

West of the Blue Gums - Extract ...

Part 4 – Lovers and Liars
Chapter 18

The past completes me.

It's odd how words and phrases stay in your mind, long after the memory of the exact time and place of their origin has gone. And that's the one phrase I know that defines me: Jess.

I can't remember where it came from: a book, perhaps, or a movie? Maybe it stemmed from one of those girly films that makes you grapple for your handkerchief two minutes from the end, and you just dread walking out into the foyer afterwards, with predictable red-rimmed eyes like every other woman. Or maybe I read it in one of those insightful novels that draw you in, spellbinding you with words and images until you feel part of the characters and plot.

But wherever it came from ◦ book or movie ◦ at the time the words felt right. They leapt towards me, burrowing into my subconsciousness. Occasionally I take them out, examine them. And it's true. Only in the past do I feel complete, a whole person.

In the present I feel disjointed and fractured, as though a whole chunk of me has fallen away. I'm no longer a mother. I'm barely a wife. My career has dissolved. Grief overwhelms me. I stumble from one day to the next, disorientated, as though I'm living in body but not in spirit. Nothing interests or excites me. I'm existing in a vacuum, performing like a puppet. Some days I feel I can't go on.

'The past completes me', I tell Brad when I'm at my lowest, my most vulnerable. I thrust the words at him, waiting to see how they fall.

'You can't live in the past.'
'It's where I want to be. There's no pain there.'

He takes my hands, presses them against his cheeks. His expression is one of sadness and regret. Regret at all we have lost, and sadness that the pain is still inside me. 'Don't talk like that. I love you. We still have each other. Doesn't that count for something?'

My own eyes fill with tears. 'I miss my daughter,' I say. 'I miss Kadie so much that it hurts.'

'I hurt, too.'

I shake my head, not to negate his feelings but to emphasize my own. To me, my grief seems so much greater than his a mother's anguish and he couldn't possibly understand. It was my body that carried her for nine months, felt those first tremulous butterfly movements. It was me who felt those initial pangs of labour. It was my breasts she nuzzled, searching instinctively after her birth. How could Brad know the emptiness I feel?

He puts his arms around me and buries his face against my neck. He is breathing hard, like a man who has been running. I wait, not knowing what to do, until finally he pulls away and holds me at arm's length. 'I want us to be a family again.'

For one long moment I cannot speak, cannot bear to hear that word: family. It has connotations of Christmas and opening presents around the tree. Kadie's first birthday party. Winter mornings when she ran into our room, wriggling under the blankets between us. Summer afternoons at the beach.

I can see her now, laughing as she runs towards the waves, Brad following close behind. I'm holding the camera. *Click*. The photo is in my wallet where I can see it every time I open the clasp. Kadie frozen in time, the colour already bleaching from her face, her clothes. Kadie fading inexorably into the past.

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