

# The Secret Deep



LINDSAY GALVIN

Chicken  
House

2 Palmer Street, Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS  
[chickenhousebooks.com](http://chickenhousebooks.com)

Text © Lindsay Galvin 2018

First published in Great Britain in 2018

Chicken House  
2 Palmer Street  
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS  
United Kingdom  
[www.chickenhousebooks.com](http://www.chickenhousebooks.com)

Lindsay Galvin has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs  
and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted or utilized  
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying  
or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Cover and interior design by Helen Crawford-White  
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

The paper used in this Chicken House book is made from  
wood grown in sustainable forests.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

PB ISBN 978-1-911490-02-9  
eISBN 978-1-911490-48-7

*For my Sea Boys, Edward and Oscar*

*What are deep? The ocean and truth.*

Christina Rossetti



*Part 1*

# Stranded

# Now

I'm not dead.  
But I'm . . .

not breathing.

Chest shudders, heaving. Panic pushes me back down  
into darkness.

I float up towards light.

wisps of thought . . .

can't catch . . .

Noise. Booming, rhythmic.

Light. Colour.

Chest full, swollen, something inside – doesn't belong.

Body flips over, out of control, heaving chest – in and  
out. Hot liquid gushes out of me, again and again and  
again. Splutters, gasps, soreness at my throat.

Whistling in and out.

Air.

My thoughts stutter. Warm relief. Confusion.

Something happened to me. I've forgotten, I've been –  
my brain is – hurt.

I can't see.

Solid surface beneath my shoulder, hip, ear. I lie on my  
side panting, mind trying to grasp on to – I can't remember.

I'm so heavy, so sleepy . . .

*Come on, think.* I'm alive, that's a start. There's a problem  
with my memory.

My eyes want to blink, but there's something over my

eyelids. I raise myself on one elbow, fumble and peel off sticky patches, wincing at the drag on my lashes.

Blinding light. My hand springs up, shielding, then I narrow my eyes as they get used to the glare. The swishing sound is constant, I have heard it before.

My breath catches and when I cough there's a bitter-sweet taste in my mouth.

Head too heavy for my neck, I narrow my eyes. Sparkling white below, hot blue above, and turquoise in front . . .

Sand. Sky. Sea.

Beach.

I'm on a . . . beach.

Alone? It's too bright, I can't see any distance, can't see any . . . one.

I'm alive and that's a surprise. I can't remember why. *Track back.* What is the last thing—?

Cool whiteness.

Memories spool into my mind.

The mist. My hand on the door handle, frantic twisting. It wouldn't open.

Poppy. She was in my arms. Blood rushes in my ears, throbs at my temples.

Where is my sister?

I pull myself into a kneeling position.

'Poppy!' My cracked whisper is swallowed by the soft scrape of the sea.



# Before 1

Poppy peers out of the plane window, nose pressed against the glass, and I follow her gaze. Dark, lush-looking forest reaches to the coast, where it bites into a sea of shining metal.

‘I’m starving,’ she says.

‘We just had breakfast, and you left half of it.’

‘I wasn’t hungry then.’

‘That figures.’ There are no refreshments on this flight as it’s only an hour long. I rummage in my rucksack. ‘Well I’ve got apples and a banana . . . oh.’

I hold up the banana, split and oozing brown mush all over the apples. We pull identical faces of disgust, but my laugh feels hollow. If Mum were here, there’d be more than enough snacks for this epic journey, plastic boxes of pasta salad and chocolate brownies we’d made together.

I look across the plane aisle at Alison, the air hostess travelling with us. I’m fourteen so I could fly alone, but Poppy is eleven and an unaccompanied minor, so needs an escort. Alison met us at Heathrow and is as quiet and as



organized as her smooth helmet of hair suggests, getting us through the connections at Los Angeles and Auckland much more easily than I ever could. She's not listening to Poppy's appeal for food now, intent on her phone. I wonder how much my aunt paid for her to come all this way, guiding us through two airports, two twelve-hour flights, and on to this final plane.

There's a rustle from the seat behind us, and a sharing-size packet of crisps dangles above Poppy's head.

I turn to look through the gap between the headrests, and see a boy around my age failing to blow a strand of damp blond hair out of his eyes. I noticed him when we boarded, as he was soaked through. It was raining in Auckland; apparently it does that a lot on the North Island of New Zealand. At least the weather will make us feel at home.

'Nice. Thanks,' says Poppy, taking the crisps. She turns to me, eyebrows raised, and when I realize she's checking I'm all right with this, I shrug. She's three years younger but I'm not used to being in charge.

Poppy opens the crisps and kneels up, facing backwards to talk to the boy.

'I'm Poppy and this is my sister, Aster. So where are you going?'

'I live in Gisborne,' says the boy, 'I've been visiting my rellies in Auckland, now I'm off home.'

'Rellies?' says Poppy, a laugh in her voice. The boy's accent is broad New Zealander, every sentence ending on a question.

I try to surreptitiously elbow Poppy. ‘Relatives,’ I whisper.

‘I know, I just didn’t know people actually speak like that,’ she says, grinning at him. He smiles back then pulls a fake serious face.

‘Well I didn’t know people actually spoke like *you*. How do you do?’ he says, in what I guess is supposed to be a posh English accent and sounds nothing like us as we are from East London.

Poppy bursts out laughing, spraying crisps. Within the next few minutes she’s found out his name is Sam, he’s sixteen, his favourite food is nachos, his favourite colour is orange, and he likes mountain biking.

Then she tells Sam I’m a champion swimmer.

‘All right Pops, slight exaggeration,’ I say. I rest my cheek against the headrest and catch the boy’s eye through the gap so I can raise my eyebrows in apology for my blabbermouth sister.

‘Only being friendly,’ says Poppy, ‘unlike you. Anyway, you *are* a champion, you set that record and won that big cup—’

‘That was two years ago and only regionals . . .’ I trail off, feeling exposed and embarrassed for explaining it.

‘To be fair, that does sound like champion-type stuff,’ says Sam. There’s a dent in one cheek where he’s supressing a smile, and I narrow my eyes at him, finding myself smiling back, just a bit.

‘Yeah. See?’ says Poppy.

‘So are you taking a holiday?’ he says, directly to me. I swallow. Now, when I’d rather she did the talking, Poppy is

giving serious attention to the crisps.

The pause is almost long enough to be awkward.

‘We’re going to live here in Gisborne, with our aunt, Iona. Our mum died a few months ago. Cancer,’ I say quickly, the words come out quiet but feel too large for my throat.

‘Crap. Sorry.’ He pauses and swallows. I look down. When he continues, his voice is low.

‘My Granda has the same, he’s doing OK right now.’

When I meet his eyes again I see his cheeks are pink and feel heat spread across my own face and throat. No one who has someone they love in cancer treatment wants to hear or speak about death. I wish I could think of something else to say.

‘He might recover, loads of people do,’ says Poppy, screwing up the empty crisp packet, oblivious to the change in atmosphere. ‘We are orphans – Mum and Dad broke up when I was a baby and he died in a car accident.’

The boy’s eyebrows climb higher. He’s looking from Poppy to me like we have the worst luck ever. Poppy continues quickly.

‘But Iona is Mum’s younger sister and she’s awesome.’

I turn back around, listening to Poppy describe how Iona is an oncologist – a cancer doctor – who works all over the world, from war zones to remote jungles. She doesn’t mention that we’ve barely seen our aunt in years, or that when Mum was dying of cancer, she was out of contact, treating cancer in others.

The boy shows Poppy some mountain biking videos on

his tablet. She insists he takes a selfie of all three of us with her phone, directing him how to hold it and then dragging me into the shot, her skinny arm around my neck as he leans over the back of the seats above our heads. Eventually Poppy settles back and plays a game on her phone and it isn't long before a voice announces that we are preparing for landing at Gisborne: local time nine a.m., the weather is cloudy with showers, and the temperature twenty degrees. January is English winter, New Zealand summer. Our escort, Alison, checks we both have our lap belts fastened and I screw my eyes tight for the landing, like I always do, feeling my heart rise in my throat. The touchdown is a little bumpy, but not too bad.

Poppy presses both hands against the window. Her hair is much blonder at the ends than at the roots and is in two messy French plaits. The parting is wonky, where she's getting used to braiding them herself, rather than bossily directing Mum on how she wants them each morning.

I chew my lip. New Zealand is such a long way to come, we've never even visited, and now we are moving here. But it's where Iona lives and without her it would be a foster placement for Poppy and me. I'm nearly fifteen, so social services couldn't promise we'd be placed together long-term, and I can't even think about being away from Poppy. We were the only family at Mum's funeral, and it was the first time in our lives our lack of relatives became an important thing. We stayed with Mum's best friend for nearly a month before social services finally tracked Iona down and she called, horrified she'd not been there for

Mum or us. I realized later that Mum never told her sister how bad it had got. It took another two months for Iona to organize our flights to New Zealand.

My eyes follow a single drop of condensation, trapped between the two layers of glass in the plane window, powerless in its course. Like us.

Alison ushers us off the plane and across the tarmac to the small, low building of the regional airport. She locates our luggage and leads us through to arrivals, where there's a few people at the barrier but no Iona. Sam is a few paces in front of us and he turns.

'Give me a buzz if you like,' he says. 'Happy to show you around.'

'OK. Put in your number,' says Poppy. Sam takes her phone, taps the screen, then with a smile and wave he strides off.

'She's there!' says Poppy, pointing. 'Oh – she looks even more like Mum now.'

Iona is the other side of the revolving doors, she hasn't spotted us yet. I hardly recognize her and see it's her lack of hair that makes her look so like Mum did towards the end. Last time we saw Iona, she'd worn her long cornrow braids tied back in a knot, now it is closely cropped against her head. My heart trips. Mum's spiralling curls had been her trademark, and although she made light of it at the time, it had been a huge thing for her when she lost her hair to the chemo. I lean into Poppy for a moment and feel her bony shoulder against my arm, solid.

Iona's eyes crinkle at the corners as she finally spots us.

Poppy gives Iona one of her stiff tight hugs and Iona's eyes squeeze shut as she hugs her back. A couple of years ago I would have hugged her too, but now I'm closed up, remembering Mum's hospital bed and the funeral, when having Iona there would have lifted the burden.

'I am so pleased to see you. Hope the journey wasn't awful?' she says.

'Not too bad thanks,' I say, burrowing my hands in my pockets. Poppy starts chatting and I get used to seeing Mum's sister again. Iona is taller than Mum, her figure rounded and strong-looking. Her mouth is like mine and Mum's, full and wide, slow to smile. Same eyes as Poppy's, deep-set and almost maroon-brown, with curling lashes. I have deep golden-brown skin like Mum's but Iona's is lighter. Our dad was white, Mum and Iona are half African American, half Korean. We never knew our grandparents; they met when travelling and were both doctors who worked abroad, like Iona. My grandmother died young, also of cancer. Guess we really aren't a very lucky family.

I raise my chin. Mum adored Iona. Mum's sister might not have been there for us before, but she's here now.

We say goodbye to Alison, and Iona takes our bags and heads out of the airport and across the car park. We pile into the back of her dusty red pick-up.

I'm surprised when we drive out of the small low-slung city of Gisborne, but figure Iona's house must be in the suburbs. The road is quiet and straight. The clouds part and the

tarmac ahead gently steams in the watery sun. We drive on, passing a few small towns on the way, cutting through thick forest then green hills, with the sea in the distance to our right. Just as I'm about to question how far outside the city we are, Iona pulls up on to the kerb beside the road. She draws a deep breath and turns.

'I've been a bit disorganized.' She pauses, looking pained, then lays her hand over her heart. 'I hope you can forgive me.'

I meet Iona's eyes for the first time and my heart leaps into my throat. She can't have changed her mind about being our guardian, not after flying us all the way out here.

'I've had a tenant in my house while I work on a project nearby. I didn't realize my contract with them is for another few weeks. I wondered how you two would feel about spending a bit of time with me out at my fieldwork site? There's plenty to do, it's an ecovillage, in the proper bush.'

I lean back against the seat.

'You mean go there . . . now?' I say.

She nods.

'Are we camping?' I turn and see Poppy's eyes narrowing, 'Don't you work at a hospital? I thought you were a cancer doctor.'

I swallow. No house for a couple of weeks. I'd been looking forward to lying on the bed in my new room, listening to music. Closing the door, and my eyes.

Iona smiles.

'I am a doctor, Poppy, but I'm also involved in medical research. I've been working with a group of students

studying the health benefits of early human cultures. Would you be willing to try it for a few days? If you don't like it, we'll book into a hotel until the house is ready.'

'How far is it?' I ask.

'We can be there by mid-afternoon if we leave now,' she says. Iona meets my eyes. Her gaze is very steady and I look down at my hand, picking at a loose thread on the seam of my jeans. I remember the last time Iona visited – the four of us had played cards late into the night, laughing so loudly the old man in the flat upstairs had banged his walking stick on the floor.

Iona is Mum's sister. This will be fine. I feel Poppy looking at me but I don't catch her eye.

'OK then,' I say.

Iona drives on and I stew in sudden anxiety. She sent us photos of a three-bedroom house by the river. She told social services that's where we'd be, and our social worker said she'd contacted family services in New Zealand so I could continue my therapy. My shoulders are so tense it hurts; I'm wound tight all the time. But plans change and I need be able to deal with that. Being here, looked after by family, will help me deal with everything.

After another fifteen minutes or so I hear the *tick tick tick* of indicators. The turn-off is barely visible, just before a sign saying Tokomaru Bay.

Poppy snaps a photo of the sign on her phone.

Now she's texting Sam – the boy from the plane – underneath the hoody on her lap, so Iona can't see what she's doing in the rear-view mirror. She must have picked



up a local phone signal. I frown and peer over her shoulder.  
Beneath the photo of the road sign she's written:

Staying at ecovillage camp thing. Poppy from the  
plane X

He replies right away.

Cool. I sometimes ride the trails out there.  
Catch you in town sometime. Sam.