

EMMA SCOTT

LONG LIVE

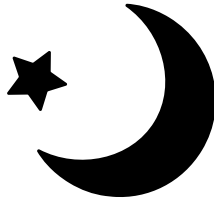
THE

BEAUTIFUL

HEARTS

Freedom

2025



*Read books by Emma Scott
in English:*

Beautiful Hearts Duet:

Bring Down the Stars

Long Live the Beautiful Hearts



In Harmony

To be continued...

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УДК 821.111-31(73)
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S41

Emma Scott
LONG LIVE THE BEAUTIFUL HEARTS

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Never again would I allow my heart to become the plaything of someone else. Never again would I let a man (or men) come between me and my goals. Never again would I love without feeling the fullness of that love in return. Not until I knew it was real. And if that took me a lifetime to find, so be it. Those were my vows, and after all that had happened with Connor and Weston, I was determined to keep them. To protect my heart. And then he came home, and my vows became his promises. He held my heart in his hands with reverence and care. He helped me find my soul's greatest purpose in life. He loved me with a love so pure and vibrant, I knew I'd never feel anything like it in a hundred lifetimes. It was real. Until it wasn't. Until it all came crashing down when I discovered the deep love I thought I'd found was nestled in a web of lies—so soft and silken I hadn't noticed it was there. Until it was too late.

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Acknowledgements

It's difficult to write about how this book came to be and acknowledge the person who needs to be acknowledged without spoiling certain plot aspects. I've saved the specific details for the Author's Notes at the end. PLEASE DO NOT READ those notes (or the Sneak Peek) until you have finished the book or YOU WILL BE SPOILED.

Thank you to Robin Renee Hill. There are no words to describe what you have done for me, including putting your own work on hold to get me through these last months, and then to complete this book. We did this together. It's our book, not mine. Love you.

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And thank you to the servicemen and women of this country. Researching these novels has brought me a deeper awareness for the sacrifices they and their families make for us every day, often with lasting repercussions. You have my utmost respect, appreciation, and love. Thank you.



Playlist



Switchblade, LP

Happier, Marshmello, Bastille

Love Me Like You Mean It, Kelsea Ballerini

In My Blood, Shawn Mendes

It Ain't My Fault, Brothers Osborne

broken, lovelytheband

Africa (Toto cover), Weezer

Natural, Imagine Dragons

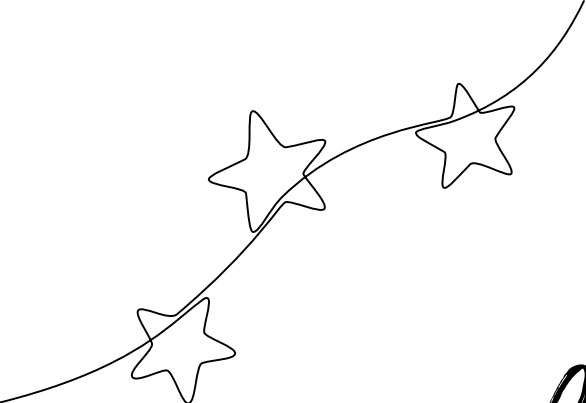
You're Somebody Else, Flora Cash

Don't Speak, No Doubt

Recovery, LP 

Something Just Like This, The Chainsmokers, Coldplay





Dedication

For Robin, who took my hand and is still holding on

For Melissa, who carries her always

For Robert, who stood up and said 'I will not let her go.'

And for Isabel

This and everything else I do with love, I do for you, baby.

Now and forever.

PART I

*Al-Rai,
Syria*

PROLOGUE

Connor

My lungs sucked in air, bringing consciousness and chaos rushing back to me. And pain. A fuck-ton of pain stabbing into my left arm.

My vision was blurred as if I were underwater. I couldn't move, my body pinned down by something heavy on my chest. I could hardly gasp under the weight, reduced to shallow breaths. Gunshots, shouts and mortar fire distant through the ringing in my ears.

I blinked hard, forced myself to focus, and found the anchor pressing me down was Wes. He lay sprawled on top of me, his head on my chest, his helmet obscuring his face. His shoulders rose and fell—but was that him breathing or my breath moving *him*? I didn't know if he was alive or dead.

Alive. He has to be alive.

Terror ripped through me, carrying adrenaline on its currents.

“Wes,” I croaked. “Wes...”

My gaze darted all over. I struggled to sit up and pain ground its steel teeth into my elbow, leaving me somewhere between puking and passing out.

“Fuck...”

I spit more curses between my teeth as I moved my left arm into my line of sight. A length of jagged shrapnel was lodged under the skin of my forearm. A wound so impossible, so ugly and *wrong*, it looked fake but for the pain that was howling up to my shoulder.

I turned my head this way and that, assessing our situation. Wes and I were exposed with no cover at the southern edge of the village. Figures moved through the blasted shells of homes, ghost-like in the smoke and dust. The fight was still happening but moving eastward.

My gaze snagged on a crater in the earth, smeared with blood. A little kid's sandal in the center. I remember running toward the owner of that shoe, trying to save him, to grab him and get behind some cover. I reached for him and then...

My memory had been blown to bits too, but I only had to look down to see my best friend lying motionless on top of me, covered in dust and blood, to guess what happened.

Wes chased me down. He saw what I didn't. He carried me away. He saved my ass.

Again.

A sob tore out of my constricted chest. Wes shielded me with his own body, taking multiple shots as we lay exposed.

And now he's dead.

“Wes,” I cried. “God, no...”

Agony's jaws still locked on my arm, I scooted out from under him and gently eased his head to the ground. His eyes were closed, his mouth slightly open. I put two fingers

to his throat. Tears stung my eyes when I felt his pulse, faint and way too slow, but *there*.

“Thank fuck...”

The relief was short-lived. As I walked on my knees, inspecting his wounds, a nauseous fear rose up in my throat. A bullet hole on the back of Wes’s thigh had soaked his fatigues with blood, all the way down to the boot. My fingers moved around his waist and under his body armor and found three more gunshot wounds. But it was the shattered fragment of bone poking through his hip that got me in the gut.

“God, no, come on, Wes...”

I forced back the tears, digging deep for my training. We were exposed. The closest cover was a pile of rubble, maybe ten yards away.

I crouched on shaking legs and took hold of Wes’s rucksack with my right hand. I gritted my teeth and pulled. Wes’s deadweight scraped across the gritty sand an inch.

“Come on...” I sucked in three deep breaths, clenched my jaw and pulled. Another inch. Fuck, he was too heavy and I was too weak.

Gunshots ripped the air open, followed by an explosion. Debris showered down and the adrenaline roared up in my three good limbs. Like the mom that lifts a car to get her kid out from under it, I grabbed Wes with my one good arm and hauled ass to safety. Once behind the rubble, I fell to my knees beside him.

“You stay with me, Wes,” I said, sliding out my own rucksack. “You hear me? You fucking *stay* with me. Don’t die on me, or I’ll fucking kill y—”

My stomach heaved as my rucksack strap caught on my left elbow.

“Medic!” I screamed as I worked to get my aid kit open. “Wilson, goddammit...”

I dug into my rucksack and found my CAT. One handed, I fought to slip the belt-like tourniquet up Wes’s right leg, getting it above the wound. I turned the clip around and around, tightening the belt until the clip wouldn’t turn any more. Once the blood stopped flowing from the ragged hole in his leg, I strapped the clip into place.

“*Medic!*” I screamed. “*For fuck’s sake, I need a medic!*”

I went to my aid kit again and grabbed my XSTAT. In training, we called them tampon shots. I tore the package off the over-sized syringe with my teeth and put the nozzle against the gunshot on Wes’s hip. I depressed the plunger and the absorbent sponges filled the gaping wound, instantly soaking up the blood.

I was fighting for consciousness now. My vision grayed out and in as I assessed a bullet hole in Wes’s lower back and another wound higher up, under his body armor. They needed tending but I didn’t have the training or the strength. I sat on my ass, hard, exhausted. I sucked in one last deep breath and put everything I had behind it.

“*Medic!*” I screamed so loud my voice turned ragged at the end, a small pathetic scrap against the machine of war. “Jesus Christ, someone help him...”

Like a tree falling in slow motion, I lay on my good side, tight between Wes’s body and the wall of rubble keeping us hidden.