

LAST BUS TO EVER LAND



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AUTUMN



ONE

THIS NEVER WOULD HAVE HAPPENED IF I HADN'T NAMED THE bloody cat Tinker Bell.

He stares at me over Leanne Watson's shoulder as she sprints up Leith Walk, his face squashed against her neck. Fake fingernails dig into his ginger fur; one gold hoop earring falls over his head like a lopsided halo. Leanne glances back, almost tripping over a buggy sliding out of the co-op, and grins.

"Come on, Fairy! Come save Tinker Bell!"

Tink wriggles and yowls, the way he always does when anyone but me tries to pick him up, but Leanne's grip is like a vise. (I should know; she's had me in a headlock more than once.) Michelle McInnes chugs along after her, pulling up her jeans as she runs.

"Yeah . . . Fairy," she wheezes. "Come . . . get . . . him."

My calves ache, and my lungs are starting to burn, but I force myself up the street, cursing my sister for leaving the door open, and Leanne for being the school's top long-distance runner, and Tink for being slow enough to let her catch him in the first place. Heads turn as the girls run past. Someone yells something about calling the SPCA, but nobody tries to stop them. Nobody ever tries to stop them.

"Fly, Fairy, fly!" Leanne shouts. "Go on—you can do it!"

They dodge an elderly couple and a man carrying a crate of fruit into the Chinese supermarket and disappear around the corner. I follow them along an empty street, into a car park bordered by two blocks of dull gray flats. Leanne comes to a halt by a shiny red Mini; Michelle collapses against the boot, her cheeks the same color as the bodywork.

"That's actually no' bad, Brody." Leanne hasn't even broken a sweat. Her ponytail is still neat, her winged eyeliner slick as ever. "Where was that sprint in PE yesterday, eh?"

Tink mews and kicks against Leanne's denim jacket. I know how he feels. Leanne and Michelle have been giving me grief since I moved to Mackay House five years ago, after they caught me roaming around the yard shouting after a cat named Tinker Bell and decided I would do for target practice. Should have called him Peter, or Smee, or Captain Hook. Nobody would mess with a cat named Hook.

"Come on, Leanne." I can feel my face burning, no doubt turning the spots on my cheeks reddish purple. "Give him back. You're hurting him."

“Leaaaaanne, you’re hurting hiiim,” she mimics, making my voice two octaves higher and a whole lot whinier. “Ask nicely, Fairy.”

Aye, like that’ll work. I lunge and make a grab for Tink, but Leanne lifts him out of my reach. I’m on the tall side for a fifteen-year-old boy, but Leanne’s a giant: six foot one in trainers, an NBA player in heels. Tink screeches as she dangles him over her head.

“Naaaaaaants *ingonyamaaaaaaa bagithi Baba*,” she sings, like Rafiki presenting Simba on Pride Rock. “Oh, sorry, Peter Pan. Wrong Disney.”

Michelle breaks into giggles. “I know! He’s got to say, ‘I do believe in fairies.’ Like in the film, eh? That’s the only way you’re getting him back, Brody.”

Leanne looks at me expectantly. I glance around the car park. There’s nobody to help me. No one unloading their shopping. No parents wrestling a toddler into the back seat. Tink squirms from side to side, mewling pitifully. Leanne’s grip tightens.

“I do believe in fairies,” I blurt out. “There. Gonnae give him back now?”

Michelle shakes her head. “Nah, you’ve got to say it like you mean it. Louder. Clap your hands an’ all.”

My cheeks burn. I loved *Peter Pan* when I was wee. Tinker Bell in particular—so much so that I named my cat after her. At five years old, I didn’t realize there was anything “unusual” about that. I haven’t read the book or seen the film in years, but still . . . that story meant something to me. I don’t want my

memories of it to fuse with that time I made a tit of myself in a car park off Leith Walk.

But I know Leanne. She won't give up until she's served me my daily dose of humiliation, and I need to get the cat back. So I say it. I say it at normal volume, but she's still not satisfied. I say it slightly louder, then louder again, and again. Soon I'm shouting the words, slapping my hands together so hard the palms sting, until—

“Hey!”

My chant cuts out, and the girls' sniggering with it. Above us, leaning out of a third-floor window, is a boy: a boy of around seventeen, with light brown hair, a cigarette in one hand, and wings. Bright blue wings, tall and sleek as a ship's sails, bursting past the window frame—two strokes of color against the pebble-dash landscape.

For a moment, Leanne and Michelle are completely silent.

Then they explode into laughter.

The boy frowns. For a second, I think he's about to have a go at me for shouting about fairies outside his window at half six on a Wednesday evening, but instead he stubs his cigarette out on the windowsill, gently maneuvers his wings past the frame, and disappears back into the flat.

Leanne is laughing so hard she can hardly breathe; Michelle's bent double, screeching harder than she did the time Rachel Rhodes sat in red paint in Art and it looked like she'd got her period.

“Hey, another fairy,” she says, spluttering. “Your fairy god-mother, Brody, come to rescue you.”

Black Rimmel tears are running down Leanne’s cheeks. As she goes to wipe them away, Tink soap-slips out of her grip and shoots away from us, sliding beneath a battered Vauxhall Astra. I start to run after him, but I hear a door being violently flung open behind me. I turn to see the boy with the wings striding across the car park. He looks thunderous.

The girls’ laughter peters out. The guy isn’t that big. He’s tall but skinny—I can see the outline of his ribs beneath his paint-splattered T-shirt—and yet there’s something imposing about him, even with the wings on. The tension in his shoulders, maybe, or the way his boots scuff the gravel. He comes to a halt just a few centimeters from Michelle.

“Get out of here.” His accent is hard to place: mostly English, with a dash of something else. Spanish, maybe. “Go on. Piss off.”

Leanne scoffs. “Nice wings, pal,” she says, though her voice has a nervous wobble to it. “This your boyfriend, Brody?”

It’s supposed to be a dig, but all I can think is, *I wish*. This boy is beautiful: high cheekbones, dark brown eyes, curly hair that flops down to his eyebrows. A constellation of freckles spans his tanned cheeks and nose, and his pale lips tilt into a sneer as Leanne speaks. He takes another step forward. Michelle blanches.

“I told you to leave,” he says, his voice low. “You’re going to go now, and you’re not going to bother him again. Okay?”

After a long moment, Leanne rolls her eyes. “All right, fine. God, Fairy, learn to take a joke.”

She bumps into my shoulder as she moves past me, and Michelle steps on my foot, but they leave. They actually *go*. If I weren’t so relieved, I’d be pissed off at how easy this guy has made it seem. I’ve tried everything to get Leanne and Michelle off my back: ignoring them, arguing with them, begging them to just piss off and leave me alone . . . Nothing works. Well, my friend Megan snapping at them sometimes does the trick. Or my brother, if he’s around. Jake’s sick of fighting my battles, though.

“For God’s sake, Brody, deal with it. They’re *girls*,” he always says. Like that makes a difference.

As soon as they’re out of sight, the embarrassment mutates into rage—Tink could so easily have jumped out of Leanne’s arms and straight under the wheel of a car, and I’d have been left to scrape my favorite family member off the road. My eyes are prickling, but I won’t cry. I never cry.

As I turn toward the Astra, the guy puts a hand on my shoulder.

“I’ll get him. Cats like me.”

Before I can tell him that Tink hates every living creature on the planet except me, the boy’s on his knees and coaxing him out from behind the tire. The poor cat’s trembling all over. It’ll take an entire block of cheddar cheese (his favorite food) until he even comes close to forgiving me for all this . . . but to my surprise, he sits quietly in the crook of the guy’s arm as he’s carried across the car park.

“There we go.” The boy strokes the spot between Tink’s ears before passing him back to me. “What an ordeal.”

“Cheers.” I shift Tink onto my shoulder, wincing as his claws dig through my school shirt. “You didnae have to do that, you know.”

The guy brushes his hair out of his eyes. His hands are smeared with paint and glitter, and his nails are royal blue.

“Just making up for all the dickheads I didn’t stand up to when I was younger. Do they often catnap him like that?”

“Nah. Well, no’ this far, anyway.” My eyes glide over the wings. “Are you . . . are you off to a fancy-dress party or something?”

Up close, I see they’re made from simple papier-mâché and covered with dozens—hundreds—of bits of blue. There are dried flowers, foreign stamps, swatches of satin and lace, sweet wrappers, splashes of nail polish, clusters of sequins and sea-battered glass. There’s a butterfly pinned above the guy’s left ear, and the eye of a peacock feather just below the right, all blending into a glittering swirl of turquoise and sapphire and cobalt.

It’s the sort of thing I wouldn’t be seen dead wearing.

It’s the sort of thing that I’d rather die than admit that I kind of, maybe, like.

The boy tugs at the straps over his arms, making the wings flap together. “Something like that. Though to be honest, wearing this type of stuff . . . It’s the only time I feel like I’m not in costume.”

Another face appears at the third-floor window: a girl, maybe seventeen or eighteen, wearing a vivid orange headscarf.

“Nico? Kasia needs help making her claws.”

“Okay, two secs.” The guy—Nico—pauses for a moment, then shouts up to the girl. “Hey, Zahra, could you chuck me down a bit of paper? There’s some on Kasia’s desk.”

The girl’s eyebrows twitch into a frown, but she nods and turns away. After a moment, something falls from the window: a small origami lily, folded from pale green paper. The guy runs to catch it, takes a pencil from behind his ear, and writes something on the petals.

“You should come here tomorrow,” he says, handing me the flower. “I think you’d like it. Don’t worry—you don’t have to dress up if you don’t want to.”

I turn the lily in my hands. Written in thin, slightly wobbly letters are the words *Calton Hill. Thursday, 11:21 p.m.—and not a minute later!*

“Aye, all right,” I say, looking up at him. The girl is still watching from the window, a curious expression on her face. “I’ll be there.”

The boy smiles. His freckles shift upward, like stars realigning.

“Great. See you then, Fairy.”

He gives another flap of his wings and winks at me before walking back to the flat. My cheeks flush. *Fairy*. That’s the word that has haunted me since third grade, when some genius realized that just adding a *y* to my surname could get my eyes to water and my face to turn scarlet. It’s the nickname that

has followed me down corridors and into classrooms and on school trips, the nickname that's never been pinned to Jake, even though his name is Fair, too. But though it's not okay when Lianne and Michelle say it, it's different coming from Nico. In his voice, it doesn't sound anything like an insult.

It sounds like an invitation.

TWO

STUFF LIKE THIS NEVER HAPPENS TO ME. MY DAYS ARE USUALLY made from the same few ingredients: school, homework, fighting with Jake and Keira over the computer. There are good things, like drumming or bingeing on Netflix and pizza at Megan's house, but nothing like this. Boys with blue wings don't appear at flat windows. Paper lilies don't come fluttering down from the sky. Walking home, Tink pressed against my chest with one hand and Nico's invitation in the other, Leith Walk seems different in a way I can't put my finger on. Like something in the world has shifted, just a wee bit.

Nothing's changed back at Mackay House. The concrete courtyard is empty—Leanne and Michelle have probably gone in to watch *Hollyoaks*, thank God—and our flat is exactly how I left it. Jake's still doing his homework on our ancient PC, and Keira's

in her room listening to music at full blast. Dad's sewing a button onto one of Keira's school shirts while he watches a documentary, probably his ninth or tenth of the day, and Mam's in the kitchen making our supper. Nobody's even noticed I was gone.

"Home sweet home," I mutter to Tink, as he slips out of my arms and onto the carpet with a bump. He turns to me, hisses, then slinks off to sulk under my bed. I flip him the finger as he goes.

"Oh, you're welcome. Next time, I'll no' bother."

My dad's balding head appears over the back of the sofa. "There you are, Brodes. Here, come and see this."

I carefully flatten the petals of the lily invitation, slide it into my back pocket before anyone spots it, then perch on the arm of the sofa. On the TV screen, a tiny puffer fish is gliding over the seabed, creating storm clouds of sand with the movement of its fins. After a moment, the camera pans out to show a pattern in the sand: a perfect circle of delicate ridges, hundreds of times bigger than the fish itself.

Dad grins at me. "Amazing, eh?"

"Aye, it's cool."

It's impressive and all, but I'm too busy thinking about the lily in my pocket to focus on artistic fish. *Calton Hill. Thursday, 11:21 p.m.—and not a minute later!* My parents aren't that strict, but there's no way Mam will let me go out that late on a school night. Especially not to a party on Calton Hill. (If it even is a party. "*Something like that*" could mean anything. Could be a church fete or an accounting conference, for all I know.)

My eyes swim around our living room. After five years, I know every inch of this cramped wee flat: the Bolognese stain shaped like France on the faded tan carpet; our heights marked in pencil on the kitchen door frame; the crack in the bathroom wall when I tripped and smacked my head during a game of tag with Keira. I didn't think I could see it in a new light, but suddenly this room has become an obstacle course. Dad falls asleep on the sofa most nights, and Jake's always on the computer until one or two in the morning. I've got no idea how I'll sneak out of here without them noticing, or without Mam vaulting out of bed to see what I'm up to.

Dad puts down the needle and thread to rewind the scene. He loves documentaries. He's seen every Deeyah Khan film two or three times; David Attenborough is practically the seventh member of our family.

"Smart wee buggers, aren't they," he says as the puffer fish zigzags backward through the water. "All that just tae attract a mate. Heck of a lot more than I did! Eh, Sally? Sal?"

No answer. I glance into the kitchen: Mam's leaning against the counter, looking at her phone and biting a fingernail. Behind her, hot water bubbles over the edge of a pan, sending clouds of steam billowing through the door and into the living room.

"Mam!" I shout. "The water's boiling over."

Her head snaps up. There are coffee stains on her lavender work uniform, and half of her hair has fallen out of her ponytail.

"Crap! Quick, Brody—give me a hand."

She turns the hob off, batting away steam. I slide down from the sofa and set the colander in the sink before she pours the spaghetti in. We had pasta yesterday, too, and the day before that. Usually I'd moan about it, but my stomach's all jittery, and I'm not that hungry. Which is weird. I'm always hungry.

"How was school?" Mam opens a jar of tomato sauce and pours it over the spaghetti. "Did you get to play the drums?"

"Nah. I did reserve the room, but some sixth-year band got there first."

She clicks her tongue, like it's somehow my fault Phil Haynes and his pals can't respect the music-room rota. "Will you get a shot tomorrow, then?"

Before I can answer, Keira swings into the kitchen singing something from *Hamilton*. She holds her hands up—the fingernails of her left one are painted glittery lime green.

"Mam, I need you to do my right hand."

"We're almost ready to eat, Keira. After dinner, okay?"

Keira's voice jumps up ten decibels. "But I'm gonnae go up to Amanda's afterward and I need it to dry by then and—"

Mam throws up her hands. "Fine, fine! Give me a second."

While Jake and I are both tall, dark, and quiet, my twelve-year-old sister is the opposite: a tiny blond whirlwind who does everything at full volume. My parents always give in to her demands. It's just easier than dealing with her sulking. Mam gives my shoulder a squeeze on the way out of the kitchen.

"Could you set the table, please, love?"

Counting out the knives and forks, my mind drifts back to the boy with the blue wings. Nico. My stomach flips. It's not just that he was hot—though I can't lie, that's part of it. It's also the way he walked out wearing those wings, like he didn't give a damn who would see or what they might think. It was the way he looked at me like he got it. Almost—though we'd only met a few minutes before—like he got *me*.

I've got to go to Calton Hill tomorrow. Somehow. I have to.

As I go to shut the cutlery drawer, something catches my eye: Mam's rota for the care home where she works, stuck to the fridge with a magnet my auntie Rhona brought back from her holiday in Tenerife. Her hours for Thursday are written in purple ink: *5 p.m.–1 a.m.*

My heart leaps. Sneaking past Mam would be like dodging a Rottweiler. In comparison, Dad's a lazy old beagle—he might even be asleep before eleven if I'm lucky. I can easily slip out without him noticing, and if I'm back by one o'clock, Mam won't even know I was gone. I can hardly stop the stupid grin from spreading across my face as I go to set the table.

Mam comes out of Keira's room, rubbing at a green smudge on her thumb.

"You're on night shift tomorrow?" I ask, just to make sure.

It's a blatant clue that I'm up to something—I never normally ask when she's working—but only Jake seems to notice. He looks up from the computer, stares at me for a second, then goes back to his homework. Jake's hoping to go to Cambridge next year. Right now he's basically incapable of concentrating

on anything other than schoolwork for more than five seconds at a time.

“Unfortunately so,” Mam says, pushing her hair out of her face. “Still, can’t complain. Some of the others haven’t got any shifts at all this week.”

She calls everyone for supper, even though we’re all in the same room—a holdover from when we lived in a bigger flat—then tosses an almost-empty bag of grated cheddar onto the table. I pick out a few bits to save for Tink. I owe him: If he hadn’t gotten himself kidnapped, I never would have met Nico. Tomorrow would be just another Thursday, and not . . . whatever tomorrow is going to be.

Something out of the ordinary.

THREE

I NEED A COSTUME. EVEN IF THE BOY WITH THE BLUE WINGS SAID it wasn't necessary, I want to dress up. Whatever this thing on Calton Hill is, wherever I might end up tonight, I want to feel like I belong. And I get the impression it might be the sort of place where you need to stand out to fit in.

When I get home from school on Thursday, I head straight to the room I share with Jake. I say hi to Tink (he gives me an evil look and goes back to staring out of the window—still in a crappy mood after his trip across Leith) and pull open the wardrobe. Rows of faded T-shirts and school jumpers greet me. Not exactly fancy-dress material. Other than a kilt that Jake's friend lent him for their school ceilidh, there's nothing even halfway fancy.

Still, there must be something I can use for a costume.

Rummaging through a pile of trainers at the bottom of the wardrobe, I find a plastic box full of relics from when we were wee: toy cars, a deflated football, rainy-day drawings. After a bit of digging, I find a papier-mâché skull mask that I made in Art back in junior high. And on Jake's side of the shelves, there's the perfect thing to go with it: a black T-shirt with the torso of a skeleton drawn on. It's very un-Jake—maybe one of his pal's, or something he had for a Halloween party. I lay it out on my bed and place the mask above it. It's not exactly Damien Hirst, but with a bit of color, it might look all right. (Plus, it'll cover up my stupid acne.)

There are only three Biro's and two dried-out highlighters in my school bag, so I head to Keira's room to nick some of her fancy pens. She's upstairs at Amanda's, Mam's already gone to work, Jake's at a rugby game or orchestra practice or whatever Oxbridge-friendly activity is on the schedule for today, but Dad's at home. Dad's always at home.

"All right, Brodes. Good day?" He leans through the bathroom door, yellow rubber gloves on his hands, and points to a DVD on the sofa. "Just giving the bath a scrub, and then I was gonnae stick that on. Fancy it?"

I pick up the case: *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*, with a label proclaiming it property of Jake's school library beneath the title. I do usually watch Dad's documentaries with him when Jake and Keira aren't around. Some of them are pretty interesting, especially the ones about cults and conspiracy theories. And sad as it sounds, it's sort of nice having my parents to myself sometimes;

Keira sucks up attention like a Dyson, and Jake has this way of making everything I say or do seem stupid. I think Dad likes having someone to watch with, too. Someone to share his small slice of the world.

I don't have time for Jiro and his sushi right now, though.

"I cannae, Dad. I've got Spanish homework. Just need to borrow a pen off Keira."

An embarrassingly bad accent calls out from behind the bathroom door. "*Muy bien. Excelente. Dos cervezas, por favor.*"

I slip into my sister's room and scan the mess for those glitter pens she used to like. There's nothing except a few blunt pencils, but she's got a collection of nail varnishes lined up on her windowsill. Tiny bottles with matching black caps, all pinks and purples and greens.

That feeling starts. It's that same creeping sense of shame I used to get when I was seven or eight, when I'd watch *My Little Pony* or look at Barbies in the Argos catalogue. Like I was doing something I shouldn't.

I wrestle the feeling away and drop a few bottles into my pockets. It's just paint, I tell myself as I hurry back to my room. Just paint in tiny tubs with fancy names. I unscrew a bottle of something called Poison Apple, wrinkling my nose at the smell, and outline the skull's mouth with deep green. I spread clear glitter across the cheeks, paint on Indigo Night eyelashes, then add a Red for Filth rose on the left side of its forehead. I hold it up to show Tink.

“What d’you think? No’ bad, right?”

He yawns and starts licking his butt. I try not to take that personally.

I touch up the rose, then add some more flowers and leaves over the skull’s chin and cheeks. Part of me wants to go all out and do my nails as well, like Nico. I could paint them green to match the mask’s lips, or maybe red. If I hide them under my sleeves, nobody will—

The bedroom door opens. Jake comes in, pausing when he sees me sprawled out on the floor. The nail polishes are scattered across the carpet, guilty as spray-paint cans beneath a wall of graffiti.

His eyebrows rise. “What’s all this?”

“It’s for Art.” I dropped Art after eighth grade but Jake won’t remember that. “We’re doing Día de las Muertos.”

He smirks. That smirk is the reason I prefer to do my homework at school or at Megan’s rather than in here, surrounded by all his awards and piles of library books. That smirk makes me feel like I’m thicker than cement.

When Jake was nine, his third-grade teacher referred him to a psychologist for an IQ test. I can’t remember the exact score, but it was high enough for the headmistress to call Mam and Dad in for a meeting after school. It wasn’t the first time they’d been brought in to talk about Jake—he was constantly in trouble, always interrupting or throwing things or wandering off in the middle of class. But this time, when they walked across

the playground to collect us from the swings, something was different: Mam's eyes were all shiny, and Dad kept looking at Jake like he'd just realized his son had a second head he'd never noticed before.

A few months later, Jake sat the entrance exams for some private schools up in town. He was accepted to three of them. Full scholarships.

Everything changed after that. Before, Jake and Keira and I had been three equal weights on a perfectly balanced scale; when he started at his new school, everything tipped in his favor. *Get off the computer, Brody. Jake needs it for his homework. Turn down your music, Keira. Jake's trying to study.* Even now, Mam just about bursts with pride every time he puts on that dumb navy blazer.

Part of me used to hope for the same—that someday I'd get my own *You're a wizard, Harry* moment and turn out to be a genius, too. But nobody ever suggested I might be able to get a scholarship. I asked if I could sit the exams, and they let me, but I didn't pass. I didn't even come close. When I looked the fees up online, I thought I was seeing double—one term was almost as much as Mam's entire salary.

I didn't bring it up again after that.

"Día de *los Muertos*," Jake says now. Of course he does. "Want help doing your nails?"

My cheeks flare. "Piss off, Jake."

He throws his hands into the air, all mock innocence. "God, Brody, I was just asking."

He dumps his bag on his bed and goes straight back to the computer, shutting the door behind him. The mask stares up at me, its friendly grin suddenly more like a leer. It feels like it's mocking me, too.

By quarter to eleven, the nerves are making it hard for me to sit still. No one's going to physically stop me going out—Dad hardly ever goes past the front door, and Jake wouldn't give up precious minutes of study time to come after me—but even so, I'm all fidgety and jittery. It's not like I usually tell my parents my every move or anything. They'd probably be surprised at how many times I've been drunk, and Mam would skin me alive if she knew I'd even thought about smoking weed. But I dunno—this feels different.

"Good God, Brody. Get a grip," I mutter to myself. "You're just going up to town, you loser."

I take a deep breath, tuck the mask inside my hoodie, and step out of my room. Dad's fallen asleep in front of *Question Time*, and Keira finally went to bed fifteen minutes ago. There's just Jake left, hunched over the keyboard, surrounded by skyscrapers of library books. He's typing so loud, he doesn't even hear me walking past.

Holding my breath, I tiptoe toward the door and slip outside. I take the stairs three at a time, not caring if my clunky steps wake up Mrs. McAskill in 8B, not thinking about what might happen when ten minutes turns into an hour and I'm still not home. All that matters is making it onto the next bus

into town and getting to Calton Hill before 11:21 p.m. I'll deal with the fallout later.

I get to the bus stop just as the number 22 pulls up. I hop on, flash the pass Jake uses to get to school (we look alike enough for me to get away with borrowing it), and then hurry up to the top deck. It's only when I sit down, panting slightly, that a huge, stupid grin breaks across my face. Nico's smile swims in front of my eyes, making my stomach flutter. This is actually happening. I'm actually going to see him again.

There's not much traffic at this time of night, but the bus feels slower than evolution as it crawls up Leith Walk. I get off just before Princes Street, hurry along Waterloo Place, and run up the steps to Calton Hill. I follow the path toward the National Monument, a row of Greek-style columns at the top of the hill, scanning the area for some sign of an event.

There's nothing. No music. No people setting up for a party. A pair of tourists have braved the cold to take photos of the skyline, but there's nobody else around. No sign of a boy with blue wings.

The rain is heavier now; when I take out the invitation to check the time, thick drops soak through the paper and blur Nico's letters. It's still just about legible: *11:21 p.m.*—two minutes to go. Down on Princes Street, the big hand of the Balmoral Hotel's clock edges forward. Maybe he's running late. Maybe they called off the party because of the weather.

Or . . . maybe there never was a party.

A sickly feeling crawls up my throat. That must be it. This

was obviously just some joke. He must have been taking the piss out of me: for chasing after my cat like a moron, for not being able to stand up to two girls. “Shit,” I whisper. I’m such an idiot. Of course he wouldn’t invite me to come out with him. Why would a guy like him have any interest in hanging out with an awkward, spotty loser like me?

A lump swells in my throat. It’s stupid, but . . . it really felt real. The look on his face when he told Leanne and Michelle to piss off. The stuff he said about sticking up to his own tormentors, and the way he grinned when he called me—

“Fairy!”

I turn around and see a group of shadowy figures moving over the hill, one of them wearing wings and waving. And for the first time in years, I’m happy to hear that word.

“You made it!” Nico smiles, a slice of moon in the darkness. “Get ready for the best night of your life.”

FOUR

FOR A MOMENT, ALL I CAN DO IS STARE AT HIM. HIS HAIR IS DAPPLED with raindrops, and a faint streak of blue eyeliner glimmers under his lower eyelashes. The wings sprout from his denim jacket, each one protected by a thick black trash bag. Just behind him, two more figures come into view: a werewolf in a NASA T-shirt, and a small, chubby Sailor Moon fiddling with the bow on her costume.

“Sorry we’re late,” Nico says. “Kasia’s tail fell off, and I couldn’t find one of my boots, and then we missed the bus.”

The werewolf looks me up and down and throws its paws into the air. “Another one of Nico’s Lost Boys. Brilliant.” Its voice is low and muffled behind the werewolf mask. “Just what we need.”

Nico rolls his eyes. “Ignore Kasia. She gets grumpy around

the full moon.” The werewolf starts to protest, but Nico laughs and steps to the side so his left wing is blocking her face. “How are you doing? Has your cat recovered from yesterday?”

Before I can answer, Sailor Moon claps her hands. It’s the girl who threw down the origami flower yesterday, Zahra, now wearing a long blue skirt, a red bow, and a bright yellow headscarf twisted into the character’s blond buns.

“Small talk later, Nico. We’ve got about thirty seconds to get inside.”

She strides past us; the werewolf shakes its head at me then hurries after her. When I turn around to follow them, my jaw drops.

The National Monument has changed. In the gaps between the stone pillars, where just a few seconds ago were slices of smoky sky, there are now colors. Greens, blues, and purples, shimmering and swirling—as if the Northern Lights had been cut into strips and draped like flags from the stone. Pictures emerge from the swirls, blurry faces outlined in thick black strokes; between the two central pillars, the haze solidifies into a deep green. I finally remember to blink, and when I open my eyes, I find myself staring at a row of stained-glass windows and an enormous green door, with a golden knocker shaped like the head of a unicorn at hand height.

It takes a moment to find my voice again.

“What. The hell. Is *that*?”

Nico laughs. “I always forget how weird it seems the first time. Quick, we don’t have long.”

Though the steps leading to the monument are almost as tall as she is, Zahra climbs onto a stack of bricks at the base and smoothly pulls herself up. Nico vaults onto the lower step, then holds out his hand to help me. I scramble up after him, bumping my knees on the edge of the stone, and follow him to the pillars.

The werewolf twists the unicorn's horn counterclockwise and pushes the door open. My brain is fumbling for sense in what I've just seen. They must have a projector somewhere . . . Someone must have propped up the door while I wasn't looking. Disorientated, I stumble through it, Nico just behind me. The door closes behind us with a loud sucking sound.

"That was close," Zahra says. "We've got to stop cutting it so fine."

"We'd have been all right if Nico hadn't spent ages fiddling with my tail," the werewolf mutters.

Nico snorts. "That sounds so wrong."

They keep bickering, but the words soon fall out of focus. Something about this place feels weird. I look down: the stone base of the monument has been replaced by a long, sloping stretch of grass. Above us, the cloudy gray sky has cleared into a deep navy filled with stars—millions of them. More than I've ever seen before. And as I follow Nico and his friends, I see something that makes my heart stop.

Edinburgh has disappeared.

Instead of streets and cars and blurry neon, I'm looking down

at a vast green valley. Three rivers spill down the pine-clad hillsides and snake across the basin; at the point where they meet is a sprawl of bright golden light, trickling out into little pockets of life dotted across the grass. In the distance, a row of mountains is half-hidden behind low-hanging clouds. I can see more lights behind them, then a slick black that could be the sea. But there's no Leith Walk, no Firth of Forth, no lights of Fife in the distance. The entire city has vanished.

I turn around. The green door is still behind us, but the pillars of the National Monument have gone. So have all the other buildings on Calton Hill. My heart is pounding. There are no trees like this up here, and definitely no rivers. This must be an illusion, some sort of trick—a really bloody impressive one, too.

Before I can ask how they've done it, I realize Nico is introducing his friends. As casually as if we'd just walked into McDonald's and not . . . wherever this place is.

"This is Kasia," he says, tugging on the werewolf's ears, "and you kind of met Zahra yesterday. Guys, this is—it's Brady, right?"

I can still hardly speak. "Um, B-Brody."

"*What?*" Kasia pulls the mask off. Long, wispy blond hair flutters around a pale, narrow face; her eyes are gray-blue and furious. "You didn't even get his *name*? For God's sake, Nico. Is there anyone else you'd like to invite? How about the girl who works in the co-op around the corner? Or maybe that skinhead with the pit bull we saw at the bus stop?"

"Maybe I will. He seemed friendly. Loved the neck tattoos."

Nico pulls the trash bags from his wings; they drop off like cocoon husks, revealing the swirl of blues underneath. “I don’t know why you get so pissed off about this, Kash.”

“Because it’s not supposed to work like this!” she snaps. “You’re supposed to let people find this place themselves, not invite every random you come across.”

“I’ve invited three people. *Three*. My friend Privashni, Mark from my art course, and now Brody. It’s not like I put a billboard up on the A9.” Nico shoves the trash bags into a museum tote bag, rolling his eyes. “Besides, you don’t even know that’s true. There are no rules to this place. It’s not up to you to decide what’s allowed and what’s not.”

Kasia grits her teeth. She mutters something in Polish and takes off down the hill, tail swinging behind her. Zahra and Nico exchange a look I can’t read.

“Sorry about her,” Nico says. “Her girlfriend used to visit here and . . . Don’t worry about it—she’ll come around.”

I’m still too busy trying to work out what the hell is going on to be offended. “That thing with the door,” I eventually choke out. “How did that work? Where did all the trees come from? And the river? What is this place?”

Zahra smiles. “Don’t try to understand it all at once. Just enjoy it for now, okay?”

They keep talking as we walk down toward the valley, but most of it goes over my head; I’m too busy staring around me, trying to work out how the hell all this is possible. Soon, the blur of lights in the distance starts to take shape. There’s a small

town built where the three rivers meet, a busy market, bonfires burning in the distance. Different sounds rise up from the valley, forming a dim buzz around us. I pick out someone speaking Arabic, a string instrument twanging, a woman singing “Heroes” by David Bowie. Deer are grazing across the hillside, but not the type I’ve seen up near my gran’s in the Highlands—these are smaller, with tan hides and white spots. Huge yellow birds fly overhead, and the river sparkles with schools of neon-blue fish.

I have no idea how they’ve pulled this off, but it’s totally and utterly amazing.

When we reach the bottom of the hill, we cross a stone bridge spanning one of the rivers and arrive in a square lined with red-brick buildings and lit by old-fashioned lampposts. Standing in the middle is a door, just like the one we came in through, only it’s red instead of green and has a dragon knocker rather than a unicorn. Dozens of people are milling around: an old man is playing a sitar; two girls kiss under a lamppost; a nun and three guys in rugby shirts are laughing over a game of cards. Most people are in everyday clothes, or some are in traditional dress or uniforms, but quite a few are in costume, too—I spot a guy dressed as a First World War soldier, a pirate, a Marie Antoinette lookalike. Zahra cuts across the square to talk to two girls wearing *salwar kameez*, leaving me alone with Nico.

“So. Let’s see your costume.” He steps back, hands on his hips, and looks me up and down. “All black—so you’re supposed to be . . . the night sky. A panther going to a funeral? A raven eating burned toast!”

“It’s supposed to go with this . . .” I unzip my hoodie and pull the mask out. It feels a bit childish compared to his wings and all the other costumes around us.

“Nice! Did you make this?” He takes the mask from me and holds it up to his face, becoming a bird-skeleton hybrid. His nails are the same deep blue as yesterday. Makes me wish I’d painted mine, too. “It’s good!”

My cheeks burn. I have to fight the urge to snatch the mask back and hide my face behind it. “Nah, it’s crap. No’ like these,” I say, tapping my knuckle to his wings. “These are awesome.”

He crosses one foot over the other and does a twirl. “Thanks. I’m applying for art school next year, so I made them for my portfolio. My dad called them ‘facile *Fantasia* nonsense.’ But whatever—I like them.” His eyes darken for a moment, but then he looks down at me and the expression vanishes. “How’s your cat doing, by the way? Has he recovered from his kidnapping the other day?”

“Aye, he’s . . . fine.”

It feels weird, somehow, talking about Tink in here. I only snuck out about half an hour ago, but right now home and the rest of my life all seems miles away. Besides, it’s hard to focus on anything else with all *this* going on around me. As my eyes begin to wander, a goth strolls past with a woman who must be at least ninety, and a man casually rides by on a camel. Nico puts his hand on my back.

“Come on—I’ll give you a tour.”

He leads me through the square, waving to a few people he

spots along the way, and down an alleyway between two of the buildings. We step out into a cramped, chaotic marketplace, where paper lanterns hang overhead and makeshift wooden huts overflow with food and baubles and trinkets. Nico zigzags through the narrow paths, past stalls selling strange fruits and pastries, snow globes and worry dolls. I hear French, Mandarin, and Russian, plus a dozen other languages. The air smells like chocolate and cinnamon, and the place is throbbing with sound and movement. All around us, people are laughing, haggling—

Dancing. Suddenly, everyone around me is dancing. I look around, blinking, but the market is far behind us. Instead, we're in the middle of a parade, lost in a sea of sequins and feathers and giant, colorful headdresses. Music fills the sky and shakes the ground, but I can't tell where it's coming from; a light rain of confetti is falling out of nowhere. Nico spins through the crowd, arms in the air, wings melting into hazy streaks of blue. I race after him, past people dressed as birds or angels or in intricate golden ball gowns, the skirts blooming outward as they twirl to the music. A guy covered in green feathers spins me under his arm and shouts something in Portuguese, and I—

Almost stumble into the water. We've reached a beach, somehow, though the water had looked like it was miles away. A little farther up the shore, an enormous flaming bonfire is spitting sparks into the darkness. Some people are sitting around it and talking, or skimming stones across the inky black water; others are waving sparklers against the night sky, drawing hearts or spelling out words in alphabets I can't read. Fireworks explode

into color above the mountains. As a blast of gold lights up Nico's face, he turns to me and grins.

"You all right, Brody?"

I open my mouth, but I'm too stunned to speak. I follow Nico along the shore, then through a noisy wedding and into a Holi celebration that leaves us covered in orange and pink. Just as I'm starting to feel overwhelmed, the crowd trickles away, and we arrive at a long stretch of moorland. I look behind me, trying to get my bearings. The party is just a blur of color in the distance; the noise is fading away into nothing.

"What . . . was . . ."

My head is spinning. There's a garland of flowers around my neck, and a fizzing sparkler in my hand, and I have no idea how they got there. The whole thing felt like five minutes, but it also seems like we came through the door hours ago. Nico smiles at me.

"Bit chaotic, I know." He flops down onto the grass. A few white-spotted deer look over at us, then go back to grazing. "Don't worry—it's not always like this."

He keeps talking, but I tune it out and force myself to think. This has to be a trick. Some sort of prank, maybe. Dad and I once watched this Derren Brown show where he staged a zombie apocalypse, all to give some lazy twentysomething a kick up the arse and get him to do something with his life. Maybe my mam's behind this. Maybe this is some crazy way of telling me to stop daydreaming and focus on my exams. Maybe they drugged me, and this is all an elaborate film set out in the

countryside—something like that. It's the only explanation left that makes sense.

"What's going on, really?" I ask, interrupting Nico. I spin around, looking for hidden cameras. "Are we on TV right now? Are you, like, filming this for YouTube?"

Nico bursts out laughing. "God, how much money do you think I have? There are no cameras—I promise."

"Then what *is* this?" I turn around again, scanning the landscape for a hint of something familiar—the shape of the shore, or the outline of Edinburgh Castle. But there's nothing. This place is a whole different world.

"Seriously, don't try and work it all out right away." Nico gives a tug on his wings, pulling them together. "You're here, Brody. You can spend the whole night stressing about how all this is happening . . . or you could just go with it, and have fun."

My mind is still a dizzy kaleidoscope of sounds and images, but out of it surfaces the memory of meeting Nico yesterday. I think about how I knew, even after a few minutes, that I could trust him. I think about Leanne and Michelle kidnapping Tink like that, and all the times they've taken the piss or pushed me around. I think about Jake rolling his eyes at me, and Keira interrupting me, and the countless times I've had my parents' attention just to have it snatched away again. Nico is different. I don't even know him, but I can tell. He just . . . sees me. Even the *Fairy* nickname feels different in his voice. He takes this word that's always made me want to wriggle out of my skin and transforms it into something good. Something I can be proud of.

The sparkler in my hand is still burning, shedding sparks onto my skin. I take a breath, and I do as Nico says. I sweep the questions aside and decide I'm just gonna enjoy myself. I deserve a break. I deserve an adventure.

So I nod. "Okay."

Nico grins and stands up, sending specks of confetti falling from his hair. Between those and the Holi paint and his bright blue wings, he's a whole spectrum of color.

"In that case," he says, "welcome to Everland."

FIVE

I'M USUALLY PRETTY GOOD WITH DIRECTIONS, BUT WALKING BACK through the valley with Nico, I don't recognize any of the places we come across. We go through a masked ball in the gardens of a huge regal palace, and down a narrow street where people dressed as devils charge past, shrieking and carrying torches. There's a water fight going on in the next square, and a huge gospel choir singing and dancing in the one after that. Nico moves through it all with total ease. No matter where we end up, he looks like he was meant to be there, even with his wings on. Maybe *especially* with the wings on.

"How the hell did you find this place?" I ask him as we make our way through a crowd dancing around a steel band.

"I came across it about two years ago, when I was fifteen. I'd

moved here from Spain with my dad and my stepmum about six months before.” He edges past a group of girls, forcing one of them to duck under his wings. “Kasia turned up a few weeks later, and Zahra’s been coming since last March. We’re here every week. Always on a Thursday. Always at eleven twenty-one p.m. We never miss it.”

I don’t know how long we walk for. It could be minutes or miles; I just can’t tell. But the moment I start to feel overwhelmed, the crowd trickles away again, and we arrive at a quiet stretch of grass by the river.

Kasia is stretched out on a blanket reading a thick hardback book, and Zahra is sitting by the water with two other people: a boy in a denim jacket and a girl wearing a school uniform a bit like Jake’s, with a violin case in her lap. As we approach them, the boy looks up and waves. He’s not bad-looking: light brown skin, thick eyebrows, bleached blond hair, ears that stick out in a way that’s sort of cute. The way he smiles at Nico—and the way Nico smiles back—makes my heart sink.

“Everybody, this is Brody. My latest ‘Lost Boy,’” he adds, smirking at Kasia as he flops onto the grass.

Over the top of her book, Kasia rolls her eyes. The guy in the denim jacket says something in Spanish to Nico, who throws up his hands and laughs as he replies. I take Spanish at school, but they’re speaking way too fast for me to make out much—all I catch is “*niños perdidos*.” But unlike Kasia, the guy doesn’t seem annoyed that I’m here. He shifts onto his knees and reaches out to shake my hand.

"I'm Dani," he says, switching to English. "Welcome to Everland."

"It's not *officially* called that," Kasia says, still with the same irked edge to her tone. "There are lots of different names for this place. Everland is just one of them."

"Thanks for that, Siri." Nico sits back and grins at me, his right wing nudging Dani's shoulder. "You should have seen his face when we walked in. I'm surprised his jaw didn't actually fall off."

Dani laughs. "And who does this make me think of?" He throws his hands up and puts on a sort-of British accent. "*Where am I?! What is happening? Is this a dream?!*"

Nico pretend-punches his jaw, a big grin spreading over his face. Dani leans in and kisses him lightly on the lips. The disappointment smarts. It's stupid—I'm probably too young for Nico. And even if we were the same age, he'd probably be out of my league. Not wanting to be a third wheel, I sit a bit away from them, beside Zahra and the girl with the violin. She smiles and gives a short nod.

"I'm Miyumi. Nice to meet you." Her voice is light and musical, with a faint Japanese accent. "Are you okay? The first time I came here was so confusing. I pinched myself so hard I bled."

Zahra winces. "I jumped into the river, trying to wake myself up." She picks a pink flower from the grass and grins at me. "Let me guess. Nico took you to, like, a rave, and then a music festival, and then some party so radge it makes Ibiza look like a quaint afternoon tea."

“Um, kind of. There was a steel band . . . and a parade . . . fireworks . . .”

I try to remember the rest, but it all happened so fast . . . it’s already a blur.

Miyumi shakes her head fondly. “Nico is always partying. Always in the crazy places,” she says. “Not everywhere is the same. In here, a lot of places are very quiet.”

Zahra nods toward Kasia, who has gone back to reading her book, *Physics of the Impossible*. “This one spends most of her time in here in the library. Wild, huh?”

Kasia makes a rock ‘n’ roll sign with her right hand. She glances up from the page, and for the first time, the steely look in her eyes disappears. “It’s unbelievable. More books than you could even imagine—like the Library of Alexandria or something. I’ll take you there sometime, if you want.”

“Um. Aye, okay.” A library wouldn’t exactly be top of my list of places to visit, but I don’t want to put myself back in her bad books. “That’d be . . . cool.”

Nico grins. “Great, and then we’ll take you to the Lawnmower Museum and an exhibition of paint drying. So much fun.”

Kasia gives him the finger; Zahra calls him a philistine. But for all Nico winds them up, it’s obvious they’re really close friends. Normally, I’d feel a bit awkward trying to slot myself into a group of people who have known each other for ages, but they fold me into their conversations as if I’d been hanging out with them for years. Some of Dani’s friends join us for a while, and a girl with a cello who Miyumi knows stops by to talk to

her. On the river, dozens of boats float toward the sea: gondolas, schooners, canoes. Two guys in a canal boat play us a tune on ukuleles as they drift past, and a floating theater troupe drops anchor to put on an impromptu play when they see us on the shore.

I want to ask where they're all going and what's beyond the water—but I push the questions out of my head and remember what Nico said about just enjoying myself.

And I really, really am. I feel different in here. The only time I ever feel this relaxed is when I'm hanging out at Megan's, away from Jake, and from Leanne and Michelle and all the other wankers at our school. I'm not worrying about saying the wrong thing or doing something to make anyone take the piss, and I don't feel out of place. It's like when it doesn't click how hungry you are until you start eating, or when you get into bed and realize you're exhausted. Something you've needed for ages, and you didn't even know it.

As a regatta of sailboats races past, Nico sits down beside me. He's disappeared a couple of times tonight: once on his own, and once with Dani. There are now white petals tucked in his hair along with the last few pieces of confetti.

"How are you getting on? You don't still think I'm punking you for YouTube hits, do you?"

I grin. "I'm well impressed if you are. This place . . . It's unbelievable."

"I knew you'd like it. Kasia's convinced you're supposed to find your way into Everland by yourself, but I don't buy it. As

soon as I saw you yesterday, I knew you were right for this place. That it was right for you.”

He smiles at me. The disappointment of seeing him with Dani hasn’t totally disappeared, but it’s starting to fade. Out of everyone Nico knows, he’s only invited three people here. I’m one of them. That has to count for something.

“Besides, I like sharing it. It’s the best thing in my life, this place,” Nico says simply. “I’d stay forever if I could.”

That’s a good point. How long *have* we been in here? I take out my phone to check the time, but the screen has gone blank—must have run out of battery. Still, it’s definitely past two o’clock by now. Mam might panic and call the police if she gets back before me. Reluctantly, I get to my feet.

“I’d better head back, now you mention it,” I say. “It must be getting late.”

“But we still have—” Nico starts, then cuts himself off. He takes a pack of cigarettes from his back pocket. “Okay, I’ll be out right after you. Just need to catch up with a few people first.”

The others wave goodbye. Dani and Miyumi, at least—Kasia gives me a stiff nod, and Zahra says the same as Nico, that she’ll be out in a minute. I start walking back along the water, toward the cluster of light where the three rivers meet. I pass through places that I haven’t seen before—a neat garden filled with bright flowers around a star-shaped fountain; a campsite of multicolored tents—but somehow I remember the way back to the bridge, up the hill, and toward the green door. I take one last

look at the valley below me, just to make sure it's still there, then pull it open and step outside.

A wave of cold air bites into my skin. It's started raining again. Still dark, though, which is a relief; at least I'll be home before morning.

As I climb down the huge steps, the door behind me swings open. Kasia appears, followed by Nico and Zahra. I blink—they must have been right behind me. How the hell did I miss that?

"Brody, hey!" Nico beams, as if days have passed since we last hung out, and not just a few minutes. He hops down the steps after Kasia. "Settle a debate for us: custard creams or bourbon biscuits?"

"Uh . . ." Behind him, the green door fades and disappears. I look up at Nico, blinking. "Custard creams, obviously. Who likes bourbons?"

He holds his hand up for a high five. "See? You're basically a heathen, Kash."

Kasia scoffs. "You don't even eat biscuits! God, Nico, I could say I liked breathing, and you'd find a way to argue with me."

We head across the hill and back down the steps to Regent Road. Zahra is singing something under her breath, and Nico and Kasia are still bickering about snacks and oxygen. As New Town comes into view, all the questions I'd pushed out of my mind start to reemerge. The river, the trees, the waterfalls. All those people, and all that space. Like, they couldn't have just . . . They must have come from somewhere . . .

The riddles are snowballing in my head, becoming too big for me to grapple with. So instead, I tune into Nico and Kasia's conversation and let my questions melt away. For now.

When we reach the west end of Princes Street, I point out my bus stop.

"This is me," I say. "Can I, eh . . . Can I come back next week?"

Kasia's face goes stony, but the others smile.

"Of course you can," Nico says. "It's your place now, too. Here, I'll give you my number just in case."

My phone's still dead, so Nico produces a pen from his pocket and scribbles the digits on the back of my hand.

"Remember: eleven twenty-one p.m. Don't be late!"

I watch them head down Princes Street: Sailor Moon, a werewolf, and a boy with blue wings. When they reach the corner, Nico spins on his heel and waves back at me. Two men turn to stare at him, but he doesn't notice. Or if he does, he doesn't care.

The skull mask is still on top of my head. I wait until they're out of sight, then shove it back under my hoodie. Unlike Nico, I would notice. I would care.

My phone wakes up as soon as I step onto the number 22. No missed calls, and weirdly enough the time is saying 11:38 p.m.—the lack of signal in Everland must have messed the clock up. As the bus edges back down Leith Walk, my stomach starts to squirm. Mam is going to kill me. There's not much she can do, really—she could ground me, yeah, but I hardly go out anyway, and I don't get an allowance for her to take away—but still, I

don't like stressing her out. She's got enough on her plate without me disappearing.

Not that it'll stop me doing the same next week.

Fifteen minutes later, the bus pulls up down the road from Mackay House. I race through the courtyard and up the steps to number 9B. Jake is still at the desk, leafing through a textbook while the computer screen flickers white. He looks at me and yawns.

"Where have you been?"

"I . . . just needed some air. Got a sore head." I look around—Mam's shoes aren't by the door, and there's no coat hung over the back of her chair. "Where's Mam?"

He blinks at me. His eyes are sickly pink around the irises from staring at the screen too long. "Not home yet. She's not done till one or something."

"Oh. Right."

I stare at him, then glance at the bottom-right corner of the computer screen: 11:57 p.m. Wait . . . *11:57 p.m.*?

Jake gives me a funny look, then goes back to his essay. An idea, an impossible idea, is gnawing at the back of my head. I take off my jacket, store the mask (now a bit damp from the rain) back in the cupboard, then turn on the old radio that sits on Jake's shelf. Tink starts, narrows his eyes at me, then goes back to snoozing at the foot of my bed. My hands shake as I wait for the Take That song to finish playing. Finally, a man's voice overlaps the final bars.

“This is Forth One,” the presenter says. “The time is two minutes to midnight.”

Two minutes to midnight. My phone could be wrong, my computer could be wrong, but surely this can’t be.

Apparently, though we traveled all throughout the valley, though we went to a dozen parties and festivals and celebrations, though I talked to Nico and Zahra and the others for hours . . . I walked into Everland just thirty-seven minutes ago.