



BEAUTY



SLEEP

USBORNE

# BEFORE

For Greta Rose Davison.

Those who you keep in your heart, enclosed in love,  
will always live.

I understood. I really did. This was a chance. Our *only* chance. It was this or die.

In some ways it was a relief. I was so tired of being ill. Worn down from all the puking, from being so feeble, from trying to seem okay when Stacey came to visit, and when Mum and Ima kept their tearful vigils between my bed and Alfie's.

It was so much effort and my head hurt so much, my joints, my skin... I just wanted to sleep. To hand over all this... *trying*... to someone else.

So yeah. I understood.

But what broke me, what killed me, was the thought of Alfie, my baby brother, being enclosed in that pod and sent to sleep until they could wake us and cure us. It was unbearable.

Alfie was so small. He'd only just turned five. We'd celebrated his birthday a few days before we both fell ill.

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His bubbly head of curls had bounced with excitement when he'd opened his present, a Fisher-Price cassette recorder.

He'd interviewed us all:

“Lulu, what you gonna be when you grow up?”

“Your big sister, little man. Always.”

I could hardly bear it. The thought of losing him was a lead weight pressing down on my chest.

He was going to be first, so he wouldn't have to go without me. They pushed our beds together so I could hold his hand as they sedated him. On the other side of the bed, Mum and Ima sobbed softly, stroking his hair. Alfie's breathing changed from shallow and rapid to barely there. His tiny hand went limp in mine and my heart cracked in two.

## chapter one

# Laura

Thoughts came, like fluff, white fluff.

Colds?

No. Clouds.

But I am cold. So cold.

Am I dead?

I can't think...

Is this death?

I am so...so cold.

My head, the thing in it...brain, my brain is...empty.

Who am I?

What am I?

There's nothing to hold on to. I can't...

There is an absence of...everything.

Not a face, not a memory.

I am...blank—

A ragged trail scorched my throat, raw and sore. I retched,

choking, gasping for air. Light blinded me. I screwed my eyes tight shut, tried to turn away, but still the light burned. I burned.

“Come on, Laura. You can do this. Your name is Laura Henley. You’re in hospital but you’re going to be fine. You just need to breathe.”

Pain bit through my head as I blinked against the impossible brightness.

“There you are. Welcome back. You’ve been asleep for a little while. We’ve just woken you up. You’re in Blackhurst Clinic and you are going to be fine. You just need to breathe.”

A blurry face hovered above me. I blinked again, trying to clear the fog clouding my eyes. Panic surged through me. I tried to move but I was weighed down, trapped. My heart raced. Where was I? Why couldn’t I move? What had he said? Had I been kidnapped? I struggled to sit up but I couldn’t even lift my hand. I tried to speak, but all that came out was a husky growl. I blinked again, trying to see, trying to communicate.

*I can’t move, I can’t move...*

Someone pressed a damp sponge to my burning brow.

“Shhhh,” a female voice said. “Shhhhhh.”

Terror flooded through me. My body trembled, shuddered, shook violently. I was the centre of my own personal earthquake. My teeth crashed together. I bit through my tongue. Gulping sobs erupted from me and tears poured down my face. Someone held my shoulders as a deep,

crushing pain cramped my heart, and flooded into my arms.

“She’s arresting. Stand clear.”

With a violent punch to my chest, I slipped into oblivion.