

The Carousel and Other Short Stories

by
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Note From Author

The Carousel and Other Short Stories is my first book of short stories for young adult readers. If you enjoy reading these and would like to read my novella *Enough Time* for FREE, the details are at the end of this book. *Enough Time* is the prequel to the first book in my Time Series of Young Adult Time Travel stories, *The Last Time*.

I enjoyed writing these stories and hope you enjoy reading them.

For Mark, Aliah, Tiana, Brittany and Jade - forever my strength and inspiration.

Invisible Beauty

Ava peers into the mirror, searching for flaws, her brow furrowed. She moves her body this way and that, craning to check every angle. At last, she straightens her back, satisfied, her full lips curving into a smile.

‘Beautiful,’ she whispers.

Feeling comfortable with her body is new to Ava, and it thrills her. She remembers a time, a few years earlier, when she always avoided the mirror.

At sixteen, Ava was shy, unpopular, and overweight. She changed from a normal, unassuming girl into a brooding adolescent almost overnight. Food was her only solace, and she ballooned from size ten to sixteen in a matter of months. With every ounce of weight she gained, Ava's self-esteem dropped until her mind became a dangerous playground. The old Ava never wore makeup, bothered with her hair, or cared about clothes. Her dark tresses hung limply on both sides of her round, often red face, and her wardrobe consisted of loose cotton shifts that hung from her shoulders like everyday linen on the clothesline. Ava withdrew from normal life, isolating herself in and outside of school. She wanted to be left alone and invisible. This worked well for Ava until one fateful day in August.

It happens at the end of an ordinary school day. Ava is taking her usual short cut through the art building on her way home. She turns the corner and finds herself on the periphery of a crowd. They babble with excitement and jostle against her as they push to get near the front. She tries to break free but is pinned on both sides and can only shuffle forward towards the focus of the crowd's attention. A flyer on the notice board jolts her. The blood drains from her face at the bold, red print and the photo staring back. It's Stevie - her rock star idol. There's a week of mentoring in Melbourne and a night on stage singing with her. Ava's eyes widen. Stevie has just released her second album with three number-one hits. She's everything Ava aspires to, much to her parents' disgust. Years earlier they ripped down Stevie's posters and banned her music from the house.

‘She's a heathen who didn't finish school!’ her father roared. ‘She has no place in your life.’

Ava remembers her heartbreak and then thinks about her current, silent rebellion: she plays Stevie's music when her parents are at work, which is all the time.

She's nudged sideways, and someone tells her to get out of the way. She ducks her head and shuffles on with bodies pressing her at all sides. She hopes they're too distracted to notice her slipping away. Being invisible means less torment and ridicule. She surges forward, pushed from behind, and keeps her head down with her eyes on the ground. Her thick hand clutches the strap of her backpack that is slung over one shoulder. The thud on her back brings her head up with a jerk. A wad of wet toilet paper drops to the ground. Heart thudding, she presses on with tears in her eyes. She is accompanied by a cruel laugh. Ava walks the three blocks home as fast as she can and swings her front door open ten minutes later. She heaves and wipes the tears with the back of her hand, locking the door and speeding down the hall. She drops her backpack on the floor in the opulent black and white kitchen and rushes to the freezer. She inhales icy air when she yanks it open and digs a chunky hand into the frozen landscape. Her lips quiver at the tub of vanilla ice cream, and she tears off the lid eagerly. The creamy sweetness dissolves on her tongue, calming the thud of her heart. She slides to the floor in front of the open freezer door with her back propped against the frozen shelves. Her spoon dips into the container over and over until it scrapes the bottom. She peers in, licks the spoon, and dumps the empty container in the bin.

The ice cream doesn't bring the solace she's expecting. Just empty guilt. She slumps in front of her computer, opens a search engine, and types the name. Stevie's dazzling smile fills the

screen. She stares at the high cheekbones, straight nose, and waves of thick dark hair. The clear blue eyes, rimmed with dark liner, and dimple popping in her left cheek are familiar. Ava presses a finger to the dimple and then a matching one on her own face. She sighs, desperate to win the competition and see Stevie in the flesh. Her eyes close and she imagines their meeting. Then a sudden stab of fear brings her back to reality. She pushes back on the chair with such intensity that it wheels into her bed and rocks sideways. She takes a step toward it and then spies the full-length mirror beyond it. She approaches the mirror with trepidation, her heart skipping. Her dressing gown drapes the glass, claiming it as a natural hook, but in reality, it is hiding her reflection.

She tries to remember her last encounter with the mirror, but it's been so long that it escapes her. A trembling finger hooks the dressing gown and lets it flutter to the floor. It puddles at her feet. Her eyes lift from the silken pile to her glassy reflection. A stranger's thick waist and broad hips stare back. She turns sideways and studies her profile; her eyes are wide at her body's betrayal. She takes a breath and lifts her uniform over her head. She cringes. Pendulous breasts and sallow skin bulge over sensible, 'old lady' underwear. *How can she meet Stevie like this?* She'll be repulsed.

Defeated, she seizes the dressing gown and hides beneath it. She moves towards the kitchen and salvation. She knocks the desk in her rush to escape, and the computer springs to life. Stevie smiles at her, blue eyes sparkling and dimple popping. Ava's knees buckle, and she freezes. *What's she doing?* She has to control herself. She can't go on like this.

Ava turns back to the mirror, tightening the wrap. With new resolve, she pulls up the chair and opens the search engine. Her fingers hover over the keyboard as she formulates a plan. And then she shops for everything she will need to set her plan in motion. Money is no object in Ava's house. She can buy what she wants without question. Her parents always offer her money to compensate for their absence. They're partners in a prestigious law firm in Delany and are never home before nine or ten in the evening. She's is a virtual stranger to them. A ghost that lives, eats, and sleeps in their extravagant house alone. As long as Ava maintains her grades and avoids trouble, her parents ignore her.

Ava is the younger of two children. Her older sister left home in a blind fury six years earlier. Ava was ten and remembers the blazing argument and the slamming door. From the day she left, it was as if her sister never existed. Her parents cleared her room, removed her photos, and never spoke of her again. It left Ava heartbroken and lonely, but they didn't care. Their tolerance of their younger daughter rarely extended to open affection. Her mother told her she was a mistake years before; she's a cruel reminder of a single lapse in judgement in an otherwise perfectly executed life.

That night, Ava sits with her parents while they eat a late supper. Butterflies swarm in her gut as she tells them about the singing competition and trip to Melbourne. She doesn't mention the singer's name. They don't even feign interest; her father adopts an immediate air of indifference.

'As long as your grades don't suffer, I can't see the harm. You can't sing that well anyway.'

The words sting as they always did, but this time she smiles at his misconception. She's been taking singing lessons every Monday for almost two years and sings like an angel.

He scratches his signature on the permission form she brings home the next day and tells her to use her debit card if she needs anything for the performance. She thanks him and tucks the note into her school bag.

Her Internet shopping arrives the next day, and her heart flutters as the delivery man unpacks and assembles her purchase. Ava locks the door after he leaves and climbs the stairs tingling with nerves. She changes into sweatpants and a t-shirt and steps aboard her new treadmill, the man's verbal instructions swimming in her head. The novelty of walking on the spot wears off

quickly, and thirty minutes after starting, she's stripped and in the shower, cursing the damn thing. Disappointed, she resolves to do better tomorrow. That night she has a diet shake and salad for dinner, but hunger pangs have her standing over the sink at midnight as she devours a handful of biscuits and an apple pie.

The following weeks bring better resolve, but Ava is racked with guilt every time she weakens and a pattern of starvation and binging emerges. One afternoon, a month into her new regime, Ava lifts her head from the toilet bowl and wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. The acrid taste of bile lingers on her tongue, and she screws her face tight. She rinses her mouth under the bathroom tap and sways on her feet. She blinks at the face reflected in the mirror. Despite losing eight kilograms, Ava fills with self-loathing, and sudden anger flares inside.

'What are you doing you stupid cow?' she asks her reflection. 'It's your voice that'll win this, not your hips!'

She steps into the shower and scrubs herself with fury. She vows to eat like a normal person without the guilt and paranoia that has plagued her for the past month. She needs to focus on her voice.

On the day of the competition, Ava wakes to an early alarm and is a tangle of nerves. She does some star jumps to release her tension and showers, careful not to wet her new hair. She'd skipped afternoon classes yesterday to get a sharp new bob and didn't want to destroy it. She can hardly believe the way it frames her face and accentuates her cheekbones. She smiles and her dimple pops. She pulls on a fitted black dress and admires the way it hugs her curves and the small bulge of her belly. For a split second, she considers changing the dress for a more sensible set of leggings and shapeless shirt, but she stops herself in time.

'No. This is me. All of me,' she whispers, her gut twisting.

She takes her time to apply a thin veil of foundation, eye shadow, blush, and red lipstick. She stands back, gives herself an air high five, and imagines singing on the stage. She's never had an audience before, and the thought makes her sick. Her song is 'You're an Angel', one of Stevie's first big hits. She hopes it will be hers as well.

When she arrives at school her nerves heighten and she keeps her head down on her way to the auditorium. There's a big crowd of students and teachers inside the building. She makes her way to the back stage area, heart thudding. It's just as busy behind the curtains and she checks in and then finds a seat to wait her turn.

She focuses on the words of the song, going over them in her mind, shutting out the stage and the crowd. When her name is called, she hesitates, almost losing her nerve. It takes all her courage to walk on stage and ignore the taunts. Someone tells her to get off, and she turns to run. Her name rings out again. She steps forward, takes a deep breath, and forces a smile. The music starts, and she closes her eyes to sing the first note, already lost in the song.

There's silence when her voice fades, and it's over. Her heart thrums in her temple, and she scans the room, expecting the worst. All eyes, wide in disbelief, are on her, and mouths are hanging open. Someone at the back starts to clap, and the whole room joins in. People spring to their feet, whistle, and shout for more. She feels her face grow hot, and tears of joy spring to her eyes. They liked it.

Ava leaves for Melbourne two days later. Her parents aren't there to say goodbye. There's a note on the kitchen counter with a brief explanation and five crisp one-hundred-dollar bills. Ava tucks the money into her suitcase and calls a taxi to the airport. Her flight is uneventful, and she's met in Melbourne by a sharp, young woman with bright red hair. Her name is Dawn, and she's Stevie's personal assistant. A black limousine takes them to Stevie's studio, where she's working

on her next song.

Ava's belly squirms when she enters the studio. In the minute it takes for her eyes to adjust to the light, she spots Stevie talking to a man in business pants and a white shirt. She towers over him; she is elegant in jeans, a dark shirt, and red heels. She holds a paper coffee cup in her hand. Ava's nerves evaporate, and Dawn calls Stevie's name. The instant she looks at Ava, the coffee cup hits the floor and Stevie squeals. She covers the distance between them in seconds and flings her arms around Ava.

'Ava, you grew up,' Stevie says, holding her sister at arm's length.

'Yep,' Ava says, grinning.

'And you're so beautiful,' Stevie says, eyes shiny with tears.

And Ava believes her.

Amazing Grace

Grace Brown is gone. Her body is sucked into the seething ocean on the midnight tide, leaving no trace of her, except a red cardigan, shifting in the froth.

Grace was an enigma in Delany, beginning the day she shot from her mother's womb, weeks early. She landed on the grimy bathroom floor while her mother slept off her latest drug fix, and she survived against the odds. Grace was a thin girl with tawny eyes, mousey hair, and grubby, dirt-stained skin. A man with insatiable greed and a dirty syringe orphaned her at three, landing her on the doorstep of Mona Brown and her depraved brother, Jimmy.

Despite her tenuous position in life, Grace is adored by most who cross her path. She exudes a 'Pied Piper' charm that seduces even those who feel sorry for the girl in threadbare clothes and the same red cardigan. Oblivious to her magnetism, Grace sweeps through life with a self-reliance and independence way beyond her years.

Grace turns sixteen on her last night in Delany. The air is thick and hot, spreading lethargy like a disease. Everyone swarms to the beach to catch the breeze and tip stolen vodka down dry throats. Clothes are peeled from sweaty skin and discarded on the sand. The other kids from school languish, half-dressed, dizzy with vodka, their heads thrown back to face the sprinkle of stars in the sky. A boom box nestles in the sand, and the pound of heavy metal is carried on the night air.

Close to midnight, Grace starts a game of truth or dare. One boy steals a hubcap from a nearby car, and two girls smash a street light by throwing rocks. The bulb explodes, showering sparks. The girls' squeals echo off the cliffs. When it's Grace's turn, they dare her to swim to Fulcrum Island, a small rocky outcrop a few miles north. While Delany's tropical waters are a benign swimming pool in the winter months, summer brings a lethal mix of jellyfish, tidal rips, and crocodiles, making them perilous and uninhabitable. Grace pushes to her feet and staggers forward, vodka coursing through her veins. She squints north to find her mark. Luke, her longest friend, grabs her shoulder.

'Don't be mad; it's too risky.'

Grace pushes past him, tottering toward the lapping waves like a toddler taking her first steps.

A boy chants her name, egging her on, and a chorus soon join him.

'Grace, Grace, Grace.'

She stumbles backwards and lands on the soft sand. Luke parks beside her.

'You don't have to do it; it's your birthday. Just have another drink,' he urges.

'No,' she slurs.

She leans a hand on his shoulder to push herself up and peels off her clothes, revealing her black bra and panties. Her smooth skin is dotted with scars, and he looks away. She knots her red cardigan around her waist for luck and stumbles toward the sea. Luke scrambles after her. His head spins with too much to drink, and he weaves a crooked path. She's too fast and hits the waves with a splash before he's halfway there.

Her name echoes off the cliffs, becoming one with the briny breeze, as the group on the beach continue their chant. Luke wobbles to a halt. He pants and cranes to see. The others form shadows behind him and peer into the dark, watching her disappear. She swims past the breakers and begins a slow, loping stroke, the moon lighting the way. When she disappears, the chanting slows and then stops. Luke keeps his eyes on the water while the others flop on the sand and wait. A designated lookout stands on the edge of the group and scans the flickering sea for the first sign of her return.

The vodka passes from hand to hand, toes dig into the cooling sand, and animated chatter drifts into the night. At fifteen minutes into her swim, people are more subdued. At twenty-five minutes, adrenaline surges with every splash of the ocean. Luke takes a sprinter's pose. His nerves twitch, and his eyes dart back and forth. Someone jokes about crocodiles, and Caitlyn leaps to her feet. She wrings her hands and screams something about murder and calling the cops. They placate her with another swig of vodka, and she slides back to the sand and buries her face in her hands. They wait another fifteen minutes. Fear pricks their insides, and they start cursing their stupidity. Their befuddled brains begin to come up with vague rescue plans. Accusations fly across the sand, and two boys stagger to their feet, facing off. Then the cry goes up, and all eyes jerk to the water. They peer into the dark and hold their breath, straining for the rhythmic splash and flash of skin.

'There! That's her.'

Grace rises on the breakers, moonlight iridescent on her slick skin. Her arms rise and fall in rhythm. Luke meets her in thigh-deep water and throws an arm around her waist to help her to the sand. She collapses, chest heaving, and opens her fingers. A shiny black rock tumbles out.

'She did it.'

Someone throws a towel around her shoulders and thrusts the vodka into her hand. Luke guides it to her lips, and she takes a long swallow. They paw and pat her until she shrugs them off. Luke lifts her so she stands on shaky legs, and she unties her cardigan, pulls on her clothes, and stumbles awkwardly towards her beach-side shack. Luke grabs her arm and pulls her into a fierce hug. His lips claim hers for a brief moment before he releases her into the night. She grins and slaps his back to hide the growing hotness in her face. It's her first kiss. The first one she's wanted anyway. She ties the cardigan around her hips and staggers down the beach, and raises her arms in victory as she disappears into the dark. For many, it's their last image of Grace Brown.

Grace stops inside the kitchen door with heart fluttering and her ears pricked up. The house groans, iron roof sighing in the cooling air. Her heart thuds as she tiptoes to her room. Her bedroom door is ajar, and she pushes it open. The smell of beer and cigarettes comes too late, and the hand snakes around her wrist before she has time to react.

'Where yer been? I've been waiting fer ya.'

She squirms, trying to free her wrist, and kicks out with her legs. She connects with something hard and her uncle curses, loosening his grip. She kicks out again, and this time he lets go, and she speeds through the door, hearing him stumble behind her.

She flies down the hall and almost makes the back door before Jimmy shoves her from behind. She trips and slams into the hard wood floor, head ricocheting and knees skimming the unpolished wood. He falls over her, scrambling to get a hold on her, but she wriggles free and is on her feet racing for the door. Her heart flutters like a caged bird as she turns the knob and is running through the night. Fuelled by adrenaline, she's through the back gate and on the sand before she hears his stumbling steps behind her. She's had enough; she can't take it anymore. She speeds on, her legs pumping across the sand and into the waves. He wades after her, even though he can't swim, fuelled by vile anger and the beer racing through his veins. She stops a few metres in and turns to face him. He's chest-deep in water; the fire is still in his eyes. He curses her, telling her she's dead.

'If you want me, come get me,' she taunts, confident of her escape.

He lunges, and she pushes off from the seabed, floating back over the drop-off, where the ocean deepens. She watches his eyes widen as the sand drops away, and his feet fight for purchase. His arms flail and manage to snag the edge of her cardigan, still tied to her waist. He pulls her under with his weight; he is fighting to get to the top. She struggles against him as they both sink

into the inky dark, the ocean filling her mouth.

The first fingers of light stretch across a calm and glassy sea. There's no sign of last night's struggle or of the ocean's last meal. The only remnant of either of them is a red cardigan shifting in the salty froth.

Eighteen-year-old Luke Ramsey rubs his day-old beard and irons the creases from his crinkled map. It's spread beneath his broad hands on the worn, laminate table of a roadhouse diner. His thick finger touches the words in her scratchy scribble; the smiley face is over Ayers Rock. He knows it was her dream and is here to make it come true. He will lay her spirit to rest in the desert. A waitress arrives with two steaming mugs, sliding them both across the table.

'Milk and sugar?'

His head jerks up, and he meets familiar tawny eyes.

'Grace?'

'No,' she says, pointing to her name tag. 'Selina.'

He frowns and scrutinises the face, watching her turn away.

'Hey,' he calls. 'You know I prefer vodka with mine.'

She spirals around and winks before heading to the kitchen. She returns moments later with a tray in her hand. A new red cardigan swings on her hips as she sashays to the next table.

The Carousel

Bella hugs herself against the winter chill while Jed pockets the keys. She sniffs the air, feeling a childish thrill at the aroma of deep fried food and sweet waffles.

‘Ready?’

‘Yeah.’

Jed grabs her hand, and she resists the urge to skip, wanting to appear older than her fifteen years.

They join the waiting crowd, and Jed points to a ride with rows of seats high in the sky. Legs dangle and faint screams carry back to them. The Big Drop.

‘Check that out,’ he says.

She cranes to see.

‘Awesome. Imagine being up there.’

‘We’ve gotta go on that. Wonder what else they’ve got this year.’

She glances at his animated face. They’re standing in line, waiting to enter the gates. Jed’s eyes are beyond the fence; he is already scanning the grounds for the latest rides. Bella gazes at the yellow floral pattern on a woman’s dress in front. She frowns, searching for recognition in a memory from long ago.

The boy is holding her hand too tight, dragging her along. He has incredible strength for a little kid. She stumbles after him—trying to keep up—gasping for breath and clutching his warm, sticky fingers.

They follow a lady in a blue dress with yellow flowers. All Bella can see is the swish of her skirts when she moves and black shoes with tiny white bows at the back of her heels. They follow her past the ticket box through the gate. Once inside, a tall man blocks their view; he has a black camera dangling around his neck. They bolt past his legs and tear through the crowd on bare feet, deftly weaving a path.

Jed smiles and slings his arm over Bella’s shoulder. The photographer’s bulb flashes. Bella clutches his hand as they merge with the noisy crowd. Loudspeakers announce winning tickets, jumping events, Dagwood dogs, and rides that promise to thrill and excite. Carnival people dressed in black throw invitations and lurid remarks into the moving throng. Bella’s breath quickens, and her heart pounds.

Puffing hard, they collapse on the grass under the trees. They look a sight in dirty house clothes and no shoes, but neither cares. They pant, trying to catch their breath. The boy moves first, tugging her hand again. Bella digs her toes into the grass and pushes up. He dashes ahead, and she eyes his dirty white shirt so she doesn’t lose him.

A bright red balloon floats past, and she watches until it’s a speck in the sky. She gawps at bags stuffed with coloured floss and red apples on sticks, and she is frightened by men in dark singlets with bad teeth and unshaven faces. A man’s voice shouts about waffles and Dagwood dogs. She wonders what they are. Crackly country music blares above the din, reminding her of home. Her heart sinks, and she wants to cry. A glittering fairy, with a purple skirt, flies on the path ahead.

Jed tugs at Bella’s hand, impatient to move, but her eyes are following the painted white

faces as they swing from side to side; she is hypnotised by their macabre and yawning smiles. She resists his insistent hand.

‘What’s up with you?’ he asks, eager to get going. ‘I thought you loved the show.’

Bella pales.

‘What’s going on? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.’

The brightly painted clowns loom above her, a man in a black shirt standing behind them. Her wide eyes track each head from side to side. Their eyes glare, and she waits for them to spring to life and swallow her whole. She holds her breath as two boys run up to the man and hand him their money. They stand on tiptoe and lean in close to roll white balls down the clowns’ throats. She’s desperate to warn them but watches instead, mute and helpless. A skinny man looks her way. His grin makes her turn and tear through the crushing crowd.

Jed catches up with Bella in sideshow alley. He grabs her arm, demanding that she slow down. She throws herself hard against his chest, blinking back tears.

‘What’s with you?’ he asks.

‘Nothin’,’ she says, peeling herself away and plucking a grin from nowhere. She avoids his gaze and grabs his hand. ‘Let’s go on The Big Drop.’

He frowns, jogging to keep up.

‘Geez, Bella, what’s up with you?’

She ignores the question, focussing on the ride.

‘This is meant to be wicked.’

She looks up as a seated row of people drop from the top amid squeals and laughter.

The boy is gone. She starts to cry, knowing she’s been left behind, and presses grubby fists into her eyes. The tears leave dirty trails on her cheeks. She stares at the sea of legs around her and a pair of navy trousers stop in front of her.

‘Hello, are you all right?’ a rasping voice inquires. ‘Have you lost your mummy?’

She stares at him, not knowing what to do. Blue eyes look through silver glasses. The man’s nose is big and red, and his dark hair is combed behind his ears. Holding out his hand, he offers to help find her mum. She continues to stare. There’s a picture of a lady stamped on his arm. She has no clothes on.

‘Come on, I’ll help find your mummy.’

He leans closer, smiling. He smells like her dad when he’s been down the road with Uncle Bill. His fingers are cool and envelope her tiny ones in a vice-like grip.

In the grandstand there are horses in the ring. She checks the seats for mum, but she can’t find her anywhere. The man sits close, his trouser leg touching the bare skin of her thigh. The horses dance with riders on their backs. Some walk sideways and whinny. She likes the white horse best and dreams of riding one of her own.

The carriage is a snug fit, and Bella is wedged between Jed and another boy. She wriggles to make room. A fat man slams the bar down in front of them. Butterflies dance inside her belly. Jed’s hand is on her thigh, and his shoulder is crammed against hers. He grins like a little kid. She smiles back. The ride jolts up a notch and begins to rise. Butterflies expand to serpents. She catches her breath as they crank higher and higher and leaves her stomach behind as they plummet to earth, the wind taking her breath.

The horses are gone now. The man is rubbing little circles on her arm. She doesn't feel good.

Jed jumps about, animated. He laughs out loud. She laughs, too, amid deep breaths to settle her nausea.

'Wicked! What a rush,' he says.

'Yeah, totally.'

'Wanna go again?'

The grandstand is almost empty when the man stands and grips her hand. Her heart sinks as they leave the ring. They walk back to the crowd; distant screams, loud music, and voices fill the air. The man dawdles as if he has nowhere to go. Tinny music crackles from a speaker, and she looks up to see horses of a different kind. They are brightly painted and following each other's tails, circling a golden pole. She loves the rainbow horses best. They're so beautiful. They stand and watch awhile. The horses make her forget about the man and going home. A thin, wrinkled lady is helping kids on the ride. Her beady eyes dart their way.

'Wanna ride?'

The man nods, reaching for his wallet. Her heart leaps, and she hops from foot to foot, eyeing her favourite horse. The lady moves to help her mount, but the man rushes in, lifting her up. His hand is under her bottom, and the sick feeling returns. She feels the cool hardness of the horse and then his hand on her leg. Her horse is rainbow. She leans over and presses herself against the horse, arms flung around her neck. She names her Beauty. The tinny music plays as Beauty starts to move. She closes her eyes, feeling a thrill deep inside, as they glide together. Her heart sings as she becomes one with her beautiful horse, riding over fields far away. She urges her to go faster, but Beauty slows instead. She opens her eyes, and the man is waiting. Her heart sinks. She doesn't want to leave her horse. Strong arms lift her, and she stares at Beauty over his shoulder. She looks at the old lady, eyes pleading, but the lady looks away. She feels her feet touch the ground and turns with force and runs. She weaves through the crowd, her heart hammering and legs pumping as fast as they can go.

They stop outside the shooting gallery. Jed pulls his wallet from his back pocket.

'Watch this! I'll get you one of those.'

He points at the top shelf prizes and hands his money to a man with greasy hair. Jed picks up his rifle. Carousel music fills the air. The man leans in and grins, his breath rancid with beer. A tattoo of a naked woman adorns the skin above his wrist. Bella draws a shaky breath, watching Jed aim his rifle. Bang.

Her heart lifts at the familiar green dress and brown hair. She's talking to a man in navy trousers. Mum spies her over the man's shoulder and shouts her name. Bella runs to her, heart singing. She's almost to her arms when the man turns. She sees the stamp of a naked lady on his arm as he places it around her mum's shoulder.

Eleven Candles

It's almost Christmas; her last one. Lisa shivers despite the December heat; the memory shaking the last remnants of sleep. Her eyes squeeze tight, lashes tickling freckled cheeks, arms finding her two best toys. The shrine of her short life is strewn across the walls around her, amid peeling paint and worn furniture. Ribbons, won on the school oval, hang like soldiers staked by a single thumb tack. Plastic ornaments, stuffed animals and amateur sketches of family and friends. Piles of books litter the floor. She wonders which of her sisters will sleep here when she's gone.

Lisa's tapping heart has her up. She tugs the sheets over her bed; then scrambles in her cupboard for clothes. She yanks a uniform over her head, checking the mottled mirror. The faded maroon shift hangs limp, stopping well above the knees, toothpick legs beneath. She crinkles her nose and sets the brush to her hair, raking it through the thick mass, filling the prongs with curly, brown knots. She scrunches it up and ties it with elastic. A pale stranger eyes her in the mirror. She frowns, wondering how it will happen. The thought is enough to propel her through the door, toward the comfort of mum and breakfast.

The first fingers of light split the curtain and wake Lisa before five on Christmas Day. Butterflies dance inside her belly as she nudges her cousin, Kim. Sleep creases Kim's face, fists in her eyes.

'It's Christmas.'

Kim bounces up with a grin, sheets tangling around her legs, hair askew. They crawl off the mattress and sneak to the lounge. A spindly Ghost Gum branch casts a shadow against the gathering light; leaves replaced with paper chains and coloured bells. A cardboard star, covered with gold glitter, sparkles at the top. They tiptoe to the tree, hearts pounding, and squint at the pile of presents beneath. They squeal, hug each other tight; and give the gifts a last look before they scurry back to bed; and giggle in the growing dawn. The floorboards creak and their eyes shoot wide.

They tiptoe to the kitchen, peer through the door and gasp at a large man bending over the stove. *Santa?* A shrill whistle has them glued together; hearts hammering, eyes on the man. Grandad turns, singing kettle in hand; and pours steaming water into the teapot. He lowers himself to the chair at the far end of the table, knees spread wide to accommodate his girth; and blue dog parked at his feet. Relieved, they burst into the kitchen holding hands.

'It's Christmas, Grandad,' said Kim. 'And Santa left us presents.'

'You must have been good, then,' said Grandad.

They scamper back to the bedroom to wake Auntie Bea. She's snoring softly, her ample frame rising and falling beneath the sheet. They pounce on her giggling and shouting.

'It's Christmas.'

Before long there's seven kids under the tree, cross-legged, hair askew; and wide eyes staring at the presents. Lisa counts one each. Grandad hands them out, each gift grasped by eager hands. Her fingers tremble as she picks at the wrapping, careful not to rip it. Then she sees her. She's dressed in a blue gown, and tiny silver shoes; with golden hair that falls to her waist. She lifts the box with a grin and wraps thin arms around her. It's Barbie. Her eyes find mum talking to Auntie Bea, and then she sees her cousin, Angie, on the wall behind.

Red glasses dominate her pixie face, dancing green eyes beneath. She's second from the right, lined up with her brother and sisters. A light brown frame surrounds them, the glass a little dusty. Angie's eyes stare, immortalised the day before it happened; they tell Lisa it's her time soon.

Flashes of memory immobilise her limbs, imagination giving her the details nobody else did. They were coming back from the beach, skin lobster red and gritty with sand and salt; dog happy. The sun was low, and the kangaroo came bounding out of nowhere. The Ute skidded across the road, through a barbed wire fence and slammed into a tree. It rolled a couple of times, and spewed kids and eskies into the dirt. Angie flew that day, dress billowing as she fluttered aground like a windless kite. She was still breathing when the siren howled in the distance and stars peppered the sky.

Lisa woke to someone crying, deep howling sobs that had her fists around the sheets and blood pounding. She curled up tight.

'She's gone.'

Auntie Bea, what's she doing here at night? She strained to hear more, heart thudding, bed covers cupping her chin.

'M.. my beautiful Angie, my lovely girl..'

Mum murmured something back, amid the scrape of chairs and chink of cups. Auntie Bea sobbed. *She never cried.* Lisa trembled at the noise.

She slid from bed and tiptoed through the lounge to the kitchen doorway. The floorboards creaked and she froze and held her breath; not wanting to be seen. Auntie Bea stayed slumped in the nearest chair, her face buried in a hankie. Lisa yearned to wrap herself in her Aunt's soft arms, but dared not. She eyed her mother's back as she hunched over the bench making coffee, her dressing gown swished; and feet were bare. Auntie Bea lifted her head and a stranger's face stared up with empty eyes.

'They tried but there was nothing they could do. She's really gone, she's dead.'

Lisa fled to the bedroom; launched herself at the bed and yanked the covers up. Hot tears mixed with snot. *She's dead, she's dead.* Vomit hit her throat and blood whooshed in her ears. She wanted to run away, but stayed glued to the bed in a tight ball; and howled. *She was just a kid, not old enough to die, just a kid.* Her tear soaked pillow, turned cold beneath her cheek.

The kids never got the full story. The adults spoke in whispers and fell silent whenever they entered the room. Mum talked about Angie going to heaven and let Lisa and her sisters pick some flowers for the funeral, but they weren't allowed to go; couldn't say good-bye. It took time, but Lisa worked it out herself. Angie was the second eldest of four, like her and she would soon be ten, the same age as Angie when she died.

The photo comes back into focus and Lisa swipes at her eyes. She skips across the room, clutching her doll and skidding on Christmas wrap; she stumbles down the stairs to flee into the paddock. Stabbing pain in her foot makes her stop and she squats to pluck the prickles from her heel. She forgot her thongs. She hops back to the stairs and sits, arms wrapping Barbie until Mum calls her to breakfast.

She's filled with nerves on the eve of her eleventh birthday; she hugs everyone good night twice; and re-organises her stuffed toys so many times; Mum yells at her to go to bed. She tucks her toys in for the last time and reluctantly hops in beside them. Before her head hits the pillow she leaps up again; to say a prayer. *Please God, don't make it hurt.* Back in bed she tries to stay awake, but her eyelids grow too heavy.

Bright rays pierce through her eyelids; their warmth prickling her skin. *This must be Heaven.* A giggle tickles her ear. *Angie?* She strains to recognise the laugh. *Must be dreaming.* Something bumps her leg and her eyes struggle open. There's another giggle and someone whispers;

'Wake up, wake up.'

Her eyes spring wide to a sea of faces. *Mum?* Her sisters jostle the sides of the bed. They're smiling, elbowing for room. *Are they dead too?*

'Happy Birthday.'

Her little sister bounces on the bed beside her. She sees her shelf and Ted's lopsided stare, over her head. Mum holds a cake, the candles dripping wax onto the pink frosting. She counts eleven.

'Come on – blow them,' says her little sister.

She pushes herself up and blows hard, watching the smoke rise from eleven tiny wicks. The thrill of not being ten anymore surges through her. Her heart leaps as she reaches for the present in her sister's outstretched hands.

Other Books

Visit Sharon's web page www.sharonhaste.com and sign up to her 'spam-free' email list to get your FREE copy of *Enough Time* - a prequel novella to *The Last Time*, the first book in her Time Series.

Enough Time - prequel novella to The Last Time

Zoe has an easy life as a popular teen and going to Ethan Walsh's party is a dream come true. But the party changes everything. Now she has a secret that threatens to destroy it all, and she can't tell anyone. Zoe walks the fragile line between life and death; and learns how far she will go to protect the people she loves.

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About the Author

Sharon Haste is Australian and was born in Queensland. She has spent most of her adult life in Darwin, in the Northern Territory. She is a nurse and a midwife and has Master degrees in writing and midwifery.

She has spent a good deal of time surrounded by young people at work and home and loves their energy and ideas. She has three daughters and three stepchildren. She loves animals and nature and is a strong advocate of protecting the environment and living free of chemicals. She also loves to travel, socialise, walk on the beach, read and drink chai tea.

Sharon has published two short stories previously; and has a novella *Enough Time* and a novel *The Last Time*, the first book in her Time Series of Young Adults Time Travel stories. She is beginning a new adventure into Young Adult Fiction with these books.

You can get a FREE copy of *Enough Time*; and find out more about her novel *The Last Time* by visiting her website: www.sharonhaste.com

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