



DYVINA SOLLENA  
**BLACK BLOOD**

# Dyvina Sollena

## Black Blood

### Аннотация

Rebecca Jannette Cross, better known as Reb, has just one wish in life: becoming a successful journalist. Hazycreek, the small town where she was born, has nothing left to offer her and determined more than ever decides to start working on the article that will lead her to the top. But she has not come to terms with the dark side of what appears to be a small joyful town. Those stories that have been passed down over the centuries, maybe, are something more than urban legends and the truth, sometimes, is not like it is told. Will Rebecca succeed in shedding light on the secrets that slowly are coming to the surface? And will her heart clear up or will it be trapped in between reality and fantasy? Rebecca still doesn't know but her life is about to change...

“Sometimes you get angry when you have something to hide. And when you have something to hide it means secrets are real.” Rebecca Janette Cross, Reb for friends, is an ambitious journalist, determined to find the news that will lead her to write a sensational article, with which she'll reach the success and be able to leave Hazycreek, the town that saw her birth. When she'll sneak in the mansion of the feared Winterbourne, she'll meet the obscure and charming Sebastian, the only son heir of the powerful dynasty. The young man, with his seducing charme and mastery of not answering Reb's questions, will manage to break all the certainties the girl had on what she

thought she knew about her fellow citizens, leading her to start a grueling battle with herself. Hovering between the blinding, as well as inexplicable, passion for Sebastian and the certainty that something darkly malignant is moving in between Hazycreek's citizens, Reb will seek for an answer to all of her questions that instead of being solved are increasing more and more. A struggle between body and mind, heart and reason, right and wrong will challenge her beliefs and her toughness in solving her town's mystery. And when she'll discover the truth behind those secrets, Rebecca's life won't ever be the same.

Dyvina Sollena

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Did you enjoy Black Blood?

**BLACK BLOOD**

“When I asked him if he knew Count Dracula, and could tell me anything of his castle, both he and his wife crossed themselves, and, saying that they knew nothing at all, simply refused to speak further.

[Dracula – Bram Stoker]

Prologue

That mansion, “The Black Raven Hill”, was rising in all its sacrilegious majesty in the middle of the forest. Isolated, far from the city and from the busy life of Hazycreek. It was staring at you from the distance, stately and massive, protected by trees and its thick walls that were surrounding it completely.

A big keep was boldly rising from a middle position, two slender towers with sharp roof were rising aside, built entirely in bulky stone. Big pointed windows and adorned eaves, resembled some sort of gothic appearance.

Then the gargoyles, from each side, looking ferocious, they were looking upon the building.

Local people tended to avoid the place because of strange myths regarding the mansion. Creepy stories, tales of blood and death. Mysterious disappearances, satanic rituals; the ground on which it stood was considered the focal point of the occult power.

The Black Raven Hill was scary, as well as its owners who built it in 1346. That of the Winterbournes was a powerful family of successful entrepreneurs, their richness and prosperity was leading each member since many generations, nobody ever dared to challenge them.

Hazycreek inhabitants were superstitious persons, bounded to their popular traditions, they kept insisting that it was better staying away from that evil place and that only crazy fools dared to approach it, but only few returned. They said that the Winterbournes were not like the others, they were different, strange, wrapped in darkness' obscurity. They whispered they had made a deal with the Devil. Too much of power, beauty and longevity, for common people. Everyone respected them, having a sort of reverential awe. Children were told to keep the eyes away while they were passing. No words, avoid to stare in their eyes unless it was necessary. Always being submissive and never gainsay them. Frightening stories were told by old people, they referred to them as animals and demoniac creatures, sucking blood for surviving.

Human blood.

They called them... the Thirsty.

Chapter 1

Rebecca

My name is Rebecca Janette Cross, but everyone knows me as Reb J. Cross, or simply Reb. I was a journalist and I was writing for *Hazy Daily*, the local Hazycreek's newspaper.

I loved my job, looking for news to propose to people, that always stimulated me a lot. The column which I was dedicated to dealt with daily facts, news and every sort of hearsays. From Mrs. Ryder's cinnamon biscuits to commissioner Tanner's shooting parties.

I thought it was fun in the beginning, but as years passed by, I realized that I was longing for something more.

My biggest dream was to emerge in journalism. I was aiming to the Capital, any well-known editing department of success. The place where I was born hadn't much to offer but a peaceful living, labored at times, but still carefree.

Hazycreek was a joyful town not very far from London. It seemed like a bubble was shielding it from the world's disgraces. Not many crimes were happening and for me finding interesting stuff to write about was everyday harder.

All this until ten days ago.

«Dear God, Reb! You must be kidding, you can't really want to go there», Josh fussed while looking at me with wide open eyes and stretched facial features.

I was sitting at my desk in our *Hazy Daily's* office.

Josh Coleman stood at my side, shaken and a bit upset. He was my best friend, also a colleague at the editorial. He was in charge of sport news, he was a great football fan, also rugby and many other sports of what I personally didn't understand a damn.

We grew up together, close friends since early ages; on the other hand, we all knew each other in Hazycreek. It was a small hamlet where getting unnoticed was difficult.

«Of course, I want to.»

«It's crazy. Nobody ever gets close to Black Raven Hill», he went on, putting his hands on his head. He kept watching me incredulous, diving his fingers into his brown curls.

He could have kept that chocolate eyed look on me all day long, still I wouldn't have changed my mind. My decision was taken: I was going to the mansion, with or without his help.

«Nobody is disappearing in Hazycreek», I argued, turning off my laptop.

«Well, it has happened. We have gangs here too and it won't be the first time», he persisted.

I got the office chair I was on turning, I crossed my arms under my breast and stared at him sulking.

A week or so had passed when the Harpers had called the police denouncing their younger daughter Claire's disappearance.

I took advantage of that and started some researches. I managed to write a good article, different than usual. I received good criticisms; local people loved my job. I rolled up my sleeves,

I grabbed pen and note and I started interviewing the locals.

It seemed that nobody knew, everyone was denying and scared for what had happened.

That same morning however, a new reporting came: also Rose Weather had disappeared.

Something to sink my teeth in!

I was scared and bewildered as everyone, but I had big potential that rarely I was able to exploit, I had to grab this chance that I was given, even if at the expense of those poor people.

While investigating on Harpers' case, I ran into some strange declarations coming from some old people. Citizens having the same age my grandfather would have had, sometimes talked about strange tales, some sort of macabre stories, quite scary, dealing with the Winterbournes.

They referred to them calling them: The Thirsty.

I barely believed, I took those as same old plebeian tales meant to scare children and keep them away from that noble family.

The Thirsty. They described them as parched vampires longing for blood, but the Winterbournes did not look at all as demons with strange habits, they were just an egocentric family, extremely powerful.

Rich with no doubts: they owned vast properties and a large amount of local commercial activities, and not only in Hazycreek. They had properties all over England: in London, Manchester, Liverpool, Oxford, Cambridge and in Nottingham. It must be said that they did nothing to be loved, their presence

in town was leading to fuss, everyone was looking at them with fear, most people didn't even stare at them, they went on straight avoiding any type of contact.

I had to admit that a mysterious aura seemed to lead them, but I thought this was a consequence to the narrow-minded mentality prevailing in Hazycreek.

A kind of mass hysteria led people to keep the Winterbournes away.

But the situation seemed not bothering them. After all, they lived at Black Raven Hill.

The endless mansion was a property of their family since ever. It was a bit far, like half an hour by car from the center and it was in the middle of the forest.

The Winterbournes stayed isolated from common people, it was clear, but how to blame them?

They were relevant, they needed nobody, they could afford it at the end of the day. But assuming that they were the cause of those two current disappearances, that sounded a bit excessive to me.

But this all story drawn a super idea in my mind, an idea that apparently Josh didn't like at all.

«I don't believe they have something to do with those disappearances, ok? However, they might have something to say», I explained to my friend.

Josh still shooked his head, more and more closed to his surrender.

«It is not wise, nor even necessary. Maybe they did it for real.»

«How can you believe those bullshits? What do you think? Persons drinking human blood? Dracula is a Bram Stoker's book, not reality!»

«I am not joking. You look like a fool. Nobody ever dared much», he addressed me once again trying to keep me from my intentions. But he couldn't succeed, I was stubborn and willful. I had already made my mind.

«They'll know for sure what people say. It may be interesting having also their opinion», I insisted, every second more convinced.

«Don't get involved with that family. Stay out of this, Reb.»

«Oh, come on, Josh! You are always the same old chicken», I laughed at him, raising my arms. I got up from the chair snorting and placing in front of him. I poked his chest with my forefinger and a little grin appeared on my face.

«I want to write the article of the year. The one that will lead me straight to London and the Winterbournes are going to be my golden goose. That's it», I said nailing my green eyes into his.

I noticed him tensely swallowing.

«Why can't you just do your job without digging too much? You are a journalist, not a detective», Josh's voice had become shrill and hysterical. He cared about me, but I wouldn't have run any risk.

I just curved one side of my mouth and, after having retrieved my purse, I passed by him, straight towards the office exit.

«Because I desire something else, Josh. I won't stay here forever. London is my goal», I concluded, opening the door and walking out of it.

«You damned ambitious!»

«I've heard you!» I scolded him from the hallway.

He followed me and once he reached me, he ruffled my red helmet hair.

«Let's have a drink at Hanna's, ok?» he asked me changing subject completely.

I agreed with no hesitation. I wanted to tell my intentions also to her.

In ten minutes, we arrived at the Moonlight, the most popular place across Hazycreek, the only opened at any time during day or night. We parked Josh's car in the side street and we went in no longer waiting.

We were immediately hit by the lounge music. Cheerful environment, slightly suffused and relaxing lights. The whole decor ranged from white to lilac, with abstract shades and decorations.

We approached the counter where our friend was serving drinks to a group of rowdy teens.

Hanna Ryder was my housemate and my best friend. It had always been the three of us, indivisible and joined until death.

«Hanna!» I called her wiggling on the chair I had been able to hoard, while Josh was standing on the counter, slouching on it.

Hanna ran to us wiping her hands in her wisteria-colored

apron.

«What can I get you, guys?» asked offering us one of her sweet smiles, then struck Josh with the eyes, he was still slouched over the counter's marble.

«Stand up from there, if Mrs. Tanner sees you, she'll get mad at me!»

«Hanna, tell your friend he shouldn't sleep over here», Mrs. Tanner barked while coming out from the kitchen.

Josh immediately straightened up murmuring sorry.

That woman was incredible. Ginger was the owner of Moonlight, but first, she was the commissioner's wife. At her place she demanded respect and a behavioral ethics that Josh never observed. She wouldn't have kicked us out after all, so we got over it and started laughing.

«Usual?» Hanna asked.

We both answered yes.

Fast as the light she was back with our orders: two cold beers. I grabbed mine and took a great sip.

«Reb has had another of her unhealthy ideas», Josh started absent-mindedly while checking his smartphone.

Hanna was listening carefully, fixing her blonde weaves and, raising an eyebrow, she looked at me.

«Meaning?»

I sighed, now they would have ganged up on me, I knew them so well.

«I want to go to the Black Raven Hill. I plan on writing an

article about the Winterbournes», I answered all in one breath.

My best friend stood silent with her mouth opened for some seconds, no words were needed for Josh's expression, happy and satisfied not to be the only one against me.

«Have you lost your mind, Reb? Those people are... weird», she said in between shocked and terrified.

Let alone she would have taken my part!

I took another sip from my beer looking up at the ceiling.

«Come on guys! This is my opportunity to aim high. New horizons can open up for me», I explained staunchly on my decision.

What could have ever happened to me?

The worst that could happen was being kicked out, by the way I wanted to observe the mansion first, without being seen.

«But the Winterbournes are dangerous and the Black Raven Hill makes me shiver. What if they kidnap you, doing you cruel things? You are aware too about all the rumors circulating, aren't you?» Hanna stirred, frantically gesticulating.

This made me laugh, she looked so goofy.

«I've tried reasoning with her the whole day, she really doesn't want to listen» Josh added.

I sighed playing with the drops of water running down my glass.

I had never hoped for their approval. I knew very well how crazy my idea was, I just wished my friends could understand my point of view.

I couldn't miss this opportunity.

«I have already made my mind», I cut it short finishing the cold beer. I showed Hanna that I wanted another glass pointing my thumb down.

She obeyed with no hesitation.

«If your parents knew they would be mad», she objected by serving me.

«My parents have been traveling around the world for two months, they won't know. At least if no one tells them», I said a bit annoyed.

«The *Thirsty*, Reb. Figure out who are the persons you would like to go speak with», she continued.

«Yes, exactly. They are not like any other, they are monsters», Josh agreed carrying out the blond's thesis.

Were they serious?

Did they really believe?

«That hassle! How old are you? Eleven? You can't believe all those bullshits. Vampires don't exist and not even those so called *Thirsty*. All those are fairytales for stupid kids», I blurted out dumbfounded.

It was about tales told through centuries by the ancients, but they were all crap. Nobody had any concrete evidence concerning those lies.

«Then again, the younger attended our same school. Sebastian Winterbourne was a kid like us. If they were all vampires, how could something like this be possible?» I asked firmly.

They both fell silent, they had nothing to reply to my consideration. They seemed like they hadn't thought about it and they found no answer to reply me back.

I grinned satisfied.

«See? All bullshits, that's why in the following days I am visiting the mansion. In the meanwhile, I am going to study it from the distance, secondly, I'll ring the bell. If you want to come, you'll be accepted, if not I'll be fine on my own», I concluded with all possible emphasis.

Nobody did express, they exchanged a glance and looked down resigned.

When I had something on my mind there was nothing that could have changed my decision. I had to discover the Winterbournes' secrets at any cost, my one-way ticket to London. I wouldn't have lived in such a small town that I was feeling so narrow anymore. I was twenty-seven, I was still young but... I wouldn't have stayed young forever. I had to get involved immediately or Hazycreek would have suffocated me.

Sometimes I was told that I was taking my job too seriously, but that was what I liked to do and I couldn't find anything wrong in pursuing my dreams. Fame was my goal, I would have chased my ambitions until I climbed to the top, and if the Black Raven Hill could clear my way, I would have presented myself at its gate.

What would I have found behind?

Only time could have told, but surely, what I was about to

discover would have changed my life completely, destroying all my certainties.

## Chapter 2

Rebecca

It was late at night; I was driving with my heart madly beating in my chest. Sure, I was excited but, also unnerved by a sense of restlessness. I was following the old road that would have led me straight to the Black Raven Hill, that was the only possible passage and the asphalt, illuminated by my headlights seemed spotless, clearly almost none was passing there.

Apart from the Winterbournes.

«I still don't get how you have managed to drag me till there», Josh complained, all pale, while he couldn't stop biting his nails.

I took a glance at him, I felt a bit sorry, he was scared to death.

«I've just asked you to come along and you have accepted. You shouldn't have come», I replied clutching my lips.

His dark eyes posed on me, but he said nothing, he just kept looking at me with a sad expression, like a puppy in need of cuddles.

I was absolutely grateful for what he was doing, but maybe I shouldn't have involved him.

I pulled over on the left and I turned the car off.

«What are you doing?» he asked confused.

I unfastened my seatbelt and I was opening the door.

«We get out, we walk forward. I don't want anyone to hear us coming.»

My best friend swallowed, but he did not oppose any resistance and he got out the car.

I looked at the sky, it was extremely dark and it was like the forest engulfed us completely. Not even street lamps were enlightening our way.

I found all this unreal.

Josh was gazing in every direction, paying attention to every single noise, he was breathing heavily and his hands were closed in fists.

I inhaled slowly and tried to look resolute to his eyes. I was, but that place was giving me goosebumps too. That gloomy atmosphere that was embracing everything was certainly to blame.

I took the smartphone from my jeans' pocket and turned on the torch mode. The camera flash appeared, I pointed it in front of me and I started walking the last meters that kept us from the mansion.

We walked silently and watchfully without saying any word, until the road made us turn to the left, where a dirt path was taking in front of the entrance gate.

It was huge, thick black metal bars soared upward culminating in pointed quills.

A sign on the right reported the surname "Winterbourne" written in gothic characters.

I illuminated it with my phone. Nothing else was written.

«What would you do now?» Josh whispered looking beyond

the gate.

I did the same.

«Just watching.»

From the distance, the dark shape of the mansion was really intimidating.

There were some lights, breaking that darkness impetuously and making the sight even more spectral.

I had brought a pair of binoculars; it was an indispensable and very useful tool: being a journalist sometimes led you behaving like a stalker.

I lifted them looking through.

The complete absence of light around made difficult distinguishing the shapes. I could see three enlightened windows. Beyond the walls, the house was surrounded by a vast garden.

It was like being in another world.

That old manor was hidden and protected.

I lowered the binoculars and I tried moving the gate. Obviously, it was closed.

«What the hell are you doing?» broke down Josh grabbing my shoulders.

I turned to him biting my lip.

«I want to get in, I need to get closer.»

«But what's in your head, Reb? Let's get away immediately», he protested.

I looked at the walls that were mingling with the vegetation, they were not so tall, the gate was way taller. I could have climbed

and then get down on the other side, helping myself with some branches.

«I can overtake the walls, I'll be careful», I said studying the environment that was around me.

I approached a tree with a thick and wrinkled trunk. If I managed to reach the first branch, then the game would have been easy. I tried to jump and grab it, but I failed.

My best friend reached me with a burst and he took me from an arm.

«Stop it Reb! This is not a good idea. Let's go», he went on worried.

«Help me reaching that point over there. I won't do anything reckless, I promise», I told him with candy eyes.

He pursed his lips hesitating for a long while, but finally agreed. He intertwined his fingers and crouched enough to lift me. I leaned on his shoulders and settled a foot on his hands. With strength he gave me a good swing by which I could reach the branch. I lifted myself up being careful with every movement. From there I continued on a higher level until I reached the walls. They were so massive that once I stood up, I was really not afraid of falling.

I swallowed while starring at the house.

What secrets are hidden in there?

My stomach tightened with a slight anguish. But I couldn't walk away, I had no intention.

I got down on the other side, looking carefully where to put

my feet, I had to jump a few meters before touching the ground. Getting back would have been more difficult, I should've found a different way.

«Are you ok?» Josh was in front of the gate, as worried as I had never seen him.

«Yes, everything is fine. It won't take me too long, I just look around », I reassured him smiling.

I saw him bringing his hands to his head, but I didn't pay this any more attention.

Slowly I headed towards the huge gothic building.

The dirt road was pursuing inside the garden, a big fountain was standing half way with a circular tub. In the middle a squared column was rising, it was all carved, culminating with four gargoyles on each side. It was all empty, as water hadn't been there for ages.

Some luxury cars were parked all around the sculpture. I could count three, looking all the same. I went on.

When I reached the mansion, I tried to stay away from the few enlightened windows. Once more I turned on the smartphone's torch, hoping to find some interesting details.

All was quiet, the wind whispered gently weaving the manicured grass that I was stepping on.

I put my hand on a wall. The contact with that cold stone made me shiver deep down my spine.

What if those stories were true?

I closed my eyes repressing that thought. I didn't believe those

foolish things. I was just been influenced by the situation.

A rustle on my back made my hair stand on end. The breathing became more intense and my heart almost exploded in my chest.

«Brave of you... Rebecca.»

I whirled around, ending starring inside two big, strangely bright eyes. They were different one from the other, the first of a delicate light blue, the other violet.

I bit my lower lip while panic took away all my rational way of thinking.

Those eyes were familiar, I had always found them attractive, but creepy in a same way.

«We were together in high school, remember?»

«Yes, of course, Sebastian», I answered gaining back a bit of my lucidity.

I had to find an excuse, something to justify my presence in his property. I should have listened to Josh. Thirsty or not, I came in their home with no permission: that was housebreaking.

Damn! I am always so impulsive

Sebastian settled his raven tuft that was on his eyes and looked at me passing the tongue on his fleshy lips.

I felt paralyzed.

«What is the reason for your visit, Rebecca? We don't usually have guests, let alone late at night», he said, shortening the distance in between us.

I swallowed the lump out in my throat and I felt overwhelmed by its intense and wild scent. He had a hoarse voice, deep and

vibrant. I didn't remember it like that, maybe I hadn't even heard him speaking at all.

He was always on his own at school, kept away from everyone, nobody got closed to him, it was like he didn't exist.

I thought that was sad, but it didn't seem to bother him.

But right now, the one in front of me was no more a kid, he was a man, the heir of the Winterbournes.

I shook my head repeatedly and I squeezed my lips. I felt terribly embarrassed and caught in a foul.

«My dog ran away. I am afraid she walked down your property, I wanted to take her back», I replied in a faint voice.

What a terrible excuse is that?

I scolded myself. I was never good in improvising and I had nothing better to say.

«I don't remember you had a dog, Rebecca», he pressed me.

The way he pronounced my name was giving me chills, nobody called me like that. I was Reb to everyone and hearing my name that way was shaking me, giving me strange feelings.

«Well, it is Hanna's dog : Beck's», I corrected.

How could he know?

At least, my best friend's border collie existed for real. And it was also very lively. A bitter smile animated his face.

«I see, and are you often taking Beck's around here in the middle of the night?»

I wanted to leave, getting rid of him and his arrogance as soon as possible. He was making me uncomfortable.

«I suffer from insomnia and such a badly idea came to my mind. That's it» I hissed a little more firmly. Even if his presence was making me feel dizzy, he wouldn't have succeeded in putting me in trouble.

«Interesting, Rebecca.»

Again.

His words were flowing so slowly and the sound of his voice was almost hypnotic. I didn't want to be overwhelmed by him.

He watched me carefully, I almost felt stripped under his gaze. He paused on the binoculars. I feared one of those questions to whom is hard giving an explanation.

«I should leave now, I really hope Beck's is not making any ailment, but if you may find her, I'll come to take her back. After that you'll be able to forgive this meeting», I said all in one breath stepping forward firmly.

He grabbed my wrist. His hand was frosted and that cold penetrated my skin freezing my blood.

«But I'll remember you. Maybe you are the only one brave enough to come up here, Rebecca Janette Cross.»

His words flooded my head impetuously.

What was that meaning?

It was all so strange and so absurd. Maybe I should had listened to my friends and give up the idea of writing an article about the Winterbournes, but my crazy mind was finding that whole situation amazingly interesting.

The more Sebastian was talking, the more my longing to

investigate on them was growing.

I retracted my arm and he released his grip.

«We are not all fools and scared in Hazycreek.»

His laughter echoed in the silence that was surrounding. He squeezed his chin between his thumb and forefinger and smiled mockingly at me.

Oh, damn! He is even charming.

«If you are stuck in, the gate opens from the inside with a mechanical lever», he informed me.

I raised an eyebrow and turned my back on him ready to go back to Josh.

«Goodnight, Sebastian.»

«Goodnight, Rebecca.»

I walked fast, without running. I could still feel his heterochromic eyes watching over me. They were stinging my back insistently. I took some deep breaths and tried to calm down.

Once I arrived at the gate, Josh fidgeted on his spot.

«Where the hell were you?»

I gestured for silence, carefully, I studied the entry mechanism. I operated a large lever that was fixed to the walls and I released the lock. I pulled the bars towards me and got out.

Josh was astonishedly looking at me.

«How did you know?» he asked me while, no longer waiting, we started walking towards the car.

«Sebastian told me.»

My best friend got mad. He started gesticulating and nervously swearing.

«Dear Christ, Reb! You got caught, and you were supposed to be silent and careful», he scolded me as if he was my older brother.

I looked at him sideways.

«And I was! It was him coming from nowhere. But don't worry. Nothing bad happened. He also told me how to get out, so everything is ok», I contested.

Josh gave up, I was healthy and safe after all and nobody had tried to bite my neck for sucking the blood out of it.

We got in the car and I almost drove flat out. I wanted so badly to be back in my apartment and wash away all the anguish of that crazy night. I drove Josh home and went straight at my place.

When I opened the door, Beck's ran up to me happy wagging. I founded myself laughing while rubbing her head, and thinking that thanks to her I had managed to save the situation with Sebastian.

A meowing distracted me, Loki, my black cat, had jumped on the couch and started purring with his yellow eyes ajar. I got closed and gently caressed him.

«Reb, is it you? I am having a tub», Hanna informed me. She must had just got home; she was on the night shift and always finished really late in those occasions.

I took off my clothes and joined her in the bathroom. I just needed a quick refreshing.

«Hi Hanna. I'm back», I said reaching the sink. She was in the bathtub, covered by a huge amount of scented foam. I opened the water and let it flow for a few seconds.

«How was it? I thought I had found you already at home, I was worried.»

«No worries, I had Josh with me, even if he was just helpful in stirring our spirits», I admitted laughing.

She did the same.

I dived my hands under the jet of water and plenty washed my face. I lifted the sight and stared at myself in the mirror. Those mysterious eyes bounced violently back in my mind.

«I met Sebastian Winterbourne. He caught me inside his property», I told her.

Hanna moved compulsively and let a large quantity of water wetting the ground.

«You are out of your mind. Josh must have had for sure a heart attack», she hysterically replied. I started laughing.

«I think he has actually lost ten years», I answered.

«He is mad about you, Reb», she suddenly changed argument.

«Oh, stop it! We are just friends», I said.

Hanna was convinced that Josh had a crush on me; while I thought it was just a sort of brotherly affection despite his concerns.

«Well, that is your thought but go and explain it to him!».

I didn't want to think about it, I just needed to sleep.

«I lay in bed. I am a bit exhausted.»

My best friend nodded her head and I reached my room. I let myself fall in bed staring at the ceiling. I closed my eyes and tried to breathe slowly.

I noticed Loki jumping on the mattress and snuggling up my side. He was purring softly, helping me relaxing and, almost without noticing, I fell asleep thinking of those magnetic eyes painted in different shades.

### Chapter 3

Rebecca

Next morning me and Josh founded ourselves dumb and involved in a perpetual yawning. Both our faces were marked with two dark and well sharped eye bags.

We slept, more or less, four hours.

We were no longer eighteen and we couldn't afford to stay out until all hours, our body was affected by that.

I rubbed the corners of my eyes before snuggling up my head between the arms. The laptop screen weighed down my sight, I was looking for some relief.

«I need to think about my next move», I mumbled, rotating the head sideways in direction of my best friend.

He turned on the chair he was sitting on, and looked at me with half closed eyes.

«Isn't there any remote chance that you might change your mind?» He asked me tiredly.

I lifted up and went back watching my laptop screen.

«I would say no.»

«I understand. I won't try to stop you any longer, it would be useless by the way. But I am going to help you only within certain limits. Just to be clear: I am not getting close to that cursed house anymore», he told me resigning to the idea that I had made my mind and my intention was to go all the way.

I tenderly smiled, he was doing all that for me and I could imagine how much it was costing to him.

Josh was very emotional, he lived everything to the ninth degree and feared the Winterbournes more than everything else. Beliefs that had been instilled in his head as a baby, and that was the result.

«Thanks Josh, I really mean it... thank you», I told him getting up from my seat to give him a hug.

I had just bent over him when the editorial's chief, William Sullivan, a masterful man, despotic and gruff in his ways, broke quickly in our office. He coughed noisily before speaking: he was a chain smoker. Probably he was paying the consequences of that unhealthy vice.

Sullivan was not particularly loved in Hazycreek, he was hated by many, mostly his employees.

«Cross!» he called in full voice with his usual irreverent tone.

Me and Josh snapped to attention. I took a deep breath and I wore the good-obedient-girl mask.

«Tell me, Mr. Sullivan», I answered showing off my best smile.

He peered at me with his stern eyes and rubbed his grizzled

beard.

«People need news. Find something about Rose Weather and write one of your articles. We need to ride the wave», he ordered me, again coughing.

«I am working on it. I was right about to exchange a few words with the Weather», I informed him with calm voice.

«Ok. Go on. But don't take too long, Reb», he concluded blatantly just before turning around and leaving our office.

Sophia Sullivan, the chief's wife, came running, wobbling on stilettos.

As her husband, not even she stood out for sympathy, she was considered an inept goose capable only of acting as a secretary to her husband.

She stopped in front of him with shortness of breath and all her unkempt brown hair. She looked at him in a shocked and agitated way while Josh and I stood watching the scene.

What could have happened?

«Sebastian Winterbourne asked for consulting with you», she reported with the breathlessness that came along with her words.

The chill seemed to drop in the ward. There were long seconds of silence.

A Winterbourne in town and without warning?

That for sure was a sensational event.

The fact that Sebastian had shown himself to the editorial office was somewhat strange. the *Hazy Daily* was owned by the Winterbournes and that may have been the only reason for his

visit, however, my distorted mind suggested that was not the only reason.

William Sullivan hesitated caught off guard. He cleared his throat.

«So? Without an appointment?» He said looking unnatural.

Those weren't the right questions; he was stalling as if he had panicked. Sophia nodded.

«He's waiting for you in your office», she concluded in an uncertain and shaky voice.

I grinned under my moustache. I took pleasure in seeing those two troubling.

The Sullivans always put on a lot of airs and addressed others with superiority.

How would they cope with someone they feared too?

The chief editor clenched his fists and grunted something confused. He looked around and clapping his hands shouted:

«Come on, everyone to work! What are you doing standing there?».

The whole department moved after stopping to witness those moments. We returned to our desks leaving Sullivan to his fate.

«I wonder what he came to do», I whispered to Josh as I watched husband and wife disappearing through the elevator door.

«That's not our business», he replied, belittling the whole matter in a moment.

I snorted and gave him a push.

«I want to meet him.»

I could not let that opportunity pass me by.

I had the chance to further my investigation over the Winterbourne family by talking to Sebastian again in a completely casual way. After all, he showed up at the *Hazy Daily*. I would have simply let myself be found near the boss's office.

«Don't do foolish things, Reb», Josh said pursing his lips.

I looked straight into his eyes. I wouldn't have done anything reckless walking in front of Mr. Sullivan's door at the right time.

«Nothing will happen to me in such a crowdy place and in broad daylight. I'll make it look like a coincidence.»

My best friend sighed, spreading his arms. I hugged him, he wrapped and hugged me as well.

«Thanks, Josh. I promise, I'll be careful», I whispered.

In a while I remembered Hanna's words. I asked myself if I was sending him the wrong messages. If he had different feelings regarding me, maybe I was fooling him. I drove away those harshly thoughts.

I had something else to focus on: Sebastian Winterbourne.

Two endless hours had passed when the deep voice of Winterbournes' heir woke me up.

«Very well, I'd say that with this we are done.»

He had raised the tone of his voice so much that his words sounded clear.

All that time I had been lurking along the management corridor. There was only the stationery, a bathroom and

Sullivan's office.

More than once I had tried to eavesdrop their conversation but the words came to me distorted and confused, I could not understand anything.

I took a deep breath and swallowed. I got a stack of A4 paper from the warehouse, tucked it under my arm, and slowly walked to the study door.

«I'll let somebody taking you to the exit.»

«Don't worry.»

«I insist.»

«This way you are offending me Mr. Sullivan. There is no need, I know the way.»

I did not understand the chief's answer, but I found Sebastian's tone rather arrogant.

Those rich people full of themselves!

I thought with disdain, I couldn't stand that kind of people, those who, aware of their wealth, assumed brazen and insolent attitudes towards the others.

I put my annoyance aside just in time to see the haughty Winterbourne heir coming out of the office and closing the door behind him.

He noticed me instantly.

His sinister irises settled on my figure and remained glued to it.

I hesitated for a moment, then, with a firm step, I joined him.

«Rebecca.»

«Sebastian.»

Our eyes remained chained to each other.

I couldn't stop looking at those eyes.

He was staring at me with a cheeky smile, a dimple had appeared on his right cheek decorating that face with rigid features, so perfect that it looked carved in marble.

«And so, we meet again, Rebecca. What a coincidence, isn't it?»

We were side by side, the air was impregnated with Sebastian's scent, I could almost feel it all over me.

«I am a journalist. I work in this place», I boldly answered. I had to keep a low profile, but I wouldn't have ever let him believe that he had me in his grip.

Not me.

«I am aware of your job, Rebecca.»

Rebecca.

My name bounced off his lips like a hypnotic symphony, I liked the sound it was making.

Suddenly something clicked in my head.

«You knew you would have found me here», I murmured with a thin voice.

Sebastian looked at me and gifted a sarcastic smile.

What should I have read on it?

He had a way of expressing himself that I found twisted to say the least, his phrases were riddles to solve and mysteries to unravel.

«Did you find Beck's ?»

The tone of his voice brought me back to consciousness.

Sebastian Winterbourne was able to numb me with just his presence, but charisma, money and a beautiful face would not be enough to fool Reb J. Cross.

I shook my head just closing my eyes, then I returned focusing on Mr. Richness.

«Oh, Beck's. She was waiting me at the car. Luckily, she is an intelligent dog», I slowly replied hoping to appear as natural as possible. I brought the stack to my chest and squeezed it with both hands.

I saw Sebastian grin, he lifted his arm and ran his fingers through his hair, adjusting the shiny black tuft. It reminded me of a crow's feather.

«Very well», he observed looking at the ceiling.

«I wanted to apologize for last night», I said catching back again his attention.

I was pierced by his mysterious eyes, then his mocking smile appeared again. He looked at the corridor that we both should have walked.

«Would you walk me out?» he asked me pointing the way as a gentleman.

It was the perfect occasion for having a chat.

He was a snob with too much self-esteem, aware of the power he wielded and convinced that with money he could have bought everything. People included. This was the idea I had made of him

by observing his attitudes and his behaviors. Nonetheless, there was something in him that tickled my stomach, distracting me and sending me into confusion.

«Let's go», I said showing him the way

«You can also leave those papers here. I know you don't need them», he hissed passing by and overcoming me in a few strides.

I was shaken by a tremble of anger. I threw the stack on the ground, weathering the temptation of throwing it at him.

«How insolent!» I muttered to myself as I was picking up my pace to catch up with him again.

«What brings you in town?» I asked right before turning the corner.

The second-floor ward turned to look at us. I could feel everyone's eyes pinching my skin.

But he didn't seem to care at all about what was happening around, perhaps he hadn't even noticed how much the tones had subsided upon our arrival, there was only a background buzz of chatter and gossips.

«Business: you know, this place is mine, Rebecca», he replied haughtily, turning in my direction.

Of course, I do, you boor.

I answered in my mind biting my tongue.

It was only thanks to Winterbournes' money that a small village like Hazycreek could boast the presence of such a renowned and avant-garde, although modestly sized, editorial board.

I looked at him closely, a tingle in my thighs made me flare up.  
Why did I think him that way?

What was happening to me?

Concentration and professionalism. He is going to be your article.

I recited in my mind like a mantra.

Sebastian was only a means to my ultimate goal.

«Your presence here is something extremely rare. You don't often show around», I teased him ready to embed any response from him.

Sebastian let out an amused snort.

His presumption made me nervous, but I couldn't look at him without feeling somehow intrigued.

«This is what happens when people fear who is stronger than them», his answer was brief and chilling, I remained silent in an attempt to understand its true meaning.

We reached the elevator; I pressed the door opener and in a short time that metal box welcomed us inside.

«What are you working on?» he went on turning a little in my direction, without realizing I imitated him, we found ourselves face to face and my heart sped up.

«On the Weather case. Sullivan wants an article as soon as possible.»

«Do you think this is my family's doing?»

He got straight to the point without dancing around.

He surprised me; I never expected such frankness.

I was afraid of not being able to handle that situation and I would have had to arm myself with all the will in my possession in order to reach the target without allowing myself any distraction.

Who knows why it was so difficult for me.

Sebastian was disarming. He had an elegant bearing, refined features, a persuasive charisma and lots, lots of charm.

And I felt weak in front of him. His every gesture, every word that was coming out of that perfect mouth, intrigued me, unleashed daring thoughts, uncontrolled emotions.

All this, confused me.

«No, maybe I'm the only one in town who doesn't think so», I replied just as direct.

Suddenly I found myself stuck against the elevator wall.

He forced me to back away without noticing his sudden movement.

He lifted one hand and placed his hand against the metal sheet, he touched my head, imprisoning some of my tufts of hair under his fingers. He observed me with those contrasting eyes of his: one of an angel and one of a demon. He lowered himself on me and put his mouth to my ear. He was towering over me.

«Maybe you are wrong», whispered caressing my neck with his cold breath.

I winced.

Why does he have this effect on me?

He wanted to scare me, why on earth feeding those rumors?

He was playing a part, the one that the dogmas of the past had

attributed to the Winterbournes.

He wouldn't fool me.

I placed my palms against his chest, it seemed so solid and resistant that I had to take a breath of air before being able to push it. He barely raised, but he didn't move from there.

«Maybe not», I pressed pushing him again.

An acoustic sound announced the doors opening. The entrance hall revealed in front of us.

Sebastian composed himself as if nothing had happened, adjusted his shirt's collar and took the road to the exit.

I followed him worried about the consequences of this unexpected situation.

«You have always been a rebel, Rebecca», he declared ready to tease me again.

I became suspicious.

«We don't even know each other.»

«I remember you since you were a baby. We always went to the same schools, and like everyone else, you kept me distant.»

Sharp, cutting words came out of his mouth. Stinging daggers, hitting me in one side.

I almost felt guilty.

Sebastian remembered me and the first memory that came to his mind was the worst. I too had contributed to his marginalization from Hazycreek's life.

Not that he was looking for someone's company, in fact he had that slightly snobbish attitude since he was a child. He always

looked bored and absent, as if nothing stimulated his attention and didn't deem anyone worthy of even a glance.

However, since I was a child, I had always observed him in secret. I found him interesting and his eyes intrigued me.

The thing that baffled me the most, however, was the fact that he really remembered me. We weren't even the same age. He knew I was a reporter for Hazy Daily, and that I didn't have a dog.

I wondered if he studied everyone so scrupulously.

We went outside.

A luxurious black car was parked a stone's throw from the front door.

«You always seemed so disinterested», I stated controlling my voice.

He rummaged in his trouser pockets and pulled out an electronic key.

«And you had anarchist blood. You loved swimming against the tide and I am glad to discover you haven't changed that much.»

The car's headlights came on and I moved my attention to the vehicle. It had tinted windows.

We had never spoken to each other before the previous night, never a nod, an exchange of words, perhaps a few glances but nothing more. Sebastian, however, knew me thoroughly, but I did not know anything about him.

A sense of uneasiness drained my throat stopping my salivation.

«See you soon, Rebecca», he exclaimed opening the door of his car.

«Maybe», I objected lifting an eyebrow.

He approached quickly, with one hand he caressed the side of my face, bringing a lock of hair behind my ear.

«I say yes», he answered in a deep whisper.

His fingers slipped down my neck, causing goosebumps where his touch brushed me.

I couldn't answer, I was petrified looking at him with my thoughts a bit clouded.

Sebastian smiled as he retraced his steps, he got into the car and, getting into gear, drove away.

My brain clouded over. I couldn't think objectively no more.

«That was Sebastian Winterbourne, isn't it?»

Hanna's voice turned into a shattered stained-glass window in my ears. It was like waking up from an advanced catatonic state.

«Oh, Hanna.»

«That was Sebastian, right?» she pressed me with her face tense in a grimace of concern. She was taking Beck's for a walk.

I crouched down and stroked her head between her ears. She happily wagged her tail.

«Yes», I answered to Hanna, staring back at where I had seen Sebastian disappearing in his car.

I couldn't stop thinking of him, his figure was filling my head with violence.

I found him so... attractive.

Damn!

I criticized his arrogant ways and disrespect he had towards others, but some sort of strange chemical reaction between our bodies was having fun in making my job more difficult.

I was attracted to him; I couldn't believe it.

«What was he doing in town?» Hanna asked staring at me suspiciously.

«Business.»

«What's wrong, Reb?»

What was wrong with me?

I was struggling with my professional ego versus my emotional one. I couldn't explain it to her, I didn't understand what was happening to me. My best friend wouldn't have reacted well if I confessed her that Sebastian was giving me strange reactions.

I was shaken but determined to just walk the path for glory.

All in all, I was gathering a lot more information than I expected and my article, in my head, was already taking shape.

«I am a bit tired. I need to go back to work. I'll have to question the Weather», I said without giving her further details.

She looked at me dazed but did not reply.

We said goodbye and, with my head in the clouds and anxiety in my stomach, I went back to my office where Josh was waiting for me and he would have choked me with questions.

Chapter 4

Rebecca

Once I was back in the studio, my best friend rushed to me.

«Where were you?» asked with alarmed eyes.

I snorted.

«I never left the editorial office», I answered him taking back my block note, the smartphone and the car's key.

Josh was impatient, he was breathing down my neck curious to know what happened.

«That's all? Don't you have anything else to tell me?»

I hesitated, I didn't feel in the right conditions to face his questions, I was still upset and baffled by that strange encounter with Sebastian.

However, Josh was entitled to some explanations, I couldn't leave without telling him anything.

«Nothing striking. But I found out that he is an asshole, cheeky and rude.»

He brought a hand to his face and let it slide slowly.

«Did he hurt you?»

«Clearly not, but he has really rude ways. He was here for entrepreneurial reasons: business», I explained acting indifferently.

«Like?»

«He didn't tell me.»

I settled the accessories in my bag and put on the leather jacket.

«Where are you going?» Josh went on helping my stress going to the roof.

«I am going to see the Weathers; I hope they're willing to talk

to me. Did you hear Sullivan? He wants an article as soon as it can be.»

I thought that was the only way to sneak away, not having to answer those annoying questions anymore.

«Good luck then», he said forcing a smile. He knew I wasn't telling him everything, but he respected me and did not insist.

I thanked him and thoughtfully I left the editorial office.

I parked near the driveway of the Weather house, got out and after double checking that I had locked the car, I walked towards the entrance.

I rang the bell.

Frank Weather opened the door.

Deep wrinkles marked his forehead when he frowned at seeing me in front of him. He looked tired and worn out.

In the corner of his mouth, he held a toothpick that he nibbled with restlessness.

He was a large man with a rough, pale skin, a wrinkled face and knotty fingers.

«Good morning, Frank», I greeted him showing a friendly smile.

He raised an eyebrow and widened his nostrils.

«What can I do for you, Reb?» he asked me with a narrow gaze.

«I hoped you were willing to exchange a few words with me.»

His mouth stretched into a bitter smile, he closed his eyes and sighed.

«Was Sullivan sending you? We've been answering the police's questions for days. My wife and I are exhausted. Have a little respect for us», he retorted angrily, pushing the door to close it.

I managed to block it with a foot.

«Please. I'll be discreet and I promise that it won't take me too long.»

He ran a hand through his frizzy grey hair, then scratched his head. He looked at me silently, chewing his toothpick.

«Just ten minutes, Reb. But I don't intend to disturb Laura, she is resting and she is not feeling well at all», he decided, letting me in.

Laura was Frank's wife, after the disappearance of her daughter no one had seen her again in town. Consumed by pain, she had holed up in the house, coming out no more.

I thanked Frank and, once inside, I followed him into the dining room. I took a seat at the table and retrieved the notebook from my bag along with a pen.

«I am doing this just in the name of the friendship between me and your father», he informed by handing me a glass of water.

«Thank you.»

My parents were friends of everyone, they were two great flatterers, always able to curry favor with anyone and, actually, their relationship with the Weather was fairly confidential.

I, however, with Rose, their missing daughter, had not been able to bond much. We had different priorities due to our age

difference.

When she was still a child, I was already in high school.

I had watched her grow, and she had always been a good girl. I remembered that she attended the parish assiduously with her friend Claire.

Now they were both missing.

«I'd love not being here. I am really sorry for what happened», I said taking a sip from the glass.

Frank shook his head and sat down in front of me.

«Let's move on.»

I did not dispute the haste of that big man with an intimidating appearance, rendered almost helpless by desperation.

«Is there any news from the police?» I asked no longer hesitating.

«No news, the investigations are stuck. Rose seems to have disappeared into the air», he reported, crossing his arms on the table.

«What was your daughter's relationship with Claire Harper?» I continued, crossing my legs.

Frank looked up at the ceiling and took a few moments to answer my question.

«They were friends. A bit like you and Hanna Ryder. They were always together. They almost had a gloomy relationship», he confessed with bitterness.

It was as if it costed him to talk about the two girls, he didn't seem to approve their friendship, even if I didn't understand why.

The Harpers were a simple family with no expectations, they enjoyed life in Hazycreek without disturbing or making people talk too much about themselves.

Like Rose, Claire wasn't a bad girl either.

I took notes and cleared my mind.

«Could they have run away together? At their age they are still a little unconscious, perhaps they made a rash and not calculated decision», I proposed thinking about it.

It was a bold hypothesis and perhaps it didn't even make much sense, but I had learned not to take anything for granted and to evaluate every possibility.

«Hard to think. Claire disappeared ten days before Rose», he replied in a whisper.

I couldn't blame him; his reasoning was correct.

«Maybe she reached her. Rose may have disagreed and then changed her mind at a later time.»

«I would love to believe your words, Reb. The hope that my daughter is still alive would not be in vain, but sadly, we are preparing for the worst», he said, drinking half of the water contained in his glass.

«I find it really strange that nothing has been discovered yet. Hazycreek is a small town, how is it possible to disappear without leaving traces?» I considered, reflecting aloud.

«It happens sometimes. More or less every ten years.»

A hard sentence that redundant in my head like an echo.

I was seventeen when three girls mysteriously disappeared

into nothing. Even then I couldn't understand it, I had kept the newspaper clippings that reported the news in a locked box.

It could have been a trail.

I vibrated with excitement thinking I was close to a turning point. I could aim high, write a shocking article that would lead me to success. I wanted to fulfil myself in journalism, the ambition was great and now I could show everyone what I was really made of.

I thought about going to my old house and look for those items. I had left them there, I just hoped to find them in their place.

Why haven't I thought about it?

I reflected silently, amazed by how everything seemed to me closer.

«I didn't remember. Do you believe this could mean something?»

«Who knows, people here believe in strange beings, looking like persons. And the punctuality with which these disappearances occur, suggests something malignant. Hazycreek is superstitious, Reb. Look at my sister Mary, exiled from the city, mocked and disgusted by the people of this town. She is considered crazy, just because she is different. We no longer know what to think.»

Frank let out a flood of words difficult to pronounce, there was despair in his voice, resignation and sadness.

Mary Weather was Hazycreek's "freak", she was considered

by everyone a mad visionary with schizophrenia.

She was convinced she could talk to the dead.

She babbled about future predictions, painful events, and sometimes her ramblings were not even understood.

I knew that she had been interned for a long time in a center for mental illness and that she had come back to her senses, but it seemed not to be the case.

«Did Mary express any thought about it?» I dared asking.

Frank clearly needed to let off steam and maybe he wouldn't hesitate to confess some little secrets.

Was I sneaky?

Maybe, but that was my job and I loved it despite the downsides.

Since I was a little girl, I used to play the journalist, I loved investigating, solving mysteries and bringing out little secrets.

In high school, when a rumor was born, I had to go to the bottom, understand what was true to confirm or deny it. Then I reported everything in the school newspaper, my friends were waiting for nothing else but reading my articles.

I thought it was my calling and, in the end, I made it a profession.

«Yes, of course she did. I have never abandoned my sister.»

«Did she speak with... Rose?»

Mr. Weather stared at me for very long moments, I had exaggerated, but I was convinced that in life you had to take risks, sometimes it was better to throw yourself without thinking too

much.

I looked forward to his response.

«Reb, my sister is mentally ill, she has always been since childhood. Mary claims that Rose and Claire are still alive and that they were taken by the Thirsty».

I didn't sleep that night.

I had the constant feeling of being close to something disconcerting.

An idea perhaps, a suspicion that was anchored in me, feeding my desire to keep searching.

Maybe mine was just hope because, let's face it, Hazycreek was boring.

It was the first time that the city's balance was altered to the point of being perceived in the air.

Something was really happening, that feeling was standing still in the pit of my stomach taking on more and more consistency.

Chapter 5

Rebecca

The next day I convinced Hanna to come along with me, to scour Elinor and Bryan Cross' house. My parents.

When they weren't there, I was just visiting to water the forest of plants they had. My mother had a green thumb, she loved flowers.

So, while they were traveling on their research missions, I took care of that home garden with meticulous attention.

Entering Cross' house meant entering a high-tech laboratory

full of plants. A Victorian-style villa that inside was transformed into a spaceship, futuristic and super modern even in its furnishings.

My parents were two Cambridge-graduated researchers with a Biological Science degree.

Dr. Elinor Cross was a molecular biologist and Dr. Bryan Cross specialized in medical, veterinary and pharmaceutical biotechnology.

Their work was never really clear to me, they spent whole days in the laboratory or traveling in search of any subject to study.

They rarely talked about it and I never asked.

It had always been like that and with time I learned to accept their secrets.

They said they couldn't share certain information, so I made up my mind even if it brought a certain detachment between us.

They loved me and I loved them, I had never questioned this, but those small shortcomings had an effect on me, making me grow quickly and alone.

«What are we precisely searching for?» Hanna asked me right entering the house's door.

I hurried to open a few windows, letting in some light and having the air circulating. I stopped to smell a white orchid, gently caressing its white petals.

It was my favorite flower.

«Do you remember my old casket where I was hiding my diary?» I retorted, asking her to follow me upstairs.

She obeyed.

We walked through the large entrance, completely white from floor to ceiling. To break that glow, a black carpet on the right traced the way to the stairs.

We walked along it until we reached the forty-three steps that would have led us to the sleeping area of the house.

My room was the only part being a little more human and less alien.

I was hoping that everything was unchanged. I perfectly remembered hiding the clippings of old newspapers in what as a child was a magical casket for me, where I kept a few objects inside, linked to some precious memories.

I had kept the articles about those disappearances from high school for no particular reason, I never thought they would come in handy ten years later.

We went into my room and turned on the light.

Everything was unchanged, as if time had stopped six years ago, when I had moved to live with Hanna.

I observed the environment: the bed was placed on the right wall facing the sun while the wardrobe and the dresser occupied the side wall. On the opposite side where my bookcase and desk.

I dived in the past, seeing myself bending over it, absorbed in writing my first articles for the school's journal.

They were good memories, the beginning of everything.

Every piece of furniture was smeared with sentences of mine. I had covered the surfaces with simple blue ink pens, a job that

lasted years.

Thoughts, fleeting moments that crossed my mind, sometimes simple words without any sense, only the moment I grabbed and then wrote clearly in the wood.

I went near the desk and touched those tangled marks with my fingertips. A puzzle for anyone but it all seemed perfectly clear to me.

My attention was captured by one particular sentence, I had written it in italics along the right edge of the desk.

Violet like her blood.

I remembered the day I wrote it; my thirteenth birthday was a few days away and I had heard my father saying those words. I passed by his studio on the way to the bathroom, those were the only words that reached my ear and stayed in my head for days.

«You used to keep it under your bed», Hanna declared going straight to my bed.

Her voice woke me from my childhood memories.

I saw her kneeling on the ground, almost sticking her head under the bed frame.

«There's a lot of dust here. But I can't see the casket», she said standing up.

She sneezed while cleaning her clothes.

«It has to be there», I objected.

I kept it exactly aligned with my pillow, if it wasn't there, then where else could had been?

I checked myself by using my smartphone flashlight. There

was nothing under my bed, just a desert of grains covered with mites.

«Damn it!» I swore furiously, the one thing I was hoping to find in its place, however, was gone.

Hanna gently placed a hand on my shoulder and smiled softly at me.

«They might have moved it, let's check better!» she kindly said.

I agreed.

We searched every corner, every possible place. There was only the wardrobe left, if it wasn't there, I wouldn't know where else to look.

We were about to open the last door. It was divided into shelves and on the penultimate one at the top I was finally able to see an edge of the casket.

«Pass me the chair, please», I asked my best friend. I climbed into the chair until I grabbed it with both hands, then tossed it onto the bed.

Hanna reached it before I did and began to handle it.

«It is open!»

I was having a heart attack.

It had always been closed with a large padlock and I had the only key. I still guarded it with jealousy and no one had ever had a copy.

I examined the closure as it appeared to have been forced. I opened the lid to make sure all the contents were there.

There was my secret diary which I immediately passed on to Hanna. I started writing it at the age of seven and continued throughout adolescence. I found a horse plush; I had called it Lucky, it was a present from Josh and Hanna for my ninth birthday. I saw the letter my grandfather had written me for my eighteenth years, it was precious, it said to chase my dreams and never give up even when life would have presented me its bills. Everything seemed to be there. I recognized a clear plastic folder with dates on it:

15th February 2008

21st June 2008

09th October 2008

I had found them.

Those were the articles about the three missing girls during 2008.

Exactly ten years ago.

The fact that the casket was open, however, was clearly not something I missed.

Had my parents done that?

And why without asking me?

It was not typical of them and I wouldn't have ignored the fact.

I took out the yellowed pieces of newspaper and handled one carefully.

«Look at this...» I suggested to my friend, leaning towards her:

«Katherine Holden. Twenty-two years. Missing», I turned the pages discovering other titles,

«Rachel Brant. Nineteen. Missing», I went on browsing.

«Julie Sullivan. Twenty-five. Missing», I concluded by showing Hanna the similarity with those facts that were affecting Hazycreek during those recent weeks.

She looked at those clippings with perplexity then looked me in the eyes.

«Sullivan, as your boss. Was she the daughter?»

«Yes. I remembered that later her disappearance was denied. They claimed that Julie had moved to London, but she has never been seen in town again», I explained, recalling the events little by little.

«Are you assuming that this is happening again?» she mumbled.

«I am not sure, this might be a coincidence», I replied studying those articles.

I thought of Sebastian and his family.

None of those writings mentioned it, or rather, not in an explicit way, they often went around it and talked about destiny, as if it was a justification for everything.

I needed more information.

Could the Winterbourne family be responsible for those crimes?

I didn't want to believe it; I couldn't bear the idea that Sebastian was involved. Handsome, rich and divinely asshole, but I couldn't think of him as a killer.

Suddenly I remembered what he had said at the editorial

insinuating that Hazycreek's rumors were true.

I took them for simple provocations while he kept me stuck to the elevator wall.

Our faces were extremely close.

I had felt his breath caressing my skin and my mind had created an almost indecent situation.

For a moment I wanted him to kiss me, feeling his mouth on mine, his hands over me.

I had just touched his chest, only imagining its perfection.

I felt a fervor inside, a craving out of my control, like a dangerous obsession from which I could not escape.

What's happening to me? Why do I think of him that way?

I watched Hanna out of the corner of my eye, I was dying to tell her everything, to explain what had occurred inside me in the last few days and ask her for advice on how to behave.

She was absorbed in her thoughts and dark-faced as she read the newspaper texts. I stood up and began pacing back and forth, took a deep breath and stood in front of my best friend.

«If I confess something to you, can you promise that you'll be listening to what I say, analyse the situation and just shut up until the end?» I said in bursts like a machine gun.

Hanna looked at me wide-eyed, stood up and grabbed me by the arms.

«You are having a panic attack! Sit down!» she ordered me alarmed.

What the fuck!

I thought incredulous in front of such idiocy.

I was talkative, it meant that I was not calm, that something troubled me, but nothing more serious.

«I am not panicking!», I objected, freeing myself from her grip.

«You're ranting. It never happens to you», she argued, putting her hands on her hips.

I sighed ruffling my tawny hair, it was useless to stall, I had to tell her.

«I might have a crush on Sebastian Winterbourne», I sighed in a whisper.

I closed my eyes and tried to keep my breathing steady and controlled.

«Are you out of your mind, Reb?»

Hanna's scream was piercing, forcing me to squint and shield my ears.

«How can I know? I find him an arrogant daddy's boy, haughty and brash. But he is also interesting...»

Hanna sprinted towards me and grabbed my face with one hand, peering carefully into my eyes.

«Are you under dose?»

«I'm not, for God's Sakes! Is it so wrong?» I replied, offended and sullen.

«He is a *Thirsty*, Reb! Are you having a crush on... a monster?» she hissed in a low voice, looking over her shoulder.

She was terrified.

«This is not a typical crush; I believe this is something more physical...» I paused, «I think I am attracted by him.»

Hanna turned to the window and after grabbing my old diary from the top of the mattress, she began to leaf through it.

She was so angry that she didn't even want to talk to me.

«Why are you always choosing the most difficult way?» she asked without changing position.

«Because it is me. Rebecca Janette Cross: rebel since I was born, curious by nature and... anarchist in the blood.»

As Sebastian said.

I fought back his thought that punctually was appearing gain, I could feel it, elbowing its way just to come back to my mind.

«Be careful, Reb. Keep always your eyes open», she retorted disinterestedly, turning to me. She was reading with a frown on something I had written.

I was about to say something when Hanna placed under my nose my outbursts as a child.

«Read it!»

“Today a girl went missing. They said in the news. My mom and dad got worried. They told me not to talk to strangers and not to go near the Winterbourne family. Sebastian doesn't look bad. He is a child who comes to school with me. He is always alone. ”

I had completely removed those events.

Those thoughts of mine were written on the first pages of the diary. I was still a little girl.

My best friend pointed out the date I had written along the

top of the page.

«18th March, 1998», I read aloud.

«Twenty years from now, ten since then», she commented, marking the newspaper articles with her finger.

Oh my God!

«You are a genius, Hanna!» I exclaimed with joy. I hugged her and printed a kiss on her forehead.

She drew back and put on a serious expression.

«Go three pages forward.»

I did what she said without saying a word, I didn't know what to expect.

“This is an unhappy day. A very bad thing has happened. Aunt Lily flew to the sky. There is no more. Josh is always crying and Mrs. Coleman too. It's sad when someone leaves. ”

Aunt Lily.

Lily Coleman was the eldest daughter of Meredith and Lukas Coleman, as well as Josh's sister. She had disappeared at the age of twenty-three, involved in a brutal car accident.

3 August 1998.

I looked at Hanna, arching my brows, I knew exactly where she was going.

«What if Lily never had an accident but simply disappeared?»

I asked rhetorically.

My best friend nodded her head, letting out a smirk.

«It would mean Josh's sister dissolved into thin air like all these other girls every ten years.»

That possibility was disquieting, I vaguely remembered that period, but nothing suggested Lily was missing, she was simply dead. There had even been a funeral.

But I was a child, like Josh and Hanna, they could have told us anything and we would have believed it.

«How does this make any sense? Why still keeping us from the truth? We are adults now», I argued not fully convinced yet.

I couldn't find a valid reason that could have led our parents not to tell us the truth.

Why was my casket open?

Doubts arose in me, questions to whom I wanted to find an answer.

Hanna looked out of my bedroom's window, she was watching the street, hidden behind the dusty curtain.

«Isn't that the Winterbournes' car?» she suddenly asked.

I rushed to her side and looked over the pane of glass.

A sinuous sport car was parked on the opposite street.

I swallowed.

«This might look like», I cut it short.

Hanna was right instead, that was Sebastian's huge car. I remembered it perfectly.

«With tinted windows?» she disputed rightly disagreed.

«I don't know what to say, Hanna.»

I was no more able to understand anything.

Missing girls, Lily Coleman, the feeling that our parents were hiding something from us. The accusations against the

Winterbournes, the legends about the Thirsty, were all buzzing uninterruptedly in my head, creating a din.

And then there was Sebastian, who had suddenly shown himself interested in me to the point of being seen in town. He had been looking for me from the beginning and now he also seemed to be following me.

I was counting on my survival instinct, it had never let me down, but I probably should have listened to Hanna and being careful.

That penetrating look had remained imprinted in my mind and made no sign of leaving.

I wanted to reassure Hanna, tell her that I wasn't feeding any of those forbidden vibes, except of course for professional purposes.

Sebastian represented everything I hated most in people, however, my body seemed to think differently, because although I was fighting to repress all sorts of impulses, the truth was that something had snapped inside me and my desire was nothing more but to have him.

«What is going on, Reb?»

«Help me find out, Hanna».

Chapter 6

Rebecca

I took Hanna to work at Moonlight for the evening shift.

Josh was waiting for us at the entrance, we had arranged to meet with him and spend the evening together.

«I can stay a bit longer with you, I have still time before starting», Hanna said sitting near us.

I begged my best friend not to say anything to Josh. Nothing regarding Sebastian or my strange unwarranted reactions in his presence.

She promised me she would not mention it.

Josh studied us for long moments, shifting his gaze from one to the other.

«There must be something you two are denying», he declared.

I ignored him, awed by the turn that this conversation could have taken.

Instead, Hanna reached Josh across the table and grabbed him by the shoulders.

«We made a sensational discovery today», she exclaimed as if holding back those words with all her might.

Josh blinked in confusion.

I motioned Hanna to sit down and tried to keep order.

«Quiet! It's confidential information», I yelled nudging her.

She pouted and ignored me.

I hoped she could really keep my secret, I trusted her, but I knew her well and I knew how much she loved talking.

«What have you discovered?» Josh asked, intrigued by our friend's statement.

I quickly checked the surrounding environment to make sure that no one was listening to us.

«A couple of days ago I managed to speak with Frank

Weather. He made coming back to my mind some episodes happened in the past. I don't know if you can remember, but those disappearances have already happened and, as a teenager, I had kept the *Hazy Daily's* articles. I could have searched online also, but I thought it would have been easier summing up those clippings that were left at my parents' house.»

Then, Hanna didn't let me finish.

«Three missing girls exactly ten years ago. And this is not everything: in 1998 Reb wrote about another girl that had disappeared, another ten years before. Those events have happened in a cadenced way», she enthusiastically finished. She decided to help me even though facing the truth had scared her to death.

«It is the same year... of Lily», Josh mumbled as he looked down at the table. As a child, he was very attached to his sister, it was an immense pain to bear that loss for him.

«Exactly that», I didn't know what else to say.

«Don't you think that maybe Lily might not have died in an accident?» Hanna spoke a bit carelessly.

I wanted to break her head.

A tactless question that would have inflicted further pain on Josh. But she didn't realize it, she was spontaneous.

Josh slammed his fist on the shiny table's surface.

«What are you thinking of?» he blurted out with a grim expression on his face.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath to keep calm. That

was the beginning of a no holds barred war, when Hanna and Josh argued, because that's what was going to happen, there was a need to take cover.

First, I had to calm myself and then I could calm them.

«Think about it», she objected.

It was necessary to stop them immediately.

«The inseparable ones, full tonight!» an unpredicted voice said.

The appearance of Gregory Tanner and Tina Harper broke the growing bickering between the two.

They were all righteous people.

Greg was the son of the inspector and Ginger.

We were born on the same day and our families often forced us to organize children's birthday parties together.

Despite the whims, in the end, we always had fun and as we grew up, we became friends.

Greg was an accomplice who deserved absolute respect. He liked technologies and had access to information that were often confidential. He had lent me his help on several occasions, he was on my side, I knew it.

Tina, on the other hand, was a quiet girl, she was the elder sister of the missing Claire Harper. The two did not get along very well, I had already spoken with Tina recently on the occasion of that tragedy.

She was sunny by nature, she faced the days with a smile, but her face didn't lie. She was hiding behind her sand-colored bangs

not to show her eyes. Reddened, swollen and adorned with two purple dark circles that not even makeup could completely cover.

I thought it was hard for her family and I was sorry for their pain.

Tina and Greg had met at school, he had completely lost his mind for her and after an infinite courtship, he had managed to conquer her. They had been together ever since, having just celebrated their ninth anniversary.

«How is it going guys?» I asked acting indifferently.

Hanna stood up in a hurry, giving them the place.

«I got to go or this time your mom could threaten me with a kitchen knife», she squeaked to Gregory, winking at him.

«What were you guys talking about?» he asked us after greeting her.

I knew I could safely talk to them.

I wanted to express myself freely on the researches I was leading but I was worried about Tina, talking about the police investigations meant raising an issue in which her family was involved.

I didn't want to cause her any more pain. It wasn't necessary.

Even if...

I looked at her with a frown, she seemed to notice and smiled at me.

«Oh dear! Don't worry, Reb. I know what you're working on. We have already talked about it», she said, putting a hand on her chest.

I listened to her and told them the correlations with old cases that occurred decades ago.

«Does my dad know that you are investigating so deeply?» Greg asked, mulling over my story.

I raised an eyebrow and looked into his thin eyes turning my back towards him.

«No... and he shouldn't know», I declared, resting my chin on the closed fist of my right hand.

A crooked smile broke out on his thin face.

«He won't know. Don't worry.»

«I need some more information. Do you think your old man is willing to chat with me?» I asked Greg, who knew his father better than anyone else.

He made a mop.

«You will hardly get what you are looking for from him. Assuming he decided to listen to you, you will get nothing from him except what he chooses to tell you. He's very secretive about police investigations, he'll never talk to a reporter, even if that reporter is you, Reb.»

The commissioner was a tough man, he knew how to be respected and he managed to maintain discipline in the city. He took his job seriously and did it perfectly.

He was in charge of the small local police district; he represented the law in Hazycreek.

Greg was right, I would have just aroused suspicions and I had to be invisible.

«You could try with Father Dorian, he knows both Claire and Rose, his information will probably not be as thorough as those of the police, but you could get definitely something useful out of it», Tina suggested, looking for her fiancé's approval, he nodded his head.

«Right. My uncle is more open to communication. But be sweet and don't push your hand too hard, he's a sensitive person. If you approach him properly, he will help you», he agreed.

«What is your opinion?» Josh, who had stood silent for a long time, intervened.

«I honestly think I've been affected by popular rumors. But I can't stop thinking about the *Thirsty*», Greg whispered, lowering his head to the table.

But seriously?

«What you have found out makes me just more suspicious about them. Yes, well, there is no evidence, but we grew up listening to those ancient stories. Everyone in Hazycreek is afraid of the Winterbournes. Maybe there is a pinch of truth», Tina asserted, expressing the same opinion.

Everyone talked about it, but no one made himself heard.

It was no longer clear where fantasy began and reality ended.

If everyone suspected the Winterbournes, then why not go and get them?

What was holding them back?

«It is too easy to justify with a legend what you cannot explain»,

I argued firmly, always supporting my position.

The Thirsty didn't exist, they were just bullshit.

Greg began handling his smartphone, plugged in two Bluetooth headsets, and handed one to me and one to Josh.

«I want you to listen this», he said with a serious face.

I motioned him to start the audio:

«We can't go on like this forever. Here young girls disappear and people ask themselves questions.»

«We have ties with them. We'll find a solution.»

«We have to get them away. I don't know how, but sooner or later the situation will get out of hand.»

«No way. It would be suicide. These are the agreements.»

I was amazed, it was a conversation between two well-known voices to me.

The first was that of James Tanner, the commissioner, while the second was that of Alan Ryder, Hanna's father, the mayor of Hazycreek.

«Why do you have this recording?» I asked, confused.

It could have meant anything, but those short lines confirmed the presence of something unspoken, masked.

«Tina and I wanted to look for the truth on our own, we had the feeling that there was little clarity about these recent disappearances, so I inserted a spy software into my dad's smartphone and discovered that he has secrets and he is not the only one», he paused briefly, during that time he looked at me in the eyes. «We also thought someone in this trade could help

us. You, for example.»

The request caught me off guard. And I couldn't refuse their cooperation, it would have been stupid.

«Yeah, but I can't understand the meaning of recording one of your father's conversations», I insisted, I was trying to understand to what extent I could count on their help.

«I have often doubted him. It happens that he is introvert, that he says things in half, and there seems to be always something tormenting him. I just wanted to find out about the ongoing investigation, but I have found out more.»

«Do you think he is hiding something?» I asked, being even more careful.

«I think it's pretty obvious. As indecipherable as the conversation is, it is clear that something is happening.»

I was impressed.

How long have Greg had doubts about his father?

Was the appearance deceiving so much?

And if the mayor was also involved, what was there so obscure that had to be hidden?

Maybe I was traveling in my fantasy, building only paper castles. But I have had a hunch.

I was aware that curiosity was sometimes paid dearly, however, I did not expect to find out so many skeletons in Hazycreek's closet.

What was I supposed to expect?

Chapter 7

Rebecca

The next day, early in the morning, I reached Hazy Central Church. In the city there were two parishes and that of Father Dorian was the most popular.

I showed up at the house of God with two black furrows under my eyes, I hadn't been able to sleep. My mind didn't want to keep silence and had kept me awake all night.

I felt tired and my head was spinning, but I was not giving up, I wanted to continue the investigation at any cost. With Greg's recording the mystery had deepened and I wanted to figure it out as soon as possible.

Dorian Tanner, the inspector's brother, was a sweet and generous person who was always kind to the others. He knew how to listen to people and never denied a chat to anyone, which is why his community of the faithful was very large. He knew how to make himself loved and the role he held made him a person worthy of trust.

I hoped to get some more details from him about what was going on.

I walked to the threshold of the Victorian-style structure, like the whole Hazycreek. The nineteenth-century style had survived over the centuries and walking through the streets of my hometown put serenity. It was like being in an enchanted place where everything seemed perfect.

Only the Black Raven Hill screeched in context, its medieval walls looked tired and sad and, despite the trees hiding it, you

could feel its presence hovering over us.

I entered the church, mimed the sign of the cross and headed to the altar. I crossed the main nave, lined with marble columns, which housed two rows of large benches arranged in a precise, almost maniacal way.

The building seemed completely deserted.

At that time, Father Dorian was reciting his prayers and only a few faithful, the particularly devoted ones, joined his litany.

I sat in a corner and waited for the priest to take a break. I didn't have to wait long; the man descended the three steps that raised the altar site and went to the lectern on the opposite side of mine.

I slowly joined him.

«Good morning, Father Dorian», I began with a bright smile and narrowed eyes.

He noticed me and returned surprised.

«Good morning to you, Reb. What brings you around here?» he asked me kindly.

I looked down.

I went hunting for news, it was part of my profession and questioning people was the first source of information. But that was the part I least liked when my questions got uncomfortable. In spite of my feelings, it was all part of the package and, with guilt, ready to scratch my chest, I accepted that side of my job too.

«I was wondering if I could spare a few minutes of your time.

You know, Mr. Sullivan is a pretentious guy», I explained with a calm and gentle tone. I made an effort to wear the same mask I wore every day at the editorial office.

Father Dorian raised an eyebrow and adjusted the neck of his cassock.

«Come, let's sit down», he invited me, showing the way to the first bench in the row.

«What would you like to know?» he said, pressing on me that pointed look typical of all Tanners.

«You knew the two missing girls? Claire and Rose» I asked as I retrieved a pen and paper from my bag.

Father Dorian looked up and moved his sight to the left, he was remembering.

«They were two good girls. Very active in the community and caring for children. They were two angels», he whispered with a mild and sorry voice. He sighed.

«What do you think is going on? It is not the first time that in Hazycreek similar facts are happening.»

The priest hesitated, blinked several times and made a grimace with his nose.

Did I say something wrong?

«Nothing is given to us to know. Not yet, there is only the hope that the two girls are still alive», he finally answered after having gathered his ideas.

I tightened my eyes and studied Father Dorian.

I made him uncomfortable.

«A lot of people in town believe that the Winterbournes are behind the disappearances, what is your position?»

I had dared again; it was a low blow on my part.

A precise question with no way out.

Father Dorian stirred, seemed struck by a tremor that lasted a few seconds, widened his eyes and stretched out his mouth.

«They are Devil worshippers! They are not allowed to enter the house of God», he raised his voice and its echo rang out through the church and slowly faded away.

I became suspicious.

«I did not ask you this, father», I urged him while maintaining a polite and respectful attitude.

«Don't ask too many questions, Reb. Don't venture into dangerous terrains. Protect yourself and forget the Winterbournes. Now excuse me, but I must resume my daily duties. With permission.»

With that stern earful, Father Dorian, liquidated me and quickly holed up in the sacristy.

I wasn't satisfied with that exchange of words. I had discovered nothing useful except the fact that Dorian Tanner had felt oppressed by the turn our dialogue was taking, and had preferred to run away.

I rubbed the corners of my eyes and, after putting the notebook back in my bag, I got ready to leave Hazy Central Church.

I walked slowly and bitterly, I had also altered a good and

peaceful man like Father Dorian.

I had to not attract too much attention, not arouse suspicions and, of course, not get people angry.

«Nobody is talking. The truth is concealed. Buried.»

It was a whisper, soft in sound, dark in tone. It tickled my neck behind my ears, drawing all my attention.

A figure dressed in rags was sitting not far from me. She was bent over and seemed to be praying. She had the hood over her head, and, for the moment, I hesitated.

I approached cautiously.

«What does it mean?» I asked in a low voice.

The strange person looked at me.

I had a gasp.

It was Mary Weather, Frank's crazy sister. Her face was covered with wrinkles, her hair was damaged, frizzy and grey, her eyes were dark covered with a sort of patina as if they were suffering from cataracts, they looked dull, sad.

«While fools stay in fear, who decides, is lying.»

Another enigmatic sentence.

It was for this kind of thing that the city community had decided to push her away. It was difficult to converse with her.

I reflected a few moments, I thought that Mary might be the only one who did not have prejudices or second ends, she lived in her strange occult world and did not participate in the city's life.

I smiled.

«Is there something you'd like to tell me?»

The woman nailed me with her blank glance and forced me to look into her eyes.

«Don't trust the Black Blood. The Black Raven Hill is infected. Walk away, Reb, or people will call you crazy.»

She awkwardly got up from her seat and walked quickly out of the building.

That was a weird day.

Everyone was telling me to let go and stifle the burning desire that was keeping me searching.

It would never happen.

It was precisely this attitude that pushed me forward.

Sometimes you get angry when you have something to hide. And when you have something to hide it means those secrets are real, unspoken information or untold events, something so wrong that it is better to bury over time. Here: Reb J. Cross would have solved the mystery and revealed all those secrets.

I needed a break to clear my head and regain strength, I continued to feel weak.

«Reb? What are you doing here at this time?» Hanna asked as soon as I walked into the Moonlight.

«Take me some coffee. A lot of coffee», I told her with narrow eyes as I headed to the usual table.

She burst out laughing as she was working to serve me.

I sat down on the chair, turning my back to the entrance. I recovered my tools and began to view my notes.

When Hanna brought me a steaming cup full of coffee, my

smartphone vibrated.

«Here you are. I am finishing in an hour, so you can tell me what is happening to you», she said winking at me.

I accepted and thanked her. I touched the phone screen and saw the chat I discovered Josh had sent me.

Josh:

Where the hell are you?

Reb:

At Hanna's. At Moonlight.

Josh:

I am coming.

And so, it was.

Only two minutes later, my best friend arrived at the club out of breath. He dropped into the chair on my left and took a deep breath.

«What's happening?» I asked him dumbfounded.

«Nothing. You said you were coming back to the office and I was worried», he admitted pausing after each word.

Josh was getting very apprehensive. Too much, I was glad that he cared about me, but I knew how to take care of myself, since ever.

«I am fine, I was having a break.»

«You said this morning that your head was spinning. I thought you were sick», he said in a low voice, motioning Hanna to bring him some water.

She handed him the necessary from above the counter.

He was not wrong; I had felt my head muffled since all day and a strange weakness deep into the bones. The stress was more and more evident, I was not used to it, but I would have survived.

«I had to clear up my mind. Summing up my morning, I could say it was a real disaster: I pissed off Father Dorian and Mary Weather told me I'm going to go crazy. I think I deserve a coffee», I answered ironically smiling to Josh.

He widened his eyes and raised both eyebrows.

«You'll never change, Reb. One day soon you'll get yourself into trouble if you keep harassing people» he said sternly.

I didn't torment people, I just chatted with them.

It was different.

A few minutes later, Greg arrived, exhausted and astonished, immediately took his place next to Josh.

«What is wrong with you?» I questioned him, amazed.

He took a deep breath and rummaged in his jacket's pocket impatiently. He pulled out a USB pen drive which he handed to me.

I grabbed it and looked at it: thin, metallic and completely anonymous.

«If my father finds out what I have done he is going to disinherit me», he said drinking the water from my best friend's glass.

Josh looked at him annoyed and, with a sudden gesture, took his glass back.

«What's in that pen drive?» he asked, pouring himself more

water from the bottle that Hanna had given to him.

«I went into the police database and found some reports about disappearances that have occurred over the past twenty years. Plus, other documents that seemed suspicious to me», he explained with the voice so low to be barely audible.

My face lit up, Gregory Tanner had done something so rebellious and dangerous just to help me. Sure, he wanted as much as I did to find out the truth, but I was equally thrilled.

I hid those important data in my bag and thanked Greg fondly.

«I adore you. I know I can always count on you. You are my hero!» I acted like a little girl admiring her favorite star.

We all laughed together when, suddenly, Josh's gaze became alarmed.

«Holy crap!» he said, turning pale while staring at something beyond my back.

Greg, not least, seemed petrified, mute, motionless and with his eyes completely wide open.

Intrigued, I turned to understand what had caused their strange reaction and my heart suddenly stopped.

Sebastian was standing in front of Hanna at the bar counter and was asking her something.

My best friend looked at me out of the corner of her eye and I swallowed, staring back at the center of the table.

«What the hell is he doing here at the Moonlight?» Greg murmured dismay by the presence of that much feared character.

I turned to him.

Sebastian conversed with Ginger Tanner, then they shook hands and his eyes, in an instant, were locked on me.

As soon as he saw me, he flashed that smile that infuriated me, but that, at the same time, teased me from within.

He walked over to my table coming straight in my direction. It took him a few strides and I found him in front of me. He looked at me with that mocking grin, not caring about everything else.

At Moonlight everyone was speechless, only the background music was there to break that silence that, otherwise, would have been deafening.

«I told you we'd have met again, Rebecca», he declared lowering himself towards me.

His scent intoxicated my senses, my heart, from stationary, began galloping fast.

I closed my eyes and searched for a bit of control.

I took a deep breath and jumped to my feet. I reached out to Sebastian and prodded him in the chest with my index finger.

«But with what nerve...» but I was unable to finish the sentence.

I could feel my face on fire, my head spinning wildly. Streams of cold sweat ran down my temples and slowly my vision blurred.

I saw everything black and the voices were now reaching me from afar, I felt weak, as my strengths were abandoning me.

Then I passed out.

Chapter 8

Rebecca

When I opened my eyes, I did not immediately recognize the room I was in. Then I noticed the drip hanging from a rod on the side of the bed and a sharp pain hit my arm. I looked at the needle piercing my vein and I wondered what had happened to me.

I only remembered Sebastian's face and nothing else.

I got up from the pillow looking for someone's attention.

The room was simple, the essential was there: a bed with an iron structure painted in white with a matching bedside table; a wardrobe with a single door on the right wall; TV, a counter in front of me, with cupboards containing accessories and medical products, to my left, I saw a machinery that I was completely unaware of.

I was at the Coleman Medical Centre, Josh's parents' medical place.

«Is there anyone?» I asked raising my voice.

I heard quick footsteps approaching, the opaque glass door swung open and Meredith Coleman walked inside cordially. She wore her hair in a bun, round glasses resting on the tip of her nose, and a white coat with her name embroidered on the edge of her breast pocket.

«You finally woke up, dear. How do you feel?» she said, approaching my bed and fumbling with the drip's tube.

«Good, but my head hurts.»

Meredith walked away quickly, opened a drawer in the opposite cabinet and came back to me with a tablet in the palm of one hand and a glass of water in the other.

«Take this, you'll feel better», she said, handing me the medicine.

I took the pill with two fingers and stared at it.

«What is that?»

«An analgesic. For your headache», she answered, smiling.

I swallowed that medicine and didn't think about it anymore, I just hoped it would have worked quickly because the pain I felt was similar to that of two drills piercing my temples.

«What happened to me?» I asked, still messed up.

I passed out as I was flaring up with anger against Sebastian. Okay, it was not just anger that ignited me, but I found it hard to ignore his arrogance and it pissed me off.

He was so cheeky.

Telling me such a thing in front of all those people was a very risky and compromising gesture.

What would had people thought?

The Winterbournes were badly seen in town because of all those legends. They were elusive, they did not entertain with anyone and if they showed up it was only for business reasons. They had no friends and people avoided them like plague.

Talking to them meant to tarnish one's reputation, and becoming the victim of Hazycreek's bigoted judgments.

Sebastian from the height of his arrogance had thought to address me in a completely confidential way and my reaction was not less. An exchange of words that hinted at the existence of precedents between us even though, after all, we had met only

two insignificant times and we were two complete strangers.

Yet when I thought of him something inside me was moving, twisting in my stomach and drying my throat. It seemed that I had known him since forever, but it wasn't true.

Sebastian was blunt and irreverent, but he had a hidden side, just like his gaze. One fair iris, clear and gentle and the other dark, hermetic and sibylline.

There was something about him that attracted me so much, that was roughly reminding me of his image, tormenting me day and night.

He was moving wrapped in mystery, he had a detestable character, a pride to slap, but his bold and polite manner, the refinement of his words and those sly and curious eyes, those were all arrows that had been shot and reached straight the right point.

Maybe Sebastian's soul was split in half, and I wanted to find out what concealed the one side he kept well hidden.

I wanted him to show me his secret side, good or bad.

«Around lunchtime, Josh and the Tanners' son arrived in panic with you in their arms. They said that you had suddenly fainted, but that you had felt unwell already since this morning.»

Mrs. Coleman's voice brought me back to earth.

«There were only them?»

«Oh, Hanna also came to visit you, but I told everyone that you needed to rest and I would have informed them as soon as you had recovered», she went on adjusting her bun.

I was sure I had fallen over Sebastian when my legs no longer held me.

«So, what is the diagnosis?» I asked, curving only one corner of my mouth and making a funny expression.

I saw Josh's mother giving a shy smile, but she remained composed and focused.

«A heavy drop in blood pressure and lack of rest. You need to take a breath, Reb. Don't worry that much about your job. Josh told me you didn't stop for a moment. Breathe.»

Yet another reprimand for that day, was it so clear what I was investigating on?

After the recent events in the company of Sebastian, probably yes.

I sighed and decided to ignore the matter nonchalantly.

«What is inside the drip?»

«Vitamins and mineral salts to get you back on track. Now I take it off: it's over. I'll take your blood pressure again, it'll take a moment and then, if you want, you can go home», she declared dedicating to the needle.

She removed it off carefully and medicated the affected part.

Free from that chain, I took the smartphone from above the bedside table and sent a message to Hanna asking her to come and get me.

She immediately replied telling me that she would have done it as soon as possible.

In a while, I was already sitting in Hanna's car, heading home.

Meredith Coleman had made a note of my latest values and handed me a bottle of tablets. Supplements that according to the prescription I had to take twice a day. I put them in the bag after having observed them suspiciously.

«What happened after I passed out?» was the first thing I asked her.

She squinted at me and made a grimace with her nose.

«You are passing out for no reason and the only thing you worry about is what happened when you weren't conscious?» she said back.

In fact, I was only interested in that.

I was just a little tired, I wasn't a superhero.

The last few weeks had been heavy, I felt weaker and slept badly. Things that usually happen, especially to a crime reporter like me.

«I am fine now, Hanna. I just need to stop overdoing. What did Sebastian do?» I pursued her undaunted.

She raised her eyes to the car's roof and denied with her head.

«Obviously, your attention is only focused on him», she said resignedly.

I smiled at her with innocent eyes.

«He took you to the medical center. As you were sliding to the ground, he caught you on the fly, saving you from an obvious fall. We all ran there. Josh, Greg and I», she explained with sufficiency. She liked playing the part of the offended, but I knew well she was acting.

Every once in a while, we pretended to be angry more than we should to see the reactions of the other.

Lack of confidence?

No, it was a game for us, we knew each other too well to fall into our own traps.

I went back to her words, had Sebastian really brought me to Coleman Medical Center?

Oh, God!

«Meredith said that I was brought to her by Josh and Greg»  
I confusingly objected.

«But with Sebastian's car.»

Even worst!

It meant that my friends had been in close contact with Mr. Filthy Rich. Because that is what he was in the end, and his bearing never denied it.

However...

«Josh tried to reject Sebastian's offer, but he couldn't hold his own. The Winterbournes car is far faster, so the three of them drove you to the medical center together», Hanna went on.

I imagined Josh at the mercy of his emotions, locked in the cockpit of an unfamiliar car, with a *Thirsty* driving while his best friend had fainted out of the blue.

Poor Josh, it will take him a week to recover.

«Dear Christ, what a mess! What did he want from Ginger at the Moonlight?»

What had prompted him, again, to show himself in public?

Why did he do this?

«Who knows? But I have to admit, Reb, that guy looks awesome.»

I burst out laughing heartily.

«It is difficult not to get lost in his inscrutable eyes.»

She nodded and I stopped reflecting while we were reaching our house's street.

A thousand queries crowded my mind. There was only one person able to give the right answers to my questions: Sebastian.

I wanted to see him again.

It was a burning desire that clouded everything else, burned my chest and teased my heart.

I was going to the Black Raven Hill as soon as possible, just a little time, enough to take a shower and find a way out without attracting attention. My car was parked in front of the house door, my friends had even bothered to bring it back from the Moonlight.

I was lucky.

I waited until Hanna went out shopping and, right behind her, I took my car and headed down the road to the Winterbournes' mansion.

I was driving slowly and carefully, the sun was setting and tinged the sky with purple and red, the trees were starting to get thicker and thicker, the wind whistled and made their foliage screech.

The silence was painful to my eardrums, it made me think.

Maybe it would have been better to wait until I had completely recovered and analyze the situation thoroughly before acting on impulse as I had done instead.

I had the feeling that something was going wrong, that something would have caught me off guard.

I was afraid of discovering things I had never wanted, but the doubt was even more suffocating.

I wanted, more than anything else, to put a stop to that story. I demanded the truth, whatever it was.

I was almost at my destination when, suddenly, a dark figure appeared before me.

I instinctively steered, but lost control of the car. I couldn't correct the maneuver in time and ended up against a tree.

The crash will remain indelible in my memories.

The windshield shattered and I felt myself sucked forward. The air bag had protected me, I had bounced on it returning to a sitting position.

My head was spinning, every part of my body was hurting and I couldn't think.

I was scared to death.

I moved slowly and judiciously unfastened the belt that had done its job admirably.

A thud on the roof distracted me, it was a rumble, as if something had landed on it.

Creaking and footsteps.

My heart was bursting in my chest, I couldn't see anything and

I was getting sick.

Someone jumped out, I could see the outlines of two slender legs and a pair of boots on what was left of the hood.

The mysterious figure moved fleetingly and imperceptibly, in a moment a hand grabbed me by the neck, pulled me out of the car and threw me across the road where I landed on the damp ground covered with rotten leaves.

I slammed my pelvis to the ground, my back and finally my head.

That was the coup de grace, I screamed in pain as I turned to the side, a keck made my stomach burn and made me throw up.

I had to calm myself and regain consciousness.

I needed to think quickly and as rationally as possible.

Someone grabbed me by the feet and dragged me away, I tried to see who my attacker was but my vision was blurry and the darkness didn't help.

I only realized there were two of them.

I was stuck, with my face on the ground. They folded my arms on my back, tying my wrists with a rope, then proceeding also with the ankles.

I tried to prevent the practice, but an elbow struck me in the back of my shoulders, causing me excruciating pain and, before I could react, my eyes were covered with a rough and a too tight bandage.

«Let me go!» I tried to scream, but I couldn't, I was out of strength.

I tried to fidget, but I was lifted off the ground and carried on someone's shoulder.

Who the hell were those two people?

I was terrified and angry at the same time.

I was upside down; I felt my temples throbbing and weakness was slowly enveloping me.

«Leave me ...» I moaned again.

«Shut up!»

A tense female voice broke the silence.

«Who are you?»

«You speak too much. Silence!».

A second voice, similar to the first, but darker and more shadowy.

It was a woman supporting me, she managed to keep me still with an unnatural ease despite my slender build.

What was happening?

I heard the creaking of a gate, the sound reached me from the distance, muffled. The breeze was caressing my skin, but not for much longer.

We walked through a door, heavy with the noise it made while closing. A scent of sandalwood incense reached my nostrils as my two kidnappers resumed their march.

Their footsteps echoed between the walls of that place. I hoped we arrived at our destination soon, I couldn't stand the pain in my head anymore. They climbed a ladder, a few more strides, and stopped.

«Brother!» called the one who was carrying me.

They untied my ankles, dropping me to the ground, where I found myself kneeling on a carpet or rug.

«What do you want?»

That voice made me hold my breath, I knew it, I couldn't forget it.

«Your sisters have brought you a birthday present.»

They untied the bandage that covered most of my face and removed it.

«Rebecca?»

I opened my eyes shyly, there was not much light in that room and when I focused on the image in front of me, I shook.

I wasn't wrong. Sebastian was there in front, scrutinizing me with an expression of fury mixed with concern.

Panic hit me, he was handsome, he was wearing a black satin robe and a pair of comfortable pants of the same color.

I was breathing heavily, nothing I was experiencing made any sense.

«What the hell is happening? You made me crush with the car!»

I whimpered in shock but was completely ignored by everyone present.

«I have already told you how much I hate your presents. I don't want them», Sebastian roared at his sisters.

I didn't know, I did not know anything about him or his family, not even how many members it was formed of, I had never cared.

I listened without moving a muscle, my bones were sore as well as my head. What I was hearing had no rational explanation, I didn't understand what they were talking about.

«Then we'll take your dinner.»

A breath behind my back and with a yank a sister pulled me up from the ground, squeezing me around my hips.

«Put her down, Victoria», Sebastian ordered coldly.

His face was a mask of nerves, a sculpted face, but reflecting a sacrilegious, wrong and evil light.

I was afraid of him: was this his hidden side?

«You always treat us badly. You never pay attention to us, instead you should show us respect», the other said, standing next to her partner.

«Shut your mouth, Virginia, and let Rebecca go. You have no idea what you just did.»

Sebastian's heterochromatic eyes became pitch black, two deep wells, shrouded in darkness. He wrinkled his nose and blew his teeth out. A guttural sound came out from his throat as his canines reached out sharp and threatening.

He was a monster, his beautiful face had changed and now I only saw those white, shiny fangs.

With a lightning movement he reached Victoria, who was still holding me. He took her arm, that was keeping me, and bent it backwards. He broke her a bone, she screamed echoing in the surrounding stillness.

«But what is wrong with you?»

Virginia was indignant as she helped her sister.

Sebastian had grabbed me by the waist and now he was holding me tight. My back clung to his chest and his bicep protected me from two identical creatures, but incredibly similar to Sebastian too.

Tall, thin and with long, tapered legs. They wore an all-black suit and had wavered, neat, raven-black hair.

Victoria wore them gathered in a ponytail while Virginia kept them loose, reaching up to her hips. Their eyes were the same shade of purple as their brother's left iris and I saw them changing in turn.

«Go away from here!» Sebastian thundered in a distorted, unhuman voice.

Virginia took her sister by the shoulder and led her to the door.

«The ancients won't appreciate what you've done to me», Victoria grumbled, clutching her broken arm.

The two left the room and I was left alone with Sebastian.

I couldn't believe what had just happened.

The *Thirsty*.

Did supernatural beings exist for real?

And did those old legends they passed down in Hazycreek have a grain of truth?

Maybe I had dreamed of everything, none of this was possible.

Were the Winterbournes really monsters?

I must have had hallucinations, I was dizzy, stressed and under the influence of drugs. But I was pretty sure of what I had seen.

Victoria and Virginia caused the accident for kidnapping me and taking me to Sebastian.

Why on earth would they have done that?

I had witnessed the transformation of their faces: black onyx for eyes and razor-sharp teeth.

Vampires. *Thirsty*. Devil worshipers. Certainly, a distorted view produced by the shock I had suffered.

I was terrified, completely shattered.

Either I was going crazy, or something had really happened.

Sebastian was still holding me in his arms. That contact agitated and embarrassed me. I felt like I had a whirlwind in my head, I could not focus my sight and felt weak.

«I feel sick...» I mumbled as my legs went limp.

Sebastian picked me up and took me in his arms, said nothing and started walking.

I closed my eyes and hugged his chest, I was traumatized. I didn't believe in anything supernatural; it was inconceivable. Precisely for this I was afraid.

How could I defend myself from something I didn't know was existing?

However, as the world swirled in my head, there, in Sebastian's arms, I felt safe and stopped thinking.

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