

The background of the cover features a close-up, high-contrast portrait of a young man with dark, wavy hair and light-colored eyes, looking slightly to the right. He is wearing a dark jacket. In the background, a large, multi-story, weathered wooden house sits on a rocky hill under a dark, stormy sky with a few birds flying. The overall mood is dark and atmospheric.

craved

book #10 of the
Vampire Journals

morgan rice

The Vampire Journals

Морган Райс

Craved

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Райс М.

Craved / М. Райс — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»,
— (The Vampire Journals)

In CRAVED (Book #10 in the Vampire Journals), 16 year old Scarlet Paine struggles to find out exactly what she's becoming. Her erratic behavior has alienated her new boyfriend, Blake, and she struggles to make amends, and to make him understand. But the problem is, she doesn't understand herself what's happening to her. At the same time, the new boy, the mysterious Sage, comes into her life. Their paths keep intertwining, and although she tries to avoid it, he directly pursues her, despite the objections of her best friend, Maria, who's convinced Scarlet is stealing Sage. Scarlet finds herself swept away by Sage, who takes her into his world, past the gates of his family's historic river mansion. As their relationship deepens, she begins to learn more about his mysterious past, his family, and the secrets he must hold. They spend the most romantic time she can imagine, on a secluded island in the Hudson, and she is convinced she has found the true love of her life. But then she is devastated to learn Sage's biggest secret of all: he is not human, either, and he has only a few weeks left to live. Tragically, just at the moment when destiny has brought her greatest love, it also seems fated to take him away. As Scarlet returns to the high school parties leading up to the big dance, she ends up in a huge falling-out with her friends, who excommunicate her from their group. At the same time, Vivian rounds up the popular girls to make her life hell, leading to an unavoidable confrontation. Scarlet's forced to sneak out, making matters worse with her parents, and soon finds pressure building from all sides. The only light in her life is Sage. But he is still holding back some of his secrets, and Blake resurfaces, determined to pursue her. Caitlin, meanwhile, is determined to find a way to reverse Scarlet's vampirism. What she discovers leads her on a journey to find the antidote, deep into the heart of rare libraries and bookstores, and she will stop at nothing until she has it. But it may be too late. Scarlet is changing rapidly, barely able to control what she's becoming. She wants to end up with Sage – but fate seems set on tearing them apart. As the book culminates in an action-packed and shocking twist, Scarlet will be left with a monumental choice – one that will change the world forever. How much is she willing to risk for love?

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Содержание

Chapter One	10
Chapter Two	13
Chapter Three	17
Chapter Four	20
Chapter Five	24
Chapter Six	30
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	33

Morgan Rice

Craved

(Book #10 in the Vampire Journals)

*“O blessed, blessed night! I am afeard.
Being in night, all this is but a dream,
Too flattering-sweet to be substantial.”*

– William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet

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Acclaim for the Vampire Journals

“Rice does a great job of pulling you into the story from the beginning, utilizing a great descriptive quality that transcends the mere painting of the setting... Nicely written and an extremely fast read.”

– Black Lagoon Reviews (regarding Turned)

“An ideal story for young readers. Morgan Rice did a good job spinning an interesting twist... Refreshing and unique. The series focuses around one girl... one extraordinary girl!... Easy to read but extremely fast-paced... Rated PG.”

– The Romance Reviews (regarding Turned)

“Grabbed my attention from the beginning and did not let go... This story is an amazing adventure that is fast paced and action packed from the very beginning. There is not a dull moment to be found.”

– Paranormal Romance Guild (regarding Turned)

“Jam packed with action, romance, adventure, and suspense. Get your hands on this one and fall in love all over again.”

– vampirebooksite.com (regarding Turned)

“A great plot, and this especially was the kind of book you will have trouble putting down at night. The ending was a cliffhanger that was so spectacular that you will immediately want to buy the next book, just to see what happens.”

– *The Dallas Examiner* (regarding *Loved*)

“A book to rival *TWILIGHT* and *VAMPIRE DIARIES*, and one that will have you wanting to keep reading until the very last page! If you are into adventure, love and vampires this book is the one for you!”

– *Vampirebooksite.com* (regarding *Turned*)

“Morgan Rice proves herself again to be an extremely talented storyteller... This would appeal to a wide range of audiences, including younger fans of the vampire/fantasy genre. It ended with an unexpected cliffhanger that leaves you shocked.”

– *The Romance Reviews* (regarding *Loved*)

About Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling author of *THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS*, a young adult series comprising eleven books (and counting); the #1 bestselling series *THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY*, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising two books (and counting); and the #1 bestselling epic fantasy series *THE SORCERER'S RING*, comprising thirteen books (and counting).

Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations of the books are available in German, French, Italian, Spanish, Portugese, Japanese, Chinese, Swedish, Dutch, Turkish, Hungarian, Czech and Slovak (with more languages forthcoming).

Morgan loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.morganricebooks.com to join the email list, receive a free book, receive free giveaways, download the free app, get the latest exclusive news, connect on Facebook and Twitter, and stay in touch!

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A MARCH OF KINGS (Book #2)

A FATE OF DRAGONS (Book #3)

A CRY OF HONOR (Book #4)

A VOW OF GLORY (Book #5)

A CHARGE OF VALOR (Book #6)

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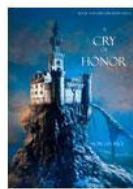
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THE SORCERER'S RING



THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY



the vampire journals





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Chapter One

Caitlin Paine sped down the West Side Highway, determined to reach the Cloisters before they closed. Her mind spun, as she reflected on all the troubles that were besieging Scarlet – troubles that no teenager should have. Scarlet was changing, Caitlin was sure of it. She was no mere human anymore, and each day, she was getting worse. Caitlin sensed that she was becoming what she, Caitlin, had once been herself: a vampire.

Of course, Caitlin had no direct memory of being a vampire herself; but from what she'd read in that journal she'd discovered in the attic – her vampire journal – she felt that it was all real. If the journal was true, and she sensed that it was, then at one time she had been one herself, back in time; somehow, she had ended up back here, in the present, with a normal life, a normal family, and no memory of it.

The only thing was, her family was far from normal. Her life was far from normal. Her daughter, somehow, was becoming what she had once been herself.

Caitlin wished, for the millionth time, that she had never found that journal. She felt that finding it was like opening Pandora's box, was what had sparked this parade of nightmares. She wished desperately that she could just make everything go back to normal.

She had to have answers. She had to know for sure that this was all authentic. If she couldn't force things back to normal, then she had to at least find out more about what was happening to Scarlet. And find out if there was any way to fix it.

As she drove, Caitlin thought again of the rare books she had found in her library. Most of all, she thought of that one rare volume, and its torn page. She thought of its ancient ceremony, the one in Latin, with its cure for vampirism. She wondered again if it was real. Was that just passed down from folklore? An old wives' tale?

Any serious scholar, of course, would say that it was. And a part of her wanted to dismiss it, too. But another part of her was clinging to it, clinging to this last possible hope to save Scarlet. For the millionth time, she wondered how she could ever find the other half of that page. It came from one of the most rare books in existence, and even if she could somehow manage to track down another existing copy, what were the chances of the other half of the page being inside? After all, the page had been torn out, likely as a way of hiding it. But from who? From what? The mystery only deepened in her mind.

She tried to focus instead on her own journal, her own handwriting from centuries ago, on her description of the vampire coven beneath the Cloisters. She had written of a secret chamber leading to the coven, down below, on a lower level. She had to know if it was real. If there was some sign, any sign at all, then it would validate all of this in her mind, would allow her to confidently go forth. But if there was no sign here, then it discredited her entire journal.

Caitlin got off the highway, wound through Fort Tryon Park, and drove into the main entrance of the Cloisters. She drove up a narrow, winding ramp, and finally parked before the massive structure.

As she got out, she stopped and looked up; for some odd reason, the place felt strikingly familiar to her, as if it had been an important place in her life. She could not understand why, because as far as she knew, she had only visited it once or twice. Unless, of course, everything in her vampire journal was true. Was what she was feeling real? Or was it all just wishful thinking?

She hurried through the arched front door, into the stone medieval structure, up a long ramp, and down a long, narrow corridor. She finally got to the main entrance, paid a fee, and headed down a corridor. She passed a small courtyard on her right with rows of stone arches, inside of which sat a medieval garden. The fall foliage shimmered. It was a weekday afternoon, and the place was nearly empty, and she felt as if she had all to herself.

That is, until she heard music. At first, it was just a voice – then several voices. Singing. Ancient singing from a small chorus. She could not fathom if it was live or a recording as she stood there, transfixed, listening to the heavenly voices echo throughout the small castle. She felt transported, as if she'd arrived in another place and time.

She knew she had a mission to accomplish, but she had to see where the music was coming from. She turned down another corridor and followed the sound. She entered through a small, arched medieval door, and found herself in a chapel, with soaring ceilings and stained-glass. Standing there, to her surprise, was a chorus of six singers, older men and women, dressed in all white robes. They faced an empty room, looking down at sheet music as they sang out.

Gregorian chants. Caitlin saw the sign, the huge poster advertising the afternoon concert. She realized she had stumbled into a live performance. Yet, she was the only one in the room. Apparently, no one else knew about it.

Caitlin closed her eyes as she listened to the music. It was so beautiful, so haunting, she found it hard to leave. She opened her eyes and looked around at the medieval walls and furniture, and it made her feel even more out of touch with reality. Where was she?

The song finally ended, and she turned and hurried from the room, trying to regain her sense of reality.

She hurried back down the corridor and came to a stone staircase. She descended, winding down to the lower levels of the cloisters, and as she did, her heart beat faster. This place felt so eerily familiar, as if she'd spent time here before. She could not understand it.

She hurried across the lower level, remembering its description from an entry in her journals. She remembered the mention of the doorway, the secret portal, that led downstairs to a subterranean level, to Caleb's coven.

She got more excited as she saw, on her left, a roped off area. Behind the rope was a perfectly preserved, medieval staircase. It led up, but only into the ceiling. It didn't go anywhere. It was just an artifact, on display. The same one described in her journal.

But the staircase also had a small, wooden gate hiding the lower half, and behind it, Caitlin could not tell if the steps led down, to another level. It was roped off, and she couldn't get anywhere near it.

She had to know. If it led down, then everything she wrote about was true, not just a fantasy.

She looked both ways and spotted a security guard on the far side of the room, nodding off.

She knew that by crossing the rope in a museum she could get in big trouble – maybe even get arrested. But she had to know. She had to do this quick.

Caitlin suddenly stepped over the velvet rope, towards the staircase.

Immediately, an alarm went off, shrieking, piercing through the air.

"HEY LADY!" the guard screamed.

He started to run towards her. The alarm was piercing, and her heart pounded in her chest.

But it was too late now. She couldn't turn back. She *had* to know. It went against everything in her nature to step over that rope, to violate a museum display, to do anything against the rules – especially where history and artifacts were concerned. But she had no choice. Scarlet's life was at stake.

Caitlin reached the staircase and grabbed the medieval wooden handle. She yanked on it.

The gate opened, and as it did, she saw where the staircase led.

Nowhere. It ended at the floor. It was a fake staircase. Just a display.

Her heart sank, devastated. There was no subterranean chamber. No trapdoor. Nothing. As the display indicated, it was just a staircase. In and of itself. An artifact. An old relic. It was all a lie. All of it.

Caitlin suddenly felt rough arms grab her from behind and drag her out, up over the velvet rope, onto the other side.

“What do you think you’re doing!?” another guard yelled, as he came over and helped drag her away.

“I’m sorry,” she said, trying to think quick. “I… um… I lost my earring. It fell out, and it bounced on the floor. I thought it went over there. I was just looking for it.”

“This is a museum, lady!” he barked, red-faced. “You can’t just cross lines like that. And you can’t touch things!”

“I’m so sorry,” she said, her throat dry. She prayed they didn’t arrest her. They certainly could, she knew.

The two guards looked at each other, as if debating.

Finally, one said, “Get out of here!”

He shoved her, and Caitlin, relieved, took off, hurrying down the corridor. She spotted an open door, heading outside, to a lower terrace, and she ran through it.

She found herself outside, on the lower terrace, in the cool October air, her heart still pounding. She was so happy to be out of there. Yet at the same time, she was distraught. There was nothing here. Was her entire journal made up? Was none of this real? Was she imagining everything?

But then how would that explain Aiden’s reaction?

Caitlin crossed the cobblestone terrace, passing another medieval garden, this one filled with small fruit trees. She kept walking until she came to a marble railing. She leaned against it and looked out; in the distance she could see the Hudson River, sparkling in the late afternoon sun.

She suddenly turned, expecting for some reason to see Caleb standing there, beside her. For some reason, she felt she’d been here before, stood here on this terrace with Caleb. It didn’t make any sense. Was she losing her mind?

Now, she was not so sure.

Chapter Two

Scarlet burst into her room, hysterically crying, and slammed the door behind her. She'd run all the way home, from the river, and had not stopped crying since. She didn't understand what was happening to her. That moment kept flashing in her mind when she saw the pulse in Blake's neck, when she felt that feeling, that urge, of wanting to bite him. Of wanting to feed.

What was happening to her? Was she some kind of freak? Why had she felt that way? And why then – of all moments? Just as they were having their first kiss?

Now that she was far away from the scene, it was harder for Scarlet to summon exactly how her body felt at the time – and with each passing moment, it was growing more distant. Her body felt normal now. Had it just been a fleeting moment? Was it just some weird, one-time thing that had overcome her, that would never come back again?

She desperately wanted to believe that. But another part of her, a deeper part, felt that wasn't the case. The feeling had been so strong, it had been something she would never forget. If she had succumbed to it, and stayed there one more second, she felt certain Blake would be dead right now.

Scarlet couldn't help but think back to the other day. Coming home sick. Running out of the house. Forgetting what had happened, where she had been. Waking up in the hospital. Her mom being so worried, so freaked out...

Now, it all came to the forefront of her mind. Her mom had wanted her to see more doctors, to get more tests. And then, to see a priest. Did her mom suspect something? Was that what she was hinting at? Did she think that she was becoming a vampire?

Scarlet's heart was pounding as she sat there, in her room, curled up in her favorite chair. Ruth stuck her head in her lap, and Scarlet leaned down and stroked her. But there were tears in her eyes as she did. She felt shell-shocked, in a daze. She was terrified at the idea that she was sick, that she had some kind of disease – or maybe, something worse. Deep down she thought it was ridiculous, of course, where her mind was going. But she dared to wonder. Her wanting to bite his neck. The feeling she'd had in her two incisor teeth. Her craving to feed. Was it possible?

Was she a vampire?

Did vampires really exist?

She reached over, opened her laptop, and googled it. She had to know.

She pulled up the Wikipedia entry for "vampire" and began to read:

"The notion of vampirism has existed for millennia; cultures such as the Mesopotamians, Hebrews, Ancient Greeks, and Romans had tales of demons and spirits which are considered precursors to modern vampires. However, despite the occurrence of vampire-like creatures in these ancient civilizations, the folklore for the entity we know today as the vampire originates almost exclusively from early 18th-century southeastern Europe, when verbal traditions of many ethnic groups of the region were recorded and published. In most cases, vampires are revenants of evil beings, suicide victims, or witches, but they can also be created by a malevolent spirit possessing a corpse or by being bitten by a vampire."

Scarlet quickly shut her laptop and put it away. It was all too much for her to take.

She shook her head, trying to physically put it out of her mind. Something was definitely wrong with her. But was it that? It terrified her.

Making all of this even worse were her feelings for Blake, and her thinking of what had just happened between them. She couldn't believe she had run away from him like that, especially at that moment. They had been having such an amazing time, a dream date. And now this. Finally, just when their relationship was starting to take off. It was so unfair.

She couldn't even imagine what he was thinking right now. He must be thinking she's some kind of freak, some kind of absolute psycho, for her to just jump up like that, in the middle of a kiss, and take off, sprinting into the woods. He must think she was totally out of her mind. She was sure he'd never want to see her again. He'd probably go back to Vivian.

She desperately wanted to explain herself. But how could she possibly? What could she possibly say? That she had a sudden urge to bite his neck? To feed on him? To drink his blood? That she had to run away to protect him?

Sure, that would really set his mind at ease, she thought.

She wanted to make things right. She wanted to see him again. But she had no idea how to explain. Not only that, but she was also afraid to be near him; she didn't trust herself now. What if the urge overcame her again? And what if, next time, she actually hurt him?

She burst into tears, thinking about it. Was she doomed to never be around boys again?

No. She had to try. She had to at least *try* to make things right. She had to try to explain herself, in some way. If for no other reason so that he didn't hate her. Even if he never wanted to see her again, she couldn't just leave things like this. And deep down, a part of her still dared to hope that maybe this was just a one-time thing, a freak episode, and that maybe they could get over this and still be together. After all, if they could get over this, they could get over anything.

Scarlet was beginning to feel a little better. She wiped away her tears, grabbed a tissue, blew her nose, and took out her cell. She pulled up his number and began to text him.

Then she stopped. What should she say?

I'm so sorry for what happened today.

She deleted that. It was too generic.

I don't know what came over me today.

She deleted that, too. It didn't sound quite right. She needed the perfect balance, the perfect mixture of apologizing and yet being hopeful that things had not changed forever. She also needed to emphasize what a great time she had up until that point.

She closed her eyes and sighed, thinking hard. *Come on, come on,* she willed herself.

She began to type.

I had such an amazing time with you today. I'm so sorry it ended the way it did. There was a reason I had to leave like that, but I can't explain it to you. I know it's hard to understand, but I hope you can. I just want you to know that I had an awesome time, and I'm sorry. And I hope we can see each other again.

Scarlet stared at her draft for a long while, then finally reached out, and hit send.

She watched it go through.

Her text wasn't perfect. She already thought of how she could have re-written it in a million ways. And a part of her already regretted sending it. Maybe it sounded too desperate. Maybe it was too cryptic.

Whatever. It was off. At least now he knew that she still liked him, and that she wanted to see him again.

She knew that Blake had his cell on him every second of the day. She knew he'd get it right away. And that he always answered his texts within seconds.

Scarlet trembled as she waited to hear.

She placed her cell on her lap and closed her eyes, breathing slowly, waiting for a vibration. Willing it to vibrate.

Come on, she thought. *Text me back.*

She sat there, waiting, for what felt like forever. She kept refreshing her phone. After a few minutes, she even powered it off then back on, in case somehow it was jammed. She then watched the clock tick. Two minutes passed.

Then five.

Then ten.

She slammed her phone down on the table, and could feel tears welling up inside again. He clearly wasn't texting her back. How could she blame him? She probably wouldn't text herself back either.

So that was it. It was over.

Then, suddenly, her phone vibrated.

She reached over and snatched it off the table.

But her heart fell to see that it wasn't Blake. It was Maria.

I can't believe u cut class like that. So... how was ur date with Blake?

Scarlet sighed. She had no idea how to respond.

Don't worry. I'm not cutting again. It's over between us.

Really? OMG. Why? Vivian?

No. Not her. It just...

Scarlet stopped, wondering what to say.

... didn't work out.

Tell me.

Scarlet sighed. She really wanted to change the subject.

Nothing to tell. What's up with u?

OMG, I can't stop obsessing about new boy. Sage. Heard fresh details today.

Scarlet was exhausted and really didn't want to continue this texting conversation. She didn't want to hear more gossip and innuendo about the new kid – or about anyone. She just wanted to disappear from the world.

But Maria was her best friend, so she had to humor her:

Like what?

He has a sister, and a cousin. They don't go to our school though. He's a senior. He transferred from a private school. I hear he's rich. Like super-rich.

Scarlet didn't care. She just wanted to end this.

Luckily, before she could type, she got another text – this one from Jasmin.

OMG, what's happening to your Facebook wall?

Scarlet read it in surprise.

What do u mean?

Before she could respond, she grabbed her laptop, opened it, and pulled up her wall.

Her heart plummeted. Vivian had posted on it:

Nice try stealing Blake. It didn't work. After he dumped you, he came back to us. I knew he'd dump you. Just surprised it happened so soon.

Scarlet breathed sharply, completely taken aback. She saw various friends of hers comment on the post, and saw that it had spread to many people's walls. She also saw that Vivian had posted it to Twitter, and that it had been re-tweeted by all of Vivian's friends.

Scarlet was aghast. She had never felt more embarrassed. She deleted the comment from her wall, blocked Vivian, then went to her settings and changed them so that only her friends could post. But it was barely a drop in the bucket – clearly, the damage had already been done. Now the whole school thought that she was stealing other people's boyfriends. And that she was dumped.

Her face turned red. She was so mad, she wanted to reach out and strangle Vivian. She didn't know what to do.

She slammed down her laptop, and burst out of her room. She tore down the steps, not knowing where to go or what to do. All she knew was that she needed air.

"Come on Ruth," she said.

She grabbed her leash and Ruth jumped excitedly, following her out the door and down the porch steps.

Scarlet ran down the steps, looking at her feet, and it wasn't until she was out on the sidewalk that she looked up, and saw him, standing there.

She stopped cold.

He stood there, staring back at her, as if he was waiting.

It was the new boy.

Sage.

Chapter Three

Scarlet stood there, at the end of her walkway, staring. She could hardly believe it. There, standing on the sidewalk, just a few feet away, staring back with his intense grey eyes, was the new boy. Sage.

What was he doing here, in front of her house? How long had he been standing here? Had he been watching her house? Had he been about to head up her walkway? Or had he just been passing by?

But passing by where? She lived on a quiet suburban street, and hardly anyone ever walked around here. Then again, she was only two blocks to town, and conceivably, he could be heading somewhere. But that was unlikely.

The thought of him standing there, watching her house, or about to walk up, freaked her out. On the other hand, she couldn't deny that she was excited to see him. Excited wasn't the right word. It was more like... transfixed. She could not take her eyes off of him. His smooth skin, his strong jaw, his proud cheekbones and nose, his gray eyes, long eyelashes – she had never met anyone remotely like him. So noble, so proud. He seemed so out of place here, like he'd dropped down out of a sixteenth-century palace.

She also couldn't help noticing that she felt butterflies in her stomach when she looked at him. And it was a feeling she did not want to have. After all, Maria, her best friend, had made it clear that she was obsessed with him. How wrong would it be for Scarlet to take him away? Maria would never forgive her. And she would never forgive herself. Besides, she had Blake. Or did she?

She thought again of Vivian's post, about Blake dumping her. Had Blake really told her that? Or had Vivian made it up? Either way, she felt pretty sure that Blake was gone from her life for good.

"Um... hi," she said, not knowing what else to say. After all, they had never even been introduced.

"I didn't mean to startle you," he said back.

She loved his voice. It was soft, gentle, yet powerful the same time. He was soft-spoken, yet there were something authoritative in his tone. She could listen to that voice forever.

"I'm Sage," he said, extending a hand.

"I know," she said, as she reached out and took it.

The touch of his skin was electrifying. It sent a thrill up her arm, as he held her freezing hand in his warm one.

"Small town," she added, by way of explanation, but then felt embarrassed. That was stupid of her; she shouldn't have admitted she knew his name. It made her seem desperate.

But wait, she thought. Why was she even thinking this way? After all, he was Maria's man. Wasn't he?

"Your hand is so cold," he said, as he looked down at her palm.

Scarlet withdrew it, self-conscious.

"Sorry," she said, shrugging.

"You didn't tell me your name," he said.

"Oh, sorry, I just figured you knew it," she said, then added, "not that I'm famous or popular anything. It's just... well, small town, you know?"

She was already stumbling, making things worse with each sentence. She always did this when she got nervous in front of guys.

"Anyway, my name is Scarlet. Scarlet Paine."

He smiled.

"Scarlet," he echoed.

She loved the sound of her name in his voice.

“The color of many things. Wine, or blood, or roses. Of course, I prefer the latter,” he added with a smile.

Scarlet smiled back. Who talked like this? she wondered. It was as if he were from another time, another place. She was dying to know more about him.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, then figured that sounded too harsh. “Not to be rude or anything. But I mean like, what are you doing in front of my house?”

He momentarily looked flustered.

“Yes,” he said. “Peculiar timing, isn’t it? I was just in town, and thought I’d do a bit of exploring. I’m new here, and thought I would see where these roads lead. I had no idea they led to you.”

Scarlet felt better. At least he wasn’t stalking her house or anything.

“Well, there’s not much to see. This town is only a few blocks in each direction. A few more blocks that way, and it’s done.”

He smiled. “Yes. I was beginning to see that myself.”

Suddenly, Ruth ran up to him and jumped up and licked his hand.

“Don’t jump,” Scarlet chided.

“It’s okay,” he said.

He knelt down, and petted Ruth gently, stroking her mane with his palm, scratching behind her ears. Ruth leaned in and licked him on the cheek. She started whining and Scarlet could tell that she really liked him. She was shocked. Ruth was always so protective of her, and she’d never seen her take to a stranger like this.

“What a beautiful animal. Aren’t you, Ruth?” he said.

Ruth leaned up and licked him again, and he kissed her on the nose.

Scarlet was stunned.

“How did you know her name was Ruth?”

He suddenly stood, caught off guard.

“Um... I read it. On her neck tag.”

“But the tag is faded,” she said. “I mean, I can barely read it.”

He shrugged, smiled.

“They always told me I had good vision,” he said.

But Scarlet was not convinced. The tag was faded down to almost nothing, and she couldn’t possibly see how he could have read it. It freaked her out. How did he know her name?

Yet, at the same time, she felt comfortable being around him. And given the state she was in, she liked having company. She didn’t want him to go. But at the same time, she thought of Maria, and how upset she would be if she drove by and saw her standing here with him. She would be so jealous. She would probably hate her for life.

“You’re quite the mystery around here,” Scarlet said. “The new kid. No one really knows much about you. But a lot of people are dying to.”

“Are they?” he shrugged.

Scarlet waited, but he didn’t offer anything more.

“So... like... what’s your story?” she asked.

“I guess everyone has one, don’t they?” he asked.

He turned and looked off at the horizon, as if debating whether to tell her.

“I guess mine is boring,” he said. “My family... recently relocated here. So here I am, finishing out my final year.”

“I heard you had like... a sister?”

A smile formed at the corner of his mouth.

“Word gets around here, doesn’t it?” he asked with a grin.

Scarlet blushed. “Sorry,” she said.

“Yes, I do have one,” he answered, but didn’t offer any more.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to pry,” she said.

He looked at her, and as she looked up her eyes locked with his – and for a moment, she felt her world beginning to melt. For the first time that day, all her worries drifted far from her mind. She felt transported.

She wanted to stop staring, to put her feelings in check, wanted to summon thoughts of Maria and force herself to push him out of her mind. But she couldn’t. She was frozen.

“I’m flattered that you did,” he said.

He continued staring, then after a moment, he added, “Would you like to take a walk with me?”

Her heart started to pound. She *did* want to walk with him. She wanted that more than anything in the world. But a part of her was scared. She was still reeling from her time with Blake. She still didn’t trust herself, her own feelings, her body, her reactions. And she was scared to betray her best friend – even if, in reality, Maria had no claim on Sage. Most of all, she didn’t trust herself. Whatever had happened between her and Blake, that impulse to feed, might still be there. As much as she wanted to know more, she felt the need to protect him.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I can’t.”

She saw disappointment in his eyes as he nodded back. “I understand.”

Scarlet suddenly heard the banging of doors inside her house, along with the muted sound of voices rising. It was her parents, arguing. She could hear it even from here. Another door slammed, and she turned and looked to the house with concern.

“I’m sorry, but I have to go back inside now – ” she said, as she turned back to say her goodbyes.

But as she turned back, she was utterly confounded. There was no sign of Sage. Anywhere.

She looked both ways, turned up and down the block, but there was nothing. It was unfathomable. It was as if he’d just vanished.

She wondered how he could have possibly run away that quickly. It was impossible.

She wondered where he went, and if there was still time to catch up to him. Because now, she felt an overwhelming urge to be with him, to talk to him. She realized, in a flash, that she had just made the stupidest mistake of her life by saying no. Now that he was gone, every ounce of her ached for him. She’d been such a fool. She hated herself.

Had she lost her chance for good?

Chapter Four

Still shaken from her encounter with Sage, Scarlet walked into her house lost in her own world.

She was snapped out of it rudely as she walked right into the middle of her parents' arguing. She couldn't believe it. In all her life, she never remembered them arguing and now that was all they did; she felt a pang of guilt, wondering if it had to do with her. She couldn't help shake the feeling that something bad had started in all of their lives, something that wouldn't go away, and which seemed to be escalating, day by day. And she couldn't help feeling as if it were all her fault.

"You're taking this way too far," Caleb screamed at Caitlin behind the closed door. "Seriously. What's gotten into you?"

"What's gotten into *you*?" Caitlin shot back. "You were always in my corner, always took my side. Now, it's like you're in denial."

"Denial?" he shot back.

Scarlet couldn't take it anymore. As if her day wasn't bad enough – having to listen to this was putting her over the edge. She just wanted them to stop arguing. She just wanted their lives to go back to normal.

She took a few steps in and pushed open the door to the dining room, hoping her presence would make them stop.

They both stopped in mid-argument, as they wheeled and stared at her, like deer caught in headlights.

"Where were you?" her dad snapped at her.

Scarlet was taken aback: her dad had never yelled at her before, and had never used that kind of tone. His face was still read from arguing, and she barely recognized him.

"What do you mean?" she said, defensive. "I was just outside, with Ruth."

"For an hour?"

"What are you talking about?" she said, wondering. "I was only outside for a few minutes."

"No you weren't. I went up and checked your room, then I saw you going outside, and that was an hour ago. Where did you go?" he insisted, walking around the table towards her. "Don't you lie to me."

Scarlet felt as if he'd totally lost his mind. Not only was her mom going crazy, her dad was, too. She felt her world caving in.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she snapped back, her own voice rising. But she was starting to wonder if somehow she'd lost track of time. If something was happening to her. If she had again gone somewhere, and not remembered. The thought of it made her heart pound, as she started to silently freak out. "I'm not lying. And I don't appreciate your accusing me of it."

"Do you have any idea how worried sick we were about you? I was about to call the police again."

"I'm sorry!" she yelled back. "I didn't do anything!"

She was shaking inside at the brunt of his anger, and couldn't stand it a moment longer. She turned and stormed out of the room, bursting into tears as she did. She ran up the steps.

She'd had it with her parents. It was just too much. Now, even her dad didn't understand her. And he had always, her whole life, been on her side, through everything.

"Scarlet, get back here!" he shouted.

"NO!" she screamed back, through her tears.

She could hear her dad's footsteps, following her up the steps, and she went faster. She hurried down the hall, to her room, and slammed the door behind her.

A moment later, his fist banged on the door.

"Scarlet. Open the door. I'm sorry. I want to talk to. Please. I'm sorry."

But Scarlet turned off the lights and jumped into bed, curling up. She sat there, crying and crying.

“Go away!” she screamed.

Finally, after what felt like forever, she heard his footsteps disappear.

It was too early to sleep, and Scarlet felt too numb to do anything else. After a long while, she reached over and picked up her phone. Her alerts were going crazy – her Facebook page blowing up with new posts and messages. It just made her feel worse, and she shut it off.

After a long while, she lay there, on her side, looking out through the window at the trees, at all the different colors, shimmering in the final light of day. She watched as several leaves fell off the trees before her eyes, swirling down to the ground.

She felt overwhelmed with sadness. Blake didn’t want to be with her; Vivian had turned the whole school against her; her own friends didn’t understand her; her parents didn’t trust her; she didn’t know what was happening to her body. And most of all, she messed up her chance to talk to Sage. Everything was going so wrong. And she couldn’t stop flashing back to that moment between her and Blake, down by the river. She couldn’t stop thinking about what was happening to her. Who was she, really?

She reached over and grabbed her journal and her favorite pen, leaned over and began to write.

I don’t understand my life anymore. It’s surreal. I just met the most amazing boy ever. Sage. I don’t want to admit it, because Maria likes him, but I can’t stop thinking about him. I feel like I’ve known him somehow. We barely spoke, yet I felt such a connection to him. Even more than with Blake.

But he left so quickly, and I stupidly turned him down. I wish I hadn’t. There are so many questions I’m dying to ask him. Like who he is. What he’s doing here. And why he was in front of my house. He said he was just walking by, but somehow I don’t believe it. I think he was looking for me.

I don’t know who my parents are anymore. Every day, everything is changing so much. I don’t know who I am either. It’s like the whole world I once knew, the world that was so familiar and safe is gone, replaced by another world. And I feel like tomorrow, it will all just change again.

I dread tomorrow. Will everybody hate me? Will Blake ignore me? Will I see Sage?

I can’t even imagine what the next day will bring.

* * *

Scarlet opened her eyes, awakened by a doorbell. She looked out and was shocked to realize it was already late morning, the sun flooding into her bedroom. She realized she’d fallen asleep in her clothes, on top of the covers. She grabbed her clock and turned it: 8:30. Her heart fluttered with panic. She was late for school.

The doorbell rang again, and Scarlet jumped to her feet. Given the time, she assumed her parents had already left for work, so she had to answer the door. Who could be ringing it so early in the morning?

She was tempted to ignore it, to just hurry up and get ready for school, but it rang again.

Ruth barked and barked and finally, Scarlet let her out and followed her down the stairs, through the living room, and towards the door.

Ruth stood before it, barking like crazy.

“Ruth!”

Finally Ruth quieted as Scarlet walked to the door. She slowly pulled it open.

Her heart stopped.

Standing there, staring back at her, was Sage. He held a long black rose, in both hands.

"I'm sorry to drop by like this," he said. "But I knew you'd be home."

"How?" she asked, totally confused.

He only stared back.

"May I come in?" he asked.

"Um..." Scarlet began.

A part of her desperately wanted to invite him in, but another part felt freaked out. What was he doing here? Why was he bringing her a black rose?

But then again, she couldn't just send him away.

"Sure," she said. "Come in."

Sage smiled wide, as he took a single big step across the threshold.

As he did, to her amazement, suddenly he sank into the floor. He sank and sank, as if into quicksand, and held up a hand, shrieking for her.

"Scarlet!" he shrieked. "Help me!"

Scarlet reached down and grabbed his hand, trying to pull him up. But she suddenly went down the hole, too, diving down face first. She screamed at the top of her lungs, as she went flying full speed, heading towards the bowels of the earth.

Scarlet woke screaming. She looked all around her room, her heart pounding. The first rays of the day came through her window. She looked over at her clock. 6:15.

She had fallen asleep in her clothes. She breathed hard as she realized it had all just been a dream.

Her heart was pounding. It had felt so real.

She got up, headed into her bathroom and splashed cold water on her face several times, trying to wake up. As she stared back into the mirror, though, her fears were compounded: her reflection. It was different. She was there, but her reflection was translucent, as if she were a ghost. As if she were fading away. At first she thought the light was playing tricks on her. But she turned up the light, and it was still the same.

She was so freaked out, she felt like crying. She didn't know what to do. She needed something to ground her. Someone to talk to. Someone to tell her that it would be OK. That she wasn't going crazy. That she wasn't changing. That she was the same old Scarlet.

For some reason, Scarlet thought of her mom's offer, of the priest. Now, she felt like she really needed him. Maybe he could help her feel better.

She walked out into the hall and as she did, saw her mom walking down the hall, getting dressed for work.

"Mom?" she asked.

Caitlin stopped and turned, looking surprised.

"Oh honey, I didn't know you were awake so early," she said. "Are you okay?"

Scarlet nodded, afraid she would cry, and walked down the hall and gave her mom a hug.

Her mom hugged her back, tightly, and rocked her, and it felt so good to be in her arms.

"I miss you honey," her mom said. "And I love you very much."

"I love you too," Scarlet said over her shoulder, and began to tear up.

"What's wrong?" her mom asked, as she pulled back.

Scarlet wiped a tear out of the corner of her eye.

"Do you remember your offer the other day? To see the priest?"

She nodded back.

"I'd like to go. Can we go together? After school today?"

Her mom smiled wide, seeming relieved.

"Of course we can, sweetheart."

She gave Scarlet another hug. “I love you. Don’t ever forget that.”
“I love you too, mom.”

Chapter Five

Scarlet got to school early, for the first time in ages. The halls hadn't filled up yet, and it was a ghost town as she walked to her locker. She was used to coming in late, to the place being packed, but today, after her nightmare, she felt too antsy to sit around the house and wait. She'd also checked her Facebook and Twitter and saw the ridiculous amount of activity as a result of Vivian and her friends posting about her, and was so anxious about how the school might react, she felt coming in early might somehow help fend it off. At least by getting here early, she felt somewhat grounded, somewhat prepared.

Although of course she knew that would do no good. Soon these halls would fill with an overwhelming number of kids, and they would cluster in groups, outnumber her, and look and whisper. Including, maybe, Blake. She wondered what he might have told everyone about their date. Did he tell them everything that happened? Did he tell them that she was some kind of freak?

The thought of it made her so sick, she'd skipped breakfast this morning. She would have to face the music, and wondered how many hundreds of kids had been following the posts – and what they all thought about her. A part of her wanted to curl up and die, to run away and leave this town, and never come back.

But she knew neither of these were an option, so she figured, better to just be brave and get it over with.

As she opened her locker and collected her books for the day, she realized how far behind she was in all her homework assignments. This, too, was so unlike her. The last two days had been so crazy, everything so different than it had ever been. Making matters worse, she was squinting at the morning light coming in through the windows, and noticed she had a terrible headache she'd never had before. She found herself shielding her eyes at a particularly bright hallway, and wondered again if something was wrong with her. Was she still sick or something?

She spotted her old sunglasses sitting up there, on the top shelf of her locker, and felt like grabbing them and wearing them indoors, throughout the day. But she knew that would only attract more negative attention.

Like a tidal wave, the halls began to fill with kids, pouring in from every direction. She glanced at her phone and realized her first class would start in a few minutes. She took a deep breath and closed her locker.

She'd noticed on her phone that there were no new texts, and her thoughts turned again to Blake, to yesterday. Her running away. She wondered again what he must have told the others. Had he really said all those harmful things? That he'd dumped her? Or had Vivian made them up? What did he really think of her? And why hadn't he answered any of her texts?

She assumed, of course, that his silence was a response. That he was freaked out, and no longer interested. But she wished, at least, that he'd respond, as she checked her phone yet again, just in case – even if just to say he wasn't interested. She hated not hearing.

As if all that were not enough, she could not stop thinking about Sage, either. Their meeting, in front of her house, had been so mysterious. She regretted walking away from him, and wished she had a few more moments to talk to him, to ask him more questions. Her dream freaked her out, though, and she could not understand why he was stuck in her mind, even more so than Blake.

She felt so confused. With Blake, it was like she consciously thought about him; with Sage, it was like she couldn't help it – she thought about him whether she wanted to or not, and she didn't understand her strong feelings for him. Strangely enough, even though she'd known Blake for years, she already somehow felt closer to Sage. What bothered her more than anything was that it didn't make sense. She hated not understanding – especially when it came to love.

“Oh my God, Scarlet?” came the voice.

As she closed her locker she saw Maria standing there, looking back at her as if she were looking at an infamous celebrity.

“You’re never here early! I texted you like a million times last night! What happened? Where were you? Are you OK?”

Scarlet felt a pang of regret; she’d been too overwhelmed to reply to all her texts. She also felt a new feeling of nervousness around Maria, given her feelings for Sage. After all, Maria made it clear that she was obsessed with Sage. If she found out Scarlet had talked to him the night before – especially in front of her own house – she feared Maria would freak out. Maria was so possessive and territorial when it came to boys. She always thought that whoever she laid her eyes on was hers – whether the person knew of her existence or not. And if anyone even remotely got in the way, they were her instant enemy. She could be very spiteful like that – and she would never forgive and forget. She was that kind of person: either your closest friend, or your mortal enemy.

“Sorry,” Scarlet replied. “I crashed early. I wasn’t feeling well. And I couldn’t deal with the whole Facebook thing.”

“OMG, I hate her,” Maria said. “Vivian. What a snake. Who does she think she is? I posted on her wall, and on her friends’ walls, too. I put them all in their place for bashing you.”

Scarlet felt so appreciative towards Maria – which made her feel even more guilty for having talked to Sage. She wished she could just tell her, just explain to her what happened with Sage – but she didn’t really understand herself what had happened. And she feared that if she even mentioned it, Maria would lose it.

“You’re the best,” Scarlet said, as she put an arm around her in appreciation.

The two of them walked side-by-side, down the halls, which were quickly filling up, the noise getting louder and louder, as they began the long march down towards the other end of school, for their first class together.

“I mean, the nerve of her,” Maria said. “First, stealing your man. Then, posting all about it. She’s just threatened. And jealous. She just knows you’re the better girl.”

Scarlet felt a little bit better, yet still felt a twinge of sadness at the idea of losing Blake. Especially under these circumstances. All she wanted was a chance to explain to Blake, to tell him that, whatever happened down at the river, that wasn’t her. But she didn’t really know how to explain. What could she say to him? She guessed she’d laid it out well enough in her text. And he never even replied.

“Hey guys,” came the voice.

Walking up beside them were Jasmin and Becca. Scarlet sensed them looking her over, and was beginning to feel paranoid about all the attention.

“Hey,” Scarlet said, as they all walked together, heading as a small group down the halls. “So are you going to like keep us in suspense?” Jasmin asked. “What happened with Blake?”

Scarlet could feel the eyes on her, and felt flustered. As they walked, she also saw the glances of all the kids. She wanted to think that she was just being paranoid – but she knew she wasn’t. There were definitely a ton of people looking at her, stealing side glances, as if she were some kind of freak. She wondered again how many kids had been online, had read all the posts, and what they believed. Was she going to be known as the girl who got dumped by Blake? Who lost Blake to Vivian? She burned at the thought of it.

“Is it true?” Becca asked. “Did he really dump you?”

“If he did,” Jasmin said, “just tell us, and we’ll slam his Facebook wall.”

“Thanks guys,” Scarlet said. She thought about how to best respond. She didn’t really know how to explain.

“So?” Maria prodded. “Are you really not going to tell us?”

Scarlet shrugged.

"I'm not sure what to say. There really is nothing to tell. We went down to the river, and like..." She paused, debating how to phrase it. "... Blake kissed me."

"And?" Jasmin prodded. "You're killing us here!"

Scarlet shrugged.

"That's it. Nothing really happened. I mean, I like him. I still do like him. But... I left. I mean, I started feeling like really sick, so I had to leave, kind of abruptly."

"What do you mean sick?" Becca asked.

"Like my stomach started killing me," she lied, not knowing what else to say. "And I had this really bad headache." At least it was partially true, she thought. "I think I was just still sick from the other day. So I rushed out of there. Bad timing, I guess."

"So did Blake like bring you back? Or was he like a total jerk?" Jasmin asked.

Scarlet shrugged.

"It's not his fault. I didn't really give him time to, I guess. I kind of just left. I felt bad about it. I wanted to explain it to him. But he never answered my text."

"What a jerk," Maria said.

"What a loser," Jasmin added. "Seriously. So you got sick – so what, he doesn't answer your texts? What's his problem? So you were sick. Big deal. I mean like he's not going give you a chance to explain?"

"Totally," Maria chimed in. "And then, what, he goes running back to Vivian, and like dumps you for her? Just because you were sick? What's his problem? He totally doesn't deserve you. It's for the best."

Scarlet really appreciated all the voices of support, and it made her feel better. She had never thought of it that way. She guessed she had been her own worst critic. The more she thought about it, the more she realized they had a point. Maybe Blake should have been more sympathetic; maybe he should have followed up, asked her how she was feeling; maybe he shouldn't have been so quick to run to Vivian.

But had he really? Or had Vivian made it up?

"Thanks guys," she said. "I really appreciate it. Though honestly I don't really know what happened after. I don't know if he went back to Vivian or if she just made it all up."

"So I guess that means you're not going with him to the dance?" Maria asked. "So then who are you going with? I mean, are you like not going?" she asked, her voice rising as if that were the most horrible thing in the world.

Scarlet shrugged. That stupid dance – it couldn't have come at a worse time. She really didn't know what to say.

"I doubt Blake's taking me," she said. "As far as going alone..."

For a moment, Scarlet couldn't help but think of Sage. She realized how much she'd actually like to go with him. She hardly knew why. His face just stuck in her mind.

At the same time, she thought of Maria, what she would think – and the thought of going with Sage felt like a betrayal. She quickly tried to push it out of her mind.

"If I don't go, I don't go," she finally said. "It's okay. Maybe next year."

"There's a huge pre-game party tonight at Jake Wilson's house. His parents are away. We're all going. You *have* to go. Maybe you'll find a date there."

Scarlet gulped. Sneaking out and searching for a date tonight was the last thing she wanted to do.

"Well anyway don't feel bad," Maria said. "I don't have a date yet either."

"What about Brian?" Jasmin asked her.

"We're over, remember?" she said.

"But he's not dating anyone else."

Maria shrugged. "He didn't ask me. And I really wouldn't want to go with him anyway. Sage is the one I really want to go with. The new boy."

Scarlet gulped.

“So why don’t you ask him?” Becca asked.

“Yeah, you keep talking about him, but you’re not doing anything about it,” Jasmin said. “Stop being chicken.”

“I’m not chicken,” Maria snapped back.

“Chicken chicken!” they taunted her.

Maria’s face turned beet red, and Scarlet could see how mad she was.

“I’m not chicken. In fact, I have class with him next period. I’m going to ask him then.”

“No you’re not,” Becca said.

“You’d never do that,” Jasmin said.

“Watch me,” Maria said.

“But isn’t that like awkward?” Becca said. “Your asking him?”

Maria shrugged. “It could be better. But what am I supposed to do? He’s new. If I don’t ask him, somebody else will. And if he’s not into me, I’d rather know now, right?”

“I still think you’re all talk,” Jasmin said.

Maria glared at her. “Check back in an hour and we’ll see who’s all talk.”

Scarlet was relieved that the conversation had shifted away from her. She was beginning to feel hopeful, as if maybe all the negative attention would actually pass over quickly, and not be as bad as she thought. After all, kids moved on to new topics of gossip really quickly. But as she thought of next period’s class, with Sage and Maria, her stomach sank.

As they rounded the corner, Scarlet’s stomach sank further: there, huddled against a wall, were Vivian and her friends. They elbowed each other, looking in her direction, then giggled and whispered.

Vivian turned and glared right at her with a victorious smile. She could see the meanness in her perfect face, the petty vindication she received from having bullied her online. For a moment, Scarlet was so mad, she felt like attacking her. She felt a tremendous rage rush through her, tingling, running up from her toes through her fingertips. She didn’t understand what was happening: it was like a hot flash. Her body felt stronger, more violent, and less able to control itself. She wanted to get out of here quick, before anything bad happened.

“Well well well,” Vivian said aloud, as they all walked past. The tension in the air was so thick, it could be cut with a knife.

“Look who it is. If it isn’t Blake’s leftovers.”

“That’s quite a statement, especially coming from Blake’s reject,” Jasmin snapped back at her.

“What are you too afraid to say it to her face, so you have to go and post it online?” Maria goaded.

Vivian’s face dropped into a scowl, as did her friends. Scarlet was mortified. She just wanted all of this to pass away. She appreciated her friends’ loyalty, but she didn’t want this to evolve into a full-fledged war.

“And this coming from a girl who doesn’t even have a date to the dance,” Vivian retorted, as she now homed in on Maria. “Loser,” she said.

“I’d rather not have a date than have someone’s leftovers,” Maria snapped back.

“Please Maria,” Scarlet said quietly. “Let’s just keep going.”

For a moment, it felt as if the two groups of girls would lunge at each other, and that this would evolve into a full-fledged fight. As much rage as Scarlet felt coursing through her, she really didn’t want any more confrontation.

She gently prodded her friends and slowly her group kept walking, going farther down the hall. Scarlet did not want to descend to Vivian’s level.

Just as the two groups were gaining more distance between each other, suddenly Scarlet sensed something. It was a strange sensation, one she’d never had before. Out of nowhere, her senses were on high alert: she felt, more than saw, a dark energy approaching her from behind. She didn’t know

how, but she did. And then her hearing became so much acute: she heard every tiny movement in the hallway. She heard the movement of a girl's footsteps, approaching her from behind.

Reacting at the speed of light, Scarlet suddenly felt her body turn itself around, felt her own hand go up as she spun, and watched herself grab someone else's hand just as it approached the back of her head.

Scarlet looked up and was amazed to see herself clutching Vivian's wrist. She looked over and saw a big wad of chewing gum in her palm, and saw her shocked expression. Then she realized what had happened: Vivian had crept up behind her and was about to cram the gum into her hair. Somehow, Scarlet had sensed it and had spun and blocked it at the last second, just inches away.

As Scarlet stood there, she found herself twisting Vivian's wrist with an incredible surge of strength; Vivian dropped down to her knees, and screamed out in pain.

Everyone in the halls stopped, as a huge crowd gathered around.

"You're hurting me!" Vivian cried out. "Let go!"

"FIGHT! FIGHT!" screamed the crowd of kids who suddenly gathered around.

Scarlet felt an overwhelming rage coursing through her, a rage she could barely control. Something in her body had protected her from getting hurt, and now it was willing her to get vengeance – to break this girl's wrist.

"Why should she?" Maria yelled out. "You were about to stick gum in her hair."

"Please!" Vivian whimpered. "I'm sorry!"

Scarlet didn't understand what was overcoming her, and it freaked her out. Somehow, at the last second, she willed herself to stop. She finally let go.

Vivian's wrist collapsed to her side, as she scrambled to her feet and ran back to her group of friends.

Scarlet turned, her heart pounding, and walked with her friends back down the hall. Slowly, the halls came back to life again, everyone whispering, as they dispersed. Scarlet's friends clustered around her.

"OMG, like how did you do that?" Maria asked, in awe.

"That was like amazing!" Jasmin said. "You really put her in her place."

"I can't believe she was about to gum you," Becca said.

"She got what she deserved," Maria said. "Nice going, girl. I think she'll think twice about messing with you again."

But Scarlet didn't feel good. She just felt empty, drained. And more bewildered than ever about what was happening to her. On the one hand, of course she was thrilled she was able to catch her in time, to fight back and stand up for herself. But at the same time, she couldn't understand how she'd been able to react the way she had.

Her eyes were hurting even more and her headache was worsening, and as crazy as it sounded, she couldn't help feeling as if she were changing somehow. And that terrified her more than anything.

The bell rang, and just before they headed to class, Scarlet looked over and saw Blake standing there. He stood with a few of his friends, and one of them prodded him, and he turned and glanced at her. For a moment, their eyes locked. Scarlet tried to decode his expression. She hoped more than anything that he would turn and walk over to her, give her a chance.

But he suddenly turned and walked with his friends in the opposite direction.

Scarlet felt her heart breaking. So that was it. He wasn't into her anymore. Not only that, but he wasn't even talking to her. He wouldn't even acknowledge her. That hurt her more than anything. She'd thought they had something real together, and couldn't understand how it had all fallen apart so quickly, how he could walk away so easily. How he couldn't at least be more understanding of her – at least have given her a chance to explain.

It wasn't even the first period of the day and already Scarlet felt beat up, like a punching bag. She'd already experienced a whirlwind of emotions, and wondered how she'd be able to make it through the day.

"Come on, you don't need him," Maria said, as she wrapped an arm around Scarlet's, and guided her into the day's first class. Scarlet gulped, knowing that waiting behind those doors was Sage.

Chapter Six

Scarlet's first period class was filled with about thirty kids, everyone scrambling to take their seats. The desks were lined up single file in three neat rows of ten, while to the side of the room were long wooden tables, benches beneath them. She scanned the room and saw with relief that Sage wasn't in it; at least that was one less drama to deal with today.

"Where is he?" Maria asked, dejected. "Figures."

It was English, Scarlet's favorite class. Normally, she'd be happy to be here, especially because Mr. Sparrow was her favorite teacher, and especially because this term they were studying Shakespeare and her favorite play: *Romeo and Juliet*.

But as she slumped into her seat, in the row next to Maria, she felt deflated. Apathetic. She could hardly concentrate on Shakespeare. The class quieted, and she took out her books by rote and stared at the page, in a daze.

"Today's going to be a little different," Mr. Sparrow announced.

Scarlet looked up, happy to hear the sound of his voice. In his late 30s, good-looking, slightly unshaven, with longish hair and a strong jaw, he looked out of place in this high school. He looked a bit more glamorous than the others, like an actor slightly past his prime. He was always so happy, so quick to smile, and so kind to her – and to all the students. He never had a harsh word for her, or for anyone, and he always gave everyone As. He also managed to make even the most complicated text easy to understand, and actually managed to get everyone excited about whatever they were reading. He was also one of the smartest people she'd ever met – with an encyclopedic knowledge of world and classic literature.

"It's one thing to just read Shakespeare's plays," he announced, a mischievous smile on his face. "It's quite another to act them," he added. "In fact, one could argue that you can't truly gain an understanding of his plays until you've read them aloud yourself – and even tried to act them."

The class giggled in response, the kids looking and murmuring at each other in an excited buzz.

"That's right," he said. "You guessed it. After today's discussion, we're going to break off into groups, each of you choosing a partner and act the text aloud to each other."

Excited whispers spread in the classroom, and the energy level definitely rose a few notches. It managed to shake Scarlet from her reverie, managed to make her forget, for a few moments, all the troubles in her life. Partnering up and reading the lines: that would definitely be fun.

Suddenly, the door to the room opened, and Scarlet turned, with the rest of the class, to see who it was.

She could not believe it. Standing there, proudly, book in his hand, was Sage, wearing a slim leather jacket, black leather boots and designer jeans with a large black leather belt and huge silver buckle. He wore a black button-down shirt hanging loose, and it revealed sparkling necklace – it looked like white platinum – with a large pendant in the middle. It looked like it was made of rubies and sapphires, and sparkled the light.

Mr. Sparrow turned and looked at him, surprised.

"And you are?"

"Sage," he replied, handing him a slip. "Sorry I'm late. I'm new."

"Well then you are most welcome," Mr. Sparrow responded. "Please class, welcome Sage and make room for him in the back."

Mr. Sparrow turned back to the chalkboard.

"*Romeo and Juliet*. To begin with, let's talk about the background of this play...."

Mr. Sparrow's voice faded out in Scarlet's head. Her heart pounded as Sage walked down the rows of seats. And then suddenly, she realized: the only empty seat in the room was directly behind her.

Oh no, she thought. Not with Maria sitting right next to her.

As Sage walked down the aisle, she could have sworn she saw him turn and stare right at her. She looked away quickly, thinking of Maria, and not understanding why he was looking at her like that.

She felt more than saw him walk behind her, heard his chair scrape and felt him take a seat behind her. She could feel the energy coming off of him; it was tremendous.

Suddenly, her phone buzzed in her pocket. She furtively reached down, slipped it out a couple inches, and looked. Of course. Maria.

OMG, I'm dying.

Scarlet pushed her cell back into her pocket, and didn't turn and look at Maria, not wanting to make it obvious they were texting. She then put her hands back on her desk, hoping Maria would just stop texting. She really didn't want to text now. She wanted to concentrate.

But her phone buzzed again. She couldn't ignore it, especially with Maria sitting right next to her, so again, she reached down.

Hello? What should I do?

Again, Scarlet pushed her cell back into her pocket. She didn't want to be rude, but she had no idea what to say and really didn't want to get into a texting conversation right now. The situation was just getting worse, and she wanted to focus on what Mr. Sparrow was saying, especially as they were on her favorite play.

But then again, she couldn't completely ignore Maria. She quickly reached down and typed with one finger.

Don't know.

She hit send, then pushed her cell deep into her pocket, hoping Maria would leave her alone.

"Romeo and Juliet," Mr. Sparrow began, "was not an original story. Shakespeare actually based it on an ancient tale. Like all of Shakespeare's plays, he found his sources in history. He recycled old stories and adapted them into his own language, in his own time. We like to think that he's the greatest original writer of all time – but in truth, it would be more accurate to call him the greatest *adapter* of all time. If he were alive and writing today, he would not win the award for best Original Screenplay – he would win for best *Adapted* Screenplay. Because none of his stories – not one – were original. They had all been written before, some many times over many centuries.

"But that doesn't necessarily detract from his great skill, from his ability as a writer. After all, it's all about how you turn a phrase, isn't it? The same plot told two ways can be boring in one instance and compelling in another, can't it? Shakespeare's great skill was his ability to take someone else's story and re-write it in his own words, for his own time. And to write it with such beauty and poetry that he really brought it to life for the first time. He was a dramatist, yes. But ultimately, and most of all, he was a poet."

Mr. Sparrow paused as he lifted the play.

"In the case of *Romeo and Juliet*, the story had already been around for centuries by the time Shakespeare got his hands on it. Does anyone know the original source?"

Mr. Sparrow looked around the class, and it was dead silent. He waited several seconds, then opened his mouth to speak – when suddenly, he stopped and looked right in Scarlet's direction.

Scarlet's heart pounded as she thought he was looking at her.

"Ah, the new boy," Mr. Sparrow asked. "Please enlighten us."

The entire class turned and looked in Scarlet's direction, at Sage. She was relieved to realize he wasn't calling on her.

She couldn't help turning just a bit, too, looking behind her, at Sage. Instead of looking at the teacher, oddly, Sage looked at her as he spoke.

"Romeo and Juliet was based on a poem by Arthur Brooke: *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Iuliet*."

“Very good!” Mr. Sparrow said, sounding impressed. “And for extra points, might you know the year it was written?”

Scarlet was amazed. How had Sage known that?

“1562,” Sage replied, without hesitating.

Mr. Jordan looked happily surprised.

“Amazing! I’ve never had any student get that. Bravo, Sage. Since you’re such a scholar, here’s one final question. I’ve never known anyone – even among my peers – to get this right, so don’t feel badly if you don’t. If you get it, I’ll start you off with an automatic 100 on your first test. Where and when was the play first performed?”

The entire class turned in their seats and looked at Sage, the tension running high. Scarlet looked, too, and saw Sage smile back at her.

“It is believed to have been first performed in 1593, at a small venue called The Theatre, on the opposite side of the Thames.”

Mr. Jordan shouted out in excitement.

“WOW! My Sage, you are good. Wow, I’m impressed.”

Sage cleared his throat, not finished.

“That is the common understanding,” Sage said, “but in truth, it was actually performed once before that. In 1592. In Elizabeth’s castle. In her courtyard, amidst her private orchard.”

Scarlet looked back at Sage, speechless. His eyes had a far-off look, almost as if he were remembering being there himself. She couldn’t understand.

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