself. Dina’s okay. Unconscious. Lost a lot more blood than we could get back in to her. You can go sit with her though.”

Lainy retreated back into the recesses of the building. After a few minutes of stunned silence Jaye stood up and started towards the double doors, holding Katie’s hand. “You carry on. I need a minute on my own.”

To be honest, Katie thought she needed the rest of the week to herself. and even that might not be enough. Then she got up and followed her friend through the swinging doors. Being alone meant there was nothing to do but think, and she really didn’t want to think about anything right now. But just as she pushed through the doors, she was struck by an image – memory? – so strong that her breath was whipped away. *There is nothing to see. All there is is a thick blackness and this sense of moving through the air, of being carried. Doors crash open and she feels air rush against her bare legs. Some-one shouts for help. Wheels squeal on a tiled floor and she feels herself being laid out on a hard board. A tremor rocks through her and pulls her muscles tight and long, feeling as though invisible ropes and chains are pulling them, holding them down. The voices call for help again and she tries to shout along with it. But even the*

muscles in her throat are rebelling. Katie drags her eyes open just a crack and for just a moment and, she does not know why she expects this, expects to see green eyes staring back down at her. Everything will be okay if her green-eyed cowboy is here. But he is not. Blue eyes, dark with emotion, hang over her. Then her eyes flutter closed once more and a new voice comes to take her away.

“Katie?” The voice was Lainy’s.

“What?” she asked, not wanting to wake up fully. Sleep was good, sleep was the only safe place. But her mouth was drier than the Sahara. She had to wake up to get the cup of water Lainy was holding in front of her.

“You fainted. Again. Can you please stop doing that?”

“I’ll try.” Katie struggled up from the tiny ball she had managed to curl herself into on one of the cushioned seats. They were in the waiting room deep in the centre reserved for families and friends of patients. “This is my least favourite place in town already. Did you know, I’ve spent more time in hospitals since I’ve been here than I have in my entire life?”

“We’re number one for life-changing experiences.”

“You can say that again.”

“We’re number one for –” Lainy started laughing at her own joke and Katie couldn’t help but join in. She remembered the first night in Northwood and how Adam and Lainy had made her feel so welcome. She’d fainted then too.

“This degree of knackeredness should be illegal. I don’t know how you guys keep up with us all.”

“Years of practice,” Lainy grinned. She looked to be in her mid to late twenties, not that much older than most students, so the years of practice could not be too numerous. It was quite young, Katie thought, to be left in charge of a group of hormonal teens. It wasn’t Katie’s job to question though. “How’s everything going with... everything?”

The question was too vague. She could have been asking about anything – probably was – was likely leaving Katie to interpret the query however she wanted. Answering it in any meaningful way would have involved thinking and her thoughts on that today contained many variations on NO. So she did the only thing she could. She laughed. Laughing, however forced it was, made things seem better for a few minutes. “I wish I could tell you Lainy, I really do. So much has gone on though, and it’s all been so fast, that I haven’t had time to decide how I feel about any of it.” That made her laugh again, but it was only a few seconds of giggles this time.

“Adam’s on his way. He can take you home if you want.”

“No, there are a few things I need to talk to Dina about. I’ll stay.”

Lainy backed out of the waiting room and Katie stretched out, not really caring about the others in the room were watching.

The complete black has taken her under and after the first few moments of swimmy half-consciousness, there is nothing. Not even the sensation of her sluggish, heavy muscles being pressed down or the feeling of moving on some invisible magic carpet. No, instead, there are footsteps. At first, Katie thinks it is her green-eyed cowboy come to rescue her. But it was not him, was it? She had seen blue eyes, had felt them in her brain somehow, had surrendered to that safe but straining grip. And the footsteps are running. They get quieter and maybe the blue eyes are running away; maybe they have given up. But they have not faded into nothing. The footsteps are still tip-tapping away on the floor and then they get closer. Katie tries to will her floating body to move faster, move at all, but brain and body are not communicating. And then the footsteps are coming up to her body and before she can shriek or cringe, a voice starts whispering nonsense words, and a red streak slices across her blank eyes. She knows what is coming before she can stop it and prays she will wake before the pain.

Katie woke with a scream and a start to feel someone peeling back the bandage on her arm. She looked down to see Dr de Rossa working on the cut, trying to clean it with a little antiseptic. It seemed quite clean to Katie and, although it would no doubt leave a life-long scar, it seemed to have started forming a scab already. “Tell me straight, doc, am I gonna lose it?” she joked, her brain evidently not as groggy as the rest of her.

“I must say, Miss Cartwright, you seem to excel in needing medical treatment. Maybe you should get a lucky horseshoe.”

“Nah, I’d probably hit myself in the head with it.”

To that the doctor said nothing. “Any other injuries or... nuisances?”

“Just a permanent headache. He’s called Leo. Lives in the next room,” she quickly added, seeing his panicked expression. Actually, her head was hurting more than a little now. She reached up and finger-combed a section of her sleep mussed hair over her eyes, glad it had mostly fallen out of the scrunchie in her sleep. She could feel a tiny slice in the skin above her left eye. It was too well hidden for anyone to notice if they were not looking for it. “How’s Dina?”

“Could use as many of her friends as possible.”

“I’m not really sure that includes me right now.”

“Are you sure you haven’t had any side effects from the Rohypnol? Anything at all?”

“That’s why. She didn’t know what was in it. Could have been anything, could have been nothing.”

“Excuse me, I think I might need the beginning of this story.”

“Dina. Spiked. Me. I heard her talking yesterday and she told Jaye she’d drugged me. It’s done now and all the sorries in the world can’t change it,” she said, knowing those words were about to trip off his tongue. “If you want some good reading, have my medical records brought up. And police records. It’s all good stuff.”

“Dr de Rossa.” The PA system crackled as it had when she had rushed in with her uncle, just as the conversation was becoming uncomfortable. “You’re needed in reception please.”

“Why would she do such a thing?”

“Wish I knew.”

“Are you sure she admitted it and wasn’t just discussing it?”

“I’m sure. But I don’t think it was just Dina being mean or anything. She doesn’t seem like a hateful girl.”

“Dr de Rossa to reception. Please.” The stocky little man glared up at the speaker as if it personally was the nuisance, hurriedly stuck the bandage back in place and scurried off. Katie went around the corner and stood in the door to Room 4. Lainy had told her to go to Room 4 when she was ready. She hadn’t warned her that this room was set up like the ones in the hospital dramas. It was the room she had feared seeing Uncle Billy in. Dina was lying in her bed, looking fragile under the white sheet, hooked up to beeping monitors and drips, tubes running into her bandaged arms. She was, however, looking mostly awake if pale and sickly. She noticed Katie at the door and beckoned her in, motioning vaguely to an empty seat. The others had left to get coffee and a change of clothes for Dina and that meant the two of them would have a few minutes alone.

“How’re you feeling?”

Dina looked at the beeping monitor for a long moment. “Like I’m still alive.” The comment was so flat that it could have been good, bad or just a statement of fact.

“Why did you do it, Dina?” Katie decided to take a tip from Lainy and let her decide what the question was asking.

“I just thought it’d make everything easier. If I killed myself then I wouldn’t have to come back and do this. I’m not Jaye. I don’t care what she says, I’m not like Jaye. Never will be.” Dina tried to push herself up to a sitting position but it was too much, and she flopped back down into the pillows. The softness had dulled the edges of sharp reality. The hospital grade morphine helped too. “She thinks I can wait for the day I die and then smile about it and be brave and help others.” She shook her head weakly.

“Should I get a nurse or something?” Katie wondered out loud. The drugs those tubes were carrying must have had some side effects because the girl was talking nonsense.

“I never want to come back.”

“Okay... But no-one’s making you.”

“You have no idea.” Dina closed her eyes and turned her face to the window where it was getting dark. It was too early for stars to shine but the sky was cloudless enough that a handful should be visible in the night sky. Katie thought Dina had fallen back to sleep and was about to turn and leave when she spoke again. “They’re making me stay. I don’t know who they are or why they want me but they make the rules.”

Rules.

There were always rules.

“I know you were listening outside the door yesterday. Jaye saw you.”

Katie wanted to ask how Jaye had seen her outside their room but she had a funny feeling that would be part of the explanation.

“I didn’t do it to get you hurt or anything. You have to believe that! I was trying to find a way to tell you everything. So I put a roofy in your drink. You ran off and I was going to come after you but when I got to the track, you were gone. I just wanted to make things okay.” Tears streaked down her face and one hand itched at the needles in the back of the other and vice versa. Pain was still a few hours off but the broken skin felt too hot, too tight for her body. Sweat popped out on her marble-white, waxy brow. It made Dina look much more vulnerable than any of the medical equipment.

“So you just left me God-knows where to be attacked? What did you think was going to happen?” Getting angry wasn’t getting them anywhere. Katie knew that – her mother would be nagging her to calm down and be rationale. She was here now.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry Katie. I never wanted any of this to happen,” she cried. “I just thought I could tell you everything you need to know and then you wouldn’t remember any of it in the morning. It was going to be safer for everyone.”

A nurse came in and Dina went quiet – Katie thought she recognised the nurse from the night she had spent in here. The nurse pulled the curtains across the window, pressed a button on the machine that controlled pain relief, handed Dina the TV remote and bustled back out with a disapproving glare at Katie. *You’d better not be tiring my patient out, missy.*

“Safer? You drugged me, Dina, and left me out there – lying dead in a ditch for all you knew. How is that safe?”

“You weren’t dead though. We live, we suffer, we die, we come back, we watch the same things happen to everyone we know. And that’s forever.”

“And you want to speed that process up?”

“No. Stop it in it’s tracks is what I want. Stop it dead. Ha!” She wriggled under the sheet, trying to find a cool and dry spot. There was none. “They’re all dead. Ghosts, every last one of them.”

And then the blanket of warm, deep sleep crept over Dina and Katie sat in the chair watching the even rise and fall of her chest. There was a small toiletry bag in the locker which Jaye must have fetched earlier. She unzipped it and rooted around for a mirror. The light in the room wasn’t fabulous but she could see just well enough to push her hair back and see the tiny slice above her left eye. It was just a nick, right on the brow line, where no-one would notice. Worrying at it, a single drop of blood squeezed out of the wound and dropped onto the crisp white sheet below. *There’s always blood.* The thought popped into her mind uninvited. It was true though. *There shouldn’t be blood. It shouldn’t always be about blood. It just is.*

Death seemed to haunt her dreams as she fought to grab a few minutes rest before the others came to takeover and Katie could go home to shower and change. Her death, Jacks’, Dina’s - and there was red liquid in each of them. Blood, red wine, crimson ink. Always spilt and always staining something.

“It’s all okay, now, Lady Katie. I’m here.”

The green eyed cowboy stood before her with a hand on Dina’s shoulder. The dream from earlier, the dream that had been so real it might have been a memory, came back to her. *Everything will be okay if her green eyed cowboy is here.* Jack frowned at the tiny cut above her eye, still with a hand on Dina, still solidifying. Katie watched this without even questioning it. Caught between nightmares and reality, everything made perfect sense. *Everything will be okay because my green-eyed cowboy is here.*

And then it was far from okay.

Okay may as well have been on another planet.

Dina began to flatline.

One tense and tearful phone call later, Jaye came blurring through the medical centre doors like hell hounds were at her feet. She looked angry rather than upset; ready for war. Immediately, she stood in the corridor outside the empty treatment room as if expecting to see some ghost of Dina still in there. Of course, there was none. Fearing her reaction, Katie gently turned to Jack and made him lead her outside. There was no more mileage in hugs or words. The

normally happy and smiling Jaye had stress radiating off her body. Her best friend had tried to kill herself. that was bound to send even the most cheerful of people hurtling towards the edge. The fight with Leo had been out of character too – well, out of character as far as Katie had seen. She was pretty sure that it had something to do with what Dina had been speaking about. Not that Dina had probably been talking much sense just a few minutes ago, but trying to string together her dreams and what people had been saying, Katie decided that there was some deep religious thing at work here making people believe in fate and the afterlife. Maybe. The explanation was good enough for now.

“You’re hurt.”

Katie turned around, lost in her own thoughts, remembering that Jack had come outside with her. Before she could say anything to him, Jaye walked out of the doors and stood in the middle of the tiny car park, rubbing her arms against the chill. She looked a bit like a B movie zombie, pale and stiff and slack faced. Katie wondered if she should go over and talk to her. But Jaye was staring at the ambulance in the car park, her whole body shuddering with the effort of keeping it all together. It was better to leave her to herself for a while.

“What happened?”

Katie stepped out of his arms, suddenly angry. “What right do you have to ask that? What right do you have to even be here?”

“I... you needed me so I came.”

“Oh, hell no, Jack! I needed you when I got hurt. I needed you when I was in danger. And you weren’t there. You weren’t anywhere!” It clicked then. He’d been everywhere with her this week. He had been the invisible hand that slipped into hers when she was scared, he was that feeling of being watched when no-one was around. “You weren’t there when it mattered.”

“I’m here now. And I can fix this.”

He was here now? That wasn’t the comforting sentence it was meant to be. Jack could see that as soon as the words tripped off his tongue. “Great! Everywhere you go, trouble, pain, blood. It’s never far behind.”

“I was meant to keep you safe.”

“Good job.” She gestured to her entire body. If there was an inch of it that didn’t have scars, visible or not, then Katie would have loved to hear about it. Jack began his tale, once more, of how he couldn’t stay away from her and so on, but Katie just faked a yawn and rolled her hand in the air. She didn’t need to hear this all over again. “Why is it that whenever I dream about you – and don’t go getting excited, you’re just infectious. Like measles. I always end up getting hurt?”

“I let you see a little bit of my past. The only part I can’t seem to forget, matter of fact. By taking you back to my own violent death in a dream – when we kissed actually – you were taken there in reality too. It was just a moment but it was enough for him to see you.” He paused and tried to look away but Katie’s deep brown eyes – so very, very sad – drew him back. “And now he knows you, he can find you every time you close your eyes.” There was so much more to be said on the subject, so much he needed to warn her about, but tonight was not the night for it. He was just smart enough to realise that she needed to rage and yell and scream her heart out tonight.

“But you were there and I thought you would save me. For some reason I always think my green eyed cowboy is going to save me from the monsters.”

“And he always will.”

“Don’t make promises you’ll only break, Jack.” He tried to reach for her again but Katie backed away once more, pushing his grasping arms away. Then she reconsidered and grabbed his left wrist. “You should have scabs, scars, something. I remember you punched the stadium seats.”

“I... heal fast.”

“Something else you can’t tell me,” she spat. Such anger was rare for Katie but a vicious temper always came to the fore when she was under a lot of pressure. Being pulled in a million different directions was only fuelling her fire. “Is that another one of these stupid damn *rules* everyone raves about?”

“Yes.”

“Oh for God’s sake. *Break* the rules. Just tell me what the hell is going on?”

“Guys!” Jaye was suddenly standing between them, looking from one to the other.

“Lovers quarrel – not helpful.”

Katie was shocked into silence and Jack put his head in his hands. The girl lying in some hospital bed in that sterile, impersonal looking building had brought all this anger to the fore and had been soon forgotten. “I’m so sorry Jaye.”

“I don’t think I want you here tonight. Either of you.”

“I’m sorry. I mean it.”

“I know. I just can’t have this, this fighting around us.”

Jack fixed Jaye with his sea-green eyes and nodded off to the side. They stood over by the ambulance, Jack leaning against it, his hat pulled low over his face but not quite low enough to disguise the shine of guilt and tears. Jaye stood in front of him, arms folded and waiting for him to speak. The cold night air carried their voices just enough that Katie could hear their words,

though little of it made sense. *Everything will be okay now my green eyed cowboy is here.* Every breath she took seemed a little bit harder when he was around though. Every heartbeat seemed like a countdown to her last. She ached to believe he could make the world normal again.

“I used Dina to bring me through. I used Katie before but I got a warnin’. So I used Dina so I could be near her and I took too much,” he said all in a rush. Not a single word came from Jaye’s mouth. The silence filled the night like a roar. “I hope she’s not on my side.”

Before the questions could even begin to form in Katie’s mind, something incredible happened. Jack began to disappear. Not the showy puff-of-smoke crap street magicians would have you believe or the holographic flickering of sci-fi shows – he was just there one minute and the next... slightly less there. Jaye stuck her hand straight out in front of her and a little bit up. She was trying to grab hold of him. Katie wanted to run forward and pull her away. Her feet were rooted to the spot. Jack had all but disappeared. Jaye jolted her body forward, as if she had just hit a brick wall. Her hand, where she had reached out, had vanished too. She forced something forward.

“Oh no you fucking don’t you dead piece of shit!” Her muscles were straining, had to be, but there was no sign of that happening.

Suddenly Jack coalesced at the end of her arm, pinned by the throat to the side of an ambulance. The grip looked tight enough to bruise.

“Are we doin’ this now? I grew up bare fist fightin’.”

“Not right now, babe. Got better things to do.” She did not let go, step away, even blink. Something passed between them. Katie felt it like some weak pulse in her stomach. It was something darker and more dangerous than she could ever imagine. It was trying to get inside her, begging, pleading to come in from the cold. Jaye kissed Jack on the forehead and backed off. “But it will happen.”

It felt more like a warning than a threat.

When Jaye had gone and that dark pulse had faded to nothing, Katie watched Jack fold himself to a crouch and coughed. And then he stood up as if nothing had happened. “Jack!” Katie ran to him, more out of concern for a person who might be hurt than out of affection. She crouched and turned his face this way and that, looking for bruising or red marks. Was it too soon for bruises to appear? But there was nothing – not even pinked up skin. It seemed a very long time ago when seeing something like that would have shocked her. “I’m going home.” And then she said what was possibly the dumbest thing in the world but the one thing she was sure would get the right reaction. More hurt than she wanted choked her voice when she ordered him, “don’t follow me.”

By the time Katie had walked a few blocks to cool off and had squeezed through the locked gates to the athletics ground, Jack was already waiting for her at the end of the long jump pit. She didn't bother to ask how he had got in there. It was time for round 2,

Her phone vibrated midnight the way it always did if it was still registering movement. Which made her wonder just why she was still moving at this time of night. What Katie wouldn't give to still have that bedtime Mom and Dad had always drilled into her. A lot of stills. Even Jack was still. He was looking at nothing in particular but he seemed to be concentrating hard on something. It wouldn't be at all surprising if he had some way of communing with Jaye to keep updated on Dine. The girl *he'd* sent over the edge. Feeling terrible was high on the emotional list but feeling bad would not change anything. It wouldn't bring Dina back. So, like Katie, he had to do something to cover that jagged hole inside.

"Do you feel it?"

"I feel a lot of things. Human trait," Katie said, not wanting to get too close to him but unable to stop herself. That dark pull from the hospital was working, trying to force them closer. Katie dug her heels into the grass and resisted the pull. It faded when it realised she had no intention of letting it control her; not completely but enough to be only mildly annoying. "Do you even have feelings?"

"That power? Something dark and a little bit frightening."

"What if I do? I might not though."

"You do. I can see it in your eyes like you can see it in mine." He frowned again at the tiny cut over her eye. It shouldn't have happened. But he'd known. "There's a lot of it in town."

"My arm? My eye?" if Katie ever went back to visit her family with unexplainable scars, she could kiss goodbye to her sporting career. Bye bye independence. Nice to know you, academy education.

"There's a man," Jack began, taking a deep breath. "He saw you when I took you into my nightmares and now he knows you, he can get to you every time you fall asleep."

So, if this man could get her while she slept, the answer was just to never sleep again. Simple. As an athlete, her body needed sleep to repair itself after exertion, and she was positive it would start systematically shutting down if she denied herself for more than 24 hours. Some people survived on power naps and microsleeps – good for them. Katie wasn't in that minority. "How long has he been after me?" It slipped out of her mouth before her brain had caught up. It sounded like a filling time question and, since Jack was taking his own sweet time in answering, she set her mind whirring to find a question that mattered.

“A few days.” He was hiding something.

“Fine. Who is he?”

“The man who killed me,” he whispered, so quietly that Katie was sure she had misheard. No. That wasn’t exactly right. She knew she had heard him correctly, she just wanted to hear it wrong. “He killed me and now he wants you too.”

“I already regret asking this but why?”

Jack shrugged. If he had known any of this might happen then he would not have dragged her into his world, even for a moment. So, why had he? Because he thought showing her the other side would be less dangerous than telling her. Less dangerous for him. He hadn’t wanted to think too much about the fact he was putting Katie in harms way.

When the silence between them had grown enough that Katie was positive he wasn’t going to answer, she thought back a few minutes and went through everything she had heard in the hospital car park, everything Dina had told her. The older girl had no reason to speak the truth but they hadn’t sounded like lies or doped out ramblings. Asking more questions wouldn’t change the answers, talking about things wouldn’t make them any less true. There were just the cold facts.

Jack was dead.

People were ghosts.

There was a murderer trying to kill her in her dreams.

Dina was dying just a mile or so away.

Katie felt something break inside her – it was a physical sensation of snapping the ropes that tied her to reality. She felt oddly detached from everything. She fell forwards to her knees and vaguely felt Jack run over to her and drape his leather jacket over her shoulders and guide her over to the seating area. It was as though Katie could command her body to move but she couldn’t coax it into feeling anything. Shock had taken her over so completely and so quickly.

“Come on. You’re freezing, let’s go inside.” Jack helped her up the stairs and through the door at the top. It led to a pavilion-style building with changing rooms and function rooms. He sat her down in one of the cushioned chairs by the door and hip-bumped the door shut.

“There.”

Katie pulled the jacket tighter around her and buried her face in it, smelling the comforting smells of old leather, years of wear, Jack. There was something else too. Something sharp and acidic. Something she refused to give a name. Then she looked at the green eyed boy crouched in front of her, barely recognising him. His face was familiar enough, his name rang in her head like a bell – she just wasn’t sure she knew him anymore. “You’re dead,” she managed

through chattering teeth. “But you’re still here. You’re a ghost and you couldn’t tell me so you took me to your ghost world so I could see for myself and now you’ve condemned me too.”

“You were always going to die young. That’s why you’re here.”

“Oh.” Under other circumstances that would have brought more tears and wild accusations.

“It’s a long story, if you want to hear it.” There was nothing but time now anyway. Katie nodded. “Some people who die before their time, mostly the ones who are too precious to lose, are brought here – they move here, go to the academy – because they can die here and know that they’ll come back.”

“How -?”

Jack pressed a finger to her lips and continued with his speech. “As long as they don’t screw with the natural order of things then they can come back as ghosts. Some people adjust really well and decide to live in this dimension. Like Jaye does. Me – I live in the world meant just for ghosts and I can come into this world whenever I want but I have to find a living person to draw energy from to give me a body.”

Jaye was a ghost too?

Thunder was rumbling in the distance and rain started battering the windows hard enough to make them rattle in their frames. Katie looked up and flinched as the first flash of lightning turned the sky silver for a heartbeat. She grabbed Jack’s hand.

She wished he hadn’t told her any of it. The fact she was here mostly because her own death was hovering in her future somewhere alone was enough to terrify her. Jack also wished he hadn’t said anything; there would be such trouble. It was against the rules for anyone under eighteen to be told the secrets of Northwood.

“I saw you get killed, Jack, I watched as that evil sadist virtually flayed you alive. I stood there, not even able to help, and watched you try to run away.”

“You can’t change the past Lady Katie. I knew you were there though.”

“I can’t affect the past right? But he can hurt me.”

Jack smoothed her hair back from her head and rubbed a thumb across the cut, feeling Katie jerk beneath him as he sent nerves jangling. It wasn’t something he could fully explain any more than he already had. One look at Katie told him that she wasn’t waiting for an explanation. She was reminding him. Warning him. Things that could get her when she slept, could leave scars when she was awake,, might mess with the natural order. It wasn’t as scary as it might be if she weren’t so damned detached. Even scary things were blunted at the edges, dulled in intensity

"I don't want to know any of this!" she cried, slapping her hands over her ears, trying to ward off the echoes of their words. Reality had definitely picked its moment to come slamming back into her body. With it came the flares of pain from her cuts, the trembling from fear and cold.

"If you let me take it away, I can," Jack offered. Tears shone in his own eyes but he wouldn't let them fall. His shame at seeing Katie so upset because of him had fuelled his guilt but cowboys did not cry. Hadn't his uncle told him that when he had turned his back on his family 150 years ago.

"You've taken so many of my memories away." She remembered that. Sort of. There were holes in her memory and, something made her believe Jack was responsible. Was it the dark crackle of energy creeping through the room? Jack's silence was more convincing than any confession. What she had learned tonight... these were ones she had to keep. All the magic in the world wouldn't have taken that knowledge away. "If I forget this then I only have to learn this crap all over again. It's not gonna be any easier a second time." She touched the hand still covering the cut on her forehead and then knocked his Stetson off to trace the perfect round of dark skin on his forehead. *I wish I could have stopped it.* Whose words they were was unknown and nor did it matter. The words hung between them like a blanket, glowing and warming the pavilion the way only wishful thinking could. Katie shrugged off Jack's coat and dropped it on the floor as she got up to stretch her legs.

"Lady Katie," Jack began. Then he fell into silence. He couldn't say what he wanted to say without sounding fake or clichéd. It was always so hard to say the important stuff. He stepped up behind Katie and put a hand in the small of her back, allowed his hand to melt through her t-shirt, felt the tensing of her spine and then as it loosened fractionally as her flesh remembered his non-predatory touch. Her nerves had been so badly fried over the last few months that any skin to skin contact with a man set her on fire. Any move could be an attack. "Let me take this away. You can forget the last hour, you can forget me." It was a tempting offer. To erase from her mind the boy who had brought so much pain over the last week. *It's been so much longer than that.* Longer? Katie didn't care. Part of her wanted to get rid of Jack and everything that came with him – the blood and death, the nightmares, the world-changing knowledge he'd just dumped on her – and go back to a normal life in her normal town with normal friends. It wasn't normal any more, she knew that, but she would not know that. And everyone would be free to carry on pretending. Win-win. On the other hand, evil was stalking her now and she couldn't fight it if she was alone.

"No."

“Katie..?”

“No, Jack! I won’t let you do it.” The rain lashed down outside. They watched the storm clouds swirl, rumble, flash with silver, swirl and gather power once more. It was a beautiful thing to see. But it was a tiny bit frightening to think of all that thunder and lightning just trying to find a living person to finish the circuit and feed it all into the ground. It was a it like Jack, she thought. A ball of energy and light searching for a life to feed off so he could manifest. Dina had been the conductor, much to her cost. And, a few nights ago, Katie had been filling that role. Dear God, she had thought she was going to die then. What the hell had Dina felt?

She turned to Jack and looked at him carefully. Nothing in his perfect face held anything but worry. The sweetness of the moment might have made Katie forget why she was angry with him. A flash of lightning and a crack of thunder so loud it might have been overhead brought her back from that edge of forgive and forget. “Stop doing that!”

“What?”

“That. Trying to make me give in to you by looking pretty.”

“I’m pretty?”

“I know stuff now and... I need you to be honest with me now. If I le you take this knowledge away from me, would it change anything?” Whatever the answer was, it was drowned out by the storm whipping itself into a frenzy. Katie had the most absurd mental picture of a tornado spinning out of the storm, Wizard of Oz style, and sucking her and Jack and this whole town into its spiral, finally dropping them into a bright fantasy world where the sun always shone. It made her smile. If only things were as simple as the movies. “I need to know why my friends are all dead or dying right now; I need to know why I hate you now; I need to know that my nightmares really are out to get me; I need to know –“ Katie ran out of breath and, as she drew in another lungful of sweet zingy oxygen, she realised she had run out of anger. All that was left was a huge emptiness in her stomach. “I need to know why you didn’t save me that night?”

That was one thing that had been bothering her since she had had that flashback in the hospital. There was no feeling, nothing at all, and then feeling came back and her muscles reacted to the foreign agent Dina had so thoughtfully provided. Blue eyes – not green – had held her down, held her until the tremors had passed.

“And why did you let it be Leo?”

CHAPTER TWELVE

The bitter-sweet aroma of fresh coffee with lots of milk and sugar was drifting through the house on Newton Street at dawn that morning. Adam was at the kitchen table with his hands around a steaming mug and puzzling over some impossible crossword clue in yesterdays paper when Katie tried to sneak through the front door. She headed straight for the kitchen where the smell was coming from, craving the sweet heat, although she had never drunk coffee and was not about to start. A caffeine buzz really wasn't a good idea. When she saw Adam already sat down, Katie turned to tiptoe away.

"Katie," he said, clicked his pen shut and closed the paper over it.

Uh oh. She instantly feared trouble. Sneaking home at dawn was bound to have gotten her into the mother of all rows with her parents. But Adam wasn't her dad, was he? *For the foreseeable future, he's the next best thing.*

She pivoted and looked at him sitting there so calm and relaxed. He stared at her without moving, just smiling slightly. It made her feel ashamed in some deep and wordless way. So much so that head down, shoulders limp seemed like the best response. "I know I'm really late back." Or really early, depending on how you looked at it. "But I spent all night at the hospital and I just needed to clear my head and –"

"Stop. You're old enough to make your own choices. Sit." She did. "Don't be sorry for testing the limits. You've probably got more freedom now than you've ever had. I only want you to be safe.

"I need food. Reddy Brek good for you?"

"I... fine. With honey, please." Honey was one of the few non-processed items they always kept in the cupboards. Strangely, most of them liked it on or in something or other.

"On or in?" he asked just as the thought popped into her brain. Freaky timing. Katie expected nothing less of the residents of this town. Adam stood up and reached up to the top cupboard where they kept the cereals. Katie watched him potter around the kitchen, clattering crockery and measuring milk like a professional chef. His perfect muscles stretched, popped, retracted and curved under his muscle shirt. Nothing ghostly about those. Katie looked down at herself, aware that her hair was frizzy from the storm and her dress was still damp and streaked with dirt. She ran fingers through her hair and scraped it back into her scrunchie, noting the pulled-to-the-limit feel of the elastic and vowing to find a new one some place. Then she grabbed

a shirt off the ironing pile and putting it over her dress to cover the worst of the grime. It smelled of jasmine and fresh air. "Surprise me."

"Looks better on you than me." Katie felt herself blush and was glad that Adam had turned back to the cooker. "I don't have the legs for it."

When the porridge-like cereal slid onto the table and Katie dug in, she realised that she was suddenly hungrier than she could ever remember being. Some toast and a yoghurt the previous morning, a hastily eaten oat and grain bar at the medical centre about mid-afternoon and that was her total intake over the last 24 hours. "It's good," she spat around mouthfuls. "You should be on emergency food support or something."

"The EFS. Nice idea but not a real thing."

"Invent it." Funny how a hot sweet meal opposite a gorgeous, funny, older guy— and shouldn't she just stop thinking of Adam that way? - could make all her troubles seem that much further away. They had always managed to make each other laugh when things had been getting too dark, too serious. "Honestly, Reddy Brek could stop world hunger. Sweeten the politicians up, that's for damn sure."

"You like politics?"

She shrugged. The name of the current Prime Minister was about the extent of her political knowledge. Dad used to flick the Parliament Channel on the TV and she half listened to some of the debates but it all seemed a bit like a dog chasing its' own tail to her. But it affected her life even though she was too young to have a say about it. "More a grudging acknowledgement."

Adam nodded. Then he shovelled in his last spoonful of oats, pushed his dish to one side and went back to his crossword. His knuckles were white from gripping the pen too tight and his paper was rustling manically in his trembling hands. The paper went down and was laid out on the table but the movements were careful and measured. It was hard for him, Katie realised. His charge had tried to take her own life. Dina had lived in this creaky old house all of last year and it was clear that everyone was so strongly bonded. It must be like losing a sister, maybe even a daughter, for him.

Katie swallowed the last of her breakfast and glanced down, trying to read upside down. "Silhouette."

He looked up sharply. He had not been really mulling over the clues. "What?"

"7 across. A shadow or phantom. A shapely darkness against light. Silhouette."

"Oh, right."

He wrote the letters in the blank spaces, concentrating on each stroke of the pen much harder than he normally would. Lessening his fine motor control would give way to the spider scrawl clogging up the last few pages and he couldn't let Katie see that. She expected him to be strong, hard, a father figure. On impulse, Katie reached across the table and clamped her hand over his forearm. No words passed between them. They just sat there, at either end of the table, Adam drawing warmth and comfort from the touch of another and thinking that Katie was doing the same. She allowed her hand to slide over his arm and down to his thick, tanned wrist where she felt blindly for a pulse. There was a pulse in the wrist, Katie often checked her own after a run, and she felt it jack hammering under her fingers. Whether or not that fact should have surprised her was a far off ambition. "Oh. You're..."

"Terrified." Adam pulled his hand away, looking confused. "I'm meant to keep you all safe."

"Shouldn't you call her parents?"

"Her dad's in America."

"Still. I'm sure he'd fly over if he thought his daughter was dying."

"I know you mean well, Katie, but you don't know what it's like. I was put in charge of you lot. In loco parentis. I can't let him know I cocked it up in case... They'll never trust us again."

"I trust you. Because you're alive and you're sweet and you let me do things my way. And that's why Dina trusts you too."

Without warning Adam shot out of his chair and wrapped her in a bear hug. For once, Katie had had nearly enough of being hugged and touched for one day – yesterday too, in fact – and having her friends feel crappy and depressed. She felt crappy and depressed too, but it felt so wrong to be robbing them of any hope they had left to warm herself. But being hugged by Adam... it fit. He was strong and solid and she could feel in his embrace that he wished he could wave a magic wand and fix everything. "It's too soon. Too soon." He kept repeating the words and Katie stroked the shaggy blond hair touching his shoulder blades until he was quiet. It was like cuddling a walking, talking teddy bear; she took as much of the comforting *I'll protect you like a glass baby* from him as she gave.

"Am I interrupting something?" said a voice from the doorway. "Not that I care but it'd be nice to know." Katie turned her head towards the doorway, knowing who it was. It was a good idea to keep Leo where she could see him. He crossed his arm and leant against the door jamb. "I don't mind watching. Considering this is virtually incest, I reckon you might need a witness."

Katie looked at him – stared him out actually. There were a lot of things she was not in the mood for and Leo and his attitude problem was one of them. It was fast climbing to the top of the list too. “Did you want something?”

“A million in the bank and my name up in lights.”

“Sorry, they don’t pay or praise morons. Let’s rephrase... you came to tell us something?”

“The phone went while you two were lost in each others eyes.” Leo over-acted a swooning pose that just made Katie want to slap him until he cried. “It was Jaye. Dina’s in a coma. Looks bad.” Understatement. When was a coma ever not bad? “My job is done, I’m going back to bed. You two can go back to... whatever.”

“Wait. How long were you there?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t like to interrupt.”

“Perv. Don’t you care that our friend might be dying? I mean, she’s in a coma and while you spend your day hibernating and stinking up that oppressive little hovel up there, Dina might drop dead or anything. God, you defy explanation.”

He shrugged again. “She’ll come back.”

“But she won’t Leo, she won’t?” Katie could hear her voice rising again, getting angry, the rims of her eyes starting to burn with the tears she didn’t think she had left. “Don’t you get it, you dumb little boy? She won’t come back.” She buried her messy head in her hands and clawed at her hair, looking, she knew, like the broken and crazy girl she was desperate not to turn into. The boys shared a quick look over her bent head – at five foot six it would have been close to impossible standing upright – and Katie had the sinking feeling she knew what the look was about. They were asking each other, without words, if she actually knew anything and what they could say for the best. Katie realised that she didn’t want any of them to know how much she knew. *It’s too dangerous. It’s just not worth it.* “You can’t do anything to fix me, okay. I’ve had a lot going on and I’m not even that good friends with Dina but I can’t help it.”

Adam nodded, seeming like he understood. “Like a sister. You don’t always like them that much but seeing them hurt is like hurting yourself.” It sounded like the voice of experience. Adam never spoke about his family – not that there had really been time for a heart to heart; how many sisters did he have then? “Careless of me, of all of us in fact, to let things go this far. Damn it! I should’ve seen this coming.”

“Adam.” Katie saw the little red light flickering on the cooker and busied herself turning dials into a perfectly symmetrical OFF line, making it a much bigger job than it was. Mostly, she was playing for time as she fumbled for the right words. Okay, she had absolutely no words to

say to him. He sat at the table staring at the sun turning the sky ever lighter shades of blue and pushing his cuticles as far back as they would go. What could she possibly say to Adam right now that she wanted to? What she wanted was to tell him everything that was pinballing round her head, let someone else deal with all this crap for a while and then just take over when she felt grown up enough. But, if Jack had been right about how much trouble she was in then she couldn't dump anyone with it. Her friends couldn't be involved. Suddenly, Katie was glad her voice had deserted her – that had been the hardest sentence she had ever even thought, let alone spoken. The dirty dishes were still on the table and Adam silently brought them to the sink and they started washing them together, hoping for silence and not getting it.

“Oh, this was pushed under the door last night.” Leo slid a sheet of creased yellow paper across the table. Katie spared a glance at it over her shoulder. It was covered with a photocopy of the academy grounds and surrounding areas with hand drawn arrows and barely legible words – the race route. “Thank you very much Leo. No problem, bitch. Bitch.”

Adam tossed the dishcloth back into the dirty water and whirled on the younger man, a moment of anger that was gone as quickly as it arrived. “What’ve you got against Katie? Against all of us actually. Life is tough. Everyone’s on a knife edge. Being horrible does not make this go away.”

“Cool it, man. This is between me and her, okay?”

“Not okay.” He was holding one of the wet dishes so tightly that his knuckles were turning white. The trio stood, two to one, in the kitchen. Tall, but feeling very small, Katie chewed the inside of her cheek and tried to turn invisible. Confrontation was not her favourite thing in the world and this one had the whiff of violence around it. Far away came the crash and smash of something fragile shattering. Katie reached out to the side for Adam’s arm and noted that he was no longer holding the plate. “Leave-“ her hand came back with streaks of blood on it. She stared at it for a moment, wondering why, after all the blood she had spilled recently, this was making her feel faint. Fantastic. Bloodophobia – Lainy would know the proper word for it – another freakism to add to her long list of oddities. She opened the cupboard under the sink, found a roll of paper towels and shoved them at Adam, doing her best not to look. It was a shallow cut to a finger because he had tried to pick up the pieces. Grabbing a few sheets of kitchen roll and pressing them to his hand, Adam hared off down the hall and slammed his downstairs bedroom door, looking both guilty and haunted. “Okay, thanks for that little show. Forgive me if I don’t call for an encore.”

“Yeah, I scripted the whole performance.”

“Seriously wouldn’t put it past you.” She pulled the plug on the dirty water and shook bubbles off her hands before turning back to Leo. “I think you and I have a little problem.”

“Problem? I haven’t got a problem except you.”

“Me? What the hell, Leo?”

“You spend every night either parading around like the world’s out to get you or crying and then pretending you weren’t.”

“I cannot help that. I’ve had the year from hell and there is no delete button on my life.” Unfortunately. “I’ve seen things I need to bleach from my eyeballs. I know things I’m way too young to think about. I’ve been put through worse than you would wish on your worst enemy.”

“I read the letter. I did the research.” Leo suddenly softened his angry stance. “It sucks. I know. Believe me.”

Katie found that she did. It was quite a shocking realisation to be honest. “I know it was you.”

“Huh?”

“It might shatter your dumb little fantasies but I’m not as stupid or naïve as I look. I know it was you. Last week.”

“Yeah well... You were there weren’t you?” He shrugged.

“Oh, I’m so glad you aren’t in danger of developing a human streak. I was just *there*. Anyway, whatever. That’s not the problem I was talking about.” There was a moment of quiet. Katie opened a cupboard to put some mugs away, decided to line them up on the sideboard instead.

“The silence is boring, not intriguing. Spit it out.” You could always rely on Leo to get right to the point of things – dismissing the traditional small talk and coded ways of saying things. No sugar coating for him.

“Okay, here goes. You know what’s going on in this town, right? I mean, you must’ve noticed how weird it feels just standing here. Like there’s something here with us – dark and strong. I’m not sure what it is but it’s everywhere apparently.”

“Are you on crack or something? I have no idea what you’re babbling about.”

“It’s okay. I figured it all out.”

Leo maintained his bewildered face and the cogs were practically visible whirring around his mind. He flicked his eyes to the door, remembering the conversation everyone in the house but Katie had had on Monday night, wishing Adam would come charging through the door to field this one. It didn’t seem likely.

“The only bad thing about this place is –“

“Stop it!” His attitude was getting on her nerves now but the steel trap behind his eyes had melted to expose a relentless denial rather than hatred. “You know. I know. But I won’t tell anyone because...” the next part of the sentence was the hardest to say. “If they know I know, they’ll make Jack wipe my memory.” She reached over and touched his shoulder, just lightly. Leo looked younger than her, despite the fact he was two years older, lost and confused. Then –

Saved!

The front door slammed opened with a jangle of keys and Lainy and Jaye clomped down to the kitchen. Both girls looked tired, stressed out, but not overly sad. In fact Jaye looked downright cheerful, a grin plastered on her face even if her eyes didn’t quite match.

Lainy looked Katie up and down. “Long night?”

“And getting longer.” She followed the woman’s eyes to the pieces of shattered plate still on the floor. Cleaning up was on the list of things to do. Not really very high up but it was most definitely there. “Adam dropped it. He’s in your room. He’s hurt.”

“Something happened while we were over the hospital. You’d better tell me what.”

“Umm...” Katie began, stalling for time.

“I surprised him when he was drying up.”

Katie glanced at Leo, caught somewhere between grateful and relieved. *That’s two you owe him.*

“Yeah, I was asleep and they woke me up. I came down to shut ‘em up.”

“Making a guy bleed obviously works then.”

Lainy grabbed a pack of sticking plasters from a drawer and trudged off down to her room. It didn’t look as though she was particularly bothered by being called to nurse duty again. Probably used to it.

Katie looked from Leo to Jaye and back again. She didn’t want to leave the two alone in case relations devolved into swearing and violence again. The fact Jaye could avoid getting injured, and that Leo had to know that, should have helped matters – but it didn’t. The tension in the house was sky high already.

“I’m sorry I yelled at you the other day.”

“I’m sorry I punched you in the face.”

This joint apology was unexpected to say the least.

“But you understand why I said it, right? I find it hard to believe in anything or anyone who could this to me and the people I care about.”

“It doesn’t give you the right to shout your gob off whenever your in a mood.”

“Never said it did.” Jaye walked over to give Katie a hug, wrapped her arms around her shoulders, thinking better of touching the grime streaked skin, and whispered, “you look like crap.”

“Thanks for the compliment.” She unwrapped the pale arm and stood once more, standing four or five inches above the other girl. Being tall wasn’t always a good thing. Jaye had to look up at her and Katie felt almost guilty for it. “You okay?” Which was a stupid question. Of course Jaye wasn’t okay. None of them were okay.

“As well as can be expected, I guess.” There was cold coffee in the pot and Jaye poured herself a cup of blackish liquid thick enough to chew. She drank it without milk or sugar, not wanting to tarnish the intense caffeine hit. It looked disgusting. “Things happen, don’t they?”

“Yeah, but this is Dina we’re talking about. She’s your best friend. Not just some random thing that happened.”

“Northwood is nothing if not random.” There was something they could all agree on. “I know how this sounds but she’ll be fine. It’s not just some blind denial of the truth or cliché that she’s stronger than this. Whatever happens to her now, she’ll just have to be fine with it because she chose this route.”

“No, she chose to die because she couldn’t face being here any longer,” said Leo, earning a warning glare from Katie. “So you called an ambulance and kept her here. I’m sure she thanks you.”

“Don’t listen to him, Jaye. He’s just pissed off about us disturbing his beauty sleep.”

“He planning to sleep until the next century?” The joke got much more laughter than it really deserved but it lightened the mood. That was the main thing. “Did I interrupt something in here? Please say yes. We really need an illicit love affair round here. And the possibilities...”

“Oh, hell no.” Katie stopped her thoughts before they went to any really dangerous places. “We’ve just both had a bad day and decided that, if we can’t be friends, we can at least not be openly hostile to each other.”

“This could be the start of a beautiful friendship.”

Leo rolled his eyes. “If you’re gonna get sappy on me, I’m off.”

“Stay. Stay, stay, stay.” Jaye grabbed his shoulders and hauled him back with unnatural ease. Her muscles weren’t bulging. Her tendons weren’t pressing against her skin. *They were right. A human – living, breathing – would have been using all their strength to hold some-one like that.* Leo was only a little taller than Katie and was not a big guy; not a skinny as Dina but hardly a muscle man of Adams standards. Still, she could see him trying to pull away, push himself out of her grip. But he didn’t manage an inch. He reached up, put a hand over Jaye’s and

squeezed with a jerk of his head towards Katie. It was as though she suddenly remembered that this display of inhuman ability was inappropriate in front of the young audience because she let go of him and put her hands together in a praying position, pleading with him to sit down with them. A look of white hot rage flared across his face and then was gone. Had Jaye forgotten her apology and what the apology was about already? If another fight was coming, Katie wanted to be far far away when it came.

But nothing happened.

Perhaps the two had already put the whole religion thing behind them. Stranger things had happened. Were, in fact happening, right now.

“So, are we all friends now?”

“Can we just say there are no current plans for warfare and leave it at that.” Katie slid onto a chair and covered her face with her hands, peeping through her fingers. While Jaye had been trying to stop Leo leaving she had slipped the cold coffee into the microwave and had removed it using a folded tea towel and fingertips, it was so hot. But now Jaye was sitting with her hands wrapped around the jelly bean patterned mug and slurping the bitter muck as if it had no temperature at all. “Better?”

“Not really. Cold coffee really doesn’t give you the same buzz.”

Leo jumped when Katie reached across to him but was too – stunned? – surprised to pull his hand away. She brushed the back of his fingers against the ceramic. Leo yelped and pulled back, blowing on his singed fingers. “What d’you that for, bit – oh.”

Jaye put the mug down quickly and flexed her hands. They did look red and over-heated. “My brain – it lost the ability to function somewhere.” No argument. The brain differentiated between extremes of hot and cold. It was interesting to put that theory to the test.

“Have you slept at all?”

There was silence. Jaye, pure caffeine now rushing through her system, didn’t look as if she needed sleep as much as a change of clothes and a good cry.

“You gotta rest, otherwise you’ll be no good to her.” The compassionate streak in Leo was well hidden but it shone through every so often. Katie thought she could probably learn to like the nice version of him. “You have to –“ the word *pray* was about to trip off his tongue, Katie practically saw it form, “–think of her and how she feels now. Hold her hand. Talk to her. She’ll know you’re there.” The words were soft and gentle and wholly unexpected. Silence crashed into the room. The heavy shutters fell on his face like he had said something he never meant to.

In the hush, Katie felt that tingly darkness creep around her. She tried to ignore it but couldn't stop herself wondering what it was. It had been seeping through the town all this while and Katie had felt it since her arrival without even knowing what it was. Perhaps believing there was something so deeply *wrong* here had made it so much easier for her to buy these stories about ghosts and ghosts in waiting. Having been told that at night, in the middle of a storm,, by a dying girl and a wild west cowboy, screamed *nightmare* or *bad bedtime story*. Only she hadn't been asleep and the story didn't have a happy ending. Anyone else would have buried themselves in denial, anyone with a molecule of sense that is, but Katie was running on Reddy Brek and sense sounded like something she could only aspire to.

"Is she..?"

Jaye nodded. It didn't look good but the longer Dina clung on to life then the longer Jaye still had hope. And without hope, what was the point in anything? "Still unconscious. I just needed a break from her bedside, watching people shoving needles into her skin, sticking her with patches and wires. And all that happens is... nothing. It just carries on beeping. There should at least be something, right? Just to say hey, I'm still here." Her slack face was lifeless, her eyes unseeing, as she grabbed the coffee pot, refilled her mug and sat back down. The false cheer of thirty minutes ago seemed to be in a war with exhaustion and it was losing. A lot. Every move Jaye made looked clumsy and mechanical. "They just keep saying Dina lost a lot of blood and she's just making more. I don't believe that."

Katie wasn't sure she trusted that diagnosis either. "Doctors really aren't wrong very often." She felt as though she should say it but the words seemed hollow. The hospital had got it terribly wrong when they had stripped her and photographed her and generally made her feel guilty that she'd been raped. And then they had sent her home with a leaflet for Victim Support, telling her she was fine. So, yeah. They didn't get things wrong a lot, but when they did, they screwed it up in some style.

"It's not just blood loss any more. She lost something else too – her soul, chi, energy, whatever the," she fired a glance at Leo who was listening intently but working hard on his detached and bored mask, "heck you want to call it."

Katie covered Jaye's hand with her own as it trembled on the mug. "I'm so sorry hon. I had no idea Jack was going to do that."

"You're sorry?"

"If I'd known..." What would she have done if she'd known? Could she have done anything at all? "I heard everything. Saw everything. I didn't know, Jaye, I didn't know. What

Jack did – I’m not sure I can even forgive him myself for what he did to Dina. He as good as killed her.”

Leo shot out of his chair and slammed a box of tissues down between them. Obviously not good with crying girls either. Surprising how many men had emotional issues. “Don’t blame yourself, Katie. It’s not like he gave you the choice.”

Jaye frowned and shifted in her chair, getting up. “I’m first in the shower. We so need another bathroom in this place.” And she was gone, clomping up the stairs in the heavy platforms she must have been wearing since yesterday. They had to be killing her feet by now. It made Katie glad she spent half her life in flats and trainers.

“So.”

Katie reached out for the darkness that drifted, unseen, through the room, tried to catch hold of it and beg it to take her back into that hellish world where Jack died over and over again, just so she could prove to herself it was real. The night before had taken on a dreamlike blurriness. But the invisible black mist kept slipping through her fingers. *Its not meant for you. Not yet.* And she knew Jack had put those words in her head. It scared her, the way he could do that.

“Quit that! It’s freaking me out.” It wasn’t until then that Katie realised she had been physically reaching for the dark energy, trying to grab it with her hand fingers as well as her mind ones. “What you doing anyway?”

“Good question. I can’t believe you can’t feel it. Maybe it’s just because I know it’s there.”

“You’re parents know you babble like a whack job?”

“It’s one of my more endearing features,” she shot back. She felt like a crazy person at that moment – fully functioning but not mentally *there*. “Okay.” Katie pulled an ice cold Diet Coke from the fridge and ran the dripping can over her head. Her face was sweating and red with – not quite heat but something close to it, although the chill of the still-early morning was making her button the shirt over her dress and curl herself into as tight and warm a ball as possible on the uncomfortable kitchen chair.

“You look different.” Leo pointed to the tiny cut over her head and Katie frowned, taking a few seconds to even remember it was there. The night had been long and her brain was on the edge of overload. “Something got you.”

Yeah, it really had. “That’s what we need to talk about. I –“

Her speech was stopped in its tracks by Lainy blowing through the room to get water, biscuits and a quick glance in the mirror as she tried to smooth her mussed up hair. She glanced

at them with a cheeky grin she tried (and failed) to hold in. there was a question in her face but no time to voice it as Adam shouted, “Lainy! Getting bored here!”

Katie returned a silent question of her own but Lainy just shook her head and scampered back out. “Too young.”

Katie decided that yes, she was indeed too young. The amount of things she was too young for had been growing rapidly lately but there was no time to consider the mall. Plus, if she did, she would only get depressed about it. “I’ve just been having these weird dreams lately. You were in one of them. I thought you were trying to kill me.”

“You know what they say. You die in a dream, you die for a real.”

“I’m starting to believe that. I got hurt in a dream and...” she gestured to the cut by her eye. The inch long gash on her arm would have been a better example but rolling up the shirt sleeve seemed like too much work. “You know you came here to die, right.”

“What?”

“This place. College is gonna kill us.”

“No more caffeine for you.” He moved to pluck the can from her fingers. Katie slapped his hand away and he slapped back, but his heart wasn’t in it. His face mirrored the haunted, lifeless look of most of the housemates. “You mean it. How? When?”

“I don’t know and I’m not even sure I want to know. I need to think about this. But, it’s not over when we die.”

“Sure. The afterlife, Heaven.”

“No. Well, not quite. I don’t know that either.” She drained her can, crumpled it and aimed it at the bin. It hit the window, skittered across the sideboard and landed on the floor a few inches from the bin. She’d always had terrible aim. The terrified look she could see on Leo out the corner of her eye made her heart sink. He hadn’t known anything about what she had told him. But she couldn’t stop herself talking now. There was one more thing she had to say. “But I could get killed before I find that out.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“You can’t tell anyone!”

Leo stared at the insane girl sitting opposite him, hearing her get crazier by the minute. But, Katie could see it in his face, that even if he didn’t want to believe her, he did. In some deep, dark place he probably didn’t know existed inside himself, he just *did*. And that was enough for now.

“I mean it, Leo. No-one!”

“So what exactly do you want me to do?”

Wow, that had been easy. Katie had expected the normal teenage boy apathy mixed with point blank refusal due to the act he didn’t like her very much. But no. it felt wrong that he was this ready to help although this was very much not the right time to be doubting help when it was offered. She saw him looking at her, impatiently, and realised she hadn’t answered yet. “Just keep me awake until I figure out a plan.”

“Some random bloke’s trying to kill you in your dreams and you haven’t come up with a plan yet?”

Katie blew her cheeks out and walked to the cooling coffee pot. There was probably another 12 hours in her tank before sleep blasted into her, though tiredness was already knocking politely on her skull. “He’s not random.” She had already explained about Jack’s death by – flaying? Was that the right word? – and how his murderer was now after her too. “I wish it was. You know, something I can just close my eyes and wish it all away but it’s when I close my eyes that he comes. And then I wake up with scars.”

A door banged open above them and feet padded along the floor boards and another door ground shut. Jaye was out of the bathroom. All the hot water was probably gone. Lukewarm showers. Katie’s favourite. They didn’t remind her of school at all.

“Why did you tell me?”

That was the question Katie had been bracing for since she began her story. She had even prepared a long answer but found that she couldn’t remember a single word of it. What she came out with was fine anyway. “Because you’re the only one who hasn’t felt sorry for me this week.” Which was true. Lainy and Adam had felt sorry for her when she told them about her rape. Dina had felt bad about not being able to tell her why the town was so freaky. Jaye had pitied her for letting her get drugged. Even Uncle Billy had apologised for needing her to go to hospital

with him. the weight of sympathy was getting to the crushing stage. “You didn’t realise that, did you?” She put a finger to her lips and headed for the bathroom. Katie didn’t think Leo needed the reminder to keep quiet; after all, he hadn’t mentioned a word about their little moment the other night. It just made her feel better to know there was one person definitely on her side.

Katie was in the middle of dragging her fingers through her tangled wet hair when she felt that familiar cold pressure on her stomach. “Why call it de-tangling conditioner if it- ow.” The fact that she was naked except for her smiley face flip flops was only mildly annoying. For all she knew Jack had seen her with no clothes a hundred times before. She reached out to the side and grabbed a towel from the rack and wrapped it around herself, determined to ignore him for as long as possible. Her resolve crumbled as soon as she felt her breath coming harder, shallower. She thrust her hands out in front of her, gripping onto the sides of the sink as though her life depended on it. In some twisted way it did. Not comforting.

Not at all.

Katie could feel a cool hand on the flat of her stomach and gasped. Now that she knew, really knew, what this feeling was, it was truly terrifying. No longer was it the blind pain of before. This was all-singing, all-dancing, surround sound pain. Knowing what was happening didn’t make it any easier to bear. This hurt like someone was emptying her from the inside out and yet...

She craved it. Just knowing Jack was on the other side of this divide, this whatever it was that kept them apart most of the time, made her want to go through this pain. It had to hurt deeper, longer. It had to hurt better. And it would. *If you let it.* Everything Katie wanted to say to him and ask of him, every second she wanted to spend looking into his ocean eyes, came pushing to the front of her mind and she felt herself cracking under the weight of it all. “No, I don’t want this.” The air in the room went very, very still. It would have certainly turned icy cold if it hadn’t been for all the steam and warm air in the room. The knot in her stomach loosened. And the hurt was gone, for the moment at least. Jack, invisible and not touching her right now, wrote in the steamy mirror – DIDN’T MEAN IT. It didn’t make any difference exactly what he didn’t mean – maybe everything – or whether his statement was true. She wanted him here right now. Not saying anything, not doing anything, just *being* there. As soon as the thought flashed through her mind, so fast Katie barely even registered words – the tightness in her stomach came back. With it came the feeling that her muscles were turning to jelly, her lungs were emptying of oxygen because she no longer had the energy in her to breathe in, and all she

cared about was Jack. Not the *oh-God-I-think-I'm-dying* part she should be worrying about but the raw, jagged need ripping through her.

“Stop this.”

The words NEED TO appeared in the mirror and, for a moment, Katie wondered if he really had to. It was a second later that the word EXPLAIN crammed itself under his other words. Katie gasped as something pulled at her insides. It felt familiar but she would never numb the pain she didn't think. It was unnatural and yet the most beautiful agony imaginable. She thrust a hand out and wiped the words away from the mirror Jaye had left in here, leaving nothing but streaks and fingerprints. Wiping Jack away was not quite so simple. He was persistent, she'd give him that. And perhaps she wouldn't be fighting this feeling so much if his words could fix everything. An icy fist drove through her abdomen –she didn't remember it hurting this much last time – and the soap dish slid off the sink onto the tiny hand towel she had dried her hair with. Katie reached down to the pressure on her stomach, feeling a whisper of skin-but-not-really-skin and sank her fingers into the air, wondering but not caring all that much if she was grabbing Jack's wrist or tearing his phantom flesh with her nails. She pushed the invisible hand away from her but didn't let go. For just a moment the emptiness hurt worse than the pulling at her insides.

And then the anger flooded that gap.

She dragged her fingers away from the heavy air and flung the door open. “I said no!” then she slammed the door shut between them and bolted down to her room, where she scrambled into her scruffiest but most comfortable clothes. Looking good, or even halfway presentable, was the least of her worries.

Katie sat on her bed, back against the headboard, and reached for her copy of *Insomnia*. Stephen King novels were usually so freaky, she devoured them in days. She'd been working on this one since before the move, and the book from yesterday had been spirited away by the tidy-up fairy – Lainy to her friends. She had to keep glancing at the door every few seconds, positive she would see some kind of dark mist pouring through the gap which would swirl and solidify into Jack. And then she would fall into his arms and his eyes and fall so very deeply that she wouldn't even feel it when the bad man killed her. And then he would condemn another young girl stupid enough to believe in a hero.

A knock came at her door and Jaye poked her head around the door. “I'm gonna get some shut-eye and then I've got a ton of work to do. You need anything first?”

Katie shut her book, marking her page with a finger. “Shouldn't I be the one asking that?”

Jaye grinned and her face lit up – she had one of those faces that were just made for smiling – and cocked her thumb towards the bathroom. “I heard.” A pause their would have been awkward. Full of questions and needless answers – they both knew what Katie knew and trying to sugar-coat it now brought the words horse, stable door and bolted to mind. “He’s still here you know. Somewhere.”

Without even realising what she was doing, Katie closed her eyes and let her mind wallow in the silence of the room – the only sound being their perfectly synchronised breaths. Jaye was right. Jack was near. The dark power pulsed stronger in the house. “I know.” And then, right at the edge of her mind, she heard footsteps, footsteps breaking into a slow but determined run and then-

She was slammed by an invisible force, away from the tingle of red sparking hate and back into her waking world. Katie started screaming the instant before her eyes flew open. Everything suddenly seemed too bright. Closing her eyes again, sinking into a deep and dreamless sleep seemed so tempting. Only there would be dreams. And they wouldn’t stay just in her head.

“Getting early admission to college, proper training, leaving home two years early – that was supposed to be the adventure of my life.”

“Yeah, dying really screws up our plans.”

“I didn’t mean-“

“Yeah, you did. And you’re right. 16’s young to know all this. Hell, 19’s young to know it, let alone have to deal with it. Believe me, this isn’t the plan I had for my life either.”

“You seem to be dealing with it quite well though.”

“Mostly. I’m not saying it’s easy – nu-uh – but it’s not the end of the world. There are so many chances I have now that I’d never have got anywhere else.” Jaye shouldered the door open and came to sit on the bed, stifling a yawn. “You know what my plan was?”

Katie shook her head.

“Leave school, go to college and coach swimming for a few years for money then go to LA and get a multi million dollar modelling contract. Teenagers, huh.”

“It’s not a stupid dream.” No ambition could be silly, just unrealistic.

“It was. Those kinds of things never happen to real people but, half a dozen years ago, I honestly believe I was different. I was meant for great things. Mental, right?”

“It’s still-“

Jaye kept talking. "I was always a good swimmer and, after just a year training at the academy, I'm on my way to being great. And if I hadn't decided to come here, I would have died in another town and I'd be rotting in some grave somewhere."

Katie didn't want to be a pile of ash in an urn or forgotten deep in the ground, but in the same breath she had no desire to be some kind of half-person half-ghost creation when she died. Considering death and what might happen after it when her own life had barely begun was just wrong. Katie shook the gloom away. "I knew I was going to be an athlete since my first PE lesson at nursery. Mom said I learnt to run before I could crawl."

"Wow. Single-minded-girl-R-U."

A breeze ruffled the net curtains and Katie reached over to pull it straight. The stretch was a little further than she had thought and, as her fingers gripped the lacy material, she felt something break apart along her arm. "Oww! Ow, oh shite."

"Lang- hey, what the fuck?"

"It's nothing." Katie picked a handful of tissues out of the pack on her bedside table and pressed them to the slash on her arm. It had been beginning to scab over when she had peeled the bandage off before her shower and the movement had burst it open. There was a little blood but thankfully not much. Lainy had been thoughtful enough to leave a few dressings and white tape on her desk, probably knowing it would split when she moved or turned on it at night – some medical boffin stuff. "Hand me a new bandage."

Jaye did it without a word, biting her bottom lip and looking freaked. Then she turned tail and ran out of her bedroom and backed up against the landing wall, sinking down to the floor, still watching her friend through the open door. "Did you do that to yourself?" she asked shakily. Was she going to watch another friend hurt herself, spill her own life blood, and not do anything about it? "'Cos we can talk about this."

"Relax, girl." More talking was the last thing she needed. "I just tripped over at the track. Always lace up trainers before moving. Consider my lesson learnt."

"Promise?"

"Promise. It was just an accident. I'm not planning to slit my wrists any time soon. Ever," she added, deciding the older girl still looked unconvinced.

"You screamed."

"Jack's doing my head in. Guess why." Katie stretched the tape over the square of gauze, patted it flat, rolled her sleeve back down and plugged her hair straighteners in. Life-savers, they were. Best birthday present ever. Running the plates through her hair was a morning ritual but

not the good kind – like breakfast. It was a nightmare and there were always a few frizzed up locks that managed to escape. “Any good with these?”

“Please. Straight, curly, corn rows, freakin’ pigtails...you name it, I can do it.” Jaye got up and took the straighteners off Katie, running a comb through her hair first. Her fingers worked fast and accurate as any hairdresser. “Don’t lie to me, Katie. You didn’t scream just ‘cos of Jack. Something’s up and I want to know what.”

“Nothing’s wrong.” She knew she had said the wrong thing as soon as she spoke and wished she could claw back the word *wrong*. Because denying something was wrong was pretty much the same as confessing all. She should just claim stress. Worry about the race. Anxiety over her new academy life. Anything.

That would have been the sensible thing to do.

“Nothing’s wrong,” she said again, willing Jaye to believe it. “I’m fine. Really.”

Jaye put the straightening irons down on the red heat mat, took Katie’s chin between her thumb and forefinger and held it in front of the mirror until Katie had no choice but to look at herself. “Look at yourself, babe. You are not fine.”

Katie inspected her reflection, properly looked at herself for the first time in days. Her lightly tanned face was tight and tired looking. Her brown eyes were jittering as if on a truckload of pills, hyper alert and ready for anything. Fear for your life probably had that effect. She didn’t look too bad, though – nothing that couldn’t easily be put down to general stress. Though it really wasn’t the purpose of this little soul-searching exercise, Katie forced her gaze up to Jaye and kept it there for a few moments until Jaye copied and looked at herself too. There was a smile on her mouth but it didn’t quite reach the eyes which looked empty and... dead. The air in the room vibrated and Jaye forced her smile wider and brighter. A scream of her own filled the room although the girl hadn’t even opened her mouth. The house seemed to shake with it. A few books shook themselves off the shelf above the bed and her careful pile of fresh clothes tumbled into a huge mess on the floor. Katie gripped the edge of her dresser while Jaye shrieked out her inner tornado, wanting desperately to slide under it and hide from the storm but unable to tear her eyes from her friends’ smiling face. Rage blew the window shut and then shattered it. Papers blew across the room and an empty glass juddered across the chest of drawers, thudding onto the pile of clothes. Abruptly, the noise stopped and her room stopped being tossed around like salad. Jaye picked the straighteners up and restarted her work. Katie pushed her away and shot to her feet, whirling to face her.

To coin a phrase- “What the fuck?!”

“Earthquake?” Jaye squeaked, trying not to look her in the eye.

“When did- how did- I never knew you could do that.”

“Are you sure it was me?” The chance that it wasn’t was damn unlikely and they both knew it. It didn’t hurt to play the *sowing the seeds of doubt* card though..

“Hey, I’m not the one with the freaky dead person powers over here.”

“We don’t have any powers!”

So, how did Jack always know when she was scared and know when to hold her hand even if she couldn’t see him? How did he put thoughts in her head? Was it just some connection they had?

“You can’t be sure of that. Look at all this mess, Jaye. That’s pretty damn powerful!”

“It wasn’t me! I admit, I’m in meltdown right now, and going on a destructive rampage sounds good to me but I didn’t do this. I couldn’t.” Jaye put the hair tools back down and switched them off at the mains. “Leave them to cool off.” She dropped to her hands and knees and tried to put some of her papers back together. Boring stuff mostly – photocopies of old textbooks from school (always useful to know the formula for photosynthesis or the name for the dots over an A in German) and scraps of paper with book titles she had yet to acquire.

When Jaye had crawled to the other side of the bed from Katie and unceremoniously dumped a handful of papers on the duvet, her spiky black head rested against the bed, staring up at the ceiling. Katie grabbed the stack of papers and shifted them to the end of the bed. Near the top was the letter from the police. She felt a sharp tug in the pit of her stomach as she really remembered, for the first time since she had opened it, what was inside. Sure, Lainy and Leo had mentioned it but Katie had somehow made it feel less important. She had somehow known that things were going to get a whole lot worse. And yet she was glad that Jaye had either not noticed it or been polite enough not to read it. Not that Katie couldn’t do with reliving the entire ordeal. *We regret to inform you that due to a lack of evidence and an unsuccessful initial investigation, we are unable to pursue this case.* Not the best news a girl had ever received but it could be worse.

A lot worse.

In – how long? – a letter could be creeping through the post, informing her parents of her untimely death.

Thinking that way wouldn’t get anyone anywhere. Katie took a deep breath of breezy air, fast becoming windy. She’d have to get Adam to board the window over before night fell if she didn’t want to freeze to death as she slept. A manic peal of laughter bubbled up her throat. Katie swallowed it back, hard enough to hurt. Sleep. Now there was something to aspire to. The papers slid back into chaos and the dolphin on the duvet leapt out of the water as Katie plunged

in. She crossed her legs and doodled her fingers through Jaye's hair. As it dried from her shower, the souks softened into short black waves, effortlessly sleek and shiny. "I wish I had hair like yours."

"Feel free to take it. It's so short and fine, I can't do anything with it. At least you can try different styles with yours."

Katie rarely went beyond a scrunchie or headband by way of hair accessories. Her mind was more focused on practical styles that stayed out of her face when running. "This place is a dump," she said, not really meaning it. Fallen books, clothes, shattered glass and her few cosmetics tipped over on the window sill were about it. It would take all of five minutes to tidy but she needed to say something to lighten the mood. "Has Dan the dirt devil come to visit?"

Jaye looked at her, confused. "Who?"

Jaye had arrived with Dina the day after her family had come to visit. She had no idea who Dan was. "My little sister," Katie explained. "If you lose her in a china shop, just follow the broken pieces. We used to be at each others throats. I'm sure my parents found her in the jungle."

"How old is she?"

"Twelve. No idea what that equates to on her planet though."

Jaye giggled. Sharing a family name didn't mean you had to be of the same species. "Twelve."

"Family – so much more trouble than they're worth," Katie groaned, throwing her arm over her face. She dared not close her eyes but she could hide in this corner of darkness. "I miss them though."

"Yeah. Me too," Jaye said and heaved herself up onto the bed. She inched across until she was lying next to her friend. "Do me a favour?"

"Go for it."

"Cherish them."

Katie turned her face to Jaye.

"After a while... it gets hard to remember. The time you have left is precious. And I'm so sorry." She put a hand up in front of her face, Katie laced her fingers with it, and tried to smile. "You should make some memories."

There was a depth to her words – they were practically a warning – that seemed to press Katie's heart into the mattress. And that was surprising. On some level she'd known she would not be going back to the city, that they might visit her but she would never go back with them.

Hearing someone else say it just made it... more. More real? More difficult? The adjectives defied her. Just more.

And this girl, just a few years older than herself, speaking with tears in her eyes and a smile on her face, had already been through it. It struck Katie how unfair this all was. "I have plenty already."

"They won't be enough. You like to think so but you always want more. Human nature."

"No chance I just dreamed this whole week?"

Jaye rested her head on Katie's shoulder and held their clasped hands to her burning cheek, staring at the ceiling. Lying sounded tempting. It also sounded too much like cheating for comfort. Just because Jaye couldn't tell the younger girl anything did not mean she had to outright lie or deny anything. Besides, she couldn't control what other people said. And there was no rule that said she couldn't fade her flesh away to protect herself from being hit. In the face. It was a pretty automatic response to physical threat. Katie had seen it, and put her thoughts together, so none of this was really Jaye's fault.

Not really.

After a minute of silence and stillness Katie figured that her friend had gone to sleep and slid off the bed. She turned to stare down at Jaye. Her cheeks were bright with worry and exhaustion but, sleeping, she looked peaceful for the first time in a chaotic 24 hours. With the innocent unconscious look of a child and the almost stillness that only showed in the truly tired, Katie found herself transfixed by the even rise and fall of her chest. The fact Jaye was technically dead and had no logical reason to breathe and yet she still did was weird. Jack did it too. Katie remembered his breath tickling her neck, whispering sweet words to her, and had to hold in a sob. Now was not the time to be getting lovesick. There had to be a way of working out the ghosts from the live people in town. How many were there and how many of them had she already met? Katie stepped into a pair of pumps, leant over and kissed Jaye on the top of the head and snuck out of the room. She closed the door behind her as quietly as she could and leaned the back of her head against it for a minute. She was listening for any sounds Jaye might be making as dreams turned to nightmares and nightmares turned to hell, but there were none. Tiptoeing away, her phone chimed. The display flashed up DAN. She clicked it to answer, hoping the sound – too loud for the full but strangely empty house – hadn't woken anyone.

"Shouldn't you be in school?" Ditching in the first week was definitely a detention offence. Mrs Blacke, still the head at her old secondary school, had no concept of going easy on the new kids.

"It's only half ten. You know, break time for normies. What's wrong with you?"

“Sorry. Time just got away from me.”

“Mom told me to ring anyway. This is strictly a business call.”

“Love you too, sis.”

Dan grumbled down the phone and a far away voice yelled at her to get out of the way. Luckily, she didn’t have the guts to swear at the lads yet otherwise Katie thought she would have gone down to Arthur Claymore High and washed Dan’s mouth out herself. “Whatever.”

“There’s my girl. What did she want?”

“She wants to know if you want us to come down for your race or not.”

“Erm...uh...” she stuttered, stalling for time. The prospect of her family coming to town threw up problems Katie hadn’t even thought of yet. “Hang on, let me go downstairs where people aren’t sleeping.”

“Seriously, I know Northwood’s hours away but it’s not in a different timezone.”

It felt like it. “Why couldn’t she ask me herself?”

“You know Mom doesn’t do the tech thing. Probably thinks the phone’ll blow up if she pushes the red button or something, I don’t know. Look, it wasn’t supposed to be a trick question. But I will warn you now, if I have to spend four hours trapped in a car with the olds, I want a present.”

“Some-one’s hit puberty like a ten ton truck.”

“And you better win.”

“The competition here’s really tough. I mean, I haven’t timed myself against them yet but these guys... they’re verging on professional.”

“Katie.” There were more half-mumbled words. Words which sounded suspiciously like a vote of confidence though Dan would rather go to school in footie pyjamas than admit she was proud of her big sister. “Come on, the bell’s gonna go in a minute and I’ve got art.”

“You in the Tate Modern yet?”

“Ha frikking ha! Do you want us to come down or not?”

The choices were absolutely heartbreaking. “I really don’t have time to think right now. I’ll give you a shout when I decide.”

“What’s there to decide? It’s a yes or no thing.”

“I’m sorry.” What was she apologising for? What *wasn’t* she saying sorry for? “One of my friends is in the hospital and I really haven’t thought about much else.” Which wasn’t completely a lie. Everything Katie had thought about lately had somehow related to what was going on in the hospital.

“Oh. Major downer.”

“You got it. But I will think when I get chance.” *If I get chance.*

A shrill bell rang out three times and the background noise increased as a thousand stampeding hormone bombs rushed indoors. The claustrophobic crush of that wave caught Katie off guard and she felt like she was back in school once more. Jaye had told her that whilst there were still class bells at the academy, students never rushed to get anywhere. “Gotta go.”

The call ended so fast that Katie was left with her mouth open, no time to say goodbye. She slid her phone shut and pushed it deep into the pocket of her baggy, faded and frayed jeans. On her way past the hall table she grabbed her baseball cap and jammed it on her head, hoping to restrain the curls Jaye hadn’t had chance to work on. She passed the kitchen door as she headed out, having worked out that cutting through the back garden would cut five minutes off her journey. Leo was still sitting at the table. He looked as if he hadn’t moved in hours and Katie honestly didn’t think he had. He stared down at the table and only raised his head when she spoke.

“If Jaye wakes up, tell her I’ve gone to the hospital.”

He looked so shocked, so sad and so hollow that Katie felt her heart break for him a little. Katie toyed with the spaghetti straps of her mini backpack, watching Leo open and close his mouth before finally speaking. “Dumb bitch.” The words should have been filled with contempt and venom but they just weren’t. Somehow it hurt more that way.

Katie shrugged. “If anything happens, I’ll be in the right place.”

Sinking back into his former position staring at dust floating through the air and blindly running his fingers up and down his arms, Leo started humming. Katie recognised the tune with a jolt, remembered his arms holding her tight and safe, and wanted to reach out to him. To tell him that she would keep him as safe as he had kept her. But neither of them needed to hear that this morning.

So she scurried out the back door.

And wondered if he would forgive the lie she had just told.

And if it mattered.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Isn’t it getting a little cold for those?”

There was an old woman standing by the pick and mix counter and shovelling sweets into a plastic bag enthusiastically. Katie recognised the woman from somewhere and took a minute trying to place her. Of course, it was Bernice from one of Roy’s photos on the desk. The woman was too focused on her sugar rush to notice Katie staring. That was nice. Being anonymous was comforting for about ten seconds and then Katie scraped the Velcro strip of her wallet over her knuckles and shook herself back into the present.

“I’m an addict.”

“Looks like rain later. You got something to keep you dry?” The man behind the counter took her money and then tapped numbers into a till. The numbers looked entirely random to her but the register opened. He counted out some change, handed it over and snapped it shut. The cash drawer popped open twice before it decided to stay shut. Katie sucked on her icy drink to keep from laughing, put in mind of the temperamental register in Open All Hours, but only succeeded in thing Bubbleberry Crush was going to escape through her nose.

“I hope so,” she said and took another suck on her drink. *You got me.*

“Got something of a sweet tooth there, miss?”

Katie had almost answered when she heard Bernice giggle like she was fifty years younger, and realised that the shop assistant had moved on. She grasped her cardboard cup and walked out of the shop. It wasn’t too far to walk to the square of waste ground on the way to Millford – not far at all, but far enough to give Katie chance to wonder if she was doing a smart thing. The answer- hell, no – was so simple and clear that Katie found herself trying to figure out hidden ways it might be a good idea. When she didn’t find any, the waste ground appeared. It seemed much bigger than last time she had come here. Bigger and somehow very far away from the rest of town. This was what she wanted though.

“Come on then, if you’re coming.”

Jack evidently didn’t need asking twice. Something sank a tingle into her stomach. She was not ready. Not yet. Katie tensed her muscles and the feeling stopped moving. Was it really that easy to stop him? “That’s close enough. I just wanted to know you’re there.”

I’m always here, Lady Katie. Whenever you need me, I’ll be here.

“Okay, fine. Good for you. But I have questions and I want answers.”

Anythin'. Just don't leave me out here.

"And if you try lying to me," she held up her big slush cup, "I'm freezin' you out."

She felt an invisible hand curl over hers and instinctively moved to twist into it. No. She couldn't let herself get distracted. "The man who killed you." Katie sucked in a breath and waited. The air was cool and still around her. It was a horrible thing to have to bring up. "What does he want with me?"

Katie, why are you so far away? Let me come closer.

"You're fine where you are. Answer the question."

After a pause came a sigh which ruffled stray wisps of hair around her face. The invisible hand traced one pale vein up her arm and made all those tiny hairs stand on end. It would be so much easier to let go, let Jack come through and take care of her....

Katie took a long pull on her Bubbleberry Crush and slapped both hands to her head, rocking back with the intense brain freeze that followed. It was numbing and almost on the wrong side of painful but it receded before it quite got there. Effective though. Jack cringed away and Katie relished her thoughts being her own for just a minute or two. Trying to keep another person's thoughts in your head was hard. No-one ever mentioned that handy little life lesson.

"What does he what with me?" she repeated, harder this time.

He wants to hurt you. Or rather he wants to hurt me and you're the best way to do it.

Best? Bad choice of words. *He saw you that night, saw me look at you, and... this is all my fault.*

Well, yeah, the angry voice in the front of her mind yelled. *Finally, the man gets it.* But being angry was a dud emotion once more. Katie wanted nothing more than to let that anger take over. Let that wild fury just rage and run and then she would finish empty and numb and feeling calm or confused or constrained would be a non issue because there would be no feelings left.

"Here's where we disagree, Jack. It wasn't just that one night that man found me. I think he's been following me for weeks. Maybe longer."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The air went frigid and Katie suddenly felt totally alone. She had never felt this way – not even when she had been spoken at rather than to, or when the police had locked her in a room with that patronising counsellor woman. Jack had left her side, gone as far away as he could. She just knew it. Maybe her words had made him feel guilty for not realising sooner – for not protecting her before now. “I don’t know how long he’s been there – I always thought they were bad dreams. Now, I think maybe he was chasing me from day one, sizing me up. Maybe you were keeping him in my dreams, stopping him hurting me, but I don’t remember any of that stuff. I only knew there’s something I don’t remember and that means my memory got wiped of that. It must have been important for you to do that.” Katie sucked on her slowly melting crushed ice drink, glad of it for two reasons and yet kicking herself for a third. The first reason she had brought it with her was that it kept Jack out of her head. The second was that the amount of E numbers in it would probably keep her awake until Christmas. And yet she hated herself for putting all that artificial rubbish into her body. It seemed like an argument that would have turned her away from Bubbleberry Crush just a week or so ago, back when her body was paying her way through college. Now, she had to drink this sweet and syrupy crap if she wanted to have a body left. Worryingly, Katie was rather liking the fruity crushed ice.

“It was something you never wanted me to know about. Or something you thought you could fix first. Then we got close and you had to show me. Only it went a bit wrong. How am I doing?”

She took the silence as a signal that he wanted her to go on.

“However, on the off-chance that this guy preceded you in intruding on my life, he wants to get to *me* and not to you through me.”

A few spots of rain plopped down on the top of Katie’s cap. A few far off clouds were rolling in, light grey, almost white. It would be a summer shower - over in minutes but the light rains were always the ones nobody wanted to be caught out in – giving the impression that it was hardly raining at all but soaking everything as thoroughly as a monster storm. She sucked the last of the melted ice through the store and started scooping out the ice with the spoon end, carefully watching the sky.

Something hummed. Not audibly but more like a vibration in the air. Perhaps there were more ghosts than Jack hidden in town and perhaps there were some here. She didn't know and didn't really care. If they were there, they weren't bothering Katie.

When she came to the end of her ice and her brain was good and numb with the speed she had shovelled it down, she threw the cup as far as she could to her side. Not exactly environmentally friendly but drops of anger were creeping through her defences and making her act rashly. She backed up a step, meaning to actually go to the hospital, and left the air – pulsing, now, with dark power – with, “I hope you’ve got a plan Jack, ’cos right now all I’ve got is run away. Fast.” And that was the truth. Something else might come later but for now, keeping one step ahead of the man with hate in his eyes was the best she had.

Katie reached a hand out and thought she felt a hundreds tiny sparks bouncing off her skin. Maybe it was the power she could feel building around. It might have been Jack trying to touch her from wherever he was. But the dark power she was aware of hanging all over town was getting strong.

It's here.

The words played in the back of her mind and their origins were unknown. Their meaning was unknown. And, as soon as they had been registered, the words themselves were unknown too. Suddenly scared – survival instinct? Dramatic much! – Katie dropped her hand and ran for the medical centre. The almost imperceptible buzz of sharp, bright energy in that patch of abandoned land was only just beginning. Going back there again would be beyond stupid. What might that many ghosts do? Anything was possible and she didn't know enough about this place to believe those possibilities were good.

Before Katie realised how far she had gone, the breeze blocks of Levenson's student medical centre loomed up – evidently her feet knew where they were going. That had to be a bad thing. The route walked so often it was automatic. How fantastic.

Standing in the car park, wrapped in his white coat and trying to press himself into the wall and under the jutting sign, stood Dr de Rossa. The cigarette he was trying to light would catch and the rain was dampening the flame of his lighter every time it flared. He cupped a hand around the white stick and managed to light it, inhaled deeply, holding it for a while before letting the smoke out with a sigh so deep it shook his entire body. He really needed that fix.

“Those things'll kill you,” Katie said, walking up to him. Shouldn't a doctor be setting a better example to his patients.

“Sue me. What can I do for you?”

“My shift with Dina. Any change?”

"I don't believe so, no. One of the junior doctors has been covering for most of the morning while I was at the primary school. Did you know, those kids think chips are a main food group? Not starch or vegetables... just chips." He shook his head and flicked ash from his cigarette. "Incredible."

"That's why you're there. To teach them better."

"I have a sinking feeling I may one day be treating a spate of chip-related eating disorders."

"You keep the faith strong doc."

"Sometimes, I think this town is a lost cause. But you want to see your friend."

"Actually, trying to put it off as long as I can. I never seem to come out of that place without some fun new scar." But she turned to the flat building and decided it looked too impersonal to deserve her fear. It was academic though. She still wasn't about to go rushing in. "It's weird how you can hate a building just because of what it is. I mean, it's just bricks and cement. Completely irrational."

Dr de Rossa disagreed. "Most people are afraid of what happens inside. They just make the association with the place."

It seemed petty now it had been explained. How unfair was it when people started using logic? "Well, it is where you have your lowest moments." *And a few good ones, like seeing your first child breathe.* But moments like that were far in Katie's future she wasn't sure why she had thought it.

"And if you break your leg in the playground or bump your head on the car door, do you develop a fear of those places too?"

"Guess not."

"How about you stay out here with me a few? I could use the company."

So she did. Huddling out of the rain under the medical centre sign, the girl and the doctor stood chatting about this and that and nothing in particular. And then she decided to head into the centre. Dr de Rossa followed her through the almost deserted waiting area, through the double doors and then he left her at the closed door to room 4 and went towards the little kitchen. Katie watched him vanish behind a corner vaguely hoping he would come running back to tell her the panic was over, Dina was awake and recovering, to go home and relay the good news.

He didn't do that.

After a while longer of no feet echoing down the halls, no voices muttering in other rooms, she told herself that no-one was going to and pushed the door open. There was a white curtain pulled around a bed in the middle of the room. The other two were empty. A steady but

slow *beep beep beep* came from behind the curtain. She grasped a bunch of material and pulled it aside. It was hard work not to look at the clips and patches and drips and needles snaking out from her blankets and nightgown. There were thick white bandages wound around Dina's slashed wrists. There was so much medical equipment here that Katie didn't know the meaning of – heart monitor and saline drip was all she could identify – that it was surprisingly simple to ignore the stuff she didn't know. But how tiny and fragile she looked beneath all of it was painfully obvious. About as tall as Katie and definitely stronger, Dina looked as though even an ant could snap her like a cracker now.

Sitting down in the hush and holding her hand, with only the hum of machines for company was nice for a minute or so. A novelty. Then it got boring and a little bit spooky. She wondered what to do. Leo had mentioned that talking was always a good idea because people might still hear even though you think they can't. She felt a bit silly doing it – didn't know what to say for a start – but hey, there was nobody around to judge.

"Why you thought attempting suicide was the answer to your problems, I can't even imagine. Because your problems just go with you. But you were sitting up and talking to me yesterday and then Jack came and changed everything. Put you back in that bed for a start."

She thought she felt Dina's corpse-like hand twitch in hers, just a minute movement of muscle. Katie held her breath and went very still but the movement never came again. Maybe some tiny part of Dina really was aware of everything going on around her and she was desperate to let some-one know she hadn't given up yet. Unlikely but Katie wasn't going to rule anything thing out. If Jack could cling on to this world for God knew how long – he was a proper, old west cowboy for goodness sake – then surely Dina could manage it.

"I don't think he knew what would happen when he took your last bit of energy to give himself form. I don't think he really knew what he was doing. He sensed I needed him and attached himself to the nearest available life source. You. And I'm really sorry. This feels kinda like my fault."

The talking helped. Which of them it was more use to was the big question. Katie liked to believed it was nice for them both. "You left me to get attacked and didn't tell anyone I might be in danger. Nothing actually happened so I'm over it. You wanted me to know everything you know so I don't end up dying in a hospital bed." She was more likely to die by bleeding her last drops on the cracked ground of the waste land. But how could she say that to a girl hanging on to life by a weak heart and air being forced into her lungs? "I don't know what's going to happen to us, Dina. I wish I did."

After a while longer of just sitting there with their hands just touching, a shadow appeared in the doorway.

“No change?” asked Lainy in a whisper. There was no need for the quiet tone but the clinical setting seemed to demand it.

“I thought she moved but I must’ve imagined it.”

“Mind plays tricks on you when you want something badly enough.” She looked down at a white plastic bag in her hand as if just remembering she had it, and held it out. “Adam said you haven’t eaten.”

Katie looked in the bag – a tuna salad sandwich, chocolate chip muffin and a bottle of fizzy drink. She noticed with a sudden ache that it was the same brand as she had drunk on her last night with her family.

“And I’ll be checking for leftovers. Go. Eat. You need the sugar.”

Lainy made a move to shoo the girl out of the room and take her bedside seat over when she noticed how exhausted the young girl looked. It wasn’t surprising really – not after training for the race, finding her own feet in a new place and having to spend valuable time here. And she didn’t even know about the paranormal parts of town yet. She was surprised when Katie threw her arms around her in a hug. It was a bit like having a daughter, she supposed, a vulnerable child who was being forced to grow up way too fast.

Thanking her, and meaning it more than anything she could think off, Katie scooted off to the little waiting room around the corner and sat down on the first seat she saw that wasn’t dirty or littered with magazines. Collapsed into the chair was probably a better word than sat down. The crushing tiredness had come washing over her like a sudden tide but she could only say here for a few gulps of her drink and until her legs stopped feeling like cooked spaghetti. *I’m too young for this*. No matter how irrational Dr de Rossa had made her fear seem, there was no way she was spending longer than was absolutely necessary in this place.

The rain had stopped and the sunshine struggling through the clouds was drying up the puddles that lay here and there. No sooner had she found a bench facing the academy building a hundred yards away that she tore into the lunch – her watch begged afternoon snack time – like a savage. Her stomach had been growling for about an hour. It didn’t take long before she was brushing crumbs off her lap and draining the last few drops of her drink. Eating had only made her hungrier. It always seemed to work that way. Weird. Her stomach seemed to have a mind of its own when it came to being kicked out of the three square meals a day routine. Then again, stuffing down what she could when she could looked dangerously like *becoming* routine. She leaned back on the bench and took a deep breath. The cool, clean air even tasted fresher. It

wasn't the polluted crap she had grown up breathing – other than a couple of motor vehicles that shipped people around town, there were no dirty exhaust fumes or carbon emissions. She could get used to this. She realised she already was starting to forget how lucky she was not to be dodging cars all the time. Katie started. She had been on the verge of falling asleep, breathing crisp cool air and thinking of... nothing but how great the day was.

Rising, the words ELAINE PIERCE 1975 – 2009 were engraved on a gold plaque right behind her head, jumped out. It was one in a long line of plaques that dotted benches right along the grassy edge. A girl had been just 24 years old when she died. That suddenly made the day really not great at all. And then Katie remembered why she had been trying to find things she loved about this town. They were things she didn't want to think about, and decided to take a slow jog home to avoid them.

“Glad the rain's stopped.”

Katie whirled to face the woman who had spoken to her. A woman half-ran across the road without looking and started walking beside her. It took a minute to place the face, but even then, Katie didn't have a name to go with it.

“I don't think we'll have anymore for tonight.”

“Oh.” She really didn't have any feelings either way about the weather. “I don't mind rain. There's something nice about curling up inside and shutting the world out. Little things make me happy.”

“I'm only going as far as the school. You don't mind me walking with you?”

“Course not. I could use the company.”

“Homesick?”

“Maybe a bit. I just feel out of place here – like I don't belong here. I'm sure I'll get used to it though.”

“It takes time. I've lived here years and I still don't fully know my way around.”

“Great. I'll still be getting lost when I'm 30. There's a life plan.” She smiled at the older woman and continued. “Sorry, I don't even know your name. in my head I'm calling you Hospital Lady.”

“Marcie.” Marcie held her hand out to be shaken. “But I'll answer to Hospital Lady. Or Bus Lady.”

“I'm not great with names so you might have to.”

“So, why're you here? Obviously, you're one of the academy's new recruits because why else would anyone live here? But you're so young. You must be something special.”

Katie shrugged and reached up to tug on the peak of the cap that was no longer there. Must have left it at the hospital. Damned if she was traipsing all the way back to get it now. She started twirling a mostly straight clump of hair around her fingers and wondered whether to blush or cringe. She was starting to accept that she was talented enough to warrant Levenson's training programme but accepting – *really* accepting – that she deserved it was another matter entirely. "That's what they tell me. I think it's because everyone else is a bit older than me, they just seem more confident with who they are and everything. But I wasn't brought here to give up and just be a scared little kid. You know?"

"I do but there's nothing wrong with getting a tiny bit over-whelmed by it all. Any time you need a mom while you're here, just call me." Marcie scribbled her home phone number on a scrap of paper and handed it over. Katie took it and stuffed it in her backpack. "Anyway, I'm in Saturdays race too. We can run together. If you think I can keep up."

"Don't think it's gonna be a problem. I'm only running to get back into the swing of it. Crap, I'm an idiot, I'm Katie."

"The school's down here." Marcie pointed off down a side street when Katie moved to carry on straight. "It's not far if you want to come. And Freddie likes meeting new people."

Katie liked talking to Marcie and decided to go with her. Going home would mean dealing with her housemates and all their crap. No, not right now. They walked in a friendly silence the few blocks to the school. A few parents lined the edges of the playground and walked off with their children when the hundred or so kids streamed out. Most, even ones as young as four or five, began the trek home alone. She supposed there was no real worry about car accidents or abduction. A dozen or so young boys – maybe the odd girl too, they were too far away to be completely sure – raced onto the chalked football pitch and began booting a ball about – just passing it to each other and whacking it towards goal, no regard for teams or rules.

"Five minutes Freddie!" Marcie yelled. "You've got chores to do."

That gave Katie time to look around her. The building was oldish and built with pretty red brick. It seemed much smaller than her old primary school but it probably wasn't really. Everything seemed smaller the bigger you got.

A young boy of six or seven years old kicked one last goal and then came rushing over to throw himself at Marcie. "Mommy! Can I have some sweeties?" he turned and looked Katie up and down. He pointed at her and looked questioningly at his mother.

"Later, okay. Freddie, this is Mommy's new friend, your Aunt Katie."

"Hi," he said, shy. As with most children, the shyness was nothing but a memory when the Mom-encouraged introductions were over. "Are you coming to our house for dinner?"

“No, I have my own house and my friends are waiting for me.”

“That’s okay. I don’t like vegetables and Mom makes me eat peas when there are visitors.”

Katie leant down and whispered in the little boys’ ear. “I like peas so next time, you can sneak me yours.”

The three of them started the walk back to the main road, Katie and Marcie holding Freddie’s hands and swinging his arms between them. “Aunt Katie, do you have monsters under your bed?”

No, I have them in my bed, she thought and shook her head. “Nope. No such thing as monsters.”

“Freddie has bed monsters, bathroom monsters, time to tidy up monsters. Were we ever that strange?”

“My sister believes in all those things too. She’s 12.”

“So there’s no end in sight?” Marcie shook her head. “I’ll be old and wrinkly before he gets out of this monster phase. Still, it’s better than the screamy, bitey, fighty phase. God, I don’t miss that.”

“Sounds like you had fun. Makes me want to have one of my own.” Like, never.

“So, there’s no monsters. You promise?”

“Cross my heart and hope to die.” She rushed the words out, trying not to think about where the saying might have come from. Part of her – the innocent, naïve part that she’d been feeling slowly dying for so long feebly protested, telling her that if she didn’t think about her situation then maybe it would all just stop. “This is where we split. Be good, Freddie and I’ll see you soon.”

He pulled free and started dribbling an empty Coke can along the street. He was as good as boys Katie’s own age from her old school. Surely professional football clubs would be fighting over him in a few years.

As long as he got out of this place in time.

“I told you he’d love you.”

“He’s a sweet kid.”

“You’re sweet too. You just have to let yourself be sweet.”

“Once again, you lost me.” But Katie was sure she understood what Marcie was getting at anyway. There just wasn’t time to be a sweet kid.

Back at home, Katie dumped her bag and comfy jacket in the hall and went into the kitchen. She wanted to run the cold water until it was bone achingly freezing and splash it all over her face both to cool herself down and to wake herself up. There was something wrong with the sink – she could tell as soon as she entered the room. It took a minute or two to figure out what it was though. That’s how slowly her brain was working. In the bottom of the sink were masses of dark brown curls. She scooped them out and piled the curls on the drainer until she washed her face and then wrapped the curls in kitchen roll and left them.

She followed voices into the living room. Adam was sitting back in his favourite chair and staring at an almost bald Leo. They were discussing Adams’ music collection but they both went quiet and looked up when she walked in.

“Okay, have I turned green or something?”

“You turned pretty much paper white. Did you eat?” A sensible first question from Adam and Katie wished she had a funny shot to make, one of the snarky but good-natured comebacks they had fallen into the habit of trading but she only nodded.

Marcie was right. Maybe. She could at least try being just a kid and not the bitter and hard woman she thought she needed to be. “Thanks. I needed it.”

“We’re playing Monopoly when Jaye’s dressed. Wouldn’t be the same without you.”

“You know I’m just going to buy Mayfair and Park Lane, build hotels and kick all your arses. But hey ho, don’t say I never warned you.”

Adam started to rummage around the games in the bottom of the bookcase and began to set up, whistling some non-tune. Meantime, Katie turned to Leo and opened her mouth. There was nothing she wanted to talk to him about, nothing she needed to ask him, but she felt as though she should say something. Before she could organise any words though, he ran a hand over his freshly buzzed head.

“I had to do something. It was driving me nuts, having to keep it tidy all the time.”

“Oh. Right. It looks ... actually, it looks really wrong on you.”

He seemed pleased with it though. Or maybe pleased was too strong a word – he looked relieved to be rid of it. “And?” he challenged. Poking fun at him was obviously pushing the boundaries of their truce too far.

“Just saying.”

They fell quiet; him helping Adam sort out the fake money and her flicking through a magazine and not really looking at the pictures. She was, instead, watching the waking nightmare in her head. She was on her knees in a dark, wet place. A light flicked on behind her – the glare was artificial enough to be a street lamp. But it was too bright, too big, to be just a

light. She turned around and squinted at a massive floodlight, trapping her in a rough circle of white light. It hurt to look right at it. Katie moved back to face forwards and squinted. The sudden light had made her surroundings seem even darker somehow, though a few blinks and her dream eyes started to adjust. Where was she? She put her hands on her thighs and rested back on her feet. It was beyond her ability to get to her feet – her legs were locked into the kneeling position and she felt like she had to stay like that. At least, for now. Something huge and blacker than everything else loomed up in front of her and she could make out the soaking grass she was kneeling on. The track. Somehow, her mind had taken her back to the track, her safe place, the place where nothing bad had happened to her.

That you know of.

The huge H in front of her was the high jump and the long dented pit fifty metres to her right was the long jump pit. The strange net cage she knew was behind her was the shot put circle. This was good. This was her home turf. She'd be okay to sleep here for a few minutes.

Closing her eyes was a very, very bad idea.

As soon as she did, the footsteps came. Up and down the asphalt they click-clacked.

“Scream for me, little girl. Beg me for mercy.”

The voice was familiar and full of a calm menace that didn't quite ring true. “Beg me for mercy, for pity, and I'll give you none.”

Katie tried to open her eyes – or rather, she knew she should try to but didn't, couldn't. Leaving them shut was so easy. And she had to wonder if fighting this urge was so bad really...

Yes. Yes, it was.

“Don't ignore me, little girl. At least do me the honour of looking at me. If I can't hear you then I wanna *see* you scream.”

A blind hate crept into that voice, subdued but virtually bubbling over with presence. She snapped her eyes open and saw a man striding up and down the sprint section of track. He had a whip dangling from one hand. He was trailing it along the ground and drumming out a steady boot heel beat.

“Little girls always cry. You gonna cry for me, little girl?”

“This little girl has a name,” Katie ground out.

“Oh, of course. Lady Katie, right? Yeah, he screams your name out every night.”

“Why do you keep hurting him?”

“Jack? Just 'cos I can mostly.”

“You're sick, you know that? He's a good guy and you killed him. I have no clue why but I saw what you did. You whipped him to death and let him die in pain and bleeding and all I

saw in your eyes when you looked at me was that you wanted to do exactly the same to me. Maybe anyone else who was handy.”

“Nah, it was definitely you.”

“Why? What did I ever do to you?”

“You seen it.”

“One time. How does that warrant these cuts?”

“You saw me. And now, you pay.”

She stilled herself, held her breath and bit down on her lip hard enough to draw blood. A scream filled her throat ut the trickle of blood sated it. Anything, *anything*, not to make a sound.

The footsteps stilled and Katie saw the man looking at her, although it was much too dark to really be sure of that. She just saw the shadow of his head pointing at her and felt the sizzling hate radiating from him. “I’m a-comin’ for you.” He took one tiny step in her direction and Katie fell flat on her back, trying to scramble away. Her brain yelled at her to get up, get away but her legs just weren’t co-operating. The drumming of his boots started up again, came closer then stopped right at the edge of the grass. “Not runnin’? Or maybe you want me to kill you the same way I killed your boyfriend.” He flicked the whip vaguely in her direction and the sonic boom it made sounded like lightning right next to her ears. It wasn’t long enough to reach Katie but she felt the ghost of the lash scrape across the side of her neck. It didn’t feel like it was bleeding, or that there was broken skin, so it was definitely all in her head. Only, somehow, the man with hate in his eyes was *grinning* like he had seen his action shock her.

And shock her it had. It had demanded her legs stretch out beneath her, push up and run for her life. It felt as though her legs as they lurched and locked underneath her body. “Run.”

“Yeah, run, little girl. I’ll never catch you.”

Ignore him. Focus on moving,, getting to safety.

Footsteps were squelching over damp grass now. Katie turned to face him, walking backwards and looking over her shoulder every few seconds to make sure she was on course.

“You think you can kill me? Do it.” God how she wished she was as confident in that challenge as she was making herself sound. “I mean, you know I’ll only come back don’t you? And I’ll find a way to stop you one day.”

“Big talk from a little girl. Better make sure you can follow up on those threats.”

“Trust me. You can scare me, you can kill me in my dreams but I have survived worse than you this year and you will not break me. You’re nothing!”

His approach faltered for a micro-second. Confusion flashed across his face but he pressed on. There was no way to beat him; he was stronger, bigger and he had weapons. Even

trying to make him feel inadequate wasn't working. Killers didn't really embrace the full range of human emotions, did they? "And yet I still have this much power over you."

"Yes. You have power over my life. My death. Is that what makes you tick? Feeling macho and strong because you have the weapons?" She backed up a couple more steps, out of the glow of the floodlight and into the inky, airless night. The blurry square of light was between them now. The bad man was fast approaching it and Katie did not want to be within reaching distance of that hateful whip. Memories of that strip of leather arcing across her tender flesh assaulted her nerves and she once more yelled at her numb feet.

Keep moving.

"See, what would make it so much sweeter would be if you came over here and finished this with your own two hands."

He tightened his grip and growled. Honest to God *growled*. He flicked his wrist and the whip shot out once more. Too far away to carve another arc into her arm but the sound sent tiny lightning bolts through her head. Katie put her hands to her face thinking she could protect herself or *something* but instead lost her balance completely and fell forwards on to her knees. The man advanced on Katie. He was in the middle of the white square of light and Katie could see his tall, thin, tense shadow outlined in it. The contrast was too harsh to make out any of his features but Katie didn't feel at all thankful.

Don't be scared until you can see the wrinkles on his forehead, the yellowing of his teeth. The movies always made you believe that; until you knew the face of your enemy, you didn't know the face of fear. Katie begged to differ. Not seeing him clearly was way scarier. "Fine. You don't want to get your hands dirty." She shot over onto her backside and dragged her hands through the grass, trying to scramble and squirm her way backwards and keep a decent distance between them. She dug her hands into the mud and tried desperately to grip tufts of overgrown grass or weed to get so leverage and pull away faster. If the man could see the deep and undeniable terror Katie felt then he didn't show it. "Whatever you did to Jack, you want to do it to me too. Maybe because you know you can still hurt him by getting to me. Maybe you're just a sadistic old fuck up who enjoys hurting innocent people. But –"

"There ain't no innocent people. Everyone's guilty of somethin'!"

"And guilt needs to be punished. But not like this!" She felt a curved block of concrete rising a few inches up her spine and pulled herself over it. Another foot or so and she backed up against a wall of net around a round of concrete, a little damp but mostly dry enough to huddle in a ball and not get soaked through her jeans. Katie reached out and felt for the steel pole that marked the edge of the netting. God, she hoped this was the kind of throwing circle that had a

door to the net. It kept kids and undesirables away from the store of heavy objects when in use. Sure enough, there was a chain link gate to it. Katie hooked her fingers through the steel wire and pulled – the hinges squealed and protested but slowly gave in and slammed into place. She wished she wasn't alone out here.

You're never alone. I can help you if you let me. The voice might have been Jacks but she was so panicked that it could have been anyone's. Even the voice she was speaking to the bad man in was unrecognisable as her own.

And now she had locked herself in a cage of steel and string with a mad man outside, pacing with a whip in his hand and hate in his eyes.

"Your move."

Katie blinked and was instantly back in the room with a Monopoly board at her feet. Adam was holding the dice out to her and she scooted down to the floor, rolled a double five and raced ahead to linger in jail. Jaye, black hair mussed into something the cat dragged in and threw at her head, scooped the dice up and held them out in a closed fist. "Kiss 'em for me. Make 'em lucky, babe," she said to Adam. He did as instructed and continued scrutinising the takeaway menu in his hand. No-one seemed to want the bother of cooking tonight.

Jaye threw Katie an odd look as she counted spaces. It was somewhere between worried and thankful and Katie wasn't eager to find out what it meant. It was just too tiring to be holding the complex conversation she anticipated.

"What just happened?" Leo muttered across the board.

Katie shrugged and put a finger to her lips. Jaye and Adam could not know about anything that was going on. They would only worry and want to help – which, she guessed, would only make things worse. "I just spaced for a while." Her watch only read five in the evening, about fifteen minutes after getting home. *I'm home. Where I should be.* The waking nightmare that she had watched in her mind had felt like it had lasted hours not seconds.

"You okay?"

She shrugged again. "You care?"

Now it was Leo's turn to shrug. He didn't. Not really. He hadn't suspected any of what Katie had told him earlier, had taken Adam and Lainy at their word when they said he imagined Jaye's flesh melting beneath his hand, it was just lightning fast reflexes. He still desperately clung to the hope he'd just gotten housed with a crazy person but that was melting away fast too.

Adam got up and sauntered out the door, phone in hand. Dinner was roughly an hour away. Wednesdays seemed to be takeaway night.

The door hung open a few inches but Jaye gave it a swift kick then scooted over to sit next to Katie. She almost looked like the Jaye of a few days ago – happy, relaxed. If it wasn't for the broken and chapped lips the picture might have been complete. "Thanks for earlier. I don't think I would've slept without you."

"No problem. I'm glad you rested up. You going back tonight?"

"When Lainy gets back after dinner."

"You just have to ask," she said and leant back against the chair. Her spine felt as though it was wound into a tight snake, too long for her body. No amount of stretching was helping. She thought for a moment of asking Adam to give her a half hour back massage. He could definitely work out her knots with those muscles and...

"Will you bring Jack?"

Oh. The fantasy folded in on itself and fluttered out the nearest window. Adam was the eye candy of the house, nothing else, it never did hurt anyone to look though. Jack was her –

"Did you guys make up or what?"

"He lied to me. He stole my memories. He's made me scared to close my eyes. He–"

"He cares about you." Jaye twisted to face her friend, cross-legged and looking like a pretty/messy Buddha. She reached out and stroked Katie's cheek, looking into her soft brown eyes, deep enough that Katie shivered imagining that Kaye was also stroking the depths of her mind. Would she understand anything she saw there? Katie wasn't sure. "I can see why. I know he told you more than he should and they'll deal with that but right now...you just have to believe me. He never meant to hurt anyone."

"Who're they?"

"They're the ones who decide whether we deserve it."

Another thousand questions started sparking in her mind but Katie couldn't seem to hold on to a single one of them. "Jaye, please don't blame him."

"I don't. But they do. He's guilty of not knowing, not thinking."

"It was an accident."

"I know."

"But I haven't forgiven him yet. Not for any of this."

Adam barged back through the door and flopped down on the floor. "Pizza's 45 minutes away. Anyone moved while I was away?"

"These two had a moment. It was beautiful." Leo wiped a pretend tear away from his eyes and set his face hard as stone again. "Screw this, I'm bored." He knocked his piece off the board and stomped off to his room. No-one was sorry to see him go.

“And the moment’s gone.” Jaye scooted over to her side of the board and flattened out on her belly, waving her feet in the air. “We were talking about Jack.”

“What’s he done?”

Katie waved her hands before her. The immediate conclusion Adam had jumped to had shocked her but not quite as much as how quickly she had got there too. “Nothing like that!” she promised. *Well, not that you remember anyway.* She bit her lip, trying to bite the voice into silence. *I’m in your head, genius. Good plan.*

“Am I missing something here?”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

When the two large pizzas they had shared were boxes and crusts, and Jaye had gone to relieve Lainy at the hospital with Adam as her gallant escort, Katie locked the door behind them and went to the kitchen to retrieve the six pack of Red Bull. Someone had already nicked one. She was going to have to start labelling her stuff. The remaining five cans went upstairs to her room with her and Katie popped one open on the way. Living on caffeine, sugar and additives for the rest of her life was starting to sound like a viable option.

As she neared her room, Katie made up her mind to try something. Maybe she could call Jack and get him to hold and protect her whilst she slept, the way he said he did. Maybe that was another lie. Maybe the man did something to her and Jack just made her forget it all.

“This?” Leo was cross legged on his bed and looked up as Katie walked past. “This is your answer?”

Katie, stopped with the can halfway to her mouth, frowned and finally saw that Leo was holding an empty sixth can. “Got another one? No? Then I guess this is it.” She made a *cheers* motion with her can and twisted away.

“You’re giving up!” he called after her. “I didn’t think you’d do that again.”

Katie paused, one hand on her door and listened to him, trying not to breathe too loudly and give herself away.

“You’re in charge of what happens around you, Katie. Nobody else.”

She pushed open the door and crumpled onto her bed, too wired to sleep, too tired to cry, too stressed to even call out for Jack. Yes, she needed him, ached to her core for him, but threw the idea out of her head the moment it appeared. If he felt her need, he would come. And what good could that do?

She screwed her headphones into her ears and set her MP3 player to play all her rock tracks at ear bleeding levels. She popped the top on a second can of Red Bull, set it in front of her desk with a few sheets of paper and pens – she might as well write that long overdue letter to Nan while she could – and sat down to work. She guessed she was singing at full blast because she always did unless she remembered not to and let her mind wander as she wrote the page of idle chitchat, nothing she needed to think about. She needed to think of a plan to get out of her cage without getting killed. Why had she trapped herself in there? As ideas went, it was good in theory but with the pleasant addition of a whip that could slice flesh like hot butter, using mesh as

protection seemed less than brilliant. Damn, why were more problems springing out than solutions? She could let herself out and start running – she could outlast him, but she doubted she could outspeed him. She could cower in her circle until he got bored and wandered off – only the man with hate in his eyes was more than a barking dog.

Maybe your green eyed cowboy can save you.

Katie had *not* seriously just thought that. Had she? Jack had caused all this trouble. The hateful man had killed him, let Katie watch as he did it then rounded on her.

“What the hell do you mean, again?” Katie shouted, ripping her earphones out and dropping them to the floor. A solid thump on the wall answered her. “Oh, come on. This is not the time to be getting all righteous over words. I’ve heard you say things you shouldn’t up here. Grow up, Leo.”

“Saying stuff doesn’t make it acceptable.”

“For God’s sake... yeah, okay, but we all say stuff without really thinking. You call me bitch, I don’t like it but it doesn’t upset me.” Much. “They’re only words.”

“Only? Like your cuts are only blood. Like this place is only killing us. Like you were only raped.”

“Yeah, like that.” Katie took a gulp of her drink and slid her chair across the carpet to draw the curtains across her partly-boarded up window. No-one would be able to see through that sheet of plywood and she couldn’t see out but it felt a bit more like normality to do something just because. “Can we get over that now? There are more important things.” Oh God, so many of tem.

“But it’s not over. It’s happening all the time.” The voice didn’t seem far away now, like it was being muffled by walls and air and furniture. It sounded right behind Katie and sure enough, there Leo was, leaning with his arms folded against her open door. “Why won’t you talk about it?”

“There are more important things,” she said again.

“My theory? Jack needs to come into this world by drawing living energy from the closest body. He’s been doing that to you, not asking permission, not giving you a choice, just taking what you have for his own benefit. You can’t tell me that’s not rape.”

“It’s not like that.” Leo waggled his fingers in a *come on* gesture. “He does what he has to do to be with me.”

“Including making you suffer.”

“What do you think you’re playing at? Trying to blame Jack for all this... that’s low, even for you.”

He shrugged. "When did this all start?"

"About the time –" - *Jack started showing up*. "He took my memories away without asking. He didn't even think my memories might be important. Oh, God."

"Huh, guess you deserve that one," he grumbled.

"He only did it to protect me." Why was she defending Jack? It wasn't as if this whole protection thing had gone to plan. "He cares about me and wants to help me."

"Uh-huh." He shifted position but didn't try to take a step into her room, casually but exactly hovering on the carpet line between hers and the one in the landing. Katie had to give him some credit for at least staying out of her space if not her business. "I don't think you want the case dropped or just to forget it ever happened. I think you want to find whoever did this to you and make him feel a hurt as long as it lasts for you. And then a bit longer. Just because he deserves it."

"Revenge? That's not very Christian of you."

"This is what you want, not me."

"And what makes you such an expert on my mind?"

"I see you flinch every time one of us gets within touching distance wondering if he's going to hurt you that way. People don't do that when they're over things."

"Fine, I haven't let go of it." And she wasn't planning to. "I want some-one to pay for what they did but it has to wait."

"Don't think it's ever okay, Katie." Leo looked away for a second, cleared his throat and kicked his heels against the edge of the door. It looked as though he was thinking about something. The boy thought. You learn something new every day. "You sort of floated away earlier. Explain."

"Points for asking politely." No-one said a word for a while. Leo just kept drumming his heels on the door. It was a horribly familiar beat. "Stop doing that."

"You mean this?" He brought his foot down harder, a louder rhythm.

"I hate you so much." For a young man nearing the end of his teens, Leo was surprisingly juvenile in some of his behaviour. Katie knew, though, that she would do exactly the same thing if she hit on something that annoyed the crap out of him. She just wouldn't be so obvious. A grin crept onto her face – one of actual amusement and, even though it felt tiny and strange, it was something of an achievement. For a few seconds Katie felt as if she was relaxing.

"You're going running? Now?"

Katie paused in the act of strapping her trainers on and reached under her desk for her rucksack with gym clothes in. "It's only just gone eight. Still an hour of light." Well, an hour of

not-night anyway. “When I’m busy and active, I’m fine. But the minute I sit down, I’ll fall asleep. We both know that’s a bad idea.”

“You don’t have to sleep for him to find you. And you don’t have to bleed for him to hurt you.”

“I’m only going to the track. I’ll be fine.” Pounding the streets sounded much better. She could vent her frustration much more easily and quickly on hard gravel than on a springy red circle. But the professional ground drew her to it, promising glory and passion and races she would never forget.

Laces tied in rough but loose knots and a Velcro bar stuck over the top, Katie shouldered her bag and walked up to him. Leo thrust an arm out, blocking her exit.

“You don’t have to let him.”

She stood on tiptoe to give herself the extra inch she needed to meet his gaze. “Forget I ever told you anything. I never asked for your help. Things were simpler when I didn’t like you and you didn’t like me. Don’t pretend you care.”

“You’re right. I don’t care one way or the other. But if this can happen to you, then it can happen to me too.”

“Ooh, let’s trade places... see if I really wanna stick around.”

“You need to tell me what’s going on.”

“Going out.” Katie batted his arm out of her way and shot him the middle finger.

She had no idea what she was going to do once she got outside. No plan. Now she was getting to know her way around, Katie knew it wouldn’t take long to get to the deserted sports stadium in the north of the town. So she did a 180 and headed downtown instead.

The streets weren’t as busy as in the daytime but couples wandered around on dates, teenagers loitered on corners, older people came out of random shops – no laws on opening time and no worries about conducting their business in the growing dark. So much life down here. So much life and so much energy. Not the pulsing mass she’d felt on the waste ground like a heavy storm cloud just waiting to burst but more like a million tiny purple-black threads. They were barely there on their own but together they were strong and unbreakable and untested. Katie spread her fingers by her shoulder straps, wanting to feel all that energy tickle her skin. Once or twice, an invisible strand touched her. They mostly missed her. *It’s not meant for you. Not yet.* Then she stopped walking, stopped trying to reach for dark threads, and stared up at the night sky. A gang of students - they looked a few years older than her – crossed the road to her right and filed down an unmarked street towards the buzz of conversation. A red-haired boy turned an

assessing look her way a few yards down the road. It felt like she was being inspected for damaged parts. Well, there were certainly enough of those. Fumbling her new student ID card from her wallet, Katie flipped the lock on the door to her left the way Jaye had shown her and shut herself in the cavernous building. “Hello?” It echoed around. The place was as empty as when she, Jaye and Dina had staged their little break and enter last week. Only that wasn’t entirely true. Some-one had tidied up and filled the pool.

Katie had really only come in to the college pool to get away from all the staring eyes. All those silent questions were burning her up. She breathed in deeply – the cool, slightly chlorinated air instantly making everything easier. It was dark. It was quiet. It was the closest thing to Paradise she had seen in a long while. The water was just *there* though. Just begging to be splashed in. mind made up, Katie headed for the lifeguards office to steal a t-shirt and a towel, stashing her clothes and bag in the corner. Swimming fully clothed was a stupid idea and skinny dipping, even alone, brought out the goose pimples.

In this dark building, the water seemed as black as oil. It shone in slices where the moonlight caught it. No breeze shifted through the air but the water seemed anything but still. And, just for tonight, it was *hers*. The diving platforms looked inviting and, before she knew what she was doing, Katie clambered onto the five metre, bounced to the edge and-

And then she was falling. Time slowed to a crawl but the water’ looking solid and sharp, rushed up at her forever.

Falling, floating, flying, whatever people wanted to call this sensation of cutting a hole through the world, Katie didn’t want any more of it. Not tonight. She gulped in a last lungful of oxygen and crunched her eyes against the water inches from her face and crashed down.

The pool sucked Katie down like wet cement. She blew her cheeks out and waited for the bottom so she could push herself back up. When her lungs were just starting to ache, she wondered vaguely why she hadn’t bothered to check how deep it was. The thought was funny in its now pointlessness and Katie began to giggle. Only the stinging in her throat as her lungs began to take on chemical water instead of oxygen stopped her. She commanded her left arm to reach up and try to break the surface. She floundered then gave up. Pain was exploding in her head, deadening her right arm, threatening to make her lungs collapse in on themselves. It was so much easier to let go of everything. No more warring instincts – one telling her she had to breathe, *shrieking* at her to keep her lungs inflated; the other shouting not to let any more of this foul liquid in. She had been lying in the water, eyes closed, muscles heavy, brain disconnected, for hours. Why had no-one come for her yet?

Maybe this is how it’s meant to happen.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Lights blazed on overhead, striking painful red flashes behind Katie's eyelids. There was a splash and a hand on her shoulder. Weight. Grabbing her, holding her still.

My green eyed cowboy...

Can't save me now...

She floated a hand out. There was no-one within reach.

And then there was nothing at all.

BREATHE!

Yeah, breathing was good.. Breathing was important. Breathing was impossible. There was air all around for once. And it was doing Katie absolutely no good. She clawed at the cold tiles underneath her but couldn't get a grip. Hands gripped her shoulders and nudged her onto one side. Convulsively, Katie coughed and spluttered and spat up as much of the poison bubbling around her respiratory system. The shock of it made her back arch and eyes fly wide. The fluorescent lights stabbed straight through her eyes and made the already present headache blast into fireworks. Tears that didn't come from pain sprang out of her. Katie struggled to sit up but she never quite made it.

"You're okay."

Okay was quite a strong word for how she was feeling but it was close enough. More important – who the hell was speaking? Water in her ears was making her own voice sound robotic. Katie raised her head and moved to slap it out, decided her head hurt enough already and lay back down.

"One down, one to go."

Craning her head a few more inches to the right – an *oh my God, that fucking hurt!* – to track down the voice showed Jaye sitting on the floor with her back to the wall and wrapping as towel around her as tightly as a second skin. Barely a drop of water clung to the girl but her eyes were red rimmed and mascara streaked.

"Jaye?"

"Don't move yet. Your muscles won't be working right."

As if there was any danger of doing that without pneumatic joints and marionette strings on every limb. A memory of a half-remembered biology lesson at school sparked. *Re-*

oxygenation. Blood, muscles, organs – no part of you functions properly without a good supply of oxygen. And, following that, a completely not-listened to physics class: *everything needs energy and everything has energy. Even nothing.* It sounded important. Nostalgic for the school days she had been so glad to leave behind? Not bloody likely! Remembering a time when things were simple. Back when the worst of her worries was overdue homework.

“Hey! Stay awake Katie!”

The sting of a firm slap on her already sore cheek broke Katie out of her thoughts. And woke up the pain crashing through her. She felt it like an earthquake deep inside, trying to tear her apart. She wished she had enough energy to cry about it. Instead, she touched her left cheek and felt it all scratched and abraded.

“Yeah, your knees are all messed up too. I think you caught the wall on the way down.”

Finally. An injury that could be easily explained. If that was what – yes, that was what happened. “I tried to get out.”

“Well, you weren’t gonna do it from the foetal position. That’s what they call it, right?”

“I thought you were at the hospital.”

“I went for a while. Couldn’t stay. They’re doing more tests.”

“Why didn’t you come home?”

Jaye shrugged. The towel fell to the floor and she knee-walked over to Katie. “I love hearing you call it home. It took me months.”

Katie used her elbows to push herself up and ran a hand through Jaye’s hair and then traced her cheekbone – tear stained but not tear wet. “You’re bone dry.” The pool was most definitely wet so how-

“It’s a Shade thing. Water just goes through ghosts if we concentrate. Forces of nature can’t act on things that shouldn’t really be here.”

Katie left her hand up. “You should be here, Jaye. Uh, clothes?” she was sitting ther in dripping underwear, suddenly aware that she was freezing, the borrowed t-shirt floating around the pool somewhere. Jaye returned with her rucksack, a pile of clothes and a clean towel. Between them they managed to mostly dry and dress Katie without jostling her too much. Every expected – and unexpected to be honest – movement made something else hurt or go alarmingly numb. “I’d’ve drowned without you.”

“I don’t know. It was a pretty good distraction.”

Katie used both hands to grasp the metal runner of the ladder by her head and pulled herself up, holding on longer, until the world stopped turning cartwheels. She didn’t trust herself to let go or to open her mouth and ask for help without throwing up. Luckily, she didn’t have to

risk it. Jaye tucked herself under one shoulder, braced to lift the heavier girl and supported her all the way home. Luckily, although her feet were still lazy, Katie was just about awake enough to take most of her own weight. Tiny Jaye would have been squished like strawberry jam otherwise. It was nothing short of a miracle that enough lights were on in the house to get the door open without some interesting key-related disaster. Surprise, surprise, there was a welcome party waiting by the stairs when they got in. Jaye tried to ignore Lainy and propel Katie up the stairs at the same time.

“Don’t ask!”

“Think I’m gonna have to sweetie. She looks trashed.” What was going on with the poor girl? It was the strangest, if not the quickest, self-destruct of a student she had ever watched. Not that there wasn’t a good reason.

“Drowning has that effect.” Lainy sent Jaye a sharp look. “Later, okay? I’ve got to get her to bed.”

Katie shrugged away and gripped the banister, swaying slightly. Up was hard. “I’m going. I’m fine.” *Must work on convince face.*

“Babe, you are so very not fine. Let me help you.”

“Okay, get her to her room but we need to talk, Jaye.”

“I didn’t mean to get you in trouble.”

“This isn’t about you, Katie.” Lainy put a hand over hers. She looked up at the too-young face hovering above, fearing this was another Dina, speeding towards the edge but not knowing quite why. “You sure you can manage the stairs?”

No. “Sure.”

“Okay then. Bed. Stay.”

“Nothing I want more.”

“God, your dad’s gonna kill me when he sees you in this state.”

“I won’t tell if you don’t.” Katie gave her a tired smile and hoped it didn’t look it. She turned to Jaye, remembering she hadn’t thanked her, but she had already vanished into the front room. “Night.” Her phone beeped midnight – it had been doing that way too often of late – reminding her that it was almost as close to her regular getting up time than to bedtime. Katie enjoyed the touch of a friend, not just some-one whose house she lived in, looking longingly towards her room and let Lainy take the hint.

“We need to talk about how you got like this. Later, I know.” Yes the girl was legal. Yes the girl was mature and independent but, Christ, she was still a child. Who looked as though she had been chucked through a plate glass window. A hospital bed would have been more

appropriate than the one Katie was heading for but Lainy put that right at the top of the PROBLEMS FOR TOMORROW list. “Now, about Dina.”

For some reason, Katie wasn’t surprised to find Jack sitting at her desk when she got there. “I don’t want you here,” she told him. “I need a pee. Don’t be here when I get back.” It didn’t provoke any strong emotion to see him – not anger or lust. If Katie had to sum up her feeling, she’d go with absent. Her body hurt but she didn’t feel it as much as be academically aware of it. Her brain was at a temporary standstill but she didn’t mind as long as the bad thoughts couldn’t get in.

When she came from the bathroom, Jack was still sitting at her desk, his eyes half closed in concentration and his body was just starting to mist at the edges. His breath was coming shallow and fast. She’d never seen him try to leave and didn’t know how it was meant to work but surely it wasn’t meant to be this hard. Jack held onto the edge of the desk and groaned low in his chest. A pained moan, Katie could tell. He looked up at her and put his head in his arms. Something was stopping him moving. Wisps of mist blurred Jack’s fingers and slowly the rest of his hand began to fade into black tinged fog. But that was all, and after a second, the process stopped and Jack was left half solid and half ghosted away. Katie stepped forward, plunged her hand into the mist and grabbed something solid. There was a jolt of energy between them and Katie froze. Nothing should ever feel like that. The pain, the red-hot pain, the complete void, empty of anything else but that bright agony. And it wasn’t hers this time. This was his. This was what Jack felt every time he had to go back into his own world. Where-ever that was. No wonder he had wanted to share that with some-one. It couldn’t be easy knowing you only had this endless agony waiting for you when the time came to leave the living world.

A scream echoed through Katie’s head so loud that she wondered the whole house didn’t come running, but she realised no-one else could hear. And suddenly, she understood. Her hand slid down whatever was left of his arm and twisted their fingers together. She took a breath and stepped into the mist, cursing her own stupidity. She had done a dozen stupid things recently but she had to do this one too. Unless she was willing to give Jack up. Whilst she wasn’t sure that would exactly break her heart, she couldn’t live with herself knowing she had condemned him to this life of hurting forever. “Where are we going?”

“You tell me.” Oh goody. Another decision she had to make.

“I don’t know how to fix any of this, Jack.” There was something, though – a tiny slippery idea that didn’t yet have words. “What did I do to deserve any of this? I wanted to learn, compete, make friends, maybe fall in love. Trying not to get killed never even registered.”

"I know you blame me." Katie started to protest but Jack put a finger over her lips and began to talk once more but his words were whipped away as her room fell away around them. Air rushed through her ears as the work got suddenly dark and cold. Some change in the atmosphere told Katie that she was going somewhere she didn't want to go and that when she got there she would be all alone.

"Wakey, wakey, little girl," a voice singsonged a few feet away. There was no joy or music in it, just meanness and hate. "There's fun to be had."

Katie felt the press of rough concrete against her face, the tightness of her muscles where she had been curled in a foetal ball on the ground. It was to be expected and Katie only felt a mild sense of annoyance. She kept her eyes closed a while longer and let her mind roam. Thinking of anything was better than having to open her eyes and see the bad man's cruel face and see that whip again. He knew how to use his weapon of choice.

"I'm gonna make you scream until your voice breaks and no-one can hear you."

"Screw you," she threw at him, knowing her words had less strength to them than a feather lifting a lead weight.

"Not right now," he replied. "But a nice thought. And the question you're afraid to ask... What did Jack do?"

Please. I don't want to know this.

"Well, you see." As the man spoke he began pacing in front of the gated circle. Katie watched him stride up and down, up and down, his boot heels beating a rhythm that never seemed to slow or quicken, the steady bumf bumf bumf she remembered from her dreams. More pieces of the jigsaw clicked into place but she couldn't tell what the picture was yet. She was trying to work out what to do next when the swish of the man's coat revealed a metallic glint about waist high. *Knife*. She knew it as certainly as anything before. He was carrying a knife – a weapon that could deliver death in one well-placed blow.

If he got close enough to use it.

"Your precious Jack, the innocent little boy with the bright green eyes, isn't all that he seems. He stole from me, he broke into my house, he took my money and my horse and then he tried to run away. Like he thought I'd never know."

"it was a hundred... two hundred years ago. Whatever."

"Oh, it was a time ago."

"And that was punishable by death?"

"Those things were MINE!" he roared, angry now. "And now I'm gonna take something of his."

“You’re killing him every night. He relives the night you killed him all the time; the same pain, the same blood, the same storm. Every time it’s exactly the same and I – I think I get it now.”

The man flicked the whip out and the sonic boom rang in Katie’s ears. She flinched, yelped and tried to scuttle even further back. At least she had a tiny bit of safety in her mesh cage.

“I was there. Not just the other night but all the time. You didn’t know it was me. Hell, I didn’t know it was me, but you knew there was someone else watching.” Katie sat up straight, ignoring her reluctant muscles, quite proud of herself for having worked that part out. “And once you knew who I was, it was just a matter of hunting me down.” There was a dull ache in her stomach – hunger. Her body didn’t like the way she was abusing it. And yet knowing that she had put herself through the past few days without completely falling apart filled her with happiness. “So. I’m here now. What’re you gonna do to me?”

“I’m gonna-“

“Make me scream? Yeah, you wish.” Katie knew she was borrowing heavily from what Jaye would say in this situation but she reckoned she had just about enough attitude to make it sound believable. In one movement, fast and fluid, the man with hate in his eyes had strode over to force his fingers through the chain link gate and was grinning down at her. There were calluses across his knuckles. They were strong, sure hands – those of a man who had earned his living from them. There was something beautiful about that – dying at the hands of a man who knew how to use them. Poetic. Terrifying. Katie scrambled to her feet – aware once again that she was almost the same as him. Were people that much shorter in the olden days? She curled her legs up to her chest and spent a few minutes tying and retying her running shoes. She had a feeling moving fast was going to be the order of the day - *night* – and she had no desire to trip and break her neck. Then, when they were as secure as they could possibly be without using superglue, Katie raised her head and stared the man straight in the eye. Not glancing away from the blind anger she saw burning there was almost impossibly difficult but worth it. After a minute or two, the man let his smile slip, the anger faded to a violent shade of confusion.

“Don’t worry, little girl. I’ll make it quick,” he promised. There was no doubt that he meant it too.

Katie fixed her eyes on that piece of metal she could see glittering at his waist. If she could reach over and grab it maybe she could stab him with it. Or slice her way through the string that kept them apart and make a run for it through the other side. Why hadn’t he grabbed

for his knife yet, used it and left her to bleed to death in this place where no-one would ever find her? Because this wasn't the real world and he could do what he wanted.

He saw where Katie was looking and tapped it with the end of his whip. "My badge of honour," he said.

"Why don't you use it, then? I'm standing right here." Not close enough, hopefully, to use it to much effect.

He finger-walked down the gate and rested on the latch to open the gate. He seemed to toy with it for an eternity. Katie watched every twitch of his fingers, fascinated. All it would take was a minute. Probably less than that, just to slip the catch out of the hook, push the gate open and plunge that evil glittering blade into her heart. How long did it take a person to bleed to death from a hole in the heart. Minutes? Moments? *That's why he won't do it. It's too quick, too easy. He wants to make you suffer for as long as he can.* "Come on in," she offered, stepping to the side. "Sorry, I don't bake a cake but sweet treats for murderers are where I draw the line."

"Murderer? I'm more of an executioner." He stepped back and brought his whip down on the lock. It popped open and the gate started a slow swing as he walked forward, slow and menacing.

He had given her an escape to her cage, she bounced off her feet and got about one step to the door when she realised he wasn't giving her an escape. He was going to stand in the door and kill her right here so she could just see her route to safety a couple of feet away as she died. *No, this can't happen here. It's not meant to be here.* "JACK!" she yelled, instinct more than anything else.

But he didn't come.

Instead, the man stretched out with his free hand grabbed her by the wrist, spun her hard into him, and they misted out of the stadium. It felt like forever being trapped in his arms. They were locked together and she looked into his face. He was about the same age as Dad, maybe a little younger, there were lines on his tanned, weather-beaten face and a square, determined set to his jaw. She closed her eyes for a second and let her muscles fall limp. There was nothing to look at although she had the loosest feeling of moving. The worst the hateful man could do while he was holding her was strangle her and she would feel that long before it began to present serious problems. There was no use in being hyper-alert, tensed and ready to run, if there wasn't even any solid ground in sight.

The man, the mist, the moving, it all disappeared. Very suddenly, the world was hers again and there was a weird feeling as Katie's own body turned to solid. It was as though her bones didn't fit so exactly any more. Bizarre. But she pushed it to the back of her mind and

concentrated on the matter at hand. Which was not falling to a horrible, messy death. She had a quick second to question where the man had gone and why when she was so vulnerable in his grip. It had felt like... like he was *taken* rather than just abandoned his victim. At least he was off her back for a few minutes. The reprieve might not last long. Katie was determined to make the most of however long she had.

Why do things never go to plan?

It took a second or two for the shock of hitting ground to kick in. Truthfully, hitting ground was a bit of an over-statement. Falling to the floor was a bit more accurate. The impact jarred Katie's muscles but she bounced lightly on the surface like collapsing onto an unbroken mattress. Everything was tired. No rest for the wicked. She rolled over and sprang to her feet, looking wildly around her trying to figure out if anyone was near her and where the hell she was. It looked familiar. The dark of night was so total out here that only the moon and stars illuminated the endless empty ground around here. A few patches of scrubby grass marked the edges of the land. The thrum of power in this place was so strong that she decided to call it an arena. In the daylight, this place would be instantly recognisable, but now it was strange and new, however anciently powerful it felt. Katie crossed her legs beneath her and pushed up, using the position to twist right around and get a full view. No. there was nobody else here. She was on her own out here and-

The storm is coming, Lady Katie. The storm is nearly here.

And I'm standing right in the middle of it, she thought, with a certainty she didn't know she had. The skies opened their lungs and let out a rumble of thunder somewhere over the next town. She dropped into a crouch, trying to make herself as small a target as possible. "Come on," she screamed at the sky, distantly conscious of tears coursing down her cheeks. Well, she was entitled to cry after the week she had had.

"Jack, help me!"

Unsurprisingly, he didn't turn up. What was she expecting? Him to come out of the mist on a white steed and take her away from this madness? When her dreams weren't so damn dangerous the image might feature.

Footsteps drilled the ground, a poison red whip mark carved the sky, a scream howled through the night, endless and ear splitting. But no-one was in this empty arena. For now, it was her and the coming storm. She was just waiting for the onslaught to arrive.

You're not meant to feel us, you know.

Katie whirled, trying to see where the voice had come from..

You shouldn't be able to hear.

And she knew. Like everything else tonight, she had visions of the knowledge slipping away from her as soon as it appeared. So she sprang on it. The voice, dark but peaceful, not friendly but not mean, a thousand voices but just one tone.

Death is coming for you. It came to us all.

“You’re all ghosts. Lost souls or something.”

We were the unlucky ones. It is not time for you to join us yet.

“I don’t think I get to decide that one.”

You must find a way to change that, to set things back as they should be.

“But-“

You must find a way. you will.

Didn’t expect much of her, did they? Katie began kicking her legs up behind her, trying to coax her muscles into co-operating. The second – could be third – wave of wakefulness crept into her, bringing with it fresh rolls of agony from parts of her that had shrieked themselves into silence. It hurt *so much*! Red Bull had a lot to answer for. “I can’t!” Didn’t they believe her?

Child, you have no idea what you can do. So few humans truly do. If this voice of many could hold any emotion, it would have been sad, grieving almost. We will help you all we can. But this is not our fight.

“It’s not mine either. I never asked for it.”

Thunder rumbled a way off but still a way of. The rain hadn’t even – yes, yes it had started. Through squinty eyes, Katie could see hard lines of rain driving slices through the air all around the make shift arena. The collected ghosts here had pooled their energies against rain and formed some kind of forcefield above her to keep the rain off. Otherwise, it would be like a giant mud bath in about five minutes flat. “He’s so much stronger than me.”

Stronger yes. Older too. He thinks the crime justifies the punishment, the ever-lasting punishment. He believes in justice. He believes in the law and in his sense of right and wrong. He is misguided.

Katie grunted and fell back to the floor, feeling as though an invisible fist had punched her in the stomach. The breath whooshed out of her lungs and she felt image after image, sound after sound, being shoved into her head. *Acid poison pain screaming help mercy blood stinging no stop crackle lightning noise hate everywhere...* Katie saw the back of a man, his shoulders hunched and tight, in the sick yellow glow of a lamp. She looked down and saw her off-white trainers staining with blood. The man took his long coat off and slung it over a bale of straw in front of her. She dashed forward and hid behind it, not doubting for a second that the man would take her down if he had half the chance. Although x-ray vision was a superpower she didn’t

have, Katie was sure Jack lay beaten and broken in the main area of the barn, where the madman was focusing, slumped in front of the same pile of dried grass. And she couldn't save him.

The knowledge tore through her like a sticking plaster being peeled off, fast but damn painful no matter what your mother said. Something incredibly cold and numb swept through her. Every ache and pain faded, still burning her inside and out, but Katie paid no attention. The sounds she could hear – the soft grunts of a man too tired to yell out, the incessant lashing of leather on flesh, the dark laughter of a murderer and his victim refusing to give in. All of that was coming to her. She bobbed her head up and had to bite back a squeak when something glinty, silvery and horribly pointy came whirling towards her. It landed heavily on the crumpled hide coat in front of her. She held her breath for a few long seconds and tried not to move until the bad man had thudded away and returned to his torture then shot her arm out and grabbed the silvery disk. It didn't feel like a knife but there were sharp points on it. Good for stabbing, or at least holding him at a distance so he didn't get stabbed. Her fingers rubbed over some uneven ridges in the metal disk. She brought it to her face and then angled it this way and that until it caught the light enough to see.

Oh, crap. He thinks he's justified to do this.

Or, maybe the man with hate in his eyes was acting outside the law and he wanted to silence her before she could tell anyone what she saw. *And maybe he just wants to kill you because he's a sadistic bastard.* Because, lying in her hands was a sheriff's badge. The man was enforcing 19th century law. Was capital punishment acceptable back then? Katie rubbed her fingers over the badge and suddenly felt it disappear. She even felt herself disappear. There was blood soaking through the straw she stood on, seeping under the wooden wall between her and them. It was getting ground into her sole. It would probably never come out.

Katie opened her eyes and stared up at the swirling, grey-blue sky. She didn't want to move. Or think. In fact, just keeping breathing was making her lungs ache. Lactic acid was flowing through her now. The desire to just roll over right here and now and fall asleep for a very long time was almost irresistible. Almost.

Just as the internal debate was raging, a shadow – black on black – shimmered off to her left. Her face hurt when she rolled over to get a better look.

He is coming, the voice said.

She shielded her eyes with one weak hand and hoped that her frazzled mind was playing cruel tricks on her. The shadowed figure looked – it looked like Dina. What the hell was she doing out here?

It's nearly here. this isn't right, Katie.

“Help me, Dina.” Katie needed to shout to make herself heard over the storm now but her vocal chords were so raw that a hoarse whisper was all she could muster. Dina seemed to hear though, it even looked as though she smiled as she reached out to the girl with one hand and thrust the other into the darkness behind her.

You must be ready, she said, her voice becoming more alien with every step she crept back, more ethereal, more voices joining hers as purple-black fingers began to cover Dina. The air was crackling with dark power. These dead things, this sense of death all around her, was so powerful. There should be nothing here but here it all was shooting out of Dina’s out-stretched hand in a shimmering black stream, jumping with purple sparks, filling her up with the good, natural energy she had used up long ago, rejuvenating her entire body and mind and healing all her cuts and bruises... and given her a little extra go juice besides. There was a well of life inside her and it was filling fast. She rolled to her feet and started running on the spot just because she could.

We have done all we can. It is up to you now.

Couldn’t they have included a plan with their little gift? Katie was about to ask when Dina stepped back – into the soup-thick storm, over-taken by the dark power that pulsed and suddenly the flow of energy from them broke. She had been taken by all these ghosts, all these dead things. Did that mean Dina was dead too? There was no time to mourn. There was a palpable sense of the ancient life leaving all at once. The invisible cover that had been keeping the storm at bay peeled back and started soaking the ground; the wind ripped holes in the air – might have blown her back down if she had felt it. But the dark power was threading out of her skin, thin as hair but sparking like tiny electrical currents grounding through her, casing her in the protection against the forces of nature they had. A body of calm in the maddening storm. In the next instant, there was a tearing at her insides – hard, fast, desperate and Jack misted into being a few metres from her. He lay on the ground, not moving.

“Jack!” Katie yelled over the thunder. “Please!” She didn’t know what she was asking for. She ran over to him, sending silent thanks to whatever spirits still lingered that they had given her the energy to do even that much. It would have been just her luck to be still lying drained on the ground, unable to even be with him as he breathed his last. If he was still breathing. The blood soaking through his beige t-shirt was dark red and fresh. That was good, right, his heart was still pumping blood. God, she wished she had paid more attention in biology. But rain was drenching him, the wind was trying to blow the clothes off his book. No energy of his own to save himself from this spiralling summer squall. It had to be possible to extend her borrowed cover to him. She was puzzling over the physics of this, hesitantly trying to get hold of

one single spark, when strong, rough hands circled her neck and hauled her to her feet. Just when her breathing was becoming shallow and distressed, the hands shoved her flying through the air, over Jack and a yard or two further where she landed with a bone-crunching thud on the ground. Getting up, Katie saw the man standing over Jack, whip at the ready, silver glinting at his belt. He had put his long coat back on too. He looked every inch the psycho with an upside down sense of right and wrong. Why hadn't she heard him coming up behind her? *Because you were too busy worrying about the boy. Lose focus for a second and he'll use it.* Great. This was sounding more and more like a fight she couldn't win. Not for the first time, Katie wondered why she was even in this fight at all. It didn't matter, she was in it now and wishful thinking was *not* going to change that. Besides, if not her, Jack would have only fallen for some other poor girl and sentenced her to this.

I didn't mean to, Lady Katie. I only tried to buy you time.

Jack was still thinking. Thinking strange thoughts, things that were vague and meaningless but he was thinking and he remembered her name. That had to be good.

"Stop!" she shouted. "He's had enough! You want to kill me. I'm standing right here."

The bad man spared her a glance and then appeared to dismiss her, curving his arm back.

"NO! Jack's dead. What's the point in killing a guy with no defences, huh? You want me. You want the challenge, right? And I'm a screamer." The two of them started circling each other around Jack. "If you can catch me." Katie bent her knees ever so slightly and took off at a gentle backwards run luring him into following. If she could wear him down just a tiny bit... okay, that was as far as the plan went but there was the distinct possibility she wouldn't live past Phase One. Developing a Phase Two was a moot point. "Come on, I'm a distance runner. I can do this dance all day."

"Same here," he growled. "I've had 200 years to get ready for you little girl."

"200 years? You should be better at this then. Death at the hands of an incompetent. It's embarrassing really." Frightening was a better word but showing fear just seemed like a bad idea. Katie reached into her pocket and found two things; her phone, a bit scratched and the screen was cracked but otherwise fine, and her house keys. She tossed them between her hands, thinking. She didn't want to lose her keys but her phone had already taken a battering. A sudden close encounter with the ground might absolutely bust it. Oh well. She took aim and chucked it at the bad man, kind of amazed that her throw was on target for once. Unfortunately, accuracy didn't make much difference. He didn't even flinch as the missile hurtled towards his head, just side-stepped at the last second and let the phone sail right on *through* his chest. And it was gone. Useless. Her only weapon was floating somewhere inside the bad man. She watched as the man

started moving her way, inching back but wanting so badly to turn tail and run as far and as fast as she could. Especially when he gave that low chuckle that started deep in his chest and then went lower, aiming for the lower levels of hell. There was evil in that laugh but a degree of humour too. As if he knew the bravado was just a front. Katie dropped to a crouch as the bad man started running for her and thrust her arm out to dislodge his legs. It always worked in the movies. The plucky heroine swept her opponents legs and his momentum – it was always a him – carried him into a sprawling forward roll, putting him on the losing side. Shame, then, that this was real.

Oh God, was this real.

He stopped inches before Katie. There was an instant before she realised he should have tripped over her and hadn't where she didn't move. She pulled herself up and, "I'm not living in fear of you."

"Smells like you are."

"I've had enough of running away. I used to run for fun. So, can we just stop this game and get to the fighting?"

"Fighting, killing. It's all fun for me."

Katie had basically just challenged this man to a hands-down dogfight. The paper-thin power of these – what had Jaye called herself, a Shade? – against twisted justice and a weapon that had killed a thousand times or more. How the bloody hell was she meant to win that? She threw her hands up as the man charged at her. If the bad man had been completely solid then she might have been able to protect herself from a fraction of the pain she suddenly felt tearing through her abdomen. He had faded his leg to pass right through her arms and then willed it back into flesh to connect firmly with her stomach. A boot in the belly was one of the most painful things Katie had ever experienced. It made her angry.

"Gonna cry, little girl? Gonna curl up and cry for your momma?"

"You're not worth the tears," she bit off. "I cry for love, loss, joy and pain. Not for pathetic little freaks with nothing better to do than terrorise teenagers." But Katie felt like crying. It was hard to squeeze back the hot sting behind her eyes. It did match the hot sting of blood in her mouth.

The rain stopped for a brief second and a streak of lightning split the sky in two. The man took advantage of the instant to crack the whip at her. Something warned her a millisecond before and Katie jerked back and the leather strip missed her by an eighth of an inch. Too close.

The dark power swirled around Katie, and she tried to wrap it around herself tighter. The wind and rain still didn't touch her. But the life the dead things had sent her was beginning to

trickle out – dodging the whip cracks and advances, trying to keep out of reach, was not helping. Much longer and nervous exhaustion would come knocking – the Shades had only suppressed her tiredness, not taken it away like they had her cuts and scratches – it was still there, pushing the edges of her brain, biding it's time before it could take her over once more. This had to be over before then.

He was definitely getting the closer. Katie thought fast. There had to be some weakness.

“Your family, friends, any of them left? Bet this is making them proud. Hey Daddy, what did you do today? Well son, I killed a kid.”

“No-one's left. Just you, me and right and wrong.”

“I killed a kid because she saw me murder some other kid.”

“Got no-one to be ashamed of me. I'm already dead, little girl. Ain't nothin' no-one can do to stop me.”

So, what was he waiting for then? He was playing with her. The sicko was enjoying this! “What would your superiors think?” It was loud and dark but Katie was positive he paused for just a second; shadows blacker than the night flickered to life. *Yes! Got him!* “I mean, that's why you're hellbent on finishing me off, isn't it? You killed a kid for stealing – and from the sheriff, of all people! You thought you were fireproof. And then you realised you had a witness. Which would be me.” Her mouth was working faster than her mind but these words seemed to be hitting all the right nerves so she was more than happy to let her mouth continue. She just wished she had known what she was about to do next before she did it. Because it was monumentally stupid.

Her arm shot out, grabbed something cold and uneven and yanked, risking him probably breaking her fingers if his reactions were quick enough. They were but some reflex of her own overrode the dark crackling energy and used whatever she had had grabbed to slice upwards feeling a satisfying resistance as the points of the sheriff's badge caught on and carved through flesh.

“Bitch!”

So I'm told. “Yeah, that's me. Anyway, you decided to find me and kill me because you couldn't risk *this*. I might have told your boss and I'm guessing the murder of a minor, whatever his crime, was frowned on.”

“Give that back. It's *mine!*” he bellowed.

“Hmm...”

He made a grab for it. Katie held it tight to her chest with both hands, understanding on some level far below her consciousness that things were going to plan. *Someone's* plan, anyway.

Still holding tight, Katie felt his hand brush her cheek gently, almost tenderly. She closed her eyes against the touch, her mind rushing back almost four months to when another man had touched her that way... and how violent/intimate that touch had turned. *It's happening again*, she had time to panic, as rough fingers turned into claws, held her chin in a vice-like grip and forced her to her knees.

“Say please.”

Katie held the badge towards him but the bad man just glared at it like the inanimate object was responsible for all this trouble. To give it its due, the badge probably had been.

“You first.”

A weak moan cut through the howling storm. Jack. It hurt to admit it but Katie had forgotten about him. She glanced over. He sounded kind of pathetic. A kicked puppy had more fight in it and that moan had sounded suspiciously close to his last breath. The bad man used the distraction to walk up until he had forced the girl back onto her elbows and was straddling her chest. He flexed his strong hands around the handle of his whip and readied himself to deliver the killing.

“I said, scream for me!”

So she did.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Into that scream, Katie poured everything she had left. All that pent-up anger, every drop of fear, every ounce of hate, every last scrap of fight. She prayed – still unsure who to – that it would be enough to kill him and knew it wouldn't.

They didn't give me energy, give me life, she realised as she wailed longer and louder than she thought physically possible. There was so much power in that alien, animal sound that she had to wonder if it was really coming from her. *They filled me with death*. The possible consequences of that were too many to even think about right now but *I don't wanna die* strobed through her head like a driving dance beat.

A broken red line folded out into the night, but slowly, so slowly. Katie fixed her gaze on the crimson line inching towards her and knew she had roughly half a second to react. It felt like an eternity though. She carried on screaming – time had either slowed down to less than a crawl or some kind of magic was constantly filling her lungs with the air she needed. The mundane physics of time, the basic biology behind respiration, none of it mattered. It was all working and that was all she cared about. The man grinned down at her, face contorted with effort and hate. She remembered how that whip carving a crimson slash through the night had drawn its own bright red streak in her flesh. It made her scream harder, pouring out fire. Purple-black fire but fire nonetheless. Katie raised a hand and felt time try to re-assert itself. She was running dangerously low on fuel. Crying now, but she didn't even realise it, focussing instead on the haunted look in the killers eyes and how he was fading. Angry as hell and looking utterly homicidal, he was starting to blur at the edges.

Katie stopped screaming as a leather ribbon, jumping with red sparks, arc down and burnt an angry red line into her palm. It tingled, she could feel it, but there was no pain. Natural anaesthetic rushed down her arm and made her hand pleasantly numb. Where the whip broke the skin, it suddenly went limp and powerless. No matter how hard the man tried to shake the object back into lethal life, it was dead. Katie held onto it and, after an instant of searing white-hot pain, everywhere she touched lost power.

Katie used it like a pulley rope between her and the man with hate in his eyes to pull herself up. She turned her face to the ground and saw through tear-fogged eyes splatters of blood on her running shoes. Just that one chance moment of seeing a boys lifeblood on her feet and she knew what to do. He was weak now. Well, so was she. However, the adrenaline was pumping,

her brain was whirling but not really moving, the end of every nerve was frazzled – sensitive as God knew what. He stalked after her, throwing the whip away in frustration. It wouldn't do any good now. Once, it held the fury of ages. No more. He didn't need the whip to silence this little girl. His hands, these hands that had dealt a thousand blows and pulled a hundred triggers, were the only weapons he needed. Katie turned on her heel and ran. She started the rhythmic jog she used when she wanted to lose herself on a training run.

It's not fast enough. Put the speed on girl. Speed!

The bad man stomped behind her, the rage audible in his step, reached out and clamped down on her shoulder. Katie bit hard on the instinct to scream out. The time for screaming was done. The life/death/whatever that had filled her up had all drained away. Just a strand or two was clinging to her skin now, just enough to keep the rain from making her job harder. Like it was going to make any difference in a few minutes. *At least I'll die dry. Oh, Christ, I don't wanna die.*

It's not time for you to join us. Where was yet? They had to say yet! Order must be restored, child.

If anyone wanted Katie to be a kid, it might help if they backed off with all this shit! Uh-oh, she'd not only thought that but she'd said it too. Which would probably give this man a bit more sick pleasure. Maybe he already knew he was terrorising a broken-inside girl. Maybe that made it more fun.

In one fluid movement,, she gripped his hand, twisted under it and brought her other hand underneath, making a bizarre hand sandwich. If this didn't work then she had just placed herself in the hands of a psychopath. He was fading, only a tiny bit, still solid enough to kill if he wanted to.

"You won't get the chance," she promised him and searched out his angry blue eyes. Something close to confusion and terror tinged his face. Their gazes locked down. Katie concentrated and pulled together the remaining scraps of dark power, feeling as though she was scraping vital membranes and linings from her organs. She imagined it coalescing into an uncomfortable ball deep in her stomach and then forced it up through her chest, down both her arms and through her hands into him. There wasn't much of the darkness left. But it was so concentrated it might just be enough. No, it *would* be enough.

Of course it wasn't. He stepped back, stumbled actually. Good sign? Bad sign? Did it mean anything? Purple-black wisps crept over the man and stopped sparking as Katie watched. The sparks throbbed, grew, multiplied until his face was barely visible inside a web of dead black energy. All semblance of life long gone.

And then he faded.

He vanished quickly, just like before when it had seemed like something was tearing him away from this world. Only this didn't feel quite the same – not like he was being taken away, more like he was being taken back. Somehow, on some level so high Katie couldn't even see it, she knew that was right.

She stood there for a few long minutes after the bad man had disappeared, positive he would come back. She realised she still had his precious badge in her hand and put it in her pocket, bending over and putting her hands on her knees to draw in some shuddering breaths whilst willing her legs to hold her up. The rain was battering her poor body now, every inch of her being was crying out for rest, a mile of bandage and enough painkiller to down a horse. There was no time to worry about that now though. “Jack!”

He was still lying facedown on the ground, his face turned ever so slightly to one side. Falling to the ground halfway over, Katie dragged herself to that side and smoothed his short sandy hair away from his face, not managing to shift the locks the rain had plastered to his face, her fingers too clumsy to pick them away. The thrown phone lay on the ground – too far away to reach without doing that impossible moving thing again – and she knew she should use it to call for the ambulance. If it still worked. As mobile phones weren't generally waterproof beyond a quick splash in a puddle or accidental ride in the washing machine, it was a long shot.

“No, Jack, you can't do this to me.”

Blood was soaking his t-shirt, so dark it was almost black. It wasn't pumping out of him in dramatic, heart-stopping bursts. It wasn't even leaking out of him now. It was just smothering his back, thick and gloopy. What did that mean? That he didn't have enough blood left for it to ooze? “It's okay. You're safe now.” She repeated it over and over again but it made no difference. His chest didn't start to rise and fall as her words willed him to breathe again. He didn't roll over, give a weak smile and murmur her name, whatever the silver screen said. He was dad, she knew it in her heart but she had the stubborn disbelief of anyone caught in that first wave of grief. Katie put her hands on his back, not caring about the blood being splashed up her arms by the rain. By this time, Katie hardly felt the storm pounding her and making her rock on tired knees. She had filled a bad man with dark power and things had turned out okay. Perhaps the same could be done for Jack. She dug down deep and tried to grab hold of anything she had left and force it into Jack. Only there was absolutely nothing left. She tried and she tried and then she cried and she cried as nothing worked.

“Dina, help me!” she yelled. There was no answer. Dina was not there.

Wait.

... a way. You must find a way. There is always a way. You must find a way. There is always...

She fell into a deep, dreamless sleep, slumped over her cowboy and listened to those words. The last few days had been a total screw up. And now someone was dead – maybe two people - that she cared about were dead. It was all her fault. *If you can hear me Jack, please know that I tried.*

And then there was nothing but two still bodies on a muddy patch of waste ground in the fading storm of their lives.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“I think she just moved.”

“A 24 hour sleep. Must be some kind of record.”

“Shut it, Ad. You just wish you could get away with it.”

“Well, I have been chained to a bed for a weekend before but I don’t think it counts.”

“I don’t want to know this.”

“Well, I do ‘cos it wasn’t with me!”

“I don’t think there *was* a girl with him. He just likes his own company that much.”

“Jaye! Come on, downstairs with me. It’s Marmite time.”

“Fuck off. That’s, like, cruel and unusual punishment.”

“It’s alright, sweetie. He’ll be cleaning up the puke.”

Katie heard all of this conversation before daring to blink her eyes against the hard artificial light. She awoke with a smile at the corners of her mouth. “This isn’t my room.” The light bulb was bare, the walls were lemon yellow, there was a poster of some swimmer climbing out of a pool – there were letters by her head by his head but they could have been anything – staring at her, and the windows were intact.

“I know. We put you in Jaye’s room and then took turns watching over you. Even Leo lasted a whole half hour.”

“Never knew he cared.”

“He thought I wouldn’t tear him a new one if he helped out.” Katie frowned her question and Adam continued. “He put a red shirt in with my whites.”

“I already asked to see the damage. Pink boxers... very manly.” Lainy shot a lightning look at Jaye but there was only good humour in it, no malice. Good, there was enough evil in the world without these two starting a bitch fight. “Relax, I do the washing too.”

“Sweetie, how are you feeling?” Lainy put a cool hand on Katie’s forehead. It didn’t feel quite right. Lainy. Elaine. Surname Pierce before taking Adam’s family name of Thomas a few years ago. Everything came flooding back. “Hey, don’t cry. What’s all this for?”

“I remember everything. I know things I can’t know about. I’ve seen things.” She leant in to the woman’s hand, relishing the heatless, sweatless feel on her burning, clammy face.

“Even you. I know about you too.”

“What about me?”

“I know you’re a ghost. You died in a car crash at age 24. There’s a memorial bench to you at the medical centre. Your dad was driving you, stopped at the pub for a drink. You would have stopped him only you were asleep. Never saw him veer over to the wrong side of the road, never had chance to scream before the C-Max smashed into you. I know you felt guilty for a long time that you got brought back and he didn’t. But it was his time, not yours.” Katie flopped back on the pillows, out of breath and tired once more.

“Sweetie, I think you have a fever. You’re talking rubbish. Jaye, get me water and paracetamol. Last night, you were all messed up and now...”

“I’m fine now.”

“Did a good job on yourself, kid.”

She looked up at Adam through droopy eyes and thought she slurred out “I don’t do anything by halves.” She dragged her eyes open one last time, trying to coax her aching brain into forming coherent questions. It was hard going but there was so much she needed to find out before she could sleep again and start healing. “Why am I here?” Lainy and Adam looked at each other for a long time before they answered. It was too long for it to be anything good but she had to know. “Why am I at home?” Katie clarified, realising that they might have thought she was enquiring about the room again. Them thinking she had lost her memory was all she needed. Actually, a good dose of amnesia might be good about now.

“Your parents called. They said they can’t wait to see you race tomorrow. You’re still going to run?”

“Oh, crap. I forgot about that.”

“Katie, we need to tell you-“

“Jack!” she cried.

“He’s fine. It’s-“ Lainy shifted a few inches to grab the box of painkillers.

Adam caught her arm and led her out of the room. “I don’t think she needs them any more.” He passed Jack on the way out and low fived him. “She needs time and TLC. Give it to her, man.”

Jack looked fine. Not a single scab or drop of dried blood. No scars that hadn’t been there before. He had changed from the black jeans and beige shirt Katie remembered him dying in and into a plain white t-shirt with blue jeans, work boots and a blue jean jacket. This outfit suited him better. “How? How can you be here?”

“I was healing when you got to me. I was on the edge but then you started fighting and it was a shock to him. He never got chance to finish me off.” He noticed her furrowed brow. “Too

crude?” After dying this death for so many lifetimes, the expression no longer had such a sharp edge.

“I saw you die Jack. I watched you bleed away your last drop, scream away your last breath. I had to watch that and now you come here and tell me everything’s-“ *OK*.

“That’s because it is okay.”

“No. No. No, it’s not. Something happened to Dina. She’s dead, Jack.”

“I went to the hospital earlier. The tests said no brain activity but she’s still on life support. Lainy said these tests, they ain’t idiot-proof.”

“She’s gone. I saw Dina’s ghost walk into the shadows.”

Straight away he began to fade, panic setting up camp on that beautiful face, sea-green eyes wild with worry. Something had spooked him but Katie couldn’t think fast enough to ask him what it was. She felt the brush of his lips on her cheek and turned her face into the kiss. But he was gone before their lips could meet. Katie allowed herself a moment of sadness and then fell back into sleep. This time she dreamed of candy floss trees and strawberry pyramids. Nothing sinister, just her body resting and fixing itself while her unconscious drifted to some far away happy place.

“Give ’em hell, honey!”

Katie waved to her father from the start line. The half of the town that wasn’t running in the race had turned out to watch and were chucking loose change into buckets on street corners for the parent and toddler group.

“Such a healthy, trusting place,” Mom had cooed first thing that morning. “What a lovely town to live in.”

“Yeah, it’s great.” Katie made herself smile way the tiredness inside. The week had been exhausting but a day of undisturbed sleep yesterday had cured most of her aches and pains; a six o’clock wake up at the weekend was just too much. Things would shake out once that old adrenaline started flowing. “My friends are all lovely and the academy – I haven’t been in yet, classes start Monday – but it looks so nice.”

“I’m so glad you’re happy, Katie. You are happy, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Mom. I’m happier than I’ve been in ages.” And, surprisingly, that wasn’t a lie. Even being so close to death all the time didn’t seem so bad. I think I needed the fresh start.”

“You will come back home won’t you? Dan wanted to come but she has that sicky bug going round but she’d love to see you when she’s well.”

“I’ll call her soon,” she said, dodging the first question. *And tell her she can have my room.* “Oh, there’s Marcie. We’re running together.”

“But-“

An official looking man blew a whistle and Katie lost herself in the ranks. Some-one shouted out, “I’ll see you at the finish line!”

If you enjoyed reading my book I would be delighted if you would leave some feedback on my obooko.com download page.

Please note: This is a free digital edition from www.obooko.com. If you paid for this book, or to have access to it, you have been swindled. We suggest you demand an immediate refund from the unscrupulous people who deceived you.