

# ~~UNDER THE STARS~~

ERIN R. HOWARD





## ONE



WHITE LIGHTS DOTTED EVERLY'S vision, blurring everything until she couldn't see the monolith or Ned and Tyler standing by it. She gripped the strap of her backpack as she waited for the light to fade, but instead, it intensified.

The air buzzed around her, building and strengthening, until a blast erupted from the monolith, knocking her backward. The force of the explosion sent her sprawling on her back, her vision swirling and dancing around her.

What just happened?

She rolled over to her side, waiting for the dizzy spell to fade. Squinting against the bright light, Everly tried to make out the shapes of the others. Did they fall as well, or was she the only one on the ground?

"Tyler? Ned?" Everly moved to a sitting position, straining to hear a response, but all she could hear was the ringing in her ears—as if she were at a rock concert, standing too close to the speakers.

Everly drew in a deep breath and exhaled. Waited for her sight and hearing to return to normal. But nothing changed.

She sat as still as she could, shielding her eyes against the light until it became so bright, she forced her eyes shut.

She opened her eyes again and immediately regretted the decision. They stung, bringing tears to the corners. She drew her knees up and buried her face in her hands, too much in shock to do anything else.

What was going on?

Just as fast as the light had intensified, it diminished, and she was able to open her eyes. Everly placed both palms on the ground, ready to push herself to an upright position when a deep rumble came from underneath her. Vibrations reverberated throughout her body, and she sank back down to the ground as she tried to figure out what to do next.

“Tyler?” Her voice came out in a hoarse whisper. She cleared her throat and tried again. “Ned?”

Nothing except the rumbling. She half expected the ground to split in two. A nervous laugh escaped from her lips at the direction her thoughts turned. That couldn’t happen. Could it?

Were they having an earthquake?

She stood, her legs shaking. Even though the light had dimmed, it was still bright and her vision hazy. Her meager breakfast threatened to come back up as the blurred images of her surroundings whirled in a frenzy and then suddenly became crystal clear.

The monolith still stood in the center of the clearing. Normal sunlight filtered through the trees, casting shadows on the stone structure. Her eyes darted from the fixture to the area surrounding her. Her breath caught in her throat.

This wasn’t the clearing.

She scanned the area again. Her heart beat out of control as her mind tried to make sense of what happened. Ned and Tyler were gone.

How could two people disappear? Well, three, if she counted Carter. But he wasn't even at the monolith when the light appeared.

There must be a logical explanation. She simply needed to get in touch with the others. Everly reached in her pocket for her cell phone, but all she found was lint. She must have stashed her phone in her backpack instead of her jeans.

Dread curled in her stomach as she lifted her hands to her shoulders. No backpack. No phone. No Ned, Tyler, or Carter. Vanished. All of them. Tears threatened to spill over, and she blinked them away. But what if it wasn't the others who left? What if it was her who had disappeared?

Even though the monolith stood in front of her, nothing else was familiar. The wooded trail was gone, replaced by a landscaped garden with stone walls bordering the perimeter.

The garden was exquisite. Instead of green leaves, the trees boasted purples, pinks, and even teal. Manicured grass, mixed with rose bushes, wildflowers, and perfectly trimmed hedges graced every inch of the ground around her. Ivy grew up the sides and along the top of the stone walls.

Everly's gaze drifted back toward the monolith, but it was what stood behind it that caught her focus.

A castle.

She let out a nervous laugh and whirled around. This was some sort of joke, right? Ned and Tyler were pulling some sort of elaborate prank on her.

Except, how could they pull off such a complicated joke? Everly reached out and touched the silky leaves of a green shrub, listened to the melodious chirping of songbirds. Laughter and chatter drifted from the pathway toward the castle.

This was real.

She tried to clear her head and investigate the garden. A

cobblestone path led through the mixture of shrubs, flowers, and bushes. There had to be a way out of here, but where was she? And what would she find if she were able to escape? The walls were too tall to climb, and she couldn't just march up to the castle and tell whoever lived there that she suddenly appeared by the monolith.

The monolith. Whatever happened must be because of the strange structure. She whirled around to return to the monument when she collided with a hooded figure.

Everly nearly screamed, but the stranger lowered her hood and gave her a small smile. The hooded person's voice was gentle but held a hint of unease. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you, but I've been calling after I noticed you by the statue."

Everly gaped at the stranger unsure of what to say. She didn't hear anyone calling out to her. Her mind scrambled to come up with something—anything at all.

"Did you get lost?"

The question seemed to clear Everly's head enough that she nodded. The girl's worried expression relaxed, and she waved her hand.

"It happens all the time. There's always some girl getting lost in the Garden of Tranquility before the Royale."

"The Garden of Tranquility? Royale?" Now that Everly found her voice, she couldn't stop the words from rushing out.

"So, you're not here for the Royale?" The girl tilted her head to the side. "Come to think of it, you're not dressed like the others." Her gaze ran down the length of Everly.

Everly couldn't help but look down at her tank top and jeans. Her right knee had a rip, and her arms were dusted with dirt. Other than that, she looked normal. But as she shifted her gaze from her hiking boots to her companion's sandaled feet, she knew she appeared anything but normal.

The young woman—probably not much older than herself—waited for Everly to answer. But her mind went blank again. She had to come up with something, some explanation, but what could she say that would make any sense? She would end up sounding like a crazy person. A wave of dizziness wafted over her, and Everly lifted a hand to her rub her forehead.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m not sure.” There. An honest answer, and her voice even sounded halfway coherent.

A hint of skepticism and fear filled the girl’s eyes before she looked away, tucking a strand of golden hair behind her ear. She glanced around them and then turned back to the Monolith and frowned.

“Come with me, and don’t say another word.” Her voice lowered to a mere whisper. “You’re clearly not here for the Royale, and everyone in the palace will know it as soon as they take one look at you.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what’s going on.”

“I know.” She pulled Everly into the shadow of the trees, off the cobblestone path that ran along from the monolith to the palace. She shrugged out of her emerald velvet cape and turned it inside out, with the black lining on the outside. “Put this on.”

Everly did as instructed, shivers racing up her arms as the velvet tickled her skin. “Why are you helping me?”

“Take down your hair and turn around.” The girl barely looked at her as she untied a black satin ribbon from around her neck. “What’s your name?”

“Everly.”

She met her eyes. “Turn around, Everly.”

Everly pulled the ponytail down and put her back to the girl. The girl separated Everly’s hair into three sections, making quick work of a braid, weaving the black ribbon through one of

the sections. "It's not very good, but maybe it will buy us some time."

"Buy us time for what? What is going on? Where am I?" Everly didn't care anymore about trying to act like she understood what was happening or where she was. She was scared and needed to know what she was up against.

"Buy us time to get you to my room and have my servant dress you and fix your hair."

Everly finally took the time to study the girl's appearance. Jewels adorned her wrists and neck, and a delicate tiara graced the top of her blonde hair.

"You're a princess."

The girl finally smiled. "Yes. I'm Princess Kaitlin of the Kingdom of Lux. We are out of time. The Royale is about to begin, and if we do not get you changed, you will have to join them."

"I don't understand. What is a Royale, and why would they make me join?"

Kaitlin's smile faded altogether, and she narrowed her eyes. "You picked the wrong day to stumble into the kingdom. Every year, girls are brought in from the surrounding lands, and they must go through a series of tests."

The princess reached out and looped her arm through Everly's. "I will explain more, but we have to go. Now."

"You didn't answer my question, though." Everly turned around to face the girl. "Why are you helping me?"

"Because I think I'm the one who brought you here."