

Chapter One

Most kids would have hated being stuck at school after hours every day, but for Noa it was the best time of her life, and a respite from the weariness of being at home. It was the only real, uninterrupted time she got to spend with her best friend—well, only friend—and first love. It was time every day she wished would never end.

“Middle C is here,” Noa pressed the key. “Each white key is a note of the major scale, and the black keys are notes of the minor scale.”

“Mmm hmm,” Denny said, watching Noa’s fingers.

“Here, I’ll play a couple of scales, you can see for yourself how this works,” Noa said, then played one scale after another. “See? Just like singing, right?”

“Lemme see,” Denny stretched his arms and cracked his knuckles, wiggled his fingers and began banging on the keys in a dissonant manner. “You’re right, this is just like Andy’s singing.”

Noa smirked and shook her head. “Show me you remember where middle C is, at least.”

Denny twirled his index finger as it hovered over some keys, then he pressed a high F sharp. “That was it, right?”

Noa sighed, looked him dead in the eye, and pressed middle C.

“This one?” Denny said, staring at her depressed finger and pressing an E anyway.

Noa pressed middle C again.

“I’m just not getting it,” Denny shook his head. “You’re gonna have to show me again.”

Noa smirked and grabbed his finger, pressing it gently to the right key.

“Oh I get it now,” Denny said, then pressed the key next to it.

Noa grabbed his hand again and led his hand to the correct key, and he continued pressing every key except the correct one, and Noa continued to guide it back. Denny began reaching to each end of the piano, away from Noa and across Noa, and she kept grabbing his hands and making him press the C key closest to his hands until they were essentially in a laughing, snorting wrestling match.

Noa looked up at Denny as he grabbed her right hand and leaned in, kissing him on the cheek. He reciprocated, putting his hands on her waist and kissing her lips, and then burying another in her neck.

“Ahem,” Mrs. Al-Hassini coughed from her desk, where she was grading papers. “I’m still in here, you know.”

“Sorry,” Noa chirped, though she enjoyed watching Denny turn and blush.

“Don’t you have a competition to practice for, Mr. Hayden?” Mrs. Al Hassini went on. “Fake piano lessons aren’t going to get you a spot in the academy this summer.”

“I dunno if I’m ready to go for it this year,” Denny said.

“Of course you are!” Noa grabbed his hand. “Besides, it can’t hurt to try. If you get in, wonderful. If you don’t, you can be consoled by the fact that we get to spend the summer together.”

Denny rubbed the back of his neck. “I just hate making a fool of myself.”

“You won’t, if you bother practicing,” Mrs. Al-Hassini interjected. “And what about you, Ms. Landale? It can’t hurt to try out, even if it’s your first year.”

“I couldn’t do it if I wanted to,” she replied, “Jay—my step-dad would never pay for something like that.”

“There are fundraisers,” Ms. Al-Hassini suggested.

Noa just turned away and shrugged. “He would never let me go.”

She could just imagine his reaction. He would accuse her of wanting to go to do all sorts of terrible things she would never actually do in a million years. He would make her feel like a trapped animal as he ranted at her, calling her names, even. She never understood why he did this, but just the thought of it made her start to sweat a little. No, asking him would not be worth it.

Ms. Al-Hassini frowned at her, but went back to her paperwork.

“But I can help you out,” Noa grinned at Denny. “I’ll be your cheerleader. Here, sing something for me right now.”

Denny raised an eyebrow. “All right.” He cleared his throat, and then began singing a song she didn’t recognize with her name in it. She wasn’t sure if it was really a song about a girl named Noa or if he’d just replaced the original name with hers—but it was the sappiest love song ever committed to the annals of music.

When he was done, Noa blushed and covered her face with a hand. “Oh my gosh.”

Denny laughed and kissed her temple.

“Good gravy,” Mrs. Al-Hassini said, “if you guys aren’t going to work, get outside and get some fresh air.”

Noa looked at the clock. “It’s about time to get going anyway.”

Noa grabbed Denny’s forearm crutches from where they were leaned against the wall and held them up while he slipped his arms into the cuffs and gripped them.

“Thank you, sweetheart,” he said, and they left the room.

“You better try out for this,” Noa kept on him as they walked to the parking lot. “If anyone in our whole class can do it, it’s you.”

“All right, baby, really, I’ll think about it,” he said.

“Really think about it,” Noa grabbed his hand and pressed it to her mouth. “You’ll be better than everyone there! You have to do it!” She kissed his hand. “I love you.”

Denny leaned in and left a soft kiss on Noa’s lips. “I love you too.”

Noa looked up and saw her brother's car pulled around the curb, idling in wait. "Call me if you can't figure out the chemistry homework."

"There's probably a hundred percent chance of that," Denny smirked, kissed her on the cheek again and walked away to meet his father and go home.

Noa hummed to herself and skipped through the front of campus to the curb. Her brother always drove up from the lower field parking lot after soccer practice, pulled up and waited there for her. She tossed her things in the backseat and slid into the car.

"Heya, Si," she said, then turned toward the driver seat.

"Oh—hello, Jay," her throat tightened.

##

"He's just my friend," Noa said with winded breath as she picked herself up from the living room carpet.

"Come on, lay off of her, dad," Silas said, though not very adamantly.

Noa looked at Silas and scowled. "How could you let him come get me, drunk like this?"

"God, was I supposed to stay in class with the flu?"

"I would have walked before I—"

"Shut up!" Jay grabbed her arm and swung her around again. "You're never staying after school again, You hear me? You'll take the bus straight home every god damned day."

Noa braced herself and put her hands over her head to block Jay's blows.

"Put your damn arms down," Jay ordered.

Noa didn't comply, so he grabbed her left arm and twisted it downward. Noa squealed in pain. She had to comply, lest her arm snap. She looked at her brother—he seemed bewildered, if anything.

"You want to be a little slut?" Jay went on.

"I told you, he's just my friend!"

Jay sucked in air through his barred teeth as he stared at her with rage-filled eyes. He stomped off to his room, and Noa's heart pounded. Just as she suspected, he came back with a belt.

"You can't," Noa pleaded. "I'm too old to get a beating like this!"

He snapped the belt in his hands.

"What difference does it even make to you?" Noa called out.

"I let you live in this house. You're not even my child, yet I allow you to live here. I pay for everything you have, and you wanna go get pregnant? I will throw you out of this house if I ever see you

with that boy again, you hear me? I don't want to see that boy's number on your phone, I don't want to see you on the computer except to do homework—”

He had a few more demands for Noa that she'd already tuned out.

“He's my best friend,” Noa stood her ground. “If you keep me from him, he might want to tell the cops that you hit me when you're drunk.”

Her words were not chosen wisely, and Jay grabbed her already sore arm and yanked her upward. He reared his arm back, ready to strike.

“You think you're going to hurt me?” He hissed. “You think you can do anything to hurt me?”

He forewent the belt and hit her in the face, hard. Noa reeled in shock—he never went this far. He hadn't gone this far in years.

“Stop this!” Noa fought him, running against his pull. Noa shook from pain and terror. “Silas!” She called to her brother. Why didn't he seem to care? He normally broke things up before they got to this point.

“Shut up,” Jay said through gritted teeth.

Noa began to weep, still in complete disbelief that this was happening, when a golden light began to flash in the narrow hallway, above their heads. Jay let go, and Noa covered her eyes to protect them as Jay began screaming.

Noa put her arm down and looked up only to close her eyes immediately again as golden light flooded her vision.

“What's happening?” Noa asked, out of breath, turning her head to face her brother before opening her eyes again.

Silas stared at the source of the light in pure, dumbstruck terror. He ignored her, but began scooting backwards from where he sat on the ground, shaking and moving toward the wall.

Noa was afraid to turn and look at what had frightened Silas and Jay so badly, but it was inches from her. Running was not an option, and curiosity won over fear.

Standing between Noa and Jay was a sun-yellow, ethereal creature. Noa was frozen, wide-eyed like her brother and step-father, but in awe rather than fear. It had a face, blurry and undefined, and a sad expression. It seemed neither angel nor devil, and the more Noa looked at it the more human it seemed. It ignored Jay who was backed against a wall and pleading for mercy, and reached an ethereal hand toward Noa's face.

She flinched, but it did not touch her. It then dissipated into thousands of points of light, back into into the nothingness from which it came.

Noa remained sitting, staring at the spot where it once was. She looked to brother, who also seemed immobilized by fear.

Jay began to crawl toward Noa, and she remembered the danger she was in.

“Get out of my house!” He shrieked. “You called the devil into my house! Get out!”

Noa didn’t move. Her heart was pounding, she was still reeling—his words made it into her brain but didn’t stick there.

“Out!” Jay shrieked, pointing a trembling finger toward the door.

Noa snapped out of her trance and looked at Silas with tears streaming down her face. He was inscrutable, and didn’t have any words for her. She got to her feet, grabbed her backpack by the front door as it was all she could take with her, with no idea what would become of her after that night.

Chapter Two

Just make it to the lake, Noa thought as she pedaled. Her head throbbed with headache from where Jay hit her and from sobbing, and her arm was filled with searing pain from Jay twisting it, but she kept riding. She had zero confidence that Denny would be able to do anything for her, but he told her he’d meet her there, and she had no other ideas.

When she finally made it to the beach shore, she locked her bike and looked at the water. Some sort of boat show was going on, and the sand was filled with onlookers. A crowd. Just what she needed when she looked like she’d just escaped a kidnapper’s basement.

She wouldn’t have been able to recognize anyone though the distorting layer of tears over her eyes, but someone recognized her.

“Hey, Noa!” A girl called. She turned to look—it was someone she was sort of friendly with, a girl from her programming class. She waved and ran over to Noa, despite Noa’s attempts to look disinterested.

“I knew it was you,” the girl, who Noa remembered was named Imogen, said as she came closer. Of course, she stopped dead in her tracks and boggled as soon as she was near enough to get a good look at Noa’s face. “Wow, what the hell happened to you?”

Noa pursed her lips to try and keep from making crying sounds, which would be humiliating. She took a few deep breaths before replying.

“Nothing good,” was all she could think of saying as she wiped away tears.

“Are you here alone?” Was the next arrow in the barrage of questions.

Noa nodded.

“Do you need help?”

Noa shook her head.

Imogen seemed to give up on this. “How about—why don’t you just come sit with my brother and I? Watch the boats?”

“Okay,” Noa agreed. It had to be better than standing and being stared at while waiting for Denny to show up. Knowing Auburn Hills public transportation, his estimated time of arrival was between a half hour and three hours.

Imogen led Noa to a blanket in the sand. On this blanket was a small radio, and an athletic looking boy with long locs and perfectly clear, dark brown skin.

“This is my brother DJ,” Imogen announced loudly.

DJ looked up at them. “Heya,” he grinned. His eyes widened as he got a good look at Noa, but Imogen made a show of swiping her index finger across her throat, a very unsubtle way of telling him not to comment. Not that he’d have the chance to comment, as Imogen launched into endless babble about him. By the end of fifteen minutes Noa knew that he was tremendously popular, charming, a genius, the best soccer player there ever was at Auburn Hills high and most definitely a future pro soccer player. In fact, he was on a soccer scholarship and majoring in nuclear engineering. DJ responded humbly to the compliments, and tried to inject praise of Imogen as well.

It was a nice distraction, though Noa kept looking over toward the bus stop. It had stopped twice and no Denny got off of it, and he wasn’t answering her texts.

She supposed she really was alone.

Noa put her arms around herself as the sinking sun brought with it cooler air. Her backpack blocked the wind a little bit, but she was going to have a miserable night outside. She should have made a break down the hall to grab a sweatshirt before leaving, even if it meant Jay following her.

She didn’t have much time to daydream about what she should have done before DJ got up and draped a jacket around her shoulders.

“Oh, I can’t take this,” she fretted, “you’re going to need it.”

DJ laughed. “It needs to get about twenty degrees colder than this before I’ll want to use a jacket.”

Noa pulled it around herself and exhaled in relief. “Well, thank you.” She said, then was careful to wipe an errant tear with her hand and not the borrowed article.

Imogen grabbed Noa’s still damp hand. “I’m trying not to press you, but I really need to know if it’s safe for you to go home tonight.”

Noa looked at Imogen’s collarbone to avoid looking at her eyes. “I, um—”

“You can talk to me,” Imogen said, then paused, deadly serious. “I have a first aid card.”

The ensuing sharp, unexpected laugh that erupted from Noa caused her to snort, and then to start crying.

“Wow,” Imogen giggled as well. “If you thought that was funny, we really should be best friends.”

DJ looked over at his sister with a worried look and mouthed something, but stopped and smiled when he noticed Noa had turned his way.

“So, Noa,” Imogen looked in the direction Noa was staring. “Are you waiting for a friend?”

For a moment that question felt invasive. Noa’s face flushed with blood, but realized she was just terrified because she didn’t have a place to stay.

“I’m waiting for my boyfriend,” she told the truth. “But—” she paused and bit her lip, “it’s not like I can stay with him. He probably realized there’s nothing he can do for me and stayed home.”

But she couldn’t help but feel completely betrayed.

“Oh,” Imogen frowned, though her eyes were distant. She probably realized she couldn’t do anything either. Her brother’s face was more sympathetic.

“We can give you a ride to a shelter I know is closest to here,” DJ offered.

“Thanks,” Noa said, though it was the most unsure she’d ever said the word. She tried to fight off tears. She didn’t want to break down in front of these people. She wanted to break down in front of Denny, who she decided wasn’t coming for her. She put her face in her hands—at least if she cried there no one would see her.

“Hey,” Imogen tapped her shoulder, “the bus just got here, and someone got off of it.”

Noa perked up and looked behind her. There Denny was, standing beside the bench and looking around.

“He did come for me,” Noa said to herself. She should have known. Why had she doubted him?

Noa stood up and waved at Denny. He looked up and started walking toward her, though walking through the sand with crutches didn’t look easy for him.

“Thank you for letting me use this,” Noa said to DJ, taking off his jacket and handing it to him. She then ran toward Denny, forgetting about the cold for the moment. When she finally made it to him and he dropped his crutches to hold her tightly in both arms, she fell apart.

“Oh, Noa baby,” he pulled away to look at her and put a hand on her cheek below her bruised eye. “I’m gonna kill that asshole.”

“What am I going to do?” She cried into his shoulder. “I don’t want to sleep outside, I don’t want to go to the police, I just want to disappear.”

“I won’t leave you alone,” Denny promised. “If you gotta sleep outside I’m gonna be under the newspaper with you, I swear. I’m sorry I didn’t message you—my stupid phone died. It’s such an old piece of crap, I swear it doesn’t stay charged for more than an hour—”

He stopped and just looked at Noa, which, for some reason, made her cry even harder. He just held her, smoothing her hair and assuring her things would be all right.

“Are you taking her somewhere safe?” Imogen interrupted.

Noa felt spied upon for and froze in annoyance.

Denny sighed. “I don’t know what the hell we’re gonna do.”

“Do you have any relatives you could call?” Imogen asked. “Even if they don’t know you very well, they might want to help you in this situation.”

Noa turned around. “No—I mean, I barely had somewhere to live now. No way would I live with my step-dad if I had anyone else.”

She could feel Denny nod against her hair as she spoke.

“Any other friends you could stay with?” Imogen asked. Noa felt like she was trying to humiliate her. She took a deep breath before lashing out—Imogen was just trying to help. Any good person would want to know what was going on with a battered girl.

“Hey,” DJ had arrived, probably to ask the same questions again. “You’re coach Hayden’s kid, Dennis, right?”

Denny bristled. “It’s Denny. You one of those kids that goes to his church?”

DJ laughed. “No way. I mean, uh, not trying to dis it. He asked me about that once, but we’re Wiccan. I was just on the team.”

Noa hadn’t realized how tense Denny was until that moment when her hand was released from his death grip. His tone softened. “Ah, yeah. Wiccan, eh? I’m surprised the old man hasn’t hit you up to cast a spell to end the team’s losing streak.”

“Pffft,” DJ laughed and rolled his eyes. “Yeah, not how it works.”

Noa’s phone began to vibrate.

“It’s Silas,” Noa was surprised. For how strange he’d been acting, and how he just let her leave home without a word, she hadn’t expected him to message her. “He says—he says he called some people and knows a place I might be able to stay tonight.”

Denny knew Silas was one of those kids that went to Hayden’s church. Noa never knew why this bothered him so much. He bristled again.

“Oh hell no,” Denny said. “You aren’t staying with any of the freaks in that cult.”

Noa looked up at Denny with a furrowed brow. “What else am I going to do? Sleep on a park bench?”

“I, there’s got to be something else you can do,” Denny began, but he didn’t have to finish his thought. Noa shielded her eyes again as a thousand bright yellow suns appeared before her. She opened them sooner, though, and saw them coalesce into the form of the golden being she’d seen earlier.

“I didn’t tell you about this part,” she whispered. “This is how I got kicked out—this thing appeared and Jay blamed it on me.”

Beach goers and boardwalk-dwelling pedestrians began to scream and scatter, but oddly enough, Imogen and DJ remained.

And Denny was surprised, but didn’t show any signs of fear.

“Oh wow,” Imogen got very close to it, reached out it but kept her hand just out of reach from touching it. “A ghost that everyone can see! This is wild!”

Noa would have thought this thing was an angel, or a demon, or an extra-dimensional being before a ghost. She supposed that was just as likely out of the multitude of absurd possibilities.

“See?” Denny’s voice quavered, “it—it’s a sign. You can’t go with your brother.”

The ‘ghost’ glowed more brightly and brought its face close to Denny’s, as if to intimidate him.

“You don’t gotta worry about me, buddy,” Denny swallowed hard.

The ghost dissipated once again.

“Worry about you?” Noa raised an eyebrow. “You—you’ve seen this thing before?”

Denny shook his head, as if pulling himself out of a trance. “No—god, ‘course not. I just—I dunno. I dunno why I said that. I was scared, I was just trying to get it to go away. Instinct I guess, like I’d say to a dog that was snarling at me.”

Noa was unconvinced.

“This is wild,” Imogen said, again. “Noa, are you a necromancer? You’ve seen this thing twice?”

Noa put her hands over her mouth to keep herself from screaming. “I think I’m going completely insane.”

“I’ve got an idea,” Imogen said, “you guys come over to my place—my mom never cares that DJ’s best friend practically lives with us, she shouldn’t care if I have friends over.”

“She’s known Tiernan for like, ten years,” DJ argued.

“Ten years for me starts today,” Imogen almost seemed giddy. “Come on, tell your brother you’ve already got a place to stay for tonight.”

Chapter Three

“You could have texted me that you were bringing in a herd of kids from the lake,” a woman said as she shook her head from the sofa. She had to be Imogen’s mom as she looked like an older version of her, sporting the same head of bouncy crochet curls and huge, doe-like brown eyes.

Noa stopped and became flustered. “I’m sorry to intrude,” she stayed behind the threshold of the door.

Imogen grabbed her arm and pulled her in. “She’s just kidding—we have random friends over all the time.”

“Hi, I’m Martha,” Imogen’s mom waved and looked at Noa. “It’s fine that you’re here, really. There’s more than enough food for everyone.” She turned to Imogen again. “But really, you could have texted.”

A man came into the room from down the hallway. He was a big man, with close shaved hair and a neat goatee.

“Hey kids,” he said. “New friends?”

“Yeah,” DJ replied, “this is Noa, and Denny—he’s Coach Hayden’s kid.”

Noa squeezed Denny’s hand.

“Who hurt you?” Martha asked, staring at Noa.

“Ah, um,” Noa was thrown off and unprepared to answer this.

Martha’s gaze snapped to Denny.

“It was my step-dad,” Noa blurted, then looked down and mumbled. “But—I guess I don’t have to deal with him anymore. I’ve been kicked out.”

“I just said she could stay here for tonight,” Imogen said. “Her bro’s gonna find somewhere for her to stay, or something. It’s fine. It’ll be fine.”

Martha’s dismay was transparent, though the alarm on her face faded when her husband put a hand on her shoulder.

“That’s fine, Noa,” Deangelo said. “Immy, why don’t you go show these kids the cyclone you call a room?”

“Yeah, totally,” Imogen was excited. “Come on, come on you guys. It’s the best room ever.”

Noa and Denny followed her down the hallway.

Noa was comforted by the chaotic nature of Imogen’s room. Her floor was her hamper, her desk was a graveyard for half-filled soda bottles, and her walls were a collage of band posters, anime posters, science posters—and posters of things Noa had never heard of or imagined. She had a twin bed with a Ninja Turtles bed spread, a hot pink lava lamp, and a disco ball hanging from her ceiling.

“It’s great isn’t it,” Imogen beamed with pride.

“It’s awe inspiring,” Noa said, and really meant it.

Imogen closed her door.

“Oh man,” Denny walked over to a bookshelf full of movies. “Do you—do you have every episode of Super Space Science Adventures here?”

“You know it,” Imogen beamed. “You a fan?”

“Am I?” Denny beamed right back, then unbuttoned his collared shirt to reveal a t-shirt with a green alien boy, a goggles-wearing cat and a young girl with a huge afro in a pink space suit. “I’m the world’s premiere SSSA fan.”

Imogen turned to Noa. “I assume you like it too then?”

Noa shrugged. “I don’t really watch TV.”

“You don’t like TV?” Imogen pressed.

Noa shrugged. “I don’t know—I mostly read, or practice piano. My step-dad and brother are the TV watchers, and I don’t like the things they watch.”

Denny huffed. It always annoyed him that they never even considered letting her pick what was on, even though Noa didn't really care.

"You guys band nerds?" Imogen asked.

"No," Noa said, "the piano was my mother's, I just play around on it. Nothing serious. We're both in chorus, though."

"Oh, for real?" Imogen's eyes widened. "Sing something for me!"

Denny smirked, then began loudly and exuberantly singing some pop song Noa had never heard before. Imogen groaned and reeled in disgust.

"He sounded fine to me," Noa was indignant.

"That song," Imogen spat. "That's like, the most obnoxious song! It's the friggin' rickroll song. You've never heard it, Noa? What, do you never go on the Internet? It's a meme—seriously how can you not know?"

"I go on the Internet," Noa insisted.

"Yeah," Denny said, "she has a very serious blog about insect taxonomy. I'm not even kidding."

Noa blushed. "Is that bad?"

Imogen laughed. "All right, nerdcakes. You're going to love Super Space Science Adventures. I just know it. We're gonna marathon it, tonight."

Noa felt embarrassed, but Denny sat next to her on Imogen's bed and wrapped his arms around her, kissing her cheek and temple and nuzzling her while Imogen dealt with getting the DVD started.

"Now you'll finally get some of the references I make," Denny said.

Noa just nodded, staring ahead.

Denny grabbed her hand, held it against his chest and rubbed her knuckles with his thumb. "You'll be okay, sweet baby. We'll think of something."

Noa was unconvinced, but she tried to concentrate on enjoying herself and watching TV.

##

Denny was stuffed from a great dinner, and Noa was asleep, draped across his lap as he stroked her hair. He figured he ought to go back home soon and pretend like nothing had happened. He knew his dad—staying somewhere for the night would enrage him more. He would have done it for Noa, but she seemed safe, for the time being at least. He half watched the TV, and half watched the hazy flicker of the television on Noa's face, like a digital candlelight.

"So, why don't you want her to go to this place with her brother?" Imogen asked, taking a sip of the cocoa her mom had handed her earlier.

Denny shrugged. “I know what happened. Her bro called my dad, and he found some freaky weirdos from his satanic cult church to let her live with them. They’ll prolly use her in a ritual sacrifice or something—I don’t know. It’s just bad news. I hate it.”

Noa murmured and squirmed for a moment, during a dream, Denny supposed. He couldn’t look at the bruise on her face without wincing. It was getting darker and darker. If her eye was still half closed and watering at school tomorrow, all of her teachers would be calling the cops.

“How could he do this to her?” He squeaked. “She’s—god you just met her, but she doesn’t deserve this.”

“Who would deserve this?” Imogen raised an eyebrow.

“Well no one, obviously,” Denny shook his head, “I just—I just I wish I could stomp out that hairy, rotten, shit-brained—”

“Okay, I get it,” Imogen said. “Man, how did you guys even meet? She always works alone even on group projects in class. I’ve never seen her talk to anyone. I seriously thought she’d tell me to go away when I saw her at the park.”

Denny sighed. “Like, I thought she was just aloof too when she showed up at chorus camp as a freshman, but man she’s just so timid. She will never, ever initiate a conversation. She has to really get to know you before she’ll open up to you. If you get to know her she’s a sweetheart, though.”

Imogen pushed out her lower lip. “Aww. I guess I should give quiet nerds a chance. What about you, though? You’re kind of a firecracker. You’ve got to have a bunch of friends. Can’t someone in your squad help her out?”

“No—I, uh, she’s my only friend, really. I’m just a jerk. Honestly, if she had the social skills God gave a constipated grizzly bear she’d be with someone better than me. I just—when I saw her sitting alone every day looking miserable, I just thought even I had to be better than nobody. Two and a half years later we’re still attached at the hip, really.”

“Aww, that’s actually kinda cute.”

Denny checked to make sure Noa was asleep—he really didn’t want her to hear him talk about her like that. She was out like a lamp.

“I just started at Auburn High this year,” Imogen said. “Well, at the beginning of the school year. So I don’t really have friends either.”

“Didn’t your brother go there?”

She shrugged. “I wanted to go to the performing arts academy. But then—something really bad happened, and I needed to switch schools.”

Denny moved his hand from Noa’s hair to Imogen’s forearm.

“It’s fine,” Imogen shrugged, and Denny moved his hand back.

“I guess you’ve got friends now. You can always hang out with us.”

Imogen smirked. “I won’t be a third wheel?”

“Nah. Honestly, neither of our parents let us hang out together outside school. We’re best friends more than anything—we’re not exactly hot and heavy. Hanging out with us won’t be awkward.” He then looked up at her. “I really appreciate that you made sure Noa was okay at the beach. It means a lot.”

Noa stirred for a moment, and Denny looked down at her and brushed a strand of her long black hair away from her mouth. His stomach began to hurt as he thought about what she could do to do, and where she could live.

“I wish she could stay here,” Imogen broke the silence. “I mean if she was my bff or something my parents would let her—I just met her today though, you know?”

Denny nodded. “Yeah. I just wish I knew what to do.”

“What’s so terrible about your dad’s church? He always seemed like such a cool guy. I seriously can’t see him in some weird poison-drinking cult or something.”

Denny frowned. “Course you can’t. He’s the anointed prince of this dink ass hole-in-the wall of a town. He could prolly stab me twenty-seven times and the cops would believe him if he said I ran into his knife.”

Imogen gasped. Denny realized he probably went too far.

“Is he—abusive to you?”

It wasn’t a rabbit hole he really wanted to go down. “Sometimes, I guess. Not physically. For the most part he just leaves me alone, though sometimes he punishes me over what seems like nothing. But—I guess it’s pretty obvious he’d be happier without me around.”

“That’s pretty terrible,” Imogen looked at him with concern. “Your parents are supposed to love you. And—I believe you. That he’s not as nice as I thought, I mean.”

Denny smiled at her, then looked away. He wasn’t sure why his eyes fogged up in that moment.

“But really,” Imogen lowered her voice, “does his church have something to do with that ghost? What do you know? I’ve always been able to see ghosts—can you see them too?”

Denny gawked at Imogen, and began to sweat. “Do you just tell everyone that right when you meet them, or what?”

“Naw,” Imogen leaned in closer. “I’ve never met anyone else who seemed to know anything about them, though.”

Denny flushed with panic. “Everyone saw that thing. Everyone on the beach saw it. Noa saw it, your brother saw it, god, Google Earth prolly saw it.”

“But everyone else ran scared. You called it ‘Buddy.’”

Denny narrowed his eyes.

“Look, I’m telling you this because I like you,” Denny began. “So just trust me when I say I’m not trying to be a jerk here. Don’t tell anyone that you see ghosts, ever again. Not me, not Noa, not your friends, not your family.”

“Pfft,” Imogen was indignant. “Look, I already know people will think I’m crazy. Don’t play dumb with me, I know you know something.”

“Oh, I’m not playing dumb,” Denny hissed, looking down to make sure Noa was still asleep. “But you need to wise up. What if I did know something? What if I knew a whole lot, and told people who would make life very, very hard for you?”

Imogen was stunned. “Is that a threat?”

“Of course not. It’s a warning! I’m just saying, you had no idea I was trustworthy, why would you just blurt that out to me? Not smart.” Denny was deadpan. “Like I said. Don’t tell anyone else about this.”

Denny could tell Imogen wasn’t convinced, just from looking at her. She might let it sink in overnight, though.

“I gotta go home, anyway,” Denny said. He would have stayed with Noa under a newspaper, as he said, but he also knew his father would probably call the police or cause some kind of trouble for this nice family if he stayed there. And Noa was safe, after all. For one night, at least.

“Well, let’s get going then,” Imogen replied, getting up and stretching toward her car keys on the nightstand.

“I gotta get up, sweetheart,” Denny said to Noa, stroking her hair. “Sorry to wake you.”

Noa stretched and blinked the sleep out of her eyes. “Oh, wow, how long was I out?”

“Only a half hour or so,” Denny replied. “You’ll be able to sleep tonight just fine.”

“You can’t stay?” Noa muttered, still woozy from sleep.

“I wish I could,” Denny grabbed her hand. “God knows I’d rather be with you than go home.”

Chapter Four

Noa almost felt embarrassed to go to school the next day. The place where Jay had hit her congealed into a shiny, purple bruise.

As long as the only person she talked to or came near was Denny, she’d be all right. She didn’t think the bruise was that conspicuous from a distance--but that was wishful thinking, perhaps.

Denny was already in his chair, slumped over his desk, fast asleep. She normally got to school even earlier and spent time with him, but coming with Imogen she arrived with only a few minutes before class was supposed to start.

Noa walked as quietly as she could manage toward her chair. She sat in stages, lowering herself inch by inch until there were mere molecules between the seat and her butt and she could merge them soundlessly. She looked over at Denny, relieved that she hadn't woken him. He never seemed to get enough sleep.

However, moments after sitting, her presence roused him to a waking state. He blinked and turned to her, reaching across his desk and putting his hands on hers. Noa grabbed them.

"I couldn't sleep all night," Noa confessed.

"Me neither," Denny said. "I kept trying to think of what to do—all I could think of was stealing a bunch of money from my dad's stash, getting camping equipment and skipping town, living on the road together."

"This is serious," Noa's voice cracked.

"I am serious," Denny said. "I only got a few months 'til I'm eighteen and I get all that money my grandma left anyway, then we can just get an apartment together while I go to college. If you can get through somehow 'til the end of the year—"

"Won't that be weird, to have a high school girl living with you in an apartment when you're in college?"

Denny was aghast. "Come on, you've been my girl forever, why would it be weird? I dunno, isn't the age of consent sixteen in this state anyway?"

Noa cringed. "I—I never considered that before, I guess."

"Sorry," Denny pulled back one hand and rubbed the back of his neck. "I guess it's weird to talk about it that way."

Noa thought she was way too young to move in with him, though the idea did appeal to her. She had a short daydream of making breakfast in the morning, only to be surprised by Denny putting his arms around her and kissing her neck. They could lay in bed together and watch cartoons—maybe moving in too soon was only bad for people who weren't as close as they were.

"I still have until your birthday to worry about it though," Noa shook off her daydream with a dose of cold reality. "Your dad will call the police if you just run away."

"We'll hide so he can't find me," Denny argued.

"Then how will you graduate?" Noa shook her head. "How will you get your inheritance money and go to college?"

He ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. "Are you sure you don't have any relatives you could live with? Even ones you haven't met before?" He asked.

Noa may have begun to cry if her eyes weren't parched from lack of sleep and her reserves already tapped. "You know I don't! I just said that, remember? If I had anyone else I wouldn't have been living with my step-dad."

"All right, all right. I knew that. I just—wishful thinking, I guess."

Noa gave herself a headache thinking about it. Maybe she could just stay in a tent, somewhere? She never wished she had other friends more than at that moment.

The conversation ended there, though, as class was about to start.

##

Noa stood in line for lunch with Denny, as she did every day. A boy was walking straight for them, though at first Noa presumed she was mistaken. He was short, had messy black hair and a lip ring. He didn't walk past them, however. He approached them with a paper folded into a square with a pull-out tab in his hands. He thrust it toward Noa.

"Hey," the boy said, pulling the letter back, realizing he'd jumped the gun. "You're Silas's sister, right?"

Noa nodded. She did not recognize this boy.

"I'm a friend of his—the name's Kit," he said, holding a folded piece of paper out to Noa. "I, I uh, I was wondering if you'd give this to him."

"I feel terrible," Noa replied, "but I'm actually, ah, not staying in the same place he is right now. He has this lunch period, though, I'll point him out to you. You can give it to him yourself."

The boy seemed dejected. "Oh, ah, thanks. I know where he sits, thanks. Sorry to bother you."

Noa was confused as she watched the boy walk away. She thought she'd seen all of Silas's friends around at one time or another.

"You know," a voice from behind Noa began, "that boy's full name is Christopher Robin Charleston. You can only imagine why he goes by Kit."

Noa turned around. "Ah! Hello, Imogen, you found us."

"Of course," Imogen smirked, sucking on a soda straw, "I have radar for cute people. Your boy here threw it off a little, but your cuteness reeled me in."

Noa put her hand over her mouth so Denny wouldn't notice her laugh.

"Yeah yeah," Denny shook his head. "I know I'm about as cute as an alligator's buttthole, no need to remind me."

"Aww! That's not true!" Noa assured and squeezed his hand, "you're adorable!"

Imogen pretended to gag herself with a finger.

Noa and Denny paid for their food, and Noa carried both cardboard box trays out to their usual spot. Imogen had already purchased hers, from the line that had actually edible food. Noa was grateful she had free lunch, especially now, but she did envy everyone who could just buy a slice of pizza when they wanted. She often wondered if Denny paid for the inferior comestibles every day in solidarity.

“This is a great spot you got here,” Imogen commented as they sat. “Shade, grass to pick at, ants to crawl all over my food and provide the extra protein I need to get through the day.”

Noa looked around on the ground for ants.

“She’s joking,” Denny put a hand on her forearm.

“So, Noa,” Imogen grinned at her, “what did you think about Super Space Science Adventures? You know, the episodes you didn’t sleep through?”

Noa gave this some thought. “It was cute. I felt like it actually tried to think of scientifically plausible explanations for the absurd things that happen. I think I like the cat character best.”

“She’s not really a cat,” Imogen corrected. “She’s from another planet, the M’raka only have feline-from-earth-like characteristics because of convergent evolution. You find that out like, in the next episode where we left off.”

“Oh,” Noa replied, not sure how to respond to that.

Imogen went on about the show while Noa tried to listen, though she was lost for a lot of it. She was worried about Denny, who barely ate and poked at a bare, damp patch of ground with a twig.

“Hold on,” Noa interrupted Imogen as she noticed her brother walking over to her. Finally he decided he was going to talk to her. “Excuse me a moment,” she said, then went over to speak with him.

“She’s so polite, she’s like a—” she heard Imogen begin talking to Denny, though she was out of earshot before she could hear what she was ‘like.’

“Hey Noa,” Silas began, holding out a plastic bag filled with clothes.

“You remembered,” Noa grabbed them. “I’m so relieved.”

“Of course I did,” Silas replied, then looked at Noa and shook his head. “You really should have tried to cover up that bruise. You look like you pissed off your pimp.”

Noa was taken aback. “Really? Silas, I’m miserable, I’m in pain, I’m homeless. I don’t know what I’m going to do—and that’s what you have to say to me?”

“Sorry,” Silas sighed. “I’m not doing so great either. Dad went completely off the deep end because of that spirit thing. He’s—he’s in a mental hospital right now, for thirty days, I guess. I’m staying with a foster family.”

“Oh,” Noa softened. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry I snapped at you.”

“It’s okay,” he shrugged. “I deserved it. I should have called you—I’ve just been kind of a mess. We need to get together, though. You need a place to stay too.”

Noa perked up.

“I talked to Coach Hayden about this,” Silas went on, “he helped find a family nearby to take me in. You could come stay with me too. They’re really nice, actually. You’ll like them. You’re definitely gonna have to talk to a social worker at some point today, but, you can let them know you’ve got a place with me.”

Noa perked up. “Do you have your car? Can we go home together after school?”

“Oh yeah,” Silas nodded. “There’s one thing, though.”

Noa furrowed her brow.

Silas went on. “I know you won’t like this, but there’s a church session this weekend. The whole family is involved in it, you’ll have to come with.”

Noa rolled her eyes. “Ridiculous. You know I’m not religious. Finding a place to live shouldn’t be contingent on finding Jesus.” Though she wouldn’t really have cared if it wasn’t for Denny’s objections to that church.

“Oh come on, Noa,” Silas raised his voice and stepped closer to her. “It’s not a big deal. You can just pretend—I just knew you were gonna have an issue with this. I don’t want you to refuse to go and embarrass me.”

Noa bristled. “Sounds like a great place to live—a place where I have to shut up and do as I’m told, lest I be an embarrassment.”

Silas rolled his eyes. “Don’t be difficult. You don’t want to sleep by a bunch of garbage cans, do you?”

Noa gritted her teeth. This time the tears in her eyes were produced by anger, but she refused to cry. “What the hell is wrong with you? Why are you acting like this? I’m not having this conversation any longer. Have fun with your cult family.”

Noa turned to leave, but Silas grabbed her arm. She squealed in pain—he hadn’t grabbed her that hard, but it was her injured arm.

This was all it took to summon Denny. She could hear him stomping over as Silas let her go. She grabbed her arm and tried to regain her bearings. Denny wasted no time getting in Silas’s face and shoving him away from her, both crutches in one arm while he shoved with the other.

“Hey, cool it,” Silas said, holding up his arms. “I don’t want to fight you.”

“Oh really?” Denny was shouting, “’cause hurting Noa is pretty much the best way to show you wanna get in a fight with me.”

“I didn’t mean to,” Silas said. “I forgot her arm was hurt, I didn’t grab her hard—”

“Bullshit,” Denny said while poking Silas in the chest. “She was favoring that arm like it was her cuter, smarter child! You knew what you were doing.”

“Shut the hell up,” Silas growled, “I wouldn’t hurt my own sister!”

“What do you call what you just did, then?”

While they fought, Imogen came up to Noa and put her hand around her waist. “Did he hurt you?” She whispered.

“It was an accident,” Noa whispered back.

“Hey,” Silas looked at Imogen, “you might be a half-way reasonable person. Tell me I’m right here—I’m staying in a foster home right now. It’s a nice place, and I just told Noa she should come with me. She’s got to—where else is she going to stay?”

Noa was stunned. “That’s quite the abridged version of what you said,” she huffed.

“She’s mad because she’d have to go to church with us, how is that even a big deal?” He then turned to Denny. “She’s my sister, how about you back off?”

“No, you’re gonna back off,” Denny said, in a low voice this time. “Don’t you get rough with her, ever. Don’t you pressure her into doing things she doesn’t wanna do, you hear me?”

Noa put her arm around Denny’s waist to try and calm him down. “It’s okay—it was an accident. Please don’t fight—I don’t want any of us to get in trouble.”

Denny backed up. “Fine.” He looked up at Imogen. “She can’t just stay with you again?”

“I can’t,” Noa blurted before Imogen even had a chance, embarrassed that he’d even asked. “I’ve got to find somewhere else eventually anyway, what’s going to change tomorrow? Or the next day?”

“I’ll think of—”

“There’s nothing you can do,” Noa sighed. “I know, you’d do anything for me. But you can’t do anything, and I need somewhere to live.”

Denny was silent.

“I’ll be all right,” Noa went on. “I can ignore a church sermon anyway, it wouldn’t be the first time.”

“Oh please, like it’ll kill you,” Silas rolled his eyes.

“No,” Denny came back to life and put his hands on Noa’s waist. “You can’t—I—don’t even step foot in there. Please, listen to me.”

Noa became indignant. “Just stop.” She pulled away from Denny, then glared at him and her brother. “You’re both being so controlling—I can’t take it.”

“I want you to do one thing for me in exchange for having food and a roof over your head,” Silas snapped.

“Now you sound like Jay!” Noa growled.

“I don’t wanna control you,” Denny insisted, speaking before Silas could reply, “I just don’t want you getting mixed up in a cult—”

“Stop, both of you,” Noa said. “Just—stop.”

“Fine,” Silas said. “But you know you don’t have a choice. I’ll see you after school.”

He turned to walk back to his friends.

“Sorry I was acting like that,” Denny sighed. Noa could tell he was ashamed of losing control. “I just—trust me, you don’t wanna get involved with that stuff.”

“I—I appreciate you being protective of me,” Noa said, “but telling me not to get involved with this church, or anyone associated with it, it’s not helping me. You do realize my only other option right now is to sleep on the street?”

“I, yeah, but,” Denny ran a hand through his hair, “I really think going to that church is worse.”

“Why?”

Denny bit his lip, trying to think of a response.

“You don’t have a good reason.”

“I do, I just—”

“You don’t want to tell me?”

Denny closed his eyes and shook his head.

Noa was stunned. “I’m—I’m just going to go to class a bit early.”

“Oooh,” Imogen came to life. “I’ll come too! Can you can help me figure out pointers? I hate them.”

“Oh,” Noa said, “yes, I can help you with those.”

“You can hang out with me for a little bit after school, right?” Denny squeaked. “Doesn’t Silas have practice today?”

Noa couldn’t stand seeing him so dejected. She grabbed his hand. “Of course—but please promise me you won’t just berate me for doing something I have no choice over.”

She really thought he was about to cry.

“I won’t,” he his voice was tense. “I—I promise I won’t.”

Noa looked around to make sure no proctors were watching and kissed him on the cheek. They’d wasted enough time that the bell rang and they wouldn’t be getting to class early anyway.

As they walked to class Noa had a sour, sinking feeling in her stomach. Denny was hiding something from her—something important, and it made her wonder if he loved her as much as she thought he did.

##

A night with the Wilsons had come and gone, and Noa survived. She was ready to fight with Denny over it, but when she met him in the morning he just hugged her and didn’t say much. He was just weary and sad. His eyes were heavy-lidded like he hadn’t slept at all the night before.

At lunch, he was just the same. Imogen plucked grass and dumped it on his shoe, and he just stared at it in a daze.

“Can’t you—can’t you get some random foster family or something?” Denny suddenly asked.

“You really mean that?” Noa was stunned. “I could be sent far away, would you really be fine with not seeing me again? You’d rather never see me again than have me go to a weird church for a while? I mean, unless they’re actually going to drink poison, I don’t see how this is the end of the world.”

“You’d only be away for a few months,” Denny argued, “then we can get an apartment together, remember?”

Noa balled her fists and clenched her teeth. “Really? I can just—go away and expect that you’ll remember me and we can pick up the pieces half a year from now?”

“Remember you? You really think I’d forget about you in six months?”

“More than that,” Noa stammered, “if some other people had legal guardianship of me, do you think I could just leave and live with my boyfriend, an adult, while I’m still a minor?”

“Uh,” Denny turned red, “I didn’t think about the guardianship thing, I guess.”

“Stop your friggin’ worrying, Dennyigan,” Imogen interjected. “I get it. You’re worried she’s going to be pressed into a weird cult and start handing out little booklets about a comet arriving to take people to the a paradise planet, and then cut off her own arms after drinking a box of poisoned Ecto Cooler. But nothing bad will happen, because I’m going with her.”

Noa perked up.

“No!” Denny shouted, then became embarrassed when people looked at him and lowered his voice. “No! That doesn’t make things any better—how could that possibly make things any better?”

“I make everything better,” Imogen folded her arms.

Denny put his hands over his face and slumped where he sat.

“Denny,” Noa lifted a hand to put on his back, but he bolted upright before she did.

“Fine, I’m going too,” Denny was shaking. “It’s a free country, my dad can’t stop me, dammit. If he’s gonna try and get my friends into his army of freaks he’s gonna have to do it while I’m there.”

Imogen stared at Denny for a moment, grinning.

“What?” Denny looked away from her.

“You said friends! That means you think I’m your friend too.”

“Well, yeah, aren’t ya?”

“I dunno, I feel like I’m in a special club, being friends with the jerk who hates everyone.”

“I added you to my facebook, didn’t I?” Denny went on. “I only have six whole facebook friends.”

Noa cocked her head. “But—Denny isn’t a jerk who hates everyone?”

Denny shrugged and scratched the back of his head like he always did when he was nervous. “Yeah, I don’t hate you guys. Just everyone else.”

Imogen wrapped him in a bear hug, laughing. He laughed too, which made Noa feel so much better.

“Team Imogen is an exclusive club,” she said.

Noa felt better about this, but was still exhausted and filled with anxious thoughts about the strangers she had to live with and Denny’s secrets. She zoned out as she finished her lunch, which was made easier by Denny and Imogen ignoring her to squabble over how it was humanly possible to only have six friends on Facebook.

Chapter Five

Noa’s stomach felt like bricks had been growing in it as the car slowed down and pulled into a parking lot. It was the church but—it was a hole-in-the-wall in a strip mall with cheesy, pathetic signage in a goofy font.

Noa wore a flower-patterned dress, white tights and shoes and a pink cardigan, given to her by the Wilsons. It made her look like a five year old. She thought Denny and Imogen would laugh when they saw her. When Noa stepped out of the car, the cold wind of the early morning pelted her bitterly.

Noa turned to her brother and whispered to him that she didn’t want to be there.

Silas ignored her.

Noa pulled her cardigan around herself as they walked to the door. As they were about to enter, she was ambushed by a familiar, loud voice.

“There’s my babies!” Imogen called, running up to them. Noa, Silas and the Wilson family all froze as Imogen approached and pulled Noa into a tight hug. Noa was surprised by this, but her shock melted into happiness to see her friend.

Following behind Imogen was Denny. He walked slowly and looked to the left and right of him constantly, as if he expected to be jumped by a pack of wolves. Imogen let Noa go, and she went to Denny and opened her arms to hug him.

“Not here,” Denny whispered, and she stopped. “I’ll explain later.”

Noa just moved away and frowned, wondering if his dad would be angry like Jay had been if he saw them being affectionate.

“I wasn’t expecting friends of yours to be here,” Mr. Wilson managed to choke out. He was the only one who ever seemed to talk.

“Well, ya know,” Imogen turned and faced him with a huge grin. “Noa told me she was gonna come here on Saturday and I was like, man I should check it out too. My family’s been looking for a new church, and if we could go to the same one as my best buds Noa and Silas, well, that’d be awesome.”

“I, I mean, y’all know my dad, Dr. Hayden,” Denny stuttered. “I just thought—”

“Dr. Hayden has a son?” Zack seemed shocked.

“I’m so excited,” Imogen kept babbling into the tension-dense air. “I’ll get my family to come too if this is great. My mom was Wiccan for like, six years, and my dad believes in all sorts of weird new age crap. They’ll be way into this. I googled the name you know—the holy Seraph? That’s so out there, worshipping giant fire angels with a billion wings and eyeballs? I am psyched! This is gonna be the best church ever.”

Mr. Wilson was stunned and disarmed by this rant. “I think you’re mistaken about what we’re about, but—”

“Well, I can judge for myself,” Imogen walked to Mr. Wilson’s side and slapped him on the back. Noa could tell it was taking all of his willpower not to blow up at her.

“Shall we go in?” Imogen pranced toward the door.

Noa almost smiled, though she wondered if Mr. Wilson’s agitation would result in consequences for her later.

He nodded and opened the door for everyone.

The church wasn’t scary at all—it was an unimpressive room. It had rows and rows of folding chairs, cheap plastic card tables with informational materials to either side of the room, and tacky looking pictures and decor on the walls. It was more like a place you’d expect old people to gather for bingo.

“We’ve got to prepare for the ceremony,” Mr. Wilson said, taking his wife’s hand. “You kids find a seat, all right?”

Silas nodded. He knew the drill, and he bounded off to the rows of folding chairs.

Noa, Imogen and Denny lagged behind, taking in the place. Noa was surprised Denny was acting as if he’d never been here before. Surely he had at some point?

“One moment,” a man stopped them at the entrance and pointed to some cubby holes along the wall. “You’ve got to leave your bags and electronics here. There is absolutely no photography or recording allowed of the service.”

“But—” Imogen pouted.

“Your other choice is to leave,” the man was firm.

The three did as they were told, and the man patted down their pockets without warning as soon as their things were shelved. Denny went with the flow. Noa was deeply unhappy at this, but Imogen

shouted and seemed the most angry, blurting out that she needed an adult and slapping at his hands as they traveled over her hips.

Finally, the cubby man directed the kids to take a seat. Noa sat next to Silas, and Imogen and Denny beside her, at the very end of the row.

“This place is kinda trashy and dank,” Imogen whispered to Noa.

“It’s too rinky-dink to be a den of evil,” Noa whispered back.

“It’s a great cover,” Denny hissed.

More people entered the room shortly. They were all high school students, as far as Noa could tell. Not a single parent was in sight aside from the Wilsons. Many of the kids around them seemed a bit unkempt and dazed. Noa was unnerved by this. She wondered if she and Silas were being targeted because of the issues at home.

At precisely ten a.m., as the door stated, services began. From a back door, Dr. Hayden filed into the room behind the Wilsons, now all clad in the richly purple robes of church deacons. The thick, expensive looking robes were completely out of place in the kitschy room. They walked through the center aisle to the podium and waited. Moments later another deacon, this one dressed in brighter robes, walked into the room. The entire congregation stood, though Denny refused even when Noa tried to help him.

The main priest was, to the surprise of no one, Harlow Hayden. He seemed bigger than life as he stared into the crowd.

“Welcome, friends,” he began. Noa had never actually spent much time in his presence before. His voice was deep and textured, and blanketed the room. “Welcome, members, and welcome, newcomers. Let us open with a prayer.”

Everyone in the room sat back down and bowed their heads, except for Denny, who stared dead ahead at his father.

“Lord, we are all here because we are soldiers in your army. We seek your presence and guidance. We pray for the strength to let go of our worldly ambitions and our desires for ourselves, and instead wish to let you lead us, and accept your plans for us.”

He went on with a boring, normal sermon about sin that Noa didn’t bother paying attention to. But then his voice became more urgent. Noa perked up and paid attention again.

“You, by virtue of being here, have proven yourselves better, more intrepid, more curious than your peers. Your open minds are what is needed in order to wage battle against an apocalyptic threat which will soon consume and threaten our very world and way of life.

“Should you be brave enough, bold enough, and worthy enough to become initiates and join our order, you shall be empowered to face this threat. You shall be the chosen ones—the ascendant—who will lead this world into in a new era.”

Noa looked at Imogen in panic, but her face was blank—Noa couldn't read it at all.

“Observe,” Hayden held out his arms. Someone turned out the lights, and the deacons to either side of him began to glow white and gold. A fog surrounded them, and ethereal wings and horns materialized above them. They descended from above and settled over the deacons' forms, only then solidifying and transforming them into otherworldly beings, like the proverbial Seraphs Imogen described earlier. They were covered in evershifting wings and eyes—like the ghostly figure that had saved her, their features were indefinite and unfocused and difficult to grasp even when staring right at them.

Imogen grabbed Noa protectively, and Noa leaned into her in fear as well. She wanted to pull Denny into a group hug, but he sat stoic, taut as a violin string.

The deacons all began to fly overhead, all across the room in a terrifying display. Many of the students gasped, others smiled. Noa figured the smiling ones must have been the regulars. Noa and Imogen trembled, increasingly stricken by fear as the demonstration went on. Hayden was the most powerful; he encircled the audience in a ring of orange and red flame. The demonstration ended rather quickly, however, and the deacons returned to the podium.

“This power can be yours,” Hayden went on. “If you agree, we will observe you over the coming weeks. If you are deemed worthy, you will attain power no other humans on earth have obtained.” He closed the sermon with a bunch of regular sermon-sounding stuff about sin that Noa was too stunned to even absorb.

As everyone began to get up and mingle, Noa realized she and Imogen remained stunned and holding hands, squeezing hard enough to cause pain, but neither were willing to let go.

“Denny,” Noa whispered, though she was too frozen to turn and look at him. “You knew about this?”

“Sort of?” Denny whispered back. “I didn't know—god, this is crazy.”

Finally, she and Imogen peeled apart and reluctantly stood, wandering the room in a daze. They stopped at a table and looked at the scattered, amateurish, printed cards on it.

“So,” Hayden approached them from behind and began cheerily, ignoring Denny and addressing only Noa. “what do you think? You're staying afterward to become initiated, right? To begin the observation process?”

##

Noa was stunned by the fact that Hayden was even speaking to her. After what she'd seen—she couldn't bring her mouth or limbs to move in response.

“Ummmm,” Imogen responded in Noa's stead, “this is all pretty awesome, I mean, we can have this power? We too can be really cool blue fire breathing thingamabobs?”

Hayden was taken back a bit. “Well, everyone’s power is unique to them. You’ll—you’d learn more if you became initiates. There’s an observation process before—”

“This is something we gotta give some thought to, you know?” Imogen interrupted. “You know, like Uncle Ben said, with great power comes great responsibility. We have to give this serious thought, you know? We can’t just jump into something like this.”

“Oh,” Hayden’s disappointment was sharp and palpable. “Well, it really is a great opportunity. You’d gain power and importance that few people your age have.”

“And we thank you for the opportunity,” Noa’s voice was low, and wavered. “But we just aren’t ready—”

“Noa,” Hayden pressed, and Noa shuddered hearing her name from his lips, “when opportunity knocks, you need to answer the door. You can come here for a few days to feel us out, but you may lose this opportunity if you do so. I think it’s clear that this is the right choice. We live in this world, and unless we act to protect it, we’ll lose everything. We can’t stand idly by and expect others to take care of this for us.”

“I—” Noa stammered.

“Back off of them,” Denny finally said, through gritted teeth.

Hayden stared back at him with an unhinged, angry gaze that stole Noa’s breath. She didn’t think a look could be a murder threat until that moment. She grabbed Denny’s hand, but he shook her off.

Hayden’s face returned to normal.

“How can you turn this down?” Hayden puffed up and backed Noa against the table, moving around Imogen and Denny. “Your brother has already joined, don’t you trust him?”

“Well,” Noa wrung her hands, looking to Imogen and Denny behind Hayden. “I just don’t know if I can make such an important decision while my life is still a mess—”

“I helped you find a new home,” Hayden was stern. “The church has helped you get your life back together. Your life will only become less of a mess when you join us.”

“She might still join,” Imogen argued, “just not today.”

“We’re always judging your character,” Hayden was flabbergasted. “This does not reflect well upon you. If you think you can just join when you please, any time from now, it will appear to my superiors that you don’t really want this, and that you aren’t taking this very real threat seriously.”

“Let’s be real here,” Imogen was defiant. She moved around Hayden’s body block and stood firm, next to Noa. “Y’all are promising supernatural powers, the protection of supernatural beings from this upcoming war or whatever—it sounds really, really ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous?” Hayden was tense. “You witnessed our power yourself, how can you disbelieve?”

“Nothing that couldn’t be done with a few strobe lights and fog machines,” Imogen shrugged, waving her hand dismissively.

Hayden’s eyes narrowed. “Weren’t all of you there when a ghost appeared at the lake? You know something strange is going on.”

Imogen shrugged. “The news said that was just mass hysteria over a weather balloon.”

“Well,” Hayden’s voice crackled with indignation. “I—I think you’ll find eventually that this battle is very real, and you’ll feel foolish to have been so skeptical.”

“Naaaaah,” Imogen replied. “I mean, look,” she grabbed a pamphlet and waved it around, “these things seem like normal church stuff. You don’t even mention the whole demon war thing. And you won’t let us have our phones! Why? Don’t want to leave proof?”

“Outsiders wouldn’t understand, they’d try to stop us, leaving the world vulnerable!” Hayden snapped.

“And why are most of the people here kids without parents?” Imogen asked. “That’s weird.”

“Young people are simply more receptive to the unknown. Do you really think we should be asking parental permission when the future is at stake?”

Imogen put her hands on her hips. “Yeah, actually. I do. I love my parents. I trust what they say. You want us to agree to something when we don’t have any information about it. My mom always tells me to read the fine print before signing up for something. You hiding something?”

Hayden’s eyes narrowed. “You’re worried that we’re hiding something?”

“You so obviously are.”

The storm behind Hayden’s eyes indicated that he was brewing a scathing retort, but before he could unleash it, Mr. Wilson put a hand on his shoulder. “Can I talk to you in private, for a moment?” He said.

“All right,” Hayden said, still filled with rage. They walked to a corner of the room.

“Noa,” Denny’s voice was scratchy. “I dunno what’s gonna happen to me because of this, but—”

“Shhh,” Imogen held up a hand. “Oh wow, Wilson is telling Hayden to lay off of Noa, and that’s she’s not worth it, but—”

“You can hear them?” Noa whispered back.

“Shhhhh,” Imogen said again. “Oh shit, Hayden said ‘oh no, this one’s personal. She’s going to be one of us.’ Oh shit, Noa. Let’s just get the hell out of here. I’ll get a new cell phone.”

Denny gave up on pretending not to be with Noa and dropped his crutches to the ground, staggered over to her and gripped her tightly.

“Just—god, get to another town and don’t look back.”

“How did you hear that?” Noa said.

“The ghost,” Imogen said.

“You can see it the whole time?” Noa boggled.

Imogen nodded. “He’s just shouting at me what they’re saying, ‘cause I’m the only one that can hear him.”

“Please, don’t let anyone hear you say that,” Denny warned, even as he fell apart on Noa.

“Why would this be personal to him?” Noa said as she stroked Denny’s hair. “What does he mean by that? I didn’t even know him until today—why would he have it out for me? I don’t get it.”

“‘Cause he’d do anything to hurt me,” Denny said. “And now he knows the best way to do that.”

Noa froze. “I should have listened to you. Oh god, I should have listened to you all along.”

“I understand why you didn’t,” Denny sniffled. “I should have told you more—but I didn’t think you’d believe me. Worse—I thought you’d—”

He couldn’t finish his thought, however, as Hayden returned, with Silas by his side. Imogen picked Denny’s crutches from the ground and she and Noa helped him pull himself together.

“Noa,” Silas said. “You’re staying, right?”

“No,” Noa had enough of trying to placate her brother. “This is not for me, Silas.”

“Really?” Silas huffed. “You’d rather just be a regular, powerless idiot? You would choose that? Who would say, ‘no thanks, I don’t want sweet super powers.’ Who would choose that?”

“Me, apparently,” Noa became gruff.

“Well, I hope you have fun sleeping on the street then,” Silas said.

“You ass!” Imogen began.

“Now wait, Silas,” Hayden tried to be the voice of reason. “I know you believe in this deeply, but we aren’t here to force people to do things they don’t want. Noa, why don’t you and your brother join me at my home for dinner tonight? After the initiation ceremony you don’t want to attend? I’m afraid we’ve made a bad impression on you, and I’d like to try and fix that.”

Noa looked at Denny. “Your house?”

Denny just stared past her at the wall, not giving her any indication of what she ought to do.

“You know, that’s a great idea,” Silas said. “Look, Dr. Hayden is great. He can explain everything, and you’ll understand.”

“Don’t!” Denny blurted, as if it was painful to speak.

Imogen put a hand on his back.

Silas shot him a look of pure venom, then turned back around. He was able to immediately affect a sweet demeanor when he looked at Noa. “Come on, we’re the only family each other has. We really need to stick together.”

Noa looked at her feet. “Well, all right, I guess.” After what she’d just witnessed, saying yes was insane, but he was her brother, and she may have been the only one who could convince him he was in a dangerous cult.

“Come on guys,” Imogen tugged at Noa’s arm, and touched Denny’s forearm. “You both can come to my place until then, I’ll just drop you off later.”

At that moment, Noa was so glad Imogen had insisted on coming with them.

“Denny is staying,” Hayden said.

“I brought him here,” Imogen argued, “I can take him home—”

“No,” Hayden said, “he’ll come home with me. Thank you for the offer, though.”

“But we want him to come with us,” Noa became desperate.

“Please, ladies, it’s time to go,” Hayden began to shoo them out by walking towards them and encroaching upon their space.

Noa felt like she should do something. What would Hayden do to Denny? What could he do to him?

“I,” Noa was shaking. With nothing to lose, she stepped around Hayden to Denny and put her arms around his neck. “I’ll see you tonight,” she whispered, then kissed him on the cheek.

“I love you,” he whispered back, though he didn’t return her embrace.

“It’s time for you to leave now,” Hayden said, holding the door open for them.

“You’re not going to get away with this,” Imogen said. “After I tell my parents what’s happening here, you and your little Heaven’s Gate but with teenagers thing you’ve got going on here, you’ll be all over the news!”

Hayden smirked. “That would be truly unfortunate. Almost as unfortunate as if your new friends here learned why you had to leave the Performing Arts Academy.”

Imogen’s eyes went wide, and her jaw dropped.

“How do you know—” she began.

“Oh,” Hayden cut her off with his lackadaisical interjection, “I hear things, here and there.”

The blood drained from Imogen’s face, and she became ashen.

“You wouldn’t dare tell anyone,” Imogen hissed.

“No,” Hayden agreed, “that wouldn’t be very professional, now would it? Word can get around in mysterious ways, though, child. In ways that could never be traced back to me.”

“You,” Imogen stammered, “you asshole! You’re trying to blackmail me?”

Hayden chuckled. “I would never do such a thing. I’m merely making a comparison here. I’m merely stating that you disclosing what you’ve seen here would be unfortunate, and making a comparison to something else that would also be unfortunate.” He leaned in close to her. “Like everyone finding out your secret.”

Imogen wrenched away from him. Tears flowed down her cheeks, and her muscles were taut like a cornered animal.

“You asshole,” Imogen gritted her teeth.

Noa really didn’t know what to do. Clearly Hayden was doing something terrible to Imogen, but she didn’t understand what.

“Imogen,” she whispered as she tugged on her friend’s sleeve, “what’s happening?”

Imogen ignored her.

“Noa,” Hayden said, his tone as cloying as always when he spoke to her, as if he were talking to a small child, “what is your answer about dinner?”

“I’ll have dinner with you,” Noa replied, “but since joining this is a requirement for living with them, I’m not going back with Silas.”

Hayden’s face almost hardened into a scowl, but he stopped himself just short of glaring at her. “Suit yourself, then. We’ll see you at six. DJ knows the way to my house, he can give you directions.”

“Well, you’re never going to see or hear from DJ again, after what you just did!” Imogen spat as they stepped outside.

“Are you sure about that?” Harlow called as they just stepped outside, and Noa was still completely confused. Was he talking to the ghost? Could he see it too?

Imogen stopped in her tracks.

Hayden went on. “He used to come into my office to vent a lot about things, you know. I’m not sure you’ll be able to convince him to stay away.”

He closed the door. Imogen reeled on it.

“Asshole!” She shouted. Imogen shouted toward the door, allowing Noa to pull her away. “You’re a pig, you’re a—”

She stopped and sniffed.

Noa squeezed her hand. “That was so weird, what was that about?”

Imogen stormed to her car, and Noa followed, piling into the passenger seat after her.

Imogen put her head on her steering wheel and began crying.

Noa put a hand on Imogen’s back and rubbed it. “What’s the matter? I don’t understand—do you think he means your brother is a part of this? Why are you so upset?”

Imogen looked over at Noa. “No. That’s not it. Didn’t you hear him say he was going to tell everyone what happened at my old school? God, are you really that oblivious?”

Noa was stunned, she pulled back her hand and frowned. She heard him mention that, but she didn’t know why that was so terrible. She wondered sometimes if people’s voices also resonated on another frequency she couldn’t hear, and perhaps she missed a word here and there.

“Yes,” Noa admitted it, “I’m always oblivious, and I never know the right thing to say. Why do you think I don’t have any friends?”

Imogen sighed. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Look—ugh. There is something I haven’t told you. But, if people at school found out it’d ruin my life, Noa. God, I thought I was safe here now. I had to leave the Performing Arts Academy—”

Imogen cried some more.

“Talk to me,” Noa said. “I don’t care why you got expelled. I don’t care if you stabbed someone—”

“I didn’t get expelled!” She said. “I—I guess I might as well tell you. Maybe it’ll hurt less if you turn on me now than when you find out from rumors at school.”

Noa felt like their conversation was completely spiraling out of control. “Turn on you? I would never—”

“I’m trans, Noa,” she said.

Noa took a moment to absorb this. People being trans was one of those things she had heard a lot about, but in a very peripheral way that allowed her not to think very deeply about it.

“Okay,” Noa said. “I’m sorry for being so dense, but is that the secret Hayden was talking about?”

Imogen groaned. “Yes!”

Noa let this steep in her mind for a long moment as well. “You know—I actually think most of the other kids at school will be okay with—”

“It’s not them I’m worried about,” Imogen sighed. “Aside from a few kids no one liked anyway, the kids at the Performing Arts Academy were pretty cool too! I miss my friends there! I was popular! It’s the parents who came after me with pitchforks!”

“Oh,” Noa said, and her small utterance stopped Imogen, somehow. “I—I never know what to say in situations like these,” she said. “But—I love you—and I will always be on your side, no matter what happens.”

Imogen looked up at Noa, then pulled her into a hug.

“I think you’re better at this knowing what to say thing than you think,” Imogen sniffed.

Noa squeezed her, and they embraced for a long moment.

“I don’t want you going to that psycho’s house for dinner,” Imogen broke the silence.

“I have to,” Noa said. “I think my brother really is brainwashed or something and—god. I need to for Denny. I don’t have any idea what I can do for them, or about this, but I have to try.”

Imogen started the car and they began to drive off.

“I should give you my switchblade,” Imogen suggested.

Noa laughed, though it was clearly a fake laugh.

“Imogen,” Noa began after a long while of replaying the evening’s events in her head, “you can talk to that ghost?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Why is it following us around?”

She bit her lip and hesitated, and Noa knew whatever she was going to say next wouldn’t be the whole truth. “It hasn’t told me that. It’s kind of mysterious, ya know?”

Noa sat back closed her eyes. “I don’t know how much longer I can deal with all of this.”

Chapter Six

Imogen opened the door, let Noa pass, and then made sure to slam it as she stormed in.

“DJ!” She shouted. He wasn’t in the room, but ran down the hallway with wide, frightened eyes.

“What?” He said. “What’s going on?”

She balled her fists and stared at him, and Martha and Deangelo entered the room with just as much concern.

“Do you know what Harlow Hayden did today?” Imogen asked DJ, her eyes welling with tears. “He threatened to out me to everyone, you know, because he knew everything about me because of you!”

DJ stood there, looking stunned.

“Is this true?” Martha asked, her voice small and tinged with disappointment.

DJ’s eyes welled with tears, and he looked away in shame. “I’m sorry, Immy. It was so long ago! I would never do anything like that now and I—I didn’t know he would ever do anything like that. I never said anything bad about you, I just, you know, talked—”

“How could you!” Imogen cried. “It wasn’t his business! It wasn’t—”

“There’s no way I could have known he’d do this!” DJ argued. “I thought he was a good guy! He always supported the LGBT kids on the team—I thought he was a safe person to talk to.”

“But it wasn’t your secret to tell!” Imogen cried.

“I know!” DJ cried as well. “I know. I feel like shit for it now, believe me.”

Imogen frowned, and then the dam broke and the waterworks began. DJ began to cry as well.

“I really am sorry,” DJ said. “I’ll never do something like that again, I swear it—”

Imogen slammed into his chest and hugged him, and they cried on each other’s shoulders.

Noa looked away, feeling like an intruder on their moment.

After a while, they both wiped tears from their eyes and looked at each other.

“I’m sorry,” DJ said again.

“I know,” Imogen said. “You know I can’t stay mad at you.”

Noa felt free to look up again.

“I don’t care how he found out,” Deangelo shook his head rhythmically, his frown so deep it pinched his entire face. “No grown man or anyone else at that school is going to harass my child.”

Martha nodded. “We’ll go to the police about the Church—and if he’s still around after that, we’ll go to the school board if we have to.”

“What the heck all happened at that Church?” Deangelo demanded.

Her voice still sodden with tears, Imogen launched into a description of events that didn’t come close to adequately describing the weirdness of that moment. She said they used lights and smoke to pretend something supernatural was going on—and Noa realized she didn’t agree with that. It was real. She was certain of that.

“Noa,” Martha looked at her with an intense glare she hadn’t seen the likes of since her mother died, “you are not going to dinner at this man’s house tonight.”

Noa’s eyes widened. “You heard how crazy this place was—I’ve got to at least try and talk to my brother. I need to make sure Denny is okay, too—”

Martha seemed shocked that ‘the look’ had failed, for a moment. Then she doubled down.

“It’s not your problem anymore. We’ll get the police involved—somebody. You can’t just pressure kids with family problems into joining cults! That’s got to be illegal somehow, right Angel?”

Deangelo frowned. “She’s right, Noa. I think this man is dangerous. Very dangerous.”

Noa swallowed hard. “I think you’re right. I think you’re both right—but I don’t have a home right now, and Silas and Denny are all I have. And—I’m sure you don’t think a sixteen year old’s relationship is important, but Denny is my best friend too, and—”

“We don’t feel that way,” Martha assured. “We know how much your friends mean to you at your age. Angel and I met in high school. We’re worried about him too—trust me.”

Noa was stunned for a moment.

“They’re right,” Imogen said. “I don’t think you should go.”

Noa looked at her, feeling a strange mix of betrayal and love.

“I’m sorry,” Noa said, so quietly everyone leaned in to hear. “Even if I have to sleep in a dumpster tonight, I’ve got to make sure Denny is okay.”

Martha sighed, walked up to her and put her hands on her shoulders. “Your safety is our priority. You’re not going.”

Noa felt terrible disappointing the Hendersons, but her fear for what Hayden might do to Denny overruled her sense of self-preservation.

“You’re not going,” Martha repeated.

“I can give her my switch blade,” Imogen suggested.

“She’s not going!” Martha snapped, and glared at us both.

Noa looked Martha in the eye and tried to plead her best case. “You guys know where I’ll be. It’s not like he can just kill me and dispose of my body. I just want to see if my brother and Denny are okay. If anything goes wrong, I’ll run out of the house as fast as I can and call Imogen.”

Martha raised an eyebrow at Deangelo and crossed her arms.

Deangelo shrugged. “If you don’t text once every three minutes describing exactly what’s going on, followed by a different emoji, I’m driving over there with my shotgun.”

“And you’re back in an hour regardless,” Martha added, clearly not pleased with this capitulation.

Noa was going to go, though, and she was determined to get her boys out of there.

Chapter Seven

Imogen grabbed Noa’s hands and pressed her switchblade into them as they stood outside of Hayden’s door.

“Text me or call me if anything really weird happens,” she said. “I’ll bust down the door and get you out. This place is only ten minutes away. I’ll be ready to come get you the second you call, all right?”

“I’m so nervous,” Noa said. “I’m nauseous.”

“We could just leave this doorstep right now and never come back,” Imogen suggested.

“No, I’ve got to do this,” Noa sighed, then turned toward the door. “I’ll call you as soon as this is over, I guess. Please, appreciate your family. They’re awesome.”

“I always do,” Imogen said, then turned back to her car.

Noa took a deep breath, held it, and rang the doorbell. This house was so normal—just a small, nondescript place in a cul-de-sac with a well-maintained lawn. It was all lies, though. From the flower bed to the wind chime to the brown welcome mat beneath her feet.

Noa startled when the door opened.

“Well hello, Ms. Landale!” Dr. Hayden greeted her warmly. “Come on in, come on in. Make yourself comfortable.”

Noa just nodded and walked inside—though she made sure to open her cell phone and set it to record everything he said before pocketing it again.

It was a cozy house with a plush carpet and plush furniture. Not a mansion by any means, but warm and inviting. Being the soccer coach, Dr. Hayden had pictures of himself with his teams over the years all over the walls. There was even one of him with DJ, holding up his acceptance letter to college. Not one picture of him with his own child, though. Noa stepped to the sofa and lowered herself in stages, as if she worried a monster would reach from beneath the cushions and pull her into the underworld.

“Silas isn’t here yet?” Noa asked.

“Ah, no, the Wilsons actually decided they all wanted to go out to dinner tonight. They’re really fond of your brother now, you know. It’s just you and me.”

“And Denny?”

Hayden maintained his smile. “Dennis is otherwise predisposed tonight.”

Noa could feel the pulse in her neck and temples. “He’s not here?”

“He’s with relatives tonight,” Hayden said.

Noa seethed. She knew he had no relatives to speak of that wouldn’t require a plane flight to reach. She clenched her fists and tried to keep calm.

“I’m making Irish stew,” Hayden said, walking toward the kitchen. He kept talking no matter how far from her he walked, and was soon cordoned off from her by a dining table and a pony wall. “Most people can only name corned beef and cabbage when thinking of Irish food, but this stew recipe has been passed down in my family for generations, I think you’ll find it to be delightful.”

Noa stopped listening to his cheerful rambling. Her eyes darted around the room—she stood up and sneaked toward the door and pulled down Hayden’s keychain. She peeled off two of the keys, stuffed them into her pockets and replaced the chain without making a sound. Blood pounded in her ears as she sat back down and put her hands in her lap.

“It’s almost ready,” Hayden said, then returned to the living room and sat beside her. “Now, Noa. I want to lay your fears about the Following of the Holy Seraph to rest. Feel free to ask me anything.”

“Where is Denny?” It was the only question she wanted an answer to.

Hayden frowned. “He’s safe. He’s not here right now—so he’s none of your concern.”

“He’s always my concern,” Noa’s voice was addled by her trembling.

Hayden sat next to her. Every muscle in Noa’s body tensed at once.

“Noa,” Hayden put a hand on her knee, which she stared at in horror. “I didn’t realize until this morning that he and you were—an item. That’s one of the reasons I felt the need to talk to you. I feel he may have poisoned the well, so to speak, when it comes to me, and the church.”

“He doesn’t really talk about it,” Noa lied.

Hayden sighed. “I know he can be charming, but, listen. He’s not what you think he is. I try my best to raise him into a good person, but he’s got—issues.”

Noa was afraid she might pass out if her breathing became any shallower.

“Has he told you that he sees a psychiatrist and a psychologist once a week?” Hayden said.

Noa shook her head.

“He’s been officially diagnosed with anti-social personality disorder—do you know what that is?”

“Not really.”

“People like that find willing victims to manipulate and control. Noa, your brother has told me about you. I know you were going through a vulnerable time when you met him. He saw that you were, well, depressed, and in need of friends, and took advantage of this.”

“By becoming my friend?”

Hayden looked up to the ceiling. “How do I word this—correctly? Almost everything he’s told you is a lie, to manipulate you. He exaggerates his disability—he can walk without forearm crutches. He uses them for attention.”

Noa couldn’t hide her incredulity any longer. She stared at Hayden as if he’d grown a second head.

“I know he’s tried to drive a wedge between you and your brother,” Hayden stammered, perhaps a bit unnerved by Noa’s angry glare.

“My brother’s done a good job of that on his own.”

With a patronizing shake of the head, Hayden was back in his element. “Can’t you see? That’s how effective he’s been at manipulating you. He’s turned you against your own family.”

Noa boggled. “You’re a real piece of work, you know that? Denny’s friendship saved my life. Even if there’s a shred of truth to what you’re saying, do you really expect me to throw away the one I love because he has a mental illness?”

“It’s more than just a ‘mental illness—’”

“Do you think you can manipulate me into deciding to trust you instead of him? Do you think I’m going to say, ‘oh, yes, you’re right, Denny, the one person who has been there for me for years, is actually terrible. Oh, you’re right, I really can’t tell when my own brother is being a complete asshole, I was just being manipulated! Please, crazy cult leader man, drug me! Or whatever it is you do to convince people they have super powers.’”

“I’m trying to help you—”

“Please! All those teenagers—that crazy light show—my god. I think this is some sort of human trafficking ring.”

Hayden just stared.

Noa suddenly began to sweat. “What have you done with Denny?” She asked again, quietly.

Hayden stood up and glared at Noa. She remembered that she was all of five-foot-three and alone with this man, in his house. She began to shake.

“I tried to do this the easy way,” he said. “I tried to be nice to you. I tried to help you.”

He leaned forward and grabbed her wrists. His face was almost touching hers as he went on, and she turned away from him.

“Who do you think you are? You’re homeless. You’re powerless. You have no family. I could kill you right now and throw your body into a gutter, and the police wouldn’t even investigate.”

Noa began to squirm and try to break away, but Hayden pinned her down.

“I don’t care about you, no one does.”

“Denny does,” Noa argued, “my brother does!”

Hayden laughed. His hot breath on Noa’s cheek made her stomach churn.

“No one who matters, I should have said.”

He stood, then pulled Noa up by her wrists, forcing her to stand.

“You were right about one thing,” he smiled, digging pills out of his pocket. “Although usually we get the kids to take these willingly.”

Noa began fighting with all of her strength to get away, but Hayden threw her to the ground, knocking the wind from her. She wheezed and tried to crawl, but he was on top of her. She clamped her mouth shut as tightly as she could manage and moved her head from side to side as he grasped for her, but he was bigger and stronger. He grabbed her chin tried to pry open her mouth so hard she thought he might break her jaw.

“Stop!” She cried out, though this gave him the opening to shove the pills in her mouth. He put his hands over her mouth and nose, suffocating her, trying to force her to swallow.

Tears streamed down Noa’s face as she held her breath. She was pinned down and couldn’t reach for the switchblade, though she did jolt and squirm with as much force as she could. She thought she was going to die for sure, until a familiar glimmer of hope in the form of sparkling golden light appeared in the room.

Hayden sat backwards, startled. Noa was able to turn and cough, spitting out the pills in her mouth. She pocketed one as she scrambled to her feet and bolted for the door.

“What the hell?” Hayden stared, though he didn’t run.

Noa’s guardian ghost. She was pretty sure it was incapable of actually physically doing anything to anyone, but she took the opportunity of Hayden’s confusion to get up and make a break for the door.

“You!” Hayden shouted at the ghost. “How did you escape?”

Noa threw the door open and ran. She ran as hard and as fast as she could, until she left the neighborhood and made it to a corner gas station. She ran into the women’s bathroom and pulled her phone from her pocket. She was crying and trembling so hard she almost dropped it.

“Imogen,” she cried.

“Where are you?” Imogen replied.

Noa couldn’t even answer. She was hyperventilating.

“Calm down baby,” Imogen said. “Come on, just give me a landmark and then you can go back to squeaking.”

“I’m at a gas station, in the bathroom,” Noa managed to say.

“The closest one to Hayden’s place?”

“Left from there.”

“All right.”

Imogen kept talking to Noa as she made her way there. The cashier knocked on the door to ask if Noa was okay, but she didn’t stop crying to answer. She just rocked back and forth on the ground, waiting for Imogen.

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Noa just kept reminding herself to breathe as she rinsed dishes and shoved them into the washer.

“I see what you’re doing here,” Martha said, standing behind her. “And trust me—I appreciate it. Getting my own kids to wash dishes is like pulling teeth.”

Noa kept scrubbing. “No, no, I’m not doing anything, I swear. I don’t expect to stay here often—”

“You know, my son’s best friend would eat twice as much as any of us when he stayed over,” Martha went on. “He never felt a lick of guilt for that, or all of the plates of his I had to wash. But I noticed you eating like a bird. I noticed your extra thanks, and insisting on cleaning everything—”

Noa’s eyes burned hot. “I’m not trying to get anything out of you, I swear, I’m not, this is the last night I’ll be here, I swear it!”

Martha walked up to Noa and grabbed the dish she held, making Noa lose her grip on it, allowing it to sink into the soapy water.

“It’s okay, Noa,” Martha put a hand on her shoulder. “I’m not trying to say you’re trying to move in or something. You’re a good girl, I know. Put the dishes down a second.”

Noa turned around, her back to the hot water and hard counter, and looked into Martha’s eyes.

“Imogen told me about—”

Noa wasn’t sure where Martha was going with this, because she was interrupted by the doorbell.

“A package?” Martha wondered.

Martha was beaten to the door by Deangelo, who opened it, leaving the security screen door closed.

“Can I help you?” He asked a short man with frosted black hair and a frosted black beard.

“Hi,” he said. “My name is Gabriel Kimbrel, but you can just call me Gabe. I’m a social worker.”

He was the same social worker Noa had seen for a short time just before being placed with the Wilsons. She was wary of him, now.

Deangelo stood firm for a moment, and Gabe held out his hand. Deangelo reluctantly took it.

“I was told that a young girl who had been kicked out of her house is here,” he said.

Deangelo nodded.

“May I come in?” Gabe tilted his head.

“All right,” Deangelo said, stepping aside to allow him entry.

Imogen grabbed Noa and held her head against her chest while giving Gabe a death stare.

“Noa?” Gabe looked at her and lowered his head. “My agency got a call from Mr. Wilson. He told us that you ran away.”

Noa didn’t answer, and instead buried her face in Imogen’s chest as if it would hide her. She didn’t have the energy left to talk to him.

“Why don’t you come in and take a seat, Gabe,” Martha suggested, walking into the living room to lead them there.

Gabe walked in and sat on the sofa. Noa realized it was time to face the music, and pulled away from Imogen to follow, staring at the ground the entire way.

“Noa, I know you’d like to stay in this town,” Gabe began, “but there is a really nice place just an hour away where you can go, and you could still visit with your brother.”

“I know I have no choice,” Noa continued to look at the ground.

“I’m not trying to punish you,” Gabe sighed. “Teens in your situation are extremely vulnerable—ending up on the street would be the worst case scenario for you. I swear I’ve worked with this family before, I think you’ll get along with them—”

“She can stay here,” Deangelo interrupted.

Noa looked up. She saw Martha and Imogen look at him with surprise, but Imogen squeaked and hugged Noa so hard she couldn’t breathe.

“I can’t ask you guys to do this,” Noa began to cry.

“Well, you didn’t ask,” Deangelo replied. “I offered.”

Gabe looked at Noa. “Is this okay with you? Do you want to stay here?”

Noa looked up and nodded. “Yes I mean, I swear I won’t be a burden—I’ll get a job, I’ll clean, I’ll—”

“I’m not worried about you being a burden,” Deangelo assured.

“Well,” Gabe got up from the couch. “If you change your mind, here’s my card, but—you can call me if you need to as well, Noa. Please listen to what I said—I don’t want you to end up homeless, all right?”

Noa was shocked he wasn’t insisting she leave. If he and Hayden were working together, she was certain he’d be trying to push her into the home of someone who could force her into that church, and force her to take those pills.

“All right,” Noa sniffed and cried a bit harder, though Imogen was still cutting off her air supply.

“It was nice meeting you,” Deangelo said, extending his hand to Gabe.

They said some cheery goodbyes, although as Gabe was about to leave, Noa moved away from Imogen and looked at him.

“Gabe,” her voice cracked, “do you know Dr. Hayden? Are you friends with him?”

Gabe seemed thrown off by this question. “I mean, he’s a counselor at AHS. I get calls from him about students, but we don’t have coffee together every day or something.”

“Could you check on his son? I was over there tonight and—” she paused. “He wasn’t. I’m worried about him. Everyone loves Hayden but he’s not a good person. No one will ever believe me but if Denny isn’t there I—”

Gabe frowned. “Do you have a reason to believe something is going on other than ‘he wasn’t at home?’”

“Oh yeah,” Imogen said, “his dad is in a weird cult and pressures kids into joining some kind of weirdo spirit army, and he was a dick to Denny when we were there, and—”

“And he hurt me,” Noa confessed. “Tonight. He got me in his house, alone with him, and tried to force pills down my throat—I spit them on the ground. I recorded audio of him yelling at me.”

Noa pulled out her phone and played it. She skipped through the parts where he told her lies about Denny. Hearing him tell her he could throw her in the gutter and no one would care, and hearing her own strangled cries made her stomach clench.

When it was finished playing, Noa walked over to Gabe and handed him a pill from her pocket. “I have no idea what this is.”

Gabe took the pill from her and stared at it.

“I’m sure he’ll figure out some way to make this seem like everything was my fault,” Noa said. “He’s always told Denny the police would never listen to him. He told me no one would care about me, either—”

“I—he’s wrong about that,” Gabe closed his hand over the pill. “They will believe you. I don’t see how they can’t. Not with this evidence.”

“Then let’s do it,” Noa’s eyes narrowed. “I want that man in jail.”

Chapter Eight

Noa didn’t steal keys from Hayden for nothing. She’d had a harrowing night of being questioned by police and just wanted to collapse in bed, but she could not. As soon as everyone in the Henderson household was asleep, she got up from the sofa and struck out into the cold, black night on her bicycle, filled with the hope that she would find Denny in the back room of the church, and filled with dread that she might find him in a state other than alive and well.

The roads were empty, but her heart skipped a beat as it became clear a car was behind her as its headlights illuminated the dark world before her. Her heart began beating quickly as the rate of

illumination's growth slowed and she knew she was being followed. She walked faster, but the car crawled alongside her.

"Hey pretty baby," the driver rolled down the window and shouted at her.

Noa turned and sighed with relief and frustration. "Oh god, Imogen, why would you follow me out here?"

"You thought I wouldn't notice you sneaking out? Girl, I invented sneaking out. I couldn't leave your trial-sized ass alone out here at night, are you kidding me? You should just have 'hey pedos, come and get it' in flashing lights on your back right now."

"I'll be fine," Noa said. "I don't have much farther to go."

"I know where you're going," Imogen said, parking the car and leaning out the passenger window, wagging her eyebrows at Noa. "You think they have Denny trapped there or something? You think they have a secret dungeon?"

"Imogen—no. I'm sorry. I can't involve you in this."

"Too bad. I'm already involved. And Denny's my friend too, remember? We made it Facebook official."

Noa turned around to get back on her bike.

"If you keep going I'll just keep following you and catcalling you the whole way there."

Noa shook her head and complied, piling into the passenger seat.

"I just—I want to find something. More proof that Hayden is not a good person. I don't want him to get away with this. I want the police to search every molecule of Auburn Hills for Denny."

"You're gonna wander around a church looking for clues? How do you plan to get in, Scooby Doo?"

Noa shrugged. "I stole keys from Hayden while he was in the kitchen—one has a strange symbol on it. I'm hoping they'll open the front door and the back room. If neither unlocks the front door, I'll throw a rock through it. I didn't see an alarm when we were there."

Imogen's eyes widened. "Wow, I didn't think you'd have that in you. I'm impressed."

"I normally wouldn't," Noa admitted, "but you have no idea how scared I am of what he might've done to Denny. He hasn't texted me or called me since we left that terrible service. He's texted me every day for two and a half years! And after what happened tonight—" she shuddered as the thought of Hayden's hand over her mouth as she suffocated surfaced in her mind.

Imogen nodded, continuing to Noa's destination.

"Well, let's go check it out," she said as she parked.

"No," Noa put her hand on Imogen's. "Please stay in the car, here. I really, really don't want you to get in trouble. I'm only getting myself into this."

Imogen unbuckled her seatbelt and opened the door.

“Gah!” Noa threw her head backwards in frustration, hitting the headrest with a thud. She piled out and followed Imogen who had gotten ahead of her quickly.

Noa walked up with the keyring she’d stolen and held it up, while Imogen simply tried the handle.

“Uh, it’s open,” Imogen said, as the door swung outward at her behest. “I guess all of the cheap junk in there isn’t worth more than fifteen bucks, but jeez.”

As they walked in, Imogen used an app on her phone to turn it into a flashlight. Noa could make out the folding chairs and cheap, gaudy podium at the front of the room in the moonlight.

“Ugh,” Noa became tense, walked over to the podium and kicked it. It fell over with a thud.

“Don’t do that!” Imogen chided. “Someone’s gonna hear us in here and call the cops.”

Noa paid her no attention and walked to the door in the back of the room the deacons emerged from for the ceremony.

“If there’s something to be found here, it’ll be in this room,” Noa said, then tried the door.

It was locked.

“They’re more concerned about this one, I suppose,” she turned and looked at Imogen.

“How did you—why did you take those keys?”

“They’re big,” Noa said. “Like a key you’d have for a workplace. I figure he’d have one for here, and for his office at the school. I would have swiped the entire keychain, but I didn’t want him to notice right away. Although—I suppose he’ll have his hands full with the police now.”

Imogen grinned. “Yup.”

Noa went to work using one of the keys on the door. The first one she tried worked.

“Well, good job Sherlock,” Imogen said.

Noa wasted no time throwing the door open and running in. She flipped on the light and closed the door behind her as soon as Imogen cleared it.

“Denny!” She shouted, then looked around. “This is a closet. How did they all even fit in here?”

Imogen stomped on the ground. “Look, this is a trap door, going underground. Holy crap, this is pretty creepy.”

Noa nodded. “Wait outside—who knows what kind of strange things lurk in here.”

Imogen rolled her eyes. “I feel like you’re just saying that to make yourself feel better if we both explode. You know damn well I’m not staying behind.”

Noa frowned. “Fine.” She knelt down and lifted the wooden handle to find a tight, metal, spiral staircase leading below. Noa began climbing down the stairs.

“Denny!” She shouted again.

The room downstairs was dark, but illuminated just enough to see as the walls glowed like blacklight. It was cavernous, an entirely different church underground with stone seats and an altar made of some sort of giant crystal which drained in gradient of color from its blood red tip to its bone white base.

“This is where all their funding went,” Imogen commented.

Noa ran around the room, peering into every corner for a room or box or—anything.

“Denny,” she shouted again. “If you can hear me—please, please call to me. I’ll come to you.”

Imogen put a hand on her shoulder. “You were really expecting to find him here, weren’t you?”

Noa walked over to the altar and kicked it, then sat beside it.

Imogen held up her phone. Its flash illuminated the room. “I’m recording this. This is wild. Denny might not be here, but the whole world is gonna notice this pit of despair once I put this all over the internet.”

“Good idea,” Noa said.

“This is what you said you were here for,” Imogen reminded Noa. “Evidence. This creepo basement is evidence in itself, I think.”

Noa felt a little more hopeful. She got up and decided to scan the room once again. She returned to one particular shelf she’d passed over before. It was covered in hundreds of crystal balls. She gasped as she took a closer look at one.

“Imogen,” she beckoned her friend, “take a look at this.”

Imogen walked over to Noa and stared at the crystal balls. In the one Noa was looking at, she could see many rapidly flickering flames of many colors—though they almost seemed like tiny people, panicking at the sight of Noa.

“Whoa,” Imogen said. “Are there like—a whole bunch of ghosts trapped in these things?”

“Ghosts?” Noa’s eyes widened. “Earlier—when Hayden saw the ghost that’s been following me he said—he was surprised that the ghost had escaped. Could he have meant from one of these?”

Noa looked at all of the crystal balls. They all seemed the same except for one, which was black and filled with stars, like a galaxy contained in a ball.

Noa reached toward it, but Imogen slapped her hand.

“Are you serious?” Imogen hissed. “Don’t touch that, seriously.” She then recorded it. “God, it’s like that movie—Return to OZ? You ever seen it? With a witch that had a room full of heads? Except this is a room full of angry, screaming souls. God Noa, let’s get out of here.”

“What if they trapped Denny in one of these?” Noa said.

“Noa, we are getting in way over our heads with this stuff,” Imogen said. “Look, let’s get out of here. I’ll google like, paranormal people or something. Maybe there’s a whole group of rebels out there or

something that can help us. But we're just asking to end up in a hell void or something hanging around here! Let's get out."

Noa balled her hands at her chin and closed her eyes. Imogen started walking back toward the staircase.

"I'm taking one."

"Oh my god," Imogen snapped, "if you were in a horror movie, no one would feel sorry for you if you died anymore! Come on, leave these alone. Don't touch them!"

Noa turned around and looked around the room. "Record this, Imogen. If something really weird happens, you can show that to the cops. Tell them to find Denny."

"Do you have a death wish?" Imogen shrieked.

Noa ignored this. She held her hand out towards the ball that looked like the night sky and hovered over it. It had an energy that compelled her—she knew she shouldn't even touch it, but she thought if she just left, Hayden would find a way to explain away Imogen's video. He'd say Denny moved to a farm in the country. He'd find a way to make Noa miserable. She'd turn away and never see Denny again.

Noa grabbed the ball, intending to shove it in her shirt. As she did, however, she felt a pulse of electrical energy, and a wave of nausea. She felt herself expand throughout the room, dissipating into the universe.

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Imogen watched Noa's soul zapped from her body, instantly. It was a dark blue, quite unlike the golden ghost that had been following her. Her spirit went inside of the orb she touched, and her body fell to the ground.

"Oh no," Imogen began to cry. She looked up at the yellow ghost. "I swear, I tried to get her not to do it. Oh god—I just can't believe she did that."

The ghost floated toward Noa's fallen body and stared at it.

"This is everything I didn't want to happen," he said.

"Why didn't we just tell her the truth?" Imogen wiped tears from her eyes. "Why didn't you want her to know who you were?"

The ghost shimmered in form. Imogen's eyes widened as she watched it form a golden cloud around Noa's body, and then soak into her, like a morning mist into the landscape.

Noa's eyes opened. She sat up and shook her head. "If you told her the truth—that the 'ghost' haunting her was her brother and his real body had been possessed, Denny would have known about your ability, because Noa tells him everything. I was trying to save you."

It wasn't Noa anymore behind those brown eyes—it was Silas.

Imogen blinked. “He already does know. He’s known this whole time! Man! I wish you told me that was your freaking hang up! Why are you so terrible at communicating?”

Silas growled. “Whatever! It doesn’t matter. How long has Denny known?”

“Known what?”

“That you can see ghosts! Christ, woman! It’s what we were just talking about!”

Imogen stopped and considered this. “Since the day I met him.”

Noa’s cheeks—now Silas’s, Imogen supposed—went pale and clammy. “How did I miss that?”

Imogen shrugged. “It was right after you appeared at the park.”

He sighed. “Of course. God, every time I used the energy to make myself appear I disappeared for—for, for like forever. Like, I didn’t exist anymore.”

“It’s always for five hours,” Imogen said. “I timed it.” She thought for a minute, and then added, “and I mean, Noa knows too. I was telling them everything Hayden was saying while we were at the church.”

Silas stared at her as if she’d grown a second head. “I specifically told you not to do that!”

Imogen shrugged and held up her hands. “What can I say? I’m ungovernable.”

Silas began to pace and clench his hands in agitation. “You’re going to be in incredible danger,” he finally warned. “Hayden would stop at nothing to be able to see into the spirit realm.”

“Well, how the hell is he going to find out?”

“Because Denny is one of them.”