

The other sister

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Jade gazed at her reflection in the mirror. A red mini-dress displayed her developing cleavage perfectly. Coupled with daring red lipstick, black eyeliner and her leather jacket, the overall effect was perfect. In the adjacent bedroom, her mirror image was also admiring herself. After applying lilac eye shadow to enhance her beautiful blue eyes, dusting blusher on her cheeks, and painting her rosebud lips a pale pink, Jasmine added a spritz of sweet, floral perfume. She was ready. Rachel admired her twin daughters. For as long as she could remember, Jasmine and Jade had been inseparable.

When the family arrived at Gracemount High School's large auditorium, Jade joined the rest of her band. Rachel, Paul, and Jasmine found a seat at the front. It was the first time they had seen Jade perform. Rachel ruminated on the direction Jade's life was taking. The kids had named their band "Rough Diamonds", an appropriate name for an eclectic group of young souls. Rachel sighed, expressing her relief that Jade hadn't indulged in piercings or tattoos like so many of her peers. However, the feeling quickly dissipated when she spotted a skinhead teen publicly devouring her daughter.

'Welcome to Gracemount High School's Battle of the Bands.'

Paul and Rachel sat with hands entwined. Jasmine fiddled with her hair, visibly nervous for her sister. Rachel had secretly hoped that years of piano lessons would culminate in a Mozart recital, not playing in a rock band. The first band got the audience on their feet, but the second was

embarrassingly dire and the volume was intense. Seated beside her mother, Jasmine was struggling.

'Mum, Mum, I don't...'

'Jasmine, are you okay? Paul, what's happening to her?'

Her petite frame shook violently.

'We need a doctor. Somebody call 999.'

'First prize this evening goes to "Rough Diamonds".'

Jade and her friends proudly accepted the award, before going to find her family in the crowd.

'Haven't you heard? Your sister's been taken to hospital.'

They weren't there. The single most important moment in her life and they had missed it. Everyone was going out for celebratory milkshakes, but Jade was in no mood to celebrate. She made her way home and ran to the sanctuary of her bedroom. Sinking to her knees, feeling more and more worthless with every tear.

'Here we go again, she thought. Life was always all about Jasmine.'

Jade reached into her drawer for her box. Her fingers caressed the soft seashells on the lid, providing a moment of calm as she reminisced about seaside trips, skipping hand in hand with her sister. Lifting the lid, she shivered as she viewed her vast array of treasures, a compass, tweezers, a hairpin, nail scissors. Yes, these would be perfect. She slid down her black leggings, unveiling her innocent pink flesh. Jade let the sharp blade glide over the skin. Gently at first, just enough to score a thin red line. Then deeper, letting the fresh red blood escape. She felt an

intense rush, making her smile with pleasure. She scored again and again until she wore three stripes. Once more, the voices said. It had to be even. Her mobile rang incessantly.

'Jade, it's Mum. Listen, Jasmine's not doing very well sweetheart. She hasn't woken up. Dad's going to come and get you.'

'Mum, we ...'

She was desperate to share her news. To be recognised for achieving something, but there was no one willing to listen. A wave of guilt swept through her. Here she was feeling sorry for herself, while Jasmine could be dying. They were barely even friends nowadays, but they were sisters, and she did love her, didn't she? Jasmine had cancer. Acute myeloid leukaemia to be exact. Her parent's vowed to give their undivided attention, taking turns to sit with her in hospital. Jade was delivered to her grandparents. One less thing for them to worry about.

A month passed and both girls returned home. The lounge was a mass of pink and lilac ribbon. "Welcome home, Jasmine," swaying above the patio doors. The aroma of freshly baked cupcakes permeated the house. The door closing was Jade's cue to play sister extraordinaire, but today she couldn't muster any energy or enthusiasm. Slamming the front door harder than she had intended, she left, wandering aimlessly. Needing to be anywhere other than there.

Somewhere along the way, 'how are the twins?' had become, 'how's Jasmine?' Jade had never been afforded her own identity. From a very young age, Jasmine had established herself as the dominant sister. Her charismatic personality ensured that she was always the centre of attention. Prima ballerina at the dance show, soloist in the school choir and top of her class in everything. And then there was Jade...

When she realised she couldn't compete with her sister, she aspired to be unique. Her current “phase”, as Mum would say, was gothic. Much to her parent's dismay, she had dyed her mousey brown hair jet black. Deathly pale foundation and black eyeliner, lipstick and nails made her look very unnerving. While her classmates referred to her as emo or freak, the younger students favoured witch.

The lane to the park was quiet and poorly lit. A carpet of autumn leaves rustled under her feet. Surrounded by sinister shadows, it was as if a cloak of guilt was seeking revenge. Jade reached into her pocket and realised that her phone wasn't there. Quickening her pace, she listened intently to every small sound. Someone was following and there was no way to escape. The park was eerily silent. Jade perched on a swing and began to gently rock. The creaking of the chains and the gentle whisper of the wind created their own disconcerting lullaby. She felt safe here with her memories of childhood innocence and imagination. She was free to dream. How would life be if it was just her? Would she have been different or was she always destined to be nobody? More tears trickled down her cheeks, smearing her perfect make-up. In the darkness, the moon was barely visible, but one star shone more brightly than the others. Should she? It was such a lame thing to do.

'I wish I may, I wish I might. Have the wish I wish tonight.'

Her parents would be furious, assuming they had even noticed she wasn't at their little party.

Jade could sense someone walking behind her, but she didn't look back. If she didn't see, then it wouldn't be real. Couldn't they just leave her alone? Without warning, a large hand covered her mouth and there was a strong stench of sweat and whisky.

'Isn't it past your bedtime, pretty one?'

He ran his fingers through her hair and pressed himself firmly against her, making it obvious what he had in mind. She kicked and scratched, drawing blood from his face.

'You'll pay for that,' the voice uttered, as he lifted his hand to strike her.

Jade could make out a figure in black heading towards them on a skateboard.

'Hey, get off.'

That was all it took for him to release her and disappear.

'Thanks', she said gratefully, but her rescuer had already gone.

As she lay in bed, the vile old man haunted her. His dirty hand over her mouth, his repugnant breath, and the strength with which he had trapped her. She needed to be clean. The warm water of the shower rinsed away the pain, but it wasn't enough. She could still feel the imprint of his fingers on her lips, contaminating her. Coating her toothbrush in anti-bacterial soap, she scrubbed her lips until they bled.

'OMG, what the hell has Emo done to her lips?'

Jade was aware of groups around her. Whispering, staring, pointing, and laughing. Her heart raced and she desperately needed to escape. She cowered in the refuge of the girl's bathroom, unsure whether to be angry or upset. She needed to cut. Using her shoe to smash the mirror, she grabbed some pieces and closed the cubicle door. The shards of glass were sharper than her usual toys. She carefully formed letters on her leg. WHY? Why did her parent's love Jasmine more than her? Why did so many people hate her? Why was she so useless at everything? She tried to stop the bleeding with the green paper towels, but it just kept flowing.

Ashley Prise (Gracemount's diva) screamed at the horror scene before her. Jade Emo was lying on the bathroom floor with blood on her hands and over her white shirt.

'Who did you kill, Emo? We knew you were a freak, but this is beyond weird.'

It wasn't serious. The school nurse successfully bandaged the wound, but bandages couldn't heal the pain she hid inside. Her mother was summoned to school and a referral was sent to the children's mental health service.

Surrounded by Lego and puppets, even the waiting room was patronizing.

'Jade Allan, please.'

The woman extended her hand, but Jade made no effort to reciprocate.

'I'm terribly sorry,' her mother offered.

'Don't worry about it. Right this way, Jade,' she beckoned.

Her mother stood up, but the doctor shook her head.

'It usually works better if I see my client on her own.'

'So, we got a referral from your school. Do you know why you're here today?'

'Yip.'

'And how does that make you feel?'

'I don't know.'

'Would you like to talk about it?'

'Not really.'

Lana mentally assessed her new project. A naturally pretty girl, protecting herself from the world with this elaborate gothic mask. Arms folded and avoiding eye contact, she obviously had no intention of taking the help which she so obviously needed.

'Let's try something else,' she said, placing a pencil and blank piece of paper in front of her.

Oh no. It only got worse. Now she wanted her to draw a picture. Really?

'I'd like you to write your name in the middle and we are going to list everyone close to you in a circle around it.'

At least that would pass the time without any other awkward questions. Soon she had a circle of names from her parents to teachers.

'Well done, Jade!' Now we have a visual representation of all the people who love and care about you. Oh, you haven't got your sister on here. Jasmine, isn't it? I'll book you in for the same time next week, shall I?'

'Whatever!' Jade said, relieved that this ordeal was over.

The initial chemotherapy was intense. Jade huddled under her duvet with her headphones to block the sound of her sister retching and sobbing. If she ignored it, then she wouldn't have to deal. School wasn't an option for Jasmine because of the risk of infection, so her parents hired a tutor to teach her at home. Pretty ironic, since when Jade was struggling with maths they "couldn't afford" a tutor.

After six months of intensive treatment, Jasmine had gone into remission. Maybe life would go back to normal. The dinner table was the only place where Jade was forced to interact with her sister and put on a united front for their parents. Ironically, Rachel and Paul were masking

problems of their own. Jasmine's illness had taken its toll on everyone. Rachel served a delicious Sunday roast.

'Isn't it wonderful to be together as a family again? Let's say grace and thank God for getting our Jasmine through this.'

The girls bowed their heads. So hypocritical, thought Jade. Her mum hadn't been in a church for years. She wasn't sure if she believed in God, but if he was real, would he answer random prayers out of the blue? She resolved to give it a go sometime, just in case.

Jasmine returned to school and was even nominated for head girl. Jade began to enjoy her weekly sessions with Lana. They had done lots of work on improving her confidence and self-esteem. To her parent's delight, she had traded her black and white wardrobe for jeans and colourful t-shirts and it had been months since she had felt the need to cut.

The school cafeteria was the usual hub of activity. Jade still felt a bit lost but being adopted by the geeks was far preferable to hanging with the Ashley Prise devotees. Jasmine smiled, as she popped a chocolate muffin on Jade's tray.

'Enjoy.'

No matter how distant they were, Jasmine never stopped trying to rebuild their friendship. Jade heard the tray crash down before she realised what was going on. Jasmine was lying on the floor. She ran to her sister's side and stroked her hand until an ambulance arrived. A captive audience gathered around for the show.

'Just leave us alone!' she cried.

Normally, her parents would be happy for her to hang out in her room like a typical teenager, but today her presence was requested in the living room. She tried to recall what she had done to merit this intervention.

'Jade, we need to talk, sweetheart.'

'We are talking, Mum.'

'For once, can you just drop the attitude? Jasmine is lying in a hospital bed clinging on to her life.'

Here we go again. Let's talk about saintly Jasmine and how well she's coping with the rubbish life has thrown at her.

'Sorry, Mum.'

'We've been talking to Jasmine's doctor and her only option now is to have a bone marrow transplant.'

'Shit, that's bad news.'

'Language!' her father glared at her.

Actually, that was great news. Finally, her sister would be better, and people might even remember that Jade exists.

'Jade, the thing is, your dad and I have been tested and we're not a match.'

'There'll be loads of donors on like a list or something though. Right?'

Her parents smiled, their eyes filled with joy, as they looked at her with anticipation.

'We are so blessed that she has a twin. A syngeneic transplant will give her a fighting chance. Jade, you can save your sister!'

'But...'

How could she shatter their newfound hope?

'We've managed to get an appointment tomorrow morning for you to be tested.'

How could she get out of this? She turned to the internet for advice.

'A bone marrow transplant can save the life of someone battling leukaemia.'

'People with recent tattoos and piercings should wait at least a year before donating bone marrow.'

There was a plan. Jade had always fancied having her belly button pierced or getting a tattoo. Stars or maybe a rose with "rock" written underneath in fancy writing.

'Jade, the donation process has improved dramatically. For five days, we will inject a white blood cell hormone and on day five, we will collect your stem cells. It takes about three hours, but you should be able to go home later that day. Do you have any questions?'

Yeah, what's with the will? Maybe I don't want to have needles poked in me. What happens if I don't want to save Jasmine?

'We'll just be swabbing your cheek today and sending the sample to our lab. We'll have the results in a couple of days, so I'll be in touch.'

Her mum embraced her awkwardly. 'Thanks for doing this, Jade. We are so proud of you, Honey. Let's pop in and check on your sister before you go back to school.'

'I should get back, Mum. I don't want to miss maths'

'A couple of minutes won't hurt.'

Reluctantly, they headed for the oncology ward. Jasmine didn't look like her anymore, Jade realised. She always looked like her. Her beautiful long hair had been stolen by chemotherapy. Surrounded by a mass of tubes and machines, her body looked frail and vulnerable.

'Just put her out of her misery,' chanted the voices, but then Jasmine smiled. Really smiled with a sparkle in her eyes. Her sweet, sing-song voice was whispered and husky.

'Oh Jade, it's so good to see you. I've been dreaming about when we were little. We were always holding hands, even at nursery. Can you hold my hand, please? Just for a minute.'

Tentatively, Jade offered her hand. Her perfectly manicured nails entwined with her sister's delicate pink fingers.

'I'm so sorry. I'm sorry I won't get to see you get married or have kids. I'm sorry we won't get the chance to be friends again.'

How could she have been so stupid and selfish? Jade wanted her future children to have an auntie. It went without saying that Jasmine would have done anything for her. She would do it. She would help Jasmine.

She wanted to go through with it. She really did, but she couldn't let them see the scars on her arms. It was obvious that they weren't accidental, and she'd promised her parents that she had stopped "all that nonsense". The more anxious she became, the more she needed to cut. Turning the music up, she reached for her treasure box, but it was gone.

Wasn't she allowed any privacy anymore? She had to think, but she felt lost and confused. Mum had confiscated all the kitchen knives and sewing needles. She needed a new plan. There would be razors in the bathroom. She desperately scoured through the cabinets, with no success. She was really panicking now. Her hands trembling, her chest so tight she could hardly breathe. Then she spotted the candles and the lighter that lay beside them. One flick of the switch sent a wave of excitement through her, mesmerized by the flame. Lifting her t-shirt, she let the flame rest on her pure, innocent skin. It hurt so much she wanted to cry out, but she deserved it.

Counting to three and closing her eyes, Jade let the flame burn again. She needed to be punished for even thinking she wouldn't help Jasmine. One burn for her evil wish on a star and one for every time she'd wished her harm. Soon there were blisters across her stomach.

The following day was a blur. Her stomach itched constantly where the blisters rubbed against her clothes. As she walked home from school, she felt the urge to run home and hug her mum. She wasn't naturally a tactile person, and their relationship was a rocky one, but everything was so messed up. For a moment, she just wanted to be a regular kid again. Throwing her bag down, she began making her way upstairs. The door to her parent's room was closed and she could hear the floorboards creaking. Seriously? She didn't think they did that anymore. At least they had the comfort of each other. He cried out, but it wasn't her dad's voice. No way. Her mum was with someone else. She blinked away tears as she barged into the bedroom, knocking a crystal vase to the ground. Her mum covered herself with the duvet.

'Jade, I can explain. Let's just keep this between us and we'll have a proper chat.'

The unknown man looked at her in horror. What gave him the right to break up her family? Who was he and what did he have to offer that her dad didn't? Even if Jasmine did get better, they couldn't live happily ever after now.

Jade was consumed with rage. She had been struggling so much. Feeling neglected by her parents and guilty about her feelings for Jasmine and about donating. Yet the whole time, her mum was lavishing her time and attention on another man. She grabbed her rucksack and shoved in as many clothes in as she could fit. A couple of snacks from the kitchen and the emergency fund from the biscuit tin and she was ready to leave.

She boarded the bus with no destination in mind. Her grandparents would just send her back home and she couldn't face telling her dad what was going on. She would get off at the train station, then maybe she could visit her cousin Emily in London. At the station, she was approached by an extremely odd-looking woman. dressed in gypsy style clothes and a knitted bobble hat complete with pom-pom.

'Buy a daffodil for cancer research. Only a pound and you can change someone's life.'

Jade dropped a coin in the collection tin and stared at the daffodil brooch.

'You can change someone's life,' echoed in her mind.

I can change Jasmine's life, she realised and got into a taxi.

Jade approached the door of the hospital with trepidation. Her mind filled with a whirlwind of thoughts. The ward sister smiled and nodded, allowing Jade to enter the room where her sister lay sleeping. Jasmine looked so serene and peaceful. She didn't deserve to suffer any more than she already had. Pampered, overprotected Jasmine would never cope with the inevitable demise of their parent's relationship. She would always be burdened with physical and emotional pain. A feeding tube, a ventilator, and a heart monitor, so many machines keeping her here artificially. Jade's hand hovered over the switch. It wouldn't be instant, but she would drift away as she slept. One movement and she could end Jasmine's battle. It was for the best. Her quest was interrupted by the incessant beeping of a machine and the rapid onset of white coats.

'Wait outside, dear. I'm sure she'll be just fine.'

If there was such a thing as divine intervention, then here it was. It was the perfect solution. The decision had been taken out of her hands and she wouldn't need to feel guilty at all. Only a few minutes passed before the ward sister emerged from the cubicle.

'She's fine. It was just a blockage in one of her tubes. Have you come to start your donation? I'll page Nurse Dunbar to administer the first injection.'

Five days later, she was admitted to the day ward. The young doctor struggled to find a useful vein. She could see them huddled around a clipboard gossiping, citing her as the perfect example of a teen who self-harms. She wanted to shout at them. To summon all these perfect people to examine her scars. Lying on the bed, she watched the tubes transporting her blood and harvesting the precious stem cells. Did it contain her essence? Her emotions, hopes and dreams. Would Jasmine feel how close she had come to flicking the switch?

'I'm pleased to tell you that the procedure was a great success. Only time will tell, but I have high hopes.'

There was a celebratory atmosphere throughout the family and among the hospital staff. Suddenly, Jade was a hero and it pleased her, but the feeling was short-lived.

'Mr and Mrs Allan, I'm afraid to say that Jasmine's body is rejecting the stem cells and her condition is critical. We would appreciate if you could come in as soon as possible.'

Jade replayed the message many times. It was her fault. She had failed again. Even her cells were letting people down. If only she hadn't willed Jasmine to die. If she had been more positive and prayed and loved her. There was no point anymore. How could her parent's love her now? Jasmine, model student and perfect daughter was gone. Just Jade, troubled teen remained.

The voices murmured relentlessly, *'it's time. Just do it.'* They didn't need her. She could balance on her pink computer chair, wrap the cord from the blinds around her neck or slash deep into the veins on her wrist.

She could hear keys unlocking the door.

'Jade, Jade, she's going to be okay.'

Jade ran downstairs and threw her arms around her mum. This was her second chance. She could never be Jasmine, but she could be a better sister and maybe now she would get a chance to shine her own light.