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Black Heart Blue

Written by Louisa Reid

Published by Penguin Books Ltd

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Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland
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Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road,
Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)
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Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand
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Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, Block D, Rosebank Office Park, 181 Jan Smuts Avenue,
Parktown North, Gauteng 2193, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

First published by Penguin Books and Razorbill 2012
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Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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ISBN: 978–0–718–15878–1

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

PART ONE

Rebecca and Hephzi

Rebecca

After

They tried to make me go to my sister's funeral today. In the end I had to give in. The black dress Hephzibah had worn last year when Granny died hung heavy from my bones and I wore it like armour. She'd always been bigger. Born first, stronger, prettier, the popular twin. I'd been walking in her shadow for sixteen years and I liked its cool darkness; it was a safe place to hide. Now I shivered in the stark January air. It was the first day of the New Year and my sister had been dead for one whole week.

Granny had been kind and we'd looked forward to staying with her like other kids look forward to Christmas. It was a chance to eat chocolate and watch television. A chance to read books until well past bedtime. At Granny's we were allowed to laugh out loud and play dress up, she even let us try her make-up. Hephzi loved make-up, the more sparkly the better. Granny made sure my sister got a bra when she was twelve and started to show. Sometimes she'd take us to the cinema and we would watch unsuitable films: Disney princesses, cartoons, Harry Potter. She was The Mother's mother and

she loved us. She used to kiss me and tell me I was lovely. Her little love. No one else ever said that. As we got older we visited her less and less. No need, said The Parents, we could make ourselves useful at their church events instead of lounging about at Granny's. Years yawned wide with her absence. I know Granny missed us. When she rang up and one of us managed to answer, her voice sounded thin and far away like a paper aeroplane spiralling out of sight. And then she died.

I've recorded today as another black day and it's there, a story inscribed hard on my heart. The tales I keep hidden within are many; if you ever open me up then you'll read the truth. Look inside, peel back skin and flesh, excavate bone, and there you'll find a library of pain. Perhaps you will ask me to explain. I am, after all, the curator of this past. But some things are too terrible to tell and those words are buried deep. Those are the words I never even whispered to my sister, those are the words that I daren't say aloud. I wish they wouldn't cry in the walls of my room and hunt me down in my dreams.

There's a scar on my heart for when Granny died and one for the day Hephzi first didn't want to walk home with me from school. I had to lie to explain away her absence when I arrived back at the vicarage alone; I said she was doing extra maths. This was when we started college in September, four months ago. At college everyone noticed how pretty and sweet and funny my twin was and soon she was being invited to parties and talking to boys.

Because I was her sister I didn't get picked on all that much but I think the other kids laughed at me behind my back. Maybe Hephzibah did too. No one would meet my eyes. Even the teachers found it hard.

But now she's dead. And it was her funeral today. The coffin was white. The Mother cried. The Father presided over the ceremony. When the good God-bothering folk of the village asked him how he could bear it, he said he had to, that it was his duty to his daughter. And I stood at the front in Hephzi's black dress and wondered if she could hear what was going on from inside that wooden box and whether she was lonely and cold too. She would know now, for the first time, what it meant to be really left out. Her school friends clustered at the back of the church crying. He couldn't forbid them from coming but his frozen gaze made it clear that they weren't welcome. I stared at the floor and loathed them all. Hypocrites. They didn't help us while she was alive, why were they here now when it was far too late? When the service was over no one spoke to me and I was left standing on my own, waiting for The Parents to finish being consoled.

Alone felt wrong; anyone could see me now that Hephzi was gone. There is usually a pair of eyes somewhere, flicking over me in fascination and dread. I feel those looks like they're ants, crawling under my skin. Eventually Auntie Melissa, The Mother's sister, came over and asked me how I was. They'd come all the way from Scotland and I barely recognized her at first, but she ventured an arm around

my shoulders and tried to hold me. When I didn't answer her concerned murmurs and shrank away from her touch she backed off. I didn't talk to my aunt because I knew he had his eye on me and I was busy telling Hephzi what they were all doing and listening carefully, hoping that she might answer back.

A week without her has been too long.

But now it's dark and the day is almost over. I'm supposed to sleep in this room still, with the other empty bed just a few feet away. Hephzi's bed. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night, disturbed by my own screams and the racket coming from the wall, and for a moment I can see the slight hump of her body there, turned away from me, like always, breathing softly.

Hephzi

Before

OK. So my family are mental. Totally weird. I'm getting out of here one day, no question about it, even if it means I have to leave my sis behind.

The day we start college is the beginning for me. I smell it in the September air of the school, hear it in the bang of the lockers, the shouts and laughter of unfamiliar voices, taste it on my lips when I smile and strangers smile right back. I know I can get free now. I told my mother if she didn't let me go then I'd make her life hell and she must have believed me or somehow persuaded my father. I'm bigger and stronger than her now and I know how to push her around, so I can get my own way sometimes, if I'm lucky. Anyway, we've made it out and it's like someone just gave me the keys to the kingdom. The corridors throng with kids our age, all sorts, different shapes and sizes. I can't wait to talk to them and I can already feel the admiring glances of the boys. That's what interests me most. Boys. I've never had a boyfriend but I'll be getting one super quick, I don't think it will be all that hard. Obviously I'll have to ditch Rebecca first. I can't have her hanging

round my neck, weighing me down with her donkey eyes.

You've no idea what it's like having a freak for a sister. I mean, I'm used to it. To me her face is as familiar as my own. But when other people see her for the first time, well, you can't blame them for wanting to throw up. And it's not like she makes it any easier for herself, she won't even try to just chat about normal stuff. I know that we don't do normal in our house but I tell her to at least have a go. If you listen then you can soon pick it up. Mostly I tell her not to be so wet, to get a life, but she's hung up on the whole thing. She just needs to be a bit more like me and quit shivering in my shadow.

By lunchtime I've had enough of her spoiling everything and it's a relief to follow everyone else down to the canteen without her. In the queue I start chatting to Daisy and Samara, who I recognize from our tutor group. I'm so excited that it's only when I get to the till that I realize that the lunch isn't actually free and that I'm holding up the line as I pretend to fumble for money in my pocket. Samara, who's just behind me, offers to lend me the one pound fifty and I have to say yes. I hope she'll forget to ask me to pay her back. When we all sit down to eat at a round plastic table they ask me what's wrong with Rebecca. I knew they'd all been whispering. I think quickly about what to say. I don't see why Rebecca has to be so embarrassing all the time. Why should I have to be the one who has to explain everything? I don't say that though. I say she's just got a funny face. End of story.

'Did she have an accident?' asks Samara.

'No. Nothing like that. It's a syndrome, it makes her look a bit weird, that's all.'

'Oh.' Samara and Daisy meet each other's eyes and so I don't explain. I don't tell them the stuff Granny told me and Reb when we were little, that it's something that goes wrong with the way the bones in your face get formed when you're growing inside your mum.

'It's OK though.' I don't think they're convinced that she's normal really (well, ish) and I can see Daisy kicking Samara under the table. But then we talk about other stuff and they invite me to go with them to the pub on Friday so I guess it's OK. They go every week. Apparently you can get in under age really easily if you have fake ID. I tell them I don't, so they promise to sort it. Craig, the tall boy with dark hair who looks good but doesn't say much, knows someone who'll do it for a fiver. A fiver's a lot but I could try to get it from Mother's purse. I wouldn't usually dare but I'm going to have to take some risks if I'm going to get a life. And if she notices then I won't take the blame.

I forget to save some lunch for Rebecca but she doesn't say anything so I don't mention it either and after school I go with Samara to Daisy's house so Reb has to walk home on her own. First I make her promise to cover for me.

It's great to go to a normal house. We knew they existed, Granny had shown us that, but I'd forgotten

what it was like not to creep around on tiptoe, not to have to make yourself as small and silent as possible. Daisy's parents are both at work and we go up to her room. She has her own TV, even her own bathroom, and everything is yellow and white – the curtains, the bedclothes, everything matches. For a minute I just stare. I want to touch each thing: cuddle the soft toys she's got lined up on a shelf, try on her shoes, jump on the big four-poster bed. Daisy puts on music and we go on Facebook. I can't believe she has her own computer up here too. They set up an account for me – it's a bit embarrassing to admit I haven't got one already, but they don't say anything and I watch carefully as they use the computer, trying to learn fast. Daisy takes a picture of me on her mobile phone and then uploads it on to my profile. I add them both and now it's just a question of waiting for the friend requests. They do my nails and pluck my eyebrows, laughing when I squeal, and tell me I'm pretty. I haven't had this much fun in my entire life.

It's only when Daisy asks me what it's like having a vicar for a dad that I get a bit uncomfortable.

'Oh. I dunno. Normal, I suppose.'

'Really? Do you have to, like, pray all the time? Go to church every day?'

'It's a bit like that. But sometimes we don't go.' I don't tell them we hide under our beds and play the invisible game. Thank God Samara changes the subject.

'Craig fancies you.'

My insides explode. He's definitely the coolest boy in the year. And he's good looking. Really.

'How do you know?' I try not to look bothered but I can feel I'm blushing. I'll have to get a handle on that.

'He said you were cute.'

Hmm. I'm not sure if that's good enough. What exactly does cute mean? Cute like a puppy or a kitten?

Daisy looks annoyed. 'He never has a girlfriend anyway, so, you know, don't get your hopes up.'

'Oh, OK.'

She changes the subject. 'What was it like being home-schooled anyway? Isn't that really weird?'

'Yeah, it got a bit dull. Just me and Rebecca and Mum.'

'I thought you met up with all the other home-school people? That's what my cousin did. She had loads of mates.'

'Oh yeah, we did that. Course.' There will have to be a lot of lies told, I realize, and I'll have to be careful what I say.

'So what do you think of college, then?'

'It's good. Yeah, I think I'll like it. Everyone's really nice.'

'Yeah, the teachers are OK. Your sister looked a bit gutted though when you left her on her own. She could have come along.'

'No, I don't think so, she wouldn't want to.' No way am I going to have Rebecca cramping my style. Being a twin is boring and Rebecca is extra dull.

'So, are you gonna come to the pub on Friday, then?'

'Maybe, I'll see.'

'You should. Craig'll be there,' Samara says.

I definitely have to go. It's just a question of getting out.

When I eventually get home Rebecca has covered for me so I ignore my parents' suspicious glances and act like I've done nothing wrong. I'd scraped all the nail varnish off as I walked home, leaving a flaky little trail behind me, like that horrible story Granny read to us a couple of times. It was good when the girl shoved the witch in the oven though, Reb and I liked that bit.

It's a prayer evening tonight and there's no avoiding going. Believe me, I've tried. We sit in the freezing cold church hall and shiver. Roderick, my father, claims there are never enough funds to heat the place properly. I look at the others. They're a tragic bunch; a few old dears and some of his fan club, who've come wearing their stinky breath and greasy hair, their eyes are glazed and faraway as if someone's just walloped them over the head with a frying pan. While I sit and despair and try not to listen to my father I think about a way of escaping on Friday night. I'll need something new to wear and wonder about the charity bags. There might be a fresh pile of stuff to root through. I'll have a look later when everyone's gone to bed. I bet Daisy's mum just takes her out shopping when she wants something new. My mother doesn't do shopping. She doesn't do

new, full stop. She's sitting there now with her eyes screwed shut and her head bowed, wearing clothes that look like they were meant for an old lady. It's pretty embarrassing, her being such a mess. At least Rebecca and I make an effort, even if for Rebecca all that means is being clean. Sometimes when they want to punish us they lock the bathroom but usually I find a way. There's no way I'm going round looking like I've dipped my head in a chip pan.

After the prayers, the chanting and the healing, Saint Roderick does his meet and greet bit. The opposite of my mother, he preens like a peacock, and I have to stand beside him, all smiles, while people compliment him on his boring old sermon. Yawn.

He grabs my arm on the walk back to the vicarage. A bit too tight.

'Well, Hephzibah. How did you get on at the college today?'

'Fine, thank you.' I try to squirm away but he's not letting go. I'll have a bruise.

'I hope you won't make a habit of being late home. I wouldn't like to think of you walking the streets in the evening all by yourself.' His voice is stretched taut, like a tripwire.

'It's perfectly safe.' Arguing with him is not a sensible thing to do but sometimes I can't help it. And I can push things, further than Rebecca ever can anyway.

'Next time you're planning on staying late, you let me know. I'll be there to collect you.'

Yeah, in your dreams, I think. But I smile and say thanks instead. With a bit of luck he'll be out of it on Friday and I'll get away with sneaking off.

In bed that night I decide it's time to build bridges with Rebecca. She's barely spoken to me this evening and I know it's because I went off without her. Her hurt, hang-dog look is massively annoying but I'm going to pretend I haven't noticed anything's wrong.

'You should have come with us today, Daisy and Samara are so nice. You'd have had fun.'

She's still silent, her face to her wall, scrunched up in bed. She's so thin you'd barely notice she was there.

'What's up? Didn't you like college, then?'

No answer. I heave a martyred sigh and roll over on to my back, way too excited to sleep. I can't wait to go back again tomorrow and see my new friends and Craig. Before I nod off I remember the fiver I need to find and remind myself to get up extra early and sneak a look in Mother's purse.

Rebecca

After

When I woke this morning, it was still January. Still the day after the funeral. Hephzi was still dead. It was over a week now. My head was like lead on the mattress and my throat felt like I had swallowed barbed wire but I still had to get up and leave for college. The new term was starting and if I didn't go in then I might as well give up completely. We were pretending to be normal and The Parents were watching me all the time, making sure I toed a line that was scored like a groove in glass; if I slipped or stumbled then something would shatter. They've always made us keep up appearances, me and Hephzi. Hephzi was always better at that too. She could smile and flutter her eyelashes and say just what they wanted to hear and people would walk away pleased to have spoken to her. She'd picked up those manners from The Father. But today I had something important to do. Just as I'd been about to go home after the funeral, Daisy, one of Hephzibah's newly acquired friends, had brushed past me and shoved a piece of paper at my chest. I'd read the message, torn the note into tiny pieces in the palm of my hand, then let the wind carry them safely away.