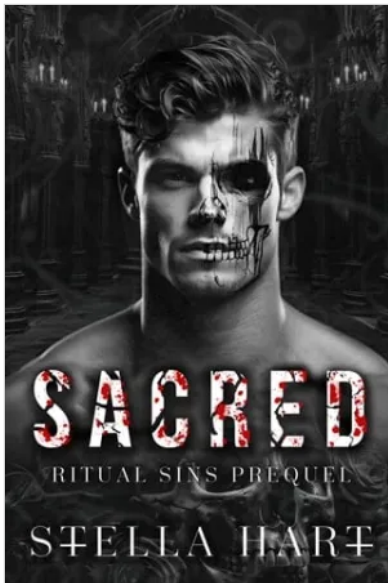




Sacred (Ritual Sins)

Author: *Stella Hart*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: They took everything from me. Now I'm going to take her... and watch her world burn

Sixteen years ago, Covenant cultists killed my mother. They thought they could escape justice. They were dead wrong.

I've spent years plotting my revenge, lurking in the shadows, waiting for the perfect moment. The key to their destruction? Her. The daughter of the man who runs this dark, twisted cult. She's completely unaware of me, but I'm following her every move, learning all about her.

Soon, she'll be mine.

Taking her isn't just a game. She's my weapon, my leverage, and the key to dismantling the Covenant's dark empire. The perfect pawn in my plan. When the time comes, I'll use her to ignite the blaze that will burn their world to the ground.

For now, I'll stay in the shadows, but she won't be able to escape me forever.

Watch out, little Rose... I'm coming for you.

Note: Sacred is the free short prequel to the Ritual Sins series. The other books are full-length.

What to know about the Ritual Sins series:

MF (no sharing or cheating)

Possessive, obsessive, OTT (over the top) hero

Dual POV

Dark romance that contains subjects/themes that may be triggering for some.

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Rose

‘Danger hides in beauty and beauty in danger.’

Belva Plain

September 15th , 2020

Everyone needed a secret.

Especially when you came from a small village like mine, where not much happened beyond the usual everyday activities. Secrets made things fun and interesting. Added a little flavor to life. They didn’t have to be big or bad; just something that belonged only to you. Something that could add a little thrill to the mundanity.

My secret was this little berry-picking spot, twenty minutes away from the village center, by the southwestern boundary of our land. It was my own private little world. No one else ever came here. They were too scared of accidentally touching the electrified fence.

I wasn’t afraid, because I trusted myself to be careful, and I knew the berries in this spot were the biggest and sweetest from anywhere on our land. There were so many different types too—wineberries, mulberries, blueberries, gooseberries, huckleberries, blackcap raspberries, and wild raisins. They all grew right here, bigger and prouder than the cultivated berries in our valley farmstead.

Perhaps they were enticed by the danger, wild things that they were. Perhaps we had that in common.

The silly thought made me smile as I picked another berry and dropped it in my basket. A chirping sound snapped my attention to the left, and I watched a bird hover close to the fence, wings fluttering like mad.

My smile dropped. “Hey!” I called out. I waved my free hand, trying to scare the bird away. “Shoo!”

Thankfully, it flew away before it touched the humming wire. I breathed a sigh of relief and returned to my berry-picking. The fence was a blessing and a curse. It kept us safe, but that safety came at the expense of innocent animals who inadvertently crossed our path.

To be honest, I still didn’t understand much about electricity, but I knew how dangerous it could be in the wrong place or the wrong hands. In the case of Alderwood, the danger was a net benefit despite all the negatives. The fence was very effective at keeping outsiders out, which was why the elders had decided not to eschew that particular form of outside technology as they did with so many others.

I always found that odd when I was a child—the outside world had so many wonders and ever-evolving technologies, so why couldn’t we have the same? But my father had explained it to me well enough. Sometimes, the outside world got something right, just like a broken clock is still correct twice a day. That was why we occasionally adopted some of their ways and tools. But overall, the world beyond our sacred land was a dark and dangerous place, just like the woods that surrounded us. It wasn’t worth living in a world like that.

Besides, the outsiders needed us to stay here. They didn’t even know it, but the work we did here in Alderwood was important. No, beyond important. It was sacrosanct.

Without us, the whole world would fall to the Darkness. The people would be lost to plagues, famines, and uncontrollable madness from the chaos-bringers that would be released, and their cities and towns would lie in ruins.

It was too bad they could never know and appreciate the efforts we made to keep them safe. But things were better that way. If they knew the true depths of the evil that lurked beneath the surface, desperate to emerge, they'd be too scared to leave their houses and live their lives.

I knelt and returned my attention to the wineberry bush, softly singing an old Alderwood folk song. "Their flaming torches, high and bright, invited the very darkness they sought to fight. They chased the—"

Another sound snapped my gaze to the fence again. This time it was a scuffing sound. Footsteps.

I slowly rose to my feet, heart pounding. Occasionally, outsiders got lost in the woods and ended up at the fence. Sometimes they even came here on purpose, hoping to talk to a member of the Covenant. Occurrences like that were especially common at this boundary, as it was the closest one to the outsider town of Pinecrest Falls. Our other boundaries bordered on the wilderness, where outsiders rarely ventured.

Our warning signs about the electricity, along with our protection charms, were usually enough to ward off lost hikers. Unfortunately, the outsiders who wanted to talk to us were harder to get rid of. They usually weren't friendly, either. They knew they could never get in, but they wanted to take the time to stand outside and insult us anyway.

I knew why. They thought we were witches. Cultists. Madmen.

Of course, we were nothing of the sort, but I could understand where the belief

stemmed from. We followed our own religious doctrine, as laid out by the Entity when he appeared to our founders, and our ways and rituals could certainly seem frightening to outsiders. Especially those who followed no religion of their own. But we were not witches. We did not worship the Darkness. Instead, we sought to contain it in order to protect the world.

We weren't a cult, either. Any member was free to leave the Covenant at any time, if they so chose. But why would anyone ever do that?

Our work was so vital, and our little corner of the world was a miniature paradise, where no one wanted for anything. Who would want to give that up? Certainly not me, and certainly none of the others. In fact, in all the years of our existence, no one had ever left. At least not permanently.

Sometimes, I felt a pang of longing to properly experience the outside world—I'd only ventured beyond the fence once during an urgent situation with my father—but in the end, I knew my place in the Alderwood community was far more important than my own fleeting dreams. The collective mattered far more than the individual. Any thoughts otherwise were selfish and impure.

Impurity was the worst quality a girl like me could possess. It could flip everything on its head, send our whole world crashing down.

A twig snapped somewhere near me, and the scuffling sounds continued, growing louder by the second. I kept my eyes on the woods beyond the fence, heart racing even faster as I waited for the stranger to reveal themselves.

A pale brown deer emerged from behind a tree, sniffing the air. I laughed, feeling silly. Of course. Deer were everywhere in these parts. This poor creature was probably hungry and hoping to inspect the bushes on the Alderwood side in search of food.

I scooped up a handful of wild raisins that I'd picked earlier. Then I stepped closer to the fence and tossed them through one of the gaps between the netted wire. They landed several feet away, in a safe place for the deer to eat.

It stared at me for a long moment, eyes big and soulful. Then it trotted over and quickly ate the raisins before turning tail and vanishing back into the woods. I smiled. Another animal saved from touching the fence. Praise you, Eternal Master.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, committing the deer's face to memory so I could paint it later. Then I opened my eyes and glanced up at the sky, lips twisting in contemplation. It wasn't dark yet, but the sun was sinking low. If I didn't leave soon, I'd wind up walking back to Alderwood in the dark.

Another half-hour would be fine, though. I needed more raisins to replace the ones I gave to the deer, and a few more raspberries couldn't hurt, either.

I stepped back over to the wild raisin shrub near the fence and carefully picked some more of the black, shriveled berries, my nose wrinkling as I worked. The leaves of the plant smelled awful at this time of the year, like sweaty feet, but the raisins were a delicious snack, and they were also one of the secret ingredients in the pies I made that everyone loved.

I glanced up at the sky again. The sun had sunk even lower, and the twilight hour would soon begin.

"Just a few more," I muttered to myself, plucking another raisin. I finally gathered enough and rose to my feet, tucking my basket under my arm.

One of the large bone charms that hung from sticks planted in front of the fence line jangled distantly. My pulse instantly picked back up. A deer couldn't brush against one of those charms as it passed. They weren't tall enough. Most bears weren't tall

enough, either.

That meant...

I slowly turned and peered to the left, breaths coming fast and shallow. The shadows cast by the trees made it too dark to see anything properly, but I could hear footsteps crunching over dead leaves and sticks, drawing closer by the second. They were human footsteps this time, loud and heavy enough that they could only come from a large person clad in boots.

If it was the middle of the afternoon, I wouldn't be afraid. I would make the same assumption I made an hour earlier; that it was a wayward hiker. But not this late in the day. Even the outsiders knew to stay out of the wilderness at night.

Evil lurked the woods beyond the borders of our land, often taking the form of a man or woman. Everyone knew that.

The footsteps drew closer, sending a chill down my spine. I didn't wait for another second.

I turned and ran, the darkness closing in behind me.

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Sebastian

“She didn’t see you, did she?” My friend Jesse jostled my side with his elbow as we trudged down the winding forest trail. “That cult girl you spotted earlier, I mean.”

I shook my head. “Nah, she didn’t see anything. Don’t worry.”

I was playing it cool, but heat was rushing through me as I remembered the girl I’d spied from behind the bushes when I went to take a leak mid-hike.

She was quite far off in the distance at the time, but I could hear her sweet voice, drawing me in like a siren with its haunting song. I’d crept closer and closer, suddenly desperate to catch a glimpse of a Covenant woman.

I was half-expecting a wizened old crone with a pointy hat, but I was pleasantly surprised to see a gorgeous young woman with wide eyes, delicate features, and delicious curves instead. She was plucking berries off shrubs and dropping them in a wicker basket like she belonged in a bucolic painting.

Despite her blissfully innocent, harmless appearance, I knew she was anything but innocent. Lurking under that sweet-faced facade was a malevolent little witch. Literally. These fucking Covenant freaks had lived off this land for centuries, worshipping ‘dark lords’ and trying to summon demons with their murderous rituals and blood-soaked altars hidden all over the forest.

Given my family's history with them, I wanted nothing more than to whisk that girl right over the fence and take out every last bit of my rage on her lithe body. I would defile it, break it, destroy it. Destroy her, along with every last member of her sick, twisted sect.

Jesse glanced up at the rapidly darkening sky. He had absolutely no idea about the sick thoughts simmering in my head, and I planned to keep it that way. "You know where we're going, right?" he said, brows knitted with concern. "I don't want to be stuck out here after dark."

I dipped my chin in a brief nod, pointing at the humming fence on our left. "It's a straight shot down to the end of this fence. Forty minutes, maybe. That's the southwest corner of the Covenant's land. We parked right near it."

"Are you sure? This doesn't look familiar."

I chuckled. "Trust me. I've been wandering around these woods since I was a kid. This is the same way we came in," I said. "It just looks different at this time of day."

As the sun began to set, the dying light cast long shadows across the forest floor, and the green foliage around us shifted to a deeper, almost-black hue. At the same time, the towering tree branches seemed to close in over our heads, giving the eerie impression that we were slowly getting caught in a trap.

Others found this land frightening after dark—Jesse included, city boy that he was—but I found it thrilling. The wilderness, though vast and wild, felt alive with a quiet, almost reverent energy. It was no wonder the Covenant cultists had set up home here all those years ago.

"Well, I'm glad you know the way," Jesse grumbled, feet crunching over a pile of dead leaves. "If I was here alone, I'd probably wind up getting eaten by a fucking

bear.”

The path narrowed up ahead, and I took the lead, brushing past yet another talisman those Covenant fuckers had strung up around the woods to scare outsiders. It rattled loudly, the echoes reverberating in the cool air around us.

Some of the handcrafted talismans were made from sticks bound together with string, while others were made from animal bones. All were crudely fashioned into humanoid shapes and hung ominously from branches or from the top of thick sticks driven into the damp earth, suggesting an ancient, malevolent presence in the woods. The creepy-looking things often freaked out even the most seasoned hikers.

But not me. No, they made me angry instead. Fucking furious.

My hands curled into fists by my sides, fingernails digging deeply into my palms. I wanted to tear every single one of the talismans down. Douse them in gasoline and set them on fire.

For years, I’d been tempted to light up the Covenant’s land and kill every single one of those demented freaks. But that was a bad idea for several reasons. Firstly, it wouldn’t even be possible to set such a huge fire, as they owned so many thousands of acres in the vast mountain wilderness. Secondly, it would do untold damage to the ecosystems there, and that was an issue my mother had deeply cared about when she was alive—all the flora and fauna in the High Peaks. Thirdly and most importantly, if all the cultists were dead, I’d never get justice for all the shit that went down sixteen years ago. I’d never get answers, either, and I needed those answers like I needed oxygen in my lungs.

As if summoned by my thoughts of vengeful pyromania, fireflies began to emerge all around us, their tiny lights flickering like stars brought down to earth. At the same time, the wilderness sounds grew louder—the distant croak of frogs by an unseen

pond, the rustle of small creatures in the underbrush, and the soft whisper of the wind through the trees.

“Please tell me we’re almost at the car,” Jesse said, zipping his jacket high around his throat. “I honestly feel like I’m in one of those found footage horror movies.”

“Five more minutes.”

We arrived at the road precisely five minutes later. Jesse anxiously glanced over his shoulder at the dark, foreboding tree line behind us as we trudged over to my car. “Are you sure that girl didn’t see you?” he asked.

“She definitely didn’t,” I replied, clicking the key fob. “And why would it even matter if she did? The cultists know the outside world exists. They even trade with outsiders sometimes.”

“I know, but I worry about you sometimes, man,” Jesse replied as he slid into the passenger side. “I mean, those freaks went after your mother. I’d hate for them to go after you too.”

“They didn’t just go after her,” I muttered bitterly, pushing the handbrake down. “They fucking murdered her.”

Dark images raced through my head as I spoke. A ceremony in the deep woods. Chanting men and women holding flaming torches. My mother, dressed in a flowing white gown, screaming as dirty hands tied her down on a sacrificial stone altar. Those fucking talismans everywhere. And blood.

So much blood...

I gritted my teeth, shaking off the awful thoughts.

“I know. I just didn’t want to say—” Jesse abruptly cut himself off. “Look, I just worry they’ll do the same to you if they find out what you want to do.”

The two of us were currently in law school together, and he’d always had an interest in the most bizarre criminal cases. That was how I’d roped him into this trip to the High Peaks—an offer to let him help me with my mission to find the truth and get some justice for my mother, who he’d actually known as a kid through his friendship with me. Her murder case had been open and cold for sixteen years, even though everyone with half a brain cell knew exactly what happened to her and who was responsible.

I just didn’t know why. No one else knew, either. All we knew for sure was that my mother got on the wrong side of the Covenant and wound up paying the price for it. And those motherfuckers got away with it, too. Not a single charge laid in the end.

But they wouldn’t get away with it forever. No way. Not as long as I was alive.

“I get it, man,” I said, pulling out onto the dark road. The sun had set all the way now, and the fireflies glowed in the darkness of the mountainous woods surrounding us. It made me feel like the woods themselves had eyes, always fixed on me. “But they have no way of recognizing me. I was only eight when it happened.”

“I know. But you know me.” Jesse grinned. “I overthink everything. Then I freak the fuck out over it all.”

I snorted. “No shit. I’ve seen you at exam time.”

He cast a side-eyed glance at me. “So... what’s Plan B?” he asked. “Now that we know all those rumors are bullshit.”

Our hiking expedition today had been a sort of reconnaissance mission to figure out if

a local legend had any truth to it. The story stated that a group of hikers had found a secret tunnel leading below the electric fence, right into the Covenant's secluded village.

Alderwood.

Everyone seemed to have their own different version of what exactly happened to those hikers. Some said they all disappeared except one, who made it home to tell the tunnel story. In other versions, two or three made it home alive while the others were caught by the cultists and strung up on the fence with strange symbols carved into their bare flesh. Others said they all made it back safe and sound. Others even claimed to be one of the hikers themselves.

The one thing that every story had in common was the supposed location of the tunnel—a one hour hike along the southwest border fence, to the right of an enormous tree. Apparently, the tree trunk had a series of carvings left by some horny teenage campers decades ago. Shit like 'A+ F' inside a heart, along with several crude depictions of tits and dicks.

Jesse and I found the tree today, but that was all we found. There was no tunnel anywhere nearby. We checked everywhere within a half-mile radius and still came up empty. That meant the only way into Alderwood was through the guarded front gate... if they allowed it. And those freaks almost never allowed anyone in.

But there were always exceptions. Like Mom.

"I'll make it somehow," I said, brows dipping in a frown. "I guess I just have to figure out a way to convince them to let me in."

"Are you fucking kidding me? You think that would even be remotely safe?" Jesse tilted his head to one side, hazel eyes wide. His voice had risen an octave. "I mean, if

they find out who you really are—”

I bluntly cut him off. “I can take care of myself. The real issue is getting answers out of those pricks. You know how they stonewalled the cops.”

“If an entire police department, and then later the FBI, weren’t able to prove anything, then what makes you think you can?” he asked. He immediately put his palms up. “Just sayin’, man. Not trying to be a dick.”

“I know what you’re saying,” I replied, tightening my grip on the steering wheel. “But like I said, I’ll figure it out. I always figure it out.”

The Covenant girl was in my head again, haunting me with that lilting tune she’d sung as she gathered berries. She was beautiful, but there was something else about her that caught my attention as well. Something strangely familiar that I couldn’t quite put my finger on. But that didn’t make sense. I’d never been to Alderwood before, and my mother was never allowed to take photos during her time there. I couldn’t possibly have seen this girl before.

Her plump red lips flashed in my mind’s eye again, along with the sight of her wide-eyed gaze as she cast it around the woods, searching for the source of the sound I’d made with my boots. The seeds of a dark plan were slowly beginning to take root in my head. It would take a long time to figure out the details and make it all happen. Months, maybe even years. But in the end, it might be the only way for me to get real answers from the Covenant.

My lips curved into a thin smile. Jesse noticed and sat up straight. “Are you thinking what I think you’re thinking right now?” he asked, eyes narrowing.

“Depends on what you’re thinking.”

“You’re going to go back tomorrow to try and talk to that girl you saw, aren’t you?”

I nodded slowly. Talk? Not so much. Other shit? Sure. But Jesse didn’t need to know the finer details.

“Yup,” I said, staring straight ahead at the road. “I’m going back.”

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Rose

“Miss Trudeau?”

I snapped out of my reverie and looked up. “Yes, Emilie?”

“I was just asking when the writing test is.”

“Oh, yes.” I sat up straight and forced a smile. “Sorry. I, er... I was just a little lost in thought there. The test is next Tuesday, so you have plenty of time to study.”

“Thank you, Miss Trudeau.” Emilie smiled and turned to join the other students slowly trickling out of the classroom.

I sighed and returned my attention to the tall stack of slates on the side of my desk. For writing tests, the Alderwood schoolhouse used paper, but today’s class for my students was arithmetic-focused, meaning their work was completed on slates that could easily be scrubbed off and reused.

I had to check everyone’s work before I left the schoolhouse, and then I had to return home and bake four raspberry and blueberry pies for the feast tonight. No one had actually asked me to do it; I’d volunteered for the task. I’d done so because I knew community spirit was important, and someone with my status had to set an example.

I was wholly regretting that choice now.

I simply wouldn't have time to complete the marking, walk to the berry-picking spot, retrieve my basket from where I'd dropped it after yesterday's scare, walk back, bake the pies, and then get ready for the feast along with the evening's rituals.

Unless...

I tapped my finger on my chin, lips twisting in contemplation. If I left right now, I could hurry to retrieve my basket, go home and make the pies, and return to the schoolhouse to complete the marking while the pies were in the oven. Papa was home this afternoon, so he could take them out if I wasn't back in time. He'd always been a fantastic baker and knew exactly when things were perfectly cooked simply by judging the smell. No clock needed. Unfortunately, his position as Governor took up most of his time, so the cooking responsibilities fell to me now. But not today. Today, he could help his frazzled daughter.

Satisfied with the solution, I tucked a small twig protection charm into my dress pocket and left the schoolhouse through the back door so I wouldn't get caught up chatting to the parents of my students. I slipped down the cobbled alley behind the building and hurried to the main path leading to the woods.

As I made the familiar journey, I giggled to myself, feeling exceptionally stupid over yesterday's dramatic episode. The noises I heard obviously weren't a malevolent shade. It was just more deer, surely. I'd made myself nervous with all my thoughts of danger and darkness, and then I'd convinced myself that a real monster was lurking right there at the fence.

Ridiculous.

In the warm light of day, I could see exactly how silly those thoughts were. I truly had a wild imagination. Still, I was grateful for the protection charm in my pocket.

Just in case.

The path forked up ahead, leading off in three different directions. One way led to the Red Rocks—our village's most sacred ritual place—and the right-most way led up to the Forbidden Cave, where only the village elders, healers, and alchemists were allowed to venture. They were the only ones in our community who had studied and fully understood our doctrine's most sacred knowledge, and therefore the only ones who were equipped to handle the Darkness within.

The final path was the one I took to gather berries. It went past the eastern part of the valley farmstead first, overlooking the vast expanse of land with a breathtaking view before it meandered deeper into the woods. Eventually, it ended in a small clearing, and my berry spot was another ten minutes through the woods from there. I never got lost on the last leg of the journey, despite the lack of a path, because I'd been exploring this part of our land since I was a child. I knew every tree, every shrub, every log.

A chill shot down my spine as I cast my eyes over the path that led to the Forbidden Cave. I whispered a silent prayer for any elders or alchemists who were working there today, and then I turned and hurried down my own path.

Leaves rustled across the ground before me. I hummed softly to myself, lifting one arm to touch nearby branches as I passed them, and the sweet scent of wildflowers filled my nostrils, making my lips curve in a smile. Despite all the stress and urgency affecting me, the beauty and serenity of our land never failed to cheer me up.

When I reached my spot, I spotted my basket lying on the ground near the fence, partially tipped over. I ran over and knelt to inspect it. Most of the berries I'd gathered yesterday afternoon were inside it, and they were still perfectly fine for consumption, due to the drop in temperature we'd experienced last night. I breathed a quiet sigh of relief and scooped the fallen berries back into the basket.

When I stood up straight, I came face-to-face with the Devil himself.

A tall, dark-haired man was standing on the other side of the fence, his presence both striking and terrifying. He was undeniably handsome with sharp features and a commanding presence, but one half of his face was grotesquely skeletal, as if death itself had reached out and claimed that part of him.

I held my hand over my mouth as the forest seemed to hum around me in a silent panic. My mind was racing, desperately trying to make sense of what I was seeing. This couldn't be real. The Devil had no reason to show himself to me. Not unless the Darkness within the caves had been released... but I knew that hadn't happened. My father and the elders worked to keep us safe from those terrors every day.

I closed my eyes and exhaled through my nose. I was daydreaming, wasn't I? Of course. I must have briefly fallen asleep due to exhaustion after the hurried journey through the woods. When I opened my eyes, the nightmarish vision would be gone.

I took a long, deep breath. Then I looked again.

The man was still there, staring at me through one beautiful green eye and one gaping black hole where the other eye used to be. His good eye seemed to glow as he watched me, emphasized by the small, malicious smile dancing across his cruel mouth. When he registered my wide-eyed gaze, the smile grew wider, and he lifted a hand, beckoning me to him.

Heat rushed up my body, and I felt my face flush with shame and confusion. Why did his gesture feel more like a predatory threat than a greeting? And why did my heart begin to race at the thought of being his prey?

I dropped my hand from my mouth. "Who... who are you?" I managed to croak, throat suddenly parched. "Are you real?"

The man's wicked smile faded, and his gaze went cold. It seemed to suck all the warmth from the air alongside it. "You'll find out one day, little girl," he said. His voice was low and menacing, dripping with icy malice.

I felt real fear then, cold as it crawled up the backs of my legs and settled in my guts. Panic surged through me, and a scream tore from my lips before I could stop it. The thick woods surrounding me seemed to swallow my cry, amplifying the terror that gripped me.

The handsome man grinned again and took a step forward.

Without thinking, I turned and ran, my heart pounding like a drum. The day was still bright but the darkness around me felt alive anyway, closing in as I fled, each rapid step fueled by sheer, unadulterated terror.

The truth was humming a haunting melody in the back of my mind. I knew why this was happening now. I knew why the Devil had shown himself to me at the fence. The Darkness was sending me a message.

Something is coming for you, Rose.

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Rose

One month later

Fire coursed through me as the skull-faced man kissed his way down my body. His lips landed on my hipbone, making me jolt and gasp, and I clenched the sheets on either side of me, feeling myself dripping all over the bed.

The man's mouth ventured lower, and I bit my bottom lip to stop myself from crying out. If anyone heard...

No. I couldn't think about that right now. All I could think about was the undeniable pleasure racing through me from the skull-faced man's touch.

I once thought he was the Devil, but now I knew that couldn't be true. The Devil would surely be cold to the touch, like death, but this man's lips were warm, and his sweet-smelling breath was hot on my thighs as he grunted out his satisfaction over the taste of my skin.

But...

Maybe that wasn't true after all. Maybe the Devil had come to me like this, warm and wonderful, just to entice me. After all, what we were doing right now was wrong. So wrong.

My purity was one of the only things that really mattered about me, and it granted me my elevated status in the Covenant. But right now, I was struggling very hard to fight my urges. I wanted this man's touch. I wanted his mouth and hands on me. In me. I wanted to feel... everything.

Only this man could give it to me. I didn't know exactly how I knew that, but I still knew it was true without a doubt.

"Oh... oh, yes. More," I said breathlessly.

His big hands crawled up my stomach to cup my breasts. At the same time, his mouth found a small spot directly between my legs; a spot that made me squirm and moan with bliss.

"You have to keep quiet, Rose," he growled, lifting his head. His enthralling green eye was glittering with lust. The other eye was still hollow and black as night, so dark and dangerous that I knew I'd get lost within it if I stared for too long.

"I know," I gasped out. I felt as if I were melting into a puddle on the sheets. "But I want you, sir. Please, I need it."

"I like it when you call me that," he said. Wickedness was emanating from him, making goosebumps stand up all over my bare skin. "Sir."

I didn't know what else to call him, because I didn't know his name, but I was glad that he liked it.

"Please, sir," I whispered. "Keep making me feel good."

"Oh, I'll do more than that, my sweet girl." His tongue dipped between my legs again, and I squeezed my eyes shut, biting my lip so hard it bled.

I let the man take control of my body, letting my vows of chastity and purity scatter to the wind through the open window he'd slipped through.

His mouth and fingers toyed with every inch of me until I felt like I was about to combust, setting the whole room on fire with my desire. I was so close to reaching something, some sort of peak. One more kiss, one more stroke, one more flick of his tongue...

A door slammed distantly, and my eyes flew open. The man was gone, and I was left panting on the bed, my thighs slick with desire. My window was indeed open, but now I remembered that I'd left it that way last night in the hope that the cool breeze coming through would quell the fire constantly raging beneath my skin.

I groaned and rolled over, squeezing my eyes shut again as a hot wave of shame crashed over me. I was losing my mind, surely. Losing all sense of reality.

Just a few weeks ago, I had no idea the skull-faced man even existed. Now, he infiltrated my dreams every night and monopolized my thoughts when I was awake.

From the moment I spotted him in the woods, he'd taken control of my mind, blotting out all rational thought. I kept hearing his voice wherever I went, even though he was never there, and every time I saw someone wave to me out in the village, I thought of his hand, beckoning me to join him on the other side of the fence.

My obsession had grown and grown, like a weed inside my brain, and now... now I didn't know what to think at all. I didn't know what to do, either. I couldn't possibly tell anyone, because then I'd have to face a Confession.

Besides, I hadn't technically done anything wrong. After all, I still held my purity. A man or woman had never touched me. At least not like that. They were just dreams.

And yet, somehow I knew it was wrong anyway. Wrong enough that I'd very likely face punishment if anyone saw inside my mind and discovered my secret shame.

Another door slammed somewhere, and I sat up straight and rubbed my eyes before glancing at the clock on the wall. My heart sank. I was almost late for Rite of Devotion in the cathedral.

"Oh, no. No, no, no..."

I dressed as quickly as possible and raced down the main street, heart pounding. Others were allowed to be late, but not the daughter of the Governor.

With every step, I heard the skull-faced man's voice in my head, whispering terrifying yet thrilling words to me.

Not long now, Rose.

You're mine, Rose.

I grimaced and pushed the thought aside as I dashed into the cathedral and made my way to the front. My father was at the pulpit already, conferring with one of the elders. I'd made it in the nick of time.

When I sat down, Papa glanced over at me and smiled. Despite the seemingly happy expression, I knew he was displeased. I could always tell when he felt that way, because his smile wouldn't reach his eyes.

The service was nice, and my father spoke eloquently. When it was over, he brushed off those wishing to speak with him, directing them to the other elders instead, and headed toward me.

“Rosamund,” he said, giving me another half-smile. “I need to speak with you in the chambers.”

“I...” I trailed off and gulped. “Don’t you have more work to do?”

“Not today. The alchemists are taking a few days off, so none of the elders need to accompany them to the cave for quite some time,” he said. “Now, let’s go and have some tea.”

He beckoned me to a door beyond the pulpit that led to the cathedral chambers. He ushered me into one of the rooms, and I took a seat on a wooden bench while he busied himself boiling some water for the tea.

I knew it wasn’t normal tea. We had that at home. There was a reason we were here in the church instead, and it wasn’t good. He must have heard me crying out and moaning in the night, and now he wanted to know the truth—had I given up my purity? Had I broken every vow I ever made to the Covenant?

Fortunately, the answer was no, but I knew I could still be in trouble if I admitted the truth about what I’d seen in the woods and what it was doing to my mind. That wasn’t supposed to happen to a celestial virgin like me. It meant I’d done something wrong. Something wicked. But how could I admit it and accept my punishment when I didn’t even know what I’d done to entice the skull-faced man into my life?

I didn’t deserve this at all.

Papa turned around a moment later, holding a small white teapot. He poured the sour-smelling tea into a cup in front of me. “Drink up, sweetheart.”

The tea was made from a blend of moonshade and whisperwort plants, gathered from the woods. It had long been known to induce truth-telling, but there were ways

around it if a person had enough mental fortitude. Essentially, you could tell the truth, but not the whole truth. Sometimes that was enough to avoid trouble.

Papa sat across from me, blue eyes dancing over my face as I slowly sipped at the scalding liquid. “You know I hate to do this,” he said. “But your behavior in recent weeks has grown too strange to ignore any longer. People are noticing, and they are talking.”

I swallowed hard. “What do you mean?”

He remained silent for a moment. I knew why. He wanted to give the tea more time to take effect.

I took another sip. As the hot liquid cascaded down my throat, a sense of calm began to envelop me like a comforting embrace. My eyelids felt slightly heavier, and a gentle drowsiness washed over me, as if I were being lulled into a tranquil slumber. Beneath the surface, there was a sudden compulsion stirring within me, urging me to unburden myself of any secrets that might stop me from sleeping peacefully.

Papa smiled. “One more sip.”

I did as he said. Then I set my teacup down and rubbed my eyes. They were beginning to blur. “Why am I here, Papa?”

“People have been noticing things about you over the last few weeks. You’ve been forgetful. Distracted. Often late. Your students have noticed this and made mention of it to their parents. The reason it’s so noticeable is because you’re usually such a wonderful, attentive educator.”

“Mm-hmm.” I blinked, trying to center my thoughts.

“It isn’t just your students. Others have noticed too, including me. Your mind always seems to be elsewhere,” Papa went on. “Just last night, when you were cooking dinner, I tried to talk to you about your day, and you didn’t even seem to hear me. You were off in your own world.”

“I know I’ve been distracted,” I murmured.

He leaned forward. “I’m concerned something has happened to you. Something that may disturb the order of things.”

I took a deep breath and nodded. Tell the truth. Just not all of it. “Something did happen, Papa,” I admitted. “I had a vision.”

“A vision?” His brows rose, and he sat up straight. “Tell me more.”

“It was in the woods, while I was out for a walk. Ever since then, I keep thinking about it,” I said. I took a deep breath. It was hard not to tell him every detail of what I’d seen that day, but I knew I must hold my tongue as much as possible.

He frowned. “I need more details about the vision. What happened during it? Was it good? Bad?”

“I... I don’t know if it was good or bad. I can’t tell anymore,” I replied. That was the honest truth. The man with the skull face had terrified me at first, but now I felt drawn to him instead.

Clearly, there was something wrong with me. Something that was threatening my purity. And yet, I couldn’t stop it. Didn’t want to stop it. The way I felt when he came to me in my dreams was simply too good.

Papa pressed further. “What do you mean? What exactly did you see?”

“The vision involved... new people arriving on our land.”

“I see.” Papa nodded slowly. “You’re right, of course. That could be construed as good or bad, depending on who these newcomers are.”

“Yes. That’s why I’ve been so distracted,” I said softly. “I really don’t know what it all means. I don’t know who this stranger... I mean, who the strangers are. I just see them at the fence. But I know they aren’t real. Not like regular outsiders.”

“I think you’re a powerful seer, Rosamund. Just like your mother.” A distant look appeared in Papa’s eyes. Then he returned his attention to me. “You could have come to me with this, my darling. You should have come to me.”

“I know. But I wasn’t sure what to say, because I’ve been so confused. The vision was so—” I closed my eyes, on the brink of spilling everything. Don’t do it, a little voice chanted in the back of my mind. “So... confusing,” I went on. I knew what I’d said was redundant, but Papa didn’t seem to mind.

“I understand. Your mother’s visions often confused her too. But you mustn’t worry. You can tell me anything.”

“I know. I will from now on, if I have any more visions.”

He nodded, and this time, the smile that stretched his thin lips was genuine. “You’ll feel more alert in an hour or so,” he said, dipping his chin toward my teacup. He leaned forward and patted my hand. “Try not to get too distracted from now on. Try to remember your place. You’re very important to everyone here. One of the most important women ever born. You’ve always known this.”

“Yes, Papa.”

He allowed me to leave the church, and I slowly headed down the main street, aiming for home. I'd planned to spend the rest of the day painting, like I always did on Sundays. It was my favorite hobby, and it was also a good way to clear my mind. I needed that clarity right now, because my head was still foggy from the tea. I almost felt like I was in a trance.

I blinked and came to an abrupt stop. I wasn't heading for home at all. Somehow, I'd walked halfway to my secret berry-picking spot without even realizing where I was going.

It must've been due to the tea. It was still affecting me, pushing the truth to the forefront of my mind until my body followed suit. And the truth was... I had to go back there. I couldn't stop thinking about the man I saw beyond the fence, whoever or whatever he was, and I was drawn to him like a moth to the flame.

I kept walking, eyes fixed on the woods ahead. The air was chilly today, but I barely registered it. My desire to see the skull-faced man was like kindling in my belly, stoking the new fire inside me and warming my body all the way from my head to my toes.

When I finally arrived back at the spot, the man wasn't there. Only thin air remained where he once stood. But something else was there now. Something that I instantly knew was a gift for me.

Lying against the fence was a single red rose.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:57 am

5

Sebastian

I knew she'd be back.

I leaned forward, staring at the laptop screen as the footage played out. My sweet girl was on the screen, slowly trudging toward the Covenant boundary fence. I had a perfect view of her, courtesy of the trail cam I'd installed on a tree directly across the borderline.

Every night, I fast-forwarded through the day's footage, hoping to catch another glimpse of her, but for weeks, she hadn't shown up. Part of me thought I might have frightened her off forever with my ghastly appearance last time I went there, but at the same time, I had a strong feeling that she'd eventually see my presence as some sort of sign.

I was right. She was back at the spot now, long black hair tucked behind her shoulders and pale blue eyes fixed right on the camera as she headed toward the fence.

Of course, she had no idea the cam was there, tucked in a nook, and even if she spied it sitting there, she had no way of knowing what it was. The Covenant refused to use most modern technology, apart from the glaringly obvious, like the electric fence. Most of its citizens had likely never seen something as basic as a TV or phone, let alone a spy camera with Wi-Fi streaming capability, full color, and sound, all wrapped up in a package the size of my fingernail.

As beautiful as she was, I couldn't help but notice that the girl looked a bit off today. When I zoomed in closer on her face, I could see that her eyes had a glazed appearance, and her face was expressionless. It was a marked contrast to her appearance a few weeks ago, when she saw me staring at her. I still remembered the look of abject terror on her face, bulging eyes and all, along with the strangled shriek that slipped from her mouth after she dared to ask me who I was.

Fuck. It made me hard just thinking about it.

I got the idea from my undergrad studies. Back then, I was a member of a collegiate secret society. We did all kinds of weird, fucked-up shit during those times—it was basically a glorified fight club—and we painted ourselves up to look like Death whenever we had an initiation ritual for newer members.

It was all to set the scene and scare the shit out of the new guys, and it worked. They knew what they were getting into the second they walked in and saw the wild, macabre scenes everywhere, and they learned to act accordingly. Every single one of us went from a regular freshman to a hardened bastard by the time our senior year rolled around. And now, a few years on, those creepy painting skills had come in handy for me in giving the Covenant girl a good scare.

It worked perfectly. She genuinely thought I might be some sort of evil spirit, as evidenced by her asking me who or what I was, as if there was actually a chance that I was a demon who'd just emerged from the pits of hell to drag her down with me.

In a way, I suppose I was exactly that. At least that was how she'd come to see me one day, if all went to plan. I would be her new master, arriving in her world to yank her down to a dark, sinister place beneath the earth. And oh, how I'd enjoy myself...

She stepped closer to the fence. I zoomed farther in on the footage. She really did look strange today. Robotic, even. Someone must have drugged her. Or maybe she

drank something of her own accord during one of her community's fucked up mystic rituals.

The latter seemed more likely, given my knowledge of the community, limited as it was. Most of my mother's notes on the sect had been lost after her death, but from what I'd gleaned from the pages that remained, the Covenant people were into some truly weird shit. Mom had described them as following a 'magico-religious doctrine' that seemed to be a weird blend of paganism, occultism, and Christianity.

The unlikely mashup had stemmed from the beliefs of the original members, who arrived on North American shores long before the United States were founded. Many of those founding members were so-called witches and alchemists who fled Europe to escape persecution. Others were French Catholics who'd shipped themselves to the new world in hope of a better life.

All of the above were initially citizens of New France, which had once colonized territories all over what was now Canada and the States, but at some point they'd splintered from the Acadians and left to create their own little world in what was now upstate New York. Some other early members were English settlers who'd defected from the British-owned territories of North America, bringing their language with them. The Covenant eventually adopted it to better communicate with the outside world when it became necessary.

The result of all that history was what we saw today: an isolated sect living in the vast wilderness of the High Peaks, practicing blood magic and carrying out ritualized murders in the name of their god. Or gods. No one knew the finer details of who they worshipped or how many deities they revered altogether.

No one except my mom, that is, and everyone knew what happened to her when she got too close.

I stiffened and narrowed my eyes at my screen, watching as the girl drew close enough to spot the flower I'd left there for her, propped up against the fence. There was no doubt in my mind that she'd view it as a sign from above.

Her eyes widened slightly, and she moved closer and knelt. The gaps between the net-patterned fence were quite small—not even a squirrel could squeeze through—but the girl was smart. She picked up a stick and carefully fed it through the closest hole until it touched the rose's stem. Then she scraped it toward her, slowly maneuvering it through the gap until there was enough for her to grab. She dropped the stick, reached out one slender hand to take hold of the stem, and yanked the whole flower through.

I saw her breathe a visible sigh of relief as she sat back, folding her legs beneath her. Her eyes fluttered shut, and she dipped her head forward to sniff the rose. A tiny smile curved up her pretty lips, and she opened her eyes and cast them to the heavens in a reverential stare.

Her mouth was moving now, whispering something that the camera couldn't catch. A prayer, perhaps. Then she closed her eyes again and slowly lay down on her back, holding the rose against her chest.

“What the hell are you doing?” I muttered, raising my brows as I watched her.

One hand remained clutching the flower, while the other drifted downward, resting on her lower belly for a moment before sliding even lower. Her eyes flew open, and she immediately snatched the hand back as if she'd been burned. Within seconds, it was drifting back downward.

Fucking hell. She was scared of touching herself. Ashamed of her own desire. That meant my little cult girl was probably a virgin.

I couldn't believe it. I assumed these devil-worshipping freaks had wild orgies by a bonfire every night after drinking blood from chalices and speaking in tongues. Never in my wildest dreams did I think any of their girls would still be virgins above the age of eighteen. And this girl was definitely over eighteen. Without the makeup and modern clothing I was used to seeing on city girls, it was hard to tell an exact age, but given her facial features and voluptuous curves, I'd guess she was somewhere between twenty and twenty-four.

My cock was even harder now. A sweet, naïve little virgin would make my plan a thousand times better.

Onscreen, her face strained, and she bit her lower lip and slid her trembling hand downward again, legs slightly widening. Once more, it didn't last. She pulled it right back again, face turning pink with shame.

I wondered if she'd ever made herself come before. Immediately after that thought occurred to me, I decided that she probably hadn't. Given the furtive, embarrassed actions unfolding on the footage before me, I figured she was probably too ashamed to come. Some part of her sect's doctrine must have taught her that she wasn't allowed to feel pleasure. That something terrible would befall her if she lost her virtue in any way.

One day, I could use that knowledge of her innermost beliefs and desires. Teach her to let go of the shame and hand over all control to me. But not yet. For now, I had to keep watching her from a distance while my plan took shape.

Once it all came to fruition, I could whisk her away from this strange, dark little corner of the world. I would make her mine; my trained, submissive pet. She would be terrified and full of hate and resentment toward me, the monster who dragged her into the underworld, but that was simply too fucking bad. The Covenant needed to be taught a lesson, and this girl was going to be the collateral damage in that process.

A normal man would probably have sympathy for her, given her age and sense of innocence, but I'd lost all sense of empathy when it came to these witchy wilderness freaks years ago.

They took from me, and I would take from them in return.

They destroyed someone close to me, and I would destroy someone close to them in return.

Real eye-for-an-eye shit, Old Testament style. Given their quasi-Christian origins, they'd surely understand that much, once they finally cottoned onto what was going on.

The right day wasn't here yet, and it probably wouldn't come for a long time, given how much preparation I'd have to do in order for everything to run smoothly. So, for now, I'd keep lurking in the shadows, keeping watch over the trail camera and making the occasional hike to the border fence to leave gifts for my future captive.

Waiting, waiting, waiting...

Waiting for the day I finally came for her.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:57 am

Sebastian

NOW

October 18 th , 2024

I stood in the dark driveway, staring up at the house. It towered on high, three stories of wood and stone throned on a mountain and surrounded by deep green foliage.

I used to think of the house as a mini paradise tucked away from the rest of the world. A peaceful escape. Now I only saw it as the place where it all began. The place that had carved its mark on my life, leaving behind all the jagged scars that defined me.

What started here twenty years ago wouldn't be over until I forced it to end. That was my job now, and I knew it was finally time.

My boots crunched against the gravel as I turned and faced away from the house. I yanked the burner phone out of my jacket and composed a text to a now-familiar number. The owner of that number always pretended he didn't care for modern technology, but I knew he checked the phone every day. He was a fucking liar and a hypocrite, just like the rest of them.

Thinking of him automatically made me think of her, down on her knees, mouth gaped, eyes shimmering with tears until one finally escaped to land on her delicate cheek.

With my lips pressed together in a firm slash, I finished the message and hit send.

I have your daughter. Follow my instructions, or I'm going to kill her.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:57 am

Sebastian

THEN

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October 4th, 2004

The monster was back.

His black claws scraped the lip of the cave as he crept forward, a deep growl rumbling from his matted belly. I could smell his foul breath and feel the horrible heat of it, drawing closer and closer by the second.

“Mom!” I screamed. “Mom, help!”

Footsteps thundered up the stairs. In an instant, my mother was in my room, the bedside lamp casting a soft light over her concerned face. “What happened, Seb?” she asked, her voice steady but laced with worry.

I sat up straight, bottom lip trembling. “I had another bad dream.”

“Oh, honey.” She rubbed my back soothingly. “I’m sorry. Do you want to talk about it?”

“There was a monster in a cave. He wanted to eat me. It’s the same dream I had last time we were here.”

“Would you like me to check under your bed to make sure he’s gone?” she asked, brows lifting.

“No.” I shook my head and crossed my arms defiantly. “I want to go home!”

Her face fell. “But you love Pinecrest Falls. You wanted to come here.”

That was true. I’d always loved spending time at our family’s vacation home. My friends back in the city vacationed all over the place, and I often had the opportunity to do so as well, but nothing ever matched up to the fun I had exploring the woods and mountains around here with my mom and dad. I loved the trees and the animals, and the way everything seemed so peaceful.

I knew my mom loved it here too. Even though the house belonged to my father’s side of the family, she spent more time here than anyone else. Like me, she loved nature, and she said the peace and quiet made it easy for her to concentrate on her work.

“I do like it here,” I said sullenly, looking down at the bedspread. “I just don’t like bad dreams.”

“How about this?” Mom said, leaning forward. There was a tiny smile on her face, and her eyes were crinkled at the corners. “Because you’ve had a rough night, you can come downstairs and hang out with me for a whole hour, even though it’s way past your bedtime. We can have some tea with honey. Maybe even a cookie or two.”

My eyes widened. “I can stay up late?”

“Yes.” She nodded, smile broadening. “Besides, it’s your birthday tomorrow, so we might as well have an early treat to celebrate the big eight. What do you say?”

“Yes!”

I leapt out of bed and raced down the stairs. Mom went into the kitchen to make the tea, and I busied myself on the living room floor with my Lego set.

“One tea with honey, coming up,” she said, stepping into the room with a tray a few minutes later. “With a special treat on the side.”

“Thanks, Mom.” I jumped up and perched on the couch as she placed the tray on the coffee table. “Did Dad talk to you yet? Is he coming?”

“I’ll check.” She pulled her cell phone out of her pocket and glanced at it before shaking her head. “Nothing yet. But you know how busy he gets at the hospital.”

“Will he come in the morning?”

“Maybe. But it might just be the two of us,” she replied, sliding into the seat next to me. “I know he’s really hoping to join us for your special day, though.”

“I hope he can. I want to go hiking again.”

“We can still go together, even if he can’t make it. And we can get ice cream sundaes afterwards,” Mom replied. Her eyes glimmered, and she leaned forward. “By the way, I thought of something cool when I was making your tea. Do you want to know what it is?”

I sat up straight. “Yes.”

“Well, I know you really don’t like having bad dreams, but in some ancient cultures, dreams were considered to be a connection to a spirit realm. That made them very significant, and those who dreamed frequently and vividly were often considered to be shamans. It was a very important role. You play a shaman in that new computer game of yours, don’t you?”

“Yes.” I nodded. “It’s fun.”

“Well, if you were born in a different time or place, you might have been a real shaman, because of all the dreams you have. Pretty cool, huh?” she said.

“Wow, really?”

“Yup.”

“That’s awesome!”

She winked. “I had a feeling it might make you feel better.”

She was right. I felt much better now. The monster from my nightmare seemed like it was a million miles away now, hiding from the light in its dirty cave. It couldn’t reach me anymore.

I munched on the cookie she’d left on my saucer. “I think I know why I keep dreaming of a cave when we come here,” I said, looking back up at her.

“Oh?”

“It’s because of something you told me a while ago. About those people you’ve been working with for your anthrology stuff.”

“Anthropology, sweetie.” Mom gave me a tight smile and cocked her head. “What did I tell you?”

I took another quick bite and swallowed. “You said something about a cave that you wanted to look inside. Somewhere on their land.”

Her smile faded, and a flicker of worry crossed her face. “I... I didn’t say that.”

“Yes, you did.”

Mom clasped her hands in her lap. “No, honey. You must be mistaken,” she said. “I was probably talking about another place I researched. Remember I told you about that desert I visited when I was still in college? There were caves there. Huge ones.”

I pouted. Why were adults so silly sometimes? They all knew they had worse memories than kids, but they’d still say they were right and we were wrong, even when we knew we were remembering things properly. It was so annoying.

“You said it was those forest people that live near here. The ones people in town call witches,” I said stubbornly. “Last time we were here, you said you wanted to research a cave on their property, but you couldn’t find it.”

Something flickered in Mom’s eyes. She leaned closer and grasped my left shoulder. “Seb, I need you to promise me something,” she said in a hushed voice.

“Okay.” I frowned, wondering why she was suddenly in such a weird mood. “What is it?”

“Don’t ever talk about this to anyone else. Not even your best friends or your dad. No one.”

“Why?”

“Because I shouldn’t have said anything about it. I didn’t know this before, but it’s meant to be a secret,” she said hurriedly. “So now it can be our secret, okay? Won’t that be fun? To have something just to ourselves?”

I shrugged and took another bite. “Okay. I won’t say anything.”

She exhaled and dropped her hand from my shoulder. She looked happier now.

“When you finish your drink, do you want me to help you build something?” she asked, gesturing to the Lego pieces scattered on the floor.

“Yes. I want to make a cas—” I stopped midsentence when I saw headlights out of the corner of my eye. “Dad’s here!”

Mom frowned and got up. “Oh, that’s odd. He didn’t call or message to say he was on his way,” she said, stepping over to the closest window.

I ran over to the other window on the right. This one had the curtains drawn, but I always liked to lift the corner and peer out like I was a spy. It was fun.

I picked up the edge of the curtain and peeked outside. An old car was slowly making its way up the long, winding driveway. “Oh,” I said, shoulders drooping with disappointment as it drew closer. “That’s not one of Dad’s cars.”

Mom was standing rigidly now, lips set in a thin line. “Maybe a neighbor needs some help,” she said. She didn’t sound sure of that. She sounded worried.

The car finally pulled up at the front of the house. Two men in strange clothing got out and walked around to the hood before stopping to talk with their heads bowed close together. There was a small girl strapped into the back seat. I wasn’t very good at guessing ages, but I could tell she was younger than me. Maybe four or five, like my best friend Jesse’s little sister.

I rolled my eyes, hoping the men didn’t want me to play with her. I hated playing with younger kids. They were so annoying.

“Who are they, Mom?” I asked, looking over at her.

“They’re from the Covenant,” she said. Her voice sounded strangely thick now, like she had a cold. “The forest people I’ve been working with. The ones we were just

talking about.”

“What are they doing here? I thought they didn’t have cars.”

“They do, but they only use them sometimes, when it’s absolutely necessary.”

“What are they doing here?” I repeated, looking back at the old brown car. The two men were still talking to each other in the driveway, and the little girl was looking at me from the back seat, eyes wide. Even though I didn’t like younger kids, I thought she looked nice. Maybe she could help me build a castle with the Legos. As long as she did what I told her and didn’t try to boss me around, it could be fun.

“I don’t know why they’re here, honey,” Mom said, clasping her hands together again. “But... maybe you should go and hide.”

“Why?” I asked, staring at her with wide eyes.

“It’ll be a fun game. You go and hide, and I’ll come and find you when I’m finished talking to the men. They probably just need gas, or something like that.” Mom smiled, but it was the same sort of smile she gave me earlier. A tight one that didn’t meet her eyes. “Don’t come out until I find you, okay?”

“Okay...” I let the curtain fall, still eyeing her warily.

“Sebastian, I’m serious. Go and hide right now.”

I didn’t want to upset her, so I turned around and ran across the living room. I knew a good spot from the last time we played this game. In one corner of the room, there was a small table with a large wooden deer figurine sitting atop a white tablecloth that went all the way to the floor. If I crawled under the table, that cloth would hide me.

I dropped to the floor and positioned myself under the table. There was a small gap between the floor and the bottom of the tablecloth, so I could see a few inches in front of me. I could hear everything from here, too.

I jolted with surprise as someone loudly rapped on the front door. The two men had finally decided to approach the house.

I heard Mom unlock the door and open it. “Augustus. Jean-Pierre,” she said. She was using the voice she always put on when she talked to people she didn’t know very well, or people she didn’t like. Friendly, but a bit high-pitched. “What are you doing here so late? Is there a problem in Alderwood?”

“Oh, you could certainly say there’s a problem, Miranda,” one of the men replied. He had a strange accent, one I’d never heard before in movies or TV shows. “But I think you already know all about that, don’t you?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.” Mom sounded flustered now. “Are you having some sort of emergency? Should I call someone for you?”

“No,” the other man said. He had a strange accent too. “We need you to come with us. Now.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t do that. My husband is on his way. He should be here any minute.”

I frowned. Why was Mom lying to these people? Dad wasn’t on his way here. He was still busy at the hospital back in the city. Unless he forgot to message Mom to let her know he was on his way.

“It’s for your own good, Miranda. Come with us right now.”

“I really can’t do that. Why don’t we talk tomorrow?” Mom replied. There was a

creaking sound, and I realized she was closing the door.

“I’m afraid we must insist,” the first man said. He must have stuck a foot out to block the door. “As I said, it’s for your own good.”

“Augustus, I can’t possibly imagine what you’re talking about. I really cannot—”

He cut my mother off. “No more pretending. You know exactly why we’re here,” he said. His voice had risen, and he sounded angry. “You tried to let the Darkness out, Miranda. We must work to contain it before it’s too late.”

“I don’t—”

He cut her off again. “Come with us right now ,” he spat out.

From my hiding place, I spied a mixture of shadows and lights dancing over the floor. More headlights.

“There, see?” Mom said shrilly. “My husband is coming, just like I said. Now, I think it’s best if you leave.”

“Grab her!” Augustus said. “There’s a backroad leading out of here. We’ll take that. He won’t see us then. But we have to hurry!”

“Augustus, please—” My mom’s voice was abruptly cut off, replaced by a scuffling sound.

Heart racing, I flattened myself on the ground and peeked through the tiny gap between the tablecloth and the floorboards. One of the men had grabbed my mom, and his big hand was covering her mouth. She was clawing and kicking at him, but he was huge, like a bear. She couldn’t fight him off.

I wanted to run out and help her. Hit the man with my fists until he left her alone. But I couldn't move. Something was keeping me frozen on the floor, like an invisible force had locked my body in place. The more I tried to move, the heavier I seemed to become.

My mother let out a muffled cry through the man's fingers, and her feet scuffed on the floor. She was still trying to escape his grip.

Tears welled in my eyes, blurring my vision. Cold sweat was trickling down my back. I could hear the pounding of my own heart echoing in my ears, almost drowning out the sounds of my mother's cries and the gruff voices of the men as they held her down and restrained her arms and legs with a rope.

I had never felt so ashamed and helpless. Why couldn't I move? I knew I should be brave, that I should run out and help, but the fear was too strong.

A few seconds later, I heard tires crunching on gravel. The men were leaving. I couldn't see them, but I knew my mother was with them, bound and helpless.

Soon, the sound of tires on gravel resonated in the air again, followed by a familiar voice a moment afterwards. "Miranda!" Dad called out, feet pounding up the steps that led to the front entrance. "Miranda, where the hell are you? We need to—wait, why is the door open?"

"Daddy?" My paralysis seemed to be gone. I tentatively crawled out from beneath the table. "Daddy, what's happening?"

"Sebastian!" His eyes widened, and he hurried over to me, scooping me up in his arms. "Why on earth were you under there? Where's your mom?"

"She went away. I was supposed to hide." My throat felt like it was closing up. "I wanted to help, but—"

He cut me off. “Where did she go?”

“The forest men took her.”

“The forest men?” Dad looked taken aback for a second, and then his eyes narrowed. “Is this a new game you’re playing?”

“No. The men she was working with took her away.”

His brows shot up. “You mean the Covenant?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“When? Where?” His voice had thickened, and the look in his eyes had turned wild and frantic with fear.

“I don’t know where they took her. They left just before you got here.”

My father set me down and lay a firm hand on my shoulder, crouching to meet my eyes. “Try to remember, son. Did any of them say anything about where they were going? Something that could help me find them?”

I swallowed hard. “I... I think one of them said something about another road that leads away from here. They were going to go that way so you wouldn’t see them when you came down the driveway.”

“Okay. Good boy. I need you to do something for me now,” Dad said in a low voice. “Go back to bed, close your eyes, and go to sleep. Don’t leave your room until I come back. Got it?”

“Yes.”

With that, he dashed outside. His tires squealed on the gravel, and I was alone again.

I did as I was told and trudged back upstairs, a heavy feeling in my stomach. I was bad tonight. I did everything wrong. Now my mom was in trouble.

I crawled back into bed and yanked the blankets over my head, squeezing my eyes shut. Maybe this was just another nightmare. Maybe I'd wake up in the morning and Mom would be right there with a plate of blueberry pancakes and tea with honey. Our favorites.

I smiled at the thought, but then I remembered the sound of her cries through the big man's hands. The smile instantly dropped. This wasn't a nightmare with a monster in a cave. This was real.

The monsters had come right into my house, and now my mother was gone.