



# AWAKE

NATASHA PRESTON

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# **AWAKE**

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*Natasha Preston*

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## **Dedication**

I'd like to dedicate this book to all of my readers. Thank you for making my dream come true.





## **Scarlett**

IMOGEN NUDGED MY arm, nodding towards the classroom door with a predatory grin. “Finally some talent,” she whispered.

Okay, she wasn’t wrong. The guy standing by Mrs Wells’ door was gorgeous. Like, shouldn’t even be at our school gorgeous. *Who is he?*

“Welcome to Fordham High, Noah,” Mrs Wells said. “Take a seat over there.” She pointed to the space next to me, and Imogen gripped my forearm. “Scarlett and Imogen, you have most of the same classes as Noah this year so please show him around and make him feel welcome.”

Im’s face lit up. “Absolutely.”

Good luck, Noah.

He walked to our desk at the back of the classroom, demanding everyone’s attention, owning the room, but his focus was on me. I squirmed in my seat, heat flooding my face. He looked older, the way he carried himself with an air of I-don’t-give-a-crap.

“Hi,” he said, still staring at me.

“Hey. I’m Scarlett, and that’s Imogen.” I pointed to my best friend beside me. “I guess we’re your tour guides.”

“Thank you,” he replied. He even sounded older; he pronounced a lot more of every word than most of the kids here did. “Although this school is so small I doubt anyone could get lost.”

“So true!” Imogen said, leaning over the desk so Noah could see her past me. She brushed her light hair behind her shoulder and pouted her full lips.

Bobby turned around in his seat. “You like wrestling, Noah?”

Noah’s forehead creased. I held my hand up. “Bobby’s a WWE freak; he’s not offering you a fight.”

“Definitely not,” Bobby confirmed. “You look like you can handle yourself.”

Noah grinned. “Handling myself is what got me expelled from my last

school.”

He didn’t seem like the fighting type, but then I’d known him for five seconds. Maybe he seemed older because he was. Maybe was repeating a year.

“How old are you? You look older than fifteen or sixteen,” I asked.

“No, I’m sixteen,” he replied. “What about you?”

“Same.”

“She’s *just* sixteen,” Imogen cut in, clearly annoyed at being ignored. “I am, too.”

I wanted to roll my eyes. As if he was going to take her over the desk right now just because she’d been the same age as him that little bit longer than me. “Yeah, it was my birthday last month,” I explained.

Still ignoring Imogen, Noah said, “It was my brother’s birthday last month, too. What date was yours?”

“Thirteenth. Thank God it wasn’t a Friday this year.”

He chuckled. His blue eyes were bigger and more beautiful when he laughed. “Are you superstitious?”

I nodded once. “Big time. I won’t walk under a ladder or cross path with a black cat. I wave to magpies, depending on how many there are, of course, and throw salt over my shoulder.” He cocked his eyebrow. I shrugged. “My parents are kinda superstitious, too. And suspicious.”

“Wow,” he said. “Well, you never know what’s out there in the big bad world.”

‘Out there in the big bad world.’ *Déjà vu*. I’d heard that somewhere before, but I couldn’t place it.

The bell rang, making me jump. “Ready for English Lit?” I asked Noah, ignoring the odd feeling inside.

“Not really. You are sitting next to me, right? You’re my tour guide after all.”

Imogen stalked off ahead, in a foul mood because she didn’t have Noah eating out of her hand.

I smiled. “Sure.”



“SO WHERE DID you move from?” I asked Noah as we walked to our second class of the day.

Throughout our fifty minute English lesson, Noah had quizzed me relentlessly. It was as if he was trying to learn every last thing there was to know. New kids weren't usually this chatty. But I liked it and wanted to know all about him, too.

"Hayling Island."

"Cool, what's it like there?"

"Small," he replied.

I'd learnt about it in Geography when we briefly covered the British Isles. It really was small.

"What made you move to Bath?"

"My dad's job. Hayling wasn't much fun, so it's nice to be here."

We reached the science block, and I turned to him. "Well, I'm glad you're here." My eyes widened to the point of pain. Why on earth did I say that out loud? I cringed. You didn't tell a guy that you kind of liked them right away – especially when you'd only known them an hour.

He shoved his hand through his fair hair, moving it out of the way of his forehead, and smiled. His light eyes sparkled. Actually bloody sparkled. I used to think I was more of a tall, dark and handsome type of girl, but it was *definitely* tall, blond and handsome for me now. His jaw looked like it had been carved from stone and his lips. Well, those things would have any girl gaping.

He stared down, a full head taller than me. "I'm glad that you're glad."

Sucking my lips between my teeth, I took a small step back. I liked him already, there was no question of that, but he looked dangerously close to kissing me, and I was in no way ready for that so quickly.

We were called into the classroom, and Noah took a seat next to me. The Bunsen burners were out which meant I was going to have to really listen because it looked like we were doing an experiment. I hated experiments.

"You good at chemistry?" I asked.

He laughed. "There is a bad joke in there somewhere. I'm okay, yeah."

"Good, because I'm rubbish. I'm failing so badly. I don't know why they continue to make me attend. I think my presence alone dumbs down the rest of the class."

He chuckled, crooking his eyebrow. "You can't be that bad."

"Oh, wait and see."

"Settle down," Mr Gregor said. "Welcome, Noah. Have you covered—"

And that was where I switched off. I couldn't be any less interested in

chemistry if I tried. I'd learned more watching *The Big Bang Theory* than I had at school.

I switched back on when Noah poured something into a test tube.

"What's the point of this then?" I asked, nodding to the Bunsen burner.

"You really don't like science, do you?"

"No."

"Me neither, actually. There is too much unexplained that science doesn't have an answer to."

"What do you believe in?"

He shrugged. "I'm not sure yet. Anyway, I might not like all this but I do understand it so I'll explain while I work and you can take notes. Let's see if I can help you pass this class."

Yeah, again, good luck, Noah.

I popped the lid off my pen, trying to concentrate on what he was saying rather than his deep voice and the way his crooked smile made me swoon. Yeah, there was no way he was going to be able to help me with chemistry – the subject anyway.

As he worked his eyes kept flicking back to watch me like I was the most interesting thing on the planet. Like he was scared if he took his eyes off me, I'd be assassinated.

He turned to me once everything was set up. "Tell me something about yourself."

"We're supposed to be making those chemicals... do something." *And there's not a whole lot to tell.*

He shrugged. "We've got a minute. Come on."

There was one thing. I didn't like to bring it up much because it was weird, and I always got the same how-can-it-not-drive-you-crazy question. Sighing, I replied, "I remember nothing before the age of four."

His eyebrows shot up. "What?"

"There was a house fire and we lost everything. My parents got me and my brother, Jeremy, out, but we were in the hospital for smoke inhalation. When I woke up, I couldn't remember anything."

"Nothing?"

"Nope. All I remember is waking up in a yellow room. I didn't even know my family."

"When did you start remembering?"

I frowned. "I didn't. They filled in the blanks with stories of stuff we'd

done, but I don't actually remember any of it."

"That's crazy. Hey, they could've told you anything."

I laughed. "Yeah, they could've had fun with that one. 'We're a normal family and you and your brother fight like cats and dogs' is pretty boring."

"They could have made you a princess. Or you could really be a princess, and they stole you away to—"

"Okay," I said, cutting him off, "You have an overactive imagination."

Smiling, he replied, "Sorry. It's just a bit weird."

"Totally weird. I repressed everything because of the traumatic experience, apparently."

"Think you'll ever get your memory back?"

I shrugged. "Probably not. Doesn't matter, though."

"I suppose not. I would just hate to have *four years* and a lot of experiences I couldn't remember."

"It bugged me before but not now. Lots of people don't remember much of their childhood, I just don't remember the first four years."

"Did you try therapy or get hypnotised?"

I laughed. "Nope. It's really not that big of a deal. I tried remembering, but there's nothing there."

He smiled. "One day you will remember."

I gave up believing that about four years ago.



## **Scarlett**

ONE HUNDRED AND eleven. That was how many texts had gone back and forth between me and Noah in the six days we'd known each other. It was a ridiculous amount of texts to send a virtual stranger. But he didn't feel like a stranger. We'd talked about almost everything, our likes and dislikes, family, friends, funniest moments, darkest moments. Although there was a lot more to learn about each other, I felt that I knew him pretty well already. He seemed determined to know everything there was to know about plain old me.

After a full school week of flirting our arses off, I had fully entered the obsessive realm and now my every thought pretty much involved Noah. I annoyed myself and was sure my family now hated me.

"I'm leaving in a minute," I said to my parents.

"Who's meeting you?"

"No one. I'm walking to Noah's, then were heading to town together."

Dad's dark eyebrow lifted. "We'll take you to this Noah kid's house. It's about time we meet him."

"What?" No, that was not happening.

"Honey, you don't expect us to let you go to the house of someone you barely know, and we've never met, do you?" Mum said.

"Yes! That is *exactly* what I expect. Noah's fine."

"I'm sure he is but if you're going to be hanging out with him outside of school, then we need to know him," Dad added. "I'll just get the keys."

"You can't be serious? Why're you doing this to me? Do you have *any* idea how embarrassing it's going to be when I turn up with my parents?" Did they skip being teenagers altogether?

Jeremy laughed. "I'm really enjoying this."

Glaring at him, I said, "I hate you."

"Alright, drama queen," Mum said. "Get your jacket and we'll go now."

“Can you at least wait in the car?”

“That defeats the objective of meeting Noah.”

Following her, I grumbled, “I know.”

Mum was really excited on the way. I was not. They followed closely behind as we got out of the car and walked up his drive. I knocked on Noah’s door and took a deep breath. He hadn’t told me if his parents were home or not. Mine were standing behind me. A guy that looked like Noah opened the door. His brother.

“Are you Scarlett?” he asked.

“Yep. You’re Finn, right?” He nodded and stepped aside for us. “This is my mum and dad, Marissa and Jonathan.”

“It is nice to meet you all. Come in. Noah is around somewhere. Can I get you anything? Are you thirsty?”

I shook my head. “I’m good, thanks.”

“No thank you, Finn,” Dad said. “Are your parents home?”

“Yes, in the kitchen, come through.”

I followed Finn into a glossy, white kitchen. He sat on a stool at the counter so I followed, wishing Noah would hurry up. Why hadn’t Finn shouted him yet?

Noah’s parents turned around. They were both effortlessly beautiful, just like their sons.

“Marissa and Jonathan, these are my parents, Bethan and Shaun.”

Bethan’s eyes lit up. “Scarlett! It is so lovely to finally meet you. And I am so glad your parents came, too. Jonathan, Marissa, how do you do?”

I slinked off to the side, sitting on a stool the other side of Finn.

“So, what are you going to see?” Noah’s carbon copy, big brother asked.

“No idea. We just go and see whatever’s on. It’s kind of a thing my friends and I do.”

“Really? Have you seen many awful movies?”

“Tons,” I replied.

Finn smiled, and it made him look even more handsome, though not as much as Noah, but then I was pretty much obsessed with his younger brother.

“Do I need to ask what your intentions with Noah are?” he asked, fighting another smile.

Laughing, I swivelled on my stool and rested my arms on the counter. “I promise my intentions are good.”

“He will be so disappointed,” he replied, winking. “Tell me about

yourself, Scarlett.”

“Not much to tell really.”

“So you are the average teenager? No skeletons in your closet?”

I held my finger up. “I stole a Freddo from a sweet shop when I was ten. But I felt so bad that I couldn’t eat it.”

He laughed. “A regular little rebel, aren’t you.”

“Totally badass,” I replied, killing the American accent with one syllable.

“I thought I heard the door,” Noah said, eyes widening when he saw my parents chatting to his. My breath caught. Every single time I saw him I felt like I was floating. Or falling. “Why didn’t you call me, Finn?”

“If you weren’t too busy doing you hair you would have been down here to let her in, *girlie*.”

Ah, brotherly love.

“Sorry about my brother,” Noah said. “And these are your parents?”

Mum and Dad turned around, and another round of introductions started.

I watched my dad closely, his shoulders relaxed, and he smiled as he spoke to Noah. Yes! Clearly he didn’t think Noah was about to murder me then.

“I guess we should get going and let these kids get to the cinema,” Mum said. “It was lovely to meet you all. We’ll have to get together sometime.”

Bethan touched Mum’s arm. “That would be fantastic. We don’t know very many people here.”

“Ready?” I asked Noah. “Or do you need more time to do your hair?”

Finn laughed, offering his hand for a high-five. I took it, earning a glare from the guy I couldn’t seem to get out of my head.

“Okay, you are never meeting my brother again,” Noah said, pulling me off the stool. I swooned inwardly at the feel of his soft-yet-firm hand covering mine.

We made a quick exit, leaving my parents to continue talking to his, and set out for the shortcut to town. I was so looking forward to spending time with him outside school that I was practically skipping.

“Favourite holiday?”

“Hmm,” I murmured. “It’s between Christmas and Easter. Probably Easter.”

“Why Easter?”

“We go to visit my grandparents and they put on a massive egg hunt. They own a farm, so it literally takes all day to find the eggs. Then we light a fire in



their living room, drink hot chocolate and eat our eggs. Sugar coma central, but I love it!”

Noah grinned down at me, and my heart soared.

“What about you?”

He frowned. “Holidays aren’t that big in my family. Christmas, I suppose. So you will be away over Easter?”

“Yep. In Cornwall so we’ll be there Thursday night until Monday afternoon. My friends usually do something Monday night if you want to come, too?”

“What do you do?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Just hang out. Imogen has an outdoor pool, so we spend the day in the water. The guys burn BBQ food.”

“You go in an outdoor swimming pool in April?”

“Yeah. Last year was okay, but the year before the English weather was not kind to us.”

“You still did it?”

“Yep, it’s tradition.”

“Crazy tradition,” he muttered, making me laugh.

We approached the cinema, and I saw my friends standing outside. I wanted longer alone with him. “And here we are. Hey, guys,” I said.

“Hey,” Imogen said, immediately taking a not so subtle step closer to Noah. “We can’t decide between scary or romantic.”

“Yes, we can,” Bobby said. “I ain’t watchin’ nothin’ lovey, so we’re going for the Slasher.”

Imogen rolled her eyes. “Fine! Whatever.”

“Slasher is cool with me,” I said. “Noah?”

He raised his eyebrow as if to say ‘or romance, really?’

Bobby clapped his hands together. “Settled then. It’s showin’ in half an hour so should we go to the arcade first?”

With previews, it’d be an hour before the film started.

Without answering Bobby’s question, we set off towards the arcade, opposite the cinema. Imogen stormed ahead. Since they broke up last year, Imogen had been cold with Bobby – because *he* broke up with her. She didn’t like that. Imogen Forest wasn’t supposed to be dumped.

“I think I’m going kick your arse at air hockey,” Noah said, nudging me with his elbow.

“Probably. I’m rubbish.”

Chris gave me a disapproving look. He knew I didn't suck. I was actually champ of our group, but that didn't mean I could beat Noah. I had no idea how he played so I didn't want him to know I was good.

"Yep, Scar-Scar couldn't hit it straight if her life were on the line."

"Thanks, *Chrissie!*"

When I first arrived at school, Chris was the one to show me around, and he took me into his group of friends – which I quickly adopted as mine, too.

We got in the arcade, and the guys went to change some money. Chris grabbed my arm and led me to the sidewall. "What's going on with you and the new boy?"

Trying not to grin like a moron, I shrugged. "Not much."

"Not much? You two are all flirty, flirty, gonna suck each other's faces off any minute. He's watching us right now, trying to work out if there's anything going on. Should I kiss you?" His face lit up with mischief.

I whacked his arm. "Don't you dare, Christopher!"

"Fine, Miss Boring. Has he not tried anything yet?"

"I've known him two minutes."

Imogen slotted beside us and raised her perfectly plucked eyebrows. "Maybe he's gay."

"So what if he is," I replied, secretly hoping he wasn't.

Chris rolled his eyes. "He's not gay! He clearly knows *you're* not easy."

He was having a dig at Imogen because Im wasn't playing along with the best friend thing. If she weren't attracted to Noah, she would be as supportive as Chris.

We all looked over to Noah, who was watching me, talking to someone on his phone and frowning. He looked away as I made eye contact.

"What's that about?" Chris said.

Imogen smirked and shrugged. "Probably his girlfriend."

"Shut up, Im," I said.

"Sorry," she muttered, holding her hands up.

Noah hung up, slipped the phone in his pocket and jogged back to us.

"Everything okay?" I asked. *Please don't have a girlfriend!* It would be pretty crappy of him if he had, we'd been flirting and texting constantly.

"Everything is fine," he said, casually throwing his arm over my shoulder. It was a friendly move, but it made my insides turn to mush. Imogen rolled her eyes and turned away. I didn't care what she thought.

We walked to the air hockey table with Noah's arm around me and Chris

winking over my shoulder. I wasn't complaining.



## Three

### **Noah**

I SAT THROUGH another un-insightful English Literature lesson, bored out of my mind. We had yet to leave the classroom in my two weeks in mainstream school. Learning wasn't just about reading from textbooks.

Scarlett sat beside me. I'd made sure to sit next to her enough that now her friends leave a space open for me if I don't make it to class first. She didn't seem to have any issue with it.

Unsurprisingly, we were reading Shakespeare. What I didn't understand was once we'd finished *Romeo and Juliet* we'd be watching the film. It was as if the teachers had given up.

Imogen turned around and said, "Movies and arcade tonight?"

"I do hope your interruption to the lesson has something to do with the Montague's and Capulet's, Miss Forest," Mr Stevenson said.

Imogen turned back, scowling and muttered, "Sorry, sir."

"You want to come tonight, too?" Scarlett whispered when Mr Stevenson went back to whatever he was doing at his desk.

"I thought that maybe we could do something together instead."

She blinked three times before replying, "We went together last time."

"I know, but everyone was there, too."

Scarlett was awful at concealing how she felt. Her eyes widened a fraction, and her posture lifted. "What do you want to do?"

"I'd like to take you on a walk."

"A walk?"

"Yes," I replied smiling. So far we'd not spent time alone, her friends were always with us. I needed to get her alone. "I promise you'll enjoy it."

She turned her nose up. "Doubt it but I'll go."

Of course she would. "Great, I'll pick you up at four to give you time to change after school."

Nodding her head, she went back to reading. It was obvious that she didn't

want to walk, but she did want to spend time with me. I needed to be able to get her to do things.

The bell rang, signalling lunchtime. I closed the book, which I'd already read when I was nine and put it in my bag. "You hungry?" I asked Scarlett as we left the classroom.

"Starving. I'm getting chips today for sure."

"You know they're cooked in a lot of oil don't you?"

"Yep," she replied.

That was another thing I didn't understand. Far too many people didn't care about what they put *inside* their body. They ate things they *knew* were bad for them.

"What're you having? Another salad?"

"Probably," I replied. It was about the only thing I knew wasn't crawling with chemicals and additives. "It's nice, you should try it."

She halted. "You think I need to swap chips for a salad?"

"What the hell, Noah?" Imogen snapped. "How dare you call her fat!"

"What? I never called her fat." I turned to Scarlett. "You know that's not what I meant." She frowned, and I panicked. Touching her arm, I smiled. "Come on, you don't think that's what I was saying. There's not one part of you that needs to change. I was just talking on a health level, not weight loss."

"Scarlett, come with me," Imogen said, glaring at me.

"Why does she need to take you away? I've explained the misunderstanding," I said, stroking Scarlett's forearm with my thumb.

"It's fine, Im, I know what he meant."

"Seriously? I know you're not used to a lot of attention from a boy, but this is ridiculous."

Scarlett shrank and bit the inside of her lip. I wanted bite back and tell Imogen exactly what I thought of her, but that probably wouldn't do me many favours with Scarlett.

"I think maybe you should go and find Bobby and Chris before you hurt your *best friend's* feelings even more," I said.

"This is a joke. Why are you letting him walk all over you?" Imogen said.

"I'm not walking all over her, Imogen, you are."

She held her hands up. "Whatever."

I waited until she left to say, "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," she replied. "Think she'll talk to me again anytime soon?"

“Honestly, I think she’s the one that should be worrying about that. She had no right to talk to you that way.”

Scarlett shrugged. “She gets like that sometimes.”

I gritted my teeth and let go of her arm. Why didn’t she stand up for herself more?

“Well, I’m sorry for my part in it,” I said, sidestepping so I was in front of her.

She gazed up and bit her lip. Her dark blue eyes shone. She really was incredibly beautiful. The longer I stared at her, the harder my heart beat. “It wasn’t your fault,” she whispered, her eyes flicking to my lips and then back up.

Heat flooded through my body. I wanted to kiss her, too. She was so alluring, so sweet and pure. I couldn’t kiss her. Not yet. I had to remember what I was doing here.

I exhaled hard. “Let’s get you those chips.”

Grinning she replied, “Nah, I might try a salad since I have it on good authority that they don’t suck.”

Laughing, I put my hand on her back and led her into the canteen towards the salad bar. “They definitely don’t *suck*.”

After school, I went home to change into some warmer clothes and my walking boots and left to get Scarlett.

She opened her front door and pouted. “Is this appropriate walking wear?”

“Yes, you look great.” She had on a fleece zip up jacket, slim jeans and boots.

“Okay, let’s go walking then.”

“Are your parents in? Shouldn’t I talk to them about where we’re going first?”

Giggling, she shook her head. “They’re both at work still. I’ve told Jeremy, though.”

“Alright, let’s go.”

“Where exactly are we going?”

“You have a great countryside here, so we’re going to explore it a little. I promise to have you back before dark.”

As we walked along the path, I took her hand. She was warm and inviting and so unable to hide her smile that it almost made me laugh. I liked the feel of her hand in mine far too much.

“Okay. I’ve not really explored where I live before.”

“Why not?”

“Well, we moved around a lot growing up. We’ve been here about three years now, and it’s the longest we’ve stayed in the same place.”

“Really? Why do you move so often?”

“Dad’s work.”

“Oh,” I replied, looking away. I wondered if they would ever give her the true reason. “Do you think you’ll move again?”

“Not sure. They seem settled so hopefully not. I have friends now.”

“You didn’t before?”

“No, there was no point. We’d move on and lose contact, so I stopped trying to get to know people.”

That sounded so painfully lonely. If she had never been taken she wouldn’t have ever had to know what loneliness felt like.

“The people I’m friends with back home I’ve known since I was little. We’re a close community. I can’t imagine what it was like to grow up with just your brother.”

She lazily lifted a shoulder in a shrug. “I didn’t know any different, so it was fine.”

“You may have. Did you move a lot before the fire?”

“I...I don’t think so, but I’m not sure. We could have.”

“Do you not know much about that time?”

“I remember nothing,” she said.

“But your parents must have told you all about it.”

“I guess.”

Why doesn’t she want to remember? I wanted her to, *needed* her to.

“Perhaps you’ll get those memories back one day.”

She would. I was determined to push gently and often to get her to try to remember.

We took a public footpath and followed it through fields and past forests. The familiarity of it settled something inside. I missed my community so much but when I was outside I felt a connection to them through nature and being among elements.

Soon Scarlett would understand how that felt, too.



## **Noah**

I HAD NEVER been excited to see a girl before. Scarlett made me feel things I didn't think I'd experience until I was a lot older. I wasn't supposed to feel *anything* for her. That shouldn't be possible.

The doorbell rang, and I wiped my hands on my jeans. That was her. My parents were sitting reading on the sofa opposite. They looked up and smiled.

"Are you ready, Noah?" Dad asked.

I nodded once and stood. "I'm always ready."

There was a lot riding on my ability to win over Scarlett. I had to make this work. Taking a look in the mirror in the hallway, I took a deep breath and gave myself a silent pep talk. Thinking of home gave me strength. There was a lot of distance between me and my people but knowing they were all behind me spurred me on.

I opened the door, and she was standing holding a carrier bag and grinning as much as I probably was. Being around her was euphoric.

April had rolled around quickly. I loved spring; everything was coming to life again, and the air was considerably warmer.

"Ready for our movie night? I can't believe you've not had a movie night in with friends before."

I shrugged and moved to let her inside. "I prefer to be outside."

"Well, you've been missing out on something great."

"Hello, Scarlett," Mum said, conveniently walking out of the living room as Scarlett came in. They were going to have to stop popping up everywhere, or it was going to look weird.

"Hi, Mrs York."

"Call me Bethan, remember?" Mum said.

Scarlett nodded. "Right."

"What do you two have planned for today then?"

Holding up the bag, she replied, "Snacks and movies."



“That sounds fun. Keep your bedroom door open please, Noah.”

I frowned. Supposedly, they trusted me but every time I was told to leave my door open or not to rush things, I felt like I was being judged—that my loyalty was in question. I knew the proper way to handle this. I wasn’t going to mess it up.

I liked her, yes. I could fool my family, but I couldn’t fool myself. That didn’t mean I was going to throw everything away over a teenage crush.

“I will,” I replied a little harder than I would usually talk to my parents. *Trust me.* With a curt nod, Mum retreated to the living room. “Come on then, show me how much fun a movie night is.”

Smiling, she walked past me, heading up the stairs to my bedroom. I couldn’t help watching her. She was petite, but her slim legs and slight frame made her look taller. Her dusty brunette hair cascaded down her back in loose, messy waves.

“Okay,” she said, turning to me once we were in my room. “Which one do you want to watch first? *Batman Begins* or *Spider-Man*?”

I shrugged. “I haven’t seen either, so it’s your choice.”

“What? You’ve *never* seen the *Batman* or *Spider-Man* movies?”

“No.”

“Noah, where have you been living for the last sixteen years!”

I forced out a laugh and took *Batman Begins* from her outstretched hand. “This one first.”

“Well, I know you’ve at least had popcorn but please tell me you’ve also had Oreos before.”

Grinning, I replied, “I was raised on a pretty remote farm on a tiny island, but I am not *that* sheltered.” I was. Until she held the packet up I had no idea what an Oreo was.

“I don’t know, you’ve not watched much TV, never had movie nights, you don’t eat a whole lot of junk and you’ve never had a girlfriend before.”

“Funny how I meet you soon after I’ve corrected all of that.” My heart jumped as I realised what I’d said. I knew I needed the girlfriend/boyfriend title, but that wasn’t exactly how I envisioned it happening. She had to feel special. It had to be romantic. And not just because that’s what I needed in order for her to put every ounce trust in me.

Unfortunately, Scarlett didn’t miss it either. She watched me carefully, silently. “*Have* you done all of them now?”

“Is that what you want?”

She frowned. “No way, I asked you first!”

Laughing, I put the DVD down on the bed, followed by the bag she was still clutching and bent my head level with hers. “Well, I think it’s a pretty good idea.”

“We’ve not known each other long,” she replied. Her voice was low, almost a whisper.

“I know, but I like what I’ve seen so far. I’m not proposing, Scarlett, you’re not forced to be with me forever. Look, this is new to me, but I like you, and I’d like to see what happens.”

She broke into a heart-stopping smile that did nothing to help me control my feelings for her. “In that case, I’m in,” she replied.

We stared at each other like morons as the air thickened. I was supposed to kiss her. I’d never kissed a girl before. She had an ex-boyfriend, so the likelihood of her having kissed someone before was high. I didn’t want to look like an inexperienced fool.

Now was the time, though. I’d let things go on for far too long with very little physical contact. She wanted to take things further, had for a while now, but I couldn’t rush anything with her and risk it burning out.

Reaching out, I gently grabbed her hips and brought her closer. Her hands fell on my chest, and she splayed her fingers, running them over my shoulders. Yes, she had definitely done this before.

I leaned in and my heart went wild as I felt her breath across my lips. This was uncharted territory but being this close to her, having my hands on her and hers on me, felt so natural it scared me. The feelings I had for her were almost so overwhelming I wanted to run and hide from them. I understood love; I felt it for a multitude of people, but this was different. This was confusing, exciting, terrifying and so, so strong already.

I closed the inch between us when I couldn’t stand it anymore. Her lips were smooth and soft and melded to mine perfectly. Scarlett was warm and felt like home. It was more than I had ever imagined.

Her hands found their way into my hair, and I pulled her tighter against my body. I grazed her bottom lip with my tongue, and she twisted her fingers through the light strands at the back of my head. My heart hammered every second I kissed her. We pulled away at the same time.

I saw, for the first time, that she *was* the light.

“So... *Batman Returns* then?” I asked, clearing my throat and holding onto her. I tried to control my breathing and my erratic heart rate so she

wouldn't know just how much she had affected me.

Nodding with a show-stopping smile, she replied, "Good film."

I gave her a chaste kiss and let go. "Get comfortable. I'll put it on."

Scarlett sat closer to me when I got on the bed. Before we left a small gap between us but now her arm was firmly pressed against mine. I wanted her closer and further away at the same time.

"Ready to experience a movie night?" she asked as the film started.

My arm was itching to be around her. I could smell her berry shampoo; it was as confusing as it was comforting.

"I'm ready," I replied, lying. Whatever was going on between us was real, and I was definitely not ready for that.



IT WAS ALMOST Easter, and I found out just how much Scarlett loved the holiday. Her room was full of decorative eggs, chicks and rabbits. Light blue and yellow banners hung twisted around each other on the wall above her bed.

Her enthusiasm was both cute and addictive. Since we got together officially, my parents had kept an eye on us from afar, and hers had been... Well, less far. As much as I wanted to spend time with her completely alone and uninterrupted, I understood why her parents had a door wide-open rule.

She lay against my side as we watched *Transformers*. Movie days had sort of become our tradition. I grew up without TV, so Scarlett was determined to show me what I had missed out on. I still preferred to be outside but I did love spending time with her – whatever we were doing.

"I remember playing with *Transformers* when I was little. Me and Finn used to fight over who got the yellow one. At least I think it was those."

She looked up from where she was resting on my shoulder. "I can't imagine you and Finn fighting, you're so close."

"Believe me, we used to. What about you and Jeremy?"

"We got along better when we were little. I'm not sure if we fought before the accident. We probably did."

I watched her for a minute, taking in the darkness of her midnight blue eyes. They were unusual, beautiful.

"What? You still think I'm weird for not remembering, don't you?" she asked.

“No, of course not. I find it strange that you don’t *want* to remember but not that you can’t.”

Sitting up her posture became defensive. “I do want to, but I can’t do it. I’ve tried a few times over the years, and it just ends up with me getting so frustrated that I feel like I’m going crazy. It hurts to try, Noah. Physically, too. It gives me headaches.”

“Alright,” I said. “I’m sorry. But if it is something you want to do, I can help. Perhaps I can take the pressure off you somewhat. I don’t like you wanting something but being too afraid to go and get it.”

She pursed her lips. “If I ever decide to try again, I’ll let you know.”

Holding both hands up, I replied, “Alright. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“Can we just watch the movie now?”

I leaned back against the headboard and held my arm out for her. Reluctantly, she lay down with me and tucked herself back into my side again. Something felt wrong, and I realised that I didn’t like her being angry with me, even if it wouldn’t last long.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered again and kissed the top of her head. This needed to be fixed. I didn’t feel right, and I knew I wouldn’t until we were okay again.

“It’s okay,” she replied, holding me tighter and breathing me in. I closed my eyes, enjoying seeing and feeling how she felt about me.

That was our first real disagreement, the first time she’d shied away from me and gotten angry. I wanted to do everything in my power to make sure that never happened again, even though I knew that was impossible.



## **Scarlett**

I WAS ON such a high. It was the last day of school before Easter. Noah and I walked along the corridor hand in hand, trailing behind Imogen, Chris and Bobby. Noah was gravity. Everything was better when he was around.

In two days, I was going to my grandparents' for the weekend, and although I would miss Noah, I couldn't wait. The Easter egg hunt was at the front of my mind. We'd even probably find a few from last year. No matter how old you got you still had a basket, and you still went searching.

"I'll see you at lunch," Noah said as we parted ways to go to our one different class.

Imogen pulled me through the door, and we took our seats. She was still a little sour about me being with Noah and him not paying her one bit of attention. I tried to not let it bother me, but it was annoying that she couldn't be happy for me. If she had a boyfriend right now, I was sure it'd be a different story.

"Have you slept with him yet?" she asked.

I was taken aback. Imogen was a little too open with things like that but I didn't expect her to come right out and ask, especially since we'd only been officially together four weeks, and it'd be my first time.

"No, but thank you for asking."

She rolled her eyes. "Don't be such a prude. Do you think guys like Noah are going to hang around forever?"

"I'm pretty sure I wouldn't make him wait forever and Noah's not like that." He really wasn't. He didn't make constant sexual innuendos and talk to girls' breasts. He'd shown me nothing but respect and hadn't even mentioned us having sex yet. I wasn't sure where his head was, although when he kissed me I had a pretty good idea, but he wasn't the type to push.

"Of course he's not. You're too naïve."

"That's the kind of guy you're used to, Imogen. They're not all like that."

“Wow, thanks so much, Scarlett.”

“Come on! You can’t tell me my boyfriend is going to dump me if I don’t put out and then be offended when I come back with the truth. You’re my friend, Imogen, so I’m going to be honest and tell you when you’re being a cow. You get your heart broken because you go for guys that you *know* are only after one thing. Sorry, but that doesn’t really leave you much room to complain or judge.”

Mr Waters started the class, and I’d never been so happy to begin a Math lesson before. Imogen pretended to be engrossed in the equations we were given, but I knew she was only doing it to ignore me. I didn’t like hurting my friend, but I wasn’t going to take keep taking her crap.

My phone vibrated once in my pocket, and thankfully Mr Waters was over on the other side of the room helping someone, so he hadn’t heard it. I slid the phone halfway out of my pocket and opened the message. It was from Noah, of course. **My place after school. Everyone is out.**

It wasn’t often that we got time alone so I sent back an immediate reply of ‘yes’ and shoved my phone back away.

School passed far too slowly, but that was only because it was the last day. Me and Noah walked back to his place after I’d got the okay and a back by nine o’clock reminder from my mum. I hadn’t told Imogen about Noah’s text because she would only give me that I-told-you-so expression that I could do without. It wasn’t her business anyway.

“So where are your parents and Finn?” I asked.

“Mum and Dad are visiting friends and won’t be back until the early hours of the morning and Finn is taking a girl from work out on a date. Hopefully, he won’t be back before I have to get you home.”

“I’m sure he won’t, unless the date is really bad.”

He squeezed my hand. “Let’s hope they like each other then.”

We got back to his house and he went straight in the kitchen, knowing I needed a post-school snack. His family were health freaks, though, so I knew I wouldn’t be getting crisps or chocolate. That didn’t matter; their food was amazing *and* healthy.

Noah fixed us some carrot and cucumber sticks, fresh, homemade bread, cheese, and dip. We sat down in the living room to eat and watch their TV that looked like it belonged in a museum. They weren’t big on TV.

We ate, snuggled up on the sofa. It was perfect.

“So, what’re you cooking for dinner to top this?” I asked, taking a bite of

carrot.

“I thought you might cook for me. You know, since you are the one leaving me for four days.”

Shrugging one shoulder, I leant further into him. “Sure, if you don’t mind oven chips and a frozen pizza.”

As I thought, he turned his nose up. “No, thanks. I’ll teach you to cook something decent.”

“Pizza is decent.”

“Freshly made pizza is decent,” he countered.

“You’re teaching me to make fresh pizza? Like the dough, too?”

“Yes.”

This could end badly, but I was surprisingly excited. We weren’t completely alone much, and this was likely to be the only time before I went away. I was glad we weren’t just spending the afternoon watching the telly. “Alright. Don’t let me ruin it, though.”

“You won’t ruin it.”

Yeah, we’ll see about that.

We went up to his room to chill before starting dinner in a little while. I sat on his bed, and Noah stood by his desk, tapping his fingers on his sketchpad. He was incredible and could draw pictures that looked like photographs – it was breath taking. He’d only just let me see them, and I seriously hated him for how much artistic talent he had. I had none.

I could tell he was considering showing me something but was nervous and maybe a little unsure of it. Suppressing the urge to beg him to show me, I pretended to look around his room. The decision had to come from him.

He bit his lip, picked the pad up and held it close to his chest. “I’ve been working on something.”

My eyes lit up. “I know. You’ve been keeping it hidden. Are you ready to share?” He would absolutely not let me see anything that was unfinished.

“I am, but I’m worried.”

“Why?”

“You have to promise me it won’t scare you. It’s something I have been thinking about recently.”

“I won’t freak, I promise. What is it?”

“Well, even though we’ve not been together long at all, I do think about our future, and I’m not saying I want to rush into anything, but it is on my mind.”

I held my hands out, on cloud nine. “Show me!”

Taking a deep breath, he gave me the pad and turned away. He hated watching someone looking through his work. It was really personal to him, and I loved that he shared it with me.

I flipped the pad over, and the picture made my heart stop. It was me and him, probably about five years older than we were now, standing outside a beautiful wooden house, surrounded by a meadow.

“You said you wanted to live in the city in a posh apartment, but I couldn’t see it. I hope you don’t hate this,” he said.

God, he made me ache.

“Are you kidding? This is incredible.” It brought tears to my eyes. I loved him and our mapped out future so much I thought I might burst. How could he think I would freak out? This was perfect. I was fairly certain that unless he cheated or killed someone, he was with the one I wanted to spend my life with.

There was no way anything could be as beautiful or peaceful in the city. Everything changed as I stared at a drawing of us, arms around each other, happy as a person could be surrounded by nature. I wanted that. I wanted to live a life with Noah where we’d have more time to enjoy things, rather than rushing around a busy city, taking hours to get anywhere and bumping into people every second. I wanted our house to be surrounded by land we could enjoy and fresh air.

“I want this, too, Noah. I have even less idea of what I’d do if we lived in the country like this, but I want it more than a built up city. I don’t care if I don’t earn as much money.”

He finally looked up, and his smile melted me. “You have no idea how much I want it, too.”

“Well, it’s done,” I said, my voice thick with emotion. “After university we’ll move to the country and live the simple life. I want goats and those cute little micro pigs.”

Laughing, he sat beside me and stroked my jaw, stealing my breath again. His eyes were alight. I couldn’t stop staring at him. “You want a farm?”

“If I’m living in the country like this, I want animals.” I handed him back the pad and instructed him to add them in. He did it awkwardly with one arm around me. It would be much easier if he let me go, but he didn’t want to. Neither did I.

I spent the next hour watching him draw pictures of my animals. He



laughed through it, even adding chicks, rabbits, a cow and a llama. I added a stick sheep with a bad woolly body. It was stupid fun and had us laughing, flirting and kissing the whole time.

At six we went downstairs to make the pizzas. Noah got the ingredients, and I got a wooden bowl and spoon. He didn't bother measuring anything out, so I left him to put everything in, and I just stirred it until it was thick enough to knead.

Noah slapped the dough down on the worktop and smirked. "Go on, get kneading!"

It was gross, I hated when things stuck to my hands and it greatly amused him, but I was having fun cooking with him.

I pushed the dough down with the palm of my hand and froze.

Noah, sensing something was wrong, asked, "You okay?"

I shook my head, clearing my thoughts. "Yeah, just had a major sense of déjà vu."

"Really? With what?"

"Kneading this with my palm. I've never done it before, so it must be when I attempted chocolate chip Christmas tree biscuits with Mum a few years ago."

"Strange," he said with a shrug. "Hey, perhaps you have done this before, you just don't remember it."

I looked down. "Noah, please."

"No." He lifted my chin and bent down to look right into my eyes. "I'm sorry, I'm not bringing it up again, and I don't want to upset you."

"No, I overreacted. You're allowed to talk about it. Wow, I really am different, aren't I?"

"Yes, you are." Ouch. "You are completely different because there is no one else who is perfect to me and for me. Different *is not* a bad thing."

He was still the same height as me, so I leaned forwards and kissed him. His arms quickly wound around my back, and I was pulled onto my tiptoes, flush with his chest. My hands were still gross and sticky from the dough, but that didn't seem to worry him as I gripped his hair.

Noah pushed me against the worktop and ran his hands down my back. When I felt my insides burst into flames, I pulled back. I had the desire to be with him, but I wasn't ready. Why couldn't my body and mind be more in sync?

He kissed my forehead, breathing just a little too fast. "We should get the

dough kneaded and rested soon or this pizza is going to be awful.”

I took a deep breath and tried to get my body under control. “Sounds good. I’m getting hungry.”

We spent the rest of the evening relaxing together. We didn’t mention my loss of memory again because it always turned things tense between us. I hoped he would get past the oddness of it, or I would remember already because I didn’t want anything causing friction between us.

I spent the next couple days – supervised – with Noah and then it was time to go to my grandparents’. I wasn’t sad that I wouldn’t see him, although I’d miss him because we were keeping in touch and, as he’d said, we had our whole lives ahead of us so what was four little days? I seriously loved him.



## **Scarlett**

I WAITED, IMPATIENTLY, in the car with Jeremy as our parents had yet another conversation *after* they'd said bye. We'd had a great weekend and I was sad to leave but could we not just go already!

"Seriously, we shouldn't even get off the sofa until they're in the car," I said, pressing my forehead against the window.

Mum and her parents could talk solidly until the end of time. Getting together again had always been a huge deal as far back as I could remember – which was actually only twelve years.

"Yep," Jeremy agreed, and I looked over at him. He didn't even glance up from his phone, which had been glued to his hand the entire weekend. "It was really annoying when you were a whiney baby and I had to try amusing you while they were still talkin'."

"Still texting Amie? You so *lurve* her."

"How's Noah?"

"Touché, big bro." I looked back out of the window and expected him to make another comment but he was too engrossed in reading her new text. Well, at least *she* was still talking to him; I hadn't heard anything from Noah all day.

Mum and Dad finally got in the car and Mum wound down her window, ready to talk more. "You two ready?" she asked over her shoulder.

Jeremy looked up then. "You for real? We've been sitting in here for fifteen-bloody-minutes."

"Language, Jeremy," Dad scolded, frowning at him in the mirror.

"Can we just go please, Jonathan?" Mum said to Dad and waved out of the window. "See you soon. Bye! Love you!"

"You kids wanna stop off at McDonalds for lunch?" Dad asked. "We won't be home until after two."

"KFC and you've got a deal," Jeremy replied.

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t think they’re trying to make a deal, idiot.”

Mum sighed. “Jon, just stop at whichever one you see in an hour.”

This was going to be a long drive. I pressed the home button on my phone, again, to check if I’d missed a text from Noah, again. Nothing. I was being stupid. It was only one day that I hadn’t heard from him, but I was used to waking up with a text and then shooting messages back and forth all day.

I loved that we could talk so much and never get tired. We never ran out of things to say but if we weren’t talking we’d just enjoy the un-awkward silence together. We’d not even been together for two months but I already felt so much more for him than I did for my ex, Jack, in the eight months we were going out.

Slipping my phone in my pocket, I reasoned with myself. I did not need to text him every waking minute of the day – it was nice – but I didn’t need to. We were seeing each other when I got home so I’d message him later to confirm that we were still on and ask if he were okay.

Feeling better about my decision not to go stalker on him, I lay back against the seat and closed my eyes. I was settled, the steady hum and movement of the car threatening to send me to sleep any second. I welcomed it. Easter was amazing but exhausting.

“No!” Dad snapped, suddenly tugging on the steering wheel. The car jolted to the left. My eyes flew open and I gasped as I was thrown against Jeremy’s side. A scream ripped its way up my throat.

“Jonathan,” Mum shouted at the same time Jeremy and Dad swore.

I heard loud horns beeping from several cars as Dad tried to steady the car. He slammed the breaks on as a minibus swerved in front of us.

I screamed again as we’re hit from behind. My body flew forward before it was caught by the seatbelt locking on. The sound of crunching steel and smashing glass pierced through my ears. My heart raced and I gripped Jeremy’s hand as someone else smashed into us from the side, making our car hurtle towards the hard shoulder on the motorway – a ditch. Trees!

*Oh, God.* I squeezed my eyes closed and everything moved in slow motion. We hit a large tree trunk but I was out before the car stopped.



## **Scarlett**

I TRIED TO open my eyes but they felt like they'd been glued shut. My mind was in overdrive trying to piece everything together. We were in the car. There was screaming and we must have crashed but I couldn't remember.

Did we hit something or did something hit us? Was everyone okay?

Glass. I remember smashing glass and a big grey building. But we couldn't have been in a building. Did we hit a building? No, a tree. Where was the building then? My head throbbed and I wasn't sure if it was because I'd hit it or because I was trying too hard to remember. And then I was drifting, or more like being pulled.

Mummy brushed my hair and I closed my eyes, smiling. I loved it when she played with my hair. "Can I have pigtails, please?"

"Of course," she replied. "You can have anything you want, my special girl."

"Mummy, can I do your hair, too?" I asked.

"You can but Mummy's hair won't look as pretty as yours. Mine is too short." She sat down and handed me the brush. I combed it through her short, blonde hair, pretending to be the mum.

"I want to be a hairdresser when I'm older."

"Oh, sweetheart, you are destined for greater things."

My eyes finally flicked open but only for a second. The light slides through the gap and I wince, closing them immediately.

"Scarlett!" I heard Jeremy say. "Hey, can you do that again? Scarlett, open your eyes." I tried to but it was too hard and his voice sounded so far away. Then I was gone again.

I sat with David, Gregory, Linda and Freya, waiting for Mummy and Daddy to get back. The house was crowded today but we were the only ones still and reading. Jeremy ran through the room and out of the other door, chasing Evelyn. I wanted to join in their game but I had to read.

“Auntie Linda, how many days until I’m four?” I knew my birthday was coming up and reading about it with my family made it more exciting.

She didn’t look up from her book but replied, “Twenty-one days to go.”

“I can’t wait!”

“Neither can we,” Gregory said, stroking my hair and pointing back at the book, read to help me again.

“Is my daughter going to be okay?” Mum said. She sounded tired like she’d not slept in weeks.

I tried to remember my dreams but all I could picture was Jeremy running after a little girl I’d never seen before. I didn’t usually dream. Well, I didn’t remember dreaming anyway. There were things I remembered. Mum combing my hair but she looked different. No one I saw was the same. I didn’t recognise anyone but Jer.

“She opened her eyes,” Jeremy said. “She’s going to be fine.”

Another voice I didn’t recognise replied, “It’s a very good sign that she opened them but there’s still some way to go yet. Let’s allow her to rest.”

I didn’t want to rest anymore. I wanted to wake up properly. I hadn’t heard Dad’s voice yet and I needed to know if he was okay. I tried my hardest, willing my eyes to open but it was useless.

The darkness was back for me.

The big room was the prettiest room I’d ever seen, especially because it was in a big, ugly grey warehouse. The floor was covered in leaves and Mummy said that’s because I was so special. My party was going to be the best party ever. Candles were everywhere, making the room really hot. “Wow,” I said, clutching my teddy in my hand.

Daddy held his hand out. He was standing in the middle of the room, in front of circle of rocks filled with green leaves. “Come, sweetheart.”

I walked over to him and looked around. Everyone was here and they were all dressed in white – just like I was. “Where’s Mummy?” I asked.

“Here I am, my special girl,” she said, walking into the room. Everyone moved to stand in a big circle around me, Mummy and Daddy.

Jeremy tugged on someone’s arm, but I couldn’t see who it was because Auntie Linda was blocking them. He looked scared and had tears running down his face. Jeremy was tough and I’d never seen him cry before. It made me want to cry. I didn’t like this anymore. Everyone looked down at me. They were so tall. I was scared. This was scary.

I looked up at Mummy and Daddy. “Can we go home now?” I asked, my

lip trembling.

Mummy shook her head. “No, sweetheart. It is now time.”

Everyone was screaming. The flames were taller than Daddy. I started to cry and my body was shaking. “Mummy! Mummy!” I didn’t know where she was. I was too hot and I dropped to the floor. I wanted Mummy and Daddy to get me but I didn’t see where they went when the fire started.

Someone picked me up but I was falling asleep.

I jolted awake, but I was still in the dark. What was that? I had a horrible, horrible feeling in the pit of my stomach.

“Can you hear me?” Mum asked, stroking my hair. “I can see your eyes moving. Try opening them, honey.” That was all I’d been doing while I was conscious. *Come on*. I forced them open and this time they responded. “Oh, Scarlett.” A tear ran down her cheek. “Thank God you’re awake. Everything’s going to be okay now.”

I nodded slowly and smiled. My head felt like it was being bashed from the inside and my throat was as dry as the desert. “Water?” I croaked.

My heart was still pounding from the dream.

Jeremy was beside me with a cup of water and straw in an instant. “You sure like to be the centre of attention, don’t ya?” he joked, but behind it I could see the relief in his eyes. I sipped from the straw until the water slid down easily and no longer hurt to swallow.

“Dad?” I asked when I’d finished.

“He’s fine, being kept for observation as he had a mild concussion but he’s okay. We brought him to see you earlier today and the doctor says if his latest results come back normal he’ll be discharged this morning.”

Thank God he was okay. “What happened?”

“Some asshole fell asleep at the wheel and caused a six car pile up,” Jeremy replied. I remembered the sounds of the crash and the screams but nothing else.

Mum ignored his colourful language. “There were no fatalities, by some miracle. You came off worst.”

“She always was a drama queen.”

Mum gave him a stern look. “Jeremy, go fetch a doctor, please.” My brother saluted and left the room. “You feeling okay?”

“Head hurts, but I’m fine. I had strange dreams when I was out of it.”

“Oh? What about?”

I frowned. “Um, a hot building, everyone in white, Jeremy chasing

someone. I can't really remember." My brain felt fried. "Were you and Jeremy hurt?"

Mum's lips thinned for a second and then she stroked my hair. "Only a few cuts and bruises. I'll just go see where Jeremy's got to, hurry that doctor up," she said, standing up and dashing out of the room.



## **Noah**

“WANT SOME, NOAH?” Chris asked, holding a bottle of White Lightning out to me. And I thought my parents had exaggerated about teenagers. My life before was fairly sheltered. I spent most of my time with a small group of friends walking, hiking, fishing, camping and building. I wasn’t at all prepared for getting drunk at a park.

“Thanks,” I said, taking a sip and passing it on. The idea was for me to fit in and make friends and I had a feeling asking to put the alcohol down and go exploring would do the exact opposite.

“When’s Scarlett back?” he asked.

Great, going out with Chris and Bobby was supposed to take my mind off her. I was anxious for her to get home. My phone had died and been repaired but when I finally got it back on there was nothing on there from her. She’d be home soon, though.

“This afternoon. I would’ve thought they’d be back already but I’ve not heard yet,” I replied. She was originally going to text me when she got home and I was going over. That should’ve been around two in the afternoon but it was now six and still nothing. But Scarlett told me they all like to talk so it was entirely plausible that they’d stayed the day and were coming home in the evening. I didn’t want to pester.

“Missed her?” he asked, smirking. I had no idea why they felt the need to tease over things like that. Yes, I missed my girlfriend, and I wasn’t afraid to admit it to them.

“A lot,” I replied. They backed down when they knew it didn’t bother me what they thought.

My phone rang an hour later as a second bottle of White Lightning was pulled out of Bobby’s bag. I didn’t care who it was as long as it got me out of drinking that vile stuff again.

“Hello?” I said, answering a number I didn’t recognise.

“Noah, this is Marissa.”

Her eerily calm voice sent chills down my spine. I stood up and walked a few steps away so I could hear her properly. “Marissa? Is everything okay?”

“We’re in the hospital. There was an accident on the way home. Scarlett... She’s doing okay, stable, in and out now, but I think you should come,” she said, her voice finally giving away how scared she was.

I couldn’t go. I could barely function. My muscles tightened, locking up. I felt cold. “Stable and in and out?” That meant something serious had happened. *Stable* was only used when it was touch and go but you were doing alright at that particular time.

Chris and Bobby stood up and moved closer. Both now giving me their full, undivided attention.

“Scarlett and Jonathan were on the side of the car when we hit the trees. They’re okay but they need rest and monitoring.”

I could feel my heart pounding. She’d said Scarlett was ‘stable’. “She’s not awake?”

“No, she’s not right now, but she has been.”

That wasn’t good enough. I needed her awake, properly awake, and chatting to believe she would be alright. I had to get to her.

“I’m on my way. Is there anything you need?”

“No, thank you. She’s on the children’s ward, and me and Jeremy will be there, too.”

“Okay, see you soon,” I said and hung up.

“What’s going on? It’s Scarlett, is she okay?” Bobby asked.

“Yes, they were in an accident. She’s fine, apparently, but I need to go.”

Chris followed as I jogged towards the gate. “Wait, Noah, should we come, too?”

“I don’t think they will even let me in.” I stopped when I reached my bike. “Look, I’ll call you when I know more. Think you can let Imogen know?”  
*Just stop talking to me so I can get to her!*

“Yeah, course,” Bobby replied. “Let us know how she’s doin’ and tell her we’ll visit when we’re allowed.”

“I will,” I said, getting on my bike. “See you later.”

I rode home, peddling as fast as I could. I had never felt so scared before in my life. It was an awful feeling. I couldn’t lose her.

Throwing the front door open, I called, “Mum, Dad, Finn?” I was desperate to get to her, more desperate than I thought I could ever be. I didn’t

like how much she was starting to mean to me.

“Noah, what’s wrong?” Mum said, grabbing my arm. Dad and Finn followed her out of the kitchen.

“Scarlett’s been in an accident. She’s in the hospital.”

Mum’s face fell. “Oh God. How is she, do you know?”

“Stable is all I really know. She’s been awake.” I felt the prickle of tears rush up my spine. I wasn’t going to cry. “We need to go.”

“Absolutely,” Dad said, face ashen. “Get in the car.”

I didn’t question them when they all decided to come. Of course, they were going. Dad grabbed the keys and we rushed to the car.

“Who called you?” Mum asked when we were on the road.

“Marissa.”

“What did she say?”

“Just that. She said they hit trees so, I don’t know, they lost control or something hit them. Scarlett and Jonathan were hurt but he’s awake and she isn’t right now.” I didn’t want to admit how scared I was.

“She has been awake, though, that’s a good sign,” Finn said. “She is going to be fine.”

She has to be.

“Of course she is,” Dad said. “Now, no negative thoughts. Positivity is key.” He switched the radio on and sound drifted through the car. It didn’t make me feel any better. I knew I should stay positive and I was usually so good at it, but I’d never cared for anyone else the way I did for her. There was just something about Scarlett, so pure, fun and innocent, that reached into my very being and attached itself to my soul.

I never stood a chance.

The hospital was eerily quiet and the stench of chemicals attacked my nose. Back home we made our own cleaning products and none of them made my eyes water or stomach turn.

We were given directions to a waiting room near where she was. I wanted to see her, to make sure that she was going to be okay but I wasn’t permitted to enter her room.

We were told that she was doing fine and had been awake again. Even though she’d been awake my concern was increasing. Her mind was resting after a knock to the head but so far today all of her tests had come back normal. She would wake up when she was ready but the wait was excruciating. Scarlett had to heal soon.

We needed her more than she knew.



## **Scarlett**

I WOKE UP to sunlight streaming through the window and Mum looking at me. “Hey,” she whispered.

“Hi. How are you? Dad? Jeremy?”

“We’re all okay. What about you?”

“I’m good. What time is it?”

“Almost nine. Dad’s been released.”

“Good.” I wished I would be, too. “Mum...Did Noah come?” I bit on the inside of my bottom lip anxiously as I waited for her reply.

“Of course. Said he’ll be back for visiting hours.”

The relief I felt scared me. I *really* liked him. Most of my friends had boyfriends and all the boy drama that came with it. I’d decided that I wasn’t going to worry about relationships until I was out of school, possibly even university but then Noah crept his way in. Now I had boy drama.

“He’s been beside himself, worrying that he’d never get to see you again, especially after your difference of opinion.”

“He told you about that?”

“Not details. I kind of figured anyway, you’ve been a little distracted over Easter. Usually, you love all the chocolate.”

“I do.” She was right, though, I had been a bit distracted.

Jeremy came in, followed by a new doctor and I could’ve kissed them both. No way did I want to talk about me and Noah anymore, especially with Mum.

“Scarlett, I’m Doctor Thorn. How are you feeling?” he asked in a thick Scottish accent. His bulging belly touched the bed as he leant down and raised a penlight, no doubt to shine in my eyes.

“Head hurts, but I feel fine.”

“Okay, I’ll sort something for the pain. It’s good to see you back with us, we were worried.”

“I can’t believe I slept for so long.”

“It’s not unusual when there has been head trauma,” Doctor Thorn replied. “I’m just going to check you over and then I’ll give you something for the pain.”

Once I’d been poked and had a light shone in my eye, the doctor left to get me something that would hopefully stop the hit-by-bus feeling.

“Can I see Dad, please?” I asked. Last night I’d fallen back asleep before I’d seen him or Noah.

“He’ll be back soon. He popped home for a change of clothes,” Mum replied.

“When do I get to leave?”

She smiled and took my hand. “As soon as you’re feeling better and the doctors are happy.”

That meant forever. I didn’t like to be still for long, especially not in the same place. Never had in any situation. I was even feeling bored of staying in one house for the three years we’d been there. We’d always travelled and moved around.

“I feel fine.”

Mum laughed. “Oh, do you really? Relax, Scarlett, you need to give your body time to heal. You were lucky, sweetheart, we almost lost you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologise! Just rest and get better.”

“Okay,” I conceded.

When the pain meds kicked in, I fell asleep, waking up every now and then. I’d had hours and hours of sleep but felt like I’d had none at all. Dad was fine and it was good to see him. He exchanged his room for mine, refusing to go home until they were kicked out at night.

At two o’clock in the afternoon, it was visiting time and I sat up in bed waiting for Noah. My parents and Jeremy had gone to the café to get some lunch and to give me and Noah some time alone.

“Scarlett, you’re awake!” He rushed over, sitting on the bed and wrapping his arms around me. “You okay? I was so scared.”

“I’m fine,” I replied, burying my head against his neck.

He pulled back, looking me over to make sure I wasn’t lying. He checked everywhere with his eyes and fingertips. I closed my eyes as his fingers trailed over my cheek, jaw, chin, neck. His touch made me feel more alive and more awake than ever.

“You’re really okay,” he said once he’d finished his examination.

“Yep, I’m really okay. I had some weird dreams when I was coming round, though. I don’t know what they mean.”

He raised his eyebrow. “They probably don’t mean anything. They’re dreams.”

“But it was so weird and so real.”

Smiling, he said, “Alright. Tell me what happened?”

“I don’t remember all of them, just pieces. Mum – but she looked different – brushing my hair. Jeremy chasing a girl. Candles everywhere. Being in some old building with lots of red then there was some sort of fire. I’m not sure. Wow, okay, maybe that does mean nothing.” What I could remember sounded stupid when I said it aloud.

He took my hand, squeezing a little harder than usual. “Don’t worry about it. Perhaps they are memories or nothing at all but right now we should focus on you healing. I thought you would want something ‘decent’ to eat,” he said, handing me a packet of Oreos.

I took them and stroked the pack. “Thank you! Do you have any idea how much hospital food sucks?”

He turned his nose up. “I can imagine. Do you know when you will be discharged yet?”

“No, but it’ll probably be a day or two. Bet I’m all better right for the start of the school term,” I said, turning my nose up. “Evelyn!”

Noah looked at me like I was crazy. “Pardon?”

“Evelyn. That’s what the girl in my dream was called. The one Jeremy was chasing.”

“Are you sure you feel alright?”

“Yeah. That has to mean something, right?”

“Not really, Scarlett.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Alright, you’ve just been knocked out for a day, I don’t think it’s a good idea to be stressing yourself out over a dream.”

“Dreams. There were a few and apart from the one where Mum was brushing my hair, Jeremy was in most. Who’s Evelyn, though?”

He shrugged.

“She was younger than Jeremy, probably younger than me, too.”

“They were dreams.”

But where they? They seemed like more. I wasn’t fully asleep when I had them but not fully awake either. Something wasn’t right.

“They seemed more like memories.” His eyebrow rose subtly. “Look, I know you think I’m crazy right now but what if I’m not?”

“About what, Scarlett? About Jeremy chasing a girl? He probably did. You’ve probably seen a room full of candles and had your mum brush your hair. I don’t doubt you, but you’ve had head trauma and as you were waking up you were piecing back together who you are and what happened. Things got muddled and you’re confused.”

“Right, but these things were from before I lost my memory.”

“How old were you in the dreams?”

“I don’t know. Young. No, three. I was three and it was almost my birthday. I think.”

“You think? So you could have been six and half dreaming/half trying to remember what was going on.”

I frowned. That was a possibility but I thought I remembered it being my birthday coming up. Was it a birthday? “I wish you weren’t so cynical.”

Turning more towards me, he grabbed my hand. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be. It’s just that... Scarlett, you almost *died*. You’re hurt and right now you’re stressing over dreams. I would rather you focus on figuring out what your dreams mean once you’re better.” He swallowed. “I thought I’d never see you again, and I want you to be okay.”

He was right. Even if they were memories of before the fire they were still silly little memories that didn’t mean much. Nothing out of the ordinary happened, not really. Not that I could remember properly now anyway.

“Yeah, sorry. I thought it might be the start of getting those years back.”

He groaned. “No, I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be insensitive. I just need you to be alright.”

“I’m okay.” I zipped my mouth. “No more dream talk. What have you been up to while I was out of it?”

“Waiting for you to wake up. Worrying that you wouldn’t. Snapping at everyone. Then there was more waiting and more worrying.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t apologise for being in an accident.”

“Right, sorry.”

We both laughed at the same time and he leant back against my pillows. “My dad was released.”

“Yes, I’ve seen them. That’s good news. You were the one who came off worse.”



“I know. Jeremy barely has a scratch on him, thankfully. Guess I’m a good pillow, huh!”

Noah frowned.

“Too soon?” I asked and he nodded.

I was glad that I was able to save my brother from the impact. I didn’t want him to be hurt.

“What’re we doing for the rest of break then?”

He shrugged. “What do you want to do?”

“Movies? Hanging out with the guys. The usual.”

“Sounds good. When you are better, though.”

I saluted and he smiled so wide it made me laugh.

Noah held his hand up and shook his head. “Alright, that’s it, you need to sleep.”

“You think I’ll dream more if I do?”

He leant forward and placed a kiss on my lips. “Sleep, Scarlett.”

Once Noah left, I drifted in and out of a very light sleep. Just when I would nod off I’d see the flicker of the flames, *feel* the heat, hear a woman’s voice that wasn’t my mum’s, and I would see Evelyn. She was so young and so pretty. I felt her eyes on me, as she ran past with Jeremy she watched me, it was only for the briefest second but that one small glance stirred familiarity and it wasn’t something I could forget.



## **Noah**

“HOW IS SHE?” Jeremy asked the second I closed the door to her room. Scarlett had fallen sleep soon after I told her to rest. Her recovery was far more important than anything else. She was starting to remember pieces, which scared and excited me. But I was concerned that she would remember suddenly. We didn’t want that. There was too much time left. If she found out the truth now, she would never come with me.

“Acting strange,” I replied.

“She’s always weird.”

I sat down next to him on the seats opposite Scarlett’s room. “Alright then, more strange. She kept talking about some dreams she had. In Scarlett’s head, you chase girls.” I smirked at him. “I won’t tell Amie.” He rolled his eyes. “Do you know someone called Evelyn?”

Jeremy froze. “Evelyn?”

He knew her.

“Yes, that’s the name Scarlett gave. Do you know her?”

After a pause, he replied, “Not really. Scarlett had a doll called Evelyn when she was really little. I think that was its name anyway. It was lost in the fire.”

I laughed on cue. “So you chase girl dolls in her dreams.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“She was talking about her like she was a person, though.”

“You said yourself that she’s strange.”

“Right,” I replied, nodding. “She just seemed upset over it so I thought I should ask. She must remember the doll and her mind created a person.”

“Yep,” he replied, his posture visibly stiffening in front of me. He was worried.

“She okay in there alone?”

“Yes. She’s sleeping.”

“Good. Look, I’m going back down to meet the folks, they’re getting even more magazines for her.”

I stood up. “Sure. I need to get home anyway. I’ll see you tomorrow morning. Tell her I’ll call later?”

“Will do. Later, Noah.”

“Bye, Jeremy.”

I walked out of the hospital feeling about twenty pounds lighter now I knew she was alright. But I was left with an uneasy sense of relief that she was remembering.

My dad was waiting for me in the car park. “Hi,” I said as I got in.

“Is she alright?”

“Yes, she’s fine. She’s awake and her usual self.”

I should tell him about her memories. It was a big deal and something Eternal Light would *need* to know, but the image of her eyes fluttering up at me and her face breaking into a smile stopped me. I told myself that it didn’t really matter because she was confused and remembered very little. They could be passed off as dreams for now.

“Thank goodness,” he said and breathed a sigh of relief. “We wanted to stay all day with you but thought that might look strange.”

“Yes, that’s fine. I was alright and it gave me plenty of opportunity to watch Jonathan and Marissa.” They played the concerned parents so well. Of course, I understood that they’d brought her up since she was four and as far as they were concerned they were her parents but they knew better. They were lying to hospital staff, giving false information and had fake identification for Scarlett, yet they were still so calm.

“And?”

I shrugged. “Nothing out of the ordinary. You would never know they weren’t her parents. They seem to love her the same as Jeremy.”

“They are not her parents,” Dad said.

“I know.”

He shook his head, frowning. “I’m sorry, Noah. Being out here puts me on edge. I don’t like it.”

“Neither do I. It’s hard to keep up with the pretence every single day, but it will be worth it.”

“It will, son. I’m proud of you, you know? I was unsure to begin with. Not that I didn’t think you could do this but it is a big ask, and I know you are a good person. You hate dishonesty and Jonathan, Marissa and Jeremy are

lying to Scarlett every day. But you have really come through, and it won't be long until we are home with her and can get back to normal. Nothing about the way people live out here is normal. Absolutely nothing."

I'd started to doubt that. But I couldn't say that to my father. "You're right," I replied, only half lying.

There were certain things, sure. People called themselves free when they were governed and bound by so many laws. They worked forty hours a week plus and most still struggled, gave up a portion of their money, and followed what society expected. That was the furthest thing from being free but they still went on fooling themselves. They believed they had a voice but they didn't use it past voting for someone they knew was lying to them anyway. It made absolutely no sense. Democracy. Freedom. Bullshit.

It was beyond stupid the amount of rubbish people fed *themselves*, but they valued human life in a way that Eternal Life did not. Scarlett would be protected out here. I couldn't help question my own attitude to human life. If I were successful, Scarlett wouldn't be safe. I would be hurting her, allowing Eternal Light to hurt her.

How was I going to watch Donald drive a knife through her chest?



## **Scarlett**

AFTER JUST TWO days in hospital, I was allowed home. Besides being tired and having a lingering headache, I felt fine. Dad and I had been on the sofa since, lying under fluffy blankets and under strict orders not to move. Throughout the morning, I'd been drifting in and out of short naps, resting my tired body.

Startled, I woke abruptly, the explosion thundered through my unconscious mind. My heart raced. I was hot all over, sweat beaded at the back of my neck. The dream was so real I expected the house to be in flames.

Mum and Dad were talking to each other, unaware that I'd woke. I gulped and pushed myself up. They looked up as I forced myself to calm down.

"Hey, are you okay?"

I nodded.

"Missa," Dad said, using his pet name for Mum.

"Yes, honey," she replied, smirking.

"Can you pass the remote, please? I'd get it myself but..."

"Of course."

I shook my head. He was loving being the patient. I was climbing the walls. Dad was completely fine now, and I gave it a day before Mum refused to do anything for him anymore. Lying around and sleeping would have suited me fine before the nightmares started.

"Do you need anything, Scarlett?" Mum asked once she'd given Dad the remote.

All I needed was my heart to return to its normal rate. "I'm good. Think I can go out tomorrow? Just to Noah's."

She tilted her head to the side, and I knew the answer was no. "Sweetheart, you've just got home from the *hospital*. You were in and out of unconsciousness for a whole day."

"So, that's a no, huh?"

“It’s a no,” she confirmed. “Noah’s welcome here. You know that.”

It wasn’t just seeing Noah; it was getting out for a bit. I’d been cooped up inside a hospital room and now my house. I missed the outside. I wanted to sit in the new hammock in Noah’s garden and get some fresh air. They were outdoors people and I wanted that for a while.

My eyes slid over a photo of Jeremy when he was about seven or eight. He had a big, front toothless smile. My mind instantly conjured the image of Evelyn. I saw them in my head, running around together. I blinked and looked away but her eyes followed me, looking directly into mine as she whizzed past me with Jer.

“Yeah. Thanks,” I said, trying to shove thoughts of Evelyn out of my mind. “I’ll text him now.” I fired off a message asking if Noah wanted to come over and turned back to Mum. My skin still felt itchy hot like it had when the explosion in my dream went off. “Can I talk to you about my dreams?”

Mum pursed her lips the way she always did when she was tired of a subject. It was the look she gave Jeremy when he was ten and absolutely needed a mobile phone. It was the look that she gave me when I absolutely needed to go to Disney Land. Both times.

“Okay.”

Her hesitance gave me second thoughts. I hated that talking about it was so hard for both of them. I opened my mouth but quickly closed it again and shook my head. “Never mind. They’re just stupid dreams.”

“They are just dreams, but if they’re bothering you they’re not stupid,” Mum said. She may have said the words but the stiffness in her posture and moisture in her eyes told me she didn’t want to have this conversation at all. I watched her lick her lips twice and clench her hands around over her knees so hard her tendons popped up.

Her fear frightened me. How could I make her relive that when it hurt her so much? “Thanks, but I’m okay actually. It just freaked me out, especially since I have a four-year gap in my memory; that’s all.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to talk about it?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. I made a decision to leave my memory thing in the past so that’s what I’m going to do. I just want to be better and get on with my life.” I said the words but I didn’t believe them, not completely. After remembering – or thinking I remembered – snippets from my childhood, I really wanted to know it all. But my parents weren’t the most approachable

on the subject and I didn't know how to talk to them.

"We're glad to hear you say that, sweetheart, we just want you to be happy," Dad said. They both looked relieved.

"Thanks. I'm going to lie down in bed for a while. Send Noah up when he gets here, please," I said.

"Of course," Mum replied faintly.

I smiled and walked out, going to my bedroom. They only made me feel guilty for wanting answers and it was exhausting. Plus Noah replied saying he was on his way and I'd much rather focus on that.

I'd just changed into an oversized knitted top and leggings when he walked in. He wouldn't care about seeing me in my pyjamas but I felt more human in clothes.

He sat down beside me on my bed and gave me a chaste kiss. "Hey," he said, flashing me his cute smile I loved so much.

"Hi." I instantly relaxed. Being around him was the best.

"How're you feeling?"

"Cramped. Want to get out but..."

"Where do you want to go?"

"I'd settle for anywhere outside right now."

He stood and held his hand out. "Your wish is my command."

Noah helped me up, still worried about my lightly bruised ribs. Honestly, they were fine as long as I didn't start doing somersaults. "Thanks. I need to tell Mum where we go." Where were we going?

"Already done. She said you were plotting your escape when she let me in. I'm allowed to take you into the garden."

I wanted to pout and whine. *We don't have a hammock.* But I really wanted light that didn't come from a bulb.

We went out and sat on the bench. I curled my legs, leaning against his side as he wrapped his arm around my back. "Oh God, I'll never take fresh air for granted again."

"You really have been going crazy in bed, haven't you?"

"Yeah. Normally I'd love to lay in bed all day but when I *have* to, it stops being fun."

"You are a child," he teased.

"A child? You looking for an argument there?" I teased.

He frowned and tapped the side of his leg. "No, I don't enjoy arguing with you."

“Oh, come on, it was once and you could barely call that an argument. People do fight, though, Noah.” His frown deepened and I realised he was so not used to people arguing. “Come on, your parents never fight?”

“No, actually. They sit down and discuss things a lot but they have never shouted.”

My parents didn’t scream at each other but I’d heard them bicker. Everyone did it, or so I thought. “Wow, we really did have a different upbringing.” Noah’s family were organic vegetarians and although we didn’t eat a whole lot of unhealthy things in my house, I definitely liked junk food and fast food.

“Opposites attract, though, right?” He smiled but I could tell his mind was off somewhere else.

“Definitely, look at Penny and Leonard.”

He frowned. “Who?”

“Never mind, just remind me to make you watch *The Big Bang Theory* sometime. All that matters is that we’re fine, me and my Dad are getting better, and we have another week before school starts again.”

“Alright. What do you want to do this week?”

“Cinema? Theme park?”

“Yes to the first, no to the second. You can’t seriously be thinking about riding rollercoasters when you’ve just been in a car accident.”

“Well, I wouldn’t do the rollercoasters but maybe we can save that until the summer holidays.”

He did that going far away thing again. I hated that; it was obvious something was on his mind but he never said anything.

“You okay?” I asked.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not moving, are you?” I felt my world slow down a little. He couldn’t just leave.

“What? No, I’m not going anywhere. What made you ask that?”

“I don’t know. You went all spaced out.”

“Sorry, it’s nothing. Finn is missing home, him visiting my aunt in Ireland last week didn’t help, and I’m not sure what to do to make it better. Things here are a lot different.”

“Does he want to go back?”

Finn was nineteen, plenty old enough to live by himself so he could go if he didn’t like it here. But I didn’t think he’d leave his family because they



were all really close. Selfishly, I didn't want Noah to leave, but I also didn't want his family to be unhappy.

"He wants to but he wouldn't. I think my parents are considering going home when I've finished school."

There it was, the panic. That was far away enough to have my life and happiness completely linked and wound around him, even more than it already was.

He laughed and kissed me. "Don't look so scared, although it's nice to know how you feel, I won't be going with them. I'll be old enough to live alone, and I'll stay for university here." He smiled shyly and added, "Well, I'll stay for you."

I bit my lip and then kissed him because I wasn't sure what to say or how to express how much I loved him. I almost blurted the words out but we hadn't said that yet. He would stay with me when his family left. I *should* have just told him what he made me feel.

Confiding in my parents about my memories wasn't an option but I could with Noah. I trusted him. Evelyn's big, innocent eyes seemed to watch me constantly. Every picture of Jeremy I saw she was there.

"You were right," I said when we pulled away. "I know this is a total conversation changer, but I do need to try to face whatever happened to me when I was a kid. After my dreams, I'm so ready to." *I need to know who Evelyn is and why I feel like I know her.*

He winced and lowered his head. "No, I'm sorry about that. I pushed and I shouldn't have. Things like that happen and just because I thought it was strange didn't give me the right to make you question your decision to let it go. I was wrong, Scarlett. Maybe you *should* leave it for now?"

"I don't want to and even if I did I couldn't. It's not a bad thing that you got me thinking about it again. I always would've liked to know, it's just now I *need* to. Will you help me?" He hesitated before dipping his chin in agreement. "Thank you."

"So, what are you going to do exactly?"

"I'm not sure yet. I'm going to write the dreams down. Every time I have one, I remember a tiny bit more, although nothing extra really happens, I don't think. Maybe the more I write them down, the more will come back to me about my past?"

"Alright. You could also try talking to me or your parents, though."

"I don't think I can. They're clearly uncomfortable talking about it."

“I’m sure it’s difficult for them but surely they’ll do it if it’s best for you?”

“Probably, but I don’t like making them feel bad. If I can remember without hurting my parents, then that’s what I’ll do.”

“Fair enough.”

“I can’t get Evelyn off my mind. I still see her so clearly as she ran past me with Jer.”

“You’re convinced she’s a person and not a doll.”

There was no doubt. “One hundred per cent. But that means my parents are lying to me, and I don’t like that.”

“Understandable. Perhaps there’s a good reason.”

“Such as?”

“I don’t know, something horrible could have happened to her, maybe in the fire, and they don’t want to upset you.”

Perhaps, but that possible reason wasn’t strong enough. “I don’t mean to sound like a terrible person here, but I don’t remember her, I don’t know if we were friends, they could tell me if a stranger died.”

“What if you two were close?”

A cold shudder ran the length of my spine. *No!* She was playing with Jeremy. A sister? My pulse started thumping in my ears. What if she was a sister and she died in the fire? They wouldn’t talk about the fire because it was too painful, maybe that was why.

“Hey, you okay?”

I shook my head slowly, eyes filling with tears. “What if she was? What if I’m pushing my parents and Jeremy to talk about something as horrific as their daughter, our sister, dying in a fire? They managed to get me and Jeremy out, perhaps they couldn’t get to Evelyn.”

His eyes widened. “Shh, don’t do that. I didn’t mean closer than a friend. It’s just one possibility that, right now, is completely unfounded. Please don’t beat yourself up and feel guilty over something that is probably untrue.”

“You’re right, but what if she was my sister?”

“I don’t know, Scarlett. I really think you should talk to your parents.”

I shook my head. “No. No way they would hold that back. I know them and they would never pretend a child they had didn’t exist. Also, Jeremy would have asked about her growing up and he didn’t.”

“Exactly. She couldn’t have been their daughter. You need to speak to your parents.”

I nodded. “I know.” It just wasn’t that easy.



## Twelve

### **Scarlett**

“HI, SCARLETT,” BETHAN said, pushing a plate of cookies towards me and Noah.

“Hey. Thanks,” I replied, taking one with a big cluster of chocolate chips on top and trying not to yawn. Since I started dreaming – always the same ones – I’ve been tired almost all of the time. Every night I’d wake up in the early hours, sweating over seeing flames and feeling emotionally drained over worrying who Evelyn was and why Mum was never herself.

This morning, I’d jumped awake when flames encased Evelyn, she still looked at me and then followed Jeremy through the fire until I couldn’t see either of them anymore. I was terrified and panting and knew there was no way I would get back to sleep whether it was five in the morning or not.

No matter where I was or what I was doing, something brought me back to her. Any little girl with a similar shade of light brown hair and big blue eyes would shoot Evelyn to the forefront of my mind for the rest of the day. It was too irrational to feel...close to someone I couldn’t remember. I had no idea who Evelyn was but I knew she was important and that I cared about her.

Noah sat on the stool beside me, leaning over so our arms were touching. I loved it when he did that.

I was completely healed and just in time for school to start up again. I was still going crazy over not remembering but Noah said when he thought I was completely better he’d try to help. Right now I was just enjoying spending time with him and seeing my friends again. I wanted to be normal for a while and not let Evelyn consume my thoughts.

“How was school?” Bethan asked.

“It was alright,” Noah replied. “What’s for dinner?”

“Casserole. Are you staying, Scarlett?”

“If that’s okay?”

Bethan smiled, leaning on the counter. “Of course it is. It’s strange when you are not here.”

Yeah, me and Noah were joined at the hip, but I was pretty sure he was my future husband, so I wanted to spend as much time with him as possible.

“You should let her stay over then,” Noah said, stroking his hand up and down my back.

Bethan smirked. “Nice try.”

I wondered how long before they would let us stay over at each other’s. It would be so cool to wake up and at least be in the same house as him. But I doubted that was happening before I was eighteen.

“Anyway, we have to go,” Noah said.

“Shopping, right?” Bethan asked.

“Yes,” he replied. “We’ll try to be back for dinner unless Scarlett can’t find the right shade of lipstick, then we’ll be late.”

I narrowed my eyes at him as he winked. He knew I didn’t even wear lipstick. What he didn’t know, though, was that we weren’t going shopping. I was taking control of my memory problem and trying something that wouldn’t hurt my parents. They were a last resort.

After the sleepless nights had rolled on, I knew writing my dreams down wasn’t helping. I never saw anything new when I was asleep. I had the same dreams over and over. What I needed was professional help, so I’d made an appointment.

“Alright, that’s fine. I’ll save you some if you are not back. Whatever happens remember to have Scarlett home by nine, even if you are later.”

He nodded. “Always.” We wouldn’t be back that late, though. Noah was so strict when it came to getting me home on time. He was determined to respect my parents’ rules and not lose their trust. It was sweet and a lot easier than Imogen and her ex where her parents hated him.

Noah took my hand as we walked to the bus stop, rubbing his thumb over my knuckles. “Are you feeling better?” he asked.

“Yeah, all that hurts is my ribs if I twist suddenly or lift something too heavy. The rest of me is fine.”

“That’s good. And don’t lift anything heavy.”

“You sound like my dad. I won’t.”

Noah looked at the timetable and frowned. “I thought you said the bus was at three forty-five?”

“It is.”

“Not one that goes into town.”

“Yeah, we’re not actually getting that one.”

His eyebrow arched. “Which one are we getting?”

“Can you just get on it and not ask until we’re there? Trust me.”

He bent forwards and kissed me. “Alright.”

The fact that Noah trusted so completely and wholeheartedly was one of the things I loved most about him.

“Thank you.”

He wrapped me in his arms as we waited. I felt so safe when I was with him. The rest of my life and the people in it were messy and I didn’t know what or who to trust. But when it came to him, I was sure.

The bus turned up five minutes later and we got on, sitting near the back. Noah picked my legs up and put them over his, rubbing circles on my knee the way he did with my knuckles.

“You know for someone who’s never had a girlfriend before you’re pretty pro at it.”

He smiled. “You make it easy.”

I think my heart actually melted into a puddle. For the rest of the ride, we sat in perfect, comfortable silence.

“So, why are we here?” he asked as we got off the bus on the opposite side to the high streets and shops.

“I have an appointment.”

“I’m not a mind reader, babe, I’m going to need more than that.” He slung his arm over my shoulder as we walked along the outskirts of town.

It was mid-May and it’d just started to warm up. Fresh green leaves blossomed on the trees and colourful flowers popped out of the ground. I loved spring. But then I found at least five things I loved about every season. Noah still held me as close to him as he did through the end of winter.

“Well, my plan to write down what I see when I’m asleep isn’t working.”

He gave me a sympathetic smile. “I didn’t think so, you’ve not mentioned it at all.”

“It was frustrating. But I think I’ve found someone, she’s a therapist, Dr Pain.”

“Come on!” He laughed.

“Would be funnier if she were a doctor and not a therapist.”

She was more of a hypnotist, but I thought telling Noah that would make him think I was totally crazy. I wasn’t crazy. I was desperate.

“Ah, your therapist. Do I drive you insane?”

“Yes, but that’s not why I’m going to see her. I’m trying to get my

memory back, as I might've mentioned once or twice before, so I can figure out if those weird dreams are real or not."

"I know, I'm only joking. Do you think she's going to tell you if they're real or not?"

"I don't know. That's what I'm hoping she can help with." At this point I knew the fire and Evelyn were real, I dreamt of them the most. The rest I wasn't sure about.

"Well, it seems like a good idea. I think you should do whatever it takes to remember, if that is what you want, but why the secrecy?"

I stopped walking, forcing Noah to as well. The warm breeze blew his short light brown hair. His eyes looked even bluer in direct sunlight. I was lucky to have him. We'd not been together all that long but I trusted him, relied on him, and he never let me down. I should've told him last week when I made the appointment. I owed him that.

"I'm sorry. My parents and Jeremy don't like talking about it. I can understand that, it's a tough time for them to revisit. I didn't want to tell anyone and have them talk me out of it."

Frowning deeply, he wrapped his arms around me, pulling me to his chest. "You never have to keep anything from me. No matter what you want to do – if it's bathing in baked beans – I'll be right behind you. On the outside of the bath, but I'll be there. I don't want any secrets, Scarlett. I want to know everything about you."

"Every couple has secrets."

He blinked twice before replying, "Not us."

"You have secrets."

"You can ask me anything and I'll tell you," he said.

"Why haven't you tried getting in my pants yet?"

It bothered me. Now I so wasn't ready for that yet but I still wanted him to want me in that way. It was stupid and a bit irrational. He knew I didn't want to yet but here I was questioning why he hadn't tried.

He arched his eyebrow. "This isn't temporary for me so I want to do this right. We're a big deal. Sex means something. It means a lot."

I felt like I was floating. Smirking, I said, "You still haven't answered my question."

His eyes glittered with humour. "You really know how to kill a moment. I haven't tried anything because you're not ready. But please let me know the *second* you are." He slapped my butt, grabbed my hand and pulled me in the

direction I was leading us.

I gave Noah the address and we followed the street until we came to 7D.

“Her office is next to KFC,” I said. “Perfect.”

He turned his nose up, not liking the idea of fast food. “You’ll regret eating that rubbish one day.”

“I doubt it, Mr Health Kick.”

Noah pushed the door open and we walked inside. The building was tiny, wedged between KFC and a Post Office. A gold-coated plaque beside the door saying ‘Dr Pain’ was all that gave away what was inside.

“Hello, can I help you?” a plump woman behind a small mahogany desk asked.

“Um, yeah. I’m Scarlett Garner. I have an appointment with Dr Pain at four thirty.”

She looked at her screen and smiled. “Have a seat, fill this form in, and I’ll let her know you’re here.”

I took the sheet of paper and pen. “Thank you.”

Noah led me to the leather seats in the corner of the room. “Do you want me to come in with you or wait out here?” he asked as I filled the paperwork in.

“I don’t know,” I replied, rapidly ticking boxes and giving a brief description of what was wrong in the tiny space they’d allowed.

Part of me wanted him there. I was nervous and he always made that better, but I also wanted to talk without anyone else around. I didn’t want Noah’s opinions swaying Dr Pain. Not that I thought a professional would side with a teenage boy and tell me I was just having normal dreams like everyone else, but I wanted her to hear only my side before she made up her mind.

“I’ll do whatever you want, Scarlett,” he said, squeezing my knee.

“Why do I feel so nervous?”

He shrugged. “Don’t be. Should I wait here and if you need me you can come and get me?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Miss Garner,” a super-tall lady said from beside the reception desk just as I’d signed the bottom of the form. Me and Noah were the only ones in here. I gave his hand a squeeze before letting go and standing up. “Hello, I’m Dr Pamela Pain, please come through.”

“Thank you,” I said, giving Noah a fleeting smile over my shoulder.

I sat down on a massive, high-back leather sofa as instructed and Pamela sat on a smaller chair beside me.

“What brings you here today?” she asked.

“Well,” I said, shifting in my seat. “When just before I was four I lost my memory and it never came back.”

“And you want it back?”

I nodded. “I was recently in a car accident and as I was waking up, I remembered things. I’m not really sure what it all was, just parts, like broken memories. But it could just have been weird dreams. I guess I want your help to try and figure out what it was.”

She nodded once, her chin-length bob falling in her face. Tucking her hair behind her ears, only to have it drop out again, she replied, “We can certainly try but first can you tell me a little more about how you lost your memory and what you saw when you were waking.”

I told her everything I remembered in detail. She said very little, only stopping me occasionally to ask for additional information.

“Okay, well, we can certainly try to tap into the lost memories but there is no guarantee, Scarlett. I have to make you aware of that. The brain is a very complex thing and occasionally pieces of information are lost forever. There is a possibility that this is one of those instances, especially since it has been so long.”

I sat on my hands, too eager despite what she said. “But there’s a chance it might work and I’m willing to try. If you are, of course.”

“Absolutely,” she said, holding her hands out. “Lay back against the seat and we’ll get to work.”

“Right now?”

“Unless you’d like to do something else for the last fifteen minutes?”

I shook my head and laid back. “This could really only take fifteen minutes?”

“Potentially. Usually, it takes longer but we should get something, a glimmer of hope for future sessions. Are you ready, Scarlett?”

“Yes,” I replied with a weak voice.

“Okay, please close your eyes and relax your muscles.”

I felt stupid but I did what she said. Her voice was soft and soothing, exactly what you’d expect, and I felt almost instantly sleepy.

“I want you imagine yourself as a three-year-old child, you know nothing of the fire that took your memory.”



I did that, picturing myself just a little bit younger than I looked in the photos we had at home.

“You’re playing with your brother,” she said.

I instantly aged in my head, to around four-years-old and I was playing the Hungry Hippos board game.

“I can’t see that far back with him. There’s nothing there.”

“Okay, shh,” she said, placing her hand over mine as I scrunched my eyes and tried to force myself to think further back. “Relax, Scarlett. Leave Jeremy and go back to the start. You’re three, almost a full year before the fire. Where are you?”

“I’m nowhere, there’s just white around me, like those models in photo frames.”

“Alright. Take that girl and put her in the park with Evelyn.” I did that. I was in the park with Evelyn but the image was blurry, flickering and unreliable. It didn’t happen.

“What’re you doing in the park?”

“Nothing, I’m watching her run with Jeremy.”

“No, you’re seeing your dream, Scarlett. Take Jeremy away. You and Evelyn are on the swings. You’re laughing and having fun. Keep that image in your head. Keep playing with her and tell me when there’s a change.”

There wasn’t a change. Not one that happened naturally that would help. The only change was Evelyn getting up and running off with Jeremy. I kept seeing that one image play over and over. It was the only memory that I knew happened; the rest was what she planted but it couldn’t fool me into linking it to something real.

Pamela ended our session when my time was up, and I could tell she was as deflated as I was, she clearly didn’t like when she couldn’t do *anything*. It wasn’t going to work. There was nothing there. Maybe if I remembered more, she might be able to help me piece everything back together, but right now all I had was a three-second snippet of Evelyn running with my brother.

“Why don’t you see how things go and if you want to try again give me a call?”

I nodded and faked smiled. “Thank you.”

Noah stood up as I walked back into reception. He saw my expression and his face fell. “It didn’t go well then?”

Shaking my head, I took his hand and led him outside, thanking the receptionist as we left. “Didn’t work, nothing happened. I don’t know where

to go from here, so can we forget it and walk for a little while before we catch the bus?”

“Of course,” he replied, pulling me tight against his side and kissing the top of my head.



## Thirteen

### Noah

I SHOVED A bad thought out of my head before I did the same thing Jonathan and Marissa had done years ago and took Scarlett away. Since she got home from the hospital, Dad had been agonising over a decision to tell Donald and Fiona about the accident or not.

Dad tapped his fingertips on his desk and peered up at me. “Do you know what you are going to do yet?” I asked anxiously.

“I believe so. When Donald calls tonight, I plan to tell them about the car accident. I do wonder if this will make them move faster, though.”

I swallowed audibly. “Right.”

“She could have been killed and if she had... Well, I’m just saying I think they will want to get her to Ireland as soon as they can, fearing something else could happen at any minute.”

I rubbed my jaw and closed my eyes. I needed longer. It couldn’t happen soon. She had so much left to do; it was unfair. Even though we’d spent almost all of our free time together, texting or on the phone, I didn’t know her enough. I didn’t know what it was like to wake up beside her. I didn’t expect to be allowed to sleep beside her with the short time we’d have together, but I still wanted it.

“They can’t,” I said. “Not by too much anyway.”

“Noah, they can do what they want if they think it is in our best interest.”

“Yes, I know that, but I mean that her parents probably aren’t going to let her out of their sight for a while, she’s recovering and I don’t know if she would willingly come with me yet. I don’t think risking taking her without her permission would be a good idea. How would we get her on the ferry? She would cause a scene.”

I watched Dad’s frown subside as he absorbed what I’d said. *Come on, Dad, side with me.*

“I agree,” he finally said. “When I speak to them, I will let them know our

fears but you know as well as I that the decision on this one is theirs. Being her parents grants them a much larger claim over her than the rest of us.”

“I’m sure they will see continuing with the original plan is the best idea. They don’t want this to go wrong either and it’s already so dangerous.”

He nodded once. “I’m sure you are right.”

Thank you.

“Do you need me any longer?”

“Are you planning on visiting Scarlett?” he asked.

“I am.”

He tilted his head towards the door. “Send our wishes.”

“Will do,” I replied, leaving his office and heading straight out of the door.

Walking to Scarlett’s, I rubbed the ache between my eyes. I felt like I was living with a constant headache and I hated it. My mind was constantly buzzing. I didn’t know what to do, what was right. I just wanted it to stop.

My breathing was heavy but I couldn’t get enough oxygen and felt like I was going to collapse. I wasn’t too proud to admit that I was lost, scared and needed help. There was no one to help or guide me, though. I had no one to talk to so I just had to fight my way through it.

Scarlett was on my mind constantly. The relief I felt when I found out she was alright was stronger than anything I’d felt before. She had gotten beneath my skin already. I was terrified that she was the one for me. We were taught there was one person, the other half of yourself, out there. Scarlett was mine, how could she not be when I already felt this strongly about her?

But what it came down to was this; I couldn’t turn my back on everything I had ever known. Eternal Light was my whole life, it flowed through my veins, it was what made me who I was, and every member was *family*. I couldn’t betray that. I didn’t even know how to.

When I fell asleep, it was restless, and I had a hard time keeping Scarlett off my mind for very long. I hated every single part of being away from the safety of my community, and I loved and hated falling for her in equal measures.



SCARLETT WAS IN a bad mood when I got to hers. I had absolutely no experience with a moody teenage girl. Everyone back home was disciplined so could deal with disappointment well. I wanted to go home and wait for her

spirits to lift, but I didn't want to leave her upset.

I felt like I was constantly battling between what was expected of me and what I wanted. We were in her room because she refused to go downstairs and be anywhere near her parents. The atmosphere in her house was uncomfortable and tense. Since the therapist, things had gotten worse. She blamed her parents for not giving her the answers she wouldn't ask them for.

Every day I struggled and every day I fell in love with her that little bit more.

She sat at the end of her bed, absentmindedly looking at the TV. I could tell she was elsewhere. She really believed the therapist would be able to help but when she came out of that room looking defeated I knew it hadn't gone her way.

But she was close to remembering. I watched her look at her parents differently. She might not even need to remember, soon she would probably just put two and two together and realise her parents aren't Jonathan and Marissa.

It was still a bit too soon. I wanted to hold her off, to steer her from the truth a little longer. But I wouldn't mess with that. She had a right to the truth and it wasn't something I was willing to sabotage too heavily.

"Hey, are you okay?" I asked.

She looked up and bit her lip. "I guess. I'm just disappointed that she couldn't help."

"Come here," I said, holding my hands out.

Usually, she would curl into my side but today she climbed on my lap and laid her head on my shoulder. I was momentarily stunned. We hadn't been quite that close before. I liked it far too much. Everything about her felt right, natural, and she fit against me perfectly. "I'm so glad I have you, Noah. You're the only one I can trust."

I bit my tongue. The stress and guilt were going to give me an ulcer. Weaving my fingers through her long hair, I replied, "It's okay. Try not to let it get to you so much. The mind is a complicated thing. The fact that you've remembered this much is a huge step."

"But is it a memory?" She groaned. "It's driving me crazy, whirling around in my head *all* the time. Make me forget it, Noah."

This was it. We were alone in her house apart from Jeremy, who was in his room with Amie. I had never had sex before and I was sure I wanted my first time to be with Scarlett, but I didn't want to do this if it was just to take

her mind off everything.

“Not like this,” I said, leaning my forehead against hers. She frowned, and I ran my thumb along her jaw. “You mean so much to me but I want our first time to be because you want me, not because you want me to help you forget.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Her arms tightened around my neck. “If you’re not ready that’s fine.”

Not ready. I wanted to laugh. Just because my experience with women was a long list of just her name, didn’t mean I didn’t have those feelings, didn’t mean she couldn’t make me burn with one simple look.

I wanted her, badly, but I could see the indecision in her eyes. It wasn’t the right time; her mind was all over the place and I wasn’t going to give her something else to regret about us. No matter how much I ached to be inside her, I could wait.

“Scarlett, I love you.”

Her dark eyes widened a fraction before they glowed. “I love you, too.”

“I can wait.” A part of me hoped she wouldn’t be ready. I was betraying her and soon she would find out. Could I let our relationship turn physical? I shouldn’t but I knew it wouldn’t be easy once she wanted to.

Tipping her head up, she offered her mouth. I kissed her long and slow, never being able to resist. She melted against me until her whole weight was pressing me against the wall. I wanted more.

Her fingers dug into my neck as I nipped her bottom lip. She invaded all of my senses, threatening to drive me insane. Everything was Scarlett, Scarlett, Scarlett, and I *never* wanted that to stop.

Was this what it was like to be completely in love? No one back home showed the can’t-keep-your-hands-off-each-other-stage. I was taught it was because of the over-sexed nation where no one thought anything of walking around with everything on show and we didn’t want that. But I wasn’t so sure. I understood it now; it was the best feeling in the world to be so in the moment with someone, so absorbed in them, that you could explode from being so happy.

She was the first one to break the kiss when she felt something that I thought would make my face burn with embarrassment. But I wasn’t embarrassed with her. It was a physical action *showing* how much I wanted her.

“Okay,” she said, breathing deeply. “Um...”

I ran my hands up her back, smiling. “I know and it’s fine. Really. You can stop me whenever you need to. No pressure, remember?”

Nodding, she beamed.

“Anyway, I should go soon.”

“Really?” she asked, pouting.

I was sure my pupils dilated when she pouted, remembering biting her lip in our kiss that had been much more frantic and needy than before.

“I’ll see if I can come back after dinner.”

“You could eat here.”

“And I wish I’d asked my parents before so I could stay.”

She tilted her head in a nod. “But you didn’t so your mum’s cooked for you.”

“Exactly.”

“Okay. Let me know if you can come back and I’ll pick a movie.”

“Sounds perfect.”

And I hated how perfect that did sound.



WHEN I GOT home I could hear Finn’s music upstairs, Dad’s office door was shut so he was locked away in there, and I had no idea where Mum was. There was a vegetable stew in the slow cooker, making the kitchen smell incredible.

I walked outside and saw Mum kneeling down in the mud, planting something.

“Hey,” I said, lowering myself to the ground beside her. “Need help?”

Her hands and knees were muddy but she always had the biggest smile when she was outside. She was the true embodiment of Eternal Light. The literature might as well be written about her. When I saw her like that, the way she did every morning back home I missed my community that much more.

“Always,” she replied. “The soil isn’t as good as back home but we are getting good produce. I do miss corn, though. Can you pick the ripe tomatoes and strawberries for me?”

“Sure.” I took a bowl and went to the greenhouse beside where she was digging the ground.

“How is Scarlett?” she asked.

“She’s fine.” She wasn’t fine but I didn’t feel like discussing Scarlett’s private life, even though I should. “I might go back over later if that’s okay?”

“Of course. Are things between you going well?”

Now I wasn’t sure what to answer. Things between us were going really well, the more I saw her, the more I wanted to be around her. When it was just me and her I felt free, I thought of nothing but us. It was addictive.

“Things are going to plan. She’s a nice girl, very sweet.”

“Do you think she is in love with you yet?”

I swallowed razor blades. Yes, she did, and that both thrilled and sickened me. “I’m not sure. Maybe. It’s still early days.” My face burned and I had to busy myself, unable to look my mother in the eye as I lied to her.

“I’ve seen how she looks at you, Noah.”

So had I.

“Even if she’s not we have a couple of months,” I said, picking the red tomatoes off the vines.

“I don’t think that’s going to be an issue. She adores you. I know she’ll go with you without incident.”

My heart sank. Mum said that to make me feel better but it made me feel worthless. I loved Scarlett’s feelings for me; it was plain to see when she stared into my eyes. I shouldn’t feel anything back but I loved her, too.

It will be fine. I’ll get an eternity with her afterwards.

“Can I ask you something, Mum?”

“You know you can. Anything, anytime.”

I licked my lips, gripping the bowl with two hands. “Do you think it will hurt her?”

Silence stretched on for too long.

“Do you mean when she finds out you have lied or the final ritual?”

Which one did I mean? Well, I didn’t want to know the answer to the first, even though I already did. “The ritual,” I replied.

“No, I don’t. It will be over too soon.”

I clawed the plastic bowl, fingertips turning white. “And do you think sixteen is the right age?”

She appeared in front of the door, tilting her head to the side. “Noah...”

I raised one hand. “No, that’s not what I mean. No second thoughts. You know how committed I am to Eternal Light, I agreed to five months in the pit that is *civilisation*. I am in this one hundred percent. I just wondered if it would be better when she’s twenty or twenty-four. She’d be an adult, we



could talk to her adult to adult, get her to come with us voluntarily when there's no chance of being arrested for kidnap."

Mum's body visibly relaxed, stress from her eyes evaporating. "I understand where you are coming from but there is no guarantee that she would come even then. It is dangerous to wait. She is out here where anything could happen to her; death is an occurrence that happens every second out here. All you hear about on the news is death. If she dies before the rituals, it is over for all of us, including Scarlett."

"Right." I scratched my forehead. "I know. Sorry, I do know that. I was just thinking aloud."

"You are entitled to ask questions, Noah. As you know, it is encouraged; you should never hold doubt in. Is it still doubt?"

"No," I replied, lying to my mother's face for the second time today alone. It was the first time in my eighteen years that I had lied. What had I become?

She smiled, proving she believed me, made me feel worse. "Good. You know you can come to me if you ever need confirmation on anything."

"I do. Thank you."

"Would you like to go over some literature tonight?"

No. "That sounds good."

"Noah," Dad called from inside.

"Yes?"

"Can you come into my office for a minute, please?"

"Sure. I'll be there in a second."

Mum smiled. "Alright, you are officially let off gardening duty."

"Thanks."

His door was open and he was sitting back on his chair behind the desk. "Come in," he said.

I closed the door behind me and sat on the armchair in the corner. "What's up?"

"How is Scarlett doing?"

She was starting to remember. That was huge and I should tell him but something stopped me every time I opened my mouth.

"She's okay. Now she's home she's back to normal."

Dad smiled. "Good. That's good. I was very concerned for a while there."

Me, too, but I think for completely different reasons.

"If she'd have died what would have happened?" I asked.

"Nothing. Nothing can happen without her. We need to keep her safe and

well.”

I nodded, crossing my legs at the ankle. Evelyn was already gone; we needed to protect Scarlett’s life until we got her to Ireland. “I know that.”

“How are you doing? The pressure isn’t getting to you, is it?”

“No. Hanging out with her isn’t stressful. She’s a great girl.”

“She is,” Dad agreed. “Jonathan and Marissa have done a good job raising her. I’ll give them that. I had visions of a teenage brat but she’s polite and kind.” And beautiful, funny, trusting, considerate, and loving.

“You care for her?” Dad asked.

“We all do. You have just listed some of the reasons why.”

He laughed. “Yes, you are right about that.”

After talking to my parents, I felt like I was on trial. They trusted me. Trust was a huge part of Eternal Light. We didn’t betray. There had been just one case: Jonathan and Marissa. I wouldn’t let them down. They were what made me *me*. I didn’t exist without them. I just had to get Scarlett out of my head, remind myself that I was doing the right thing for everyone here.

I am doing the right thing.



## Fourteen

### **Scarlett**

JEREMY WAS OUT with friends so it was the perfect time to finally speak to my parents about what was going on. Only I was terrified to. They didn't like going over the past and discussing the fire. I understood why, it must've been awful, but I had questions that just got louder and louder until I wanted to scream.

They were sitting on the sofa watching *Grand Designs* when I walked in the living room. *Here goes.* "Mum, Dad, can I talk to you about something?"

Looking up, they both smiled. "Of course, sweetheart," Mum said. They looked happy. Like I was about to tell them something great. I felt worse.

Sitting down, I avoided eye contact. "When I was waking up from the accident I had dreams, as you know. They seemed so real that it made me wonder about before."

"About before?" Dad said, prompting me to elaborate. He knew what I meant, though, but he didn't want to be the first one to say it.

"Before the fire."

I was met with silence and finally had to look up. They watched me carefully.

"I'm sorry, I know you don't like talking about it but there are things that I think I remember."

"Like what?" Mum asked.

"Like a girl named Evelyn. Who is she?"

"Darling, that was your doll."

Yeah, Jeremy had said that, too, but the 'doll' I remembered was running around.

"I remember a girl, this wasn't a doll."

"I don't know what to tell you, Scarlett. Evelyn was your doll. This was a dream not a memory."

"It felt like a memory. Everything was so familiar that I..."

Dad sat forward, straightening his back and asked, "That you what?"

"I went to see a hypnotist."

"What? Why didn't you tell us? Why is this the first we're hearing about it?" Mum asked, sitting up far too straight.

"Because I know how you feel when we talk about the accident."

"Hey," Dad said softly. "It's hard, I won't deny that, but I don't ever want you to feel like you can't come to us. Nothing is off limits, Scarlett, no matter how difficult the conversation may be."

"Okay," I replied, dipping my head. "Then will you tell me about it again?"

Dad took Mum's hand. "The hypnotist couldn't help?" he asked. I shook my head. "Right. Well, it was just after two in the morning when we were woken by the smoke alarm. We ran out of our room and grabbed you and Jeremy. You were hysterical, screaming and crying on your bed, you were so scared. Your mum picked you up and covered you with a blanket to try to limit how much smoke you inhaled. I got Jer and we made our way downstairs."

They obviously had a hard time reliving what'd happened. Mum's knuckles had turned white around Dad's hand and her eyes glossed over.

"The smoke was so thick and when I think back I can still feel how suffocating it was. The whole of the ground floor was in flames; we made it out of the back door. Your grandparents made it out the back window from where they were sleeping on a sofa bed in the dining room. I think if we'd have been just minutes later we'd have been trapped there. Your mum collapsed to the ground when we got out. Neighbours had come to help. You screamed the entire time, Scarlett. By the time we got you on the lawn to check you over, you were out and didn't come to until a few hours later in the hospital. When you woke, you remembered nothing."

"Why was I the only one in the hospital?"

"We all went, sweetheart," Mum said. "We all had inhaled smoke and needed to see a doctor but because you were in such a state you inhaled a lot more and you were very young."

"Okay. Then what happened?"

"Then we had to start again. We tried everything we could to get you to remember. We were told that familiar things might jog your memory but we lost everything to the fire. I'm sorry, sweetheart, we tried therapy and we spent every night for a long time telling you stories of your past but nothing

helped.”

I remembered them telling me stories. But not being in the hospital. The earliest thing I could recall was being curled up on a sofa with them while Jeremy told me about a hamster we’d had. There was one thing that bugged me, if Evelyn was a doll I’d had, why was now the first time I was hearing of it? Surely they would have mentioned her if they went through everything in my past to try to help me remember.

Something was definitely off, and I couldn’t help thinking that my parents were lying to me.

“What did the doll look like?” I asked.

“Um,” Mum said, “she wore a dress and had brown hair, I think.”

So did the girl I saw when I was waking up. Either my fuzzy mind made her a human or I was remembering a girl I’d known before and they weren’t telling the truth. At this point, I had no idea.

“Why didn’t you tell me about it before?”

Dad frowned. “We did but it was clear that talking about your toys wasn’t helping you to remember so I guess we just concentrated on the more important things like family and things we’d done together.”

“Did you take me back to the house?”

“No, by the time you had calmed down enough to talk and interact with us again the house was gone. There was too much damage so the landlord had it torn down and he built three houses on the land.”

Completely possible, but I wasn’t sure I believed it.

“Why do you think your dreams are of something that’s happened?” Mum asked.

“I don’t know, it feels different,” I replied.

“So, you don’t just think because Noah has said a few things about how strange it is to have no recollection of four years of your life that you’re slotting perfectly normal things into something that makes sense, or no sense, of that time you lost?” Dad said.

I only just understood what he meant and it was possible. It’d been a long time since I gave up letting it bug me but since Noah, I was trying to remember again.

“Honey, I know it is strange and frustrating but it doesn’t make you different to anyone else,” Mum said.

“This isn’t about fitting in. Noah hasn’t said anything horrible about it or me.”

“Good,” Dad said, raising his eyebrows and sitting back in the seat. “So, the hypnotherapy didn’t work, is there anything else you’d like to try?”

Sighing, I ran my hands through my unruly hair. “I don’t know. I don’t want to obsess about it anymore, it’s tiring, but it does bother me that I don’t know.”

“Would you like to work on seeing if you can remember or learning how to let it go, again?” Dad asked.

I’d let it go before. When I was eleven and determined to remember. It was useless and Mum and Dad spent a lot of time helping me come to terms with the knowledge that I probably wouldn’t ever get those memories back. It was a difficult time where I argued with my parents a lot, even though it wasn’t their fault. I had no desire to thrust us back to that.

“Let it go,” I said with a defeated sigh. “I want to let it go again.”

Mum smiled. “I think that’s a wise choice. And you never know, you may remember one day. You’re most likely to when you’re not stressing over it.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

I didn’t feel like I would remember, though. I wished I could let it go as I had before. This time was different; I had *something* to hold onto. My memories as I woke created real hope.

“What do you need from us?” Mum asked.

I need you to tell the truth.

“Nothing,” I said. “Can we just forget this happened and I’ll stop letting some stupid dreams eat away at me.”

Mum smiled, swallowing hard. “Of course, we can.”

“Good,” I replied, standing up. “I’m going to get ready to go over Noah’s.”

I didn’t look back but I knew they were watching me as I left the living room. I hadn’t let it go but they needed to believe I had. They weren’t going to tell me anything if there was even anything else to tell.

Whatever happened before my fourth birthday, it was up to me to unlock. No one else was going to tell me the bloody truth.

## **Scarlett**

I WALKED ALONG the back streets of town towards the industrial areas after not going to Noah's. It was stupid and irrational, but the disappointment of my failed conversations with Mum and Dad left me desperate and determined.

So here I was, trawling the nearest industrial estate, looking for anything familiar to what I'd seen in my dreams. I wasn't even in the same town that I knew for sure, but I hoped that something would look similar. How different were warehouses anyway?

I wrapped my arms around myself as I walked. The cold wind nipped at my skin, and I wished I brought a bigger coat. It was supposed to be warming up in May, but the weather had turned again. Going back wasn't an option. As crazy as I was right now at least I was doing something.

Images of what I'd seen when I was coming around plagued me 24/7. They were more than dreams and my family weren't talking. I *had* to know what was going on – or what had gone on. I still didn't understand how the information could just get lost. It didn't make any sense.

My mobile phone rang in my jeans pocket. I answered the call to Noah and took shelter in a doorway to a UPS warehouse. "Hey," I said.

"Hey. Where are you?"

"At home," I replied, wincing as I lied to him. I'd hoped he wouldn't have called until after I'd got back. Noah was the only person I could actually talk to about it. Imogen thought I was just being a drama queen and told me there were things that she didn't remember, but it didn't stress her out. It was different; mine was four years and not just a few occasions.

"Right," he said, obviously upset by his tone. "Shall we try that again, Scarlett?"

"What?"

"You're lying, you're not at home."

Blood rushed to my face. "I'm sorry."

"You're lucky I called before I came over. Your parents told me you were on your way to my house but when you didn't show.... What's going on?"

"I'll come home now," I said.

"Where are you? Who're you with?"

"No one. I'm just walking."

"You're just walking," he repeated, sounding like the least convinced person in the world.

I started making my way home, walking with long strides so I'd make it back quickly.

"Yeah. Things have been crazy recently, you know they have. I feel like my head's going to explode, the stress is too much. You think I'm obsessing for no reason because I'll remember eventually, and my family refuse to talk about it. No one stops to think about what I need. I just wanted some fresh air and to think for a while."

"Without telling anyone where you are?"

"Yes!" I stopped walking. He was irritating me, and I knew it was only because he was worried, but I was tired of not doing what I needed because of other people's opinions.

"I'm not coming back yet. I need time."

"Scarlett—"

"I'll speak to you tomorrow. Bye, Noah."

Hanging up and turning around, I headed back to the industrial park. I didn't want to sneak around and lie to my parents and Noah, but none of them understood how badly I needed to figure out what was going on in my head. Every time I thought about it, ice settled in my stomach. I couldn't help feeling that something was very, very wrong.

My phone rang in my pocket and as soon as it rang off it started again. Noah was persistent. I switched it to silent.

Back at UPS where I'd answered the call to Noah, I looked around. Warehouses all looked the same, right? Big and grey. I took it all in and nothing. Closing my eyes, I tried to put myself back there. To walking into the building with someone holding my hand. There was mud and rubble under my feet. The warehouse was abandoned. My white dress skimmed the ground as I walked.

I squeezed my eyes shut and pinched the top of my nose, feeling a banging headache coming on.



Remember.

It shouldn't be that hard. I'd lived through those four years; I should be able to remember them. My head constantly hurt where I desperately tried to fix the broken link in my mind.

Remember.

*Evelyn. Focus on her.* She was the only name I knew of the strange faces I saw. I wished I knew who she was. I didn't see much of her face, but she was pretty and had light brown hair that fell to her waist and curled at the ends. That was all I knew about her but it was still a lot more than the others.

She was running with Jeremy. Where? What were they doing?

Remember.

The soft glow of candlelight made them seem dream-like, but I knew better than that. They were in the room that was hot, too. I couldn't remember if I was playing with anyone but at the time I was just standing and watching them. Why wouldn't I have joined in? Me and Jeremy played all the time when we were younger.

I leaned back against the metal wall and gripped my hair. I was back there, playing the same memory over and over in my mind, desperately trying to extend it past the few short seconds it lasted. What happened next? I imagined a broken link and fixed it in my head, hoping, praying that it'd somehow trick my mind into mending whatever went wrong after the accident.

It happened, I was there. I could do this.

Gripping my hair tighter, I whimpered as my head started to throb. *Stay with it. Don't give up.* Everything was inside my head; I just had to let it out. Think. Remember. *Please.* I tried to do what Dr Pain got me to do and manipulate the memory. I paused it, keeping Evelyn still in my mind. All I could see was the side of her face, her rosy cheek, button nose and the corner of her eye.

Remember.

I imagined I was with her, standing by her side, slightly taller because back then I was only a few inches shorter than Jeremy, and she only came up to his shoulder. She wore a white dress like the one I'd been wearing. I didn't feel anything when she was there.

"Ahh," I cried, pressing down on my forehead as pain sliced through my head.

The memories of me crying and boiling from the candles made my heart

race in the worst way. Evelyn brought on nothing. But the candles might.

The smell, warmth and *feel* of having candles alight may do something. I'd been around them before, of course, but I wasn't focused on them before. I turned around yet again and jogged home, hoping this latest direction would work.

Mum and Dad were watching a movie in the living room when I got home. Jeremy's car wasn't in the drive, so he was probably off with Amie. "Is that you, Scarlett?" Dad called.

"Yeah."

"Do you want to watch Golden Gun with us? It's just starting."

"No, thanks, I'm going to have a bath."

"Okay," he replied, and I headed upstairs, stopping in the hall to grab Mum's box of candles from the dresser. If I didn't remember tonight, I didn't know what I was going to do. I was close to tears and so frustrated I felt like slamming my fist into the mirror. *Something is wrong, and they won't tell me!*

I locked the bathroom door, took a deep breath and started the water running. I was going to have to actually have a bath now I'd said it, but there was no way I could lock myself in the bathroom without them getting suspicious if I were just burning candles.

I set two tea lights on the windowsill, a candlestick in a holder on the side of the bath, and struck the match against the side of the box. Staring at the flame, I said a quiet prayer for this to work and lit the wicks.

Sitting on the edge of the bath, I stared at the tall, white candle on the side of the bath. That one was the closest to the one I'd seen, and I just wanted the others to give the illusion of there being more flames around without the danger of them falling out of the silver holders.

I felt the warmth and calm that staring at a flame brought, it was like cuddling up indoors on a cold, winter's day. I loved fire, had always been drawn to it. Ironic really as it was fire that stole four years from me. Well, possibly.

Stripping out of my clothes, I got into the bath and sat closer, making sure to leave enough distance so if it did fall I wouldn't get burnt. I breathed in and out slowly for five seconds, closed my eyes and felt myself being drawn towards the heat.

I gasped and was a child again and in the room that was too hot. Jeremy and Evelyn were running and this time I made them run round and round,

coming in and out of shot. But this time I didn't focus on them. I left them and walked to the candles. I felt the heat from the one in front of me, smelled the smoke as the small flame flickered, creating light and dark patches behind my eyelids.

I didn't realise I was breathing so hard until my chest started to hurt. I should stop, but I felt closer than I had before. The heat and smell made me feel something. Fear. My skin may feel hot, but inside I was cold. Frozen. I gagged, swallowing bile as I *felt* betrayal and loneliness, even though I didn't understand it.

My eyes flew open, and I clung to the handles on the bath. Tears streamed down my face as I tried to make sense of what'd just happened. I wanted to curl up and sob until my throat was raw because of the feeling of pure fear I'd just experienced. And I didn't even know why I was afraid. Something really bad happened to me, something that my memory was protecting me from and even though I could feel how scared I was back then, it still refused to let me relive it.

"Scarlett?" Mum called, knocking on the door.

I jumped and spun around, making water swoosh up the side of the wall. My head and heart hurt so much I felt like I was going to pass out. "Yeah?" I replied as calmly as I could.

"Are you okay in there? Are you crying? Did something happen with Noah?"

Hearing her concern suddenly made me furious. How dare she ask if I was okay when this was all her fault?

"I'm fine," I replied. "We argued, but we've made up already."

"Are you sure you're okay? Why don't you come out and we can talk."

I gripped the bath handles tighter. "No, thanks. I'm okay, just want to relax for a while." I honestly did want to relax, not that I could.

"Alright. I'm downstairs if you need me."

"Thanks." I think I managed to keep the seething anger out of my words. She was my mum, how could she keep something that was obviously a huge deal, from me? They demanded honesty from me but were lying themselves. I never thought my parents would turn out to be hypocrites. I was so disappointed in them and frustrated with myself.

The truth was all I wanted. Why wouldn't anyone just give me that?



## **Noah**

“HELLO, DONALD,” I said as I took the phone from Dad and walked to my room for privacy. My nerves were all over the place after getting off the phone to Scarlett. I wanted to know where she was so I could go and get her. I felt like I was losing my grip on everything.

This was the absolute worst time to speak to Donald.

“Noah,” he said smoothly. “How are you?”

“I’m fine.”

“Staying strong?”

“Of course,” I replied. I was trying to anyway.

“Good. We knew you would be. You ascended long ago. Your mind is strong and sharp.”

Hearing those words from him now sounded... odd. “Thank you.”

“No need to thank me, Noah. You are responsible for all that you have achieved.”

Silence hung in the air.

He cleared his throat. “I’ll get to the point, shall I?” he said, chuckling under his breath. “Scarlett. How is my daughter?”

I gripped the phone tightly, something twisting in the pit of my stomach. “She’s fine.” She was out there somewhere.

“Good. I expect you are keeping a close eye on her.”

“I am.”

“We are almost there. Just six weeks to go now.”

They – we – needed her six days prior to the ceremony day to perform the rituals necessary for the sacrifice to be accepted, so we had seven days in total that she had to be with us. Her parents and the police could easily find her in that time.

“Are you worried about being caught?” I asked.

“No,” he replied. “Jonathan and Marissa will expect us to have stayed in

England where we have other land. They will not suspect we bought land in Ireland and merged our commune with Eternal Light in Bournemouth.”

Bournemouth was my old home until we heard that The Light was going to be sacrificed and moved to Ireland where we waited for the other commune to join us afterwards. Donald had bought land in the woods in Ireland, so we could all relocate and live together as one larger united community. A few weeks later, they turned up ten people lighter and without Scarlett.

My directions were clear: Make her love and trust me then take her to Dublin on a day trip and hand her over.

The more time I spent with her, the more my instructions bothered me. I didn't want to hurt her, and I didn't want her to lose faith in me. But this was bigger than my feelings or what I wanted.

“Alright, good. I'm looking forward to coming home,” I said.

“And we are looking forward to being complete once again. If you need anything, please call,” Donald said. “I need to make my way back now, you know how I don't like being away from the community, even if it is to make a quick call.”

No one did. We had to make runs into the nearest town every month for supplies and drive to the edge of the forest to make any phone calls. We all hated going.

“I will. Bye, Donald.”

“Noah,” he said and hung up. Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath and dropped my phone onto my bed.



I RUBBED MY forehead, downing a glass of water. Scarlett's parents took her because they didn't believe in Eternal Light anymore but could they have a point? It was my entire life, and I was starting to doubt it.

“How's it going?” Finn asked from behind me.

I lowered the glass and turned around. “Fine.”

“Everything going according to the plan?”

My scalp prickled. “Yes, why?”

He shrugged. “You are spending a lot of time with her.”

“That was the whole point, you idiot!” I was harsher than I planned to be. It was getting harder and harder to control my feelings and pretend this was

all business. I trusted my family but what if Eternal Light were wrong? What if we were just killing the funniest, most loving, passionate, annoying, and beautiful girl I'd ever met?

What if she wasn't The Light, the key to the next life, to eternal life?

But what if she was and I could spend an eternity with her?

I wanted to ask Finn if he'd ever have doubts, but I didn't know who to trust anymore. If he told anyone that I was questioning it, I could get sent back to the others and where would that leave Scarlett?

Finn held his hands up. "Alright, just asking. What crawled up your arse and died?"

"Nothing. I'm tired, that's all."

"Is she keeping you up?"

I ground my teeth. "Nothing's happened between us."

"Whoa, Noah, calm down. I know it hasn't."

I turned back around, scared that he'd see the guilt in my eyes. Kissing was as far as I was supposed to go, our relationship had to look real, and Scarlett had to believe it.

I'd built a wall around myself the first day we'd met, but she used a sledgehammer to smash it down and made me care for her.

"You know exactly when Donald and Fiona want to do this thing?" I asked. 'Do this thing'. It was a crappy way to say 'sacrifice Scarlett'. I knew six weeks but not a specific date.

"When they're ready," he replied "Are you ready?" I used to be. We'd been working towards this forever. Everything we did was in preparation of the ritual. Now I wasn't so sure. They'd chosen me because they said I was strong and could keep the poison of the outside world out of my mind. The outside world I could do. What I couldn't do was keep a sixteen-year-old girl out.

I was either the weakest member of Eternal Light or the strongest.

"I'm ready," I replied.

"Good. Me, too." He slapped my shoulder. "I can't wait."

Smiling, I tried to dig through my mind to a time when I thought the same as Finn. When everything was easier, and my life was clear. I didn't like how clouded it had become.

"I'm going to Scarlett's, I'll see you later."

He nodded, already engrossed in the contents of the fridge.

Walking to Scarlett's at a faster pace than I usually did, I contemplated

what she would do when she found out. Would she believe Eternal Light like Fiona and Donald said? She was their daughter after all. Or would she hate us all, especially me?

Marissa answered the door and sent me up to Scarlett's room, telling me yet again to leave the door open. We always did, but she insisted on relaying the rule every time.

Her door was open, and she was lying on her stomach on her bed, facing away reading a new book. Her chin was resting on her hands, and her legs were in the air. Her hair was still damp from a shower, but she'd not even taken the time to dry it before delving into another fictional land.

I watched her for a minute, carefree with everything ahead of her. Was eternal life worth sacrificing this girl for? Even if we waited another four years, give her one more cycle, to perform the sacrifice it still wasn't enough time for her to properly live this life.

I sighed, and she looked over her shoulder, smiling as her eyes landed on mine. "Hey," she said, sitting up. "I didn't think you were coming until later or at all."

Walking in, I sat on the bed and replied, "Couldn't wait and of course I was coming. I'm sorry."

She smiled. "I'm sorry, too."

"Did you get done what you wanted?"

"No. Can we just relax, please?"

"That sounds perfect. I don't want to argue, I just want to spend time with the girl I love."

"That's sweet," she replied, leaning over for a kiss. "I'll put a movie on."

We got into our usual film watching position – me lying against the pillows and cushions and her lying against my chest with her legs between mine. It was sitting like this that had started the doubt.

## **Scarlett**

THERE WAS NOTHING left to try. What else could I do? It was so hurtful knowing that my parents had the answers.

I could hear them talking in the kitchen, Jeremy was telling them something about extra football practice now he'd made the university team. Jer taught me to kick a ball before I could walk, apparently. Was that a lie, too?

Then I heard Noah laugh. No one had told me he was here. I walked in, and he immediately looked up and smiled. I didn't return it. How could Mum and Dad carry on as normal, laughing and joking around when they were so obviously lying to me? I didn't understand how they could look me in the eye but they did every single day, and that hurt more than anything.

Neither of them cared that I was having a hard time dealing with my flashbacks...or dreams...or whatever they were. They didn't put aside how difficult it was to help me. Wasn't that what you were supposed to do for your child?

Something inside me snapped and boiled over. I couldn't stand pretending anymore. They were telling me now, or I was getting on the first bus to my grandparent's house.

"Are you alright?" Mum asked.

I shook my head. "No. What's going on? I'm sick of not knowing what happened, and I'm sick of you lying to me. I know that Evelyn isn't a bloody doll, so tell me the truth." Mum gripped Dad's hand, her face ashen as if she'd seen a ghost. Fear gripped me. "Stop hiding things and tell me what's going on."

"Sweetheart..." Mum said.

"No! Don't do that anymore. I deserve the truth and you know I do. This isn't fair."

"She's right," Dad said, eyes glazed with tears. "It's time she knew the



truth. We can't continue doing this, Marissa. We always said if she remembered we would help her through, it shouldn't be different for part memories. Sit down, Scarlett."

I did as he said and carried myself to a chair with shaking legs. Noah sat, too, his face filled with concern. Mum and Jeremy looked downright terrified.

"Before we tell you this I need you to know we did what we did to protect you."

Gulping, I replied, "Okay."

"Your dreams are memories; you're right. You're remembering what you repressed after the fire," Dad said and sat forward in his seat.

The fire was true?

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mum and Jeremy exchange a worrying glance. Did Jeremy know everything? *Of course, he does.*

I shook my head, trying to put everything together, but it was like trying to complete a puzzle with pieces missing. "Tell me," I demanded.

Mum pursed her lips, blinking back tears.

"Sweetheart," Dad started, "Twenty years ago we were involved with a cult, although at the time we didn't see that."

My head hurt more. Was he joking? It didn't make sense. A cult. "What...?"

"Eternal Light was a group of people that believed in inner wellbeing, living off the land and harmony. Our faith was put in nature and its ability to regenerate and adapt. We believed in an after life, one with no pain or loss, just peace and happiness. One night there was a fire in the old warehouse building we used for our weekly meetings. A few made it out, and we scattered, to later meet up back at the commune. It wasn't long until we realised how misplaced our faith had been."

That wasn't it. They could've told me that. "You're holding something back. You said you kept it secret to protect me. Where's the danger in what you just told me?"

"Honey, I don't think—"

"No, Dad, tell me *everything*." How dare he still try to cover things up?

His knuckles and Mum's turned white around each other. "The leaders, Donald and Fiona Mapel, convinced us that the only way we would *all* find eternal peace in the beyond is by human sacrifice."

My pulse roared in my ears. I stood up, steadying myself on the arm of the

chair. Noah was up with me, checking I was okay but Mum, Dad and Jeremy sat dead still.

“Human sacrifice?” Noah said, his complexion paling in front of my face.

“Please sit down, love,” Mum said.

Noah helped me sit. But I wasn’t sure if I wanted to hear more. Did they actually murder someone? Were my parents murderers?

“I don’t understand. You killed someone? You were all going to kill yourselves?”

“No, that’s not it,” Dad said.

“Than what is it?”

He took a deep breath and licked his bottom lip. “That night was the night we were supposed to perform the sacrifice. For the months previous your mum and I had been having severe doubts. How could you find peace after murdering someone? Things Donald and Fiona said stopped making sense to us. We told no one of our doubt, of course. We feared being thrown out and left unable to intervene.”

“What happened that night? That’s what I was remembering, right? I remember candles. It was hot. And white, everyone was in white.”

“The sacrifice was going ahead and we knew then and there that Donald and Fiona were off their bloody rocker. They were going to go through with it. I stepped in,” Dad said.

“An argument,” I said, suddenly seeing an image of Dad shouting and wrestling with someone. It made my head pound, but I didn’t care because it was another memory. Was he fighting with Donald? People joined in, limbs flailing around as they tried to throw Mum and Dad out of the door.

“Yes,” he said. “In the scuffle candles were knocked, and the room was quickly engulfed in flames.”

“I remember the heat.”

Mum nodded. “I grabbed Jeremy’s arm, and Dad picked you up. We made a run for it. One-half of the building was already falling down so we knew it wouldn’t be long before the room buckled under the pressure.”

“I barely remember anything. Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“On our way out, the building started collapsing, timber from the roof fell and we were hit. Not badly, you had a small cut on your forehead. We’re not sure if that caused memory loss or if you repressed it. Either way, when you woke you remembered nothing at all.”

I knew that I had no memories before the age of four because of a fire, but

I was led to believe it was a house fire, not a derelict building because of a cult.

“And you never filled in the blanks?” It still didn’t make sense. They’d had years to tell me the truth, and yet they chose to fill my head with fake memories of a childhood I’d never had. Neither looked at me. “No, that’s not all, is it? What’re you still not telling me?”

“We love you, Scarlett, never forget that,” Mum said.

My heart stuttered. “What are you not telling me?” I repeated.

Dad closed his eyes and said, “Donald and Fiona are your biological parents.” The air left my lungs in a rush. “And the sacrifice was you.”



## Eighteen

### **Scarlett**

“NO!” I SPRUNG to my feet, tears welling in my eyes. Everything I thought I knew was a lie. I wanted to rewind ten minutes because the lie was much better than the truth. “I... How could you...? Shit, I was...” I didn’t know what I wanted to say. There were too many questions whizzing through my mind to pick one to concentrate on.

They were going to kill me.

“Please, Scarlett,” Mum said, standing and holding her hands up. “We’re sorry. It was never going to happen; we’d never have let them go through with it. We love you so much. It doesn’t matter where you came from. You’re *our* daughter.”

She took a step closer, and I backed up, the backs of my legs hitting the sofa. I held my hand up. Over the last few weeks, my head had hurt from trying to remember everything but that paled in comparison to how I felt now. I’d just had my whole world tipped upside down.

“I need to leave,” I said and rushed out of the room.

My parents shouted my name, but Jeremy told them to let me go. Noah followed, and I was glad. I didn’t want to be alone, but I didn’t want to be around someone who had betrayed me.

I collapsed on my bed in a daze. That couldn’t be true. It was too... A cult. How could they have been in a cult? One that I was going to be killed in? Surely things like that didn’t actually happen? But they wouldn’t have made that up. It was far too much.

“Are you okay?” Noah asked, laying down behind me and bundling me up in his arms.

“No,” I replied. “I’m not dreaming, right?” I muttered, staring at my wall as I tried to make sense of something that was so senseless.

He shook his head against mine. He’d barely said a word. He was probably thinking of the best way to break up with me and get the hell out.

“You’re not dreaming. I wish you were.”

“It doesn’t make sense.”

“No,” he replied.

“I think I would’ve believed them more if they told me we were vampires.”

“You can go out in the sunlight,” he said, trying to lighten the atmosphere.

“What am I going to do?”

Shrugging, he replied. “I don’t know. I can’t get my head around what they said. What do you want to do?”

“I’ve no idea. No, actually I do. I want to rewind time to before the car accident and leave my grandparents house later. I want for it not to be true. I want to go back to a time when everything was simple. I hate this, Noah,” I said and started to sob. “I hate this and I just want to be normal.”

He held me tighter and let me cry. I completely lost it, sobbing until I could barely breathe. I was scared of what I’d been told, scared of what it meant now and scared that Noah would leave, and I wouldn’t have any normality in my life.

“Are you going to run? I wouldn’t blame you at all,” I asked once I’d calmed down enough that I wasn’t gasping for breath anymore.

“No, I’m not going to run. I love you, Scarlett, no matter what. I’m not going anywhere,” he whispered into my hair.

I turned around and clung to him, his words setting me off again, and I cried until I literally couldn’t shed another tear. My heart was breaking. My parents weren’t my parents, my whole life was one big lie, and I was almost murdered as I turned four.

Noah stayed with me until I’d calmed down. He looked stressed and tired, but he’d been amazing, everything I needed. We lay side by side on my bed with him playing and stroking my fingers. It was calming.

“How are you feeling now?” he asked.

“I don’t know if there’s a word to describe it. Shocked, betrayed, hurt and confused all come close.”

“You’re going to be alright.”

I sure didn’t feel like I was going to be alright. I didn’t know how to even process what they’d told me, let alone come to terms with it. “Yeah, how do you know that?”

“Because I won’t give you another option. I won’t pretend to understand how you are feeling, but I know that there is nothing I wouldn’t do to make

things better.”

Closing my eyes, I turned on my side and snuggled closer to him. “I’m going to miss you this weekend. You always manage to put things into perspective for me.”

“Do you want me to stay?”

“No, you’re excited to see your friends again. Besides, I’ve got a lot to get my head around.”

“I know but if you need me to help you get your head around it…”

He was so sweet, always thinking about me first, but now I had the chance to do something for him and letting him go home without guilt was exactly what he needed.

“I do, but this isn’t going to get better in a weekend, Noah. Maybe time alone will help me and when you’re back things might be clearer, and then you can help me move on.” It all sounded so simple. I didn’t even buy my own words so there was no way he would either.

“I still don’t like to leave you when you’re upset.”

“That’s exactly why I love you so much. You spend time with your family, and I’ll work on talking things through with mine.”

He rolled to his side, so we were facing each other. When his fingertips brushed my chin, I took a deep breath. He made me feel so many things all at once and even though sometimes the intensity of those feelings scared me, I wouldn’t change it for the world.

“*I love you, Scarlett,*” he whispered and claimed my lips.



# Nineteen

## Noah

IT'D BEEN MONTHS since I'd been home, and I missed everything and everyone. We were such a close community, and I hated how distant everyone was here. I had no idea who our neighbours were, the most contact we'd had was a grumbled hello over the fence.

But we were finally going back to visit for the weekend, and I couldn't wait. Dad loaded up our bags while Mum made food for the long journey. We were leaving in an hour, and I wanted to spend some time with Scarlett before I left.

"I'll be back soon," I said to Dad as I walked down the path.

"Alright, send our regards to Scarlett."

"I will." Stuffing my hands in my pockets, I made my way to her house, not even bothering to try to convince myself I wasn't overeager to see her anymore. I felt what I felt, and I couldn't change it any more than I could control it.

I arrived minutes later, and Jeremy answered the door. He rolled his eyes and told me she was upstairs. I'd become a regular at their house as me and Scarlett went through that needing to be around each other all the time stage that really didn't need to be faked by me anymore. I honestly didn't think I ever needed to fake it. Even before she consumed most of my thoughts, I enjoyed spending time with her.

They shouldn't have chosen me.

Scarlett was laying on her back on the bed when I walked in, just staring up at the ceiling.

"You okay?" I asked.

She didn't look over, but she did smile. "I'm *really* good." She wasn't, but she was dealing. Having me there helped because she thought I hadn't betrayed her. And I hadn't. Not really. Not yet.

I sat on the bed and started playing with her fingers. "Yeah, why is that?"

Looking over, she arched her eyebrow and replied, "Why do you think!"

Of course, I knew but every time she said something like that she made me feel a hundred feet tall. Hell, every time she looked at me she did.

"But I'm also sad." She pouted adorably. "Two days is a long time."

"It's not that long."

"No," she said, sitting up. "You're supposed to agree with me here because you'll miss me, too."

"I will miss you, too, but it's okay."

"How is it okay?"

"Because there are people out there, living and working so far away from the people they love for months, years even. Time doesn't mean anything, Scarlett, not when you care about someone."

"Okay, that just made me feel a hundred times better about this weekend."

"Good, because I don't think I'll be able to speak to you much. I'll try going to town a couple times, though."

She shook her head. "No, it's actually okay. Time doesn't mean anything, right? Just enjoy your time with your family and don't worry about leaving your stupid limited service and no internet village and checking in. I'll see you when you get back."

It didn't feel like checking in, not when I *wanted* to talk to her. I wasn't going out of my way because I wanted that contact. But she was right, and I needed to reconnect with everyone back home because I could feel myself losing touch.

"I'll still try to call. I want to," I said, making her smile.

"Okay, it's not like I'd ignore the call or anything."

I knew she wouldn't, and I loved that she wanted me just as much as I wanted her.

"What do you have planned?"

"Sleepover at Imogen's. I've been a bit of a crap friend since you came along."

"You haven't, you still spend time with your friends." She'd made sure she spent time with Imogen, Bobby and Chris. She wasn't going to Imogen's because she felt like a bad friend, she was going because she didn't want to stay home all weekend.

She shrugged. "I do but not as much as I used to. A girl's night will be good, especially after everything that's been going on."

"Yeah, you deserve some time away from the tension." There was still a



lot of tension; Jonathan and Marissa tiptoed around her, and she barely spoke to them. She still had a lot of questions and still didn't know who Evelyn was, but she could barely look at them to ask.

I wanted to tell her but of course I couldn't. Even if I could, I wouldn't. After everything, she deserved the truth when she asked for it. When she was ready.

"Think one weekend I can come with you to visit your family? I want to see where you grew up?" she asked.

"You want to see my tiny, technology neglected island or my aunt's in Dublin? Both are home." I couldn't show her the island, I'd never even been there and only knew enough to answer any general questions. Ireland, where I grew up from the age of seven, she would see soon enough.

"I'd love to see both."

I would love to show her around, too. I would love for us to be normal and be able to live out a life I'd started to fantasize about. She deserved that. I deserved that.

"Do you think your parents would let you go away with me? They look like they want to run away with you when you mention leaving the house to go in the garden," I said.

She shrugged. "I don't know. They can't stop me from doing everything. It's so weird, a part of me wants to meet my biological parents, even after everything they've done. I don't know how to speak to my parents anymore, I still have so many questions, and I'm pretty sure I'm either still in shock or dead inside. How stupid is that?"

"It's not stupid. It's going to take a while to get your head around everything – it would for *anyone*. You're not dead inside for needing time to process what you've been told or for not being ready to have another conversation with your parents about it. And it's natural to want to know where you come from, Scarlett. But how would you even find them?"

"I've no idea. I wouldn't actually do it. Believe me, I now understand the danger of being near them, and I'd be lying if I hadn't considered running far away from here, too."

That was news to me. "You have?"

"At first, yeah. When they told me who they are I was so scared. But we've moved around a lot, and they obviously have no idea where I am. And, you know, if they ever tried to contact us we'd call the police."

"You're going to be fine here."

“I know. Besides, I don’t want to have to start all over again, and I don’t want to leave you.”

“What do your parents think?”

“They don’t think I’m in any danger just because I know the truth. In fact, they agree that it’s safer I do so I can be more cautious. We love where we live and the friends we’ve made and don’t want some crazy cult to ruin that. I need the familiarity of here and my friends when everything else has changed so much.”

I swallowed hard, an uneasy feeling settling down. I still felt loyal and didn’t like her calling my family crazy. But I could see it from her point of view. A point of view I was leaning more and more towards sharing. I’d never needed to go home so much before. I had to be back in my community so I could hopefully set everything straight in my head.

“Look, I’ve got to go or my parents are going to be angry. I’ll try calling but if I can’t, I’ll see you in two days.” I kissed her, cupping her cheeks in my hands. When I was with her like this nothing else but her made sense. If she was the only thing that gave me clarity after this weekend, I would know Eternal Light was wrong and everything I’d been led to believe my whole life was built on poor judgement and twisted truths.

I was petrified.

## **Noah**

WE ARRIVED AT the commune hours later, and I felt like I could breathe again. Everything was right here. I didn't have so many difficult choices. We had a clear path and followed clear rules.

We were immediately jumped on by the community and led to the communal table, which I'd helped to carve from fallen trees in the forest. They had so many dishes laid out I couldn't count them. It was real food that I knew exactly where it'd come from and what it was going to – or not going to – do to my body.

I couldn't keep the elation off my face as I sat on the wooden bench and tucked into Bernadette's famous asparagus fettuccini. I sat at the end of the table with Finn and a couple friends, Skye, Zeke and Willow. They were the only ones around my age, with Skye and Willow the closest. I wished they were guys so one of them could've gone to betray Scarlett instead.

Everyone started passing dishes around, filling their plates with wide smiles on their faces. The atmosphere was electric. We were all happy to be back together again.

"Thank you," I said to Bernadette as she passed me the basket of homemade rolls. The only thing that was different were the sunflowers, they were bigger, taller, and brighter than when we'd left. A feeling of belonging settled in my heart and I properly relaxed for the first time since we moved.

Laughter filled the air. Animated conversations were being had all the way along the stretched table.

"So, Noah, what's she like?" Willow asked. Her and Skye were identical twins, and if it weren't for Willow's love of short hair and Skye's of long, you'd never be able to tell them apart. They sat side by side, directly opposite me.

"She is everything we've been told," I replied. We'd grown up loving Scarlett, only now I loved her in a completely different way.

Skye rolled her dark green eyes. “Oh, come on, Noah!”

“Fine. She’s beautiful, funny, compassionate, little bit crazy, stubborn and smart. She never has a bad thing to say about anyone.” *And she deserves a chance to go to university and live off cheap noodles like she wants.* But that couldn’t happen. The next life she has will be perfect, much more than this one. She’ll be happier, and I’ll join her eventually.

“I can’t wait to meet her,” Zeke said. He spoke of her with such admiration it made my throat thicken. There wasn’t one person here that wouldn’t give their life to protect her for as long as it took to get her here. “Do you think she will hate us, though?”

Yes, absolutely.

I shrugged. “I’m sure once Donald and Fiona explain she’ll understand. She challenges society’s ideas already so I don’t think it’ll take her long to come around.” She didn’t challenge them. Well, she might, I just hadn’t had a conversation like that with her.

“What is it like living out there?” Willow asked, making it sound like we’d moved to the moon. It didn’t feel too far off actually.

“It’s horrible,” Finn said. “I can’t wait until she’s back here and I never have to step foot outside the commune again.”

“You’ll still have to do the food runs,” Willow pointed out.

“You know what I mean.”

“I’m with Finn,” I said. “Although I’m not having quite as hard time adjusting. It’ll be good to be home permanently.” When that happened it’d mean Scarlett would be dead. I didn’t like ‘civilisation’ much, but I’d stay there if it meant I could stay with her. I wished Donald would give me four years with her.

I took a deep breath and pushed all of that stuff away. I wasn’t home long, and I was determined to enjoy it. Whatever I was feeling would sort itself out. We all loved her, but I knew her in a way no one else did, that was bound to throw up some issues and emotions. It didn’t mean I wasn’t still just as devoted to Eternal Light.

After our meal, I helped to clean up and we gathered goblets of water. The year of Water was coming to an end, in a short few months the year of Earth would start again and Scarlett would be safe for a while. If it wasn’t for the fact that we already had her within our grasp, of course.

Fiona gathered us around a lake I helped to build six years ago. It was between the edge of the forest and our wooden houses. We’d dug it wide and

somewhat narrow, so it was rectangle with curved edges. It was the length of forty people with their arms stretched out to their sides.

I held my goblet up in one hand, mirroring what everyone else was doing. Donald walked along the line, touching each one and bowing his head.

“You give us life, give us the means to sustain ourselves,” Fiona said. “Water cleanses the earth, it allows people to drink, to wash and grow crops. You give us all we need to live now and beyond.”

Donald reached the end of the line and took his offering from Fiona.

“We will not forget to be thankful every day for what the earth provides us. We will not take it for granted, nor will we be selfish with it. We will take only what we need and make sure we are able to replenish what we use.” He tilted the goblet, and the water poured over the lip of the glass and into the lake, adding to the water we’d blessed and built up over the last six years.

Once Donald’s was empty, he bowed his head, giving the cue for us to follow. I tipped mine slowly and watched it trickle into the water. There wasn’t a day that passed that I wasn’t grateful for life. People abused the earth we lived on, most without any realisation of what they were doing. I wouldn’t turn into that.

For the next two days, I fell back into my old life but there was something missing. Or someone. I couldn’t stop thinking about her, wondering what she was doing, if she was hoping I’d call. There was no way I’d get signal out here, and they’d already done a run into town to get supplies last week.

When it was time to leave, I felt an even mixture of dread and longing. I’d missed Scarlett, but my community were everything, and it was hard to be without them.

“Not long now,” Bernadette said, handing a paper bag that would be filled with snacks for the journey back.

“Thank you. I cannot wait until we’re back here for good.”

Our goodbyes were longer, everyone hugged me and my family for longer, trying to shorten the time we would be apart, even by precious seconds. We knew what it was like to be separated now.

Donald and Fiona approached, leaving their goodbye with me until last.

“Noah,” Donald said. “I cannot even begin to express how proud of you we are and how grateful.”

“You are doing a wonderful job of keeping Scarlett safe,” Fiona added. “But I know that it is not easy, so remember why we are doing this. Keep that in your heart and you will be fine.”

I felt like she could read my doubts and see how much I felt for Scarlett. Would they have said that anyway or were they concerned that I was falling so felt they had to back up our beliefs?

“It isn’t easy, but I know what I have to do, and I know it’s the right thing for us all.”

Donald smiled and put his hand on my shoulder. “You are wise beyond your years, son.

Sometimes I didn’t feel it. Coming home for a while was exactly what I needed but that didn’t stop me wanting more for Scarlett before she made the ultimate sacrifice for our community. If I thought they would consider my request and let me go back to her, I would have asked them for those four years. I could stay with her, see that she did everything she wanted to and then in four years time bring her here. But I knew if I asked they would question my loyalty and I couldn’t risk that. And I knew I’d never bring her back.

“Thank you,” I replied.

“Are you ready, Noah?” Dad asked. He had one of the community’s cars running. My tearful mum was already in it, and Finn was saying a last goodbye to Zeke, Willow and Skye.

With an uncertain nod of my head, I replied, “I’m ready.”

As we got in the car, people shouted things like ‘bye’ ‘see you soon’ ‘take care’ and ‘remember we love you’. I took a deep breath and waved home goodbye. Knowing I would see Scarlett soon made me miss her more. I was anxious to get back to her. My heart beat faster knowing I would see her soon.

I felt sad to leave, but that was quickly replaced with a content smile at the thought of holding her again. The whole way home I was silently counting down the hours until I could go and see her.

I was hopelessly in love with her.

And our love was hopeless.



## Twenty-One

### Scarlett

I WAS COUNTING down the seconds until Noah got here. Two days without him around was awful. I didn't know how to look my parents or Jeremy in the eye. They'd told so many lies I didn't even know who they were anymore. I wanted to know more, but I couldn't handle them dressing up the truth again. Noah was right. I needed time.

"Scarlett, good morning, honey," Mum said, pouring boiling water into four mugs as I came downstairs and ignored them.

I grumbled a 'morning' and sat at the table.

"Come on, please talk to us. You have to understand why we made the choices we made," she said.

"I understand. I really do. If you hadn't stopped me from being murdered then you wouldn't be the people I know, deep down, you are, but you lied to me for twelve years. You moved us around so much and told me it was because of Dad's work. You had your parents and son lie. That's the part I can't get past. You didn't have to make some elaborate story up; you could've told me the truth."

She looked at me like I was insane. "You were a *child*. We thought about it, believe me, but we couldn't risk you saying something, we had to keep you safe, all of us safe. This was the easiest way to do that, and I'm sorry that you feel betrayed but keeping you alive meant more to us than you being upset about us lying."

"Is Evelyn your daughter?"

"No," she said.

"She's not a doll?"

Shaking her head, she replied. "No."

"She was a friend of Jeremy's?"

"She was, yes."

"Is she dead?"

“I don’t know.” Lowering her head she wiped her eyes. “I think so.”

“Why couldn’t you tell me that?”

Sighing, Dad said, “We were trying to protect you.”

We could go over it and over it, but it would never get us anywhere. I would never think they were right for letting me believe something that wasn’t true for so long. While I was younger, sure, but I was *sixteen*, and they could’ve told me a few years ago, when we moved here. They should have told me when I started remembering.

“This isn’t getting us anywhere,” Jeremy said. “We’re not sorry, Scarlett. If we’d have done things differently, you could be dead now.”

“Jeremy!” Dad scolded.

“No, Dad, I’m tired of walking on eggshells around her. We lied, but we did it for good reason, so stop being a brat and get over it. You’re my sister whether we share genes or not.” He pointed to Mum and Dad. “They brought you up and love you the same as me. You’re theirs so enough now.”

My eyes narrowed. He was right and that only made me angrier. How could he tell me to just get over it? He hadn’t just been told that his biological parents would’ve murdered him if no one had stepped in.

“Okay, we all need to calm down,” Mum said. “Coffee is ready so let’s try to have breakfast like a normal family.”

That was all well and good, but we were nothing like a normal family. I almost laughed.

Hurry up, Noah.

Breakfast wasn’t normal, it couldn’t be. I sat beside my brother and focused solely on the pastries and coffee. They watched me the whole time, making everything ten times more awkward. Did they think I didn’t love them anymore? Did they think I would feel out of place knowing I didn’t share their genes? I didn’t. I loved them, no matter what they still felt like family. But they’d hurt me so badly by keeping the truth from me.

We ate mostly in silence with Jeremy occasionally saying something about football, the present he got Amie for her birthday or a trip he and his friends were going on. I picked at my croissant, only having managed a few bites from the cinnamon swirl.

“What time is Noah home?” Dad asked. I think he was as eager to get him here as I was, hoping he’d be able to help.

I looked up at the clock and back to him, meeting eyes that I once thought were the same shape as mine, even if they were a different colour. Everything



looked different now. “Around now. He’s dropping his bags off and coming straight here. I’m finished, can I go to my room?”

Mum’s dark eyebrows pulled together. “You’ve not eaten much.” Neither had she.

“I’m not hungry.”

With a sober smile, she nodded, and I left the table.

I wasn’t back in my room long before Noah’s confident knock echoed through my room. “Come in,” I said, immediately brightening.

His smile for me was wide and light, and I didn’t realise how much I’d missed him until I saw how happy he was to see me. “Hey,” he said, flopping down on the bed beside me and pulling me in for a kiss.

I held onto his upper arms and kissed him back, feeling more whole by the second. He was someone linked to the me I knew before, someone that hadn’t changed almost beyond recognition.

His lips were soft, but the kiss was much firmer than usual. “Hey back,” I whispered when he broke the kiss and leant against my forehead.

“I missed you, Scarlett. It’s stupid, it was only two days, but not seeing you just felt wrong.”

“I missed you, too,” I replied, grinning like a fool. “Things here have sucked but knowing you were coming back made it bearable.”

He winced. “I’m sorry.”

“No, don’t be. I didn’t mean to make you feel bad, you’re allowed to have a life outside of me, you know.”

“I know. Not that sure if I want to.” Frowning, he shook his head. “Alright, that sounded less co-dependent in my head.”

I laughed and replied, “I know what you mean.”

“Tell me the truth, are you okay?” he asked.

I wrapped my arms around my legs. I was so not okay, but I felt better now he was back. It was stupid, he wasn’t gone long, but I really needed him to stay for a while now.

“Not really. It’s still hard even trying to get my head around what they told me, you know? They had Mum’s parents in on it, too. What a burden their lie must’ve been on everyone.”

And they did it all for me.

I felt horrible for being angry and angry for feeling horrible all at the same, mind screwing time.

He pulled my hands apart, untangling my body and wrapped me tightly in

his arms. “Yes, it’s...” His foot tapped on the bed, and I was so sure he was about to run off.

“Screwed up?”

The corner of his mouth kicked up. “That is one way of putting it.”

“If you want to leave, Noah, I’ll understand.” We hadn’t been together that long and add in the fact that my biological parents were crazy cult leaders. I wouldn’t blame him if he wanted to run for the hills.

“No.” Taking my hand, he turned to me. “I know things are...strained right now, and you have been told something that’s hard to understand and hard to believe, but I’m not going anywhere. When I told you I love you, I meant it. We’ll get through this together. You need to decide what you want to do?”

“Thank you,” I whispered, squeezing his hand. “I have no idea what I want to do. I don’t even know what to think right now. It’s so surreal. Cults and human sacrifice...”

Me as the sacrifice.

“I know,” he whispered.

“This stuff only happens on TV.”

“I’m so sorry, Scarlett.”

I shrugged. “It’s not your fault.”

“Still,” he said, “I hate that you’re upset. Is there anything I can do?”

“You can tell me about visiting your family and how your aunt is doing.”

“Come on, you don’t want to be talking about that stuff right now.”

“No, I really do, Noah. Please.” I would’ve talked about football if it meant it would stop me watching my memories of my childhood rip apart. None of it was real.

“Okay. They’re all good. My aunt overfed us all, and my cousins are going through a pirate phase. They spent the two days running around with patches on their eye. Lottie had both on for a while, and I had to guide her around the house for an hour.”

A face flashed through my mind, giving me an instant headache. I rubbed my forehead, trying to get the fog in my mind to lift.

You will guide us.

I scrunched my eyes closed and shook my head. What did that mean and who had said it? I felt familiarity, comfort and fear at the same time.

Noah’s voice pierced through the haze and pulled me back to reality. He was sitting on his knees right in front of me, eyes wide with worry.

“I. Um.” Licking my lips, I slouched forwards and into his arms. “I think I remembered something else.”

“What was it?”

“A face of a lady, she was pretty and had long, light brown hair. She said ‘you will guide us’ and...” I closed my eyes again, trying to go back there, repeating the phrase over and over to try to get my brain to latch onto the memory and give me more. I hated that it was so out of my control. Why couldn’t I just get my brain to work properly?

“Who do you think she was?” he asked.

“I don’t know, could be anyone. I don’t recognise her at all.”

“Do you remember her eye colour? Think you could try to draw her? That might help.”

I shook my head. “She would just look like a stick person. I don’t remember her eye colour. She had a kind face, though, and she was smiling as she spoke.”

“Do you think it could be...”

My biological mother. That was what he couldn’t finish saying.

I shrugged, and he immediately wrapped his arms around me. “I don’t know. She didn’t look like me but then maybe I look like him... My dad. Anyway, I’m tired of this. Can we do something else? Why don’t you put a DVD on while I go and get some snacks?”

His face lit up. “Alright.” Before he got up he added, “Hey, you know I love you, right?”

“I do know. I love you, too.”

“It’ll be alright, you’ll see,” he said and kissed my forehead before going to find something for us to watch. I hoped it would be alright because I missed feeling close to my family. If I could fast-forward to a time when we were past this and had healed, I would.



## Twenty-Two

### Noah

“IS SHE OKAY?” Marissa asked, wiping her eyes as I got downstairs. Scarlett had fallen asleep, and I didn’t want to wake her so I left a note telling her I loved her and would see her in the morning. I wasn’t sure where Jonathan and Jeremy were, but I couldn’t hear them in the house.

“She will be,” I replied.

“This is such a mess. I never wanted her to find out. We only ever wanted to protect her.”

“She’ll understand that. She just needs time to process everything and adjust. I mean, that was some confession.”

This was the first time since she found out the truth that I was talking to them about it. But everything they’d said was exactly what Donald told me they’d say. Jonathan and Marissa had completely lost sight of what our *community* was trying to achieve. They’d let their doubt grow into something toxic that clouded their judgement and caused them to make snap decisions that affected everyone. In their heads, they’d turned Eternal Light into something it wasn’t.

When I finally got my chance, Scarlett would see the truth behind her parents’ tale.

Marissa managed a smile. “Yes, it was. We had to get her out of there and when she woke up and couldn’t remember a thing it was so easy. It was as if fate had given us this chance to start over and make it up to her. What we almost sat back and allowed happen...” She paused, shaking her head. “Finally we could give Scarlett and Jeremy a normal, safe childhood, so we took it.”

“Did you ever worry about her remembering?”

“At first, yes. As time went on we assumed it wasn’t going to happen. Perhaps we shouldn’t have been so complacent.”

“Do you think you should have told her?”

“No,” she replied. “We had to protect her and this was the best way to do it. Those people were going to murder her, Noah.”

I pursed my lips and nodded. That wasn't right. *I don't think*. Going home hadn't given me the clarity I hoped for. I was still just as confused and kept going back and forth.

“I'm terrified she's going to hate us and I'm even more terrified that she'll try looking for them. If they knew where she was...” Scrunching her eyes closed, she took a deep breath. “She may not have my blood running through her veins, but she is my daughter and I love her. There's nothing I wouldn't do to keep her safe.”

“You mean leaving town?” I asked. The thought of not seeing her hurt but at the same time I wanted to tell them to take her and get as far away as possible.

“I don't know what I mean. I don't believe there's any danger to her here. If they knew where she was, they would have tried to take her already. We're safe here; I'm more concerned about Scarlett right now.”

“She'll be alright.”

“I hope so,” she replied.

“I've got to head home for a bit, but I'll be back tonight if that's okay?”

“Of course,” she said. “It helps her you being here.”

“I won't be long. See you later.”

I had to get out of there. I couldn't think straight. The walls were closing in, air thinning to the point where I could barely take a breath. My mind hurt, and I was mentally exhausted from trying to work out what I believed and what I was going to do.

This was exactly what they talked about. They said that the outside world could get to you, make you believe whatever they wanted you to. The government fed you little pieces of information that made you think things were okay.

I didn't want to be one of them. I wanted to think for myself but what if Donald and Fiona were the equivalent of a government? The tug of war between Eternal Light and Scarlett was going to ruin me.

Home wasn't even a break from it. The second I got in, Dad told me I needed to call Donald. I just wanted a break from everything, some time where I could be left alone to think independently.

Scarlett occupied ninety per cent of my thoughts, but that could just be because of the attraction I felt towards her. I liked her, loved her, fancied her

like crazy, but I shouldn't let that come between what I'd known my whole life. Everyone back home was family and family came first.

I went to my room to call him, knowing my dad would allow me privacy to speak to Donald. We held trust very highly, something that made me feel even worse about doubting Eternal Light.

"Noah," Donald said. His smooth voice calmed me, made me remember what I was part of. I wanted it to be over already; I wanted to be home again, where everything was simple, and I didn't have to constantly struggle and fight to find my way.

"Hello, Donald. How is everyone?"

"We are doing just fine. And you, I trust the journey home was pleasant?"

"Yes, it was alright," I replied, rubbing vigorously between my eyebrows. Headaches were coming all too often now. I never got ill back home where we had little to stress about.

"Noah, I am going to have to call you back another time, tomorrow perhaps. Fiona needs assistance with something rather urgently."

I opened my mouth to protest. I should tell him about Scarlett knowing the truth, nothing was more urgent than that, but nothing came out. I'd spent two days pretending everything was alright with her, and I still couldn't tell him what was really going on.

I should've told him. It should've been the first thing out of my mouth when we arrived home.

"Alright, was there something you wanted me for, though?"

"No, it was just to check in and see how everything is this morning. But we will talk later, I have to get back."

"Speak to you soon," I said, and he hung up.

I put my phone down and looked up to the ceiling. *What am I going to do?*

"Everything alright?" Finn asked. I snapped back to reality to see my brother leaning up against the doorframe.

"Yes, why?"

He shrugged. "You look tired."

That was an understatement.

"I am. Nothing a good night's sleep won't cure."

"Alright." He pushed away, and I was left with my obsessive thoughts again.

Scarlett or Eternal Light? It shouldn't even be a choice.

Before I could think anymore, I dialled Donald's number back. *Family*

*first*. My community had to stay my number one priority. Please don't let him be far enough back to the commune to not get signal.

My heart was in my throat as I called. Part of me wanted to take Scarlett to the other side of the world away from her family who broke her heart and Eternal Light, who valued their eternal life over her human one. Either way, someone would suffer. And either way, *I* would suffer.

I understood why they wanted to do it – Scarlett was our salvation – and we'd be reunited with her afterwards.

"Noah," Donald said. "Is everything alright?"

Closing my eyes, I replied, "No. Sorry, you didn't give me chance before but Scarlett knows. Jonathan and Marissa told her everything."

A minute's silence stretched out in front of us until he finally replied, "I see. When did this happen?"

Swallowing, I replied with more lies, "Today. What do you want to do?"

Call it all off. Please.

"Act," he replied, and I closed my eyes, temples throbbing. "We move this forwards. It's not ideal, but perhaps it will work in our favour."

"How so?"

"Right now she will be confused. It will be easier to get through to her with the truth."

What is the truth?

"Are you sure, Donald? We're still weeks off."

"I understand that, Noah, but we do not have a choice. We cannot risk them running."

"With all due respect, I don't think they are going to run. They have nothing to run from."

"We can't risk the fear that Scarlett will now undoubtedly have, forcing Jonathan and Marissa's hand. You know they moved every few years in the past. They don't know what to do, so they run; it is their answer to everything. We need Scarlett here, Noah, and the longer we leave it, the higher the risk of something going wrong. We have worked so hard for this. Scarlett will be sacrificed so that we may all live on. She is the one, our salvation, our *everything*. My daughter is the light that will lead us to eternal life. I am not willing to wait, not another four years, not even another three weeks."

Ignoring the distaste on my tongue and twist in my gut, I replied, "Yes, Donald. When do you want to do this?"

“I’ll call you tomorrow to finalise the details, but we move on Saturday.”

“Saturday? That’s only six days away.” *I should have weeks. I need weeks.*

“I know. Can you do this, son?” he asked. He often called me and the other guys ‘son’ but this was the first time it bothered me. That alone left me with an uneasy feeling. I used to rely on him for answers. He always had answers, but they didn’t make as much sense anymore.

“I can,” I replied.

“Good. You are strong, Noah. Do not let the outside world make you crumble.”

Donald hung up, and I dropped the phone on my bed. I wasn’t sure that hadn’t already happened.

What have I done?

“Dad,” I called. My heart was stuttering, and my palms began to sweat. “Donald wants it done on Saturday.”

The next thing I heard were three sets of footsteps thudding up the stairs.



MY FINAL WEEK with Scarlett was passing too quickly. She tried to act as though nothing had happened, but she still hadn’t sat down with her parents and sorted their situation out. I wanted them to do it now, more than ever. I didn’t want their last memories of each other to be tense.

It was Wednesday and just three days before we would be in Ireland. And I still hadn’t asked her to come with me. We sat on the bench at school during lunch hour while our friends laid on the grass listening to music.

I was putting off the inevitable. Turning to her, I blurted out in a low voice, “Let’s go to Dublin this weekend.”

“Dublin?” Scarlett said, eyes widening in surprise. “You want to take me to Dublin? This weekend?”

I shrugged, swallowing the acidic taste of bile and took a look around to make sure no one was listening. Chris and Imogen were engrossed in what they were doing, and Bobby was serving detention. If either of them had heard, they would have questioned it or at least looked up “You said you wanted to.”

“I know, but it’s a bit sudden, isn’t it?”

“I suppose, but you could probably do with the break and it would be nice to fall off the face of the earth with you for a while. We could do something



that's just for us. I'll tell my parents I'm staying with Chris, and you tell yours you're staying with Imogen."

"Dublin?" she repeated, a slow smile spreading across her face.

"Yeah, why not? It's no different to going to London for the day; we'd just take the ferry rather than a train."

"I suppose. I do like it when it's just me and you. We don't get that enough."

Bending my head, I kissed her and replied, "Me, too. I want us to be alone."

She gulped, biting the inside of her cheek. "Like...that?"

"I love you."

Her breathing came out a little harder, then she smiled. "Yeah, I think I *really* want that. No, I know I do because I love you, too, so much."

Her words sucked the air out of my lungs until I felt like I was suffocating. Keeping my calm, I said, "I'm so glad you said that. I would also like us to have fun, and I can show you some of the places I visited a lot growing up."

"And try Guinness?" she asked, giggling.

"If we can get served!"

"You look older than sixteen you'll get served."

"Then yes, we will try Guinness."

She watched me for a minute. I didn't want to push it and have her get suspicious, but I think I wanted her to say no. When I imagined her agreeing my stomach churned. She looked at me with big, trusting eyes. Her expression for me was different for everyone else, softer, happier. I didn't deserve it.

She placed the palm of her hand on my chest as she stared at me.

My throat started to close. A weight crushed my body until I felt like I was going to break. *No*. She looked at me with such adoration it made me feel physically sick.

"What's up?" she asked, her voice so low I barely heard her.

Gulping, I replied, "Nothing."

"There is. All of a sudden you tensed up and you're looking at me like... Well, I don't know what like."

"Nothing is wrong, I just *really* love you, Scarlett."

It was her turn to get emotional. "I just *really* love you, too."

I kissed her. "Right."

Biting her lip, she did a surveillance of our surroundings. "I want to be

with you, Noah. Today.”

My body went rigid. I wasn't supposed to do that. Would it be so wrong to give us that? After what we would both have to sacrifice very soon, was it wrong to want something perfect first?

“Tonight,” I repeated and kissed her. She pulled back smiling and tucked herself into my side.

She loved me, trusted me, and I was about to throw her to the lions.



## *Twenty-Three*

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### **Scarlett**

I FELT A RUSH of adrenaline as we got off the bus at the port. It was a long, four and a half hour drive, and now we had a three and a half hours ferry ride, but I didn't care because we were free until tomorrow morning.

Imogen was covering for me if my mum called her. Noah said he'd asked Chris to do the same for him. Neither of them knew where we were, we'd just told them we were spending time together and they had to cover.

Im was too busy telling me all about how I was going to lose my virginity to bother with any other details anyway. Little did she know that I'd lost it on Wednesday. It was perfect, Noah was perfect, and I felt even closer to him than I did before.

Mum didn't take long before she'd agreed to let me stay at Imogen's for the night, but they never did. I was pretty sure they'd be glad to have me out of the house. Dad had said the space would do us good and he was right. We needed to not be under each other's feet for a day and then maybe when I went home tomorrow we could talk and sort everything out. I was ready for things to be normal with them now.

We'd get the ferry back at two in the morning and be home by eleven when I could claim to have come from Im's. It was going to be a long two days, but I needed to get away for a while and spending time with Noah – alone time – was a bonus.

Noah had our passports – I'd snuck mine out of the drawer last night – and led us through the port. It was obvious he'd done this quite a few times before; he knew exactly where to go. It didn't take long and we were soon sitting in the café. After a long drive, I needed a coffee. Noah had green tea. I had no idea how he coped without caffeine.

“You okay?” I asked.

He stared at his mug and nodded. “I'm fine, just tired.”

“Me, too. Are you excited to see your aunt again?” It wasn't that long ago

he was there but this time he was bringing his girlfriend home, it was a lot different.

Smiling, he nodded and sipped his tea. "I am. You excited to meet her?"

"Excited and nervous. You're sure she won't call your parents?"

"Everyone will love you. I promise. And no, she won't. I'll get told to never go behind their back again, but she will be fine."

"Wait, everyone? Wow, how many people am I meeting?"

"Just a few cousins and my aunt's boyfriend. They are all nice, so you'll be fine. She can't wait to see you."

"You told her much about me?"

"Maybe."

"Like what?"

"Like how amazing you are and how much I love you."

Yeah, that'd do. I grinned and was pretty sure I blushed as well. Noah was so sweet. Some of the lads at school would never say things like that to their girlfriends in front of people. Noah said it no matter who was around.

We got off the ferry and were officially in *Ireland*. If my parents found out, they were going to freak and probably ground me until I was thirty. "We'll definitely be home in time, right?"

He nodded, not meeting my eye. The closer we got to Ireland the more distant he'd become. He'd usually hold my hand, but he'd dropped that an hour into the ferry ride.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Let's get a taxi," he said, taking my hand and ignoring my question.

Frowning, I followed. Something wasn't right. He was never off with me, and I was worried he was having second thoughts about me meeting his aunt. Maybe it was a too big a step for him, and he hadn't realised until now?

"Noah, have you changed your mind? If you're not sure about this, we can do it another time. I don't mind."

Shaking his head, he opened the back door of a black taxi. "Get in, babe."

I did as he said, and he climbed in beside me. I looked at the driver and froze. Shaun. What was Noah's dad doing here? Noah hadn't told me he was coming, too, and why wouldn't he have taken the same ferry? Were we being busted? My heart sank. If Shaun told my parents I would be in so much trouble.

"What's going on?" I asked, gulping and looking between the two men. They watched each other through the mirror. Wasn't he about to bust us?

Noah took a deep breath, clenched his fists and looked out of the window as Shaun locked the doors and sped off. I gripped the seat in front of me as Shaun's erratic driving had me falling to the side. He levelled off and started to drive properly. My heart was rattling in my chest. *This isn't right.*

"Noah!" I said. "Look at me! What's going on?"

He refused to face me, but I could make out him squeezing his eyes closed as he leant against the window. I started to feel sick. Noah had never made me feel anything but safe and loved before, but right now, it was like I was sitting next to a different person – one that scared me.

"Shaun, what's going on?"

"We are taking you home, sweetheart."

Beside me, Noah's body tensed.

"Home? What do you mean home?" We weren't getting back on the ferry.

"Shaun, what do you mean?"

"Eternal Light, Scarlett. We are taking you home."

My eyes widened. *What?* "I don't..."

Suddenly everything slotted into place and my world spun off its axis. *They are part of it.* Whimpering, I pressed my fist to my mouth as bile shot up my throat. No, no, no. He *lied*. All this time Noah had been lying to me.

I couldn't believe he was taking me back to them. After everything my parents said, after everything he *knew* about them, he was taking me to them. They were part of that cult and had come to England to get me. I was glued to the spot with shock.

Noah is part of Eternal Light.

No, he can't be. He can't!

"Noah," I whispered, tears rolling down my face. "How could you?"

His jaw tightened. "Hurry up, Dad."

"I can't speed, son, you know that."

"Shaun, please," I said, finally moving. I poked my head between the seats, desperate to get him to listen to me. "They're going to kill me, you know they are. Just let me go and I promise I won't tell anyone. Please, I just want to go home. You don't have to do this."

"Sit tight, Scarlett, it won't be long until we are back."

I shook my head, hair flying around my face, sticking to my tears. Neither of them cared that I was going to die for no reason. Falling back in the seat, I looked at Noah wide-eyed.

This can't be happening.

Had everything he said been a lie? He told me he loved me, but he couldn't.

"Why did you pretend to love me?" I asked, far too calmly for the situation. I felt like I was in one of my dreams.

He'd pretended to love me. It hurt, so badly. He might as well be stomping my heart into the ground. "You didn't have to take it that far. Did you want to hurt me before they murdered me? Was that it? Do you hate me?"

He stared out of his window, clenching his fist against his forehead. He looked in pain, and that made me want to strangle him.

"Noah!" I snapped. "You at least owe me an explanation. You didn't have to take it that far! Why? Answer me, damn it!" I thrashed my arm out and hit his shoulder. He didn't even flinch. I was so angry, so hurt that I felt like I was going to explode.

"Settle down, Scarlett," Shaun said. "Noah had his instructions."

"Instructions!"

"Shut up!" Noah shouted. "Both of you. Please, just stop talking." He rubbed his forehead roughly.

"Did you ever live on that Island?" I asked in disgust.

He shook his head.

"Always in Ireland?" He didn't have the Irish accent.

"Since I was seven."

Wow. He made up a whole life. *Just like my parents.* Was there anyone in my life who didn't lie?

"Was any of it real?"

He turned away again, and I wasn't sure if that was a yes or no. As much as it broke me, I wanted to believe no, it was easier than knowing he loved me but did it anyway.

"You're going to be fine, Scarlett. Your parents will explain better than we can so just sit quietly until we get there," he said.

"But I'm not going to be fine. You know I'm not. My *parents* told you what those people are going to do."

He blinked a few times, looking down at his feet. The blood drained from my face. He knew before that. "No," I whispered, and his eyes closed again. Pain cut through my chest.

Noah knew they were going to kill me all along, and he still brought me here.

*I have to get out.* Gripping the door handle, I tugged at it until I thought

it'd break. The door was locked. The window wouldn't open. *I'm trapped.*  
*No, no, no.*

Sobbing, I pulled my legs up, curling into a ball and cried. My heart was splitting, pieces breaking off. Everything he'd said, we'd done, we had, set on fire and burned to ashes. None of it was real.

He'd played me, and I fell for it. That *hurt*.

I held myself tighter, holding my body together. How could he? Did he even care about me at all or was it all one big, fat lie to get me to his cult.

"Scarlett," he whispered. "I'm sorry."

Sorry would never be good enough. I would never forgive him for what he'd done. He always seemed so mature and level headed. How was Noah in a cult?

Noah is part of Eternal Light. Shit.

"Don't talk to me ever again," I growled, sobbing around each word. I was done. No matter if he felt guilt or not we were done.

Sighing, he looked away, and I cowered back inside myself, burying my head between my knees and wrapping my arms as tightly as they'd go around my legs. *Think. You can still get out of this.*

I didn't know what I was going to do or how I was going to get home. How stupid was I to go off somewhere without my parents knowing, even if it was with someone I trusted. I was so upset with them for lying to me that I'd compromised my safety because I was angry.

No one knows where I am.

All I wanted was to be home. I wanted to forget Noah ever existed. It was too good to be true. I should've known I wasn't going to be lucky enough to find *the one* in school and marry my childhood sweetheart.

Noah's betrayal was already killing me.

I had no one to blame but myself.



## *Twenty-Four*

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### **Noah**

DAD PULLED UP to the commune and Scarlett tensed. For the thirty-minute car ride, she'd said nothing to either of us and stared out of the window in a daze. I was worried that she was in shock – of course, she was in shock. Before she turned into stone, she'd cried nonstop. Every sob was like a deep cut to my skin. I felt her pain like we were one person.

I wanted to ask if she was okay, but I knew I was the last person in the world she wanted to talk to. And I knew she wasn't okay.

Her eyes, which were usually so full of light and happiness, were cold and empty. She hadn't looked at me much but when she had it was with hate and contempt. That wasn't the girl I knew and loved. But it was exactly what I deserved.

"Here we are," Dad said. "Are you ready to be reunited with your parents, Scarlett?"

She glared at him. Her skin was pale but around her eyes was red and blotchy. She looked like she was going to be sick. I wanted to take her and run again.

"Scarlett," I said softly, "It's going to be alright."

"How?" she spat, finally looking at me. I was momentarily stunned by how much darker her eyes looked. It was like a punch to the gut. She may well be The Light, but it'd definitely gone from her eyes.

I felt as sick as she looked.

People started to gather and walk towards the car, led by Donald and Fiona. They all looked so excited, our saviour was here. Only I wasn't sure she was, not for Eternal Light anyway, but perhaps she was mine.

Scarlett saw everyone walking, and her eyes widened in alarm. "Please take me back. Please. I swear I won't say anything, just take me back to town and I'll find my own way home. Shaun, please."

"Shh, it's alright now, you are home," Dad said.



She shook her head, eyes filling with more tears that took my breath away. I wasn't at all ready for how I felt seeing her so upset.

Turning to me she whispered, "Noah, *please*."

I'd never felt so low in all my life. Even after everything I'd done, she still turned to me. I knew it was only out of desperation, but she still relied on me.

"I promise you, it'll be fine," I said. I didn't know how yet but there had to be a way. She didn't believe my words. I wasn't sure if I believed them either.

"Don't do this. You told me you love me, and I *loved* you. Please don't let them hurt me."

That was out of my control entirely. I didn't get to make decisions for the community. We did that as a whole, and there was no way I'd be able to convince them to postpone. They'd wanted this for years. It would be like asking a child to wait a week after Christmas to open presents.

Her door was opened by Donald. She shouted *no* and leapt into the middle of the backseat, wedging me against my door.

"Scarlett, it's okay," Donald said, staring at her in amazement. No one could quite believe she was finally with us again.

"Hey," I said. "I'm going to get out my side, and I want you to follow me. It's going to be alright, just come with me."

She laughed without humour. "Why would I trust you ever again? Get away from me, all of you freaks just leave me alone!"

"Scarlett." Donald's tone was sterner. "You have nothing to fear. We are not going to hurt you. Please do as Noah asked or take my hand."

She pressed back against my side, and I opened the door, grabbing her hand and taking her with me. Malc and Drew grabbed her so she wouldn't get the chance to run. We were out in the middle of nowhere, and she didn't even know which way was north, there was no way running would do her any good.

"Get off," she yelled, thrashing in their grip. "Noah! Get them off. Let me go. Get off! Get off!"

I couldn't stand there and watch her like that. I took off, going back to my house, leaving her to be carried into Donald and Fiona's kicking and screaming. I hated myself and had never felt lower.

Flopping down on my bed, I growled into the pillow, pulling my hair. Everything felt hopeless now. What was I going to do when Scarlett wasn't walking around on this planet anymore? Her happiness was my happiness.

It took me ten minutes to compose myself. I knew I didn't have long, I was supposed to be over the moon about her being back. When I stepped outside the house having changed I was greeted like a king. Friends came up and hugged me. My community thanked me and told me how incredible I was for pulling it off and getting her home.

I had a hero's welcome. I didn't feel like a hero.

I was the devil.

Scarlett had struggled, but Donald and Fiona managed to get her in their house. I knew they would be taking her inside straight away to prevent her running so they could explain, but I didn't like being separated. As much as she hated me right now, I was one of the only people she knew here.

"Noah, well done. Didn't I tell you that you're the best man for the job!" Zeke said, slapping me on the shoulder. Zeke was a year older than me, and it was either me or him going to England to get Scarlett. I was closest to Scarlett's age, though, and Zeke did look older than he was. I had a better chance at blending in with fifteen and sixteen-year-olds.

Smiling, I nodded and replied, "You did. Least she's here now." I half wished it was him that did it so I wouldn't have to carry around as much guilt as I was. She deserved better than how I'd treated her.

"I know you were nervous, but I never had any doubt. This is it, Noah, this is what we have been waiting for."

He was absolutely correct; this was everything we'd worked for, everything we believed. But it didn't feel right anymore.

"I know. Hard to believe it's finally happening after years and years of planning."

I remembered it all. The planning and discussions. When was the best time to get her? Some thought right away, but Donald and Fiona wanted her to understand what was going on. But we couldn't leave it another four years for the next cycle to be complete. It was easier to get her away from her parents but if we'd have waited until she was twenty she could've had a boyfriend.

Logically I knew I wasn't her boyfriend anymore, she hadn't said anything but I knew the second she found out, she'd ended our relationship, but I still felt like it. The whole thing was only supposed to be for show, but I couldn't fool myself. It was much, much more than that.

Ironic how she started out being the only one really into us and now that was me.

“You alright?” he asked. “You don’t look very pleased.”

I wasn’t rejoicing like they were; that’s what he was questioning. I couldn’t let anyone know I was having doubts. Well, I could, everyone would be there for me and help me through it but I didn’t feel like Eternal Light lessons right now.

“Yes, I’m fine. Sorry, it’s just been a very long day. I’ve missed home and honestly, lying to so many people, even strangers, didn’t feel great.”

We’d been taught the value of honesty. No one told lies here, but I’d been telling huge ones for months.

He winced. “Sorry. I should have thought. It couldn’t have been easy being away. And everything else you had to do. You weren’t lying for selfish reasons, though, Noah, you were doing good.”

“I was. It feels good to have her here, be home and not have to lie anymore.” So why was I still lying?

“Do you want to grab a drink? My dad made another batch of pear cider yesterday, and it’s his best yet.”

No, I wanted to go and check on Scarlett but I knew I couldn’t do that yet. I smiled, making it as genuine as I could. “You have no idea how good that sounds. The mass produced stuff is nothing like Kian’s.”

“I’ll bet.”

Kian and his wife, Marley, were over on their porch handing out the cider. Zeke strolled up and grabbed two that his mum handed him.

“We’re so proud of you, Noah,” Marley said. Her sentiments were echoed again by everyone that was around us.

“Thank you,” I replied, taking a sip. “Do you know when my mum and Finn will arrive?”

“We spoke to them about half an hour ago and their ferry had just arrived. They’re going a different route, though, to make it look like they’re headed for Shannon airport.”

My dad was doing that as well. After dropping us off, he was going to head to Cork airport in the hope that the car would be spotted on CCTV and lead police to think we’d maybe left Ireland.

We weren’t stupid, once Jonathan and Marissa discovered Scarlett wasn’t at Imogen’s they would call the police. Eventually, the police would find out where we’d taken her. I had no doubt that they’d call the police, despite what it would do to them. They loved Scarlett and put her life before theirs. They were nothing like Eternal Light.

An hour later, Fiona came out of her house looking as calm and composed as ever. Scarlett's clear distress hadn't bothered her at all then. For me, it felt like taking a knife.

I held my hand up, leapt to my feet and jogged over to her.

"How is she?" I asked.

"She is doing well, Noah."

"Can I see her?"

I hoped she didn't pick up on how desperate I was. Scarlett had every right to hate me, and when we met again, I knew it wouldn't go how I wanted it to but I had to see her.

"I don't think that is a good idea," Donald said, shutting his front door behind him. My dad had stopped beside me, too. Why did I get the feeling that I was being kept away from her?

"Why not?"

"Noah," Dad said, "I know you've formed a friendship with her, but it's unlikely that she will want to see you until Donald and Fiona have had a chance to explain and educate her."

Well, how long would that take? Once the rituals started, she had just seven days. Would I get the chance to talk to her at all before she was gone? The thought filled me with dread. I hated that I might not get to hear her voice again.

"I understand that she's angry with me, but she doesn't know anyone here. She knows me and surely we don't want her to feel alone?"

"Absolutely," Donald said, smiling. "We all want exactly that, Noah, but she's not even been here three hours yet. It is too soon. Give us today to talk to her and tomorrow we will bring her out in the community before the rituals start. Alright."

I didn't like it. Donald's words used to be gospel. I believed everything he said, but now he didn't satisfy the questions I had. And there were a lot of questions.

"Alright, I respect that. I just want this to be as easy on her as possible. She's a good person."

Fiona touched my arm. "We understand how you feel and know your intentions are good. You will get to see her and spend time together before the ceremony, we promise."

Now I was confused. In my community, you never made a promise you couldn't keep. Never. Even though I was questioning Eternal Light, I knew

that Fiona would not break that promise.

I could see her soon.

I ached to hold her. Something she would never let me do again.



## *Twenty-Five*

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### **Scarlett**

I SAT MOTIONLESS on the sofa, same thing I'd been doing for what could've been minutes, hours or days. But it'd only been two and a half hours. I still couldn't believe it'd all happened. Noah was someone I trusted. I never thought he would betray me. I never thought he'd be involved in a damn cult. He hurt me more than my parents.

His lie wasn't to protect me it was to hurt me. *Kill* me.

Donald had come back, but Fiona was still...somewhere. He looked completely clueless as to what to do with me. They tried talking, but I didn't want to talk. They didn't listen when I shouted, screamed and pleaded with them to let me go so why should I do anything for them? All they kept saying was 'let us explain' and 'if you'll allow us we can show you the truth'. I didn't want to hear it.

The sun was starting to disappear, and I felt my heart go with it. My parents thought I was staying at Imogen's, and Imogen would cover for me. They took my phone, which I was positive Noah would use to text Mum, telling her I was at Im's.

I was so stupid.

Fiona came back after about half an hour and knelt in front of me. "How are you doing, Scarlett?"

What a stupid question.

"Awful," I replied. "What are you going to do to me?" I wanted to hear her say the words. What part of killing your own child made sense to her?

"We are not here to hurt you. This is where you belong. We have brought you home. We are going to protect you, and you are you going to save us."

But it wasn't real. Their idea of how I would save them was all in their mind. I rubbed my hands over my face and shook my head. "That's not what will happen. How can you not see that?"

"Scarlett, you have only heard the version Jonathan and Marissa have told

you. They took you and poisoned your mind. I ask that you open it and allow us to show you the truth.”

“I have questions,” I said.

“You may ask us anything,” Donald said.

I didn’t want to talk about the sacrifice right now. That could absolutely wait for a time when I wasn’t wound so tight, angry, scared and heartbroken. I wanted them to acknowledge it but I sure as hell wasn’t ready for it.

“Who is Evelyn?”

“They told you about her?”

“No.” They tried to pass her off as a doll and then told me she was Jer’s friend. “I remember her name and face.”

Fiona straightened her legs, stretched and sat beside me. “Scarlett, Evelyn is your sister.”

The air in the room thinned. “I have a sister?”

Donald leant forwards. “You do.”

“Just one?”

“Yes. Just you and Evelyn, you used to call her Evie.”

Evie. *Evie*. I still couldn’t remember her.

“Once the ceremony is over, and the sacrifice has been made, you will be reunited with her,” Donald added.

Two things took my breath away; how casually and callously he spoke of killing me, and the fact that my sister was dead.

“When did she...?”

“Not long after you were taken,” Fiona replied. “But please do not be sad. She is not lost forever.”

Their youngest child died and they were talking about her like she was a bloody shoe.

They didn’t seem that cut up over her death, and I wasn’t sure if that was because they believed they would see her again or because they didn’t believe she was the one that could save them. Either way, I knew they were selfish and didn’t deserve to have children.

Noah had led me to think Evelyn was someone close to me. I didn’t understand how he could lie so well for so long, drip-feeding me information in the sneakiest ways. He was so convincing. I believed he loved me. That hurt the most.

“They did tell me one thing,” I said.

“Oh?” Fiona said.

“That you’re all brainwashed lunatics who’re going to murder me in cold blood that will end up with your sorry arses in prison. My parents will look, which means the police will look. Do you really think you’re going to get away with it?”

I had no idea what’d come over me. I hated confrontation but here I was, completely out of character, telling things exactly how they were. As scared as I was, I also felt liberated. The Scarlett before I was betrayed too many times would let so many things go.

I wasn’t weak. I could be strong. I wasn’t going to take anything lightly anymore, and I was going to fight. One way or another, I was going to make sure they didn’t take my life. My teeth clenched together, a burning fire inside me roared to life, spurring me on.

Fiona shook her head lightly, even when challenged she was calm and smiling. Evil cow. “We are not the brainwashed ones, Scarlett. We want love, peace and happiness. We do not live in a place where war, discrimination and hate occur. We live with nature; we do not rip it down. We do not eat once living creatures.”

“Right, you only murder your offspring.”

“You will see. I promise you that.”

“I already see everything for what it is. Do you honestly think I believe life outside here is perfect? Grow up. I’ve watched the news. I know what evil shit is out there and I don’t think it’s right but I will *never* believe taking someone’s life is okay. No matter what you *think* is going to happen after. You’re monsters dressing up belief as something else to justify what you *want* to do.”

“If you would rather not eat with the community tonight, Scarlett, you may eat in your room. Perhaps you may benefit from an early night,” Donald said, totally changing the subject.

“I think I’d rather skip dinner and just sleep.”

Fiona tilted her head as she looked at Donald. Getting his permission? Was he the one that led her to believe killing her child was a fabulous idea? I didn’t understand what made them think I was anything other than just a girl. Who decided I was the one to save them all? Him. My guess was him.

Donald dipped his chin. “As you wish. Fiona, would you like to show our daughter to her room?”

“Of course,” Fiona said, rising to her feet. She stared down at me, her blue eyes that matched mine glowing with happiness. I looked a lot like her but



my hair was a lighter brown like Donald's. Seeing them made me realise how much I didn't look like my parents or brother. It was another hard kick to the stomach.

The thought of my family waiting for me to come home was like having a knife ripped through my heart. How would they react when they found out? I regretted ever being moody and angry with them. They were saving me from this. I never had so much love, respect and admiration for them as I did right now.

I followed Fiona through the short corridor to the room at the end. Everywhere was clad in a light wood, giving it a cabin feel. I didn't want to think it was pretty, but it was. She opened the door and there was my room. Cream painted wooden walls, a slightly darker painted built-in wardrobe with matching bed and bedside tables.

In the corner of the room was a mint green fabric chair and small bookcase. It looked like there was a lot of Eternal Light literature on there and I was undecided if I wanted to read it. Knowledge was power after all, and if I stood a chance of stopping the sacrifice or getting away, I had to know. On the wall above the bed was a photo of what looked like all of them. It was relatively recent; Noah didn't look much younger than he did now. I *hated* that he was in this room, even in photo form.

"There are clothes in the wardrobe. If you would like something to eat or drink, please come and let me know. Donald and I will be in the living room tonight."

I stared back at an older version of me and felt nothing. "I won't want anything." Besides them taking that picture down, which I didn't think they would. It looked like an everyone-has-one kind of thing.

"Very well," she said, closing the door behind her.

As soon as I heard her footsteps getting further away, I tried the window, shoving the glass to see if it would budge. It didn't, of course. Dropping my hands, I leant my forehead against the glass and tried to hold it together. I was close to crying. I hurt physically and emotionally. I missed my family and, damn it, I missed Noah. My heart ached for the person I thought he was, the one I loved and thought I had a future with.

Think, Scarlett.

Breathing deeply through my nose, I tried to compose myself to think of a plan. I refused to believe there wasn't a way. Appeal to the mother in Fiona? If she even had anything maternal inside her. Run for it and hope I found

someone to help. Try to find a phone or computer to contact my parents and the police.

Knowledge is power.

*Yes, that's it.* I was going to learn about them, be one of them until I found a way out. They hadn't told me when the first ceremony was going to start but there would be seven days of rituals. I could do this. It was live or die, and I wasn't dying without one hell of a fight.

I grabbed the first manually bound book off the shelf and flicked it open. With a deep breath, I started to read, mumbling words aloud. "Nature regenerates, should live in harmony with what naturally grows on the earth, eat well, blah blah blah." I rolled my eyes until I came to a part about *The Light. Me.*

It was hard reading. "The Light will be born in human form, it will provide a link between this life and eternity." Closing the book, I closed my eyes. It spoke of me like I wasn't real. But I had to do this. I opened it back up and continued. *Seven rituals must take place before the sacrificing of The Light.*

Nope. Not now.

Slamming it shut, I shoved it back on the bookshelf. I wasn't ready to hear it. Jumping on the bed, I buried myself under the layers of blankets and closed my eyes, thinking of anything else other than what Noah had done and where I was.



## Twenty-Six

### Scarlett

I WOKE UP to the two crazy people – who were my *parents* – watching over me. They looked perfectly normal, well dressed, and friendly. It was only when they opened their mouths that you realised how bat-shit crazy they were.

“Good morning, Scarlett,” Donald said. “Did you sleep well?”

“You kidnapped me yesterday, didn’t sleep too well, no.”

“You are our daughter; we are not the ones who took you from where you belong. But that doesn’t matter now because you are home,” Fiona said.

“I’m not your daughter. You don’t *murder* your daughter.”

She shook her head. “No, Scarlett, you don’t understand.” *Damn right, I don’t.* “You are The Light. You are going to lead us to a higher plain, a better existence. It is not death; it is eternal life in a much better place than this.”

“But I’ll be dead.”

Donald covered Fiona’s hand with his giant one. “Perhaps we should show our daughter around and explain properly.”

I didn’t want to go anywhere with them, but I did want to look around and try to find a way to escape. I also wanted to scream and shout at Noah. His betrayal stung deep. I felt sick whenever I thought about what he’d done. Not only had he brought me here to be killed but he made me love him first. He was evil.

“That is a good idea, love,” Fiona said to Donald, returning his sickening smile. “We’ll give you ten minutes to get dressed, Scarlett.”

I watched them stand in sync and leave my prison cell of a room. They were my parents. They made me, and they wanted to kill me. The door closed and was locked. My room was nice, I’d give them that much. They gave me nice things to what, soften the blow for when they stuck a knife through my heart?

Ignoring the hysteria building, I got out of bed and opened the wardrobe.

Everything in there was pretty. Lots of long dresses. I dressed in a floor-length white and yellow sundress and brushed my hair through. It felt pointless, but I *had* to keep it together.

If I had a chance at escaping I had to get out of this room as much as possible. Maybe I could pretend that I'd converted to whatever crap it was they believed. If they trusted me, I could get out. I'd glanced through the *She Is The Light* book last night but on page one where it basically referred to me as a door that needed opening – not a person – I threw it back on the bookshelf like the other one.

Taking a deep breath, I slipped on a pair of sandals, knocked on the door and waited. The lock clicked and then my *mother* was standing before me. I couldn't just go from telling them all to do one to converted Eternal Light member because they'd know it was fake, so I scowled.

"You look beautiful, Scarlett."

"Where're you taking me?" I asked coldly.

"We will meet your father outside and show you around."

"Will Noah be there?"

She looked at me out of the corner of her eye. "He is around, yes."

I wanted to refuse to go. He was the last person on the planet I wanted to see.

"Well, he can go to hell."

Wisely, she said nothing and just pursed her lips. In her eyes, he was a damn hero. To me, he was the enemy. He was the worst one, pretending to love me.

Arsehole.

I followed her out of the cute, log cabin style house and stood on the deck. Every other house was the same, and I had a feeling they built them all themselves. A large meadow to the left of the settlement stretched on as far as the eye can see and to the right was thick forest. I had no idea where I was or where the nearest town was.

A sense of hopelessness knocked the air from my lungs, and I fought to stay positive. It wasn't over yet. I had to focus on that. I wasn't doomed yet.

Gulping, I took another step, following Fiona. *I can do this*. The forest was probably my best bet. If I ran across the meadow, they would see me straight away. But I wasn't sure when I'd be left alone long enough to make my escape. And I had no idea how big the forest was.

I was getting too ahead of myself. First I had to work out how I would

escape and then I could worry about where I would escape to. *For now, just fall in line.*

“How many people live here?” I asked, emotionlessly. I wanted to sound bored for a while longer. I had to remain angry for another day or so before slowly starting to fit in. There was a danger that they’d see through it, but my options were limited to two: fight or die.

“Thirty-nine,” she replied.

That was what I was dying for. So thirty-nine people could supposedly live for eternity in some magical world Donald and Fiona cooked up. Still, people had been killed for less.

“Wow, that’s a lot of people you’ve brainwashed. Nice one.”

She stopped and turned to me. I worried that I’d overstepped the mark. If she thought I believed they’d been completely brainwashed, then she wouldn’t trust me when I started to listen. Had I gone too far?

“It is not brainwashing, Scarlett. From the age of four you have had your mind trapped within society’s walls. Free it now, let me help you, and you *will* see the truth. You are The Light.”

I wanted to laugh in her face. I was human. *Who does she think she is?* I wondered if she’d always been like that – crazy – or if someone made her believe the things she lived by. Eternal Light was older than me. They were going to kill me when I turned four, and you didn’t just decide to do that five minutes after creating a cult or religion – or whatever they wanted to call it.

Half of me wanted to appeal to her as her biological daughter. I thought it was just engrained on you when you gave birth: protect child at all cost. That was how it was supposed to be. Parents were meant to die for their children, not be the ones hurting them.

“We’ll see,” I replied, walking off.

Three people stood on high alert. Spinning to face me, thinking I was going to run, ready to pounce. They didn’t give me much credit if they thought I would run in broad daylight with everyone around.

Fiona held her hand up, and they immediately relaxed. “Do not be alarmed, I am just showing Scarlett around.”

One of them, a plump lady wearing a long skirt and apron, nodded. She looked maternal. Surely she wouldn’t stand by as someone drove a knife into me? Or however they were going to do it.

“Welcome, Scarlett, I am Judith,” the plump lady said. “This is my husband Bill and son Terry. Oh, it is lovely to see you again. It has been so

long, sweetheart.”

She knew me before. When I was just a little child. My heart sank with the realisation that she wouldn't help, if she was willing to stand back and let a four-year-old be killed then she wouldn't help me at sixteen.

I gritted my teeth and stared. *What's wrong with you?*

“Ah, there are my two girls,” Donald said, coming out of one of the houses.

“And there you are,” Fiona replied. “Are you joining us on the tour?”

“I wish I could, but I have business to attend to. Will you be alright on your own?”

Fiona nodded. “Of course.”

What did he think I was going to do? Could I even do anything? Could I hurt her to get away? I'd never even squished a spider, even though I was scared of them. What a stupid, irrational fear. I was scared of a small bug with eight legs when there were people like this lot in the world.

“Mother/daughter bonding time, huh,” I muttered dryly. “Perhaps after the tour we could drown a litter of bunnies. Or do you only do that to your child?” I was now definitely going too far, but I couldn't hold back when my stomach tied in knots and I wanted to scream.

Everyone fell silent. Fiona and Donald watched me cautiously.

“I can explain everything, Scarlett, but please keep an open mind,” Fiona said. Hilarious that she would tell me – repeatedly – to keep an open mind when hers was so closed.

“It's alright,” Donald said when Judith and her family stood open mouthed. “Her mind has been closed off; we have discussed that. This is not a surprise, and we are here to help and not to judge, remember?”

Judith's husband nodded. “Right, of course. Despite what you may have heard, Scarlett, we are not bad people. You will see that soon.”

I smiled sarcastically and turned to Fiona. “Can we go now?” Standing around listening to that garbage spout out of their mouths was just making me feel ill. I wouldn't see the 'light' or anything else so talking about it was pointless.

Fiona took me past the ten wooden houses and a field before the meadow that was home to different kinds of crops. No wonder Noah only ate 'real' and organic food, it was all he'd ever had.

No, don't think of him.

Ridiculously I still loved who I thought he was and every time I thought

about what he'd done it sent sharp, stabbing pains through my heart. He could've just befriended me; he didn't have to make me fall for him first.

In the distance, I saw Bethan and Finn picking what looked like potatoes. I didn't know where Shaun or Noah were, and I didn't care.

Ahead of us was a larger wooden building and beside that a small lake that looked out of place for the location. "What's that?" I asked, lifting my chin to the place in front of us.

"That is our community hall, where we meet most nights. Where we will celebrate being reunited with you."

"Will you kill me in there, too?"

I wanted to say it as plainly and bluntly as I could in the hope that it would register something in her. She was killing her child. She *had* to understand that.

"I will show you where the rituals will take place and explain everything fully, so you don't still believe we are taking your life."

"You do know how death works, right? And what about the *rituals*?" I swallowed glass. What were they going to do to me?

"There are seven in total," she said as we reached the heavy, wooden double doors. "Please, come inside." I weighed up my options and took a look over my shoulder. There were too many people about for me to run. One against thirty-nine was not good odds. I couldn't be reckless.

With trembling hands, I stepped inside. Chairs were stacked along one side. It was bare, a few tables dotted around holding large jugs of fresh, wildflowers. Paintings of nature – the meadow, flowers, trees, water – hung on the walls. Glass lanterns hung from the vaulted ceiling.

Everything they'd done was beautifully simple. They were just insane.

"So you come in here to do what?"

"This is where we hold meetings and celebrations if the weather isn't nice. This is where we give thanks for you on your birthday. My beautiful daughter. Our saviour."

"Saviour? Who's threatening you? As long as you're not off sacrificing people no one's gonna care that you're here."

"If they hadn't taken you, I would have raised you and you wouldn't be so disrespectful."

"If they hadn't taken me, I'd be dead."

"You would be at peace, waiting for us to join you. We have the chance to live another life; this is not the only one we can have, Scarlett."

She believed that totally. She stared straight into my eyes and said it with so much conviction I understood why so many people were sucked in.

“How can you be so sure?” I whispered, purposefully widening my eyes.

The corner of her mouth twitched. She thought that was the first crack: that my mind was beginning to *open*. Good.

“Faith, my darling. I would not risk my daughter for something I was not completely sure of.”

There it was. My appeal-to-the-mother-in-her plan vanished with her words. Not that I held up much hope for it.

I stood in their pretty barn and knew that my only option was running.

“But what if you’re wrong?”

I felt the tingle of tears and blinked rapidly. She wasn’t going to see me cry. I wouldn’t crumble in front of them.

“I am not. That I can promise you. Now, let me show you the outdoor communal eating area before dinner is served.”

“Will you tell me more about the rituals?”

“Of course. I can tell you some,” she replied, smiling. Some.

I couldn’t work her out. One minute she was cautious of me, suspicious even, and the next she was grinning like I’d just converted to her church of crazy.

“So?” I pressed, not totally sure if I even wanted to know.

“Most involve us calling upon nature, chanting if you will. The first one is a cleansing and the call will be for nature to accept you and accept us. Ritual two,” she started, closing the doors behind us, “links us to you. We have to become one entity to follow you into eternity.”

I gritted my teeth. “And how long will I be in eternity alone until you all follow? You killing yourselves after or waiting out your cosy, little lives here until you die old, fat and happy?”

“It is not what you think, Scarlett; you will be happy. You will be at peace.”

“So you are living out your lives here. Lovely. And I was perfectly peaceful back home.”

“You will understand if you allow yourself to open your mind to us.”

“Perhaps you’ll understand if you open your mind to what’s really going on,” I said. “What’re the other rituals?”

“They are much alike. There is a binding that will then bind us as a whole.”



“I thought I’d already be linked to you all with that first one?”

“That is slightly different. We need a piece of you, so we are physically linked, each one of us to you, and then we need to be spiritually bound as a community.”

That made absolutely no sense. But then what did here?

“Right. Lots of chanting, cleansing and binding.”

She smiled, and it looked a lot like mine. She may look like my mum, but she certainly wasn’t. “Ritual one that will take place tomorrow will be in the lake. But don’t worry, the water is clean.”

She was murdering me in seven days time but thought I’d worry about a little dirty water.

I was speechless for a second before replying a sarcastic, “Great.”

“You will be dressed in a white gown and stand in the middle of the lake. It is not too deep, perhaps waist height on you. Donald and I will bless you and then we will leave. For ten minutes, we will stand near the lake and say a few words.”

“Where will I be?”

“In the water still. To be cleansed you need to be alone, we don’t want to contaminate the blessed area by staying. You are the key to everything, Scarlett. We don’t want to get in the way of your light.”

Then let me go.

“What time are you doing this cleansing?”

“Tomorrow at noon. The water should have warmed up a little.”

I found myself almost thanking her, but fortunately I caught myself. I had *nothing* to thank her for. I turned away, not being able to look at her anymore.



## *Twenty-Seven*

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### **Scarlett**

THE MORE I knew about them, the more terrified I became. There wasn't going to be any getting through to them. They genuinely believe all the crap about my 'crossing over' and 'opening the door' for all of our eternal life. In-bloody-sane.

Today marked day one of the ritual and my second full day at the commune. It was too soon for me to jump in the water and cry with happiness because I was The Light, but I also didn't want to put up too much fight.

I was told to wear one of my white gowns; they hung to the left of the wardrobe. Not giving a crap what I wore, I ripped the first white one off the hanger and threw it on. Tonight was the first 'ritual'. We were going to be joined or some rubbish like that. We weren't going to be joined; I was just going to be terrified while they did whatever they felt they had to. Then I'd die.

"Are you ready?" Bethan asked.

The last time I spoke to her she was offering me cake in her kitchen. I straightened my back and stared at the traitorous bitch. How could she have had me over at her house so many times knowing what was going to happen?

"Yes," I replied sharply.

"Don't look afraid, Scarlett, this is just the beginning."

Yeah, that was what I was afraid of.

"Can't wait," I said sarcastically.

Smiling, she reached up and placed a headband made from daisies on my head. I almost asked the significance of it, but then I realised I didn't care.

Fiona and Donald walked me out of their house and towards the lake. The rest of them followed. I didn't falter one step as we walked past the houses and stopped in front of the water.

"The Light has returned," Donald said. "She and she alone will lead us into eternal peace and harmony. We will become at one with nature. We

accept The Light as our salvation. Cleanse her and let her lead.”

Fiona took my arm and walked me into the water. My bare toes slipped beneath the cool surface, and I wanted to bolt. Donald’s words were insane. This was all insane. Fiona took another step forwards and extended her arm, making me go it alone the rest of the way.

Looking back over my shoulder and purposefully avoiding Noah’s eyes, I took a step closer to the centre. The water stung for a second before I became accustomed to the temperature. Fiona was right about one thing; it wasn’t too cold.

I shook with fear as I reached the middle, flattening the dress to my side, so it didn’t puff up and float to the surface. Turning around, I saw them all standing much further back, watching me. They were in one single row and although I couldn’t hear them I knew they were speaking. Their mouths moved in perfect synchrony.

Leaves rustled in the light wind, making it even harder to hear. I managed to lip read The Light a few times. The dress, now plastered to my legs, felt like it weighed a ton. I might as well be wearing an anchor.

I could run now. They were far enough away that I could get a head start, but it would probably just be a few seconds. And I had no idea where I would go.

Gulping, I closed my eyes as I couldn’t hold in the fear and uncertainty anymore. I cried in the middle of the lake while thirty-nine people watched.



I HOPED RITUAL day two was going to be better. Yesterday was horrendous. Ten minutes after I was sent into the water, I was taken out, carried back to Fiona and Donald’s and put in a bath. I tried to be strong, but I was exhausted in every sense. I curled up in bed, refusing to talk to anyone or eat anything and cried until I fell asleep.

That was the one weak moment I’d allowed myself, and I put it down to the shock of it all actually happening. From now on I would hide my feelings. I would be strong. Whatever they had in store for me over the next few days, I would be ready, and I would deal with it.

All forty of us sat around the communal outdoors dining table eating dinner. I knew the second ritual was coming this evening, but I didn’t know exactly when and that had me on edge. I didn’t want to ask because then I’d

be able to count down the minutes and stress.

At the end of the table was Noah. I could feel his gaze burning a hole in the side of my head. Hell would freeze over before I acknowledged him.

I picked at, annoyingly, one of the most delicious homemade bread rolls I had ever eaten. We had vegetable soup, bread and salad for dinner. I was starving but I knew something was happening to me again soon, and that made my stomach churn too much to accept food. It looked like I was missing another meal.

If I weren't careful, I wouldn't have enough energy to bloody escape.

"Are we all ready?" Donald asked once Judith and her sister, Mary-Elizabeth, had cleared the table.

Everyone stood and walked off without answering. Noah too. He was ready. I wasn't but then I didn't get a choice.

Where were they going? I craned my neck to try and see, but they disappeared around the houses, lost to the night. My eyes darted towards the people that gave me life. What was going on?

"It is time," Fiona said, after five minutes of nail biting silence.

Like with the last ritual, they led me to what felt like my death already. I hated having no idea what they were going to do to me, almost as much as I would hate knowing what was coming. This time we went to their community hall. I bit my lip, heart hammering. It was eerily quiet tonight, and the sky was a moody grey. I walked slower, placing my gladiator sandal-clad feet hard on the grass as if I could make them stick.

As we approached the barn, I started to feel cold and wanted to bolt in the opposite direction. Whatever was waiting for me in there, I knew I didn't want it. Every step I made took every ounce of courage I had.

"Do not be afraid, Scarlett," Fiona said.

I wanted to ask her why I shouldn't be afraid. I pursed my lips and stared ahead at the closed double doors. It didn't really matter what was going on, they could have me cuddle a puppy for an hour, and I'd still be scared.

"Okay," Donald said, stopping to grab a handle. "I can't tell you how elated I am that we have been reunited, Scarlett." He already had.

He opened one of the doors, and I stopped breathing altogether. Everyone was in the hall, dressed only in white, standing in a circle.

Candles were alight everywhere. They'd done all that in five minutes? I closed my eyes as my mind forced a few missing puzzle pieces together. I remembered this before, a few times it'd happened.

My head throbbed. I saw a sea of white, smiles on everyone's face, and blood. Why blood? Shit, why blood? My mind felt like it was cracking, fizzing, bursting. It *hurt*.

"Are you okay?" Fiona asked.

There was no point in telling her that I was remembering before. She wouldn't care anyway. "Fine," I whispered, balling my hands into fists as the throbbing escalated so quickly I felt a sharp pain behind my eyes.

"Good evening," Donald said. "I know how exciting tonight is, believe me, but Scarlett is still new to this, so I ask again that we try to keep things as calm as possible." He was met with a sea of nods. "Thank you. Scarlett, please step into the circle."

I looked down and on the floor was a ring of wildflowers and sticks. "Are you bloody kidding?"

"Please step into the circle," he repeated, completely ignoring how rude I was.

As I stepped forwards, I caught Noah's eye. No, I hadn't wanted to do that. He didn't deserve anything from me at all.

He watched me carefully, regret plastered across his face. Seeing him brought his betrayal back, and it stung just as much as it did three days ago. I wanted to stop loving him. Turning away, I looked down at the floor. I couldn't do it. I couldn't be around him. He made me feel claustrophobic like the walls were closing in, ceiling collapsing.

I hated him.

"Does Noah have to be in here?" I asked, not bothering to lower my voice. I didn't check if he'd heard, I hoped he did so he knew I hated him as much as I still loved him.

"He does, yes," Fiona replied. "Please don't be too hard on him, he was only doing what was right for Eternal Light. And for you."

I turned away from her, too. There was no point in saying anything else. They were all too far into their stupid cult to understand that what Noah had done was wrong and see what they were doing was plain crazy. Not to mention illegal and something they'd be imprisoned for.

"If we are all ready, we can begin," Donald said.

I'm not ready, but apparently that doesn't matter.

Everyone took one step forwards. They were so obedient. He'd done a good job in convincing them he was the leader and could take them – by sacrificing his firstborn child – into eternal life. And no one questioned that.

No one.

Evelyn. My heart ached for a sister I didn't even know. I wondered if she cried when she saw what they'd done to me. Was she as scared as I felt? I wished my parents could have taken her, too.

"The Light was given to us so that our souls may be reborn, and we would be reunited upon our human death. Through her we will live on. Through her, we will be with loved ones passed. We offer her. She is the one; she is the light," Donald said. He spoke slowly, quietly and with so much conviction I could see why the others believed what he said.

"She is the one; she is the light," Fiona repeated and then so did the rest of them. Their voices, although were low, carried through the room making it deafening. Or it could just be deafening because they were basically chanting about murdering me.

I was so scared I wanted to run away and hide somewhere until my parents found me. That wasn't an option. I was all I had. *Stay calm*. If I could just switch off while they did the rituals, I would be able to hold everything together until I found a way out. I could do that.

Donald took a knife and my eyes widened. I turned cold and spun around to face the door. Behind me, now in front, was Shaun and Bill. They were obviously there to stop me running. They each grabbed an arm and kept me in place.

I shook my head. "No! What're you going to do? No, please don't." This wasn't supposed to happen, not yet. Ice travelled through my veins. I backed up as much as I could, putting as much distance between me and Donald as I could. He had a bloody knife! "Don't. Please, please don't." I had to stay calm, but I was panicking.

"It is okay, Scarlett," Donald said.

"It's not," I wailed, thrashing in their arms, spilling tears over the floor. My heart beat so fast that I felt lightheaded. "Please don't do this. Noah, help me! Please help me." This couldn't be happening. Did they lie about the other rituals? I started to hyperventilate, completely unable to get enough oxygen. This couldn't be happening.

I screamed, knees buckling as another memory smashed its way back into my mind. Burning fire. A throbbing in my arm. People yelling. Panic. I could taste the panic. I was crying, but it was different to now, it was a petrified *child's* cry. I was scared of my parents for the first time. Now I was scared of them again.

I came to again as a pain sliced through my arm. I screamed so loud it left a ringing in my ears. He'd cut my inner forearm. The gash was about four inches long and deep enough for blood to steadily pour out.

I watched, frozen, wide-eyed and in horror as the man who half created me held a white goblet under my arm to catch the blood. I think I was in shock. Would I know if I was? I couldn't move, too stunned that he'd cut me, even though I knew what their end plan for me was.

Before, it was all talk but now he'd physically hurt me, and I knew there would be no convincing him to let me go. My breathing was far too fast, but my rapid chest was the only part of me capable of moving at all right now.

"Shh," Fiona said in a soothing voice while the rest of the cult chanted in whispers.

I did what she said but not through choice. I latched onto her calm aura and kept my eyes glued on hers. Surely she couldn't actually let her husband murder her daughter?

"I...I don't... Why?" I rambled, trying to make sense of something that was senseless.

"It is alright, Scarlett, but you need to calm down and breathe."

Breathe. I took as even breaths as I could while I was still crying and a little dazed. They'd opened up the light scar that I was told I got from a bike riding accident when I was three. The scar wasn't from an accident.

Fiona hugged me awkwardly as Shaun kept hold of the arm that wasn't bleeding. But he didn't have to; I couldn't move anyway. I saw Noah over Fiona's shoulder, watching me with such pain and sadness in his eyes that it made me cry harder.

How could you?

Bethan brought forwards a large, deep bowl made from bamboo. Donald poured my blood into it, and I watched threads of blood sink into the water. My eyes flicked back to Noah. He was still watching me, still looked in pain.

Imagine how I feel then.

"We will become one. We will share her light," Donald said, prompting the rest to switch their chant.

Noah's mouth moved in time with the words, but it didn't look like he was making a sound, but that could have just been wishful thinking.

Taking the bowl from Bethan, Fiona held it to her lips and took a sip. I wanted to throw up and felt very close to losing the little amount I ate at dinner. They were all going to drink my blood. Noah. I looked to him but this

time he didn't meet my eye.





## Twenty-Eight

### Noah

I UNLOCKED SCARLETT'S door, so grateful that I was allowed to see her again. I needed to see her, especially after today. Irrationally, I could still taste her blood on my tongue, long after I'd eaten and brushed my teeth.

Today would go down as the worst day of my life to date. When Donald cut her, I wanted to kill him. When she looked at me, tears streaming down her face, I wanted to kill myself. He'd hurt her and every instinct screamed at me to fight them all and take her away.

I had never felt an emotion as strong as I did then. Standing there and watching it was the hardest thing I had ever done.

The veil covering Eternal Light lifted as I sipped her blood. What we were doing was wrong. It was murder.

I loved Scarlett more than anything else in the world and I wouldn't stand by and let anyone hurt her.

I *had* to make it right. Today was also a turning point for me. I realised that Scarlett came first. I was turning my back on Eternal Light. All I could see was waves of long ash hair and dark blue eyes.

She is the one, but she is the one for me.

She was sitting on the bed, staring out of the window and holding her bandaged arm. Her posture was tense and she tried to ignore whoever came in. I had a plate of dinner for her. Fiona wasn't going to make her socialise after what'd happened but she let me be the one to give her the meal.

"Scarlett," I whispered, closing the door behind me.

She stiffened and clenched her jaw.

"Please, I need to explain."

I took a step closer and she snapped out of it, pushing herself to her knees on the bed and holding her hand up, warning me not to come closer. "Don't," she hissed. "There's *nothing* you can say to make this okay. Just get the hell out, Noah. If that's even your name."

Ignoring her, I moved closer to the room. “That is my name. I didn’t lie about my feelings for you.”

“Well, thanks so much for that tiny piece of honesty,” she spat bitterly. “Now get out.”

Rubbing my hand over face, I blurted, “I love you.”

“You can stop lying now.”

“I didn’t lie about that either.”

“You murder everyone you *love*?”

“You have five days of ceremonies left.”

“Yeah, believe me, I’m counting, too.”

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath. Her icy reception was no shock but it did hurt. “Look, there is nothing I can do until the morning of the sacrifice.” I paused, expecting her to say something. “It’s the only time you will be far enough away from everyone. You will be cleansed in the lake again and you’ll do it alone for thirty minutes.”

Hope widened her eyes and she stepped off the bed. “They think I’m actually going to stay there? I know I had to go in again but for that long? They’ll stay away for half an hour the day they try to kill me?”

“Yes. They will be there but back far enough that we’ll have a good head start. No one is permitted to be within fifty feet of you.” I winced as it all sounded so ridiculous now. “They don’t want your cleansing to be... contaminated.”

She raised her eyebrow.

“I know, Scarlett. I know...now.” I put her plate down on the table. “That,” I said, tipping my chin in the direction of her bandaged arm. “Was an eye opener for me. I felt sick seeing you hurt and all I wanted to do was leap in and stop it from happening. I can’t change what they just did to you and I will have to live with that for the rest of my life, but I can help you now. The final ceremony, I’ll be the other side of the lake, hiding. When I say, you run to me and we’ll be gone.”

Her eyebrow rose yet again. “How can I trust you?”

I was waiting for that. “I have made a *huge* mistake, many huge mistakes actually. But you have to understand, Scarlett, my whole life I have believed what I was told. It is all I’ve ever known. I never questioned it, just like you never questioned your parents until you started remembering.”

Her eyes narrowed a fraction at the mention of her parents. “I need you to answer my questions *honestly*.” I nodded. “How did you meet them?”

“Your parents?”

“No, Donald and Fiona.”

“Right. Sorry. They arrived at our commune when I was a kid. Had similar beliefs but, like I said, theirs made more sense.” Scarlett snorted, and I couldn’t fault her for it not now I saw everything so clearly. “And it wasn’t long before they were running the place, maybe a week. They told us about the fire in the warehouse and how you were kidnapped.”

“How did they find me?”

Gripping the post at the end of the bed, I looked down and replied, “Scarlett, you were never lost.”

I didn’t look up to see her reaction but I felt it. “Every four years, once the yearly cycles of elements have been complete, they get a chance to... you know. When you were eight you were living in a flat and being home schooled, we couldn’t get near. Then you moved a couple of times and settled down.”

“You all knew where I was the whole time?” she whispered.

“Yes. I’m sorry.”

She took an uneven breath. “Why you?”

“I’m closest to your age. My family were to move to your town and I was to enrol in high school. Then I had to get close to you, make you love me and let me take you to Ireland.”

“Well,” she said, “You did that just fine.”

“I wasn’t supposed to fall in love with you. I tried so hard not to but the more I did, the less I believed what I’d been taught my whole life. My dad always said that you know you are in love when someone comes along that makes you question everything. You did that, and at first I hated it.”

She didn’t react at all, just stared at me with empty eyes. “Things used to be so clear and so easy. Eternal Light came first, like any other religion. Being on the outside made me realise that religion is flawed. People twist things to suit themselves and their needs. It makes normal people fight and kill and hate. It’s supposed to be pure but people make it the most tainted thing on the planet. I didn’t see it until I saw the outside world...until I fell in love with you. Even if it were all true, I still wouldn’t let them touch you again.”

“Why?” she whispered, standing up.

I made the two steps to her, our chests almost touching. Reaching out, I tucked her hair behind her face. Just touching her again made everything slot

into place. She is where I was supposed to be. We were made for each other; I was born to love and protect her and that was exactly what I was going to do. "Because your human life means more to me than my eternal one."

Gulping, she lowered her eyes and replied, "Don't, Noah."

"I am so sorry. I know I've let you down so badly, but I won't let them take your life. I *will* make it right, Scarlett. I promise. I understand that you can't forgive me. I don't deserve your forgiveness. Hell, I don't deserve anything from you. But *please* trust me one last time, so that I can get you out of here."

"Why can't you call my parents or the police?"

"No phone," I said. "I ditched it when I got back. We don't get reception out here anyway. If I leave and they put two and two together... Scarlett, this is so dangerous. I don't want to risk raising their suspicion. I'm terrified that they will take you and that'll be it. We get *one* chance, and this is the only way I can think of that stands a shot."

"I don't know..." she said, trailing off and frowning. "This could be a test. You could be lying."

"Why else would I get you to run, Scarlett?"

She gripped her hair and sighed sharply. "I don't know! I don't know anything anymore. Everything is so screwed up and I...I..." She burst into tears and fell against my chest.

I hadn't expected that. I didn't think she would ever want to be near me again.

For the first time in days, I held her again. I was complete. I had to get her away from here. I needed her to live a full life the way everyone was supposed to. Sacrificing someone for your own sake was selfish, no matter how it was dressed up. Scarlett deserved everything she wanted. She didn't owe us her life. We had no right to take hers.

I held her close, burying my head in her shoulder, breathing her in. It was very likely to be the last time I'd have my arms around her. I memorised everything, the way she clung to me, the way she fit perfectly against me, the softness of her hair, the perfect scent of her skin.

"Shh, it's okay. Everything is going to be okay. Trust me, beautiful girl. *Trust me.*"

She pulled away first, and I resisted the urge to grab her back.

"I don't have a choice anymore."

"I promise I won't let you down, not again. Now you need to eat that," I

said, nodding to the food on the side. “And everything else you’re offered, okay?”

Stubbornly, she folded her arms over her chest, ready to argue.

“I mean it, Scarlett. We are going to be *running* from these people, and I need you to have all the strength you’ve got.”

“Fine,” she replied. “Where do we go?”

“Through the forest and into town. There are two police stations there. Depending on where we come out depends on which one we go to. We will maybe have a one or two-minute head start. We run as fast as we can without looking back. I will get you to safety and back to your parents.”

“What happens to you?”

Gulping, I shrugged, genuinely not knowing. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll leave and you will never see me again.”

Her eyes hardened. “If they find you?”

“I’ll go to a city. They won’t look there. With any hope, the police will pick them up anyway.”

“Your parents?”

“Are dangerous. I love them, I can’t help that, and as much as it kills me to hand them over – because they’re victims, too – they won’t stand by and let me help you. I will tell the police everything. I know it’s the right thing to do. If they killed someone because I didn’t give them up...”

She nodded once and sat back down. “Don’t make me hate you all over again.”

That hurt. “I won’t. Never again, Scarlett. I have to go. Try to calm down the attitude. We don’t want them to be on high alert.”

“I know,” she replied.

“I’ll see you later.”

Fiona was reading in the living room when I left Scarlett’s room. She looked up and smiled. “How is she?”

“Hungry. She seems to be doing well, doesn’t she?”

“I think so. I had hoped she would have understood when I explained on the first night but I think she is now. I am grateful for that. This is so much easier now she is beginning to believe.”

“Beginning to?”

“I think there is a little way to go. There are things she still doesn’t understand but we haven’t had a chance to go through everything yet. She is reading but there is a lot.”

I nodded. "There is. We have had years and she only gets eight days. I think she's extraordinary for coming this far."

"I completely agree, Noah."

"I'll see you at later, Fiona."

Smiling, she nodded and then went back to her reading. It was dark when I left. Thick grey clouds coated the sky. I used to find beauty in all weather but bleak summed up how I felt right now. I wanted to get her out, and I would try, but that didn't mean I'd be able to do it.

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Donald and Fiona were outside with Scarlett when I left my house. They were showing her the gardens where we grow crops. She looked so uninterested but she watched everything they did and listened to everything they said.

Her long hair blew in the light wind and she wrapped it in her hand, throwing it over one shoulder. She was beautiful, full of life and passion. It had to work; I had to get her out. Whatever it cost me, I had to get her away.

I slowly walked over to them. Yesterday was the first time I was allowed to see her one on one and I didn't want to push it but I still couldn't stop myself from going to her.

"Morning," I said as I approached.

Donald and Fiona stood; Scarlett already was. She wasn't sure how to play things, whether she should ignore me or reply. I needed her to act angry but still respond, as that's what was expected of her.

"Good morning, Noah. Would you like to help pick tomatoes?" Fiona said.

Scarlett gripped the wicker basket with both hands and I wasn't sure if she was trying to tell me something. "I would, if that's okay with you, Scarlett?"

Shrugging as if she didn't give a damn, she turned around and started wrenching red tomatoes from the vine. She was good, almost too good. Of course, she would still be angry with me but I hated the extent of her anger. I was doing everything I could to make it right.

"Well, grab a basket then," Donald said.

Donald and Fiona gave us a little space once we'd started picking. I think they liked that I was friends with her. If she wasn't the key to our eternity, then I had no doubt that they'd be happy for us to be together.

I slowed my picking down so I could have more time with her. Donald and Fiona didn't seem to notice or they didn't care. If they didn't care that I

wanted more time with her then getting her out might be a little bit easier.

“How are you finding it here?” I asked when they moved a little closer.

She glanced at them before answering, wondering why I’d asked her that and understanding when she saw where they now were. “Um... It’s different.”

“Yes, it is definitely different.”

“It’s confusing.”

I nodded. “It’s an adjustment. I remember my first few weeks out of the commune; it was pretty horrible. You’re home now, though, and that’s all that matters.”

Donald and Fiona smiled at each other. They were so sure of Eternal Light and their ability to convince everyone else that they didn’t even consider that Scarlett could’ve changed me completely.

“Okay, I think we have enough for lunch,” Donald said, raising his basket. “Let’s get these to Mildred, Bernard and Kathy and then I need to help Hank and Bill finish Hank’s veranda.

That was one thing I loved about my community; everyone worked together. If you needed something, everyone was willing to help. I liked some of the core values of Eternal Light and the way we lived but there was a dangerous side to our beliefs that had to stop. Only I knew I would never be able to convince anyone that Donald and Fiona were wrong and we shouldn’t sacrifice their daughter.

“Alright,” I said, taking Donald’s basket so he could get straight off.

“Thank you, Noah. I’ll see you all at lunch then.”

He left me with Fiona and Scarlett. “Fiona, do you think once we drop these things off I could show Scarlett the chapel?”

“What chapel?” Scarlett asked.

Thank God she hadn’t seen it yet. I didn’t think she had since they were keeping her close to the commune and the chapel was a minute’s walk into the meadow.

“I think that is a lovely idea, Noah,” she replied.

Scarlett looked hopeful, wondering if we were running now. There was no way. The meadow would maybe hide us up to our knees but we needed the cover the thick forest offered. We dropped the tomatoes for the lunchtime salad off, and I led Scarlett past the houses and hall.

“Are we doing it now?” she asked once we were safely away.

“No, I just wanted to be able to talk to you in private. We won’t get many

opportunities between now and the...day.”

“Why aren’t we going now?”

“Look around, Scarlett. There’s nothing but the meadow and open fields this side.” Sure we were slightly downhill and that was why the chapel wasn’t visible from the commune but we’d have to run up hill to get away and we’d be seen immediately. “They can drive over the fields, we’ll be seen until we hit the forest at the far side and by that time they would’ve caught up. I’m just as desperate to get you away but we have to be smart about it. I promise you the way I have chosen to do this gives us the best possible chance.”

“I just want to leave.”

“I know and I do, too.”

Sighing, she folded her arms over her stomach. “Sorry. Are you really showing me this chapel then?”

“Yes, it’s where we get married. Well, not we but you know what I mean.”

She smiled as I squirmed in embarrassment. If things had been different, if Eternal Light were just a simple way of living off the land and not about living forever then maybe we could’ve been married here one day. I wished that was true. I wanted so bad for Eternal Light to be an innocent alternate to the *normal* way of living and for Scarlett to stay here with us. I wasn’t going to get much more time with her but I desperately wanted it.

“Yeah, I know what you mean.”

“How is your arm?”

Her hand immediately went to the wound. “It’s okay. Fiona gave me ginger tea.”

“It is a good natural pain-killer.”

She smiled tightly. “So she said. It just tasted gross.”

I pushed the door to the chapel open and ignored where our conversation was headed. I knew it relieved pain; I’d used it when I broke my wrist a few years back but Scarlett was used to pills and modern medicine.

“It’s nice,” she said, looking around. It was a fairly simple hexagon shaped wooden building with a steeple roof and exposed, chunky beams that had wildflowers and vines wrapped around them for a wedding. I wished there was one on before the rituals, I would’ve love for Scarlett to witness a wedding Eternal Light style.

“It’s better when it’s decorated.”

“You love it here.” It wasn’t a question, she knew I did and I wasn’t ever



going to hide that from her.

“I do, I won’t lie. But I understand what they want to do is very wrong and I don’t believe, for one second, that what they think is going to happen is actually going to happen. Please don’t doubt me, Scarlett, there is nothing that will change my mind, no matter how much I love my home and my community.”

“Promise me,” she whispered.

I didn’t hesitate when I said, “I promise. I love you so much more.”

## Twenty-Nine

### **Scarlett**

FIONA LED ME into the meadow, smiling warmly as if everything was completely normal. Her cult was there already, standing in a circle. They each held a white candle in a cup, even though it was daylight.

It was hot today, much too hot. I had the only spaghetti strap dress in, white, on because I woke up melting but it wasn't doing much to keep me cool. That could also be because of Noah's confession last night and the fact that my 'father' had cut me.

Noah was there, his eyes burning into me. I refused to look at him through fear of giving away our plan – *his* plan. I wasn't even sure if I believed him, but he was all I had right now. I'd contemplated running off to the side Noah would be waiting but in another direction to go it alone but that was probably stupid. It was hard to know who to trust when every single person important to me had lied.

We walked slowly. Fiona kept breathing in and out deeply, and I wanted to laugh, but I was too scared. They all looked absolutely ridiculous, dressed only in white, lips moving with whispered words. It was probably about me being 'the light' again.

Without a word, Fiona took me to the centre of the circle and went to stand between Donald and Shaun-the-traitor. I licked my lips. What was about to happen now? On the floor in front of their feet were vines of what looked like ivy. I didn't want to know what they were going to do with them but no doubt I would find out very soon.

The only comfort I had was knowing that they wouldn't kill me before the final ritual in a few days time. But would they hurt me again? Would Noah stand by and let that happen for a second time? Probably, if he intervened they'd know he was – possibly – on my side and that would be it.

I hated placing my faith in a guy that had betrayed me and crushed my heart.

Donald picked up a vine and closed in. I braced myself, clenching my fists and breathing heavily. My cut started to sting but I ignored the pain.

Don't hurt me. Please don't hurt me.

He stopped and knelt down winding the vine around the bottom of my ankles. They were tying me up? My breathing came out in thick pants as he wrapped around and around until my ankle was covered.

With wide eyes, I looked at Fiona. She at least half explained what was going to happen. I knew we were going to a field and there would be chanting but I didn't know about being tied up.

He stood a few feet away and with a warm smile said, "What are we but part of nature. Like trees breathing new life in spring, we will be born again. Into eternal light, you shall lead us. Wind around our souls and take us with you, my love. The Light, our saviour, my daughter."

If I could move, I would've run right then. My fists trembled, digging into my legs where I tried to stop people seeing how scared I was. I didn't want to give them the satisfaction, not that I thought they'd get any out of it anyway.

My eyes flicked to Noah. He looked like the rest of them, calm and happy. He looked like he didn't care about me in the way he'd proclaimed yesterday, but I'd learned the hard way that the guy had the best bloody poker face, so I hoped he was pretending to fit in.

I was counting on him completely, and I hated that.

Fiona was the next to move, she picked up her vine and made her way over. She looked at me like she loved me, but she didn't, not in any real way. If she did love me, she wouldn't let this happen. I held myself tighter, my arm now throbbing as it crushed against my side.

Smiling, she bent her knees and wound the vine around my legs, starting where Donald left off. How long was this going to go on for? "You are the one that will lead us, Scarlett. Your gift grants us eternity."

You're bloody welcome.

Biting my lip, I nodded and stopped myself blinking so I could make my eyes tear up. I didn't need them to trust me or think I was all for their cult now Noah was getting me out, but it'd help them relax, and I wanted to catch them off guard when I ran.

It was thirty-eight against two. We didn't stand much chance, but I was determined to do everything I could to get away. All I wanted was to be back with my family.

I had a few apologies to make to Mum, Dad and Jeremy.

I closed my eyes as one by one they tied vines around my body. I hated not being able to move. There was about half a centimetre leeway where I could move and that felt tighter with every second. The vines bound me to the elbow and there was still one person left to go. Noah.

He stepped forwards, and I held my breath. This was the hardest one. I could push away the panic of being trapped but Noah having a hand in that was awful. When he was right in front of me, far enough from the others that he could show his true emotions, his face fell. His eyes looked haunted, pained. He didn't want to do this. That meant something. Actually, that meant a lot.

"It's okay," I said under my breath, trying not to move my lips.

He reached around my back, feeding the vine to his other hand. I didn't take my eyes off him. He worked slowly, eyes tight, jaw clenched, and it didn't bother me as much. As stupid as it was to allow him to be my comfort, he was. We were in this together right now. He was following their orders, but I knew he was with me.

His breath blew across my neck as he leant around to wrap the vine around me. I closed my eyes and it was almost like we were back in my room, cuddled up on my bed with him kissing my neck and behind my ear.

"Don't," he said.

Stepping back, he turned and walked away, leaving the last knot as loose as he could get away with. He hadn't alleviated on his 'don't' but he didn't need to. He knew I was thinking about the way things had been before all this happened, and I knew he wanted it back as much as I did.

When Noah stood back, I noticed that they'd all closed in, standing in front of me in a crowd rather than a circle. I stood my ground, lifting my chin to appear unaffected.

Fuck you all.

They can't kill me. Yet.

"Let these vines bind her with nature, let her lead us into forever. She is the one; she is the light." Their chant chilled me. It was repeated over and over until I wanted to scream. Even with the crazy chanting they still looked kind, like they would give you their last bloody Rolo.

I couldn't move at all without hurting my arm more and that made me panic.

Closing my eyes, I tried to imagine I was somewhere else. I wanted to get out of the vines and be free, but I didn't know how long they were going to

keep me tied up. I had to think of something else because I was so close to struggling, and I was trying to get them to think I was coming around.

I refused to think of my parents or Jeremy because I wouldn't be able to hold it together. Even though I missed them and just wanted to be home, I couldn't cry over my family right now. I looked up at the bright sky and wondered how people like this could exist in such a beautiful place. They had the perfect location; everything was peaceful and pretty but they ruined it.

Evelyn's pretty face drifted into my head. My sister. I smiled, finally being able to picture her doing something other than running with Jeremy for three seconds. I could still only see her profile but she was standing next to me, holding my hand. I felt love for her even though I didn't remember it.

I will remember you, Evie.

I felt someone pull the vine behind me and slowly they were removed. I flexed my hands when they were free, noticing blood begin to seep through the bandage. It came as no surprise that it'd started bleeding again. I didn't care.

"How do you feel?" Fiona asked as the last vine was removed.

I couldn't tell her the truth but I couldn't come right out and lie. "It was okay, I suppose. I don't like not being able to move." There, that wasn't too bad but not so positive that she questioned why I was okay with the rituals so suddenly.

I honestly had no idea if she would suspect anything if I told her right now that I loved her and couldn't wait to be the sacrifice. It wasn't a risk I was willing to take, though.

"I can imagine that wasn't pleasant. It is done now, and it means we are one step closer."

I smiled tightly but didn't reply. She could take that however she wanted.

"Let's head back," Donald said. "We have a communal dinner tonight so let's make it a special one for Scarlett."

A special dinner with all of the psychos. *Daddy* really knew what I wanted.



THE SKY WAS now light orange where the sun had begun to set and it was still warm out. Everyone was outside around the large dug out seating area. Two small pit fires in the middle kept us warm. I was sitting with Donald and

Fiona, with Shaun and Bethan beside Fiona.

Noah was here, too, but I ignored him as much as I could. We needed everyone to believe that he was just with me to get me here and I was still half angry with him. I had to thaw with everyone else the longer I stayed, but I wasn't sure if forgiving Noah would be realistic, so I'd opted for pretending he didn't exist.

Dinner was large stone baked pizzas with vegetarian toppings. I hated to like anything about this place and these people but they could cook. Living a life the way they do could be amazing if it weren't for the added insanity.

No one spoke about the fact that they'd tied me up just a few short hours ago, but I did prefer it that way. I couldn't pretend that I didn't hate them if they spoke about one of the most terrifying things I'd been through.

Noah avoided me just enough but not too much that it looked wrong. He made the effort to speak to me a couple times. I'd overheard him telling his mum that he didn't try too much because he wanted to give me space to realise what Eternal Light were about before we had the inevitable conversation about what he'd done. He was almost too good at lying that it made me question who his allegiance was to – again.

“Scarlett, would you like pepper and mushroom or spring onion and sweetcorn?” Fiona asked. “Or a little of both.”

“Onion and corn, please. I don't like mushrooms.”

“Really? You used to like it.”

Did I? “Well, I don't now.”

“Okay, I will be right back.”

Finn planted himself in Fiona's seat and smiled over his shoulder. I couldn't help the less than warm reception I gave him. Tightening my jaw, I made show of looking as far away as I could.

“Come on, Scarlett, don't be like that.”

I turned back. “Don't be like that? Are you serious right now?”

“We didn't do any of this to hurt you.”

Sacrificing didn't fall under the category of hurting?

“Think about that for a second, Finn.”

“Donald and Fiona have explained. Haven't they?”

My eyes widened. He was questioning with the obvious goal of finding out just how anti-Eternal Light I was. I had been doing so well gradually coming around, and I wouldn't let anything ruin that, especially not Noah's brother. He was the only person who seemed to look deeper than the show I

was putting on. I'd barely said anything but I could already feel my shot at freedom slipping and it made me feel like breaking down and crying.

I just want to go home.

"They have," I replied, swallowing my emotions. "But that doesn't mean I'm not scared."

"I suppose that is understandable. You've not been here long, by the time of the seventh ritual, you will be sure. All you need to do is keep an open mind and let the truth in."

Wow, they all sounded the same. That could've been Finn, Donald, Shaun or any one of them speaking. There was no difference. You could tell they were singing from the same, la-la-crazy song sheet.

"Right," I replied.

"Are you sure?" His eyes were too questioning, too searching.

"Finn, a couple of weeks ago I didn't even know you all existed. I thought two other people were my parents. Forgive me for feeling a little scared and confused right now. I'm human, I need time."

He looked down, wincing. "You're right, I'm sorry. That is a lot to deal with. We just want the reunion to be a happy one for us all. Sometimes I overlook what a huge adjustment it is for you. Please remember that you are back with your family now. This is where you belong."

For the next few days. Until you kill me.

"I'm trying to."

"It's all we can ask," he said, getting up as Fiona walked back over with two plates of pizza.

"Have you had anything to eat yet, Finn?" Fiona asked.

He shook his head. "Noah's gone for us both."

I hated how casually everyone spoke about Noah in front of me. There was no consideration for the fact that I was in love with him and he'd betrayed me. But then they didn't view it as a betrayal. He was doing his duty, the way I would have to at the sacrifice.

Human life didn't mean anything to them.

Unless it was theirs.



## Thirty

### **Noah**

TODAY MARKED THE final full day Eternal Light had planned for Scarlett. At lunch, she was expected to give element offerings and tomorrow those elements would guide her into the next stage of her eternal life.

It was only hearing it when you'd turned your back that you really *heard* it.

I had an ice cold shower, not wanting to be comfortable. My muscles locked; skin tightened and stung. It hurt, but I welcomed the pain, the distraction. Tomorrow weighed heavily on my mind. The responsibility choked me. I shut off the shower when I shook so violently that I felt ill. My skin had lost its colour – I was pale and looked lifeless. Wrapping the towel around myself I stood still until I'd dried enough to put clothes on.

I had to pull myself together. If I couldn't, Scarlett wouldn't have a chance, and she was all that mattered to me. I dressed quickly, feeling the sting as warmth seeped into my icy skin. I looked tired all the time since I got home with her. Everything that I'd done haunted me, preventing me from sleeping for too long.

Even though I was now doing the right thing, I still couldn't forgive myself. I never would.

"Noah, are you ready?" Finn asked, knocking once on the door with what sounded like his palm.

"Almost, I'll meet you there."

Communal lunch, offerings, communal dinner, then an early night before tomorrow. That was what Donald had ordered for all of us today. He didn't usually try to tell us what to do and when, we sort of all did that together, but he was completely running the show now.

"Alright, don't take too long."

I wanted to take all the time in the world. My nerves were running wild. Although I never had second thoughts about helping her escape, I did about



how we were going to do it. Was there a better way? Could I have snuck out of the commune, got help and got back unnoticed before anyone realised I was missing?

Stretching my muscles out, I mentally prepared to lie to everyone again and pretend I was as excited as them. In a way, I was glad this day was here. I couldn't do this for much longer. Soon I wouldn't have to pretend anymore. Everyone would know where my loyalties lied and hopefully Scarlett will be safely away.

As soon as the front door closed behind my family, I went to my bedroom. They would be distracted for a while before anyone came to look for me, so I knew I had at least five minutes to find the bag for tomorrow.

There would be a few things that we needed, and while I didn't have time to pack everything with everyone milling around outside, I needed the bag under my bed ready for me to pack a few things in while everyone was distracted later.

The bags were in the store cupboard beside the bathroom. I opened the long door and reached up on the top shelf to get it, looking over my shoulder to make sure no one had come back in. I didn't want to use the one I brought here because that was still on the chair in my room, unpacked, and would look suspicious if it suddenly disappeared.

I grabbed the lone bag right at the back and headed back to my room. I hated lying and sneaking around but they'd left me with no option.

"Noah," Finn called.

Jumping, my heart slammed against my chest, and I looked around. He wasn't near me. Yet. But I was in the middle of the hallway holding a bag. Opening the bathroom door as quietly as I could, I stepped inside and carefully slid the lock in place.

I stopped breathing and pressed my ear to the door so I could try to hear where he was. His footsteps thudded lightly on the wooden floor, but they were getting louder.

"Noah, are you in here?"

I flexed the hand that didn't have the bag in a death grip. "In the bathroom," I called.

"You alright?"

"Fine, just needed the toilet. I'll be back out soon."

"Sure? You want me to wait?"

No, please just go.

“I’m alright, thank you. See you outside in a minute.”

“Sure,” he replied.

I forced my ear against the door harder, but it was difficult to hear. I felt sick at the thought of being caught. What would I tell him if I walked out there and he’d decided to wait for me anyway?

Giving him enough time to leave, I placed the bag on the floor where it would be hidden when I opened the door, flushed the chain and washed my hands.

My nerves were shot as I unlocked the door and pulled it open. I was met with complete silence. Finn would surely talk to me now if he were here. Poking my head around the corner, I did a quick sweep down the hall. Empty.

I swiped the bag, dashed to my room and shoved it deep under the bed.

“Where have you gone now?” Finn asked.

I froze, crouched on the floor by my bed. He’d been waiting where? Straightening my legs, I turned to face the door a second before he walked through it.

“Alright?”

“I was just contemplating getting a jacket, but I think I’ll be too hot.”

“Yes, it’s warm out. You ready now?”

“I am,” I replied. “You didn’t have to wait.”

He shrugged. “I was worried when you didn’t come out.”

I smiled as I left my room, closing the door behind me. “Let’s do this,” I said.

“Alright!” Finn didn’t hide his excitement. I used to feel the same when we spoke about what was going to happen and what Scarlett was leading us to.

When we left the house, the last few people were making their way to our outdoor dining area. They carried vases of water and bright green leaves.

Scarlett stood in a long, white dress that made me think about marrying her one day. She was undeniably beautiful, naturally beautiful. She had no make-up on, and nothing had been done to her hair, but she took my breath away.

“Finally,” Zeke said, handing me and Finn a lantern.

Donald was, as usual, the first to approach Scarlett. He carried soil and a rock in one hand and placed them by her feet. Earth.

Fiona stepped forwards next, placing a small, freshly dug plant next to Donald’s offering. Air.

Judith was up next, laying down a lantern. The orange flame flickered in the glass. Fire.

Lastly, Bill laid a vase of liquid by Scarlett. Water.

Gulping, I held my lantern at arms length the same as everyone else and closed my eyes. I couldn't watch.

"By the four elements we live. By the four elements, you shall ascend. By the four elements we shall live on, be reborn upon death so that we shall be joined in eternity," Donald said.

"By the four elements we shall live on," I said in tune with the rest of the community, a piece of me dying because, technically, I was still taking part in this.



TONIGHT WAS ALSO the last time we'd eat together as a community before Scarlett was supposed to be sacrificed. There was a buzz in the air that was slightly infectious. Everyone was elated that we had finally reached the point we'd been striving for.

It felt a bit nostalgic to be living something we'd spoken about almost on a daily basis. But I now knew the dangerous truth behind Eternal Light's teachings.

Under her perfected act, Scarlett looked rightfully terrified, and I had an even harder time tonight pretending that I couldn't wait until tomorrow. Things were about to get very real, and I still wasn't convinced we'd be able to pull it off and get away. It *had* to work. If we didn't get out, the girl I was in love with was going to die.

"Are you okay, Noah?" Mum asked, frowning, questioning why I didn't have a big, fat smile on my face.

"Yes, I'm fine. Just can't believe it's finally here, you know?" Please know.

She smiled. "I do, I know exactly what you mean. But it is here so please try to enjoy it."

Damn. "I am, Mum. I'm just taking everything in. This is the night you've been talking about since I was little, you told me to step back and take everything in because it'll go by in a flash. That's what I'm trying to do."

Her eyes filled with tears. "I remember that. I am so proud of you, Noah. You really have grown into a wonderful man." She kissed me on the cheek

and then looked around, sighing in content.

I wasn't a wonderful man, but I hoped tomorrow might correct that, even a little. I was going to do the right thing. It was the right thing by Scarlett, myself, and Eternal Light. Not only was I going to do everything I could to save her life but I was preventing us being murderers.

Scarlett stood with her parents as people came forward and kissed both of her cheeks. She played it so well. She was withdrawn enough to play the nervous card but smiled and interacted enough to make people believe she with us all the way. She wasn't the only one that was nervous, we all were, but for different reasons.

I managed to get a minute with her out of earshot of everyone else when we both went back for more food. Donald watched us; I didn't even need to look around to know that. I kept smiling.

"How are you feeling?" I asked. It was an innocent question and one that everyone had asked her, but I was referring to our escape, not the ritual.

She nodded, giving me a reserved smile. To everyone else, she'd not quite forgiven me yet and still acted cooler to me. She probably didn't have to pretend that much.

"I'm okay," she replied. "Nervous."

"I think we all are a little. Don't worry, though, tomorrow is going to run smoothly and then everything will be alright."

Fear flashed through her eyes. "Yeah, everyone has been reassuring me all day."

"They all love you and want you to feel at ease with what's going to happen."

I knew she was talking about the same thing I was, but hopefully everyone else thought it was about the ritual. *Please trust me, Scarlett.*

"I know that. It's been a huge change, and I've only just had time to stop and think about what's coming. I'm a little scared."

"That's natural, Scarlett, but trust me when I tell you that it *will* be alright." I had no right to tell her to trust me, not after what I'd done, but I was all she had now. The responsibility was overwhelming, but I made a promise not to let her down again.

"Do you really think so?" she asked.

I didn't want to lie to her; the odds were heavily stacked against us, but the only choice was to try. "I know so. Stop worrying and enjoy tonight. This is all for you, Scarlett."

Donald stepped behind her and smiled at us both. “Noah is right. Come and enjoy the evening, everything will be fine tomorrow.”

Scarlett smiled up at Donald and followed him back to their seats. I wasn’t sure how I felt about her being able to lie and manipulate so easily, but then she was facing death so I couldn’t question her character too hard. And what I was doing and had done was no better. I was lying to everyone I loved – everyone but her.

“Tell Finn not to eat everything, I’m just running home for a second,” I said to Mum.

Her eyes immediately filled with concern. “Are you alright?”

“I think I have a headache coming on and I want to make a tea in case. I won’t be long.”

She nodded. “Do you want me to make it?”

“No, you stay here and enjoy. I’ll bring it back when it’s made,” I said, walking off.

I had our bag and needed to pack and stash it. The only chance to plant it in the forest would be now while they were all distracted with the festivities. Scarlett watched me go back to my house, but I didn’t look at her. I didn’t want anyone to see me looking at her and become suspicious, not that they would. You didn’t turn your back on Eternal Light, your family and the community. Jonathan and Marissa had. They’d lost their chance at eternal peace, tranquillity and happiness. They would get nothing when they died.

Same as all of us really.

I closed the front door and ran to the kitchen, boiling a pan of water to make tea. Then I went to my room and pulled the rucksack from under my bed, filling it with some clothes and fleece jackets that I’d set aside in my drawer, water and food that I’d stashed right at the back, and a pair of shoes for Scarlett. There wasn’t a lot in it really, enough for one day. I didn’t want to be weighed down when we had to run as fast as we could.

I made the tea and left it on the side while I went outside to creep into the forest. I could hear everyone talking and laughing, but I was far enough out that I couldn’t be seen in the dark. *I hope.*

The sky had clouded over, making it darker. It was as if some other force was helping me get her out of there. I felt every thud of my heart as I crept past the lake. If I were caught that would be it, I’d be out, and Scarlett would die. There was so much riding on this.

Letting Scarlett down was the last thing I ever wanted to do but it was a

huge possibility.

I walked slowly, being careful not to make too much noise when I stood on fallen branches. It was stupid, they wouldn't hear a stick breaking over the sound of the fire and everyone's talking, but I was scared and paranoid.

There was a collection of bushes relatively close to the edge of the forest and the lake Scarlett would be cleansed in. It was my chosen hiding place for the bag now and me tomorrow.

Breathing deeply, I gave myself a quick pep talk.

Crouching down, I shoved the bag under the bush, covering it with leaves and whatever else I could find on the floor. My eyes scanned the area to see if anyone had broken away from the group. The houses furthest away from the fire were just silhouettes, so I was confident that I couldn't be seen from where they were. Still, I stood up and crept back as fast as I could.

It'd been cold in the forest and I was glad I'd packed the fleece jackets and a change of clothes and shoes for Scarlett, she'd be running straight after getting out of water and would be freezing.

I can do this.



## Thirty-One

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### **Scarlett**

I WOKE WITH the strongest urge to throw up. My stomach rolled and flipped. Today was *the* day. The day with only two outcomes: Noah and I escaped, or I died. Apparently there was going to be a day of celebration, lots of big meals and well wishing to send me on a safe journey where I'll wait to be reunited with each of them when they die.

I literally couldn't understand why it didn't sound ridiculous to them.

Laid out on the chair beside my bed was a soft mint colour sundress and new underwear. The only time I was told what to wear was when I had to be in something white for the rituals. This was green and clearly laid out for me to wear. I hadn't been here long but long enough to establish a routine and to be scared if it was broken. They ran the community so smoothly I would nominate them to run the world, if it weren't for the fact that they were all insane.

Why green?

"Good morning," Fiona said when I got dressed and made my way into the small kitchen.

"Morning," I replied, wishing for a cup of coffee to settle my nerves. Green tea was about as good as it got here.

"Breakfast is in ten minutes, would you like some tea before we go?" she asked.

I shook my head. "No, thanks."

"Please don't look so nervous, Scarlett."

Please don't kill me.

"I'm trying," I replied, forcing myself to smile at her. "I know the pain will only last a few seconds but..."

Tilting her head, she held the tops of my arms. "It is understandable, of course. Don't fear it, though; revel in the knowledge that you are destined for something much greater than this world can offer. You are a miracle."

I need a miracle.

Gulping, I replied, "Okay. Thank you."

Every single time I had to pretend to agree I felt my heart sink further. It was wrong, and I hated having to act like I was fine to be sacrificed. Talking about the ending of my life wasn't an easy thing to do, and I had to do it with bloody cheer.

"Good. Now, are you sure about that tea?"

"I'm sure." *It tastes like pee.* "What's for breakfast?"

"Ah, we're having fruit, freshly made bread, and pastries."

Their food was incredible, but I could've killed for a bacon sandwich. It was my last breakfast, shouldn't it be what I want?

"Sounds great. Should we go and help prepare?" I asked.

"No need," Donald said, walking into the room and leaning against the table. "It is all in hand and they want to give us a few moments alone before the day starts. I just want to thank you, Scarlett. I know it couldn't have been easy, especially after what you have lived through with Jonathan and Marissa."

The sound of my parents' names made me ache. I missed them so much it hurt. But I was doing everything I could to get back to them, and I was sure they were doing everything they could to find me.

He smiled. "None of that matters now because you are here, and you have made us so proud. We have always known you are an inspiration, and nothing gives me more pleasure than seeing you grow into a beautiful young woman who is willing to take her destiny with such grace and elegance. It will be with a heavy heart that we let you go, but I know it won't be long before we are reunited again. Fifty years, or whatever we may have left, is nothing compared to the eternity awaiting us."

I wondered if he actually listened to himself.

"Thank you," I said. "I know my transition hasn't been easy on anyone, but I didn't know the truth."

"Oh, we know," Fiona said, "And we *all* understand. No one has ever thought badly of you."

I couldn't have cared less if they thought badly of me.

"Okay, good, I don't want them to," I lied and smiled.

I wanted to throw myself in the lake now so we could get this thing started and over with. Glancing at the clock, I counted down. *Five hours.*





AFTER EATING BREAKFAST together, we had to help set up the hall. “Are you coming with us, Scarlett?” Willow asked, linking arms with Skye. She and her twin sister were the only teen girls here. There were four children, but they weren’t yet teenagers. I tried my best not to remember names or make much of an effort with anyone other than Donald and Fiona.

It would be too tragic to hear children talk like the rest of them.

“Yeah,” I replied and then turned back to Fiona. “Is that okay?”

She smiled brightly. “Of course, it is. We are now headed to the barn so we’ll see you there in a few minutes.”

“We won’t be long,” Willow said. “We just want to talk to Scarlett a bit; we haven’t had much chance to yet.”

And this was the only chance they’d get. One way or another, I wouldn’t be here in *two hours*.

“It has been a strange and busy week, hasn’t it?” Skye said.

“Understatement,” I muttered. I didn’t want to talk to these girls or be their friend. That was pointless.

“Right. Yes, obviously,” Willow said. “I’m sorry we didn’t get to spend much time together. Noah told us you’re an amazing person.”

Skye grinned and added, “Not that we didn’t know that already.”

How often did Noah talk to them about me? Were there weekly reports? I fisted my hands. *No, don’t think about that*. I couldn’t look back, not now.

It had to be in the past.

I had to trust him.

“Well, thanks.” We started to walk towards the barn at a leisurely pace. The same pace me and Imogen walked anywhere at.

“What’s high school like?” Skye asked, completely taking me by surprise.

I frowned. “Um, it’s okay, I guess.”

“Sorry,” Willow said, “We just haven’t been to a public school. Obviously.”

“No, you never got the chance to experience that. Noah hadn’t even had a movie night before...” I stopped myself. What the hell was I doing? Why was I talking about this? It was sick. We weren’t friends and never would be. And I couldn’t talk about what happened with Noah so casually when it still burned.

“He said he will miss that. I know he is a lover of the outdoors, but he did

enjoy the films,” Willow said.

I wanted to hit her. I knew he enjoyed it. He may have lied about everything but he reacted to the movies, and you couldn't fake laughter like that. I hated that she was trying to make me feel better about Noah. I didn't want to talk about him with anyone. It was private, and it still *hurt*.

Skye touched my arm, and I fought hard not to whack it away. “We are very glad you're here, Scarlett.”

Through gritted teeth I replied, “Thanks.”

They walked in ahead of me, and I stopped to look up at the brass clock above the barn door. *One hour and forty minutes*.

I stepped into the building and something that felt like an explosion went off in my head. I cried out and gripped my forehead. Everything slotted into place, and I felt dizzy. Memories came flooding back all at once making my head pound.

The barn inside looked identical to the warehouse. I saw the final ceremony, the one after the cleansing. I was little. I started to cry when they laid the leaves on the ground inside the stone circle. They held me down. Dad had a knife. I was screaming. There was fire. The curtains were alight. Hot. Too hot. People ran, trying to find something to put the flames out with. Chaos. Terror. Pain.

Then Mum – Marissa – grabbed me. And...darkness.

I couldn't breathe. Turning, I ran out of the barn and leant against the wall outside. Oh God, *that's* what they were hiding. I was scared before but now I remembered, everything was a million times worse.

Don't cry.

I didn't want them to know something was really wrong. I wasn't supposed to not want this.

“Scarlett!” Fiona said, hot on my heels. She bent down to meet me eye to eye. “What happened?”

Gulping, I replied, “I was remembering, but I couldn't really see anything. It gives me headaches. That's all. I just had to get some fresh air.”

I wanted to scream at her. I remembered her hovering over her young child watching and not caring how worked up and scared I was. How could she?

Oh God, I'm going to throw up.

Stay calm.

“Are you alright now?”

No! “I’m fine,” I replied, straitening up and smiling. It took everything I had. “Like I said, I just needed some air.”

“Why don’t you go with Bethan and Noah?” She pointed to where they were in the field. “I’m sure they could use some help harvesting the potatoes.”

They were having a feast after I was slaughtered, and she wanted me to help prepare for that. She was beyond sick.

Trying to keep the sarcasm from my voice, I said, “Good idea.”

I left her as quickly as I could and made my way over to the field beside the meadow. They were both happy to see me, for completely different reasons. “Fiona asked me to come and help,” I said.

Bethan smiled. “We love having you. The potatoes aren’t buried too far down, so you should get them up easily.”

There were about five other people digging up potatoes, too. How much were they going to eat? They would all eat together, celebrating, for fifteen nights after I was gone. It was disgusting.

Harvesting was about the only time I got alone with Noah, and even that wasn’t exactly alone. We still had people everywhere, watching me in case I took off. If I thought I could make it alone I would go in a heartbeat. Noah was risking a lot to help me.

We were on our hands and knees picking potatoes from the ground and putting them in a basket. It was warm, but I felt freezing. I focused on my task and realised this could be one of the last things I’d do. My heart raced with nerves. I felt trapped, cornered, and I fought to keep playing along until the time was right.

Once the potatoes were picked and everything was ready, it was time to get dressed for the ceremony. Fiona took me back to the house, and I was instructed to have a bath and get ready in the dress she would set out on my bed.

I did as I was told because there was little else I could do right now. After soaking in a bubble bath, using most of it up as my own little screw you, I got out, dried and went back to my room.

Unsurprisingly the dress I was to wear was full-length and white. It was pretty and thankfully not a slim fit so I would be able to run properly in it. I held it up – *this is what I’m supposed to die in*. Not many people knew what their last outfit would be. I instantly hated it.

I pulled it over my head. It fit me perfectly. It had long, loose fitting

sleeves, a modest neckline, and waves of material on the skirt. I pulled it and was satisfied when I could stretch both arms out to the sides.

There were no shoes, and I was afraid I'd have to run through the forest barefoot. There wasn't a lot I could do about that. I couldn't ask for shoes and have Fiona question why I'd need them if I was getting in a lake. Besides, I'd run barefoot over a bed of nails or hot coal to get away.

I looked in the mirror and took deep breaths to calm my nerves. I could do this. I was strong.

“Scarlett, are you ready?” Donald called.

Time to fight for my life.



## Thirty-Two

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### **Scarlett**

TWO THINGS ENTERED my mind as every member of Eternal Light stared at me from the meadow. One, no matter how hot it was outside it never warmed the water enough for it to not be cold. And two, if this didn't go to plan I would be dead in *forty minutes*.

Noah wasn't there. He walked out with them but soon disappeared around the back of the houses. I didn't watch where he went from there through fear of it gaining the attention of someone else. Obviously, he'd positioned himself right at the back and when they'd said whatever crap they were saying and while kneeling down with their eyes closed he'd slinked off.

Since they'd stood up and opened their eyes they hadn't stopped staring at me.

I pretended to look around, turning my body so I could take a few unnoticed steps back towards the other side. Running in water wasn't easy, and I would be slow to get out, giving them plenty of time to make it around the lake. I had to give myself as much time as I could. At least they would be further away as they called upon nature to accept and cleanse me for the final time.

Idiots.

Soon I had to run for my life in a cold, wet dress. Noah said he was packing me some clothes, but we couldn't stop to change until we knew we'd lost them. I had no idea how long it would be before I could change. Or how cold it was going to get in the forest at night.

In the distance, I could just about see their lips moving but I had to strain. Some of them had their eyes closed again. Why couldn't they all do that? My heart started to pound. How long would they chant for, and why hadn't Noah called me yet? Had someone realised that he'd slipped away? He said they'd be so focused on what they had to do to that he didn't see a problem with getting away. I couldn't be so confident – this was *my* life on the line.

Where was he? Gulping as my stomach churned with petrified nerves, I glanced around, still trying to make it look like I was just moving to get more comfortable and flattening the floating skirt of the dress.

When their chant felt like it'd entered the third minute, I started to panic. I didn't know how many more opportunities I was going to get to escape. My hands shook, and I felt like crying. I clenched my trembling lip.

Run now.

I should just go now. This was my last chance and Noah wasn't here. I officially had nothing to lose. Just when I was about to go it alone, I heard him. His voice was like an answered prayer.

Looking over my shoulder, I twisted my body in the direction of his voice. It took a minute but after another whisper and rustling of a bush I saw him.

"Now!" he hissed.

I took off, wading through the water as fast as I could. It was difficult, and I burst into tears as the water fought against me, determined to keep me there. I pushed myself harder, and it was when the water reached the bottom of my knees that I heard shouting. Noah stood up, dashing forwards with his hand outstretched.

I whimpered, terrified that they would catch me up. We were stupid; they were going to get us. It felt like ages before I was out and Noah was tugging me forwards. My ankle length dress weighed a ton, and I was instantly freezing as the wind nipped at my skin. But none of that mattered because I was free and had a chance.

"Faster, Scarlett," Noah snapped.

They were behind us, but there was no way I was turning around to see how far. Their footsteps and voices were quiet so hopefully we still had a good head start. Noah didn't seem to care about where they were; he ran with sheer determination, half dragging me behind him.

Loose branches snapped under my bare feet, and I knew it was only a matter of time before they broke my skin. I pushed myself, ignoring the burn as my calf muscles screamed in protest. There was no time to care about anything but reaching safety.

"How far behind us do you think they are?" I asked, holding onto his hand so tight I could feel myself crushing his bones together.

There were so many of them and just two of us. *They're going to catch us!* My heart hurt as it beat too fast, too hard. Adrenaline and fear coursed through my veins.

They couldn't be too far back.

Oh God, oh God, they're going to catch us, and I'm going to die.

I tensed as much as I could, terrified that I'd feel a hand grip my shoulder at any second.

I wanted to be home.

"Probably not far, keep going." He didn't sound as out of breath as me but he was close, and it had only been a few minutes.

Five minutes in, and I was completely overwhelmed and exhausted. I felt tears stab my eyes like I was being pricked with hundred of needles. My vision blurred. My side stung, lungs burned, legs hurt, feet throbbed and I was chilled to the bone, but the worst part was the fear of being chased down, caught and taken back.

"You okay?" he puffed after we'd run another ten or fifteen minutes, going deeper into the woods.

I blinked rapidly and replied, "Yeah." Not seeing wasn't helping with the panic but it was dark under the trees anyway and we were running fast, so there wasn't a lot to see. "We're going to be okay, aren't we?" I asked, wheezing.

I'd forgotten how my PE teacher had told me to breathe when running. It was either breathe in through your nose and out with your mouth or the other way around. I tried both, and my lungs and throat still burned.

Everything *burned* and ached.

"We'll be fine, don't slow down."

Not once while we were sprinting towards the unknown did he let go of my hand. He would never know how much I appreciated that. I forgave him, right then and there, while he risked everything and turned his back on all he'd ever known to save my life.

I forgave him.

One agonising hour later, I couldn't do it anymore. "Noah, I need a break," I said, doubling over. I gagged. He stopped immediately and dropped to his knees as I slumped to the floor. My legs were now completely unable to support my weight. We'd been slowing for some time now, but I'd run faster and for longer than I ever had before.

"I'm sorry, but I can't." Red spots danced in front of my face and felt like I was going to be sick.

"Okay, we'll take two." He tugged open the backpack. He pulled out two bottles of water and a pair of socks and trainers. We downed the water,

breathing heavily between long swigs, and I put on the shoes. My feet were swollen and sore, but it felt good to have some protection again. Noah winced as he saw the blood seeping from my feet, instantly turning patches of the white socks red.

“Sorry,” I said. We need to go. We can’t stop.

“Don’t. You have nothing to be sorry for, I should’ve made you put them on sooner, but we really didn’t have time.”

“It’s not your fault. We couldn’t stop too soon. Cut feet is a small price to pay for my life.”

He stroked my hair and tucked it behind my ear like he had dozens of times before. I wanted to close my eyes at the contact. It still felt so real and so natural. He sighed. “We have to get up, Scarlett; we need to keep moving. They would’ve closed the gap considerably by now.”

His words made me get up. I didn’t want to, the thought of moving even an inch brought me to tears, but I didn’t have a choice. Stuffing the empty bottles back in the bag, he stood and helped me up. My legs almost gave out again.

Clenching my teeth, I breathed through the throbbing pain. “Do you know where we’re going?” I bit out.

“I know a general direction, but I’ve not been this deep into the forest before. There are miles before the nearest town – it’s the reason Donald bought the land.”

Great, we were going in a ‘general’ direction, and I couldn’t complain or let myself get disheartened. I had less of an idea than he did. We were in this together, and we’d find a way out *together*.

“Let’s go then,” I said, looking back to check if anyone was coming. I wasn’t nearly ready to run again, but then I wasn’t nearly ready to die, so I had no choice.

Noah threw the bag on his back and held his hand out. I took it without hesitation, and we started off in the direction we were headed before. The first few steps were the hardest, my muscles had seized from our few short minutes stop, but I ignored the pain.

The stitch in my side slowed us down considerably. Sweat dampened my clothes; I swallowed metallic bile from over-exerting myself, and exhaustion threatened to collapse my legs again. But we pushed on, much, much slower than before but still heading away from Eternal Light.

“Your parents are in Ireland, you know,” he said.



My heart ached to be reunited with them. “How do you know that?”

“It’s all over the news. My dad drove the car eighty miles to try to put the police off, make it look like we were heading to an airport but they quickly realised. Your parents are here.”

It was a huge comfort knowing they were in the same country. I didn’t have time to dwell on the fact that they’d probably told the truth about who we all were and why they’d taken me because Noah upped the pace and had us sprinting through the forest again. The thought of getting to safety and telling everyone that my parents were heroes for taking me that day gave me the added boost I needed.

After weaving between tall trees and jumping a few fallen ones, Noah pulled us to an abrupt stop and slapped his hand over my mouth. My eyes widened. What could he hear? I swallowed glass and pressed my body into his side. They were close, close enough for Noah to hear them so that meant there was a strong possibility that they’d heard us.

They’re going to find us.

“Noah,” I whispered behind his palm, trembling with fear.

He mouthed ‘it’s okay’ and led us to one of the fallen trees. We were going to have to hide.

Bloody hell, we’re going to be caught!

We made it behind the large tree before the footsteps and voices got too loud. Noah had me pinned to his chest. We both tried to control our breathing, so we were barely making a noise. Both of my hands covered my mouth, and I forced myself to suck air in slowly and quietly.

My heart thumped hard when they sounded practically on top of us. Their feet broke sticks and squelched damp moss. They had to be right next to us. I closed my eyes and prayed, pushing back into Noah, trying to melt into his body.

I was so, so scared.

“Where would he take her?” Donald seethed.

“I don’t know,” Shaun replied, sounding just as angry with his son. “We will find them both, though. Noah doesn’t know this forest as well as he obviously thinks. We’ll pick them up soon.”

Noah’s arms tightened around me, and he buried his head in my hair. What was he thinking? I’d not been around them long, but they’d always spoken to each other and about each other with respect. When Noah was telling me he wanted to get me out he still never spoke ill about his

community. It had to hurt that they could speak about him with such hate in their tone.

Despite what he'd done, I wanted to comfort him. I hated that he could be in pain, and I wanted to fix it. I loved him completely, whether he was an ex-cult member or not. I loved who I thought he was, and I adored that he'd grown into that person again.

We didn't move for a long time, clinging to each other, and my body started to seize up. I wanted to question him on when we were leaving, what he was thinking, and ask if he was okay but fear prevented me.

"Ready," he said, after a few more agonising minutes. He still held onto me tight, and part of me wanted to stay hidden. There was less risk. We had to keep moving, though.

"Which way?" I asked.

He did another scan of the area and stood up, taking my hand. "Not the direction they went in, we'll go further west."

I had no idea how he knew which way was west, but I gripped his hand and ran beside him.

## *Thirty-Three*

### **Noah**

I WAS EXHAUSTED. Completely and utterly exhausted. Sweat ran down my forehead, and my lungs burned. Scarlett was tired, too, but we still kept moving. Before they'd caught up with us, I knew the direction we were going but now we could be heading back to the commune for all I knew.

I didn't tell Scarlett because it'd only panic her more. I'd never seen a person so terrified before and I wanted to do everything I could to make it better for her.

"Noah," she said through ragged, struggling breaths.

We'd slowed down a lot, going at a pace somewhere between a walk and a jog. The sun was beginning to set, slowly descending the forest into darkness. Soon we would lose all light, and the temperature would drop dramatically.

"I know," I replied, pulling her to a stop. Her legs buckled, and she fell to the floor as soon as I stopped her, and I doubled over, leaning against a tree.

"What're we going to do?" she asked.

It was all on me, but then it was my fault for promising to get her out. "Right now we should concentrate on finding shelter. I've seen a few dirt roads, and I know there are houses in the forest. Rather than trying to find town, I think we should find somewhere to stay the night and head back out at first light."

Her dark blue, fear filled eyes widened. "Isn't that dangerous? What if they come for us?"

That I wasn't sure of. Eternal Light usually avoided outside interaction at all cost, we didn't want to be known and knocking at someone's door asking for two runaway teens wouldn't help. But they had nothing to lose now so I wasn't sure if they'd go for it or lay low and try to find us alone.

At this point, it was anyone's guess.

"We have to be smart about this, as soon as that sun's gone it's going to get really cold, add complete darkness to that and it's not looking good for

us. We'll find somewhere to stay the night. I think someone's house is the best bet. I have a story."

"You really think that'll work?"

I stood up straight and scrubbed my face with my hands. "I don't know, Scarlett. It's all I have right now. I wish I could wave a magic wand and get us out of this, but I can't."

"It's okay," she said softly. "I know you're doing all you can, and I understand what you're risking."

"Come on, let's keep moving." I helped her up, and we jogged for what seemed like hours before finally came across an old bike and gardening tools.

Scarlett looked at me, afraid. "Whose do you think those are?" she asked.

"I don't know, but it probably means we have stumbled onto private property, and a house is nearby. This is good." Finally.

"Is it good? We don't know who is going to be there."

"It will be fine, Scarlett. No one can be as dangerous to us as them right now. You know that we have no choice."

She nodded. "I'm with you. Can we just walk now, no running? I feel like I'm going to collapse again."

"Yes, let's take two minutes first so you can get finally changed now we're further away. We don't want this to look any more suspicious than it already does." I dropped the bag, and she bent down, taking the clothes out of it. I had a pair of jeans and t-shirt, but it was better than the dress. "Put the fleece on, too, you're freezing."

I could just about see her rosy cheeks with the last of the light. But that didn't fool me, she was cold to touch, and we'd been slowly losing pace for the last couple of hours. I slipped mine on as well and turned around, giving her some privacy even though I'd seen her naked before.

It only took her a minute to get changed, probably because she was cold. "I'm done, Noah," she said. I turned back to see her shoving the dress in the bag and gripping the front of the fleece against her in a bid to warm up quicker. "We should take this, so they don't find it and know we've been here, right?"

I smiled and took the bag. "Yes, good thinking."

When I stood up from bending down to get the bag we were closer than before. I could smell her hair, her skin, and it drove me crazy. I missed her so much. Everything was entirely my fault, I'd lost the best thing that had ever happened to me, and I had no one to blame but myself.

Her eyes locked me in, preventing me from moving or even speaking. She was so beautiful, inside and out. “Noah,” she whispered and the softness in her voice made me ache. Even if it was only for a moment, she remembered how we were, how she loved me. It might not be much, but that tender look was enough for me. I didn’t deserve more. I didn’t even deserve that.

“I know,” I replied. “Let’s try to find this house.”

She stepped back first and the warmth I felt when I was near her subsided. I put my hand on the small of her back to guide her in what I hoped was the right direction. I didn’t need to but the urge to have some physical contact with her was overwhelming.

She tried not to look at me when I touched her, but I caught the glance in my direction. I took it as a good sign that she didn’t push me away. We only had each other right now, but I desperately wanted her to, at the very least, not hate me.

“Are you feeling warmer?” I asked as we power-walked ahead, being careful to watch the ground as well as the surroundings since we couldn’t see that well anymore.

“Yeah, thank you.”

“Sorry we couldn’t have stopped for you to change earlier.”

“It’s okay, I wasn’t that cold back then anyway. Not sure if it was because it was warmer or if the shock has just worn off now.”

“You’re not going to faint on me, are you?”

She smiled, looking out into the distance and then in front of her feet. “No, I’m pretty sure I’m saving that for when we get to town.”

“Noted,” I replied. “I’ll remember that for when we step into the police station.”

“That’s where were going first?”

“Of course.”

“You’re really turning them in?” she asked, genuinely surprised. I could just take her home, let her parents run away with her and go somewhere myself, but I would never do that. Eternal Light were dangerous and had to be stopped. Besides, the police were looking for her. Jonathan and Marissa weren’t the type of people to think of themselves first, they would tell the truth and get themselves into trouble to save their daughter.

I pulled her to a stop and spun her around. “I understand that I have no right to ask anything of you, but I need you to believe me when I tell you I love you. They would have killed you, Scarlett, and I have never felt fear like

that. I felt physically sick from the moment I woke, worrying that something would go wrong with the escape. Nothing matters but you and maybe I'm blinded, but I don't care. Bottom line is you come first, and there's not one person in this world I wouldn't betray to keep you safe. So, yeah, I'm really turning them in. I'm keeping you safe."

She looked like she was going to cry in a good way. I loved that I could still affect her.

"We need to keep moving. They could be anywhere," I said. There was a dirt track road to our left, so it had to lead somewhere. I led her down it and prayed somewhere safe was at the end.

Ten minutes later, we found a small cottage. An old Ford Mondeo was parked outside. Eternal Light had 4-wheeled drives because of how deep into the forest we lived. I was confident we'd be safe here.

Scarlett's hand slipped into mine, and she squeezed. She was afraid.

"It's alright. Just let me do the talking."

With a little nod she replied, "Okay."

I hated the next words out of my mouth; "We can't be holding hands for this. I'm going to tell them you're my sister."

She let go, and I wanted to punch myself. That may well be the last time I'd get to hold her hand. I shouldn't have said anything until we were closer. I needed more time.

"What will you tell them?"

"We've lost our camp."

Frowning adorably, she said, "Huh?"

"Don't worry, just follow my lead," I said, knocking on the faded red door. When it opened an elderly man smiled at us. "Hello, my name is Jacob, and this is my sister, Amelia, we got lost in the woods with the loss of light and wondered if we could stay until morning, please? We won't be any trouble, but we're cold and need a floor to sleep on."

"You're lost? Where are you parents?" he asked.

"We know our way around here but ventured further than usual, and I would prefer not to have my sister walking through the woods in the dark. And our parents will be at home drunk, sir. We camp out a lot, they know about it. I'm eighteen, old enough to take care of us both, but right now I just need a little help."

"Who is it, dear?" the man's wife said, leaning around his shoulder.

"Kids here are lost in the woods," he replied.

“I was just explaining to your husband that my sister and I walked further than usual and didn’t think about the time. Before we knew it, the sun had set, and we couldn’t find our way back. We need somewhere to sleep until sunlight when we can see our way home.”

“Of course, of course, dear things,” she said, shoving her husband to the side and taking Scarlett’s hand. “Come on in, let’s get you warm and fed. Through there, dear, that’s right.”

She showed Scarlett into the living room and her husband and I followed.

“Thank you for this, we really appreciate it. We’ll be out of your hair at first light.”

“Nonsense,” he said. “You’re no trouble. We don’t get too many folk knocking on our door anymore.”

That I believed. I just hoped we’d be the only ones knocking on the door tonight.



## Thirty-Four

### **Scarlett**

BRIDGET HAD ME and Noah sitting on the sofa wedged under a thick tartan blanket. She'd made us hot chocolate with mini marshmallows on top. It was so unbelievably nice to have freshened up a little and be somewhere warm and dry.

I felt human again, but my nerves were still raging. *They* were still out there looking for me and any minute and could knock on the door any minute. Noah didn't seem to think they would because questions would be asked, but they didn't have anything to lose anymore. If I disappeared, they wouldn't get their chance at eternal life.

"So, you two live in town? You don't sound from around here," Seamus said.

"We moved here from England two years ago. I imagine the accent will catch eventually," I replied.

I hated lying to them. They were so sweet and so kind, but we couldn't exactly tell them the truth. It was too unbelievable anyway. Eternal Light was well hidden, and although they had electricity and running water, I doubted many locals knew they were even there.

"Ah, I thought as much."

Noah smiled. "We camp through most of the summer, though. We've always loved the great outdoors and wish our parents had bought one of the houses in the forest."

"They don't come along too often."

"No, I don't expect they would."

"We've been here forty years now," Bridget said.

I was waiting for her to say something about a cult or weird group of people living in self-made shacks in the woods, but she didn't. She didn't know about them, which wasn't surprising.

"Wow, I bet you know everything about this forest then," I said. "We've



only been exploring for a couple of years.”

Noah looked at me out of the corner of my eye, but I didn't care about his warning to stop. I wanted to know if they at least suspected something odd was happening around here.

“We like to think so,” Seamus said. “We were young explorers like yourselves back in our youth. We've always loved it out here, the peace and tranquillity it has to offer, so when this house came on the market shortly after we married we snapped it up. There are seven houses in total. Ours is about the deepest into the woods.”

Noah watched him with curiosity. I could tell he was thinking *there's a lot more in the woods than seven houses*.

“Any horror stories?” I asked.

“Amelia!” Noah said, and it took me a minute to realise he was talking to me. “I'm sorry, she's really into ghost stories.”

“No, no, it's fine,” Bridget said. “I was, too, at your age.”

“You still are, dear,” Seamus added. “Not much happens here. Most exciting thing that's happened is a little girl being seen running in the woods. There was talk of a young girl haunting the forest. Best thing that story ever did was stopping so many teenagers partying until all hours by that clearing a half a mile west.”

A rush of adrenaline sat me forwards. Evelyn? Was it my little sister they saw, running scared and alone? Did no one stop to help because they'd assumed she was a ghost?

I felt such empathy for her. I'd experienced the same but I was fifteen, not three, and I wasn't alone. She must've been petrified. They should've gone after her. I didn't understand why she ran. Was she afraid because of what was happening to me? Fiona and Donald were too caught up in sacrificing me they didn't stop to think what it would do to her.

“Wow,” Noah said. “That is crazy. We'll be sure to look out for child ghosts.”

Making a joke out of it made me feel sick, even if I did understand why he was doing it. I suddenly felt exhausted, and I couldn't take another sip of the hot chocolate.



NOAH AND I WERE given a guest bedroom at the side of the house. Shortly

after the ghost story, Bridget told Seamus to let us get some rest. The room was small and only had a tiny single bed and a sofa bed, but it was perfect. I wasn't sure if either of them had ever been used before. They really didn't have many visitors and no family, which was sad because they obviously wanted the company, and they were so lovely.

I sat on the bed while Noah paced the room, my mind half on Evelyn and half on what the plan for morning was. Noah had acted relaxed when we were in the living room with them, but I could tell he was listening for every outside noise.

He'd scanned the room, checking out the windows and positions of the doors. Although he told me he didn't think they'd come knocking, his actions showed me he wasn't so sure.

"Are you okay?" I asked. I'd never seen anyone look so stressed before. I knew he felt responsible for what happened and for getting me away, but what happened wasn't all down to him.

"Fine," he said, not paying any attention to me at all.

"We're in this together now, Noah. You can tell me your thoughts and fears. Maybe I can help."

He stopped his pacing to look at me. "I think my fears are obvious, Scarlett. And I don't want you to worry."

"What are you doing?"

"Thinking," he replied. "Trying to work out where we are and which way we should go."

"Maybe you should sit down for a while?"

"Can't," he said and started the pacing again. "I'm sorry about before."

"What about before?" He was talking about Evelyn. Raising his eyebrow, he cocked his head as if to say *don't act stupid*. "It hurts to think about what happened to her."

"I know, and I'm sorry. She was only with us a day when your commune joined mine in Ireland after the fire. Evelyn ran into the forest."

"No one went after her?" He licked his lips and closed his eyes. *There's more to this.*

"Noah!" I hissed, feeling my body go cold.

What isn't he telling me?

"Donald and Fiona let her go. She wasn't supposed to make it out. Evelyn was a trade. Let her go and the nature would find a way to bring you back. One sister for another."

I was falling into a deep, dark pit of despair. It kept getting worse. Every new thing I learned made less sense than the last. *Oh, my God. No.*

“Evelyn was born as insurance, just like a second child to a royal couple, or so we were told. She was loved in the way you are, but she wasn’t worshipped. There was always a risk that something could happen to you. No one is immune to death or disease. That’s why you’re so close in age; there’s barely eleven months between you. You were born to save us all; she was born to trade her life for yours should anything happen to you first.”

I wanted to reject what he’d told me, but why would he lie about that?

“I’m sorry,” he said when he saw the tears in my eyes. I hated them so much. They let her go to die cold, hungry and alone in the woods. She was only *three*. Still a baby.

“They’re evil,” I spat. “Why didn’t you do anything?”

“I was a child, and I was told she was going to bring you back to save us all. I didn’t understand.” He sighed and lowered his eyes. “I didn’t really understand anything until I fell for you.”

I couldn’t blame him, it was wrong to, but it was so hard to believe he sat by while that happened, even if he was just a child himself. “I know,” I said, not wanting to make him feel worse about something that had been out of his control. He was a victim of Eternal Light, too.

“I really am, though, Scarlett. I wish I’d been strong enough to see what they were doing this whole time.”

“You couldn’t. We believe what we’ve been taught, right? Especially by the people we trust the most.”

He turned quiet again like he’d slipped into his own world.

“Do you think we should split up?” I asked.

“Are you…” he trailed off, looking at me like I’d said the most stupid thing in the world. I knew it wasn’t the best idea, but I was worried about him. I didn’t trust any of them, and I knew they took loyalty very seriously. What Noah had done was unheard of. He knew the woods and the cult better than me, so he had a better chance. “We’re not even talking about that.”

“I’m worried about you. Betraying them wasn’t easy, was it?”

“When I finish talking, we’ll pretend this conversation never happened and perhaps you’ll finally believe how much I would sacrifice for you and stop asking such stupid questions.” He’d turned deadly serious, posture stiffening, jaw hardening. “You above *everything*. In the end, turning my back on the people that were going to drive a knife through your heart was

almost as easy as falling in love with you.”

He turned away again, and that was the abrupt end of that conversation. He made my heart swell, made me want to be with him again. I didn't know how we could be, but it hurt to think that we could never have a chance to be together. If we got away, maybe we could.

We'd both been through something horrific and made mistakes. In the end, all that mattered was Noah saving my life

“Noah,” I whispered. “I love you, too.”

He sucked in his breath but didn't look back at me. I didn't need him to. He felt it just as much as I did. He wanted what I wanted, but neither of us was sure if we could ever have it again.



## *Thirty-Five*

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### **Noah**

“HOW LONG DO you think we should stay here for?” Scarlett asked, peering out of the window for the hundredth time.

“Come away,” I said, tugging on her hand. “We don’t want to be seen.”

“I’m scared.”

“I am, too,” I replied. “We have to keep our heads down until light. If we keep going now we’ll only get lost in the forest.”

“But isn’t it more dangerous to stay? They’ll expect us to be staying somewhere.”

“We don’t have many options, Scarlett. You agreed this was our best chance. Why don’t you try to get some sleep?”

She shook her head. “There’s no way I can sleep.”

“We are leaving at first light and we’ll probably have a whole day of running and hiding. You’re going to need all the strength you can get.”

“What about you?”

“No.”

I could see in her eyes that she didn’t completely trust me. She wanted to, but she couldn’t. I was determined to get her to safety and earn that trust back.

“So...you don’t think I’m the key to eternal life now?”

I started to pace again. “No. I think you’re the key to my happiness. As long as you’re okay, I’m okay. There’s nothing in this world I wouldn’t fight against to make sure you’re still breathing.”

“Do you think we’re going to make it out of this?”

“Yes, I do.” They’d be looking, and they wouldn’t stop until they found her, but there was no way I was letting anything happen to her. She was getting out of here no matter the cost. “I need you to think positively.” I ran my hands through my hair. I was starting to sound like my dad. “We’re going to be fine, Scarlett. I need you to trust me.”

“I’m trying to. It’s hard.”

I left my post and knelt down in front of her, pulling her arms from her legs. “I won’t betray you again. I love you, Scarlett.”

Her eyes filled with tears; she opened her mouth to reply, but a thud on the front door had me covering her mouth with my hand. She looked as terrified as I felt. “Shh,” I whispered. “Get off the bed and follow me.”

Her hand trembled in mine as I led her to the door. The knock, this time harder, echoed through the tiny cottage. *They’re here.*

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” Seamus said, heading to the door in his slippers and a threadbare dressing gown. My heart was pounding. *They’ve found us, and I need to get her out of here right now.*

I picked up the bag and yanked Scarlett’s arm. “Put this on,” I said, putting the straps over her arms. “Remember we run straight and don’t stop. In the morning, we’ll see where we are, listen out for sounds that we’re near town.”

We made it into the kitchen when Seamus’s guttural scream stopped me in my tracks. Scarlett froze. What was going on? I turned around with a heart racing. “Noah! Noah!” my dad shouted.

“What’s going on? Who’re you?” Bridget asked. “Seamus,” she screamed next. “No, Seamus. What did you do? What did you do?”

*Oh no.* What’d they done to him?

“Go now, Scarlett!” I shoved her towards the door. They were already coming. Their footsteps thudded in between Bridget’s wailing. It was so much worse than I could have imagined. I expected a fight, but I never dreamt they’d hurt someone else. I couldn’t hear Seamus, but I knew they’d done something *really* bad to him.

That wasn’t supposed to happen.

Scarlett grabbed my arm when I opened the door.

“Go now!” I said, pushing her.

“No, what’re you doing?”

“There’s not enough time. I’ll hold them off. Run, Scarlett. Let me do this one thing right. I love you. Run.” I kissed her hard and shoved her out of the door.

Her eyes were wild. I closed the door and turned around, my hands trembling. They were searching the rooms. I heard doors being opened and lights being switched on. There weren’t too many rooms, so it wasn’t long before the kitchen door was slammed back to the wall.

Dad and Donald stood before me.

I straightened my back, having no clue what was about to happen or what to do other than stall them, so Scarlett had as much time to get away as possible. *She's out. She's okay.*

"Where is she?" Dad asked.

"Gone," I replied.

My dad had never looked disappointed or angry because of me before. But then I had never done anything to disagree or disobey him before. Sacrificing – *murdering* – Scarlett would have been a mistake, one that we could never right.

"I'm sorry," I said, "But you are wrong about this."

Donald took a step beyond my dad and held his hands up as if I was dangerous and required calming down. "It is alright, Noah. We don't blame you. This was a risk, having you on the outside for so long. But you know the truth, everything we have taught you is the truth. Deep down you still know that."

I shook my head. "No. You're just going to kill her. Nothing will happen, she will be *dead*."

"That isn't true, Noah. Everything *they* are told is a lie, one to make them conform and fit perfectly into society. I used to be there, too, until I realised the truth. Until I had my mind unlocked. You're making a huge mistake here, Noah, but it's not too late to rectify it. None of us are angry with you; we can help."

I gripped my hair, closing my eyes. No, he was lying. I thought about Scarlett, her smile, her soft musical voice, the way her hair naturally curled just a little bit, her bright eyes. Opening my eyes again, I said, "But she'll be dead."

"Only in this life, Noah. There is so much beyond this," Donald replied.

"Why now? Why not when she's sixty or sixty-four?"

Donald tilted his head. "If we want our community as it is now it has to be now. You know that if we waited that long I, Fiona, your parents, the rest of the elders will be dead, and it'll be over for us."

Selfish. That was all this was. He was willing to sacrifice his daughter so he could live in eternal happiness while he was still fit and healthy. Never mind Scarlett wanting to grow up and have a family of her own.

"What about what Scarlett wants?" I asked. "Does it not matter that she has things she wants to achieve?"

“This life won’t matter in the next,” Dad said. “We’ll be reunited, we’ll see Scarlett again, for eternity. Now, stop this, Noah, you know what is true.”

I stood taller. He was right. I did know the truth. “I won’t give her up.”

Dad took a step closer. “You either step aside right now so we can find her, and you can return home or this is it. Either way, we’ll get her back, but this the only chance you’ll get to make the right choice.”

“I won’t give her up,” I repeated.

Dad’s face sobered. “Alright. Remember that you have made your choice, Noah. There is nothing we can do for you now.”

Fear clawed its way up my throat. His eyes hollowed. There was nothing that looked at me like I was his son, his blood. He was choosing Eternal Light. He pulled a blade out of his pocket.

I looked between him and the knife, too shocked that my *dad* had pulled a knife on me.

“Dad, what’re you doing?”

“Shh,” he said, moving closer. Donald stood behind him, watching. The order would have come from Donald but the fact that my own father could go ahead with stabbing his child made me sick.

“Dad, don’t.” I backed up again, taking a sweeping look around the room to see if there was anything I could use to fight him off. An umbrella and an old, wooden walking stick that looked like it would break if I picked it up. “You’ll regret this for the rest of your life. I’m your *son*. Think about it for a second. How can you believe in Eternal Light and everything Donald’s told you if he’s asking you to kill? Love, peace, respect and harmony. Does that sound like what’s happening right now?” I said desperately.

My heart thumped against my chest, beating too fast and too hard.

“Dad, please. You know this isn’t right.”

“Stop talking, Noah. You made your choice, and *you* have to live with the consequences. You are a loose cannon now, a risk to us all and one we are not willing to leave.”

I lurched forwards, grabbing the arm that held the blade and shoving it away from me. Dad cried out and spun around, trying to shake me off. I held on, fighting for my life, knowing that if I gave him the chance it could be all over for me.

He stopped being my dad at that moment. When I knew I had to fight against my father to stop him murdering me, he became nothing but an enemy.



He flung us forward and my back cracked against the concrete wall, knocking the air from my lungs. Gritting my teeth, I tightened my grip of his wrist and tried to turn the knife back on him.

Donald did nothing but stand and watch. I expected him to dart after Scarlett.

He must have other people out there looking for her.

Shit. Run, baby.

The muscles in my arms ached from the struggle, and I didn't know how much longer I could hold him off. My head swam, dazed from hitting the wall. I kicked my leg, and Dad grunted as it came in contact with his shin.

"What will Mum think?" I said. "Or Finn?"

"They'll understand because they haven't been poisoned," he said through clenched teeth, straining to get the upper hand. Growling, he slammed me back again, and my head hit the wall for a second time with a loud thud. My vision blurred, and I saw black dots float in front of my face.

Dad used it to his full advantage; he punched me in the stomach hard enough that I doubled over and felt like I was going to throw up all over the floor. He pushed his whole body weight against me, forcing me to stand up straight. I was pinned against the wall. My abdomen in agony, and I could barely see properly from hitting my head so hard. But I didn't need sight to feel the pinch of the knife against my skin and then the hot, blistering pain as he shoved it into my gut.

I was frozen, suspended in time as he stepped back, retracting the knife. It hurt so badly, but the shock kept me from crumbling to the floor and shouting.

"Likelihood is she went out of that door," Donald said. "Let's go."

Neither of them looked back at me as I slowly slid down the wall. I tried to breathe evenly, but I couldn't do it.

I was cold, shivering and already felt dead.



## Thirty-Six

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### **Scarlett**

I COULDN'T STOP running. The stich in my side slowed me down, but I wasn't going to stop until I found a town. I promised Noah I would keep running, and that was exactly what I was going to do. But I also wanted to go back for him. I was scared about what they'd do after he turned his back on their sick cult.

My feet hit the ground, crunching the crisp leaves beneath them as I went. Sunrise was just around the corner; between the trees I could see a glow of orange starting to appear. I had to have been running for two or three hours at least. I hadn't stopped at all, just slowed down to grab a bottle of water from the bag.

I was hungry, thirsty, and tired, but I wasn't going to stop. They could be anywhere in the woods. I was terrified that I'd run into one of them. As far as I knew, I'd been running straight but without being able to see I could have easily veered off to the left or right. I just wanted to find someone who could help and get back to my parents.

I wanted to be safely in my mum's arms. Before I was taken, I was so angry with them for lying to me. Now I understood what they were protecting me from. I just hoped I got the chance to tell them how much they all meant to me – even Jeremy.

Noah was nowhere to be seen. I half expected him to pop up and tell me to run faster. They loved him, so I wanted to believe that they would never hurt him, but I wasn't so sure. They'd done something to Seamus and Bridget at the house, and they were completely innocent. That wasn't supposed to happen. If we'd have known they would do something like that we'd never have gone there.

Tears leaked from my eyes, rolling down my face. I felt awful for them, they were nice, decent people who took us in, and they didn't deserve anything bad. When was it going to end? Who else was going to be hurt over

me?

Continuing to run became increasingly difficult. I could feel the fear and heartache slowly start to pull me under, digging its ugly claws into my skin. If I'd just handled my parents telling me the truth better, I probably wouldn't be here now. If I hadn't fallen in love with Noah, then it never would have happened.

Then I lost my footing on damp, slippery leaves and crashed to the ground. I threw my arms out and pain shot through my wrist. "Ahh," I cried out, instantly stopping myself by slapping my good hand over my mouth.

Sitting on the damp floor of the forest, holding my screaming wrist I had never felt so alone.

Get up, keep moving.

I took a few deep breaths and battled the urge to cry. I'd done something to my wrist and while I was at it stretched the cut on my forearm, too. Everything seemed hopeless. I forced myself up, crying silently as I hobbled forwards again, trying to work up to a jog. My muscles, bones, screamed at me to give in, and I almost listened.

But from somewhere I found the strength to keep going.

Every step sent sharp pains the full length of my legs. I didn't know how much I had left inside before I gave in to the need to curl up and for it all to be over with, one way or another. But then I heard something. I froze, gripping a dead tree for stability.

Road traffic. I had never been so happy to hear cars before, but I wasn't so stupid to go straight out onto the road in case one of Eternal Light was on it. A shimmer of hope was all I needed to keep going.

I stumbled forwards, barely having the energy to move anymore. I saw houses first, on the other side of a road and burst into tears. The area was built up and to the right of the housing estate were shops. There must be a police station nearby. *Please*. Sobbing, I ran faster, stopping briefly to make sure there were no cars coming.

I ran along the street, probably going no faster than a walk, desperately trying to see through tear filled eyes. People stopped and looked, a few pointed and at the end of the road two police officers did a double take and then ran towards me. They knew who I was.

Oh, thank God.

"Scarlett Garner?" one of them said as they approached.

I cried harder and collapsed into his arms, nodding my head. He scooped

me up and turned around; walking back the way they'd come. "It's alright," he said. "You're safe now."

They had me bundled in the police car within seconds and started talking on his radio. I rambled about everything, the cult, almost dying but mostly about Noah. Where was Noah? Even I knew I wasn't making sense, but I couldn't stop the jumbled words flowing out of my mouth.

The officer who sat in the back with me placed his hand on my upper arm. "Scarlett," he said.

I looked over my knees where I was huddled against the door and finally spoke my only legible word, "Yeah?"

"I need you to calm down so we can find out what happened and help you. Can you do that for me?" I nodded. "Where are they?"

"I-In the forest. Noah's still out there; you *have* to find him."

"Noah? The Noah who took you to Ireland?"

I knew how it looked. "Yes, he was the one who helped me escape in the end. He turned his back on them and now he's out there and if he didn't get away in time..." I took a deep, shaky breath. "They found us in a house, and I don't know what they did to the people living there, but Bridget screamed for Seamus and then Noah made me run. Please. *Please* go back to that house, check the old couple are okay and find Noah."

"Okay, shh, calm down. We'll have people check that out, don't worry. Are you hurt?"

I shook my head even though I was. My feet ached and stung from running barefoot for ages; pain throbbed through my wrist and the cut to my arm had started to hurt, too. But I didn't want to go to the hospital first because they would make it all about me. I needed to go to the police station and tell them what happened so they could find Noah and arrest every crazy member of Eternal Light.

"No, I just need you to find Noah and that house."

He nodded once. "Alright."

When we got to the station, I was helped to freshen up in the bathroom, given a hot drink and biscuits and a blanket to wrap around myself. I sat in a room with my hands hugging a steaming mug of coffee, trying to keep it together long enough so that I could go over everything – again.

"Hello, Scarlett, I'm Detective Crosby but you can call me Adele, and this is my colleague Detective Long. We need to speak to you and ask you a few questions if that's alright?"

I nodded and sat up in the seat. “Do you know where my parents are?”

“They’re in Ireland. We want to have a chat with you first.”

Thank God. It was a good sign that they were free to go wherever they wanted. “What do you want to know?”

She scratched the back of her neck, probably not knowing where to start either. There was so much. “Your family have said you’ve no memory before the age of four, is that correct?”

At least she was still referring to them as my family and not making them out to be child-snatching criminals. “That’s right. Want to start from the beginning?”

Detective Crosby smiled and tilted her head in a nod, making her short black hair slide into her eyes, and I went right back to where I could remember – waking up a scared and confused child.

When I’d told my story, every detail, right up to escaping two hours had passed. It was the same story I’d already told the police, but they had been lucky enough to only need the condensed version. Naturally she had a lot of questions.

“So, you were never told where you were really from? You knew nothing of Eternal Light?” Detective Crosby asked.

“No, I only found out... Um, a few weeks ago, I think. It was recent anyway, not long before Noah brought me to Dublin. Listen, I know in the eyes of the law my parents did wrong taking me but they were going to kill me. My mum and dad saved my life, and I just want to see my family again.”

“We understand, Scarlett, but we need to establish all of the facts and make sure you’re protected.”

“Everything I told you is true, and my parents do protect me. They could’ve left me and lived a normal, lie-free life, but instead they risked everything to keep me safe. No one else out there is going to go through those lengths for me. You have to believe me.”

“We do, Scarlett. We just need to hear your side of things, that’s all,” Detective Crosby said.

“Now you have, Can I please see my family? *Please.*”

She smiled. “Absolutely, in a little while, I promise. We need to take you to the hospital and get you checked out first, though.”

“Why? I’m fine.” I want my parents.

“You’ve been through a terrible ordeal; you’re exhausted and probably in dire need of some pain medication. Especially for that wrist,” she said, lifting

an eyebrow.

How did she know my wrist hurt? I thought it'd get better after a while, but it didn't, it was throbbing.

I pursed my lips. "But what about—"

She held her hand up. "We're taking you to the hospital to get checked out and then we will call your parents to meet you there. Okay."

It was an order, not a question.

Nodding, I replied, "Yeah, okay."

Detective Crosby drove me to the hospital and had me checked out. I had a sprained wrist from the fall and minor cuts and bruises on my arms. The cuts to my feet stung now and walking was slow, but it wasn't too bad. I was alive.

I was finally given a bed, had an IV for pain relief, a drink and some toast. It was now just after six in the morning. I'd been awake for twenty-four hours. I felt like putting toothpicks in my eyes just to keep them open.

"Thank you, Adele," I said as she handed me another cup of coffee.

She'd stayed with me, asking the odd question, while I waited for my parents and Jeremy to arrive. I'd asked for an update on Noah every five seconds, but they hadn't found him or the rest of them yet. It'd been hours. He should've been found by now.

"Are they here yet? Has Noah been found?" I asked, feeling my eyes getting heavy. I yawned and blinked hard. There was no way I was going to sleep until I knew how he was. If I found my way out, then he should've done it by now. I didn't want to think of any reason why he wouldn't be able to.

"You're exhausted, Scarlett, please try to relax. Your parents are due here any minute now, and I promise you as soon as we find Noah we'll tell you. Now drink your coffee if you won't sleep. I'll wait outside your room until your parents get here."

I waited until she got outside before I collapsed against the pillows.

Please hurry up. All of you.



## Thirty-Seven

### Scarlett

I HAD BEEN IN the hospital almost two hours when my parents and brother burst into the room.

“Scarlett!” Mum sobbed. I started crying the instant I saw them. It was over, they were here, and I was safe.

“Mum, I’m so sorry,” I said, crying on her shoulder as she held me tighter than she ever had before. She smelt like home, and it made me grip hold of her and never want to let go.

“Shh, it’s okay. Everything’s going to be okay now, sweetheart.”

We sat together crying for a good ten minutes. Dad and Jeremy joined in, huddling in on my bed.

“Are you okay?” Dad asked for the millionth time.

“I am now. Just worried about Noah.”

“He’ll be fine. They’ll find him,” Mum said, stroking my hair. “Does your wrist hurt? We can get you some more pain relief.”

“I had some not long ago. Stop fussing, I’m fine.” Jeremy stared out of the window, at the police officers outside my room. “What’s up, Jer?”

He turned back and spoke more to Dad when he replied, “I think we should leave, like right now? If they’re all in Ireland and the police feel the need to have two people guarding Scarlett maybe we should go.”

Mum squeezed my hand and looked up at Dad. “He has a point. The police in England can work with the police here. There’s no need for us to stay here.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” I said, causing a stunned silence. “I mean it. Noah is out there somewhere, and I’m not leaving.” Besides, could they just go off with me? I was sixteen and a minor in the eyes of the law, they didn’t have me or adopt me, so they weren’t legally my parents.

“What?” Jeremy said. “These *people* almost killed you and you’re worried about one of them?”

“No. He’s not one of them; he’s one of us. I would’ve been dead now if it weren’t for him.”

“None of it would’ve happened if it weren’t for him,” Jeremy said.

I didn’t like how Jeremy spoke about him, even if it was understandable. I felt loyal to Noah, and I wasn’t going to let him down. “I know that, but it wasn’t his fault, not really. He realised the truth and put things right. Sound familiar?”

Jeremy’s mouth set into a hard line, knowing I was right. They’d nearly stood by while I was killed, too. “Fine.”

“Calm down,” Mum said. “Jeremy’s just worried, we all are, but we know exactly what you mean. Hopefully, Noah will be found soon, and then we can go home.”

“Can we go home? Are you allowed to do that?”

Dad smiled. “We’ve been speaking to a very good lawyer and a solicitor and both seem to think given the unique situation and circumstances we’ll be able to adopt you. It’s going to be a long process, but we’ll fight it.”

“So, I can’t go home with you yet?” I asked, panicking. Where would I go? I didn’t want to be in some facility; I wanted my room in the house I shared with my *family*.

“We’ve already applied for a Residence Order, which means we’ll be fostering you. After that, we’ll go for adoption. Our case is a little more complicated, but we’re hoping that might go in our favour,” Dad said.

“And if it doesn’t? What happened anyway? Were you arrested?”

“Shh,” Mum said. “We were all questioned for hours when we reported you missing, but we’re thankful that they believed us. Your father had two leaflets on Eternal Light and our stories matched, of course, so that helped. We’ve been told that no charges will be brought against us for taking you as your life was literally on the line and we were fearful of what the cult would do if we were found, which is why we never told anyone, not even you.”

“So, you won’t go to prison, and I can still live with you?”

Mum squeezed my hand again. “We’re not going to prison and there is no battle we won’t take on to have you with us.”

That wasn’t quite what I wanted to hear, but I realised it was probably the best I was going to get right now. “Okay. When will we know if I can go home with you?” I asked.

“We’re hoping in the next day or so. The doctors want to keep you here until tomorrow anyway.”



Right. After everything I'd been through and my family had been through, you'd think I'd just be allowed to go home with them. They saved my damn life it wasn't like they'd taken me because they felt like having a daughter that day.

"Don't worry, love, there is no way we're not going home as a family," she said, brushing my hair from my face.

I nodded, wishing I could be as optimistic as her. It would be cruel and wrong if they tried to split us up, but it wasn't like things like that didn't happen every day.

"Will you tell me about Fiona and Donald? They treated you well?"

"Yeah. Well, besides the obvious."

Smiling sadly, she brushed my hair again. "I'm glad they weren't cruel." She frowned. "You know what I mean."

"I do. How were you and Dad part of that, Mum? I don't understand how it could have ever made sense."

"Neither do we now. At first Eternal Light was just about living off the land. It was such a simple and beautiful way to live. We did believe that there was someone that would take us into eternal peace, much like any other God in any other religion. But then you were born, and Donald announced that you were *the one*. He said he could feel it the second he held you. For hundreds of years animals and humans had been offered as sacrifices, we knew that; we studied it and already celebrated the element and nature with rituals and food offerings. When Donald said about sacrificing you on your fourth birthday, we felt joy..." She cleared her throat and blinked to stop her tears falling. "We felt joy because it wasn't the end, not for you and not for us."

"Right." I couldn't dwell on that, it'd happened, and the main thing was they took me away. "How did you and Dad start questioning it?"

"We asked Donald why when you were four and not older so you could experience growing up and falling in love. He said it was because he couldn't risk our community being found and broken up, or something happening to you. It all made sense, and we accepted it, but the more we saw you, the more unfair it seemed. We had many late night talks when Jeremy was in bed and the more we spoke, the less sense any of it made."

"Do you know what happened to Evelyn?"

Mum gulped but wasn't surprised that I knew about her. "No, honey, I don't. When we settled down, we tried to find out. There were no reports of a

child being found, so we assumed Eternal Light had her. She wouldn't be in any danger if she were back with them. She wasn't the one. She wasn't there, huh?"

"No. They let her go" Mum gasped. "They sent her into the woods as some sort of messed up exchange. Her life for my return. How terrible is that?" My heart hurt for a little sister I didn't even know. "Didn't you know about that?"

Dad's face paled. "We knew that she was born to protect you, we thought spiritually. God, how stupid we were."

"I'm so sorry, Scarlett." I could tell what Mum was thinking, and I guess she was right. Evelyn probably died out in the forest. But what if she didn't? Either way, she deserved to be found. I wasn't sure how many resources the police would put into looking for a girl that went missing twelve years ago. They would have to look. They were legally required to look, surely?

"Why haven't they found him yet?" I asked, changing one painful conversation for another. At least I knew he was definitely still out there. For now, I had to concentrate on him. "I need to go and help look."

"No, honey. We just got you back, and you need rest. You need to stay right here; they'll find him," Mum said.

"But I don't understand why they haven't found him. What did they do to him, Mum? I shouldn't have gone. I should've stayed and helped him."

"Shh," she whispered, stroking my hair again. "You did the right thing. Noah did the right thing by making you run."

Logically, I knew getting as far away from them as possible was the right thing, but they were insane, and I didn't think, for one second, that they wouldn't hurt Noah. He'd disobeyed them, gone against everything they believed and everything they'd taught him to save me. I hated him at first but he did the right thing, and that was what mattered.

"Can you take me for a walk, please? I'm tired of sitting in this bed worrying."

Dad stood up. "I think that will do you good. Do you need a wheelchair?"

"Yeah, thanks, Dad." My cut feet made walking very difficult and very painful.

"I'll go with you to find a chair," Jeremy said.

"How're you feeling?" Mum asked when they left the room. "And I don't mean physically."

I took a deep breath. That I didn't know. "Right now it all seems like a bad

dream. I know what happened, I know how scared I was and then how relieved I was to escape, but I don't know. I feel disconnected. Do you think there's something wrong with me?"

"No, I don't. I know *exactly* what you mean, Scarlett. You're safe, thank God, but it's not over yet, is it?"

I shook my head. "Not until Noah's found. He was part of it."

"Yes," she said. "He had us all fooled, but that is something I can identify with. For years, your father and I, even you and Jeremy, believed the same things as Noah was taught and, like us, he realised the truth and turned his back on it."

"What if he never gets a chance at a normal life?"

"I have faith that he will."

We didn't even know if he was alive.

Jeremy held the door open as Dad wheeled in a chair. "Your chariot awaits. We're only allowed down the corridors on the ground floor, but it's better than these four walls, right?" Dad said.

"Definitely. I'll take anything right now," I replied.

Swinging my legs off the bed, I stood carefully and winced as my tender feet screamed at me for putting weight on them. "Here," Jeremy said, leaping forwards and taking my weight with his arm around my waist.

"Thanks."

Dad pushed the wheelchair because I couldn't get it to go in a straight line. It felt good to be out of bed. We rounded the corner with Mum and Dad behind and Jeremy walking next to me. I even managed to ignore the police officer behind us.

We went through the double doors to go through the Accident and Emergency waiting room when paramedics and doctors came jogging towards us, gripping the sides of a gurney and talking rapidly.

Dad moved me to the side of the corridor, so they had plenty of room to get through.

The first thing I saw was blood, and then my whole world came to an abrupt stop.

"No!" I pushed to my feet as Noah's pale, sleeping face cut my heart.



## Thirty-Eight

### Scarlet

“OH GOD, NO, no, no.”

“Scarlett,” Mum said, rushing to me, but it was too late. I was already up and hobbling along towards them.

“Noah! Noah!”

One of the nurses looked back and held her hand up. “You know him?”

I nodded frantically and collapsed to the floor, consumed with grief. “Is he dead?” I asked, sobbing on the floor.

Mum knelt down and wrapped me in her arms.

“He’s dead, isn’t he? They killed him. He’s gone.”

The same nurse had a quick conversation with someone else and then came rushing towards us as they took Noah through another door.

“Scarlett, sweetheart, you need to get up,” Dad said. I could barely understand what he’d said. My mind was stuck on seeing Noah like that. He couldn’t die. After everything we’d been through and what he’d done to get me away from Eternal Light, he couldn’t just be gone.

“I can’t. It hurts so much,” I sobbed, trying to catch my breath. He was gone, and I had never felt anything hurt so badly. I was consumed with grief.

“Are you alright?” the nurse said, kneeling in front of me.

“No. Is he okay? You need to make him okay,” I said, gripping her arm.

“Shh, we’re doing everything we can for him, but I need you to help. Can you do that?”

I nodded. “Whatever you need just, *please*, don’t let him die.” Tears burned my cheeks and made everything blurry.

“Do you know his name?”

“It’s Noah.”

She smiled and nodded her head. “We thought so.”

“How do you know?”

“He was found about thirty minutes ago in the forest.”

The police had found him.

“Why is he bleeding? What’s wrong with him?”

“Let’s get you back to your room and then—”

“No. I’m not going anywhere until I know he’s okay.”

“Alright. Maybe we can get you back in your chair and go in a room up the corridor where you can wait.”

I looked longing at the door where they’d taken him. They wouldn’t let me in there, so I didn’t even bother asking. “That would be great,” Dad said, picking me up and carrying me to the room. I couldn’t get up. Jeremy wheeled the chair in, too. After lowering me on one of the chairs Dad kneeled on the floor, probably worried that I would take off.

“What happened to him?” I asked, sobbing.

The nurse smiled, but her eyes didn’t. “He’s received a stab wound to his abdomen and lost a lot of blood.”

*Stabbed.* I coughed, crying at the same time. “W-What?”

“He’ll be alright,” Mum said, stroking my hair from the seat beside mine.

What if he wasn’t?

I cried harder. I’d lost him once, but we’d found each other. I couldn’t lose him forever. We’d been through too much for it to end like this. We deserved a chance, a proper chance.

“Mum,” I said, leaning over and crying on her shoulder. My body shook with every painful sob. “He can’t die, he can’t die,” I chanted. This was too much. I wanted to retreat back into myself and stop the pain, but Noah was a part of me now. There was no way to stop it hurting so much.

“Shh, honey, it’s okay,” Mum soothed. “I’m *sure* he’s going to be alright.” She was crying, too. That didn’t look good. Noah wasn’t her favourite person right now, but she was still upset over what was happening to him.

“I’ll go and check on him and let you know when we have an update,” the nurse said.

“Thank you,” Dad replied.

The update could be he’s fine, or I’m sorry, there’s nothing more we can do.

“I need him, Mum.”

“I know you do. Jonathan, Jeremy, can you follow and see if there is any immediate news you can find out rather than waiting?”

“You’ve forgiven him completely?” Mum asked when Dad and Jeremy left.

I curled up against her side. “Yes. Have you?”

She was silent for a minute. “I think so. I understand what it’s like to be completely controlled by someone or something else. Don’t get me wrong, I’m angry, you could’ve died, but I don’t blame Noah. He was merely a pawn in their game. They would sacrifice his life to get what they want if they had to. They make you feel part of the best thing on earth. I could never judge Noah for something I would’ve done when I was still under their influence.”

“Do you think Jeremy will come around?”

“Of course. It’s a little more difficult for him, he was so young and never knew the level of control people like that have over you. Noah believed he was doing what was best for everyone. You included. His love for you was able to override that and question what he was taught, just like us. Then he was able to think freely and form his own opinion.”

“Thank you,” I said, wiping my wet cheeks with my hands only for them to be damp again the next second. “It means so much that you don’t hate him. I knew you’d understand.” How could she not, though?

“Of course, honey. He’s going to need a lot of support. Living outside the commune and knowing what a fool you’d been for so long isn’t easy.”

“I’ll be there for him.”

She smiled and kissed the side of my head. “I had a feeling you might.”

“What do you think is going to happen to him now? I mean after he’s better because he will get better.” There was no way he couldn’t.

“He’ll be fine, and I guess that’s up to him. He is in charge of his life now. For the first time, he can do what he wants, go where he wants, and believe what he wants.”

“Yeah,” I replied. He deserved that, and I think he’d want to be with me. I took a deep breath and threaded my fingers together, nervously tapping the backs of my hands. Now I was sitting down and a little calmer than before I felt the consequence of standing up. My feet hurt, but it was nothing compared to the feeling of possibly losing Noah.

I still loved him so much. Probably more now than before he’d betrayed me. Now it was my turn to help him, and *when* he was better, I was determined to do just that.

## Thirty-Nine

### Scarlett

IT WAS ANOTHER thirty minutes before I found out what was going on. Dad and Jeremy had come back shortly after leaving, having heard nothing new. Adele turned up and tilted her head to the side.

“You okay, Scarlett?”

“I’m fine. Have you heard any news?”

“I’ve just spoken to the doctor on his way here and Noah’s out of surgery and doing fine.”

I closed my eyes as the relief took my breath away. Mum squeezed my hand. “Thank God. Do you know when I can see him?”

“A nurse will come and get you...from *your* room, so let’s get you back up there. They’re just getting him settled first.”

I nodded and accepted Dad’s help into the wheelchair. I’d gone back out after learning he was being rushed into emergency theatre. “Okay, let’s go so we don’t miss her.”

Dad laughed and started pushing me towards the door.

Adele waited until I was back in my room and then said, “Thirty-eight members of Eternal Light have been picked up. There was a massive raid on the commune and most of them were still there. Donald and Shaun were found on the edge of the woods, still looking for you. The couple from the house are okay. Seamus is in hospital with stab a wound but nothing as serious as Noah’s injuries. He’ll be allowed to go home tomorrow.”

“Oh, my God,” I whispered. They were only trying to help us and that was what they got because of it. Guilt burned in my chest. I wiped yet another round of tears and replied, “Okay, thank you.”

“I’ll be outside if you need me,” Adele said. “The nurse shouldn’t be too long now.”

I practically leapt out of bed when the nurse came for me. Mum, Dad and Jeremy trailed behind. I hadn’t had chance to speak to my brother about Noah

yet but his clear concern meant he'd forgiven him. Or at the very least was willing to work on it. There was no doubt that Noah saved my life.

"Slow down, Scarlett," Jeremy said. "I'm not carrying your arse when you collapse on the floor."

He was right, I should. I was still beyond tired and every single part of my body ached beyond belief, especially my legs, but Noah was alive and wanting to see me as much as I wanted to see him. A normal walking pace was not an option.

"I won't collapse." Well, I would but not until I saw he was okay and was back in my bed.

I reached his room with a lot help from Dad who was practically holding me up the entire way and turned to my family.

"You want a few minutes first?" Mum asked.

"Yeah, thanks."

There was a police officer outside his room but he gestured with a nod for me to go in. I recognised him from the station, but he hadn't been one of the ones questioning me.

"Noah," I said, slowly peeking around the door. He was pale and looked exhausted but he was sitting against his pillows *alive*. "Can I come in?"

He half smiled and nodded once. "You alright?" He even sounded tired.

"I'm fine, just worried about you," I said, taking very slow, careful steps towards him.

"Why?"

"Um, because you were stabbed!"

"Wasn't too bad. Good thing my dad is a bad aim."

I stopped dead, eyes filling with tears. *No*. I assumed it was Donald. "Your *dad* did that?"

"Don't be surprised, Scarlett, your parents were going to do the same to you."

I guess I shouldn't be surprised, but his parents had raised him for sixteen years. How could his own dad turn around and try to kill him? "I'm still sorry."

Sighing, he replied, "Yeah, me, too. Scarlett, why are you even talking to me?"

"Because of what happened."

"That's exactly why you shouldn't be talking to me. I know what you said when we were out in the forest but we're safe now, the danger is over. You



don't have to forgive what I did to you..."

"You saved my life, Noah. I'm not going to pretend that I understand Eternal Light, but I do know that when it came down to it you put me before what you'd believed your whole. That means everything." I sat on the bed. "Seeing you like that, being wheeled into hospital..." Taking a deep breath, I continued, "It changed me. I was terrified that you wouldn't make it. You chose me, and you almost died because of it."

He gulped. "Yeah, well, I love you. I always knew it, but I didn't know how strong it was. I love you more than everything, and I didn't care if the prophecy was true and you were the key to eternal life because you deserve this life. Every dream or goal you have, you deserve a chance of achieving."

"You're pretty amazing," I said, swallowing what was likely to turn into an ugly cry. My heart swelled at his words. "And I love you, too. I tried to stop when I found out who you were, but I couldn't turn it off. That actually made me even angrier with you. But I do *really* love you."

He held his hand out. "Come and lay with me for a bit."

"I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't, just stay on the side that wasn't stabbed."

I dropped my head. He was stabbed saving me. I lay on the bed against his pillows keeping a little distance so I didn't put any pressure on his body at all. "I won't break, Scarlett." He pulled me closer, and I laid my head on his shoulder, keeping my arms and legs away from him.

"You were stabbed, and I don't want to do anything to hurt you more." He'd lost a lot of blood and was also out all night and most of the morning in the cold.

"Believe me, you laying with me won't hurt. How are you feeling?"

"Tired, sore and achy but nothing a really, *really* long sleep won't fix."

There was a lot more than that to fix, but I couldn't even think about the emotional stuff right now. If I stopped to admit how scared I still was and how much I just wanted to hide away, I wasn't sure if I'd be able to make it through another minute.

"It's going to be alright now," he whispered.

Now was the start of the hard work to be okay but that was fine. I didn't have to fight for my life now. I just had to fight to come to terms with having to do it.

"My parents and Jeremy are outside," I said, tracing the letter S and N on his chest with my finger.

“They didn’t want to come in.” He said it as a statement not question.

“That’s not it. They’re giving us some time first.”

He looked away in shame. “I’m surprised they let you near me again.”

“They’ve been you, Noah. Don’t forget that.”

He raised his head and looked me in the eye. “They don’t hate me?”

“No one hates you.” Except probably every member of Eternal Light. “I want to help you.”

His smile was unconvincing, and I wasn’t sure if he didn’t think I should help because he felt guilty or if he wanted a clean break and was worried about ditching me. A clean break would probably be the most sensible thing to do, we had a lot to work through, but it wasn’t what we both wanted and if we left each other then Eternal Light would win.

Mum, Dad and Jeremy gave us ten minutes before coming in. They had nothing but sympathy and understanding for Noah. It made him uncomfortable. He didn’t think he deserved it. But you shouldn’t forgive and help someone if they felt worthy; you should do it just because.

“What’s your next move?” Jeremy asked. He was still mad at Noah but he was trying, and I couldn’t ask for more than that.

“I don’t know. I don’t have a plan yet,” he said. “I’m nineteen next month but—”

“What?” I asked, cutting him off. He wasn’t that old.

“Almost nineteen?” Dad said. “Noah, we thought you were sixteen.”

“That’s what I was told to be. My birthday is the same, Scarlett, I just lied about my age.” He closed his eyes and sighed. “I’m so, so sorry.”

I nodded. After everything that’d happened, him being a couple of years older wasn’t that big of a deal. “Okay,” I said, wondering just how much more there was that he’d lied about. I was sixteen, he was nearly nineteen, that wasn’t too bad. I was fine about it and understood that he was following instruction. Now I wanted to know the real him. But I doubt even Noah knew who the real him was right now.

Even if he didn’t know what his next move should be I did. “I want Noah to come home with us,” I said. The atmosphere thickened. Mum and Dad, although clearly not thrilled, couldn’t really say no. They were in the same position as Noah when they left the cult.

Noah shook his head. “No. After everything, Scarlett, you can’t ask your parents to do that.”

“She’s not asking,” Dad said. “We’re offering.”

Jeremy's eyebrows shot up in shock, and I think mine did the same. I expected to have to chew Dad's ear off before I got him to agree. "Jonathan, you've done more than enough for me already."

Dad held his hand up. "You saved my daughter's life. I almost stood by and let her be sacrificed, too."

I licked my lips. I hated hearing about myself like that. I was nothing to my birth parents but the key to an imaginary door. It wasn't a great feeling.

Noah breathed deeply and squeezed my hand. "I don't know what to say."

"You don't need to say anything," Mum said. "You deserve a life the same as me, my husband and children. It won't be easy, believe me it's a huge adjustment, but if you're willing to put in the work then we're willing to help you."

Smiling, Noah replied, "Thank you. I'll do whatever it takes. I *want* a normal life like everyone else. I feel like I've lost eighteen years, my whole childhood was a lie. I want to be a better person, to deserve Scarlett."

I wasn't even going to waste my breath commenting on that stupid remark.

"It's okay. Your life starts now, and I promise it's going to be pretty great from now on," I said.

"Not too great, though, Scar, yeah?" Jeremy said.

My face caught on fire. I wasn't ashamed that I'd been with Noah, I loved him, but I sure didn't want my parents to know anything about it. Ever. "Ignore him," Noah said, fighting a smile.

Twenty minutes later, Noah and I were left alone again while my family went to get something to eat. Well, sort of alone. A police officer was just outside the door. "Are you really okay?" I asked.

He smiled from his bed. "Never better. I get the chance at a normal life with the girl I'm crazy about. That is if you'll have me?"

I shrugged. "Suppose. You did take a knife for me and all."

He laughed, content. "So, I get out of here in a couple days and we'll be living under the same roof." *Same roof but not living together*. Rules, rules, rules. I loved my parents so much. "You've got to finish school, and I have to do something to get some sort of qualification. Life is going to be good, Scarlett."

I took his hand, not knowing how this would go down. "It is," I replied. Man, I could not wait to get out of hospital, go home to England and help Noah adjust to normal life.

“When we get back what do you want to do first?” He asked, probably thinking I’d say a movie night. I had other plans.

Licking my lips, I replied, “I have a sister out there, Noah, and I’m going to find her.”

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