

descended

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descended

ingrid j. adams

For Xay.

Because lights out is just another beginning...

warning:

You're about to step back in time to the 1990s, when the insults were slurrer, society was more laid back but less tolerant, and kids had unsurveilled freedom. No mobile phones or social media meant trials, tribulations, and mistakes mostly stayed at the scene of the crime, and political correctness was a largely theoretical concept not many abided by. If you think this book may go places that aren't productive for you to immerse yourself in at this time, then please feel free to set it aside.

not a child of the 90s?

Then here's a QR Code I prepared just for you. Amongst other things, it will take you to a Spotify playlist (entitled 'descended · one') so you can play along at home. Because 90s (and 80s) music was so angsty and awesome — I hope you agree.

X

Ingrid



prelude

manly, new south wales, august, 1995

Reinenoir was hungry.

Ravenous in fact.

But it wasn't food she needed.

The night was pitch black, the only sounds the cracking of twigs beneath her feet, the rustle of shrubbery. The scent of leaf litter and fragrant wattle filled the air. By the time she arrived at the edge of the clearing, her eyes had adjusted to the dark. In its centre sat a circular altar draped in deep purple satin. A young woman lay upon it, unmoving, unconscious, her platinum pixie cut dishevelled, her rumpled navy scrubs barely concealing the generous curves beneath.

A nurse.

Reinenoir smiled.

Four tall white candles stood around the altar. She watched as a small figure stepped forward, stretching to light them, the candlelight flickering over her jet-black bob, her square jaw, her creamy skin. It was her Maiden. Reinenoir heard a sound then, and her gaze shifted to the tree line from which a great hulking mass was emerging, the shadows seeming to run and drip from him as he rose up behind the nurse, towering over her to block the meagre moonlight. Artax. Most of his face was obscured by the satiny hood of his dark purple cloak, a cloak that matched those worn by Reinenoir and the Maiden.

The nurse stirred, shuddering as Artax's breath hit her. She groggily raised the back of her hand to cover her nose and Reinenoir knew too well

the stink that filled her nostrils; a stink reminiscent of the deep rotting stench of fetid guts.

“Leave the ressst to me, Maiden,” Artax lisped, opening his hand. There on his palm, a small pale flame sprang to life.

The nurse blinked and looked again and Reinenoir smiled to see the disbelief in her expression. The flame was burning higher now, cupped between his sharp black nails. He swept his arm in a circle and the sea of tealight candles that rimmed the clearing ignited in its wake. Reinenoir edged back into the shadows, happy just to watch. For now.

The clearing was ringed by pale gums, their luminous branches stretching eerily into the infinite blackness. Artax stood over the nurse, the Maiden beside him. He pushed his hood back enough that the candlelight strobed over his face. The nurse recoiled. His lips were pierced with silver rings, his chin adorned with a big black stud and a large silver bolt protruded horizontally from the bottom of his nose. Resin skulls plugged the gaping holes that stretched his earlobes to his chin. Every inch of visible skin was a tapestry of black tattoos, the whites of his eyes inked to dark pits. He held the nurse’s gaze and slowly opened his mouth; a forked tongue protruded to deliberately lick raven lips.

The nurse scrambled back on the altar, but Artax pushed her roughly in the chest, holding her down and drawing an athame from his robes. The ceremonial knife was golden, its crooked blade decorated with runic markings. She gasped as he held it to her throat.

“You move, you bleed,” he hissed.

Reinenoir made her entrance then, gliding from the tree cover.

“Don’t damage the merchandise, Artax.” She pulled her hood low. All her victims ever really remembered of her were her lips and nails, painted the same shade of haemoglobin red.

“Of coursse not, Lady Reinenoir,” Artax said ingratiatingly, withdrawing the dagger from the nurse’s neck. He and the Maiden bowed to Reinenoir, joining in unison to greet her with, “Blessed be the evening, High Priestess.”

Reinenoir nodded with disinterest. She moved straight-backed to stand at the nurse’s head, with Artax and the Maiden flanking her.

“What do we have here?” she asked, placing a small hand on the nurse’s

cheek. At her very touch the young woman gasped, tried to pull away, and Reinenoir knew she could feel the black emptiness swirling through her, creeping into her every pore.

“It’s an empath, my lady,” the Maiden replied, a heavy accent clinging to her words, “but it’s not trained and is oblivious to its true power.”

“Interesting,” Reinenoir replied, moving her hand to the nurse’s chest. The young woman immediately began to choke and splutter. Reinenoir regarded her blankly for a moment or two before casually removing her hand. The nurse gulped air deep into her lungs. “This is just what I need to strengthen my collection. Excellent.”

The nurse tried to sit up, to protest, but the Maiden flicked a hand in her direction, and although she didn’t come close to touching her, the young woman was thrown roughly back onto the altar, pinned down by an annihilating weight. She couldn’t move, she struggled to breathe.

“Please,” she rasped, but the Maiden closed her fist and the nurse’s mouth snapped shut in response. Panic-stricken, she tried in vain to part her lips, raising her fingers to claw at her mouth and the Maiden laughed callously.

“I don’t have all night,” Reinenoir said impatiently. Their juvenile games tended to irritate her. The Maiden opened her fist to release the nurse from her hold. “Let us begin.”

A reverberating sound filled the air then, as the three of them began to chant, the resonance so powerful the nurse shook. They started moving around her, raising their arms up high. Around and around they went.

“No!” she whispered, her eyes wide, her breathing rapid. “Please stop. Let me go. I have a family, people who need me. My name is Essie...”

But they only moved and chanted faster. As they spun around her, her eyes began to roll, glazing, deadening. She fumbled her hands to ward them off, to protectively cover her chest, but she was already too weak. They suddenly stopped their flurry and Reinenoir stepped forward to stand in front of her. Reinenoir spread her arms wide and threw back her head as a swirling vortex opened over her sternum, iridescent streams of inky bioplasma unfurling from within, coiling and twisting like great writhing snakes to hook into the nurse’s chest.

Reinenoir knew just like the others before her, the nurse would be

feeling a crushing pressure in her heart, in her lungs, as if they were being vacuumed out through her solar plexus – as if Reinenoir was sucking the very life out of her, pumping all that she was, from deep inside her body.

Because that's exactly what she was doing.

Her loss was Reinenoir's gain.

When the nurse's head lolled to one side and her eyes drooped shut, Reinenoir smiled broadly, breathing heavily, cheeks warm, as her hooks retracted and the vortex spun shut. "Woo!" She shivered with a coursing rush. "Well done," she nodded to the two of them, "that was just what I needed."

She spun on her heel, heading for the edge of the clearing. Just before she disappeared into the bush, she glanced over her shoulder.

"Get rid of that, would you, Artax? And go hunt me another. And quick." She narrowed her eyes before adding, "You know, time is running out. And I need to be prepared. For him."

five years earlier...

chapter one

something to believe in

manly, new south wales, march, 1990

indigo

Indigo crossed his arms and leaned back in the heavy mahogany chair, long legs sprawled out in front of him.

“Why are you always in my office, Wolfe?” Mr Hargreaves sighed. The headmaster eyed him wearily.

Indigo shrugged his broad shoulders and glanced out the second-storey window, barely registering the panoramic views over Manly Beach and beyond. The rolling lawns and manicured gardens of North Head Grammar sat vacant. Everybody was in class.

Between them on the headmaster’s imposing desk sat a crumpled pack of Benson & Hedges.

“We’ve spoken about this repeatedly,” Mr Hargreaves continued, “you know, the other kids look up to you. Every time you’re caught smoking, I have to deal with a barrage of copycat incidents. You’re fourteen-years-old, Wolfe, you shouldn’t be smoking.”

Indigo continued to stare out the window, now absently tracing a finger over the sharply pressed crease in the thigh of his charcoal trousers, the same trousers every boy in the school wore with a white button-down shirt and a navy-and-grey-striped tie. He smoothed his hand through the back of his dark blond hair, still slightly salty from his morning surf. He

wished he was surfing right now.

The headmaster slammed his palm down on his desk and Indigo jumped. “Look at me when I’m talking to you, Wolfe!”

Indigo turned his attention to the headmaster who was looking a little worse for wear these days, his face lined, his hair shot with grey. Mr Hargreaves’ students always joked that what he lacked in chin he more than made up for in nose.

“Sorry, sir,” Indigo said, flashing his most charming smile. Indigo knew no one could resist that particular smile, “won’t happen again.”

Yeah right!

The headmaster stared at him for a moment or two before sighing again, his shoulders slumping as he opened a desk drawer and rummaged around inside. He came up with a piece of paper, a form Indigo was more than familiar with. He scribbled on it, then slid it across the desk. “You know the drill. Have your guardian sign this and return it to me.”

Indigo nodded as he reached for the page, swallowing a smile. He had forging Edita’s signature down to a fine art.

“Just because you don’t have to work to get top marks doesn’t mean you can slack off, Wolfe,” Mr Hargreaves said, “so pull your socks up and start setting a good example for your peers!”

“Yes, sir,” Indigo said, suppressing an eye roll.

Business out of the way, the headmaster’s demeanour shifted. Indigo knew what was coming.

“When’s that mother of yours next in town?” he asked, his sudden forced casualness cringeworthy. Indigo was more than familiar with the fake nonchalance people adopted when asking about either of his parents. “I think we should arrange for her to come in and see me.”

Yeah, he was sure Mr Hargreaves would love that. Just like he’d loved that autographed picture Indigo had gotten him last year. Mr Hargreaves never needed to know Indigo also had forging his mother’s signature down to a fine art.

“I suppose she’s busy promoting her latest album,” the headmaster continued, his sultana eyes glinting. Indigo shrugged again. As if *he’d* know. He hadn’t seen or spoken to his mother since he’d left her in Aspen in January. “I heard she might be doing another movie with your father;

wouldn't that be marvellous? Hollywood royalty Bernadette Van Allen and Wilson Wolfe reunited on the big screen after all these years!" The dude was practically getting off at the thought.

Indigo snorted and quickly covered it with a cough. Hell would freeze over before those two ever set foot in the same room again. They hadn't spoken since Indigo was a baby.

"I don't think that's likely, sir," he said. Mr Hargreaves looked so disappointed, Indigo actually felt bad for him. He stood to leave.

He made it two steps before his conscience got the better of him.

"I could get you a signed copy of her album?" he offered, knowing he'd probably regret it. He felt bad for the guy. As far as teachers went, he wasn't that much of an asshole and he had a soft spot for Indigo. Plus, the man wasn't well. He had chest pain. A lot. Indigo had let his guard down and asked him about it once, suggested he go get it checked out, but Mr Hargreaves had lost his shit and Indigo realised he'd overstepped. It wasn't as though he wanted to know that sort of stuff about people. But he couldn't help it. He just had a way of *knowing*. Like when one of his mates had a sprained wrist or a headache or that time his teacher had that shocker of a toothache. When he was near someone, he felt what they felt in their body, in his. He always had. When he was younger, he'd assumed everyone could. It wasn't until he was older he'd understood he was a freak. So he'd made a habit of keeping his mouth shut.

"Could you really?" Mr Hargreaves breathed. He looked like he was about to have a heart attack on the spot right now. In a good way.

"Sure, why not?" Indigo grinned. The headmaster was so bloody excited, Indigo made a mental note to call his mother's PA in LA and have a genuinely autographed copy sent out.

Mr Hargreaves jumped up and rounded the desk, prattling on about how deserving Bernadette was of the Oscar she'd won last year and how ground-breaking the music video for her latest single was. Indigo's lip curled. Somehow, the more skin his mother showed, the more she was branded empowering and revolutionary. While the headmaster was distracted, Indigo reached for the pack of cigarettes, subtly palming them and slipping them into his pocket. Mr Hargreaves clapped him on the back as he walked him to the door. Indigo towered over the man, as he did most people.

“I don’t want to hear about you getting caught smoking again, okay, Wolfe?” he said as he opened the door. The bell rung and doors up and down the hallway burst open. Students began pouring out.

Indigo turned and flashed Mr Hargreaves his most convincing smile before launching into the corridor without looking. He collided with someone – hard. Books went flying as his hand shot out by instinct, catching a slender wrist in his. He’d always had quick reflexes.

“Watch where you’re going!” she snapped as he righted her. His eyes met hers, sapphire blue and long-lashed, and he couldn’t stop the goofy grin from spreading on his face. It wasn’t returned.

“Shit, I’m really sorry,” he apologised, dropping her arm and swooping to pick up her books. Her hands moved to her hips as she narrowed her eyes at him. She was wearing her school uniform, of course, navy tartan skirt and a white shirt with a tie that matched his.

He’d definitely noticed Harper Valentine around, because who hadn’t? She was wicked hot and she knew it. She pretty much ruled the school. But she was in the year above him in year nine and only dated older guys, so he’d never considered going there.

“I’m going to be late for class,” she said impatiently as he finished gathering her books in a neat pile.

Before he even knew he was going to say it, the words were out. “Or you could skip class and come for a smoke? Let me make it up to you?”

She stared him down for a moment or two and he was sure she was going to shoot him down. But then she smiled.

“Well, that’s the least you can do.”

So he tucked her books under his arm and they snuck out to the gardener’s shed.

“You got plans for the weekend?” he asked as he cupped his hand around the end of her ciggie and flicked the lighter. She inhaled deeply. The tin shed was gloomy. A ride-on mower was parked in one corner, and an array of well-used gardening tools hung from hooks on the wall above a muddy wheelbarrow. The earthen floor was littered with cigarette butts. He lent his shoulder into the corrugated wall, arms crossed as he gazed down at her. She really was gorgeous, with her long buttery hair, her skin like moonlight. She was fine-boned, like a dainty little sparrow.

"I assume you're going to the Prescotts' party?" she asked, smoke furling from her pouty lips, "I usually see you at those things."

"Yup, I'm obligated to go," he grinned, "Drew's my best mate." Drew Prescott was the youngest of three boys and his older brothers were notorious for their wild house parties. He took a drag of his ciggie as he pocketed the lighter. "You going?"

"No," she said, examining the cigarette clasped between two delicate fingers, "I'm being dragged to Melbourne for the weekend." She stared up at him. "For my uncle's funeral."

"Oh," he said, brows pinching, "I'm sorry to hear that. Were you close?"

"Pfft," she scoffed, eyes narrowing, "no."

He tried to get a read on her to see if that was true, but she was strangely impossible to decipher. Indigo couldn't only feel when others were sick or in pain, he could also sense their other feelings – sad, happy, scared, excited – if they felt an emotion in their body he could feel it in his.

But apparently not Harper's. And that intrigued him.

Right now, there was only one thing he wanted to be able to gauge in her and that was how she felt about him. But his talents had never extended to that. He'd never been able to feel what someone else felt *for* him. He knew how they felt in his presence and could presume from there, but right now, with Harper, he didn't want to make the wrong assumption.

"He's been in a coma for years. He was basically a brainless lump of broccoli," Harper said, her eyes large on his as if trying to determine whether she'd shocked him. "He had nothing left to give; he's better off dead." She finished her cigarette, dropping it to the floor and twisting her toe over it. "But now my parents are making me go play pretend happy families at the vego's funeral."

"Uh, okay," he said, wishing she wasn't such a closed book, "you don't get on with your folks?"

She stared at him in silence for so long he started to squirm. "We're not going to do *that* are we, Indigo?" she finally sighed.

"Do what?"

"Attempt to bond over our shitty parents." And that was the only time she mentioned his parents, alluded to the fact she knew who they were, that she understood they weren't what everybody thought they were.

Indigo was speechless. He never told anyone the truth about his parents — he didn't like to shatter the illusion. Nobody knew Indigo was essentially an orphan, raised by Edita who'd been hired as his nanny when he was a baby and had never left, her role morphing into guardian and housekeeper. Edita and her husband Lukas lived with Indigo at the Van Allen Estate up on Manly's Eastern Hill, but as much as the two of them cared for him, they were more a kindly aunt and uncle than anything resembling parents.

He didn't know how Harper knew that his parents weren't anything like the bullshit public images they projected. But for someone to know the actual truth? He needed that.

"Who are you, Harper Valentine?" he breathed, gazing at her in rapture.

"If I told you, *mon chéri*, I'd have to kill you," she smirked, hoisting herself up onto the rough-hewn workbench behind her, leaning back on her hands, swinging her legs gently as she looked up at him. She flicked her tie over one shoulder, the shirt buttons straining across her chest as she arched back and he gritted his teeth, forcing himself to focus on her eyes. When it came to girls, he was usually pretty good at figuring out what they wanted from him, what with his gift and all, but Harper, she was different. She made him almost... nervous?

In the end, she made it easy for him. She grabbed a fistful of his shirt, drawing him to her, crushing her lips to his, kissing him senseless. Legs clad in knee-high socks wrapped round his waist as she pulled him closer. She drew back after a while, studying his face.

"You really are to die for, Indigo Wolfe," she murmured, fingertips tracing the plane of his cheek. "I could stare at you for hours. Look at this bone structure, your head would look so pretty mounted on my wall," she said, hauling his lips back to hers, "like an exquisitely beautiful work of art."

Okay, that was a bit creepy, but she was so hot and her hands were everywhere and he didn't care.

"Just so you know," she said, releasing his lower lip from between her teeth, "I don't do relationships. I don't do *love*. And I certainly don't do younger guys." She grabbed his hair and yanked his head back, exposing his neck before attacking it with her mouth. "So you'd be well advised not to fall in love with me. It will only end in heartbreak."



So he and Harper weren't in a relationship because she didn't do relationships. Apparently she didn't do younger guys either, but that didn't stop her from doing him every day at lunchtime in the Australian History section of the school library where no one ever went, nor did it stop them spending every weekend together.

Being around Harper was easy in a lot of ways, because Indigo didn't have to make decisions anymore. He was happy to take the path of least resistance for a while. She was strong willed and opinionated and seemed to know exactly what he wanted. And she wanted to be with him all the time.

It was by no means perfect, but he did his best to ignore the imperfect parts. The way she spoke about other people behind their backs was a problem for him. It never occurred to Indigo to be mean to anyone. Because he knew how others were feeling, he often found himself lending a shoulder to someone having a bad day, or to someone in need of a friend. Helping someone else to feel a little better made him feel better. But it pissed Harper off no end.

"Indigo," she hissed one day when he was sitting in the corridor, back to the wall, knees bent up, talking to a year seven boy who'd been teased mercilessly when he'd come to school crying because his pet budgie had died in a fit of feathers in his cornflakes that morning.

"Indigo!" she hissed louder, more insistently.

He looked up then and saw her peering around the door to the library, beckoning him urgently. He stood and pulled the boy to his feet, squeezing his shoulder and telling him to come find him if he needed to talk more, before sauntering over to Harper.

"What's wrong?" he asked, brow creasing. She looked livid as hell.

"Why are you talking to that fat-arse loser?" she seethed through clenched teeth, yanking him roughly into the library and dragging him to the familiar dark corner where dusty tomes featuring Ned Kelly, the Eureka Stockade and the arrival of the First Fleet, filled the floor-to-ceiling shelves.

“H-huh?” he stammered.

“That four-eyed pile of lard. Why are you talking to him?” Her eyes glinted dangerously.

“Wow, nice, Harper, real nice,” he said, “He’s a twelve-year-old kid whose pet just carked it. How can you be so nasty?”

“How can you be such a doormat for all these dead-shit losers who invent excuses to be seen with you? Everyone knows you’re with *me*, Indigo. Do you know how majorly my stock plummets every time you hang around with another one of these try-hards?” She shook her head, her long hair shimmering. “You need to stop being so selfish. Think of me for once in your life!”

“Seriously, Harps, are you kidding me?” he snapped. “How can you be so shallow?”

“Oh grow up, Indi! This is what I get for mucking around with someone younger. You’re *such* a child!”

“If I’m so immature, maybe you should go find a real man, see if he likes being bossed around,” he said, stepping past her to leave.

She grabbed his arm then, wrenching him around and he saw something akin to panic in her eyes. Panic and a vulnerability.

“No need to overreact,” she said quickly, “I mean, you’re not going to let that dweeby butterball come between us, are you?” she asked, tilting her head, “because that would be a big, big shame...”

Her hand was snaking up his torso, unbuttoning his shirt, wandering inside, her nails scratching lightly over his pecs. “All I’m asking is that you put me first,” she said, her lips now travelling up his throat, “is that too much to ask? I’m sorry I got mad, but you know I tend to lash out when I’m hurt.” She pulled back to pout at him, then leant in to kiss him, her tongue rolling leisurely over his.

He groaned, too distracted now to register what she was saying as she raked her hands up his thighs towards his fly. She knew how to press his buttons and had a way of wearing him down. Sure, she could be exhausting, but she always managed to reel him back in. One upside he found, of being with Harper, was he was always so tired after being around her all day, that he slept like a log at night in his enormous bed in his giant room inside his big old ivy-clad house. There was no tossing and

turning and worrying about the state of his life and the world around him, which had consumed so many of his nights before she arrived on the scene.

He ignored the fact she was rude to the teachers. He ignored the fact she spoke down to Edita, that he'd had to ask her to leave his house and she was no longer welcome there. He ignored how quick she was to anger, like when he focused his attention on anyone else. If bitching behind people's backs was an Olympic sport, she could rep Australia and bring home the gold, and that he ignored too.

Afterwards, when the blood was restored to his brain and he could think rationally again, he tried to talk to her.

"We can't go on like this, Harps," he said as he fastened his belt, "I can't do it anymore." He didn't know if he loved her because he didn't know what that would even feel like, had nothing to compare it to. But this whole casual thing was doing his head in. He wanted more.

From her?

From someone.

He could be someone's whole world, couldn't he?

"Do what?" she asked, that vulnerability creeping back into her eyes as she gazed up at him.

"Be on and off with you," he sighed. "Either we're together or we're not. You act as though I belong to you, yet you refuse to put a label on it. I'm sick of all the games. Either you're my girlfriend, or we're nothing."

She went white. She shook her head then, shooting him a look of such revulsion he reeled back. And then she ran. He let her go, gasping in a raggedy breath, his hands trembling as a terrible thought consumed him. Harper had always had a way of just knowing things about him no one else did. She was really intuitive or something, had been from that very first day in the gardener's shed. A sudden wave of nausea rippled through him as he realised she might know the truth about him. That's why she wouldn't commit to him. That's why she was always pushing him away, trying to piss him off.

Could she know the secret he'd kept hidden from almost everyone forever? Why would she want to be with someone like him long-term? Why would anyone? He was damaged goods.

Because feeling other people's feelings, it wasn't the only thing about him that made him a freak.



A slip of a woman in a stiff grey dress opened the door when he knocked. Her face was a map of lines, her salt-and-pepper hair cut to shoulder-length curls.

"Yes?" she asked, peering all the way up at him. "Can I help you?" She had a jaded look about her, as though she'd seen it all and found it wanting.

"Uh, hi there, I'm looking for Harper?" he said, glancing over her shoulder into the foyer beyond. He'd never been inside Harper's house before and was curious about the interior of the palatial estate.

"And you are?"

"Indigo," he said. Her face lightened in a way that indicated she was aware of his existence.

"I am Fernanda." It was obviously in her job description to answer the Valentines' phone, because Fernanda was the one who picked up whenever he called.

"Fernanda! Nice to finally put a face to the name," he smiled.

She opened the door wide and invited him in, leading him to a formal sitting room off the foyer decorated in an austere monochrome palette. The ceilings were high, the furnishings sleek and minimalistic. Indigo felt a wave of loneliness shudder through his gut.

"Can I offer you a refreshment?" He wasn't planning on being there for long. He was done with Harper and her games. He just needed to find out what she knew about him and he'd be out of there.

"Ah no thanks, I'm good," he said as he took a seat on the sable sofa, which he quickly figured had been purchased for appearance, not comfort. She nodded curtly, then left. He glanced around but there wasn't much to look at besides a stack of travel brochures on the glass coffee table showcasing the azure waters and white sand beaches of Tahiti and Fiji. His eyes travelled to the picture-rail behind him, landing on

the photo that sat there in a heavy silver frame. He stood and leant in. It was a picture of three little blonde girls, all dressed identically in pretty white dresses, the oldest maybe eight, the youngest probably four. He recognised Harper in the middle by her eyes. She must have been around five or six when it was taken. He frowned. Harper was an only child, so who were the other girls?

When Harper slipped in a few minutes later, she looked far from happy to see him. “What are you doing here?” she stage-whispered, glancing over her shoulder before firmly closing the door.

He crossed the room slowly towards her.

“You won’t take my calls,” he said, “I wanted to check you were okay. After this arvo.” She’d looked so upset when she’d run out of the library. Despite everything, he’d been worried about her.

“You shouldn’t *be* here,” she said, fingering the tip of her school tie.

“Do you want me to go?”

She glowered at him silently, obviously battling some internal struggle. Before she could answer, the door opened and an elegant, middle-aged woman wandered in, her nose in a brochure for the Maldives. She was blonde and slim, her left arm in a heavy cast. When she looked up and saw them she stopped short, colour draining from her face as she stared at Indigo like a deer in headlights. He could see the heavy bruising around her eye and jaw she’d tried to cover with pancake make-up. He felt a sudden sharp pain in his ribs and realised a couple of hers were broken.

“*Mama!*” Harper snapped, stepping in front of her mother to shield her from Indigo’s view, “*J’ai de la visite! Va-t’en!*”

Harper’s mother flinched, then backed quickly out of the room. Harper slammed the door behind her.

“You didn’t want to introduce me?” Indigo said dryly.

She stood stock still, staring at the floor.

“Harps?”

He noticed it then, her lip trembling.

“You shouldn’t have come here,” she whispered. She swiped at her eyes, sniffing. Oh shit. She was crying. All the time he’d known her, he’d never thought her capable of it. He reached for her and she jerked away, turning her back on him. Her shoulders began to shake. He felt terrible.

He reached for her again and this time she didn't pull away when he spun her, drew her into his arms.

"I d-don't want you to see," she choked against his chest. He assumed she meant see her cry, so he was taken aback when she said, "I don't want anyone to ever see... what he does to her."

Her voice was so small. He tightened his arms around her as her whole body shuddered. They stood there for he didn't know how long as she sobbed in a way that made it clear she never let go of herself like this.

When she'd cried herself out, he led her to the couch, sat her down.

"Do you want some water?" he asked, peering into her face, swollen and blotchy. She shook her head. "Talk to me, Harps," he ventured, reaching for her hand. "Your mum... Her arm, her face... What happened?"

She stared at a spot on the geometric rug, her expression unreadable. "He hates her," she finally breathed, "he hates her so much."

"Who hates her?"

"My dad. Because, uh, of the accident." Her eyes moved then, landing on the photo of the three girls. "I-I'm not an only child, Indi," she said, her voice so low he had to strain his ears, "I mean, I *am*, but I wasn't always." She swallowed hard. "There was an accident," she said, "when I was seven. Mum was driving." Her gaze remained on that photo, glassy and unmoving. "We were fighting, my sisters and I. Ebony was nine, and Reign, she was four. It was my turn to sit in the front, you see, but Ebony the liar said it was her turn, and of course Mum believed her. Mum always believed Ebony, her *favourite child*. So she made me sit in the back with Reign. Ebony and me, we were screaming at each other, and Reign was crying, and Mum was yelling at us to stop. She was so worked up and there was a red light, but she didn't see it. I remember it so clearly, the force of the truck slamming into the passenger side of the car. And then, nothing..."

She closed her eyes, her face impassive. "I think I blacked out, because when I woke up, I was on a stretcher and there were people in uniforms all around me and when I turned my head I saw... I saw two small heaps lying there on the road, covered in white sheets. And I could hear my mother, although I didn't realise it was her at first because the sounds coming out of her, they sounded like something an animal would make."

Indigo gripped her hands in his. That she'd gone through this, it made his heart ache.

"Afterwards," she said, "Dad couldn't cope. Apparently, he'd always had a drinking problem but had been sober for years. I'd always thought my father was a kind man. But when he's drunk, he's mean. And these days he's mean a lot."

"He doesn't hurt you, does he?" Indigo growled, anger swelling inside of him.

She shook her head vehemently. "It's his only way of coping, you see?" she said, "After we lost Ebony and Reign... Well, Mum was driving. In his eyes, it must have been her fault. And while Mum always loved Ebony best, I was always Dad's favourite. And I didn't want to ruin that by admitting it wasn't all Mum's fault," she said, "and I often wonder, what if I hadn't been fighting with Ebony? What if she'd just let me sit in the front?" She scowled.

"You can't think that way, Harps," Indigo said, "it happened the way it happened and you can't change that."

Her head popped up then and she was glaring at him, eyes stormy.

"Why did you have to come here?" she hissed, "Nobody knew! When we moved up here from Melbourne after the accident, we could start again. Nobody knew our tragic tale, nobody looked at us with *pity*. Here, I wasn't the poor little girl who lost her sisters in an accident! Here, I could be whole and strong. I could be whoever I wanted to be! And now you've gone and ruined all that!" Tears gathered in her eyes again and she blinked them away angrily.

He reached for her and she recoiled. He suddenly understood why she was the way she was. It made sense to him now, all of it, her nastiness, her inability to open herself up, to let others in. To let him in. It wasn't anything to do with him or what he was.

Hurt people hurt other people.

"Do you want me to go?"

Her face collapsed then and she shook her head as the tears started again.

"Please don't go," she whispered, "please don't ever go."

He pulled her into his arms while she sobbed, rocking her gently and

whispering to her. His heart went out to her. He could hardly break it off with her now. Instead, he'd stay. Because, for the first time in his life, someone needed him.



Indigo was lounging with his mates in his usual lunchtime spot on the wide sandstone steps of the fountain on the school's back lawn, when he noticed the boy from the corner of his eye. Praying-mantis-lanky and tall, the boy would start to approach, his eyes fixed on Indigo, then veer off at the last minute only to circle back around and attempt his approach again. Indigo and Drew had ditched the class before lunch for a choof in the gardener's shed and he was still a little stoned. He glanced at his mates, some sitting on the staggered steps, others on the grass at the fountain's base, but none of them seemed to have noticed the boy.

He felt a slow smile stretch his face as he watched the boy. He was in the year below, Indigo knew that, and his name was Robbie. Robbie Carlisle. He seemed a nice enough bloke, a little awkward, sure, but there was something about him that Indigo warmed to. He couldn't put his finger on it, but Robbie was different and Indigo had always had a soft spot for different.

Indigo eased himself up onto his elbows, his eyes trained on Robbie who now seemed to be muttering to himself. He held a fistful of paper in one hand as he circled round the back of a building, only to emerge on the other side of the fountain.

Indigo sat up and made eye contact with him and Robbie stopped dead, a blush blooming from his cheeks to the tips of his ears. Indigo lifted a hand and beckoned him over. Robbie stared at him for a moment or two, then glanced over his shoulder, then looked back at Indigo. "Me?" he mouthed, pointing at his chest.

Indigo nodded. "Come here."

Robbie hesitated for only a moment before he began his slow approach, this time coming in for landing. He stopped in front of Indigo and stared at him dumbly. Drew sniggered. Indigo elbowed him. "What's up, mate?" he asked.

Robbie opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He reddened further. He thrust his hand out towards Indigo, who saw the paper Robbie was carrying was a stack of invitations. Indigo reached for them. The minute his fingers closed around the edges, Robbie turned tail and bolted. The boys all burst out laughing.

“Give him a break, guys,” Indigo chastised, staring after Robbie. He’d barely glanced at the invites when Harper appeared. “Hey, Harps,” he said, stuffing the invitations in the pocket of his navy school blazer. She wordlessly poured herself onto his lap to straddle him, twining her fingers through his hair and kissing him in a way that made everyone in the vicinity shift uncomfortably and look away.

“Get a room,” Drew muttered.

“Are you high?” she asked, extracting her lips from his and staring into his eyes, which he knew were probably still a little red-rimmed.

He shrugged. “Barely.”

She rolled her eyes. “When are you going to grow out of this bullshit, Indi? You’re so boring when you’re stoned. Why do you do this to yourself?”

He gazed at her silently. He knew exactly why. But he couldn’t tell her the truth – anyone the truth – without giving himself away. It wasn’t just something he told people. He liked that people liked being around him, and if he told them, well, they might decide they didn’t actually like him. Sure, like wasn’t love, but at least he wasn’t alone. Indigo was certainly never short of mates. Although it did keep him up at night, wondering how it was possible to have so many friends yet still be so desperately lonely.

Because whenever he was alone, the anger and the sadness and the darkness crept back in. He felt constantly disappointed in himself, like he wasn’t good enough, and that was a thought that played in a loop inside his head. He worried a lot, alone in his big bed in his enormous room in the small hours of the morning. He worried about who he was and why he was here and what the point of his life was and if it was ever meant to be easy.

Indigo had grown adept at being who everyone else wanted him to be. He was good at smiling, good at fun, good at making others feel good.

But then there were days he was too exhausted to keep up the charade, and on those days, he'd lay his head down on his school desk and close his eyes and wish the world away. Such behaviour would often earn him a chalkboard eraser to the head and an express pass to the headmaster's office, so he tried his hardest to minimise it at school. These days, he only skipped school when the pain he felt in his body was unbearable.

The thing was, to be around people, he had to numb himself. He hated having to feel what everyone else was fucking feeling all the fucking time. Walking down crowded school corridors and feeling the emotions, the pain of every single person he walked past, sitting in class and absorbing his classmates' aches and agonies, at times it was too much. The weed, it helped with that.

The day he realised he had the power to shut it all off was a Saturday arvo when he was thirteen. Drew had nicked one of his older brother's bongos and their stash of weed and brought them over, declaring, "Let's get radical!" with a mischievous grin. They'd waited for Edita to go out, then sat in the pool house, the bifolds thrown wide and spent the afternoon punching cones. At first it was hard not to cough as that deluge of sweet-scented smoke consumed his lungs, but once Indigo mastered that, he'd really liked the way it made him feel, the heavy relaxation that melted through him as the weed descended upon his mind and body with its mellowing caress. It stopped him overthinking. It stopped the judgement playing over and over in his head, the emotion perpetually bombarding his body, leaving only a lazy detachment. It worked much better than booze. When he was stoned his only worry was the quality of snacks available as he and his mates had a laugh over the latest episodes of *Seinfeld* or *Married... With Children*, as they lazed around his pool house, solving the problems of the world.

But Harper hated it. Since that day two months ago he'd learnt the truth about her family, things had shifted between them. It was like her opening up to him had flipped some sort of switch inside of her. He was now officially her boyfriend and that apparently meant he was at her beck and call twenty-four seven. Some days it felt like now he knew her secrets he was irrevocably tied to her 'til the end of time, whether he liked it or not.

“I’ll see you at the gates at three, *mon chéri*?” Harper said, climbing off his lap.

“Yeah nah, I was gonna go for a surf with the boys,” Indigo told her, wincing, waiting for the fall-out.

She tilted her chin and set her jaw, her eyes boring into his. Most days after school, they went back to her place to hang in the boathouse at the bottom of the sprawling waterfront property. But he’d missed his morning surf and he went crazy if he didn’t get in the ocean every day.

Indigo sighed. He knew that look. It meant they were about to have a major blow-out. Nothing unusual about that these days, though. Harper was used to getting her way and when she didn’t she lost her shit.

“Did you just *sigh* at me, Indigo Wolfe?” she demanded, eyes narrowing lethally.

His mates had stopped talking, glancing between him and Harper in wary anticipation. They all knew how this would go. A screaming match followed by her publicly dumping him, followed by her ignoring him for the rest of the week, followed by her finding out which parties he’d be going to that weekend and turning up with some hot older guy. She’d then fawn all over her date in Indigo’s eyeline ‘til he couldn’t take it anymore, at which point he’d try to leave and she’d follow him, grab him and drag him into the nearest empty bedroom to make up. And so the cycle would begin all over again.

Drew asked him regularly why he always took her back. But Drew didn’t understand. He didn’t know the truth, that she needed him, that she was more than what she seemed. Sure, he didn’t like pissing her off because the fights that followed totally sucked. But mostly, he wanted to help lessen the hurt inside of her. It was her sadness that had eroded her heart and made her mean. But when they were alone together, she smiled more; she relaxed and opened up. And she wasn’t *as* mean these days. He made a difference to her.

He stood then, taking her hand and leading her away from prying eyes.

“Listen, Harps,” he said, stopping under the shade of a Norfolk pine in the far corner of the schoolyard, reaching for her other hand, “we’ve talked about this. We can’t be together all day, every day. I need time to hang with the boys, to surf. You need to not take that personally.”

She stared sullenly at the ground, refusing to meet his eye. He squeezed her hands, craned his neck to catch her gaze. “You didn’t come over yesterday either,” she said softly, blinking hard. She finally lifted her eyes to his and they were hard as stone. “I saw you, you know, in the *carpark*. With that *bitch*.”

He exhaled heavily. Great.

“She’s not that bad, Harper,” he said, struggling to keep his tone even, “and what did you want me to do? It was pouring with rain and she’s like, pushing seventy.” He dropped her hands, crossed his arms.

“*Not that bad?*” she snapped, voice rising. “What about what she did to us last week? The frigid old *dyke!* I bet she’s never blown anyone in her life!” A group of year sevens walking past gaped at them, then fell all over each other, giggling as they scurried away.

“Can you keep your voice down?” he said through clenched teeth.

She glared after the year sevens, then turned back to him. In a quieter voice she said, “Well, it’s true. If I can’t get into the library, Indi, I can’t finish my assignments and then I’ll fail. But that’s what the old cow wants, isn’t it?” Mrs Critchard, the school’s ancient librarian had banned the two of them from the library for life after she’d caught Harper on her knees doing apparently filthy things to him under the portrait of Captain Cook.

Late yesterday arvo when Indigo had been leaving school, he’d seen Mrs Critchard standing by her car in the torrential rain, wringing her gnarled hands and looking bewildered. The carpark had been deserted. He’d stayed back to help a kid from class with his maths homework and was meant to be heading to Harper’s. He was already late, but he couldn’t just leave the woman standing there. Night was falling and the rain was only getting heavier. As he’d approached Mrs Critchard, he’d been able to feel her rising panic.

“Everything okay, ma’am?” he’d called. A raincoat swathed her bulky frame and a scarf covered her head, but neither seemed to be doing much of a job of keeping her dry.

Relief had flooded her eyes as they landed on him. “Oh! Oh, Indigo, no, it’s not. I seem to have procured a flat tyre,” she’d said, kicking at the wheel, which he could now see was completely deflated. “There’s a spare in my trunk but with my hands...” She’d trailed off as his eyes wandered

to her knuckles, swollen and waxy white. His hands tingled and he'd winced, understanding how much hers throbbed.

He'd pushed his soaking hair out of his eyes. He'd forgotten his umbrella again. "Pop the boot for me, will you?" he'd said, moving round the back of the car.

"Oh, are you sure?" she'd asked, following him to unlatch it. He'd quickly located the jack and the spare, hoisting them out and chucking them on the ground.

He'd shrugged his school blazer off, handing it to her to hold.

"Where's your broolly? You're soaked to the bone, you'll catch your death in this," she'd said as he'd knelt down and positioned the jack beneath the car.

His shirt was already drenched through, sticking to his skin. He'd grinned up at her, "I think that ship has sailed. It's not possible for me to get any wetter right now, ma'am."

He hadn't realised Harper had been there, that she'd seen him. But she had, and for some reason, him helping Mrs Critchard had pissed her off royally.

"I came to get you," she said now, "I knew you were staying late and when it started raining, I asked Jack to drive me back to school to pick you up." Jack was the Valentines' chauffeur. He picked Harper and Indigo up most afternoons. "But when I got there, I saw you. With her."

"What, so you just bailed?"

She stared him down.

He pressed his lips together and glanced away, pocketing his hands. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her he'd sweet-talked the librarian into lifting their ban, but he couldn't bring himself to give her the good news. He knew she was hurt he hadn't turned up at her place last night, but by the time he'd finished with the tyre he'd been filthy and chilled to the bone and all he'd wanted was a hot shower and an Edita dinner. He'd called to tell her he wasn't coming, but she'd refused to come to the phone.

The bell rang, signalling it was time to get to class. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow, then," Harper said. Her voice was soft, but there was venom in her tone. She spun on her heel and stormed off. He wished for the

umpteenth time he could feel what she was feeling.

“I’ll stop by your place later on, okay?” he called after her. “After my surf.”

“Don’t do me any favours,” she snapped over her shoulder, “far be it from me to force my boyfriend to want to see me.”

He sighed again. She seemed to bring that out in him. His fingers brushed the invitations he’d stuffed into his pocket earlier. He extracted them, unfolding the top one so he could read it. And as he did, he immediately knew he really wanted to go to this party.

Because Robbie’s name wasn’t the only one on the invitation.