

Fiery Glow

The night we lost everything was the night the Leonids peaked in the Northern Hemisphere.

I was writing an essay about Communist Russia when I was momentarily distracted by a flash of light that danced across my bedroom window. My phone buzzed; a message from my best friend Phoebe.

-Hey, babe. We're outside.-

I pushed away from my desk and stood, nearly knocking the space heater at my feet, then peered out into the darkness. Phoebe and her boyfriend Kieran waved from the pavement below, their lit torches aimed towards me.

An icy gust of November wind ruffled the curtains and blew several sheets of paper to the floor as I opened the window. 'What are you doing here?' I asked, keeping my voice low. 'It's after midnight.'

'We're going to the golf course to watch the meteor shower,' Phoebe said. 'Come with us!'

'I can't. I've got to be up early.'

'Come on, Lexi! You've always said you wanted to see shooting stars.'

'Tonight's your best chance,' Kieran added, pointing his torch upwards.

A quick glance at the sky confirmed ideal viewing conditions. Still....

'I don't think my parents will let me.'

'So sneak out. It'll be fun,' Phoebe said.

'I'm in pyjamas.'

'Throw on a jumper. Gabe won't mind.'

My pulse raced. 'Gabe's coming?'

Kieran nodded. 'He's meeting us on the fifth.'

Though he didn't know it, Gabriel Akerman owned my heart from the moment he asked me for directions to the Tech Centre on his first day at Brenton Secondary. 'Okay. I'll be right down.'

'Blimey. You came prepared,' Kieran laughed when we met Gabe at the base of the Mound. Gabe pulled a festival trolley behind him laden with blankets and several bottles of cider.

'Have to stay warm... and hydrated,' he grinned, before starting up the rise. 'Don't just stand there, mate. Give me a hand.'

After we'd set up camp, Gabe and I sat under a shared blanket with our feet pointing east. Up above, thousands of stars twinkled against a velvety-black backdrop. 'I wasn't going to come, but I'm glad I did,' I said. 'This is perfect.'

'I came here to watch the Aurora last month. It was amazing.' He gestured towards the rooftops jutting above the bordering shrubbery. 'Look. We can even see your house from here.'

Only a few hundred metres separated us from the cluster of houses on Olwen Close, but out here, in the stillness of the night, home felt miles away.

‘You come here to spy on me?’ I teased, nudging his shoulder.

‘Obviously.’ He sipped from his bottle then offered it to me.

‘Better not. I’ve got swimming in the morning.’

‘Good shout.’ He drained the bottle before setting it down. ‘Lie back. Let your eyes adjust.’

Phoebe giggled and coughed into her fist. ‘No shenanigans, you two!’

‘As if, Phebes!’ I said, resting my head on the ground against Gabe’s. ‘Where should I look?’

He pointed to a constellation shaped like a reverse question mark. ‘See there? That’s Leo. Look about thirty degrees below it.’

It wasn’t long before the first shooting star revealed itself; a divine, fiery glow that blazed across the sky and vanished as soon as it appeared.

‘Did you see that?’ I blurted out.

‘That was a good one.’ Gabe found my hand beneath the blanket and squeezed it, sending a tingle through me. ‘Did you make a wish?’

‘Um....’

‘Next one we see... make a wish.’

I’d already got my wish. He was holding my hand.

Sometime later, Kieran stood up and wandered to the trolley. ‘Hey, Gabe. Mind if I... Holy shit!’ he gasped. ‘Is that fire?’

We sat up and followed Kieran’s finger. Plumes of black and grey smoke billowed high into the air amidst a faint, orange glow radiating from....

‘Oh my God! That’s my house!’ I kicked off the blanket and scrambled to my feet, then bolted down the Mound and sprinted towards the gap in the fence we’d snuck through an hour before. My friends shouted from several paces behind me, but their words were drowned out by distant sirens and the clamour in my head. *Mum. Dad. Joshy.*

As I neared the Close, the acrid smell of smoke assaulted my nostrils and stung my eyes. I searched for my family amongst the panic-stricken faces in the crowd gathered on the green, but my legs had turned to lead, as if the weight of fear had seeped into my bones. I spotted Mum and Joshy huddling on the kerb across from my blazing house.

‘Lexi! Over here!’ Mum shouted.

I mustered the strength to run to them. ‘Thank God you’re okay.’ I wrapped my arms around their trembling bodies then looked around. ‘Where’s Dad?’

Mum shook her head. ‘He went back inside... looking for you.’