

In
Your
Light

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ANNALIE
GRAINGER

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For Naomi



*'Only in the Brightness shall we find
Light for all, for all eternity.'*
– THE BOOK

At the centre of the clearing, the Sun's fire burned strongly, its fiery fingertips slashing at the dark midnight sky. Around it danced the sixteen members of the Sisterhood. Their brightly coloured dresses – the red chiffon, the purple velvet, and the green taffeta – swirled wide so that the forest became gyrating flame. Brilliance's chest tightened at the sight, heart beating fast like the wings of an insect trapped in a jar as the sisters raised their voices in the Light's saying:

I dance with the fire in my heart, in my soul, in my veins. I dance until it rises up for me. I dance into the Brightness. Into the Light. Into the Light.

Brilliance stared deep into the fire. She loved the way it moved like liquid, undulating in shapes and colours. She loved to lose herself in the Light's power, as the flame became a part of her: its pulse her pulse; its breath her breath. The power and the beauty, the two sides of a knife.

The air hung heavy tonight with a coming storm, like a thick coat in high summer. Somewhere nearby an owl hooted, and Brilliance jumped. Its cry had sounded almost human and in pain. And then the high priestess's voice cut across the clearing. Her hood was thrown back to reveal flaming red hair crowned with white flowers that glinted in the firelight. Her eyes were as blue as the deepest part of the ocean. The symbol of the Light – a yellow sun – was painted on her cheek. 'The Brightness,' she cried. 'The Brightness is coming and it's going to save us all.'

Excitement tore through Brilliance.

'The Light's Gift will show us the way,' the high priestess said.

Brilliance's sisters began to move towards the fire, faces hidden by their cloaks, and the Light burned inside Brilliance, as red and bright as a flame.

ONE

Lil sat back in her chair and read the words she'd typed into the status update on the Find Mella website: 'We love you, Mella. We miss you. We're here for you whenever you're ready.' The message had been the same every day since Mella had gone missing. One hundred and thirty-four days. Lil added the sign-off: 'Love Mum and Mouse.' Mella was the only one who still used Lil's childhood nickname. Ironic, now that Lil was over six feet tall.

Lil glanced at the rest of the page. There were a few new 'likes' for the picture she'd uploaded last night of her and Mella at the beach last summer. The photo was just so Mella. She had one arm flung round Lil, and the other out wide, and she was smiling. A stupid pair of star-shaped sparkly sunglasses were perched on her freckled nose. They were a child's pair, won on an arcade game earlier that day. Mella had refused to take them off, and Lil had to admit that their

bright-green colour complemented her sister's pale-pink skin, flushed almost bronze after a summer of sunbathing. By contrast, Lil was blue-white, pale as ice, made bluer because she was thrown into shadow by Mella's outstretched arm. She was smiling, though – not broadly like Mella, but a half-upturn of the corner of her mouth. A half-smile. By comparison to Mella, everything Lil did seemed to be at half-pace. Not in a bad way. It was just that Mella did everything at warp speed, at one thousand per cent, and like the brightest star in the sky, it threw everything around it into shadow. But the light that stars emitted was a long-ago memory of what once was. They'd died out years ago. The thought stung, and Lil clicked out of the photo quickly, not wanting to think about death and Mella in the same sentence.

She logged into her email. There wasn't much in there. They'd had so many messages on this site in the early days – when the story had been on local news and radio – but they had mostly dwindled to nothing now. 'No fresh leads,' was what the police said. There hadn't been a single sighting in over two and a half months. Lil knew what the police thought that meant, but she would not . . . she could not believe that. Her sister was alive and they were going to find her. Even if it took the rest of Lil's life.

Erin had sent a message. She had been Mella's best friend at school. She wrote every now and then. It was really nice of her. She and Mella hadn't even been that close in the end.

Mella had lost touch with a lot of her friends from school when she started college, then lost touch with most of them when she began going out with Cai. Mella was like that. She just kind of moved on from things. Unlike Lil, who had been friends with Rhia since they moved to Wales from London when she was nine, although just recently maybe Rhia wasn't such a good example of Lil's loyalty. Lil didn't want to think about that now.

Instead she read Erin's message:

Lil – hey! How's it going? Haven't checked in for a while, so I thought I'd email. Any news? Dumb question, I know. You'd tell me if there was, right? God, I want there to be news ... I went up to the river yesterday – you know, by Haven's Field? I don't know why, I just wanted to see it. Probably sounds weird. You remember how she used to draw up there? Those damn trees! The ones she thought looked like women dancing? God, that girl could be crazy sometimes. Anyway. I'm rambling. Call me, won't you? Even if there's no news. It'd be nice to hear your voice.

Take care, Lil.

Call me! Call me! CALL ME!

E

XOX

Lil typed a quick reply:

Hi, Erin! Thanks for checking in. No news on Mella. I'll let you know as soon as I hear anything. And I'll try and call you soon. Hope everything's good with you.

Love, Lil xx

Lil wouldn't call. Erin was lovely, but it was too painful to talk about Mella. It hurt having to tell people that they still had absolutely no idea where she was.

After clicking send on the email to Erin, Lil turned her laptop off. She had planned to upload some more photos onto the Find Mella website – she liked to keep the page fresh – but she'd lost energy today. Instead she looked out of the window. The rain was properly coming down now, and the wind was howling around the house like it wanted to take it down, brick by brick. Even in a torrential downpour, the Welsh countryside was beautiful. There was something so amazing about the way it just rolled on and on. Lil had loved it the second they'd arrived. Mella less so. She'd missed the buzz of London.

Lil stared out into the storm for a long time. She missed Mella so intensely, it was a physical ache. Sometimes in the morning when she woke up there would be a second before she remembered that Mella was gone, and then the realization would rush in like an icy blast, and it would be like losing her all over again.

Lil had real trouble sleeping now and the doctor had prescribed some sleeping pills because she was so tired she couldn't concentrate at school. She'd taken them and enjoyed blissful deep sleep, her dreams full of Mella: burying their grandad in the sand at the beach, driving into Old Porthpridd with the windows open, singing as loudly as they could to the radio; her, Mella and Rhia eating chips in the rain, kicking their legs against the harbour wall.

After one week, Lil had stopped taking the pills. Why should she have a peaceful night when who knew where Mella was? Who knew what she was up to, who she was with, if she was even still alive? Lil cut off that last thought with a gasp. Mella was alive. Mella was coming home. Lil had to believe that or else . . . She couldn't even consider the alternative.

Lil's clock radio beeped the hour. *'This is Capital FM Cymru and the time is one o'clock on Saturday the eighth of July. Flood warnings are in place across much of North Wales this afternoon as unseasonably bad storms continue to batter the country—'*

Lil jerked out of her chair and turned the volume down. She had to meet Kiran at the kayaking clubhouse in an hour and she was going to be late if she didn't get a move on. She tugged her long hair, dyed unicorn purple this week – Lil's natural colour was as close to mouse as you could get without actually being one – back into a ponytail. She was going kayaking so there was no point showering, but after

a quick sniff of her armpits, she sprayed another long blast of deodorant into each one. Then she pulled on her goat T-shirt – the one Mella had bought her a few birthdays ago; the one with the words ‘Here’s looking at you, kid’ and a picture of a fluffy baby goat on it – and then took her grey tracksuit bottoms from the drawer.

‘Extra, extra, extra long for the vertically gifted, Mouse,’ she heard her sister saying. Even after four and a half months, Lil couldn’t get her sister’s voice out of her head. Not that she wanted to.

Her mum called from downstairs as she was pulling her red hoodie on. ‘Lilian! I’m going now.’

‘Coming,’ Lil shouted back. She grabbed her beaten-up white Converse and bag and headed down the stairs to join her mum in the kitchen.

‘Maybe I shouldn’t go,’ her mum said. She was standing by the sink, and in the gloom, with her long, dark curly hair tucked behind her ears, she looked so much like Mella that Lil had to hold onto the doorframe and take a deep breath.

Lil flicked on the light and the mirage faded to reveal her mum, face pale and drawn, dark eyes ringed with bags. Lil wasn’t sure her mum had slept since Mella had left. Her mum’s face was more lined too, and grew more so every morning, as though each day that Mella was missing was inked onto her skin.

‘You should go, Mum, you deserve a treat,’ Lil said as she

crossed the kitchen to the bread bin. Lil's mum was going to Chester to see an old college friend from her music academy. It was as far as Mum had gone since Mella had left. Her mum needed to do this. Lil needed her mum to do this.

'It's a long way,' her mum said. Despite being Welsh-born, her mum always spoke English to Lil. She had spoken English to Lil's grandad too, although he always responded in Welsh.

Lil took out a slice of bread. It was mouldy, so was the second piece. The third looked all right. She shoved the other two to the bottom of the pack, so her mum wouldn't notice. Her mum had been struggling to keep on top of stuff since Mella had gone. Not that she should be solely responsible for the shopping. It was just kind of hard to get about here without a car, what with being in the middle of a field in the middle of three other fields, on the top of a mountain. Things would be easier when Lil turned seventeen and passed her driving test. But that wasn't until next February, and Lil hoped Mella would be home by then. She woke every morning hoping today would be the day that Mella came back.

Her mum was speaking again. '... There was an accident on the A55, near Brynford, earlier. Tailbacks, they said, on the radio. And the rain ...'

'It's Wales,' Lil said with a smile. 'It always rains. It'll stop. Eventually.' *Hopefully.*

'I don't like leaving you,' her mum said.

‘I’ll be fine. And you can call me. It’s only for one afternoon.’

‘Sandi wants to go for dinner afterwards too, but . . .’

‘You should stay for dinner.’

‘Really? Well, maybe . . . I don’t know . . . If you think I should. Do I look all right? I didn’t know what to wear. Maybe I should have gone for jeans. Do I look like I’m about to give a concert?’ She sighed. ‘I look like I’m about to give a concert, don’t I?’ She was wearing a white shirt and black skirt and Nain’s peacock broach. It was the outfit she used to wear for recitals, but still.

‘You look great.’ Lil smiled and said gently, ‘Seriously, just go already. You’ll be late.’

‘Okay.’ Still her mum didn’t move. ‘I just . . . I don’t know if it’s a good idea. What if she comes back and there’s no one here? You know what she’s like. So hot-headed, she’ll be off again before we know it.’ Her mum sat down at the kitchen table.

Lil sat down opposite her and took one of her mum’s hands in hers. Delicate with long fingers, they’d once been her mum’s most beautiful feature. She’d had them insured when she’d trained as a pianist at the Royal Academy of Music in London. It was where she’d met their father, although by some bizarre coincidence he’d grown up in Wales too, only a couple of villages away from where Lil’s grandparents Taid and Nain lived. Now her mum’s hands

were chapped and red. The moisturizer Lil had bought her for Christmas was still in its wrapper in the bathroom.

She held her mum's hand softly but firmly, like she would a creature that might startle and run at a sudden movement. Her mum never used to be this fragile. She used to be kind of angry, especially about the things she cared about. Like the lack of music education in schools. That was her big topic. 'Why is everything about maths these days?' she'd rant. 'Art and music are just as important!' She and Mella were so similar like that, both passionate about certain things, and both of them would argue their point with anyone, even if the person didn't argue back, or didn't care. Lil's mum had once had a full-on rant at the postman for posting a political leaflet through their door. 'Do I look like I'd vote for *them*?' she'd demanded, even though the postman clearly didn't care and was only doing his job. Mum didn't seem to bother so much about stuff like that any more. Or about anything very much, except Mella.

'You think I should go?' her mum asked quietly. Even her voice had changed. It was rougher somehow, like even saying words was an effort now.

'I do,' Lil said. What was the point of her mum staying locked up in the house? It was driving her crazy and it wasn't making Mella any more likely to come home.

'Okay. But only because you asked me to.'

Lil held back a sigh. If her mum went anywhere these days, it was always 'because Lil wanted me to'. If she made

any decisions, it was ‘because Lil said so’. It was as if her mother had handed over her entire life into Lil’s keeping. After what happened with Mella, she was too scared to say anything in case she upset Lil and she disappeared too.

Her mum stood up then. ‘Right, looks like I’m going.’ She took her lipstick out of her bag, pulled the lid off, and then looked at it for a long while as though she’d forgotten what to do with it. Finally she put it back in her bag, unused. Then she zipped up the handbag. ‘Your aunt called earlier. Said she’d drop by after her shift. Oh, if you get a chance to speak to her before then, can you ask her to pick up some supplies? Milk and that. Some more bread, probably. Whatever you want, really. Didn’t get a chance to go to the shop, so there’s not much in.’

As if on cue, the toaster beeped and Lil’s mouldy toast popped up. There was clearly no butter to go on it, and definitely no jam. Lil pressed the lever a couple of times before managing to catch the toast. She juggled it in her hands over to the plate. Mella used to jab a knife right into the toaster and skewer the toast out. ‘You worry too much, Little Mouse,’ she’d say when Lil squeaked at her about possible electrocution.

‘I love you,’ her mum said, tugging on her coat. ‘So much.’ Her mum said this every day now. Lil couldn’t remember her ever saying it much before Mella left. She probably hadn’t thought she needed to. There was such raw need in

her mother's eyes these days. It hurt to look at her. All the love she'd felt for both her daughters was concentrated into just Lil now. It was kind of scary. Lil didn't know what to do with all that love.

'I love you too, Mum,' Lil said. It didn't sound like enough.

'I wish you'd come with me,' Mum said.

Lil screwed up her nose and then tried to hide it.

Her mum smiled. It was watery. 'Of course you don't want to come. Okay, well, I'll be back by six. I don't fancy the meal so I'll come straight back. Sandi'll understand.' She shouldered her handbag. 'Be safe today, Lil. And call me. Or I'll call you. We'll call each other.'

'Mum . . .'

'I'm going.'

It took her mum another ten minutes to leave the house. First she wanted to check that her phone was fully charged, and then she couldn't find her car keys – which turned out to be at the bottom of her handbag. But finally, finally, she went, after another brief hesitation – 'Would you look at the weather!' – she was gone.

Lil waved her off from the shelter of the porch with a sense of relief. It was like someone had taken a rubber band off her lungs, and a little of the tightness that had been inside her eased. It was hard being positive all the time. Hope could be painful, especially other people's. Especially her mum's. It was so fragile. You had to be careful not to damage it.

Lil shoved the last bite of toast into her mouth. She chewed quickly because it was – *yuck* – cold, not to mention mouldy, and she went into the hall. When she stooped to pick up her rucksack, she couldn't help but flick a glance down the corridor behind her. Taid and Nain's house was old – part of it had been built in the seventeenth century. Bits had been added on over the years, meaning that it was long and sprawling, with a narrow hallway that ran the length of it, from the front door to the back. There were no windows along it, so it was always dark.

Mella had been convinced it was haunted. 'A house that old? That many people living and dying here? It has to be, right?' she'd say. Lil said that she was being ridiculous. Still, sometimes, Lil got a funny feeling about the place. It wasn't helped by the back door, which had never fitted properly and banged in windy weather. People weren't as particular about locking their doors around here as they were in London, and a couple of times it had worked loose and swung wide open.

Shrugging off the thought of ghosts – *what nonsense* – she dragged on her coat and headed outside.

Lil's bike was resting up against the wall of the house, just beyond the porch. In the past her mum would have nagged her to move it before it turned to rust. Now it was just another thing her mum barely noticed. The helmet was hanging off the handlebars. It was full of water. She tipped it out and then checked the bike's wheels – not too flat – gave a quick

squeeze of the brakes – all good – and then hopped on. The wind nearly blew her straight off again. She had to drop her foot hard to the ground to stop the bike from toppling over.

She glanced at Taid's green VW Beetle. Her mum had promised to insure her on it as soon as she passed her test. Lil would rather be insured on her mum's little Renault, but she knew Mella would kill her for such sacrilege (and Taid would turn in his grave). They had both loved this car. Mella said driving it was like being in a sixties movie, although why that was a good thing Lil never established. Mella was a terrible driver. Whenever they were in the car together Lil closed her eyes and prayed to all the gods she could name that they wouldn't die.

'Take it, take it,' she could hear Mella say as though right in her ear.

'I don't know how to drive it,' Lil said, as Mella blew a raspberry.

Mella would have taken the car. It wouldn't have bothered her if she had no licence or that the insurance had lapsed. But Lil wasn't Mella.

She set her teeth and mounted the bike again, pedalling hard up the drive and then turning right onto the narrow road beyond. The house was halfway up a mountain, and it was downhill for two miles to the main road at the bottom. You went left for the kayaking club, which sat on the river, and right for Old Porthpridd, the nearest village, if you could call

it one. It had a café, a newsagent's and a bike shop. 'Is this it?' Mella had asked. Lil had never been into shopping, not like Mella, but even she'd been disappointed. It had taken a while to get used to the fact that it was 40 miles to Caerwen and the closest proper shops. 'And two hundred miles to any decent ones,' Mella had always said. They'd been here seven years, but Mella had never stopped missing London. 'I'm getting out of here, Mouse,' she'd say. 'The first chance I get. And I'm never ever ever ever coming back.' Lil hadn't really taken her seriously. Hadn't considered how long *never ever ever* really was.

With the wind slapping her cheeks raw and threatening to tear her from her bike, it was going to be a struggle to get anywhere today. Her body was already rigid with cold. After a while she realized her muscles were aching and she forced a deep breath out of her lungs and drew her shoulders down away from her ears. The wind ripped into her again and her shoulders shot back up, tense and hunched. It was an effort to even keep the bike upright.

She only had to make it down to the river. Kiran would give her a lift back. He would have picked her up too, if he hadn't had to drop his little twin brothers off at their science club. But Lil wondered again why she was even bothering going. Mella had been the kayaker. Lil was just pretending. Before Mella went missing, Lil had mostly just hung out in the café at the kayaking place, waiting for her to finish up.

Then after Mella left, Lil went there to pretend that Mella was out kayaking and would be back any second. It was stupid, but for whole seconds at a time, Lil could convince herself that Mella was about to walk in like she used to, curly hair tamed in a long French plait down her back, unpeeling her wetsuit. ‘Why, Mouse,’ she’d say. ‘Fancy meeting you here? And, yes, I don’t mind if I do have a hot chocolate. Sure is nice of you to offer.’

It was in the café that Lil had met Kiran, in May. She was finishing a hot chocolate, doing her usual pretence of waiting for Mella and bracing herself for the long cycle ride home, when a super-tall (taller even than her) guy had walked in. And amazingly that hadn’t been the first thing she’d noticed about him, because he seemed to have fallen into a pot of neon paint. His T-shirt was lime green and his trainers were tangerine orange. More amazing than that was he didn’t look ridiculous. Just bright and happy. And like he didn’t give a damn what anyone else thought of him. Lil had liked that, so she’d smiled, brighter than she had in a long while, and he’d smiled back.

‘Hi,’ he said with his Birmingham accent. ‘You here for the induction?’

Lil had never been interested in kayaking, but there was something about the way this guy asked that made her want to try it. Not because he was cute, although he was: with his brown skin, deeper than deep brown eyes and caterpillar

eyebrows that were a facial expression all of their own. He had stubble too, that curved around his full lips.

So she'd done the induction, much to Gavan's surprise. He ran the kayak club with his partner, Jon, and had been on about Lil doing a course ever since Mella had gone missing. 'It might do you some good. Get a bit of fresh air in your lungs.'

Cai – Mella's boyfriend and one of the instructors at the club – had been surprised too, and Lil had loved that, because she hated the thought of Cai knowing anything – *anything* – about her. She still wanted to gouge his internal organs out with a blunt instrument for what he'd done to Mella.

The wind whipped around her again, bringing her back to the present and nearly knocking her over. She ducked her head against it, which meant she wasn't looking where she was going. When she took the next bend, she didn't see the girl lying motionless in the middle of the road until she was almost on top of her.

TWO

Lil swerved sharply. The bike's wheels skidded on the wet tarmac. She tried to brake, but got no traction. She was heading for the wall, topped with barbed wire. Hitting that was going to hurt, so Lil did the only thing she could think of. She threw herself off, landing on the grassy verge with a bone-shaking jolt as her bike crunched into the wall. The impact took her breath away, but she hobbled to her feet as quickly as she could. The girl hadn't moved, and something darker than water stained the tarmac around her. Lil took a steadying breath and then went over to her.

Close up, the girl was a mess. Lil guessed she must be about fourteen, or thirteen maybe. Her eyes were closed and she wasn't moving. Her face was bruised, blood coming from a cut to her head. And her feet – *oh my God, her feet!* Above her thin pumps, they were caked with mud, and her ankles were lacerated with cuts. There were scratches on her

wrists too, visible under the long sleeves of her white tunic. The wind whipped about her, making her long hair dance.

The sight of her chilled Lil, but she fought back the anxiety and crouched down. ‘Hi,’ she said. ‘Hello? Are you okay?’ With shaking fingers, she touched the girl’s shoulder. It was icy cold through the thin fabric of her dress. Lil shivered and nearly snatched her hand back. ‘Can you hear me?’ she asked softly.

There was no response, and Lil’s anxiety rose. Was she . . . was she *dead? This can’t be happening.* Lil thought she might faint. The world seemed far away, suddenly, the faint sun filtering through the trees and making patterns of light and dark on the wet tarmac. Even the wind seemed to quieten for a moment. Then there was a noise behind her, and Lil snapped around to see a flock of birds rising up from the steep wooded bank. One cawed loudly, and the sound cut through to Lil. She blinked and her vision cleared. At the same time something seemed to switch on in her brain: a power cable finally connected to the main circuit board. What the hell was she doing? She needed to call 999 immediately. This girl needed help.

Lil’s backpack lay where she’d dropped it on the side of the road, her phone inside. It took a moment to open it, and then she couldn’t find her phone. *Where is it? Where is it?* As she rifled through the bag – a book, crisps, a jumper – she cast an anxious look at the girl, who still hadn’t moved.

Her fingers closed around the rectangle of metal, but relief became horror when she tugged the phone free and saw the cracked screen. It must have got smashed during the fall. Nothing that Lil did could get it working again. Almost crying with frustration, she threw the phone back in her bag.

What was she going to do now? They were in the middle of *nowhere*. No one drove on this road. There were only about two cars a day, and that included her mum's. The nearest village was miles away. It would take Lil over an hour to walk there and then what? There was no doctor's surgery and certainly no hospital. And what would she do with the girl? She couldn't just leave her here, lying in the middle of the road.

Her panic sharpened, but then a thought cut through her mounting dread: first-aid training. Gavan didn't let anyone put so much as a pinkie in the river before doing a full-on first-aid course. But could Lil remember it? Why hadn't she paid more attention? Because it had been funnier to mess around with Kiran, and she'd never thought she'd have to use it. What if she did it wrong? Could you make someone worse?

Lil gave herself a stern talking-to. What were her options here? Stand about and have a nervous breakdown while a girl lay – *do not think dying* – or try to help the best she could. Lil took what she hoped was a steady breath and crossed back over to the girl.

‘Check for responsiveness by talking to the patient,’ Gavan had said.

‘Hello,’ Lil said, and amazingly her voice sounded calm. It gave her confidence. ‘Hello,’ she said again. ‘My name’s Lil. I’m here to help you. Open your eyes if you can hear me.’ That’s what Gavan had said to do. ‘You want to get the patient responding to you. The smallest gesture to show they are conscious.’ *The patient*. It sounded so cold and remote. Nothing like the reality of someone lying unconscious in front of you, covered in blood.

Lil wished she’d not panicked so much at first. She could have done this already. A terrifying thought came to her. What if the girl had been alive, but had died because Lil hadn’t reacted quickly enough? The idea was too overwhelming and Lil pushed it aside as best she could.

When the girl didn’t respond to her voice, Lil shook her shoulder again, more firmly this time. Her skin was cold and wet, and her bones were tiny. It was like touching a baby bird. She didn’t react to Lil’s touch at all, so Lil tilted her head back as tenderly as she could, one hand on her forehead and two fingers under her pointed chin, to make sure her airways were clear. Her neck looked exposed like that, and it brought home to Lil even more how vulnerable she was, and how fragile. But they didn’t seem to be any obstruction in her throat and she was breathing. *Thank God.*

Lil's movements were less flustered now. She was shocked at how she instinctively seemed to know what to do. She started to move the girl into the recovery position. She barely weighed anything; her arms were so skinny.

Lil sat back on her heels, assessing what to do next. Rainwater seeped through her tracksuit bottoms. She took off her coat and put it over the girl. The girl was wet through, her thin dress no protection at all from the storm. Lil felt a lurch of compassion for her, a desire to help, no matter what.

She'd have to go home and call the ambulance from there. Perhaps she could use her broken bike to create a barricade, or obstacle in the road, slowing down any vehicle that might come past. It wasn't ideal, but Lil honestly didn't know what else to do, and the chances of a car coming down this road were remote anyway. Despite the girl's small size, Lil didn't think she'd be able to carry her, and besides, you weren't supposed to move someone, were you? Gavan had said that could make them worse. Or was it worse to leave her lying in the middle of the road? Perhaps Lil should drag her closer to the verge?

No, Lil decided. She'd leave her here rather than risk causing more damage, although the thought of the girl being alone made Lil's insides twist. But she could run pretty fast. She reckoned she could be home in less than five minutes. She was getting to her feet, still scared, but more rational

now she had a plan, when the girl's eyelids flickered open to reveal large dark-brown eyes, bloodshot with tiredness.

In biology they'd watched a documentary of a lion chasing a zebra. At the moment that the lion brought it down with a giant paw, the camera had zoomed in on the zebra's face. Foaming at the mouth, lips drawn back in a silent scream, and eyes, wide and terrified – and exactly like this girl's.

Fear scoured Lil, and for a moment she was speechless. She pulled herself together. 'Hi,' she stammered, voice shaky, from fear, or cold, or both. 'Hi! Are you okay . . . ?' She tailed off. It was obvious this girl was anything but all right.

The girl didn't answer. Her gaze flitted from Lil's face to the trees that clung to the steep slope on one side of the road, their thick roots spread out like spider webs. They were strung together tightly, so you couldn't see between them. Rainwater gushed down the bank, making the mud run like a river. Lil couldn't tell what the girl was looking at up on the ridge. It was almost impossible to make out anything up there, like someone had taken a huge eraser and rubbed everything out, leaving only smudges. And it was so quiet. Even the storm seemed to have stilled, and there was only the drip-drip of the rain from leaves. It was as if the world was drawing breath before— Before what?

Calm down, Lil told herself. But there was a charge in the air, and Lil felt a sudden, desperate urge to get inside,

where it was safe. *Safe?* Lil was caught out by that thought. Safe from what? She was less than a mile from her home. Nothing ever happened here – and yet she couldn't shake the instinct that was building inside her, growing stronger every moment. *Run*, it said. *Run now*.

'Are you okay?' Lil asked again, like a stuck record, but she couldn't seem to think of anything else to say. 'What are you doing out here? What happened to you?'

The girl didn't answer. She had paled further, and her eyes were even wilder and darker. She looked ready to bolt, and Lil didn't know what to do. 'It's okay,' Lil said, as softly as she could. 'I'll help you. What's your name? I'm Lil. It's okay. It's okay,' Lil repeated, as if saying it enough times would make it true. 'I live just up there. You can come back to mine and we can call someone. Someone who'll help you.'

'No, no. Call no one.' The girl shook her head, drawing back from Lil, her limbs scrunching up under her, like a small animal ready to crawl back into its hole. She looked even younger suddenly, no more than nine or ten.

Lil felt panicky again. 'We can't stay out here. You're hurt and it's raining.' *Not safe*, her brain screamed at her. *Run. Run. Get away*. 'Come with me,' she said. 'I'll help you.'

The girl shook her head even more vigorously.

Then, without any warning, a shaft of sunlight broke through the thick clouds overhead, catching Lil full in the face, blinding her and making the dark world glitter

in an almost magical glow. It disappeared as quickly as it had appeared.

Lil blinked in the fresh gloom, and then her eyes widened in amazement at how the girl's expression had changed. The terror had retreated from her features, and she even smiled. 'You will help me,' she said quietly but with absolute assurance.

'Yes . . . Yeah,' Lil said, although she had no idea what had made this girl suddenly change her mind. She looked upwards as though the explanation might be there, but all she could see was the sky, heavy with dark rainclouds, hiding the brief sun.