



# BLINDED BY THE LIGHT

JOE KIPLING



THE UNION TRILOGY

BOOK I

# Blinded by the Light

---

Joe Kipling

Cillian Press |

First published in Great Britain in 2013  
by Cillian Press Limited. 83 Ducie Street, Manchester M1 2JQ  
[www.cillianpress.co.uk](http://www.cillianpress.co.uk)

Copyright © Joe Kipling 2013

The right of Joe Kipling to be identified as the Author of this work has been asserted  
by her in accordance with the Copyright, Design and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a  
retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior  
written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of  
binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without similar  
condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data.  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-909776-00-5

eBook ISBN: 978-1-909776-01-2

Cover Design: Billie Jade McNeill

‘There is Power In A Union’ Words and Music by Billy Bragg © 1986,  
Reproduced by Permission of Sony/ATV Music Publishing Ltd, London W1F 9LD

Published by  
Cillian Press – Manchester - 2013  
[www.cillianpress.co.uk](http://www.cillianpress.co.uk)

For my dad who introduced me to Sci-Fi and my mum who  
would have told everyone in park.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to thank the following people for their help with this book:

To the many friends and family who listened to my ideas and commented on the various drafts, including: Helen Coen, Richard Power and Nikki Harris. Thank you for your time and patience. Special thanks to Annwyl Port and Bekka Kipling who's insight and thoughtful comments helped to shape this book. Michele Lemon as always your encouragement and enthusiasm was gratefully received. Thanks to the Olive Tree Bistro in Holmfirth for keeping me well supplied with Cappuchino's and home made scones. To Mark Brady and Sonia Devons at Cillian Press thank you for your expert guidance and support. Finally, thank you to Will, Jake and Max for letting me use your names.





Chapter 1: Stranded  
Chapter 2: Welfare  
Chapter 3: Party  
Chapter 4: Aftermath  
Chapter 5: Alone  
Chapter 6: East Park  
Chapter 7: Boundary  
Chapter 8: Outside  
Chapter 9: Union  
Chapter 10: Truth  
Chapter 11: Caves  
Chapter 12: Celebration  
Chapter 13: Rebellion  
Chapter 14: Rescue  
Chapter 15: Discovery  
Chapter 16: Escape  
Chapter 17: Flight  
Chapter 18: Family  
Chapter 19: Return  
Chapter 20: Decision



# Stranded

The sun shimmered like a blood red orange, its bright rays reflecting vibrantly across the darkening city skyline. The deep orange hue backlit the clouds and glinted off the glass and steel buildings below giving the Neighbourhood an otherworldly, almost magical feel.

‘It’s beautiful,’ I gasped, as Reese and I sprawled out across the grass.

Reese took a noisy gulp from his can of beer. ‘S because of the pollution,’ he slurred.

‘I don’t understand?’ I frowned.

‘The pollution makes the sky that colour. All the crap in the air filters the light and turns it orange.’

‘Oh,’ I responded.

‘Not so beautiful now is it MaryAnn?’ he laughed. ‘Now that you know that it’s the pollution.’

I tried to ignore the sneer in his voice. Reese was the coolest boy in school. I’d spent six months trying to get him to ask me out on a date and I wasn’t going to waste time arguing with him about a stupid sunset. I’d already spent most of our first date squeezed into the front seat of his convertible. His best friends Danny and Charlie had sprawled out across the back seat, drinking beer and shouting insults at any girl who was unfortunate enough to be passing by.

By the time we'd arrived at the park I was desperate to escape the confines of the car and breathe the clean fresh air outside. Thankfully Danny and Charlie had grabbed a six pack and, after making a couple of lewd gestures at Reese and me, they'd disappeared off in the direction of the kids' playground. The last time I'd seen them they were drunkenly trying to push each other off the swings.

Reese had grabbed the remaining beers off the back seat and had led me over to the edge of the park where we had a magnificent view across to the Neighbourhood. I thought it was very romantic.

I rolled off my stomach and sat up straight, turning my back to the setting sun so that I faced Reese. I crossed my legs and leant towards him trying to make myself look as alluring as possible. If Reese didn't ask me to be his girlfriend then I'd be the laughing stock of the school on Monday.

Georgina and Natalie, my two best friends, were waiting for me to get back from my date so that I could fill them in on all the gossip. The anticipation had been building all week until we were almost giddy with the excitement of it all. We'd discussed my hair, makeup, wardrobe, how I should behave, topics to talk about. We'd planned everything. In fact with all the planning that had gone into the event you would have thought that I'd never been asked out by a boy before. It wasn't my first date, but we all understood the importance of this particular 'date'. If everything went well and Reese asked me to be his girlfriend then by Monday I'd be hanging out with the coolest group of Alphas in school. Alphas were the social elite, not just at school but across the whole Neighbourhood. Even though I was Alpha too, Daddy was a politician not a celebrity. So I was pretty popular at school, but not popular enough to be invited to all the best parties; the really glamorous ones that all the celeb kids went to.

Reese was in a whole different league, his mother was the model, Diana Temple. She wrote her own fashion blog on the Portal and

EVERYONE followed it. Daddy once said that if she told the Neighbourhood that wearing a teapot on their head was fashionable then everyone would be rattling around in one.

Georgina, Natalie and I met up every Thursday after school and waited impatiently for her blog to be uploaded onto the Portal so we could find out what to spend our weekly credit allowance on. Reese's father was a famous singer too, so it meant that his social status was pure gold and I was hoping that some of that gold would rub off on me and make me sparkle.

With this thought uppermost in our minds Georgina and Natalie had arrived at my house early this morning to help me get ready. Georgina said I needed to go for *the girl next door look - with a touch of sexy . . .* She said *that was what boys liked*. As Reese had spent most of the afternoon drinking and belching with his friends rather than paying any attention to me, I was beginning to wonder whether Georgina really knew what she was talking about. Although, now we were alone, Reese finally seemed to be giving me his undivided attention; even if he was peering down my top.

I pulled self-consciously at my vest but Reese leered at me. 'Leave it. I was enjoying the view.' I flushed red with embarrassment. Reese snorted and took another loud gulp of beer.

'You want?' He opened a can and thrust it under my nose. I hesitated. I didn't want any more beer. I'd never been able to handle my drink very well and I'd already had two cans in the car. My head was feeling a bit woozy and I didn't want to risk getting drunk, but I didn't want to look like a total fool in front of Reese either.

After a moment's hesitation I grabbed the beer from his outstretched hand and took a reluctant sip. I hated the taste and I tried not to grimace as I swallowed it down as quickly as possible.

Reese was laughing at me, 'You don't like it?'

Crap! He really did think I was a loser. 'No,' I protested, 'it's good.'

‘Not a problem.’ He snatched the can out of my hand and poured the contents out on the grass. ‘There’s more where that came from.’ He drained the remnants of his own can of beer, crumpled it up and threw it on the grass in front of him.

‘Don’t you think you’d better pick it up? We’ll get into trouble for dropping litter.’

‘I’m just keeping Delta in a job.’ He gave me a crooked smile. ‘*One Neighbourhood working in harmony*,’ he repeated a Light slogan. ‘I’m a real humanitarian.’ He laughed loudly and kicked clumsily at the empty can with the toe of his shoe so that it bounced away from us across the wet grass.

I nodded in agreement. The city employed Delta to do all the menial jobs; like sweeping the streets and cleaning houses. Daddy said that it showed just how benevolent the Light had been in giving them a safe place to live, so they could still contribute to society. Still, there were strict rules about dropping litter in the Neighbourhood. Daddy said that with so many people living in the Neighbourhood, if we all dropped just one piece of litter a day we’d soon be drowning in waste and that would lead to disease and infection. I gave a shudder of revulsion at the thought.

‘It’s not the Delta I’m worried about,’ I said. ‘If we get caught dropping litter and Daddy finds out he’ll kill me.’

‘You’ve got to be kidding. You’re the Legislator’s daughter; I thought he’d protect you.’

I shrugged. It was true, Daddy was very influential in the Light and he would do anything for me. I had him wrapped around my little finger, but I didn’t want Reese to think I was spoilt.

‘He might decide to make an example of me,’ I said. ‘He could get into lots of trouble if I break the law and he ignores it.’

‘Yeah right! Wasn’t it your father who helped when you and your friends got drunk at the school party last year?’

I squirmed in embarrassment at the memory; Georgina had sneaked a bottle of vodka into the end of term party and Natalie and I had got incredibly drunk (did I mention that I don't handle my drink very well?). All three of us had ended up dancing in the school fountain in our underwear. Daddy had been incredibly embarrassed, but he'd spoken to the headmaster and dealt with the situation. Someone at school had obviously been gossiping to Reese. I wasn't sure whether I was upset that someone had told him such an embarrassing story, or happy that he'd been talking about me. If he'd been listening to gossip then that must mean he liked me.

'What about the time you were caught shoplifting in the Hub,' he continued. Crap, he knew about that too! I wondered who he'd been talking too, probably Melissa Carter; she had such a boring life she was always gossiping about something.

'It was a joke,' I stammered. 'To see if we could get away with it.'

'And obviously you didn't!' he replied.

I was embarrassed. 'No, no we didn't.' It had been a stupid bet anyway and mostly Georgina's idea. It was Daddy who had had to sort out the mess, and he'd been so angry with me.

'So if we get caught then your father will just bail us out.'

'HMMMMM, maybe.'

'Of course he'll bail you out; your father would do anything for you.'

'That's where you're wrong,' I protested. 'He didn't help my brother when he got into trouble.' I clasped my hand across my mouth, but it was too late. I hadn't meant to mention my brother.

Reese looked interested. 'Brother! I didn't know you had a brother.'

Of course he didn't know about my brother, he was the best kept secret in the Neighbourhood. He'd left home when he was fifteen and had disappeared without a trace. I was only eleven at the time and still didn't understand what had happened to him. Mummy and Daddy refused to talk about it. I'd heard rumours that he'd gone across the

Boundary, but I didn't believe them. I couldn't understand why he would run away from the Neighbourhood to live Outside when it was a death sentence? At school we'd been shown broadcasts of the Outside and they terrified me. The Ferals who'd survived the virus had been driven mad by the disease and they fought each other for food. The reporter had said that some of them were even cannibals. It was too horrible to think about.

I couldn't imagine why my brother would cross the Boundary, but there hadn't been a sighting of him since he left home four years ago. I sometimes fantasised that he'd sneaked onto a bus and gone to one of the other Neighbourhoods; he could have travelled up north to Edinburgh or gone south to London. He'd always wanted an adventure. Our Neighbourhood had never been big enough for him.

Reese had only moved to our Neighbourhood six months ago so he'd never met my brother. He'd travelled to Manchester from London, which was another reason why I was so desperate to date him. People rarely travelled between the three Neighbourhoods as the buses were used for transporting supplies. It took months for the Light to authorise travel permits because we had to conserve resources.

Daddy said that before the virus people would catch buses and travel across the country any time they wanted. I couldn't imagine what that must have been like. Some people still travelled across the Outside, mainly traders moving between the Neighbourhoods, but it was incredibly dangerous because there was no protection from the Feral Echo. There was also the risk of disease. People travelling between the Neighbourhoods had to undergo weeks of quarantine in case they brought any infection with them. Daddy said that we couldn't risk another outbreak of the Sandman Virus. The next outbreak could be the end of us all.

I'd never met anyone else who'd travelled from another Neighbour-



hood before so just sitting and talking to Reese made me feel excited and slightly dangerous. When he'd first arrived at the school that's all anyone could talk about; the boy from London. We'd listened enthralled as he told us his story over and over again. How he'd travelled across the Outside for a full day on the bus. We'd all cringed in disgust when he mentioned the Feral Echo, starving and deformed by disease, living in hovels by the side of the road. I shuddered at the horrors that he must have seen.

'MaryAnn, I said I didn't know you had a brother,' Reese interrupted my chain of thought and brought me back to reality. He was staring at me, obviously waiting for a response.

I picked at the sleeve of my gloves and avoided looking at him. 'He went away,' I said uncomfortably. I was aware that I was flushing self-consciously and I desperately wanted to change the subject. I didn't want Reese to find out about my brother, to hear the rumours that he was living Outside with the Ferals. I didn't want to see the look of disgust on his face and I definitely didn't want to ruin our date.

'Went where?' he probed. I realised I must be behaving strangely because he had a curious look on his face.

I didn't know how to respond. I desperately wanted to change the subject but my brain was like treacle and I couldn't think of anything else to say.

'Went where?' he persisted. He obviously wasn't going to give up.

'Can we just drop it?' I was so anxious my voice came out louder than I expected.

Reese's brow crinkled in annoyance and he jumped to his feet, scowling down at me. 'Don't shout at me . . . stupid bitch.' He stormed away across the grass.

Immediately I regretted raising my voice. Panicked, I jumped up and ran after him, angrily berating myself for upsetting him. Why did I always get so defensive about my brother? He'd run away from

home and I should just accept it. Now my stupid temper could ruin my date with Reese.

I found Reese standing under the shade of a broad oak tree with his back to me. I moved beside him. 'I'm sorry,' I said. Reese didn't respond. Instead he bent over and made a strange choking noise . . . then he threw up all over my brand new tiger print pumps.

I stared in horror as the slimy vomit soaked through the thin material of my shoes. Reese bent over again, but this time I managed to jump out of the way. He groaned loudly as vomit splattered across the grass.

'Too much beer,' he moaned. 'Need to go home.' He staggered away from the tree in the direction of his car.

'What about Danny and Charlie?' I called after him.

'Don't care,' he said. 'Got to go home now.' He dug into his pocket and threw a metal object at me. It was the key card for his car.

'You have to drive,' he said.

'What?' I shouted in alarm. 'I don't have my licence yet.'

'Can't drive,' he answered. 'Too drunk, and daddy won't let you go to jail. I get caught driving drunk and I'll be in serious trouble.'

I tried to think of a response but before I had chance to come up with a reason why I couldn't drive the car Reese had opened the passenger door and climbed inside.

I hesitated, not sure what to do next. If I was caught driving illegally I'd be in big trouble, but what other choice did I have? I briefly toyed with the idea of calling Daddy and asking for his help, but I dismissed it right away. Daddy would help me out, but he'd have that disappointed look on his face when he arrived to collect me. Besides, Georgina was having a party at her house at the end of the month and there was a chance that Daddy might ground me for drinking beer. I couldn't risk it. I had to drive Reese home.

Reese was sprawled out across the passenger seat. His face had a

green tinge to it and he smelled strongly of vomit. It made me think of disease and sick people and my sensitive stomach heaved slightly. I opened the driver window to let in some air and took a couple of deep breaths to calm my nerves. I'd only ever driven a car once before in the car park behind our apartment after I'd persuaded Daddy to give me a driving lesson. I tried to remember what he'd taught me, but all his instructions were jumbled up in my head.

I took another deep breath and inserted the key card into the ignition. The engine roared into life. I checked the rear view mirror, remembering vaguely that Daddy had said it was important to make sure there was no-one behind the car. I think it had something to do with people on bikes. Sometimes when Daddy started talking at me I just switched off and made sure I nodded in all the right places to make him think I was listening.

Gripping the steering wheel tightly and hunching forward a little so I could get a better view of the road I slowly released the handbrake and cautiously pulled away from the kerb. I was grateful that the car was an automatic so I didn't have to worry about the clutch and gears.

I drove slowly out of the park. The road to the exit was unsealed and bumpy and Reese groaned as we lurched uncomfortably along the path. 'Take it easy,' he snapped before making a gagging noise. I yelled at him to hang his head out of the window and thankfully he made it just in time.

When we arrived at the main road I was relieved to find that it was quiet and there was very little traffic. Reese lived on the other side of the Neighbourhood to me and even though I'd travelled the road as a passenger in Daddy's car I still had to concentrate hard to remember the way.

By the time we pulled up outside his house Reese had fallen asleep and was snoring loudly. I prodded his arm gently and he woke with a start. With his grey face, mussed up hair and smelling sourly of

vomit he looked dreadful and nothing like the cute boy that I'd been so desperate to go on a date with.

I waited expectantly for the concierge to open the car door. When nobody arrived, Reese opened the door on his own and staggered drunkenly out of the car. Annoyed, I switched off the engine and climbed out too. If our concierge had behaved so irresponsibly then Daddy would have been furious. It was incredibly bad manners.

Reese was unsteady on his feet and swayed alarmingly for a moment. I thought he was going to fall over, but somehow he managed to regain his balance. I escorted him up the porch steps and once we were at the top he grabbed at the heavy wooden door frame to steady himself.

'Are you going to be okay?'

He didn't respond, just grasped for the handle and opened the door.

'Key card,' he mumbled.

'What?'

'I want the key card for my car.' He held out his hand impatiently. 'Give me my card.' His voice was slurred and almost incoherent.

I handed the card back to him. 'How am I going to get home?'

'I dunno,' he said as he stepped into the HealthScan. It flashed green and he entered the house, closing the door behind him without giving me a backward glance.

I remained on the step staring at the closed door thinking that he wouldn't really abandon me with no way of getting home, that he would at least let me inside so that I could call a taxi. Eventually I realised that he definitely wasn't coming back and I sank down onto the cold stone steps unsure what to do next.

I shivered. It was getting cold and I was only wearing a thin vest. It was a cute hot pink vest that Georgina had chosen especially for the date. She said the colour really suited me and that I looked great in it. At that moment I would have gladly swapped it for a less sexy

jumper. I opened my handbag and pulled out my phone. The battery was low; too low to make a call but it allowed me to check my credit. Great! I had no credit left. I'd meant to ask Daddy to top it up before I'd left the house this morning but in the excitement of getting ready for the date I'd completely forgotten. I couldn't call anyone or connect to the Portal to top up my credit so that I could at least order a taxi. 'Really!' I muttered to myself, could this day get any worse?

With no phone and no credit it seemed that the only option was to walk home. It was at least four miles to my house which meant I had a long trek ahead of me and I hated walking. It seemed such a stupid way to travel. I gave Reese's closed door a final, hopeful glance before climbing down off the porch and heading in the direction of home.

I was about half way home when I heard the first crack of thunder. Moments later the heavens opened and it started to pour with rain. Within minutes I was soaking wet, freezing cold and angry at myself for leaving my jacket at home. I muttered a string of obscenities that would have gotten me grounded if my parents had been around to hear them. At least the puddles of water that filled the street were able to wash away the vomit from my new shoes. It seems there was a silver lining after all!

# Welfare

It took forever to walk home and it was already dark when I arrived at my apartment block. The concierge greeted me with a nod as I entered the Atrium.

The apartment was in darkness, which meant that Daddy and Mummy must be out; probably at a charity event or a dinner party. I was relieved that I didn't have to explain to them why I'd arrived home so late, soaked to the skin and shivering with cold.

I was exhausted, the day had been a complete failure and all I wanted to do was crawl into my bed and go to sleep. I switched on the hall light and then clambered wearily up the stairs, squelching wetly along the corridor until I reached the door to my room.

As I entered my room I almost jumped out of my skin as two people leapt off the bed. 'MaryAnn,' they chorused in unison. 'Where have you been? We've been waiting here for ages.'

With my heart hammering wildly in my chest I realised it was Georgina and Natalie, who it appeared had spent the evening camped out in my bedroom.

'We fell asleep,' said Natalie.

'You're soaked,' Georgina said, her dark brown eyes quickly taking in my bedraggled appearance and sodden clothing. 'What happened to you?'

I was too miserable even to speak and threw myself dramatically across the bed. I felt the mattress depress as they took a seat on either side of me. Natalie pulled the hair back from my face and I screwed my eyes shut so I didn't have to look at her. 'Tell us what happened.'

I shook my head. I deliberately kept my eyes closed, refusing to look at either of them. The day was too awful to talk about and I just wanted to be left alone.

'Sit up and tell us what happened,' Georgina spoke in the tone she used when she expected to be obeyed. I'd learnt from experience that it wasn't wise to ignore Georgina when she was in one of her moods, so I reluctantly sat up. My hair hung limp and wet against my skin, sending rivulets of cold water running uncomfortably down my spine.

Georgina was examining me, waiting for me to speak.

I tried to hold her gaze but my face crumpled – I felt so humiliated. 'It was awful,' I sobbed. 'Just awful.'

'Oh it can't have been that bad,' Natalie said kindly.

'It was horrible, the worst date of my life. We drove around in Reese's car for ages -'

'The convertible,' Natalie interrupted.

'Yes the convertible,' I murmured.

'Sweet.'

'Natalie, shut your big fat mouth and let MaryAnn talk,' Georgina hissed. Natalie fell silent.

'It would have been sweet if Danny and Charlie hadn't been with us. We drove round and round for hours while they all drank beer. It was horrible, the car smelt like feet and it made me feel sick.' I could hear the high pitched whine in my voice, but I was so miserable that I didn't care.

Georgina scowled. 'What happened next?'

'We drove to the park and Reese and I went up to The Point. You

know at the edge of the park where you get those great views over the Neighbourhood?’

‘Very romantic,’ Natalie murmured.

This comment elicited another scowl from Georgina.

‘I was just saying that it’s very romantic,’ she protested feebly.

‘No-one wants to hear what you think so just shut your big mouth.’

‘It was really romantic until Reese drank too much beer and threw up all over my new shoes.’

They both stared at my feet. Natalie pulled a face, but didn’t comment.

‘So after he threw up on your shoes what happened?’ Georgina asked in a measured tone.

‘He was too drunk to drive so I had to take him home -’

‘You drove his car?’ Natalie squealed excitedly. ‘You actually drove his convertible. Now that really is sweet.’ She whistled softly through her teeth.

‘But he took the key card off me when I got back to his house and I didn’t have enough credit for a taxi so I had to walk all the way home, in the rain. It took me hours.’ I hid my face in my hands, too ashamed to look at either of them.

‘What an idiot. I can’t believe he left you to walk home on your own,’ Natalie patted my damp shoulder sympathetically.

‘I told you it was the worst date ever,’ I said, basking in the sympathy I’d been craving. At least my friends cared about me and understood how awful my night had been.

‘It wasn’t that bad,’ Natalie sounded unconvincing. ‘It could have been worse.’

‘How?’ I howled in despair. ‘How could it have been any worse? He threw up on my shoes.’ I indicated my feet and she wrinkled her nose in disgust.

‘You idiot,’ Georgina hissed so vehemently that both Natalie and I jumped in surprise. I stared at her, my mouth hanging open. Georgina



wasn't renowned for her compassionate nature, but surely even she understood how horrible my night had been.

'Do you realise what you've done? There's no way that Reese is going to ask you to be his girlfriend now. This was our big chance. We invested time in you and you blew it. You've ruined this for all of us, and all you're concerned about is a pair of stupid shoes. You're pathetic MaryAnn. Absolutely pathetic.'

I continued to stare at her open mouthed. I wasn't sure how to respond. I'd expected sympathy from my friends, not an attack.

'I don't think I can ever forgive you for this,' she continued.

'What could I have done? He was drunk. He threw up on me. I couldn't stop -'

'Of course you could have stopped him,' she interrupted. The venom in her voice was unmistakable. 'You could have stopped him drinking at any time. You could have refused to get in the car with Danny and Charlie. You let things get totally out of control.'

Natalie raised her eyebrows at me, but didn't say a word. I didn't blame her. It was wise to keep your mouth shut when Georgina was annoyed. She could often be relied on to follow a tirade with a hard slap across the face.

Georgina sprang up from the bed. 'Come on Natalie. We're going home.'

'But what about MaryAnn. Shouldn't we stay with her? She looks so miserable.'

'She deserves to be miserable,' Georgina hissed.

'But . . .' I started.

She rounded on me. 'You don't see boys messing me around do you? Getting drunk and throwing up on me.'

It was true. I don't think there was any boy in the Neighbourhood brave enough to mess around with Georgina, and if they did I suspected they wouldn't live long enough to tell the tale.

‘You’re so selfish MaryAnn, this wasn’t just about you. We spent ages getting ready for this date and now you’ve ruined it for all of us. There’s no way Reese or his friends will ever invite us to any of their parties now. You’ve totally killed our social life and probably made us a laughing stock. I don’t think I can ever forgive you for this. In fact I don’t know whether I even want to be friends with you anymore.’ With that parting shot she stalked out of the room pulling her coat from the back of the chair as she went. Natalie hurried after her, throwing me a sympathetic smile as she closed the door quietly behind her.

Alone in my room I lay down miserably on my bed. My clothes were still damp and I pulled a blanket around me so that I was cocooned in its safe warm interior. I closed my eyes. This was not how my evening was supposed to end. I should have arrived back from my date jubilant and excited, Georgina and Natalie should be hanging on my every word as I told them all about my date, the romantic conversations in the park, the moment he asked me to be his girlfriend. Instead I’d been humiliated by the coolest boy in school and my friends had disowned me. Life was so unfair.

If anyone tells you that things look better in the cold light of day, then they’re lying. I know this because when I woke up the next morning things were worse. I’d slept in my clothes and woke up feeling cold and damp and achy. My insides were tied in knots at the thought of facing Reese at school and I couldn’t even bear to think about my tattered friendship with Georgina and Natalie.

There was a knock at the door and Mummy called for me to get up. Mummy was not a morning person and usually woke up in a bad mood so I’d learnt not to antagonise her by being late for breakfast. I lay in bed for a few moments before I gave myself a mental shake, *MaryAnn Hunter stop wallowing in self-pity and get out of bed.*

Throwing off the bedclothes I reluctantly dragged myself into the bathroom. I peeled off my clothes and stepped into the shower. 'Hot, Massage,' I commanded and a hot stream of razor sharp droplets immediately hit my head. The water felt good and soon I began to feel a little better. The chem rinse that followed the shower stung my eyes and as always I gagged at the smell. After my date from hell the previous evening I felt that I deserved the misery. For once I wasn't tempted to cut the rinse short and risk my parents' wrath when they found out. Instead I stayed under the rinse for the prescribed five minutes.

As I stepped out of the shower I heard the tinkle of a bell that signalled that breakfast was about to be served. Everything was run with military precision in the Hunter household. Daddy liked to keep things in order. I used to sometimes wonder if he behaved the same way in the office and whether he used a bell to signal lunch or break times to his staff.

I towelled myself dry before pulling out my green dress from the wardrobe. Once I was dressed I opened the bathroom cabinet and took out a series of bottles. I didn't have to count the bottles: I knew that there were ten in total, each containing a health supplement. I swallowed each supplement in turn. They were all artificially flavoured to make them more palatable. My favourite was the orange tasting one; a high dose of vitamin C combined with an anti-viral that the Light had manufactured to prevent colds and flu.

I swallowed the final supplement and then pulled a clean pair of gloves out of the cupboard. As I pulled them on I marvelled at how they so easily formed a second skin. Only a few years ago we'd been forced to wear thick material gloves as a protection against the spread of disease. Then the engineers developed a new synthetic fibre that was so cheap to produce that even Delta used them. It meant that once the gloves were fitted they were barely noticeable and everything you touched felt so real.

I headed downstairs, carefully avoiding my vomit stained shoes that were still lying on the bedroom floor, and arrived in the dining room just as breakfast was being served.

Daddy and Mummy were already seated at the table. As I approached the table Daddy dropped his newspaper and offered me a nod and I returned it before slipping into the seat next to him.

‘Your hair’s wet,’ Mummy commented.

‘I didn’t have time to dry it.’

‘Well don’t go out with it like that. I don’t want the neighbours to see you with wet hair . . . and you could catch a cold.’

Mummy was very keen on keeping up appearances and she thought that she could scare me with the threat of a cold. It wouldn’t do for the Legislator’s daughter to leave the house with wet hair. Being a member of my family sometimes felt like I was part of an elaborate theatre production; perfectly groomed, perfectly dressed and perfectly behaved. There was no room for mistakes, especially not if those mistakes affected Daddy’s job with the Light.

Thankfully Mummy was distracted by the arrival of breakfast and she turned her attentions to Anita our maid who carefully set out a series of sterile tubs containing scrambled eggs and sausages. As always there was far too much food for the three of us, but Mummy said that extravagance was a sign of our status. It was important that our wealth and prosperity be demonstrated at every opportunity. Mummy usually ate like a bird, picking at the crumbs on her plate, while Daddy often ate at the office. So there was always a lot of food left after each meal. Mummy personally supervised the disposal of the food into tightly locked waste bins to make sure that the servants didn’t pick through any leftovers. Not only did sharing food and leftovers spread disease but Mummy also believed that giving Delta free food destroyed their work ethic and made them lazy.

Daddy took a gulp of his coffee and smiled at me over the rim of

his newspaper. ‘Poppet, you remember that we have tickets to the charity ball next week don’t you?’

I nodded in response, my mouth too full of scrambled eggs to answer him.

‘Do you need a new dress?’ he asked.

I quickly swallowed the last of my food. ‘I have an old dress I could wear. The red one that I wore to the Christmas gala,’ I added.

‘That old thing,’ he said. ‘That won’t do at all. We can’t have everyone in the Light thinking that my daughter has to recycle her old dresses. I’ll add some credits to your phone. Would a thousand be enough?’

I smiled at him. There was no way I’d ever wear an old dress to a party. It made Daddy feel good if he thought he was spoiling me and a thousand credits would buy a very nice dress and shoes too.

Appearances were very important to Daddy too. He always expected us to look our best. He never left the house without being perfectly groomed. He had a manicure and facial every week and all his suits were handmade. I’d never seen Daddy casually dressed, he was always formal in a suit, accompanied by a waistcoat, tie and an ornate gold pocket watch, that he said had belonged to his father.

The sound of a car horn beeped in the distance. Daddy folded up his newspaper. ‘Back to the daily grind,’ he said before draining the last remnants of coffee from his cup. I knew he didn’t mean it, Daddy loved his job. Mummy always referred to his job as his second wife. She sometimes complained that he paid more attention to his job than he did her. I knew that wasn’t true, Daddy absolutely adored her. He was always buying her nice things and planning extravagant surprises.

‘I’ll walk you out,’ Mummy said as Daddy prepared to leave.

Once they’d left the room I finished the rest of my breakfast, trying not to think about the day ahead and how awful it was going to

be. Instead I focussed on the prospect of buying a new dress, which helped to cheer me up a little.

Mummy didn't return to the table, so once I'd finished breakfast I went back to my room to dry my hair, put on my makeup and get ready for school. I also checked the Portal, but there were no messages from Georgina or Natalie, just a big empty space of nothingness on my Contact page.

I usually met up with Georgina and Natalie outside the Olive Tree Café so we could walk to school together. Today I wasn't surprised to find that there was no-one waiting for me. I lingered outside for ten minutes hoping that at least Natalie would turn up, but she didn't. After the events of last night I hadn't expected that either of them would be there, Georgina would be determined to make me suffer and Natalie would be too scared to go against her wishes. Finally I lost all hope and walked to school on my own.

I tried to convince myself that I didn't care, but I was used to being popular and having my best friends around me and I cared a lot more than I liked to admit. I was feeling really miserable by the time I arrived at the school gates.

I made my way to the entrance and stepped into the HealthScan. It held me for two or three minutes and I was just getting concerned when it flashed green and released me into the interior of the school.

On a positive note, school wasn't as bad as I'd expected. Reese obviously hadn't told anyone about our date and when I bumped into him in the corridor he stared right through me as if I didn't exist. While I hated being invisible to him, it was better than everyone knowing the excruciatingly embarrassing details of our date. Georgina also seemed determined to ignore me. She barely glanced at me during any of our classes. Natalie cast a few sympathetic looks my way, but kept her distance too.

Break time was miserable. I didn't want to hang around the common room as I didn't want Georgina to see me on my own. I thought I would hide out in the girls' toilets, but I found a SanTech outside who told me they were out of order. He wouldn't even let me use the toilets for five minutes to reapply my makeup. I lost my temper a little and told him it was a stupid idea to work on the toilets during break time, but he ignored me. When I tried to insist that he let me inside he muttered something rude under his breath and rifled through his tool bag refusing to speak to me again.

After resisting the urge to punch him in his stupid blonde head I stalked away in disgust. Once I'd left I regretted not taking note of the name on his ID badge so I could report him to security. He was designation Delta and should show more respect to an Alpha. I was in such a bad mood that I would have enjoyed getting him in trouble. It would teach him to mind his manners. The altercation had made my head throb, so I went in search of an empty classroom and hid out there for the remainder of the break.

By early afternoon I was sure that something was wrong. When I'd woken up I'd put the achy body feeling down to sleeping in my clothes, but by lunchtime my head started to throb and my throat was scratchy and sore. I informed my teacher and he called Welfare who immediately escorted me to Isolation.

The School Isolation Unit was white and clinical and simply furnished with a metal bed and chair. I lowered myself onto the bed and waited for Welfare to take me home. This was only the second time I'd been in Isolation but I knew the procedure, everyone did. We'd been drilled on it so many times.

My head was starting to throb painfully. I curled up on the bed and leant my cheek against the white pillow, enjoying the cooling sensation against my hot skin. I expected that Georgina would totally hate me now. She and the rest of the class would have been escorted

to quarantine and given painful anti-virals. If they didn't present symptoms in the next eight hours then they would be released and allowed to go home.

The door to Isolation opened and two people in orange suits and helmets entered the room. The uniform worn by Welfare made it difficult to tell if they were men or women, but by the size of the two people who entered the room I thought they might be men. In voices muffled by their helmets and oxygen masks they told me that Transport had arrived to take me home. They both escorted me out of the back of the Isolation Unit into a white tiled corridor. The tiles of the corridor gleamed brightly in the harsh strip lighting and the glare hurt my eyes. I mused to myself why all Isolation Units looked the same; white floors, white walls, white ceilings, even white handrails for people who were infirm and unable to walk unaided. Who decided that Isolation had to be white? I wondered, why wasn't it red or blue or even green? It would be much more welcoming. White was so horribly clinical and cold.

The long white corridor ended in a plastic tunnel and it crackled and popped as I clambered through it into the back of the Transport. Once inside the Transport we travelled back home to my apartment. During the short journey I was treated by the doctor, who took my temperature, blood and urine samples. It was so embarrassing giving the urine sample and I hoped that the doctor looked away, but I couldn't tell as it was impossible to see his eyes through the dark visor of his Isolation Suit.

Transport pulled into the car park at the back of my apartment block and I clambered out to find Mummy waiting for me. At least I recognised the familiar shape of Mummy as she was wearing her Isolation Suit too. Mummy's suit fit much better than the Transport doctors and you could tell that it was expensive and designer made.

The Atrium had been cleared so the Welfare Officers were able to



escort me up the stairs and into our own Isolation Unit.

As I entered the Isolation Unit I gave Mummy a tight smile and she dipped her head in response. The door closed automatically behind me and I heard the click of the lock as it activated. I'd entered Locker One so I quickly took off all my clothes and stuffed them into the orange contamination bags. I shivered in the slight chill that pervaded the room. All Isolation Units were purposely kept cold so that germs couldn't incubate.

I quickly moved into the shower room. If I hated my daily chem shower, then the infection showers were a million times worse. I'd only been sick a few times before but could vividly recollect how horrible the showers were. I remembered fifteen minutes of hell, as high grade antiseptic chemicals were sprayed over my body. No matter how tightly I shut my eyes they still stung horribly. My eyes had been red and sore for a week afterwards.

The intercom clicked loudly and the sound echoed eerily around the room. 'Ready?' a grainy voice asked.

'Yes,' I replied and then braced myself for the onslaught. There was a loud hiss followed by the clattering of pipes as the liquid spurted out overhead and hit my body with such force that it squeezed a hiss from between my clenched lips.

The smell of the antiseptic filled the room like a thick fog around me. It was almost suffocating. I tried not to gag. Gagging would involve me opening my mouth and then I might swallow some of the liquid. I shuddered at the thought. The last time I had an infection shower I'd held my breath for so long trying not to breathe in the horrible smell that I'd felt light headed. I'd opened my mouth to take a much needed gasp of air and instead had gotten a mouthful of antiseptic liquid. I spat it out immediately but some of it had trickled down my throat, where it seemed to burn a trail all the way to my stomach.

This time I mashed my lips into a tight thin line as the liquid poured

over me. I started to count out the seconds in my head, one, two, three, four . . . fifty eight, fifty nine, sixty, another minute had gone by. I only had to endure another fourteen more minutes. I concentrated on each number, forming it in my head, focusing on its shape until thirteen minutes had gone by, then fourteen and finally the fifteen minutes were over and the shower stopped. Even without the liquid spraying over me the air was still heavy with the sharp sting of the antiseptic so I continued to hold my breath as best I could. My eyes were watering furiously and my vision was blurry.

‘Move out please,’ the intercom crackled into life.

I stepped out of the shower and groped my way into the drying room where warm drafts of air buffeted my body and dried away the last remnants of the shower.

When I was completely dry I stepped into Locker Two. This time, instead of the orange bags, there was a sterile white nightgown, gloves and socks waiting for me. I pulled the nightgown over my head, slipped the socks on and then pulled on the gloves. I moved over to the door at the end of the room and pressed the bright red buzzer. The door opened for me and I exited Locker Two and entered the Isolation Unit. This would be my home for the next week. Thankfully this room wasn’t as stark and white as the Isolation Unit at school. Mummy had added some home comforts and the white walls were covered in tasteful prints. There was also a PortPad so I wouldn’t be bored. I could see Mummy waiting on the other side of the large glass window that connected the room to the rest of the house. Now that she was out of danger she had taken off her Isolation Suit.

‘Are you alright, darling?’ she asked using the intercom on the other side of the glass. She was frowning slightly and there was a look of concern on her face. She was alone so I assumed that Welfare must have already left the house.

I nodded and gave her the thumbs up for added reassurance.

‘The doctor says you have a cold,’ she said. ‘So you need to stay in isolation for the next seven days.’

I gave her another nod in response.

‘You need to get into bed and rest,’ she said. ‘Daddy will come and see you when he gets home from work.’

She waited until I’d climbed into bed and then gave me a small wave before heading back into the main part of the house. I was glad that we were rich enough to have our own Isolation Unit. If we hadn’t been able to afford one then I would have had to go to Community Isolation. In Community Isolation I would have been facing a week of boredom staring at four white painted walls with no PortPad to keep me amused. Gillian Davies, a girl in my class who was designation Bravo, so of course didn’t have her own Isolation Unit, had to spend two whole weeks in Community Isolation last year with a throat infection. She said it was the most boring time of her life. She said that it had been so boring that she had even been looking forward to going back to school!

# Party

When Daddy arrived home he came to visit me straight away. He promised that he would arrange for my favourite designers to come to the house and model dresses for me so that I could choose something for the charity ball.

It was actually a lot of fun to sit in bed and watch the designers and models parade outside my window in an array of fabulous dresses. I made them turn one way and then the other, showing me the back and front of each dress. In the end I selected a beautiful royal blue strapless silk dress. It was floor length and Mummy said that it would fit me like a glove.

By the evening of the party I was declared fit and well. All sign of infection was gone and I was able to leave Isolation. Mummy collected me and accompanied me back to my bedroom.

‘Daddy and I are heading to the party early,’ she said. ‘He’s meeting VIPs and doesn’t want to be late. We’ve asked the chauffeur to pick you up at seven thirty. Is that okay with you darling?’

I smiled in response, grateful she didn’t expect me to spend time with Daddy’s stuffy VIPs. I wanted to have fun at the party. I didn’t want to be bored by lots of old people.

When we arrived at my bedroom Mummy fingered the blue dress

hanging up on the rail. 'You'll look beautiful in this darling,' she said. 'I told Daddy all about it and he can't wait to see you in it.'

The dress certainly was beautiful and I couldn't wait to put it on.

'I'll see you later,' Mummy said as she left the room. 'Please don't be late. You know how much it upsets Daddy.'

As I didn't have to leave until seven thirty I had enough time for a long relaxing soak in the bath. I scrubbed and exfoliated my whole body to wash away the last remnants of the nasty antiseptic smell of the Isolation Unit. Then I moisturised and carefully sniffed myself all over to make sure that I smelt normal again.

Once I was satisfied that no trace of antiseptic remained I slipped into my dress and twirled around in front of the mirror admiring my reflection. The dress really did look good and it brought out the blue of my eyes. My dark brown curly hair bounced playfully on my shoulders. Originally I'd planned to wear my hair up, thinking that it would make me look sophisticated, but since I'd run out of time I left it hanging loose, gripping the fringe with a diamanté clip.

At seven thirty I skipped down the stairs in my new sliver sandals and found Daddy's limo waiting for me in the drive. Normally Daddy used the limo to travel to work or for official engagements but on special occasions it was made available for all the family to use. It was important that the Legislator's family arrived in style.

The inside of the limo smelled like old worn leather and the woody scent of Daddy's aftershave. I settled comfortably into the soft leather seat and my stomach was full of butterflies as I thought about the party. I was hoping there might be some cute boys there, maybe that would make up for my epic failure with Reese.

We drove to the Hub, which was the name we gave to the centre of the Neighbourhood. As we rounded the corner the Building of Light came into view. This building served as the headquarters for the Light. It was located at the northern edge of the Square of Light.

The square was filled to bursting with people. My attention was drawn to the centre of the square where 'Our Hero' stood. The stone sculpture showed a doctor wearing an Isolation Suit standing tall and proud above the afflicted. What caught my attention was the stream of light which illuminated the statue, changing it from red to white and then blue; the colours of our national flag. The Light must have arranged this show especially for the gathered crowd. Daddy always said that the Director had a flair for the dramatic.

The statue commemorated all of the brave doctors who gave their life during the worst days of the Sandman Virus. Each year on Boundary Day, everyone from the Neighbourhood gathered in the square so that each citizen could lay a single white rose at the statue. The rose, a sign of purity and cleanliness, was our Neighbourhood emblem. Of course it was difficult to find real roses nowadays so most of them were synthetic.

The car crawled around the square until we reached the Building of Light. Above the entrance, proudly displayed in a haze of red, white and blue, I read the familiar words '*The Light is Right. The Light is Might*' etched into the moulded stone.

This was the slogan that the Light had used when they took control of the Neighbourhood twenty years ago. The Sandman Virus was still raging across the country and hundreds of people were dying every day. The government had lost control, they couldn't cure the disease and they couldn't stop the food riots that followed. It was the Light who had discovered the Cure and it was the Light who had funded the building of the Boundary so it was right that they took responsibility for the people inside.

Daddy had been a legal assistant with the Light during the worst days of the virus. By the time my brother was born he'd worked his way up the ranks and had been named as the Legislator, the head of the Legistate. His position meant that I got to enjoy the perks of his job, like being invited to some of the really good parties. It wasn't

the same as being part of the celeb crowd and being invited to all of the celeb parties, but it was still fun. Georgina and Natalie's parents worked for the Light but they were only minor partners which meant they didn't always get invited to the same parties as Daddy. Usually I was able to arrange an invite for them both and we'd have a great time mingling with anyone that was famous and trying to get our pictures posted on the Portal.

Tonight I was going to the party alone, and it felt strange. I wondered what Georgina and Natalie would be doing this evening. I expected that they would be watching the party on the Portal. Maybe this was the opportunity I was looking for to show my friends what a great time I was having without them. Normally I attended parties with Daddy and Mummy and they quickly ushered me past the photographers. Neither of them were interested in being celebrities and they definitely didn't want my picture all over the Portal. Daddy told me that once a picture was online it could never be removed. We had to be careful that nothing got onto the Portal that could hurt his position in the Light.

Tonight without my parents protecting me I had an opportunity to make my mark. If I could get my picture on the right blogs looking fabulous in my new dress then big things could happen. I could be voted 'best dressed' and reinvent myself as a style icon. Maybe I'd get a dedicated blog or, even better, a guest appearance on a reality show. That was how lots of people in the Neighbourhood became famous. Maybe I could become a celebrity in my own right. Georgina and Natalie would have to come crawling back to me, begging to be my friend – that could possibly be the sweetest revenge of all.

I fumbled in my purse and pulled out the little jewelled mirror that Daddy had given me for my birthday. I flipped it open and reapplied my lipstick. If I was going to make the right impression then I needed to look perfect.

There were crowds of people outside the Building of Light clamouring for a view of the party guests.

'Here we go,' I muttered as I popped the mirror back into my handbag. The chauffeur opened the car door and I took a deep breath as I exited into a blaze of lights. Normally at this point Daddy would pull me away, sometimes throwing his coat over me to shield me from the photographers and insisting on 'no pictures'. This time I was alone and could behave how I wanted. There were journalists and photographers everywhere and I stopped to pose for the cameras at every opportunity. Some of the photographers even knew my name and I blushed with pride as they called out to me. This was definitely going to be my night.

Eventually another car drew up and the photographers' attention turned to its occupant. I walked towards the entrance of the building blinking madly in an attempt to get rid of the yellow spots that danced across my vision.

Halfway up the stairs I came to an abrupt halt as I thought I spotted a familiar face in the crowd. I lurched forward as someone bumped into me from behind. It was Dr Butters, the Head of Environmental Affairs. His blonde head bobbed up and down manically as he accepted my apology for stopping so suddenly, his face beetroot red and shining brightly. I remembered that Daddy didn't like him and referred to him as 'that blithering idiot'. I let him pass me on the stairs, his massive girth pressing me uncomfortably into the brick of the building. As soon as he was gone I quickly turned back to the crowd, but the familiar face had disappeared.

I proceeded up the stairs towards the entrance to the building, sure that I couldn't have seen my brother in the crowd. I must have imagined it. Once inside the building I handed my invite to the Watch and then pushed through the throng of guests as I tried to locate my parents. I noticed Daddy and Mummy entertaining a group of



octogenarians in the corner of the great hall. Not wanting to waste my time talking to old people I gave them both a brief wave and made my way to the bar. Mummy frowned at me but I pretended not the notice. I knew they would expect me to introduce myself to the VIPs and play the loving, attentive daughter. But if I was going to make the most of the party I needed some time to myself, just for a little while.

I hadn't seen any eligible boys so far, but I thought I might find some in the bar area. I ordered a fruit mocktail from the cute barman. For a moment I even considered flirting with him to pass the time, but I checked myself almost immediately. It would be totally inappropriate given that he was Delta.

I took my drink and scanned the bar and was delighted to see two or three cute boys. I noticed an attractive dark haired boy talking to a group of men. He was dressed in a flamboyant purple velvet dinner jacket which stood out vibrantly against the stuffy black suits worn by the older men in his group. I caught his eye and he gave me a brief smile. I watched him for a few moments while I finished my drink and handed the empty glass to a passing waitress. I ordered another drink, keeping one eye on the cute boy who was still talking animatedly to the group of older men. He'd glanced over in my direction a few times so I knew that he was interested. I decided to leave the room to see if he would follow me.

I took my drink and headed to the door. I could feel the boy's eyes on me as I walked across the room. Before I exited the bar I turned and threw him an encouraging smile.

Once I was out in the hall I slowly headed towards the ballroom. I turned a few times but was disappointed to find that the boy wasn't following me. I'd been so sure that I'd made a good impression.

In the ballroom the orchestra was taking a break and guests milled around the room chatting in small groups. I scanned the room. Every-

one appeared to be in couples and I couldn't find any unattached men.

'Miss Hunter,' a waiter appeared beside me, an empty tray in his hands. I nodded, surprised that he'd addressed me directly and that he appeared to know my name.

'I have this for you,' he said uncertainly. He offered me a folded piece of paper. I took it from him, and he hovered nervously as I opened it. '*Meet me outside in 15 minutes.*' I turned the paper over but there was nothing else written on it. Nothing to identify the author.

'Who gave this to you?' I asked the waiter.

'A young man,' he said. 'He was waiting outside in the rear gardens.'

Curious, I asked him to describe the man.

'Dark hair, dark eyes,' he said.

'Attractive?'

The waiter shrugged. 'I suppose so,' he said.

I smiled to myself. So the dark haired boy was interested and now he wanted to meet me out in the gardens. How exciting and romantic.

'You can go,' I said as I dismissed the waiter.

He seemed relieved to get away from me.

I immediately headed out of the ballroom and down the rear stairs into the gardens. The gardens were deserted, everyone else was inside at the party. It had been raining earlier in the day and I had to lift up the hem of my dress so it didn't get wet. As I fussed with my dress I realised that someone had stepped out onto the path.

I looked up excitedly, expecting to see the dark haired boy. I let out a gasp. It was a dark haired boy, but not the one I was expecting. Standing on the path in front of me was my brother. He was older and a little bit taller, but I would recognise him anywhere. His messy hair still stuck out at right angles, his clothes slightly too big for his slender frame. He didn't say a word, he just stared at me while the hint of a smile played on his lips. I opened and closed my mouth like a goldfish.

My brother found his voice first. ‘Hello MaryAnn,’ he said. It seemed too casual a greeting from someone I hadn’t seen for four long years.

‘Daryl,’ I responded a little unsteadily. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I came to see you,’ he said. ‘I missed my little sister.’ He gave me an appraising look.

There were a million things I wanted to ask him but most importantly I wanted to find out where he had been for the last four years. When I asked him this he simply shrugged in response. ‘Here and there,’ he said evasively.

‘Here and there?’ I queried. ‘That’s not a proper answer.’

‘It doesn’t matter where I’ve been.’

‘What do you mean it doesn’t matter? We’ve all been so worried about you.’

He cocked an eyebrow. It was an expression I remembered well. ‘Really, you were ALL worried about me?’

‘You just disappeared and no-one knew where you’d gone. Daddy and Mummy were distraught.’

‘Oh I bet they were.’ There was no mistaking the sarcasm in his voice, but I wasn’t sure what it meant.

‘Of course they were,’ I said. Then I paused uncertainly. In reality, Daddy and Mummy had barely spoken about Daryl after he’d left, usually changing the subject or telling me to hush if I asked about him. I’d found it extremely frustrating but had come to the conclusion that his disappearance was too painful and that they couldn’t bear to talk about him.

‘I expect our parents were more concerned about whether I’d damaged our father’s esteemed position in the Light,’ he said bitterly.

‘Stop it,’ I said. ‘You make them sound so callous. It was horrible after you left. Everyone was miserable.’ I was ashamed to hear my voice crack with emotion.

My brother’s face lost its scornful look and it was replaced by

something akin to shame. 'I'm sorry. It must have been horrible for you. If it makes you feel any better I missed you too. I came back because I wanted to see you again.'

There was a part of me that desperately wanted to believe him, but, as happy as I was to see him again, something wasn't quite right. There was a tension in his face that made me feel uneasy. I recalled the rumours I'd heard about him going Outside and the memory made me step away from him in horror. Frantically I fumbled in my bag for my antiseptic spray and wipes. I needed to sanitise myself immediately.

'What's the matter?' Daryl asked. He frowned when he saw the spray and wipes in my gloved hand.

'MaryAnn,' he said, through gritted teeth. 'I'm not sick. I'm fine.'

I ignored him and instead wiped frantically at the bare skin on my arms.

'MaryAnn,' he repeated. 'I am NOT sick.'

I continued to scrub at my arms. 'I heard that you went Outside. What if you've brought the infection back with you?' I said.

He shook his head, 'MaryAnn, Outside isn't what you think it is,' he said.

I stared at him, confused. Outside was a horrible place filled with disease.

'MaryAnn, I'm fine, honestly, but if it makes you feel better I'll keep away from you.' He took a few steps away from me as if to prove his point.

I hesitated, torn between revulsion at the threat he posed and curiosity about where he'd been for the last four years. He didn't look sick. Maybe a little bit thin, but he definitely didn't have the pallor of someone who had the Virus. I'd seen broadcasts in Wellbeing at school about the infection and these had shown people bleeding from the eyes and ears. A fact that made me want to gag a little.

I was still a little unsure but then he smiled and I immediately softened. I'd forgotten about his smile, how it didn't just stay on his lips but played across the muscles of his face until it finally reached his eyes. That's why he'd been so popular at school. People always fell for his easy charm and ready humour. Despite myself I smiled back.

'You look good,' he said. 'And all grown up.'

'Well it has been four years. That's what happens to eleven year olds, they grow up you know.'

'So you're, what, fifteen now?' he asked.

'Yes, sixteen in ten months.'

'You look like our mother,' he said. 'That's how I recognised you.'

Damn! Daddy and Mummy. I'd forgotten about them. They were still inside at the party and would probably be looking for me, expecting me to entertain their VIPs.

'Daryl, I'm supposed to be inside at the party with Mummy and Daddy's guests,' I exclaimed. 'You know how Daddy gets if we make him look bad in front of his friends. He'll be furious.'

I was going to ask if we could meet again when my brother surprised me by grabbing hold of my arm. 'Don't leave,' he said. 'We have so much to talk about.'

I pulled away in horror. 'Daryl, you promised, let go of me.' I tried to twist my arm free and was startled at how strong his grip was.

'Daryl, I'm going to be in so much trouble if I don't go back to the party. Let go of my arm.'

Rather than release my arm my brother's grip became even tighter and he was actually starting to hurt me. Daryl's eyes were darting around nervously and his smile no longer looked soft and welcoming. It was stretched taut and thin across his face.

'Daryl,' I hissed a warning. 'I want you to let go of my arm right this minute.'

He ignored me and instead pulled me onto the lawn, physically

dragging me away from the building. My heels sank into the grass and I stumbled.

‘You can’t go to the party,’ he said in a very quiet voice. ‘You have to come with me.’

Alarm bells began to sound in my head. There was definitely something wrong. After Daryl had left home my parents had told me he’d *got in with the wrong crowd*, but they’d never explained what that meant.

He continued to drag me across the grass. ‘We have to make them listen,’ he said unexpectedly. ‘Stay with me and you’ll be safe.’

At his words I mustered all of my strength and, taking him by surprise, I wrenched my arm roughly out of his grasp. As soon as I was free I sped back across the lawn. In my haste to get to the building I left my shoes behind in the grass and was running barefoot, but I didn’t care. If I was safe out here with Daryl then there was something dangerous in the building . . . and Daddy and Mummy were inside.

Daryl bellowed loudly behind me. I was so desperate to reach my parents that I ignored the stones that ripped at my naked feet and ran for the door. As I pulled it open I could hear my brother yelling; his voice high pitched and screaming.

There was a deafening roar; loud like a thunderbolt, followed closely by a blinding light. I was flying backwards through the air, my arms flailing helplessly. I felt something rip into my face, my head slammed against something hard and blackness engulfed me.

End of Extract

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JOE KIPLING is a Hull born, west Yorkshire based young adult fiction writer with a lifelong passion for Sci-Fi, particularly the post apocalyptic variety. She currently lives in Holmfirth with her dog Rosie and is a full time consultant and part time writer. A lifetime of travelling and avoiding near catastrophe has provided endless inspiration for her debut novel *Blinded by the Light*.

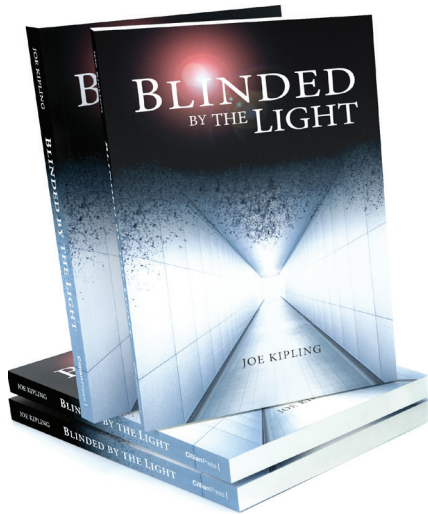
[www.joekipling.co.uk](http://www.joekipling.co.uk)

Join in on the discussion  
[www.facebook.com/theuniontrilogy](https://www.facebook.com/theuniontrilogy)

Click below to pick up a copy at



or any other major online retailer and selected bookstores



Brought to you by

**Cillian**Press |  
an Independent Publisher



# 'In the Light we trust'

*'Daryl bellowed loudly behind me. I was so desperate to reach my parents that I ignored the stones that ripped at my naked feet and ran for the door. As I pulled it open I could hear my brother yelling; his voice high pitched and screaming.'*

In the near future, when the world's population has been decimated by disease, the fortunate few live inside the Boundary, while the unlucky ones are left to die on the Outside. MaryAnn is one of the privileged. It doesn't matter that her friends can sometimes be cruel or that the boy she likes just threw up on her shoes, it's all about being noticed at the right parties.

It takes a single event to rip her life apart.

Struggling with physical and psychological scars, MaryAnn must face up to the truth about the foundations of the Neighbourhood, the authority of the Light, and the legacy of her family. Once she learns the truth she can never go back, but can she really put her faith in the Union?

*Blinded by the Light* is about coming to terms with loss, the abuse of power, discrimination and overcoming the fear of the unknown. It is the first book in the Union Trilogy.

**Cillian**Press |

Cover Design by Billie Jade McNeill





