

## RED

I sit in the passenger seat of my mother's car, beginning to hyperventilate. Being in a car again terrifies me. But as much as I'm terrified, I'm even more afraid of stepping out of it and facing ridicule at a new school.

It used to be that Mum would touch my shoulders to reassure me that I wasn't alone. But she can't do that anymore.

She knows that I hate physical touch.

Especially on my shoulders.

The last thing Greg ever did was touch me on the shoulder.

She's triggered flashbacks so many times that she knows not to touch me now.

'It's going to be okay, Rob,' she says softly, bringing my mind back to the present—to a different car, a different hand, a different place.

A different me.

I simply nod, not trusting my voice to hold steady, despite my breathing beginning to slow back to normal.

'Would you like me to walk in with you the first time?' she speaks again, her voice still soft and reassuring.

I shake my head.

As much as I'd love to have her there, I won't give them any more reasons to mock me.

I let out a deep breath, squaring my shoulders and opening the door. My feet hit the pavement. Standing beside the car, I reach up and pull the hood of my jumper over my head to shadow my face.

No one is going to see my face today. No one is going to mock me.

No one.

But despite my intentions, when I reach up to put my backpack in my locker, the hood slips off my head, exposing the scars that march down the left side of my face and neck.

Three boys gathered around an open locker turned to look at me. I can see a hardness in their eyes that makes me sure they aren't going to forget what they saw.

...

I smile faintly as I limp through the front door of my new house. School hadn't been nearly as bad as I'd feared, and the only unnecessary attention I received was a few stares. I was used to those, and people were usually polite enough to stop looking at me once I made eye contact with them.

But the real reason I was smiling was because the movers had delivered our furniture while I was at school, which meant that Mum and I would finally be able to settle in properly.

Strangely, I think I'm one of the only teenagers in the country who's glad to move halfway through high school. It had become almost unbearable at my old school, being surrounded by old happy memories and new bullies.

I sit on my bed, looking at the freshly painted light blue walls and the piles of boxes that I can now unpack because I have somewhere to put my things.

I'd thought it would be harder—to move back to the area where *it* happened.

My left leg shakes slightly, and I let out a sigh as I stand and pick up the first box—the things that belong in my bathroom. I know that I should let my bad leg rest, but I am determined to unpack at least a few boxes to make this room feel more like home and less like a cardboard factory.

But when my bare feet touch the cold tile floors, I freeze, the box in my hands falling to the floor with a thud. I stare at the wall above the basin, my eyes widening with horror, my hands clenching at my sides, my breathing becoming shallow and fast, my heart pounding.

*It was supposed to be covered.*

I have no idea how long I stand there, staring at my horrible, ugly face in the mirror.

Something inside me snaps. I raise one clenched hand and slam it into the mirror.

Once. Twice.

The sound of splintering glass brings back the memories. The terrible memories.

I cry out, just as I had back then, shaking with the terror of those final moments, closing my eyes against the torrent of fear and pain and grief.

A flying piece of glass embeds itself in my cheek, others in my neck and shoulders. The pain is familiar.

I hear screams. Hers. Mine.

I hit the mirror again—it feels good somehow, to try and take control of this tiny thing that rules me.

But it only makes it worse.

My knuckles begin to bleed, staining the broken glass with red.

Red.

I crumple to the floor.

Red.

I pull my knees to my chest.

Red.

I begin to rock back and forth, trying to dispel the memories.

Red.

The colour of fear. Anger. Danger.

Death.

*Greg, I exclaim in my mind. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry for that day. I'm sorry I asked you to come. Forced you to come. It's my fault. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.*

I try to forget the red, to remember the blue. Her eyes. Her eyes. Her eyes.

*Focus on her eyes.*

'Rob?' the voice comes quietly into my mind. My mother's voice: quieting, reassuring, calming.

My breath comes in shaky gasps as she simply stands there, talking to me. She knows not to touch me, but she is there, allowing me to choose to accept her help.

I need to make a choice.

*I made the wrong one that day. I'm sorry Greg. I'm so sorry.*

But today I make the right one.

I focus my gaze on my mother as I stand and slowly walk away from the glass, the terror, the blood.

I choose to accept her help.

But I know that even she will never be able to help me walk away from the memories.

...

I intentionally come to school late the next day, hiding my hands in my hoodie pocket and hoping that people won't see the fresh cuts from the mirror. I stand in the shadows, my hood up once more, simply watching as stragglers make their way to their classes.

A quiet scream draws my attention.

I see the same three boys that stared at me yesterday, but this time they are circling a petite dark-haired girl. One of them shoves her, sending her to the ground as the books she was holding were scattered over the pavement.

The boys laugh as the girl curls into herself, as if trying to make herself smaller and less threatening.

After the boys walk away, I tentatively step towards the girl.

I could see the fear in her expression.

'Are you okay?' I ask, pushing aside my own awkwardness. *Come on Rob, you can help one stranger, can't you? Just be nice to her and maybe she won't ridicule you like everyone else.*

The girl nods, but it feels like her blue eyes aren't really looking at me. 'Yes, I'm fine, thank you,' she says as the tension in her shoulders eases.

'I'm Robert,' I say, holding my hand out to her, intending to help her up.

'I'm Elise,' she replies. But she ignores my hand, and I awkwardly push it into my pocket.

'Uh, your books are a little scattered. Would you mind if I helped you pick them up?'

The girl shakes her head, her dark ponytail swinging from side to side. 'I'd appreciate that, thank you.'

As I pick up the first book, I realise that it is written in Braille. And so is the next one. And the next one.

I can't help but see her differently, but even though she can't see me staring, I still get the feeling that she'd hate it.

*The bullying is bad enough for me, I think as I pick up the last book. But it would be a thousand times worse if I couldn't see it coming.*

As Elise stands, I pass the books to her.

'Are you new?' she asks quietly.

'Yes, I just started here yesterday, and to be honest, I'm actually a little lost.'

'Maybe I can help,' she smiles. 'Which classroom do you need to find?'

I smile as I dig my timetable out of my backpack, recognising that I may have just made my first friend.

...

A few weeks later I am walking towards the tree in the school grounds where I meet Elise for lunch when the three bullies find me. They kick at my weaker leg, forcing me to fall heavily to the ground in order to protect it from being hurt again. I frown as they laugh, high-five and walk off.

Elise is already at the tree, and she hears the difference in my walk as I approach.

'Did they hurt you again?' she asks.

'They tried to, but my leg was already hurting more. Sometimes it does that.'

'Is that why they pick on you? Because you limp because you broke your leg and it never healed properly?'

I sigh softly. 'There's more to it than that.'

'More to it,' she muses. 'Is that part of the reason why you don't treat me differently because I'm blind?'

'You noticed?'

'Of course I did. You don't ignore me because I can't see you, you wait patiently for me when I'm finding things in my locker, and you have that way of describing beautiful things so that I can enjoy the world around me. I like it, but I don't understand why.'

‘Well,’ I take a deep breath and hold it for a moment. ‘I know what it’s like to be excluded because of something you cannot control or change,’ I pause, then continue quietly, ‘no matter how much you’d like to.’

Elise doesn’t speak, giving me the chance to gather my thoughts.

‘Have you noticed anyone else talking to me? Other than what is necessary I mean?’ When she shakes her head, I continue. ‘That’s because I, uh,’ I try to swallow past the lump in my throat. ‘I have these scars. They’re all down the left side of my face and neck, and it seems to push people away from me. It doesn’t look pretty, and it means that people don’t take the chance to actually get to know me.’

Again, the silence settles for a moment before I continue.

‘I miss it sometimes, you know. The ability to make friends with anyone I wanted to talk to. You’re the first person who’s given me a chance as a friend.’

‘That’s because I judge you based on what you say and do,’ she says. ‘Besides, when I first met you, you were nice to me. If you hadn’t helped me pick up my books, I could’ve been there for ages, because it’s quite hard to find things when you have no idea where they are,’ she smiles. ‘After that, there was no way I wouldn’t give you a chance. And you’ve proved yourself to be a very good friend to me.’

Silence settles between us for a minute.

‘It’s kind of nice sometimes, you know,’ she says, ‘to judge people by what they have inside them instead of what’s on the outside.’

I know that she hadn’t always been blind but had lost her sight in an accident. I hadn’t asked her about it, because I knew that if she was anything like me, she would prefer not to talk about it.

I smile at her. ‘You’ve really learnt how to find the blessings from your accident, haven’t you?’

She nods.

‘How did you get your scars?’ she asks.

I close my eyes, once more hearing the breaking glass and screams, feeling the pain and terror, seeing red. My body begins to shake with the memories.

All I can see is the red.

I feel a small hand on my forearm, and jerk away from her touch as I open my eyes and the memories clear for the moment.

‘Robert?’ she asks softly.

‘It’s okay,’ I manage to choke out, my heart slowing a little as I look into her blue eyes. ‘Your question,’ I swallow, ‘it just triggered a, uh, flashback of sorts.’

‘You got the scars in an accident, didn’t you?’

I nod, but then remember that she can’t see that and reply ‘Yeah.’

Silence settles again.

But then I break it with the words: ‘It was almost a year ago, but I still see it happening.’ I pause. ‘I still feel the terror of those moments.’

*And Greg, I think. Should I tell her about Greg?*

*Yes, I need to tell someone the whole story.*

‘I was in a car accident. With my cousin. Greg.’

I can already feel the tears burning in my eyes.

*I can’t.*

I stand up. ‘I’m sorry Elise, but I can’t talk about it. The memories, they’re just—too recent.’

I don’t even look back over my shoulder as I walk away. I can’t.

...

I struggle to fall asleep that night. My mind is full of images and memories from that last day with Greg, and they’re all swirling around, making me relive that day over and over and over again.

First I lay on my side, then roll over and stare at the ceiling, then go back to staring at the wall.

I remember that morning—that cold, rainy winter morning. Oh, how I wish I hadn’t convinced Greg to go with me to the performance in the city. He’d still be alive if it wasn’t for me.

I see the dangerously wet roads glinting in the headlights, the music playing, Greg’s hands—one resting on the steering wheel, the other reaching out to punch me lightly on the shoulder.

His green eyes looking at me instead of the road.

His smile. The last one.

I remember feeling the car beginning to slide on the slick bitumen, the overcorrection, the spinning, the traffic flashing past in flickers of red and white.

I remember the fear. Those heart-stopping moments.

Greg's hands—both on the steering wheel now, gripping it so tight that his knuckles turned white.

I remember wanting to close my eyes—wishing I could blink and it would all be different. I remember seeing her in those final moments.

The blue-eyed girl in the other car.

She looked just as scared as I felt.

I couldn't look away from her, even though I wanted to.

Then came the sounds that haunt me now: breaking glass, squealing tyres, screams.

The red blood staining everything.

I wonder what happened to her sometimes. Where she is now, whether she was injured in the crash.

I know she's alive.

Because I know that there was only one fatality from the crash.

Greg.

If I hadn't wanted to go to that performance so badly, my cousin would still be alive.

It was all my fault.

I deserve the scars, the stares, the bullies.

I don't deserve happiness.

That's why I've pushed everyone away since the crash.

There are only two people that I don't have the heart to hurt.

My mother, and Elise.

I can't hurt them like that.

I just can't.

...

The next day, I'm sitting with Elise again. We've got our backs against the tree trunk, and I'm commentating parts of the nearby soccer game for her.

'Rob?' she interrupts, resting her hand lightly on my arm.

This time I don't jerk away. 'Yes?'

'About yesterday, I just wanted to say that I'm not going to push you for details, but if you ever want to talk about your accident, I'm willing to listen.'

I smile at her. 'Thank you,' I say, then return to commentating the game.

But then I look back at her.

There is something familiar about her—I can't quite put my finger on it. Had I seen her before I came to school here? Did I know her *before*?

The familiar flashback races through my head like it does whenever I think of the accident.

But then it slows down—in the moment when I saw the girl in the other car.

Those blue eyes, the dark hair, the petite frame.

My eyes fly open and I stare at Elise.

Only to find her staring at me.

'Robert?'

'Yeah?'

'You stopped talking. Are you okay?'

I swallow, then say, 'Yeah, I'm okay.'

My mind continues to deny it. There is no way that the girl I'm friends with now is the same girl from the accident. No way. My brain probably just wants it to be Elise. I slowly shake my head. *I'm not going to mention it to her. Not when I'm just imagining things.*

Only moments later the bell rang, and Elise and I walk our separate ways to different classes.

...

I lay on my bed that afternoon, staring at the ceiling and pondering the remote possibility that Elise was the girl that I saw in the accident.

It couldn't be her, right?

How could it?

Of course it couldn't be.

It was statistically almost impossible.

The chances were so remote.

And yet...

I couldn't deny that Elise was physically similar to the girl I saw that day.

But how could it be that the one person who made friends with me was the one person who'd have the most reason not to?

If she knew I was in the other car, she'd hate me for causing the accident that took her sight.

Even if she was the girl I saw that day, I could never tell her.

I couldn't lose my only friend.

The doorbell rang, pulling me out of my reverie, and I limp to the front door. Elise stands on the other side, holding the arm of a woman.

'E—Elise?'

'Hi Robert,' she says, letting the woman's arm go. 'I'll be okay now, Mum. Wait for me in the car?'

The woman smiles, agrees, and walks away.

‘Robert, I hope you don’t mind me coming here unexpectedly, but there’s something I wanted to talk to you about.’ Despite the confidence of her words, the fact that she was fiddling with her hands tells me that she’s nervous.

‘Sure,’ I say. ‘Come on in.’

Taking her arm, I gently lead her down the hallway to the living room.

‘So,’ I break the silence once we are settled opposite each other on the couches. ‘What did you want to talk to me about?’

‘I, uh, I haven’t told you about my accident. About how I lost my sight. I realised that this afternoon. How can I expect you to talk about your accident if I don’t ever talk about mine?’

I am silent at that. I can’t think of anything to say.

‘Mine was a car accident too, you know,’ she says. ‘My mum and I were driving home from the airport, and it was raining really hard. We’d just dropped off my dad for a flight to Melbourne for business. I guess it was just a case of wrong place wrong time, but about halfway home, this other car began sliding towards us.’

My eyes grow wide and I find myself gripping the armrest of the couch.

Could it really be that Elise *is* the girl from the accident?

‘I was terrified. I remember gripping the seat so hard and bracing for the impact while praying that it would miss us. Then the car was close enough to us and I could see a boy in the front seat of the other car.’

My hands are shaking now. She is describing my flashbacks exactly—just from a different person’s perspective.

‘He had short brown hair, and he looked just as terrified as I was.’

Tears gather in my eyes as she pauses for a moment, then adds, ‘His face was the last thing I ever saw.’

‘You’ll never forget those moments, will you?’ I ask.

She shakes her head.

*She’ll hate me for this, I know she will.*

*But I have to tell her.*

*I have to tell her that that boy was me.*

‘Did—did you ever find out what happened to him?’

‘Not completely. My mum helped me with some research, and we found out that one of the boys in that car died, but we never found anything that said if he was the driver or the passenger.’

*I have to tell her.*

‘He was the driver,’ I say.

‘How do you know?’

‘Because—’ I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. ‘Because I was there.’

The room is silent as I whisper the next words.

‘I was that boy you saw.’