
Hidden

MARIANNE CURLEY



BLOOMSBURY

NEW YORK LONDON NEW DELHI SYDNEY

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To Zachary James and Josephine Anabelle: angels mine

Ebony

Do you ever stare at your reflection and wonder who that person is looking back at you? For as long as I can remember I've felt different, at odds with myself.

I live on a farm in Cedar Oakes West where Dad breeds horses for show. Until last year I used to be home-schooled, but now I go to Cedar Oakes High in town. My next-door neighbour is Amber Lane. We're both sixteen and best friends.

I've never had any major dramas in my life, so why do I feel this deep discontentment? It's only when I'm out riding, sprinting across the plains beneath the cliffs of Mount Bungarra with the wind in my face, that I really feel like me.

Even when I started high school, I still felt disconnected. I could run faster than boys who were older than me. I could hear whispered conversations from the other side of the playing field as if I stood there too. I soon learned this was not normal.

I taught myself to conceal my differences, and so far I've avoided attention, but that's only because, except for Amber and a few girls I sit with at lunch, I keep my head down.

But there's something that's impossible to disguise – my violet eyes. They're not as deep as purple or as light as lavender. They're precisely midway between blue and magenta on the colour wheel.

Who has violet eyes?

Amber says I should be proud of their uniqueness because they're beautiful. How can something that makes me a freak be beautiful? It doesn't make sense.

But I tend to over-think every aspect of my life.

It doesn't help that Mum and I aren't getting along that well at the moment. She says I'm acting strangely, but I think she is. Every time I want to know something about my relatives or our family history, which is admittedly becoming more often, she starts an argument – on purpose. She accuses me of being on a search to find myself – as if it's a bad thing. I know she's worried I'll leave the valley some day. Almost everyone does eventually.

My parents have always been overprotective. I'm not exactly housebound, but Mum doesn't like travelling, and Dad doesn't like to leave the horses.

For the first few years of my life my skin reacted to ultraviolet light and I had to stay indoors and cover up in dark clothes. I remember the little girl next door wearing pretty yellow and pink outfits while my clothes were mostly navy blue and black tops and pants, and always with long sleeves. But by the time I was five, my skin had developed the pigment it needed and my sensitivity to light disappeared. Today, Amber says I look tanned all year round.

Anyway, that wasn't the real reason Mum's so over-protective.

My parents had wanted a big family, but Mum miscarried twice, then lost her third pregnancy during the twenty-ninth week. It took years for them to want to try again after that. Finally she found out she was pregnant – this time with twins. But something went wrong again.

Mum gave birth to a girl and a boy. The girl, of course, was me. My brother, Ben, died in his first hour of life.

I think it made them terrified of losing me. And I'm sure it's one of the reasons they wanted me to be home-schooled. Once I understood the origin of this fear I didn't pressure them again until, well,

recently.

For most of my home-schooled years I dreamed of sitting in a classroom with children my own age. It wasn't boredom. I craved companionship. When I turned twelve, my parents let me ride Shadow anywhere within the boundary of our property. With hundreds of hectares to roam, I had my first taste of freedom. I would disappear for hours, exploring the woodlands and creeks on our land. And on these expeditions I would imagine myself a princess living in a world where everyone rode horses, children played on cobbled streets, and the handsomest prince in the land courted me.

Riding Shadow around the property was exhilarating at twelve and thirteen, but I'm sixteen now and those daydreaming days are well behind me. I need to uncover the real Ebony Hawkins, the girl suffocating inside me. It's become crucial lately, for reasons hard to explain, except that ... I'm developing in ways I don't understand and can't find in any biology books. For a start, my light brown hair, weirdly, is turning a sort of dark reddish-brown colour with gold highlights. By itself.

Anyway, back to the here and now. It's Saturday morning and I'm in the kitchen arguing with Mum about going to a club in town with Amber tonight. Mum is bringing up every reason, absurd and otherwise, why I'm not allowed to go. Dad shot away to the stables at the first hint of raised voices.

'You have to trust me, Mum.' I'm standing at the breakfast bar with the sun warming my back through the French windows behind me. I pour a cup of home-made muesli into a bowl. 'You taught me to look after myself, so why do you still worry?' I reach into the cutlery drawer for a spoon before lifting my eyes to hers. 'Unless there's something you haven't told me?' I wait, gauging her reaction.

She closes the fridge door with a jug of milk in her hand and, keeping her eyes down, walks slowly to the breakfast bar. She's taking her time to formulate a reply, which freaks me out; my imagination leaps.

'What's wrong with me, Mum?'

She looks up then, her hand freezing in mid-air. 'Nothing is wrong with you, Ebony. Why would you think that?'

I take the milk from her hand before it spills, kicking myself for asking that foolish question. There is something wrong with me. I feel it in my bones. It's happening to my bones! But I'm not ready to tackle that particular detail with Mum yet – or with myself.

'Ebony, are you all right? You've gone pale.'

'Yeah, Mum, I'm fine ... Well, actually, no, I'm not.' At her confused frown, I explain. 'Sometimes you and Dad look at me as if I have three heads.'

She forces a laugh. 'What on earth are you talking about, darling?'

'Forget it. Just let me go tonight, Mum, please. This dance means a lot to me. Amber's going. Leah's going. Ivy and Bec are going. And you *never* let me go to stuff like this.'

'For good reasons, Ebony. The subject is now closed.'

'Oh, this one too?'

'Don't be cheeky.'

'But, Mum, Mr Lang has already agreed to drive us both ways since we all know you wouldn't let me go if one of my friends were to pick me up.'

'Are you trying to provoke an argument, dear?'

'Me?' I shake my head at this. I take a deep breath and count to five in my head, in an effort to tone down any attitude in my voice. 'Mum, I just want to go to a *supervised* dance for under-eighteen. What's wrong with that?'

She cups the side of my face with her hand. 'Something bad could happen when you're away from

home.'

I step backwards. ~~'Why do you say that all the time? What were all those self-defence lessons for?'~~

She lifts her eyes to the ceiling and bites down on her lower lip.

'Mum? What *were* those lessons for?'

She sighs. 'Self-protection, darling, that's all.'

There's more in her eyes than she's saying, so much more that goosebumps break out across the skin of my arms. Well, if she's not prepared to tell me anything, I'll just have to find out for myself.

'I'm going tonight, Mum. It's all arranged,' I say.

Her eyes turn hard and she inhales through tight lips. I know this look. I *hate* this look. 'Your lady, you are *not* going anywhere tonight.'

'I *am* going! You can't stop me. I'm sixteen!'

'I can, and I will, and sixteen is still a baby.'

'Mum, really!'

She takes a deep breath. 'Ebony, calm down. Take Shadow for a ride. Cool that fiery temper of yours.'

Not hungry any more, I dump my muesli in the bin and head for the back door. But once there I stop and turn back. 'That's funny, you know.'

'What?'

'You say I have a temper, yet I don't raise my voice or argue with anyone except you. Can you tell me why that is, Mum?'

Her mouth opens and a pained look enters her eyes. She doesn't say a word but her eyes gleam with unshed tears, and my head fills with more questions.

Jordan

It's Saturday night, the air is cold, and I'm standing outside the nightclub – Chill – in my black t-shirt, blue jeans and the brown suede jacket I picked up at the charity shop this morning. I shiver inside my jacket. I should have told Danny I'd meet him inside. My best friend, my one-and-only friend, is running late.

Which means, while I stand here watching parents dropping off their kids, my brain has time to remind me how my father is in a prison cell with seven more years to serve, and my mum is long gone from a heroin overdose.

People say it's a wonderful world. Well, from where I stand it's a load of bull. Man, this world is feral. It's cruel and unpredictable.

I've lived in more houses than I have fingers, including a six-month stint in juvenile detention for hitching a ride in a car I didn't know my mate's brother had stolen.

I was pretty much living on a day-to-day basis at the time. Then a new caseworker named Lillian Fisher took an interest in my well-being and secured a decent place for me to live, giving me hope.

Today, a few weeks after my sixteenth birthday, my life is still going well enough, though it's anyone's guess how long this run will last. Deep inside, I know I'm a hair's breadth away from spinning out of control. When Mum died, I thought I would too. I wanted to. What does a nine-year-old do for the rest of his life without his mum? Call me morbid, a pessimist, whatever you want, but that sense of death still simmers beneath the surface, rising up on days like today.

I glance at my tattoo. It's on the inside of my left wrist – a big strong angel, his face in profile, surrounded by masses of gold curls, with big white wings on broad shoulders, and in his hands a golden bow. My mother's boyfriend, Jason, a tattooist by trade, penned it for me on the day she died. He wanted me to have something lasting to remember her by. It was my first experience of real pain.

I don't recall much from that day or the months that followed. One year blurred into another and soon I had hit eleven. Social services had just placed me with an older, childless couple. When I came to the house at No. 42 Warrigal Road, there were already two other boys there – brothers: Adam and Seth Skinner. Adam was in my year at school and we hit it off instantly. His mother was in hospital with a broken heart after his dad died from a brain tumour.

Adam had an irritation in his life in the form of his little brother, Seth. I didn't mind Seth tagging along half as much as Adam did. I used to pretend they were my real brothers. I think I knew this was the closest I would come to a family of my own. Adam never understood, back then, that having a brother made the difference between being a family and being alone.

But the good times didn't last.

People say you can tell when tragedy is about to strike. You get a vibe, a sense of déjà vu, something like that. If that's true, then I'm not one of those people. If my mother had been alive, she would have said the Angel of Death walked in our shadows that day, waiting for the right moment to collect. Maybe he was following us, and we were just too excited to notice.

It was the last weekend before school started for the new year, and we were going to an abandoned mine to search for gold.

Later, what happened earned the label 'tragic accident', but no amount of apologising could undo the damage. A split-second decision turned best friends into mortal enemies and changed my life and

those of the people around me for ever.

Ebony

The nightclub fronts one of the town's busiest roads. Its black steel door sits back in a dark recessed porch, creating an air of mystery in direct contrast to the bright flashy lights of the twin cinemas across the road.

The arriving crowd spills out on to the pavement as groups gather before going inside. Traffic is heavy in both directions. Mr Lang pulls up behind a white van and waits, engine idling, while six girls jump out of the van and start preening. The girls are Year Nines from my school, all dolled up and buzzing with excitement. Their outfits are mostly short skirts, black tights and crop tops, and they're all wearing sparkly make-up.

The girls look cute; their energy is catching.

Mr Lang inches forward into the spot the white van just vacated and releases the door locks. 'I'll be back at eleven. Don't dawdle, you two. It will be bedlam driving out of here tonight.'

'Sure, Dad. Thanks for the lift,' Amber says on her way out.

Meanwhile, I shuffle over, trying to keep my skirt from riding up my legs.

'Thanks for the lift, Mr Lang.' I have one high-heel-clad foot almost to the ground when he calls my name and I answer, 'Yes, sir?'

'Young people,' he says in a philosophical tone, 'need balance in their lives. It's not all about schoolwork and chores.'

'No, sir, it's not. Thank you for taking time out to drive us tonight.'

'It's a pleasure, Ebony. I don't mind. That's not the problem.' His fingers strum a rhythm on the steering wheel. 'If you ever find you have to climb out of your bedroom window again, promise me you'll be more careful. Your mother's rose trellis might not hold up next time.'

'Ohhh.' *So he saw me!* 'You're not going to make me go home, are you, Mr Lang?'

Looking straight ahead he says, 'I've brought you here now, so, no, I won't take you back, or tell your mother I saw you.'

'Thank you so much!'

He tries not to grin. 'This one time only, you understand,' he warns.

'Yes, of course, and thank you again, Mr Lang.' If only Mum shared Mr Lang's philosophy!

'Did you leave a note, Ebony?'

'In my room. But if Mum doesn't find it, I'm sure it won't take much to figure out where I am.'

'No doubt. Well, you should get out before I change my mind,' he says.

I climb out of the vehicle in a hurry to find Amber before she walks into the club. But when both my feet are on the pavement, I swing around and collide with someone standing still.

It's a boy, and I hit him so hard I send him flying across the pavement, into the brick wall, where he slides to the floor with the wind knocked out of his lungs.

Oh, no!

I'm at his side before he opens his eyes. 'Are you all right?' He lifts his head at the sound of my voice and his eyes flutter open. I take his hand to help him back on to his feet. Not my wisest idea. My pull is more like a yank. He springs up in one go and slams into my chest. I hear something crack.

Oh no, no, no! Was that his rib?

Silently he looks at me, eyes wide open now— deep, dark blue and full of amazement at my strength.

Terrified he's going to fall, I keep my arm around his waist and a firm grip of his hand, forgetting how strong my grip can be until he yanks his fingers out and shakes them with a confused expression, furrowing his brow.

Embarrassed, I offer my stammered apologies. 'I'm so, so sorry, really, truly, so sorry. Is anything broken? Can you stand if I let you go?'

Finally he says, 'I think I can manage.'

I breathe a sigh of relief. 'Good. For a minute there ...' I stop mid-sentence when I realise he's staring again, his eyes wide and focused directly on mine.

'Are your eyes really ... purple?' he says.

'They're violet, actually.'

'Does anybody have violet eyes?'

'Apparently I do.'

I hastily make to move back but find his hand is now clasping mine. Maybe he's not feeling entirely stable yet. 'Did I hurt you much? I'm stronger than most ... you know ... *weak* ... people.'

Oh no! Did I just call him 'weak'?

'Listen, I didn't mean to say you're a weak person. I'm just ... I'm, well, er ... worried about you. Should I call ... ?' I pause and inhale a quick deep breath. 'OK, I'm going to stop talking now.'

He stares at me as if I've gone nuts. I can't say I blame him. 'Ummm,' he murmurs, pointing down to our feet. 'Is that your heel sticking into the space between my toes?'

I gasp, but it comes out more like a screech. 'That *is* my heel! Oh no! It's shot right through your shoe! I'm so, so, so sorry! Is your toe broken? Is that what I heard?'

Still gawking at me with his mouth hanging open, he finally says, 'You heard something?'

I plaster a fake smile quickly to my face. 'Maybe you should test your toes?'

He moves them quite well, considering my stiletto heel has nailed his shoe to the ground!

Annoyed with myself, and horribly embarrassed, my face undoubtedly redder than beetroot juice, I wrench my foot up to extract my shoe's ten-centimetre heel.

All the while I can't stop mumbling. 'I'm such a klutz! I'm just not used to wearing high heels. It was my friend Amber. She said I looked like a cowgirl in my riding boots ...' I stop suddenly. Damn it, I'm rambling again! For some reason I feel the need to fill the void created by this boy's silence.

'Has anyone ever told you how captivating your voice is?'

I laugh a little. I nearly killed him and he says my voice is captivating! 'No. No one has ever told me that.'

He smiles sweetly, obviously still dazed by pain. And shock. I lean forward and whisper, 'Actually, I *never* wear heels. I'm more comfortable riding a horse ...' *Aaargh!! What am I saying?* 'Pretty soon you're going to regret that you came and stood in this spot.'

'Somehow I doubt that.'

'By the way, how is your back? You hit that wall so *hard*'. I spin around and nonchalantly try to check his spine.

He gets that *Is-she-all-there?* look again. 'You're not checking out my butt, are you?'

I shake my head so hard my clasp drops out, and my curls tumble down all the way to my waist. 'No, I swear I'm not.'

He moistens his lips with his tongue and kind of laughs. It's an unconscious act and quite sexy. 'My back's fine, although I can't say for sure about these,' he says, pointing at his toes, 'but I think

they'll survive.'

'I really am sorry about your shoe.'

'It's no big deal; it's just a small hole. You can stop apologising.'

I smile at his kindness.

'Even if my toe were broken,' he adds, 'it wouldn't matter because I have another nine. Really.' He sighs then, sounding cross at himself. 'I'm rambling now, aren't I?'

'It's your turn,' I say. Even though he's speaking now, he still has that dazed look about him. 'Are you positive you're OK? You look a little spacey. You didn't happen to hit your head?'

'I didn't hit my head, but you're really strong.'

Instantly my eyes flutter downwards.

He rushes to say, 'Hey, I didn't mean anything by that. It was just a surprise when you bowled me over like a steam train. *Crap*. It's my turn to apologise. I'm sorry.'

'It's OK. I *am* strong, but I know that some people find strength intimidating in a girl. So ... um, you don't mind, could you keep that information to yourself?'

'Absolutely! I swear, your secret is safe with me.' He puts a hand over his heart. 'I won't tell anyone, not a soul, not a -'

'Thank you.'

We both glance down and realise how close we're standing, our joined hands between us at chest height. We stay this way, still and silent, looking into each other's eyes. I feel something tangible stretch between us, and I know he's feeling this unusual connection too. I mean, if I concentrate, I can hear a person's heart beating if they're standing close enough. Right now, this boy's heart is beating very, very fast.

The link between us feels electric.

I will remember this moment. It's burning into my memory as we continue to stare at each other until, gradually, I see something really sad inside his eyes. This dark misery wraps around me like a shroud. I feel smothered by it, as if I'm choking and can't breathe. I don't quite know what to make of it. I sense a despair inside this boy that must be hard to live with. My smile fades at this thought and I step back. It doesn't take long for embarrassment to replace the feeling of closeness.

The world shifts back into focus quickly, starting with Amber's voice calling my name. 'Ebony! What's keeping you?'

'Over here!' I call out, turning to make eye contact.

She runs over. 'You know, I thought you were behind me this whole time until I got my hand stamped and you weren't next. Are you OK? You look a bit stunned.'

'I'm fine.'

Our friend Leah comes out then. 'Hey, are you girls coming? I found a table.'

Before I realise what's happening, the two of them are leading me inside. I swing my head around to the boy standing on the pavement watching me. I smile at him and wave, promising myself that before tonight is over I will know his name and understand the reason I feel so connected to him.

Jordan

‘How’s that little heart of yours thumping now, Jordy? Still marching to the beat of the pretty girl drum?’ Danny comes up to me, thoroughly amused. Obviously he saw it all.

I glare at him to no effect.

He asks, ‘Do you know them?’

‘Nope.’

‘Not even the redhead who was fawning all over you?’ He grins.

‘Her hair wasn’t red,’ I correct in a hurry. Danny’s girl fetish this month is redheads.

‘It was red under the spotlight.’

‘Well, not from where I was standing. Mitts off, OK?’

‘OK, OK! She’s not my type anyway.’ He lifts his hands in the air in a gesture of peace. ‘I could swear you knew them.’

‘I told you already.’

‘Not even the “brunette” who couldn’t keep her hands off you?’ In joking fashion he hikes his fingers under my jacket, running them up and down my chest. People stare. A few laugh at his tomfoolery. ‘When you looked into each other’s eyes, *man*, no one knew where to look.’

I shove his hands away. These days there are times I’d like to block Danny out, press the mute button on his remote control.

‘Trust me, Danny, I would have remembered *those* eyes if I’d seen them before.’

‘Man ...’ He pauses, offering a moment’s silence, as if the girl’s eyes warrant a profound reverence. ‘What do you call that colour? Purple?’

‘Violet.’

‘I think those girls go to our school, but I haven’t seen them around any of the local haunts, so they must be hicks from the west.’

I stare at him. *That girl goes to my school?*

He thumps my chest with an open hand. ‘You know – horse people.’

‘You’ve seen them at school?’

‘What’s more, I think they’re in our year.’

‘Dude, it’s the hair. That dumb rule about keeping it tied back. Girls look different with their hair down.’

That look is back in his eyes. ‘So ... did you get her number?’

‘Whose number?’ Since I didn’t, and could kick myself for it, I decide to be vague. It’s slightly less embarrassing and gives me time to think of a reply.

‘The bronze hottie, the one who almost brought down a wall of the club with your spine.’

‘I *tripped* and *fell* into the wall.’

He laughs. ‘Jordy, I know what I saw. I’ll be your witness when you sue for injury compensation.’

‘Dude, thanks for your concern, but I won’t be suing anyone since it was *me* who lost *my* footing. OK?’

He stares, lifting his dark eyebrows. ‘You’re touchy tonight. Did I hit a chord? Ah, yes, the chord

love.' He sings this last word.

~~'Shut up, Danny.'~~ I change the subject from one that's making me uncomfortable to one that might make him uncomfortable. 'So what happened with Rebecca?' His girlfriend of five months.

He clicks his fingers. 'Aah, that was her name! Apparently she was only killing time until Bosh asked her out.' He gives one of his couldn't-care-less shrugs. 'You know, it's hard being this good looking. Girls just want to hang around with me all the time. It's getting to be a chore,' he moans with appropriate melodrama, then swings an arm across my shoulders. 'Are you coming inside? The night is still young. We can find us each a hottie to take home tonight.'

I think of the brunette with the sweet voice and stunning eyes. I'm definitely going inside.

Ebony

Numbly I go through the motions of having my hand stamped with a red elephant and, with Amber's arm hooked through mine, follow Leah into the club's interior. The soft coloured lights, the chink of glasses, the roar of voices and laughter swirl around me like a zephyr. It's exactly what I came here for – to have fun and feel the buzz of life thrumming inside me.

I stand still, close my eyes and exhale the breath I've been holding in since ... I don't know, but it seems like for ever.

Amber squeezes my arm excitedly. 'Leah found a table on the balcony upstairs and the girls are already there already.'

She means our friends Bec and Ivy, who, along with Leah, we sit with at lunch.

We wade through the crowded stairs to find the girls bunched together in a dark corner right up the back. It's a small table in a perfect location for a romantic couple wanting to avoid the spotlight, but ...

Leah notices my grimacing look. 'Don't you like it?'

'It's a table with chairs – what's not to like?' I say, not wanting to offend her. I wonder how on earth I'm going to find my mystery boy from up here.

Leah goes down to buy drinks. Leaving Ivy and Bec to chat about their clothes, I tug on Amber's sleeve and whisper, 'Come on; let's get out of this corner.'

Standing at the top of the stairs, we spot a few people we know and a few we'd rather not, like the group of loud-mouths from town who are always taking shots at us because we're into horses.

Amber rests a hand on the balcony railing but doesn't look over into the club's interior.

'Um, Amber, why are you staring at me?'

'Oh, *I'm* the one staring?'

I hate it when she answers my question with one of her own. 'I'm staring,' I explain, 'because I don't get out often and it's all so amazing, especially the chandelier. You know, it has a hundred and forty-five little bulbs. Imagine the energy it uses when it's fully turned on.' I glance at her and smile. 'You don't have to say it – I'm pathetic.'

She laughs. 'Ebony, that line's not going to work with me. I know what you're doing.'

'Yeah? What?'

'You're looking for a cute guy who walks with a limp.'

I turn back to scanning the room, keeping an eye on everyone as they first walk in. 'I suppose he's not here because he had to seek urgent medical treatment. I knew I shouldn't have worn your heels.'

She laughs. 'Blame the shoes, why don't you?' She lifts her eyebrows. 'He didn't look too injured when he held your hand against his chest. You should have seen your face!'

'I'm glad I didn't,' I mumble under my breath.

'The way that guy looked at you, there's no doubt *he* will track *you* down before this night is over. Hon, I guarantee it.'

'Do you really think so?' I try to sound as if I don't care either way, but it doesn't work. I need to see him again.

'He goes to our school, you know,' Amber remarks casually.

My eyes swing to hers. 'He does?'

'Yeah, his name is Jordan Blake. He's the guy that always heads for the back row and never makes eye contact. And it's not because he's shy.' She adds this last part softly, but before I can ask her about it Leah's back with our drinks and we return to the table, where we plan a riding day together during the first week of our break.

Every so often I check the faces around me, hoping to catch sight of the boy named Jordan.

Leah and Ivy get up to dance as soon as the band starts playing. It's a great idea. Anything to get a better vantage point, so we head downstairs to the dance floor, where I have so much fun I don't realise how much time is passing.

Taking a break, Amber and I go to the restroom. When we come out to wash our hands and freshen up, I glance into the mirror and point out that her theory seems to be flawed. 'I'm going to find him before anything else distracts me.'

'I'll come with you.'

'You don't have to, you know. The band will be back soon.'

She shrugs. 'I'm all danced out.'

We walk to the door and I pull it open. 'What about the others?'

She pulls out her mobile phone. 'I'll text Leah and tell her where we'll be.'

We wander over to the bar and I ask a barman if he's seen a boy with blue eyes, brown hair, about my height and wearing a brown suede jacket. 'He might be walking with a limp,' I add.

'Sorry,' he says, shrugging.

But while standing there a group of five or six girls rushes past. 'What's down there?' I ask the one hanging back a little.

The blonde glances up from texting. 'The rear exit.'

And the moment she says it I know Jordan Blake has passed this way. I turn and tell Amber, 'He's outside.'

'How do you know?'

I have no answer. I just feel it. 'Instinct, I suppose.'

'You want to go out in the dark on a hunch, looking for a boy you only just met?'

'Um ... yes. I need to check on his injury,' I answer with a nervous giggle.

'All right, I'm game.'

OK, who am I kidding? I quietly admit as we head for the exit. It might be the stupidest idea I've had in a while, but there's something as strong as it is strange between this boy and me, and I need to know what it is.

Jordan

We bumped into Sophie Hunt at the door about an hour earlier, a beautiful girl with blonde hair and blue eyes and bad taste in men. She was alone – and upset – so we decided to keep her company even though we’ve exchanged no more than a few words since she moved to Cedar Oakes at the start of the school year. She told us she had problems with her boyfriend, Adam Skinner – see, bad taste. Danny let slip I had history with the guy, and she started pounding me for info, trying to figure out why he has suddenly become so unpredictable.

‘You know, Sophie, perhaps you should start by asking Adam to explain what happened that day at the mine.’

‘Don’t you think I’ve tried? No one mentions Seth around him. Even Josh and Damien told me to leave it alone.’ Her voice drops so low I strain to hear it and move my right ear closer to her mouth. ‘Josh thinks Adam is worried about losing me.’ She looks at me then, her big blue eyes swimming with tears.

Adam Skinner is worried about Sophie’s feelings, worried she might leave him. This isn’t the Skinner I know. It surprises me.

I close my eyes for a second and finally give in. But deep inside I just know that somehow, at some time, I’m going to regret this.

She gives a barman some cash and he slides two beers under the counter, then we slip outside on our own and sit on the bottom step of a small concrete deck. By the time I finish relating what happened, she’s sniffing back tears and swabbing her eyes.

Leaning forward on to her knees, Sophie cups her chin in her hands and stares straight ahead in the dark alley, where the only other sound is a cat scratching at a black garbage bag.

‘Are you OK?’ I ask.

‘No, I’m a horrible person, pressuring you into telling me this story on his brother’s birthday.’ She hiccups.

‘You didn’t know it was Seth’s birthday. And at least now you understand where Adam is coming from.’

‘How can you stick up for him after all he’s put you through? Danny told me how, in that first year he turned every person in this school against you, including the teachers.’

‘Well, that was three years ago, and I put up with the crap he dishes out because ...’

She squeezes my forearm. ‘Don’t say, because of what you did to his brother. It was an accident, Jordan. A dreadful tragedy, but it wasn’t your fault.’

She’s silent a moment before she says softly, ‘Why couldn’t he tell me himself? I would have understood. I could have been there for him instead of ...’ She glances down the dark lane with tears welling again, her tissue shredded in her hands, ‘Jordan, I was so awful to him last night. I said some horrible things. He’s never going to forgive me.’

‘Forgiveness isn’t exactly Adam’s strong point. A few days’ space around certain days of the year is probably good to remember.’

She starts to cry again and wipes her eyes with the last of her tissue. ‘I dumped him last night.’

‘The fight was that bad, eh?’

She nods.

~~‘I’ve seen you two at school together. He doesn’t let you out of his sight. He’ll come back.’~~

She slides her hand in mine and gives it a friendly squeeze. ‘Do you think so?’ She glances up at me with her big blue eyes half obscured behind her blonde fringe. ‘If only I’d met *you* on my first day.’

Her hand in mine grows uncomfortable suddenly, as if we’re crossing a line. She’ll be sorry she said that by tomorrow. Obviously Sophie has some thinking to do. She’s hurting and vulnerable. I glance at my watch. I’ve been outside too long, but at least there’s still time to find the girl with the violet eyes.

Sophie gets to her feet. ‘I’ve kept you out here long enough. You should go back inside and enjoy what’s left of the night.’ Taking my hand again, she hauls me up. ‘Besides, I realise now I have somewhere else I need to be.’

A dark figure fills the space behind her. The figure moves and two more step out of the shadows. It’s Skinner with his mates Josh and Damien. The hairs on the back of my neck bristle at the look on Skinner’s face.

Quickly I drop Sophie’s hand. ‘What is it?’ she whispers, and spins around. ‘Adam! It’s you. Gee, you freaked me out—’ Her voice fades as she takes in his dark eyes and hostile expression.

‘Yes, it’s *Adam*’, he mocks, glaring at her.

She goes from relieved to confused and then terrified in the space of one beat. ‘What’s wrong, babe?’

Skinner takes her arm and flings her to Josh as if he were discarding a rotting carcass. Josh plays football for the region. I’ve known him since we were kids. He was one of the many who stopped associating with me after the accident. It’s his loyalty that has him here now being a moron.

‘Don’t let her go, Josh. I’ll get back to her after I deal with this scumbag.’

‘Listen, mate, you’re jumping to the wrong conclusion. You should trust your girlfriend. She cares for you, and that’s not something you should take for granted.’

Whack! His right fist smashes into my jaw, knocking me to my knees.

Man, I didn’t see that coming.

‘*Adam!*’ Sophie screams. ‘What are you doing?’ She struggles to escape Josh’s arms but they’re braced like iron bands around her waist. ‘Let me go, Josh!’ He doesn’t respond. ‘What’s the matter with you? Let me go!’

He continues to stare straight ahead.

‘Josh? Josh!’ She catches my eye and shakes her head. She can’t explain what’s going on any more than I can. She tries again, ‘Think about what you’re doing, Josh.’

Josh tries not to look at Sophie’s big pleading eyes staring up at him.

‘Josh,’ she pleads, ‘we’re friends, aren’t we? I made you a chocolate cake for your birthday.’

Finally she gets through to him. ‘I’m sorry, Soph, but I saw you two with my own eyes.’

‘Saw *what* exactly? Jordan and I have been out here talking, that’s all.’

When he doesn’t answer, I yell at him, ‘You saw nothing cos there was nothing to see.’

‘Go on, Josh,’ Skinner pipes up, keeping his eyes fixed on me as I inch my way into a better position. ‘Tell her how we saw the two of them meet up at the front desk like they obviously planned then cosy up together every chance they got. And when that wasn’t enough, they came out here for privacy!’

‘I came on my own!’ Sophie protests. ‘Jordan came with Danny Webber. They just happened to walk in at the same time as me. Adam, we didn’t plan to meet, I swear!’

‘Danny was your cover. And you know how I know that? You couldn’t wait to sneak out the back without him.’

Sophie groans. ‘It wasn’t like that! I can explain everything. We’ll go somewhere quiet, just the two of us. Tell this brute to let me go. And if you don’t take me seriously, I’ll report this to the cops.’

‘Shut up, Sophie! I saw all I needed with my own eyes. Evidence doesn’t come better than that.’

‘But, Adam ...’ Sophie’s voice softens. ‘I know what happened to Seth.’

Everyone freezes. Even the cat picking at the hole in the garbage bag suddenly stops. Realising she’s made a mistake, she reaches out to Skinner’s other pal, Damien Hall, with her eyes, but there’s no help there. He knows mentioning Skinner’s brother is a forbidden topic, especially today of all days.

‘You know *nothing* about my brother,’ Skinner hisses, and pointing at me says, ‘You dumped me for *him*? If it were anyone else, maybe we could talk, but *him*? From now on you are nothing to me. You’re dust!’

Sophie gasps. She’s never seen this side to her boyfriend before and it’s clearly scaring her half to death. ‘How can you dismiss me as if I’m nothing after these last three months?’

He turns slowly as if he’s listening, but then he raises his hand and sucks air in loudly, making a torrid hissing sound through the gap in his front teeth. ‘You cheated on me with the person who destroyed my family.’

Whack! He slaps Sophie in the face with the open palm of his hand.

It shocks everyone.

Sophie whimpers in disbelief, ‘You hit me.’ She lifts a trembling hand to her cheek.

Stunned, Josh loosens his hold. Sophie breaks free and charges at Skinner with both fists flailing. ‘Don’t you ever! Don’t you *ever* raise a hand to me again!’

Josh and Damien pull her off, leaving Skinner completely open to me for the first time and, though the two momentarily occupied, I ball my right fist and jab him across the bridge of his nose.

Enraged and in pain, he grabs my arm and twists it behind my back. ‘Think you can get away with that, do you? You’re a weakling, a girl, a weak little girl!’ He continues to yank and twist my arm. Over the top of my head he yells at Sophie, ‘I don’t understand why you would pick this loser.’

‘Adam, *stop!* What does it take to get through to you?’

‘You’re a moron, Skinner,’ I yell. ‘Do you think Sophie will stick with you now? You just lost the best thing you’ve ever had when you hit her. She’s not going back to you now, not ever, man.’

‘Shut up, Blake!’

When this doesn’t work, I try to reason with Adam’s mates. ‘You guys want to risk going to jail all over a misunderstanding? You’re dumber than I thought!’

‘Shut up!’ Skinner bellows, dragging me to the brick wall, where he starts punching me in the gut and yelling at Damien to give him a hand. Damien rushes over and hauls me to my feet. Glaring at me, Skinner knees me in the back, then kicks me with his left boot.

After a few more minutes of this, Damien releases me, steps back and says to Skinner, ‘Mate, you can’t do this.’

I slide to the ground.

The kicking doesn’t stop.

Meanwhile, Sophie is screaming. She breaks free from Josh, hollering accusations at the two friends. ‘You should be stopping him before he ends up doing time for this!’ They stand back but do nothing. ‘You’re both pathetic.’

‘He tried to steal my girl. It’s what he deserves,’ Adam says, pointing to my beaten body sprawled

on the ground.

‘That’s bullshit!’ I tell him. ‘This goes back years.’

Finally Skinner stops and stares down at me, gloating. ‘You’re right. I should have done this a long time ago.’

Hurting in more places than I can count, I scramble to my feet. Broken, but not dead yet, I ram my head into Skinner’s gut. He doubles over, winded. Trying to keep the momentum going I ball my fist again, and connect with the underside of his chin, then again with his nose. He sinks to his hands and knees and, gasping, scuttles away like a rat.

Skinner will get his breath back in a few seconds, so time is short. I look at Josh and Damien. I don’t think they will stop me if I take Sophie and run. They glance at each other with confused looks. This is more than they had bargained for.

Standing in the darkness, Skinner appears as a ghost, hunched over and breathing heavily, blood dripping from his nose. He steps out of the shadows, eyes on fire with rage. That’s when we all see the empty beer bottle in his hand. He smashes it over the banister rail, breaking off the end. Glass scatters across the concrete.

Did I say how twisted this world is?

The golden glass glistens under the light of the single globe hanging above the club’s exit. I hold my hands up, palms out, as Skinner points the bottle at me and I’m thinking I’m screwed cos Skinner is out of control. I knew he would snap one day.

He’s reached the point beyond reason, but I still have to try. ‘Adam, listen to me, man. I’m sorry. I’m *really* sorry for what I did. We can walk away from this peacefully if you put the bottle down. At least let Sophie walk away. She has nothing to do with the real reason we’re here.’

Josh stares at Skinner as if he doesn’t recognise him. He’s no help at all. I try to reach Skinner again. ‘Dude, remember how it used to be. I loved Seth too. He was like ... *man*, you two were my brothers! I never meant for Seth to die. If I could go back, I’d choose differently. I swear I would take his place.’

My words only enrage him more. But at least Josh comes to his senses and tries to make Skinner see reason. ‘Adam, come on, mate. This has gone too far,’ he says. ‘We were just supposed to shake him up a bit. Not this. And ... and ... what if they’re telling the truth? You could be making a big mistake.’

‘Shut up, Josh. Just *shut up!*’

Damien says, ‘Mate, I can’t be found here if this goes bad, and it’s bad enough already. You never mentioned hurting *her!*’ Glancing briefly at each other, Josh and Damien start backing away.

‘Wait!’ Sophie yells after them.

They don’t look back.

Disgusted, Sophie yells, ‘Cowards! I thought he was your friend!’

‘Sophie, stay back,’ I call out before she makes a rash move. Skinner’s friends are gone, but that doesn’t mean he’s any less dangerous. ‘Go around to the front and get help.’

She shakes her head. ‘I’m not leaving while this maniac is aiming a broken bottle at you.’

‘He needs help, Sophie. *Please*, get help.’

She scans the ground for her handbag. Running to it, she gets out her mobile phone and calls the cops.

Undaunted, Skinner blocks the stairs by moving in front of them. ‘Calling the cops won’t help,’ he taunts. ‘They won’t get here fast enough to save your new boyfriend.’ He turns his attention to me. ‘I should *never* have let you get away with killing my brother. Consider yourself lucky I allowed you

live this long.'

The door swings open and Danny steps on to the platform. 'There you are!' Oblivious to what unfolding before him, it takes him a moment to figure out something is wrong. 'I was wondering where you two had gone.' And then, 'What's going on?' He steps down on to the top stair.

'Go back!' I take my eyes off Skinner for a second to gesture to Danny. 'Get security out here quickly.'

But a second is all it takes for Skinner to charge. The sharp inhalation of air screeching through his front teeth is my warning, but it's not enough. He slams into my chest, plunging the jagged glass into my gut. It rips through my shirt, my skin, the muscles of my stomach and everything in its path. I drop instantly forward into his arms. Holding me up with one arm, he twists his hand, driving the glass upwards, shredding my insides as if his purpose is not to stop until he pierces my heart.

I glance up, our eyes connect, and instantly I know two things for certain. One is that I'm looking into the eyes of someone who has lost his grip on reality, and two, I'm going to die.

It occurs so quickly it starts to feel surreal, as if I'm watching it happen to someone else. Sophie and Danny reach me simultaneously, pulling Skinner off and tossing him to the ground. From there he crawls past the bags of garbage along the back wall, scrambles to his feet and disappears into the night.

Automatically my hands search for the broken bottle. They fold around the glass, still stuck in my chest, slippery with my blood. I look up through a growing haze, my brain registering pain from front to back, rapidly becoming excruciating. Everything that follows is a blur. I hear sirens in the distance. People are pouring out of the club, their faces curious, alarmed, horrified. Danny and Sophie support me, one on each side. I'm still clutching the bottle with Danny's hand now folded around mine. They talk over me, frantically discussing whether they should or shouldn't remove it.

A security guard takes a look. 'Don't touch it!' he orders. 'Right now it's acting as a plug. Release it, and he's gone.'

Gone? Dying, he means. I know that. He orders a staff member to bring a blanket, then tells Danny to lay me down. 'Flat on his back,' he says. 'Here, I'll help you.'

My mind drifts. It's a strange sensation, as if part of me is floating while the rest is heavy as mud. I get a moment of clarity. 'Where's Skinner?'

'Beats me,' Danny says, 'but the cops will find him. His life is over, man.'

Like mine ... It seems an alluring thought.

No life, no pain. Right?

This life was too hard anyway.

But it was getting better, remember? You met that girl tonight, the girl of your dreams.

Yeah, and now I'll never get her number ... never get her name ... never ...

I close my eyes, drifting in a fog, but Danny urges me to stay awake, his voice breaking through my thoughts. 'Don't shut those pretty blues of yours, OK? Stay with me, Jordy.'

I open them and see Sophie. 'Where is that ambulance?' She sounds scared.

There is blood everywhere, saturating my clothes, sticking to my legs, all over Danny and Sophie. She shakes her head. 'Forget the blood. They'll give you more at the hospital.'

I feel myself drifting once again, but then I hear Danny pleading as if from a distance, 'Stay with us, Jordan. Come on, buddy. Stay focused, man!'

Sirens bleat loudly and an ambulance reverses into the lane. Two paramedics leap out and start working on me. The urgency in their voices scares me more than the sight of all the blood. They push me on to a gurney and gingerly take over the bottle-holding. My hand slides away.

Danny and Sophie stay close as the gurney starts moving, and Danny asks, 'I can come to the hospital, right?'

I don't hear the reply because a girl steps into my line of sight and for a second there is nothing else but her. It's the girl of my dreams.

A grey haze swims before my eyes, making everything blurry, and now the girl with the violet eyes and Sophie are side by side.

Maybe my mind is playing tricks on me. I have a broken beer bottle carving up my insides; it's not outrageous to be seeing things.

They slide me into the ambulance. Danny tries to climb in after us, but the paramedic stops him. All I can do is hold on to the three stricken faces until the door closes. Then I give in to the pull of the darkening haze.

Ebony

Kids with shocked faces fill the corridor near the exit. It doesn't take long to figure out something terrible has happened outside. I stare at the people around me but Jordan is not among them and my stomach sinks like a rock dropped into deep water.

Something is wrong.

Two security guards in their black T-shirts push past us, one carrying a blanket. Amber murmurs, 'This doesn't look good.'

'No.' There is an urgency escalating inside me now. Somehow I know Jordan Blake, the guy with the sad blue eyes, needs my help. I start pushing people out of my way, careful not to shove and possibly hurt someone.

Amber calls out, worried about what I'm doing, but I don't *know* what I'm doing!

Finally I'm outside, overlooking a chaotic scene. There are people everywhere, blue lights flashing from two police cars, another arriving with its siren blaring, and an ambulance with its rear door open wide.

When I see him, something inside me jerks and I stagger forward, stumbling down a few steps. It's Jordan, and he's dying. I know this like I know my own name. He's lying flat on the ground with the new girl from my physics class, Sophie, down on her knees on one side of him, and another boy from my year on the other. It's clear they are trying to keep him from bleeding to death, with their clenched fists pushing down on pressure points above and below a wound to his stomach. Someone has stabbed him and it doesn't look like an accident. Sophie's face is coming out in a bruise, her right cheek gleaming bright red.

A security guard moves through the crowd, ordering everyone inside. I slip around him while his back is turned.

This is my chance.

The paramedics are working fast to strap the boy to a gurney and hook up an intravenous line. His friends are now standing aside. Sophie turns and notices the gawking crowd still hanging around. 'Hey! Get lost! This isn't a freak show!' She spots me and hesitates, probably recognising me from school, or sees my concern in the anguish that must be showing in my eyes. 'Ebony, are you OK?'

'I have to talk to him.'

The gurney starts moving towards the ambulance parked a few metres away. Sophie notices, but turns to study my face again. Blood drips from her soaked hands. She doesn't know what to do with them so just holds them out in front of her. 'Are you his girlfriend?'

Girlfriend? How well does she know this guy if she thinks I could be his girlfriend? Apparently not well enough to know the intimate details of his life. 'Ah, no, I'm not.'

'Friend?'

'Er ...' It takes a moment to reach for the right word. At my hesitation her eyes flare with white-hot anger.

'You don't know him at all! You're like the rest of these vultures.' She flicks her head at the crowd, holding their phones in the air, taking pictures. 'Go back inside and take the rest of these sick losers with you.'

She rushes over to the gurney and takes Jordan's hand. Unable to stop myself, and not understanding what's driving this odd, compelling urge to touch him, I run over too and grab hold of the gurney. I try to get his attention.

But he's in shock and dazed. His eyes close and open several times as he looks from one side of the gurney to the other. He's fighting to hang on to consciousness.

I don't know what's got into me, but I've got this inexplicable yearning to help him. I can see I'm adding to his confusion, but I can't stop myself.

Looking down at the injured boy I whisper, 'I can help you. You just have to let me. Do you understand what I'm saying?'

I manage to hold on to the gurney for a few more seconds before a paramedic attempts to prise my fingers away. 'Let go or I'll have you arrested!'

I step back, feeling helpless as the ambulance door closes. Blue lights flashing, the ambulance rushes away, and I'm left standing, an emptiness searing me from the inside out.

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