

book #2 in
the vampire journals

loved

morgan rice

The Vampire Journals

Морган Райс

Loved

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

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Райс М.

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Caitlin and Caleb embark together on their quest to find the one object that can stop the imminent vampire and human war: the lost sword. An object of vampire lore, there is grave doubt over whether it even exists. If there is any hope of finding it, they must first trace Caitlin's ancestry. Is she really the One? Their search begins with finding Caitlin's father. Who was he? Why did he abandon her? As the search broadens, they are shocked by what they discover about who she really is. But they are not the only ones searching for the legendary sword. The Blacktide Coven wants it, too, and they are close on Caitlin and Caleb's trail. Worse, Caitlin's little brother, Sam, remains obsessed with finding his Dad. But Sam soon finds himself in way over his head, smack in the middle of a vampire war. Will he jeopardize their search? Caitlin and Caleb's journey takes them on a whirlwind of historic locations – from the Hudson Valley, to Salem, to the heart of historic Boston – the very spot where witches were once hung on the hill of Boston Common. Why are these locations so important to the vampire race? And what do they have to do with Caitlin's ancestry, and with who she's becoming? But they may not even make it. Caitlin and Caleb's love for each other is blossoming. And their forbidden romance may just destroy everything they've set out to achieve...

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Morgan Rice

Loved

(Book #2 in the Vampire Journals)

*“She dreamt tonight she saw my statua,
Which, like a fountain with an hundred spouts,
Did run pure blood: and many lusty Romans
Came smiling, and did bathe their hands in it:
And these does she apply for warnings, and portents,
And evils imminent...”*

– William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*

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Select Acclaim for The Vampire Journals

“LOVED, the second book in the Vampire Journals series, is just as great as the first book, TURNED, and jam packed with action, romance, adventure, and suspense. This book is a wonderful addition to this series and will have you wanting more from Morgan Rice. If you loved the first book, get your hands on this one and fall in love all over again. This book can be read as the sequel, but Rice writes it in a way that you do not need to know the first book in order to read this wonderful installment.”

– *Vampirebooksite.com*

“THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS series has had a great plot, and LOVED especially was the kind of book you will have trouble putting down at night. The ending was a cliffhanger that was so spectacular that you will immediately want to buy the next book, just to see what happens. As you can see, this book was a huge step up in the series and receives a solid A.”

– *The Dallas Examiner*

“In LOVED, Morgan Rice proves herself again to be an extremely talented storyteller....What was most enjoyable about LOVED is the history. When you get

actual historical connections written in a book, you have a tendency to become much more fascinated in what happens to the characters.”

– *The Romance Reviews*

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

– *Vampirebooksite.com*

About Morgan Rice

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

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

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

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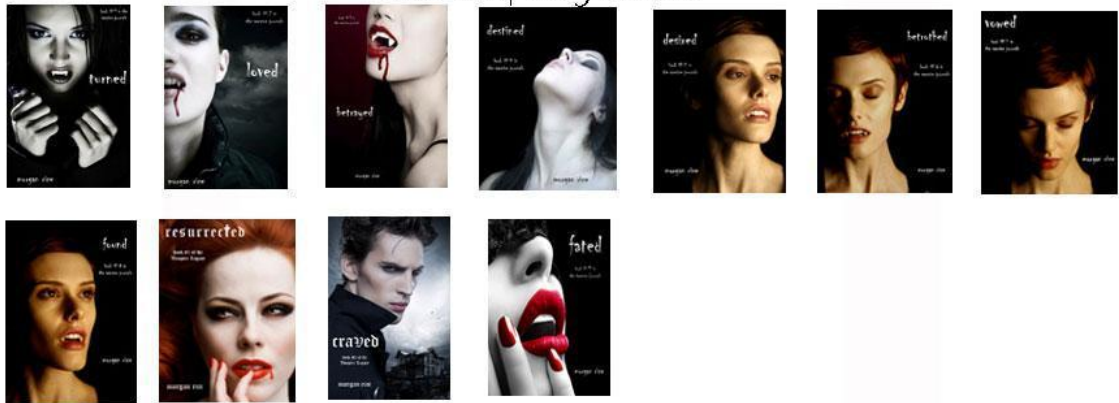
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THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY



the vampire journals





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FACT:

In Salem, in 1692, a dozen teenage girls, known as “the afflicted,” experienced a mysterious illness that led them to become hysterical and to independently scream out that local witches were tormenting them. This led to the Salem witch trials.

The mysterious illness that gripped these teenage girls has never, to this day, been explained.

One

*The Hudson Valley, New York
(Present Day)*

For the first time in weeks, Caitlin Paine felt relaxed. Sitting comfortably on the floor of the small barn, she leaned back against a bale of hay, and exhaled. A small fire raged in the stone fireplace about ten feet away; she had just added a log, and felt reassured by the sound of cracking wood. March wasn't over yet, and tonight had been especially cold. The window on the far wall afforded a view of the night sky, and she could see the snow was still falling.

The barn was unheated, but she sat close enough to the fire for its warmth to take the edge off. She felt very comfortable, and felt her eyes getting heavy. The smell of the fire dominated the barn, and as she reclined a little bit further, she could feel the tension starting to leave her shoulders and legs.

Of course, the real reason for her sense of peace, she knew, was not the fire, or hay, or even the shelter of the barn. It was due to him. Caleb. She sat and stared at him.

He reclined across from her, about fifteen feet away, so perfectly still. He was sleeping, and she took the opportunity to study his face, his perfect features, his pale, translucent skin. She had never seen features so perfectly chiseled. It was surreal, like staring at a sculpture. She couldn't fathom how he had been alive for 3,000 years. She, at 18, already looked older than he did.

But it was more than his features. There was an air about him, a subtle energy that he exuded. A great sense of peace. When she was around him, she knew that everything would be all right.

She was just happy that he was still there, still with her. And she allowed herself to hope that they would stay together. But even as she thought it, she chided herself, knowing that she was setting herself up for trouble. Guys like this, she knew, just didn't stick around. It just wasn't how they were built.

Caleb slept so perfectly, taking such small breaths, that it was hard for her to tell if he was even asleep. He had left earlier, he'd said, to feed. He'd returned more relaxed, carrying a stack of logs, and he'd figured a way to seal the barn door to keep out the snowy draft. He had started the fire, and now that he was asleep, she kept it going.

She reached up and took another sip of her glass of red wine, and felt the warm liquid slowly relax her. She had found the bottle in a hidden chest, under a stack of hay; she'd remembered when her little brother, Sam, stashed it there, months ago, and on a whim. She never drank, but she didn't see the harm in a few sips, especially after what she'd been through.

She held her journal on her lap, page open, a pen in one hand and the glass in the other. She had been holding it for 20 minutes now. She had no idea where to begin. She'd never had trouble writing before, but this time was different. The events of the last several days had been too dramatic, too hard to process. This was the first time she sat still and relaxed. The first time she had felt even remotely safe.

She decided it was best to begin at the beginning. What had happened. Why she was here. Who she even was. She needed to process it. She wasn't even sure if she knew the answers herself anymore.

* * *

Up until last week, life was normal. I was actually beginning to like Oakville. Then Mom marched in one day and announced we were moving. Again. Life turned upside down, like it always did with her.

This time, it was worse. It wasn't another suburb. It was New York. As in city. Public school and a life of concrete. And a dangerous neighborhood.

Sam was pissed, too. We talked about not going, about taking off. But the truth was, we had nowhere else to go.

So we went along. We both secretly vowed that if we didn't like it, we'd leave. Find someplace. Anywhere. Maybe even try to track down Dad again, though we both knew that wouldn't happen.

And then everything happened. So fast. My body. Turning. Changing. I still don't know what happened, or who I've become. But I know I'm not the same person anymore.

I remember that fateful night when it all began. Carnegie Hall. My date with Jonah. And then... intermission. My...feeding? Killing someone? I still can't remember. I only know what they told me. I know that I did something that night, but it's all a blur. Whatever I did, it still sits like a pit in my stomach. I'd never want to harm anyone.

The next day, I felt the change in myself. I was definitely becoming stronger, faster, more sensitive to light. I smelled things, too. Animals were acting strangely around me, and I felt myself acting strangely around them.

And then there was mom. Telling me she's not my real mom, and then getting killed by those vampires, the ones who'd been after me. I never would've wanted to see her hurt like that. I still feel like it's my fault. But with everything else, I just can't let myself go there. I've got to focus on what's before me, what I can control.

There was my getting caught. Those awful vampires. And then, my escape. Caleb. Without him, I'm sure they would have killed me. Or worse.

Caleb's coven. His people. So different. But vampires, all the same. Territorial. Jealous. Suspicious. They cast me out, and they gave him no choice.

But he chose. Despite everything, he chose me. Again, he saved me. He risked it all for me. I love him for that. More than he'll ever know.

I have to help him back. He thinks I'm the one, some kind of vampire messiah or something. He's convinced I'll lead him to some kind of lost sword, that will stop a vampire war and save everybody. Personally, I don't believe it. His own people don't believe it. But I know that's all he has, and that it means the world to him. And he risked everything for me, and it's the least I can do. For me, it's not even about the sword. I just don't want to see him go.

So I'll do whatever I can. I've always wanted to try to find my dad, anyway. I want to know who he really is. Who I really am. If I'm really half vampire, or half human, or whatever. I need answers. If nothing else, I need to know what I'm becoming...

* * *

“Caitlin?”

She woke in a daze. She looked up to see Caleb standing over her, hands resting gently on her shoulder. He smiled.

“I think you fell asleep,” he said.

She looked around, saw her open journal on her lap and snapped it closed. She felt her cheeks flush, hoping he hadn't read any of it. Especially the part about her feelings for him.

She sat up and rubbed her eyes. It was still night, and the fire was still going, although it was down to embers. He must have just woken, too. She wondered how long she had been asleep.

“Sorry,” she said. “It's the first I've slept in days.”

He smiled again, and crossed the room towards the fire. He threw several more logs on, and they crackled and hissed, as the fire grew greater. She felt the warmth reaching her feet.

He stood there, staring down at the fire, and his smile slowly faded as he seemed to become lost in his thoughts. As he looked into the flames, his face was lit with a warm glow, making him look even more attractive, if that were possible. His large, light brown eyes opened wide, and as she watched him, they changed color to a light green.

Caitlin sat up straighter, and saw that her glass of red wine was still full. She took a sip, and it warmed her. She hadn't eaten in a while, and went right to her head. She saw the other plastic glass sitting there, and she remembered her manners.

"Can I pour you some?" she asked, then added, nervously, "that is, I mean, I don't know if you drink –"

He laughed.

"Yes, vampires drink wine, too," he said with a smile, and came over and held the glass while she poured.

She was surprised. Not by his words, but by his laugh. It was soft, elegant, and seemed to fade smoothly into the room. Like everything else about him, it was mysterious.

She looked up into his eyes as he raised the glass to his lips, hoping that he would look back into hers.

He did.

Then they both looked away at the same time. She felt her heart race faster.

Caleb walked back to his spot, sitting on the straw, leaning back, and looking at her. Now he seemed to be studying her. She felt self-conscious.

She unconsciously ran her hand along her clothing, and wished she were wearing something prettier. Her mind raced as she tried to remember what she had on. Somewhere along the way, she couldn't remember where, they had stopped briefly in some town, and she had gone to the only store they had – a Salvation Army – and found a change of clothes.

She looked down in dread, and didn't even recognize yourself. She wore torn, faded jeans, sneakers a size too big for her, and a sweater over a tee shirt. Over that, she had on a faded, purple pea coat, one button missing, also too big on her. But it was warm. And right now, that was what she needed.

She felt self-conscious. Why did he have to see her like this? It was just her luck that the first time she met a guy she really liked, she didn't even have a chance to make herself look nice. There was no bathroom in this barn, and even if there were, she had no makeup on her. She looked away again, feeling embarrassed.

"Was I sleeping a long time?" she asked.

"I'm not sure. I just woke myself," he said, leaning back and running his hand through his hair. "I fed early tonight. It threw me off."

She looked at him.

"Explain it to me," she said.

He looked at her.

"Feeding," she added. "Like, how does it work? Do you...kill people?"

"No, never," he said.

The room fell quiet as he collected his thoughts.

"Like everything in the vampire race, it's complicated," he said. "It depends on the type of vampire you are, and the coven you belong to. In my case, I only feed on animals. Deer, mostly. They are overpopulated, anyway, and humans hunt them, too – and not even to eat."

His expression turned dark.

"But other covens are not so gracious. They will feed on humans. Usually, undesirables."

"Undesirables?"

"Homeless, drifters, prostitutes...those who won't be noticed. That's the way it's always been. They don't want to draw attention to the race.

"That is why we consider my coven, my breed of vampire, to be pure blooded, and other types to be impure. What you feed on...it's energy infuses you."

Caitlin sat there, thinking.

"What about me?" She asked.

He looked at her.

“Why do I want to feed sometimes, but not others?”

He furrowed his brow.

“I’m not sure. It is different with you. You are a half breed. It is a very rare thing...I do know that you are coming-of-age. With others, they are turned, overnight. For you, it is a process. It may take time for you to settle, to go through whatever changes you are.”

Caitlin thought back and remembered her hunger pangs, how they’d overwhelmed her out of nowhere. How they’d made her unable to think of anything but feeding. It was horrible. She dreaded it happening again.

“But how do I know when it will happen again?”

He looked at her. “You don’t.”

“But I never want to kill a human,” she said. “Ever.”

“You don’t have to. You can feed on animals.”

“But what if it happens when I’m stuck somewhere?”

“You will need to learn to control it. It takes practice. And willpower. It is not easy. But it is possible. You can control it. It is what every vampire goes through.”

Caitlin thought about what it would be like to capture and feed on a live animal. She knew she was already faster than she’d ever been, but she didn’t know if she was *that* fast. And she wouldn’t even know what to do if she actually caught a deer.

She looked at him.

“Will you teach me?” she asked, hopefully.

He met her stare, and she could feel her heart beating.

“Feeding is a sacred thing in our race. It is always done alone,” he said, softly and apologetically. “Except...” He trailed off.

“Except?” she asked.

“In matrimonial ceremonies. To bind husband and wife.”

He looked away, and she could see him shift. She felt the blood rush to her cheek, and suddenly the room became very warm.

She decided to let it go. She had no hunger pangs now, and she could cross that path when she came to it. She hoped he would be by her side then.

Besides, deep down, she didn’t really care that much about feeding, or vampires, or swords, or any of it. What she really wanted to know was about *him*. Or, really, how he felt about her. There were so many questions she wanted to ask him. *Why did you risk it all for me? Was it just to find the sword? Or was it something else? Once you find your sword, will you still stay with me? Even though romance with a human is forbidden, would you ever cross the line for me?*

But she was afraid.

So, instead, she simply said: “I hope we find your sword.”

Lame, she thought. *Is that the best you can do? Can’t you ever get the courage to say what you’re thinking?*

But his energy was too intense, and whenever she was around him, it made it hard for her to think clearly.

“As do I,” he responded. “It is no ordinary weapon. It has been coveted by our kind for centuries. It is rumored to be the finest example of Turkish sword ever crafted, made of a metal that can kill all vampires. With it, we’d be invincible. Without it...”

He trailed off, apparently afraid of voicing the consequences.

Caitlin wished Sam was here, wished he could help lead them to her dad. She surveyed the barn again. She didn’t see any recent signs of him. She wished, again that she hadn’t lost her cell on the way. It would have made life so much easier.

“Sam always used to crash here,” she said. “I was sure he’d be here. But I know he came back to this town – I’m sure of it. He wouldn’t go anywhere else. Tomorrow we’ll go to school, and I’ll talk to my friends. I’ll find out.”

Caleb nodded. “You believe he knows where your father is?” he asked.

“I...don’t know,” she answered. “But I know that he knows a lot more about him than me. He’s been trying to find him forever. If anyone knows anything, it’s him.”

Caitlin thought back and remembered all those times with Sam, his always searching, showing her new leads, always getting disappointed. All the nights he’d go to his room and sit on the edge of her bed. His desire to see their father had been overwhelming, like a living thing inside of him. She felt it, too, but not as badly as he. In some ways, his disappointment had been harder to watch.

Caitlin thought of their messed-up childhood, of all that they’d missed, and suddenly felt overcome by emotion. A tear formed at the corner of her eye, and, embarrassed, she wiped it away quickly, hoping Caleb hadn’t seen.

But he had. He looked up and watched her, intensely.

He got up slowly and sat beside her. He was so close, she could feel his energy. It was intense. Her heart started to pound.

He gently ran a finger through her hair, pushing it back off her face. Then he ran it along the corner of her eye, and then down her cheek.

She kept her face down, staring at the floor, afraid to meet his eyes. She could feel them examining her.

“Don’t worry,” he said, his soft, deep voice putting her completely at ease. “We will find your father. We’ll do it together.”

But that wasn’t what she was worried about. She was worried about him. Caleb. Worried about when he would leave her.

If she faced him, she wondered if he would kiss her. She was dying to feel the touch of his lips.

But she was afraid to turn her head.

It felt like hours passed until she finally summoned the courage to turn.

But he had already turned away. He was leaning gently back against the hay, eyes closed, asleep, a gentle smile on his face, lit by the firelight.

She slid closer to him and leaned back, resting her head inches away from his shoulder. They were almost touching.

And almost was enough for her.

Two

Caitlin slid back the door to the barn and squinted at a world covered in snow. White sunlight bounced off of everything. She brought her hands to her eyes, feeling a pain she had never quite experienced: her eyes were absolutely killing her.

Caleb stepped out beside her, as he was finishing wrapping his arms and neck in a thin, clear material. It almost looked like Saran wrap, but it seemed to dissolve in his skin as he put it on. She couldn't even tell it was there.

"What's that?"

"Skin wrap," he said, looking down as he wrapped it carefully again and again over his arms and shoulders. "It's what allows us to go out in the sunlight. Otherwise, our skin would burn." He looked her over. "You don't need it – yet."

"How do you know?" she asked.

"Trust me," he said, grinning. "You'd know."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small canister of eye drops, leaned back and put several drops in each eye. He turned and looked at her.

It must have been obvious that her eyes hurt, because he gently placed his hand on her forehead. "Lean back," he said.

She leaned back.

"Open your eyes," he said.

As she did, he reached over and put one drop in each eye.

It stung like crazy, and she closed her eyes and lowered her head.

"Ow," she said, rubbing her eyes. "If you're mad at me, just tell me."

He grinned. "Sorry. It burns at first, but you'll get used to it. Your sensitivity will go away within a few seconds."

She blinked and rubbed her eyes. Finally, she looked up, and her eyes felt great again. He was right: all the pain had gone away.

"Most of us still won't venture out during sunlight hours if we don't have to. We are all weaker during the daytime. But sometimes, we must."

He looked at her.

"This school of his," he said. "Is it far?"

"Just a short walk," she said, taking his arm and leading him across the snowy lawn. "Oakville high. It was my school, too, until a few weeks ago. One of my friends *has* to know where he is."

* * *

Oakville High looked exactly as Caitlin remembered. It was surreal to be back here. Looking up at it, she felt as if she had just taken a brief vacation, and was now back to normal life. She even let herself believe, for a brief second, that the events of the past few weeks had all just been a crazy dream. She let herself fantasize that all was completely normal again, just as it had been. It felt good.

But when she looked over and saw Caleb standing beside her, she knew that nothing was normal. If there was anything more surreal than coming back here, it was returning with Caleb by her side. She would be entering her old school with this gorgeous man by her side, well over six feet, with wide, broad shoulders, dressed in all black, the high collars of his black leather trench coat hugging his neck, slipping under his longish hair. He looked like he had just walked off the cover of one of those popular teenage girl magazines.

Caitlin imagined what the reaction would be when the other girls saw her with him. She smiled at the thought. She had never been especially popular, and certainly no guys had paid much attention to her. She wasn't unpopular – she had some good friends – but she was hardly in the center of the most popular clique, either. She guessed she was somewhere in the middle. Even so, she remembered feeling scorned by some of the more popular girls, who all seemed to stick together, to walk down the halls with their noses up, ignoring anyone they didn't consider to be as perfect as they were. Now, maybe, they would take notice.

Caitlin and Caleb walked up the steps and through the wide double doors to the school. Caitlin glanced at the large clock: 8:30. Perfect. The first class would just be letting out, and the halls would fill any second. That would make them less conspicuous. She wouldn't have to worry about security, or a hall pass.

On cue, the bell rang, and within seconds, the halls started to fill.

The good thing about Oakville was that it was a world apart from that awful New York City high school. Here, even when the halls filled up, there was still plenty of space to maneuver. Large glass windows lined all the walls, letting in light and sky, and you could see trees everywhere you went. It was almost enough to make her miss it. Almost.

She'd had enough of school. She was technically only a few months away from graduation, but she felt as if she'd learned more in the last few weeks than she ever would by sitting in a classroom for a few more months and getting an official diploma. She loved to learn, but she'd be just as happy to never go back again.

As they walked down the hall, Caitlin scanned for familiar faces. They were passing mostly sophomores and juniors, and she didn't spot anyone from her senior class. But as they passed the other kids, she was surprised to see the reaction on all the girls' faces: every single girl literally stared at Caleb. Not a single girl tried to hide it, or was even able to look away. It was incredible. It was as if she were walking down the hall with Justin Bieber.

Caitlin turned and saw that all the girls had stopped, still watching. Several were whispering to each other.

She looked over at Caleb, and wondered if he'd noticed. If he did, he didn't show any sign of it, and he certainly didn't seem to care.

"Caitlin?" came a shocked voice.

Caitlin turned and saw Luisa standing there, one of the girls she'd been friends with before she moved.

"Oh my God!" Luisa added excitedly, throwing her arms wide for a hug. Before Caitlin could react, Luisa was embracing her. Caitlin hugged her back. It felt good to see a familiar face.

"What happened to you?" Luisa asked, speaking in an excited rush, as she always did, her slight Hispanic accent coming through, as she had only moved here from Puerto Rico a few years before. "I'm so confused! I thought you moved!? I texted and IM-ed you, but you never responded —"

"I'm so sorry," Caitlin said. "I lost my phone, and I haven't been near any computers, and—"

Luisa wasn't listening. She had just noticed Caleb, and she was staring, mesmerized. Her mouth literally dropped open.

"Who's your friend?" she finally asked, almost in a whisper. Caitlin smiled: she had never seen her friend so flustered before.

"Luisa, this is Caleb," Caitlin said.

"A pleasure," Caleb said, smiling down, extending his hand.

Luisa just kept staring. She slowly raised her hand, in a daze, obviously too shocked to speak. She looked over at Caitlin, not understanding how Caitlin could have snagged such a guy. She looked at Caitlin differently, almost as if she didn't even know who she was.

"Um..." Luisa began, wide-eyed, "...um...like...where...like...how did you guys meet?"

For a second, Caitlin toyed with how to respond. She imagined telling Luisa everything, and smiled at the thought. That wouldn't work.

"We met...after a concert," Caitlin said.

It was at least partially true.

"OMG, what concert? In the city? The Black Eyed Peas!?" she asked in a rush, "I'm so jealous! I've been dying to see them!"

Caitlin smiled at the thought of Caleb at a rock concert. Somehow, she didn't quite picture him there.

"Um...not exactly," Caitlin said. "Luisa, listen, sorry to cut you off, but I don't have much time. I need to know where Sam is. Have you seen him?"

"Of course. Everybody did. He came back last week. He looked weird. I asked him where you were and what his deal was but he wouldn't tell me. He's probably crashing out at that empty barn he loves."

"He's not," Caitlin answered. "We were just there."

"Really? Sorry. I don't know. He's a sophomore, you know? We don't really cross paths that much. Have you tried IM-ing him? He's always on Facebook."

"I haven't had my phone –" Caitlin began.

"Take mine," Luisa interrupted, and before she could finish, thrust her cell into Caitlin's hand. "Facebook's already open. Just log in and message him."

Of course, Caitlin thought. *Why didn't I think of that?*

Caitlin logged in, type Sam's name in the search box, brought up his profile, and clicked message. She hesitated, wondering exactly what to write. Then she typed: "Sam. It's me. I'm at the barn. Come meet me. ASAP."

She clicked *send* and handed the phone back to Luisa.

Caitlin heard a commotion, and turned.

A group of the most popular senior girls were heading down the hall, right towards them. They were whispering. And all looking directly at Caleb.

For the first time, Caitlin felt a new emotion well up inside of her. Jealousy. She could see in their eyes that these girls, who never paid her any attention before, would love to steal Caleb away in a second. These girls had sway over any guy in school, any guy they wanted. It didn't matter if he had a girlfriend or not. You just hoped that they didn't set their eyes on *your* guy.

And now they were all staring at Caleb.

Caitlin hoped, prayed, that Caleb would be immune to their powers. That he would still like her. But as she thought about it, she couldn't understand why he would. She was so average. Why would he stick with her when girls like these would die to have him?

Caitlin silently prayed that the girls would just keep walking. Just this once.

But, of course, they didn't. Her heart pounded as the group turned and headed right for them.

"Hi Caitlin," one of the girls said to her, in a fake-nice voice.

Tiffany. Tall, with straight blonde hair, blue eyes, and stick thin. Decked out from head to toe in designer apparel. "Who's your friend?"

Caitlin didn't know what to say. Tiffany, and her friends, had never given Caitlin the time of day. They had never even so much as looked her way. She was shocked that they even knew she existed, and knew her name. And now they were initiating conversation. Of course, Caitlin knew it had nothing to do with her. They wanted Caleb. Badly enough to have to humble themselves to talk to her.

This didn't bode well.

Caleb must've sensed Caitlin's unease, because he took a step closer to her and put one arm around her shoulder.

Caitlin had never been more grateful for any gesture in her life.

With a newfound confidence, Caitlin found the strength to speak. “Caleb,” she answered.

“So, like, what are you guys doing here?” another girl asked. Bunny. She was a replica of Tiffany, except brunette. “I thought you, like, left or something.”

“Well, I’m back,” Caitlin answered.

“So, are you, like, new here, too?” Tiffany asked Caleb. “Are you a senior?”

Caleb smiled. “I am new here, yes,” he answered cryptically.

Tiffany’s eyes lit up, as she interpreted it to mean he was new to their school. “Great,” she said. “There’s like a party tonight, if you want to come. It’s at my house. It’s only for a few close friends, but we’d love to have you. And...um...you, too, I guess,” Tiffany said, looking over at Caitlin.

Caitlin felt the anger swelling inside her.

“I appreciate the invitation, ladies,” Caleb said, “but am sorry to report that Caitlin and I already have an important engagement this evening.”

Caitlin felt her heart swell.

Victory.

As she watched their expressions collapse, like a row of dominoes, she had never felt so vindicated.

The girls turned up their noses and slinked away.

Caitlin, Caleb, and Luisa stood there, alone. Caitlin exhaled.

“OMG!” Luisa said. “Those girls never gave the time of day to anyone before. Much less extended an invite.”

“I know,” Caitlin said, still reeling.

“Caitlin!” Luisa suddenly said, reaching out and grabbing her arm, “I just remembered. Susan. She said something about Sam. Last week. That he was hanging out with the Colemans. I’m so sorry, it just came back to me. Maybe that helps.”

The Colemans. Of course. That was where he’d be.

“Also,” Luisa continued, in a rush, “we’re all getting together tonight at the Franks. You have to come! We miss you so much. And of course, bring Caleb. It’s going to be an awesome party. Half the class is going. You *have* to be there.”

“Well... I don’t know —”

The bell rang.

“I gotta go! I’m so glad you’re back. Love you. Call me. Bye!” Luisa said, waving at Caleb, and turned and hurried down the hall.

Caitlin allowed herself to imagine herself back in her normal life. Hanging out with all her friends, going to parties, being in a normal school, about to graduate. She liked how it felt. For a moment, she tried really hard to push all the events of the last week completely out of her mind. She imagined that nothing bad had ever happened.

But then she looked over and saw Caleb, and reality came flooding back. Her life had changed. Permanently. And it would never change back. She just had to accept it.

Not to mention that she had killed someone, and that the police were looking for her. Or that it would only be a matter of time until they caught her, somewhere. Or the fact that an entire vampire race was looking to kill her. Or that this sword she was looking for could save a lot of people’s lives.

Life was definitely not what it was, and never would be. She had to just embrace her current reality.

Caitlin put her hand into Caleb’s arm, and led him towards the front doors. The Colemans. She knew where they lived, and that would make sense, Sam’s crashing there. If he wasn’t in school, then he was probably there right now. That’s where they’d have to go next.

As they walked out the front doors and into the fresh air, she marveled at how good it felt to be walking out of this high school again – and this time for good.

* * *

Caitlin and Caleb walked across the Coleman property, the snow on the grass crunching beneath their feet. The house itself wasn't much – a modest ranch set on the side of a country road. But way back behind it, at the end of the property, it had a barn. Caitlin saw all the beat-up pickup trucks parked haphazardly on the lawn, and could see the footprints in the ice and snow, and she knew a lot of traffic had headed towards that barn.

That was what kids did in Oakville – they hung out in each other's barns. Oakville was as rural as it was suburban, and it gave them the chance to hang in a structure far enough from your parents' house so that they didn't know or didn't care what you were doing. It was a whole lot better than hanging out in the basement. Your parents couldn't hear a thing. And you had your own entrance. And exit.

Caitlin took a deep breath as she walked up to the barn and slid back the heavy, wooden door. The first thing that hit her was the smell. Pot. Clouds of it hung in the air.

That, mixed with the smell of stale beer. Way too much of it.

Then what struck her – more than everything else – was the smell of an animal. She had never had such keen senses before. The shock of this animal's presence raced through her senses, as if she had just sniffed ammonia.

She looked to her right and zoomed in. There, in the corner, was a large Rottweiler. He sat up slowly, stared at her, and snarled. He broke into a low, guttural growl. It was Butch. She remembered him now. The Colemans' nasty Rottweiler. As if the Colemans needed a vicious animal to add to their picture of mayhem.

The Colemans had always been bad news. Three brothers – 17, 15, and 13 – somewhere along the way, Sam had become friends with the middle brother, Gabe. Each was worse than the next. Their dad had left them a long time ago, no one knew where, and their mom was never around. They basically raised themselves. Despite their ages, they were always drunk or stoned, and out of school more than they were in it.

Caitlin was upset that Sam was hanging out with them. It couldn't lead to anything good.

Music played in the background. Pink Floyd. *Wish You Were Here*.

Figures, Caitlin thought.

It was dark in here, especially coming from such a bright day, and it took her eyes several seconds to fully adjust.

There he was. Sam. Sitting in the middle of that worn-out couch, surrounded by a dozen boys. Gabe on one side and Brock on the other.

Sam was hunched over a bong. He had just finished inhaling, and he set it down and leaned back, sucking in the air and holding it way too long. He finally released it.

Gabe tapped him, and Sam looked up. In a stoned haze, he stared at Caitlin. His eyes were bloodshot.

Caitlin felt a pain rip through her stomach. She was beyond disappointed. She felt like it was all her fault. She thought back to the last time they saw each other, in New York, to their fight. Her harsh words. "*Just go!*" she had yelled. Why had she had to have been so harsh? Why couldn't she have had a chance to take it back?

Now it was too late. If she had chosen different words, maybe things would be different right now.

She also felt a wave of anger. Anger at the Colemans, anger at all the boys in this barn who sat around on those beat-up couches and chairs, on piles of hay, all sitting around, drinking, smoking, doing nothing with their lives. They were free to do nothing with their lives. But they weren't free to drag Sam into it. He was better than them. He'd just never had any guidance. Never had any father

figure, any kindness from their mom. He was a great kid, and she knew that he could be the top of his class right now if only he'd had even a semi-stable home. But at some point, it was too late. He'd just stopped caring.

She took several steps closer to him. "Sam?" she asked.

He just stared back, not saying a word.

It was hard to see what was in that stare. Was it the drugs? Was he pretending not to care? Or did he really not care?

His look of apathy hurt her more than anything. She had anticipated his being so happy to see her, his getting up and giving her a hug. Not this. He didn't seem to even care. As if she were a stranger. Was he just acting cool in front of his friends? Or had she really screwed things up for good this time?

Several seconds passed, and finally, he looked away, handing the bong off to one of his friends. He kept looking at his other friends, ignoring her.

"Sam!" she said, much louder, her face flushing with anger. "I'm talking to you!"

She heard the snickers of his loser friends, and she felt the anger rising up in waves in her body. She was beginning to feel something else. An animal instinct. The anger in her was welling to a point where it was almost beyond control, and she feared that it would soon cross the line. It was no longer human. It was becoming animal.

These boys were big, but the power rising in her veins told her that she could handle any of them in an instant. She was having a hard time containing her anger, and she hoped she would be strong enough to do so.

At the same time, the Rottweiler ratcheted up his growling, as he started slowly walking towards her. It was as if he sensed something coming.

She felt a gentle hand on her shoulder. Caleb. He was still there. He must've sensed her anger rising, the animal instinct between them. He was trying to calm her, to tell her to control herself, not to let herself go. His presence reassured her. But it wasn't easy.

Sam finally turned and looked at her. There was defiance in his look. He was still mad. That was obvious.

"What do you want?" he snapped.

"Why aren't you in school?" was the first thing she heard herself say. She wasn't exactly sure why she said that, especially with all the other things she wanted to ask him. But the motherly instinct in her kicked in. And that was what came out.

More snickers. Her anger rose.

"What do *you* care?" he said. "You told me to go."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean it."

She was glad she had a chance to say it.

But it didn't seem to sway him. He just stared.

"Sam, I need to talk to you. In private," she said.

She wanted to get him out of that environment, into the fresh air, alone, where they could really talk. She not only wanted to know about their Dad; she also just wanted to talk to him, like they used to. And to break the news about their Mom. Gently.

But it wasn't going to happen. She could see that now. Things were spiraling downward. She felt that the energy in this crowded barn was just too dark. Too violent. She could feel herself losing control. Despite Caleb's hand, she just couldn't stop whatever was overcoming her.

"I'm all set here," Sam said.

She could hear more snickering among his friends.

"Why don't you relax?" one of the guys said to her. "You're so high strung. Come sit. Take a hit."

He held the bong out to her.

She turned and stared at him.

“Why don’t you shove that bong up your ass?” she heard herself say, through gritted teeth. A chorus of heckling came from the group of boys. “Oh, SNAP!” one of them yelled.

The boy who’d offered her the hit, a big, muscular guy who she knew had been kicked off the football team, turned bright red.

“What’d you say to me, bitch?” he said, standing.

She looked up. He was much taller than she remembered, at least 6’ 6”. She could feel Caleb’s grip on her shoulder tighten. She didn’t know whether it was because he was urging her to keep calm, or because he was tensing up himself.

The tension in the room rose dramatically.

The Rottweiler crept closer. He was now only feet away. And growling like crazy.

“Jimbo, relax,” Sam said to the big kid.

There was protective Sam. No matter what, protective of her. “She’s a pain in the ass, but she didn’t mean it. She’s still my sister. Just chill.”

“I *did* mean it,” Caitlin yelled, angrier than ever. “You guys think you’re so cool? Getting my little brother high? You’re all a bunch of losers. You’re going nowhere. You want to mess your own lives, go ahead, but don’t drag Sam into it!”

Jimbo look even angrier, if possible. He took a few threatening steps towards her.

“Well look who it is. Miss teacher. Miss mommy. Here to tell us all what to do!”

A chorus of laughter.

“Why don’t you and your faggot boyfriend here come make me!”

Jimbo stepped closer and reached up with his big paw of a hand, and pushed Caitlin on the shoulder.

Big mistake.

The anger exploded inside of Caitlin, beyond anything she could control. The second that Jimbo’s finger touched her, she reached up with lightning speed, took his wrist, and twisted it back. There was a loud crack as his wrist broke.

She raised his wrist high behind his back, and shoved him, face first, into the ground.

In less than a second, he was on the ground, on his face, helpless. She stepped up and put her foot on the back of his neck, holding it firmly on the floor.

Jimbo screamed out in pain.

“Jesus Christ, my wrist, my wrist! Fucking bitch! She broke my wrist!”

Sam stood up, as did all the others, staring, shocked. He seemed really shocked. How his little sister could have taken down such a huge guy, and so fast, he had no idea.

“Apologize,” Caitlin snarled at Jimbo. She was shocked at the sound of her own voice. It sounded guttural. Like an animal.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” Jim yelled, whimpering.

Caitlin wanted to just let him go, let it be over with, but a part of her just couldn’t do it. The rage had overcome her too suddenly, too strongly. She just couldn’t let it go. It was still continuing to course, to build. She wanted to kill this boy. It was beyond reason, but she really did.

“Caitlin!?” Sam yelled. She could hear the fear in his voice. “Please!”

But Caitlin couldn’t let go. She was really going to kill this boy.

At that moment, she heard a snarl, and out of the corner of her eye, she saw the dog. It leapt, in midair, its teeth aimed right for her throat.

Caitlin reacted instantly. She let go of Jimbo and in one motion, caught the dog in midair. She got under him, grabbed hold of his stomach, and threw him.

He went flying through the air, ten feet, twenty, with such force that he went across the room and through the wooden wall of the barn. The wall cracked with a splintering noise, as the dog yelped and went flying out the other side.

Everyone in the room stared at Caitlin. They couldn't process what they'd just witnessed. It had clearly been an act of superhuman strength and speed, and there was no possible explanation for it. They all stood there, mouths agape, staring.

Caitlin felt overwhelmed with emotion. Anger. Sadness. She didn't know what she felt, and she didn't trust herself anymore. She couldn't speak. She had to get out of there. She knew Sam wouldn't come. He was a different person now.

And so was she.

Three

Caitlin and Caleb walked slowly along the bank of the river. This side of the Hudson was neglected, littered with abandoned factories and fuel depots no longer in use. It was desolate down here, but peaceful. As she looked out, Caitlin saw huge chunks of ice floating down the river, slowly separating on this March day. Their delicate, subtle cracking noise filled the air. They looked otherworldly, reflecting the light in the strangest way, as a slow mist rose. She felt like just walking out onto one of those huge slabs of ice, sitting down, and letting it take her wherever it went.

They walked in silence, each in their own world. Caitlin felt embarrassed that she had shown such a display of rage in front of Caleb. Embarrassed that she'd been so violent, that she couldn't control what was happening to her.

She was also embarrassed by her brother, that he'd acted the way he did, that he was hanging out with such losers. She had never seen him act like that before. She was embarrassed she had subjected Caleb to it. Hardly a way for him to meet her family. He must think the worst of her. That, more than anything, really hurt her.

Worst of all, she was afraid where they would go from here. Sam had been her best hope in finding her dad. She had no other ideas. If she did, she would have found him already, herself, years ago. She didn't know what to tell Caleb. Would he leave now? Of course he would. She was of no use to him, and he had a sword to find. Why would he possibly stay with her?

As they walked in silence, she felt the nervousness well up, as she guessed that Caleb was just waiting for the right time to choose his words carefully, to tell her that he had to go. Like everyone else in her life.

"I'm really sorry," she said finally, softly, "for how I acted back there. I'm sorry I lost control."

"Don't be. You did nothing wrong. You are learning. And you are very powerful."

"I'm also sorry that my brother acted that way."

He smiled. "If there is one thing I've learned over the centuries, it is that you cannot control your family."

They continued walking in silence. He looked out at the river.

"So?" she asked, finally. "What now?"

He stopped and looked at her.

"Are you going to leave?" she asked hesitantly.

He looked deep in thought.

"Can you think of any other place your father may be? Anyone else who knew him? Anything?"

She had already tried. There was nothing. Absolutely nothing. She shook her head.

"There must be *something*," he said emphatically. "Think harder. Your memories. Don't you have any memories?"

Caitlin thought hard. She closed her eyes and really willed herself to remember. She had asked herself that same question, so many times. She had seen her father, so many times, in dreams, that she didn't know anymore what was a dream and what was real. She could recite dream after dream where she had seen him, always the same dream, her running in a field, him in the distance, then his getting further away as she approached. But that wasn't him. Those were just dreams.

There were the flashbacks, memories of when she was a young child, going away with him somewhere. Somewhere in the summertime, she thought. She remembered the ocean. And its being warm, really warm. But again, she wasn't sure if it was real. The line seemed to blur more and more. And she couldn't remember exactly where this beach was.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I wish I had something. If not for your sake, for mine. I just don't. I have no idea where he is. And I have no idea how to find him."

Caleb turned and faced the river. He sighed deeply. He stared out at the ice, and his eyes changed color once again, this time to a sea-grey.

Caitlin felt the time was coming. At any moment he would turn to her and break the news. He was leaving. She was no longer of any use to him.

She almost wanted to make something up, some lie about her father, some lead, only so that he would stay with her. But she knew she couldn't do that.

She felt like crying.

"I don't understand," Caleb said softly, still looking out the river. "I was *sure* you were the one."

He stared out in silence. It felt like hours passed, as she waited.

"And there is something else I don't understand," he said finally, and turned and looked at her. His large eyes were hypnotizing.

"I feel something when I'm around you. Obscured. With others, I can always see the lives we've shared together, all the times that our paths have crossed, in any incarnation. But with you...it's clouded. I don't see anything. That's never happened to me before. It's as if...I'm being prevented from seeing something."

"Maybe we never had any," Caitlin answered.

He shook his head.

"I would see that. With you, I can't see either way. Nor can I see our future together. And that has never happened to me. Never – in 3,000 years. I feel like...I remember you somehow. I feel I am on the verge of seeing everything. It's on the tip of my mind. But it's not coming. And it's driving me crazy."

"Well then," she said, "maybe there's nothing after all. Maybe it's just here, now. Maybe there was never anything more, and maybe there never will be."

Immediately, she regretted her words. There she went again, shooting off her mouth, saying stupid things which she didn't even mean. Why had she had to say that? It was the exact opposite of what she'd been thinking, was feeling. She had wanted to say: *Yes. I feel it, too. I feel like I've been with you forever. And that I will be with you forever.* But instead, it came out all wrong. It was because she was nervous. And now she couldn't take it back.

But Caleb was not deterred. Instead, he stepped closer, raised one hand, and slowly placed it on her cheek, pushing back her hair. He stared deeply into her eyes, and she watched his eyes shift again, this time from gray to blue. They stared deeply into hers. The connection was overwhelming.

Her heart pounded as she felt the tremendous heat rising up all throughout her body. She felt as if she were getting lost.

Was he trying to remember? Was he about to say goodbye?

Or was he about to kiss her?

Four

If there was anything that Kyle hated more than humans, it was politicians. He couldn't stand their posturing, their hypocrisy, their self-righteousness. He couldn't stand their arrogance. And based on nothing. Most of them had lived barely 100 years. He'd lived over 5,000. When they talked about their "past experience," it made him physically sick.

It was fate that Kyle had to brush shoulders with them, walk past these politicians every evening, as he rose from his sleep and exited above ground, through their hub at City Hall. The Blacktide Coven had entrenched their habitat deep beneath New York's City Hall centuries ago, and it had always been in close partnership with the politicians. In fact, most of the supposed politicians swarming about the room were secretly members of his coven, executing their agenda across the city, and across the state. It was a necessary evil, this commingling, this doing business with humans.

But enough of these politicians were real humans to make Kyle's skin crawl. He couldn't stand to allow them in this building. It especially bothered him when they got too close to him. As he walked, he leaned his shoulder into one of them, bumping him hard. "Hey!" the man yelled, but Kyle kept walking, gritting his jaw and heading for the wide, double doors at the end of the corridor.

Kyle would kill them all if he could. But he wasn't allowed. His coven still had to answer to the Supreme Council, and for whatever reason, they were still holding back. Waiting for their time to wipe out the human race for good. Kyle had been waiting for thousands of years now, and he didn't know how much longer he could wait. There were a few beautiful moments in history when they had come close, when they had received the greenlight. In 1350, in Europe, when they all had finally reached a consensus, and had spread the Black Plague together. That was a great time. Kyle smiled at the thought of it.

There were a few other nice times, too – like the Dark Ages, when they were allowed to wage all-out war across Europe, kill and rape millions. Kyle smiled wide. Those were some of the greatest centuries of his life.

But in the last several hundred years, the Supreme Council had become so weak, so pathetic. As if they were afraid of the humans. World War II was nice, but so limited, and so brief. He craved more. There had been no major plagues since, no real wars. It was almost as if the vampire race had been paralyzed, afraid of the growing numbers and power of the human races.

Now, finally, they were coming around. As Kyle strutted out the front doors, down the steps, out City Hall, he walked with a bounce in his step. He increased his stride as he looked forward to his trip to the South Street Seaport. There would be a huge shipment awaiting him. Tens of thousands of crates of perfectly intact, genetically-modified Bubonic Plague. They had been storing it in Europe for hundreds of years, perfectly preserved since the last outbreak. And now they'd modified it to be completely resistant to antibiotics. And it would all be Kyle's. To do with as he wished. To unleash a new war on the American continent. In his territory.

He would be remembered for centuries to come.

The thought of it made Kyle laugh out loud, although with his facial expressions, his laugh looked more like a snarl.

He would have to report to his Rexius, his coven leader, of course, but that was just a technicality. In truth, he would be the one leading it. The thousands of vampires in his own coven – and in all the neighboring covens – would have to answer to him. He would be more powerful than he ever had been.

Kyle already knew how he would unleash the plague: he would spread one shipment in Penn Station, one in Grand Central, and one in Times Square. All perfectly timed, all at rush hour. That would really get things rolling. Within a few days, he estimated, half of Manhattan would be infected,

and within another week, all of them would be. This plague spread quickly, and the way they had engineered it, it would be airborne.

The pathetic humans would cordon off the city, of course. Shut down bridges and tunnels. Close air and boat traffic. And that was exactly what he wanted. They would be locking themselves in to the terror that would follow. Locked in, dying from plague, Kyle and his thousands of minions would unleash a vampire war unlike anything the human race had ever seen. Within a matter of days, they would wipe out all New Yorkers.

And then the city would be theirs. Not just *below* ground, but above ground. It would be the beginning, the siren call for every coven in every city, in every country, to follow suit. Within weeks, America would be theirs, if not the entire world. And Kyle would be the one who started it all. He would be the one remembered. The one who put the vampire race above ground for good.

Of course they would always find a use for the remaining humans. They could enslave those who survived, store them in massive breeding farms. Kyle would enjoy that. He would make sure to get them all plump and fat, and then, whenever his race felt like feeding, they would have an endless variety to choose from. All perfectly ripe. Yes, humans would make good slaves. And quite a delectable meal, if bred properly.

Kyle salivated at the thought. Great times were ahead of him. And nothing would stand in his way.

Nothing, that is, except for that damn White coven, entrenched beneath the Cloisters. Yes, they would be a thorn in his side. But not a major one. Once he found that horrible girl, Caitlin, and that renegade traitor, Caleb, they would lead him to the sword. And then, the White coven would be defenseless. Nothing would be left to stand in their way.

Kyle flared with rage as he thought of that stupid little girl, escaping from his grasp. She had made a fool of him.

He turned down Wall Street, and a passerby, a large man, had the bad fortune of walking his way. As they crossed paths, Kyle bumped his shoulder into him for all he was worth. The man stumbled back several feet, smashing into a wall.

The man, dressed in a nice suit, screamed, “Hey buddy, what’s your problem!?”

But Kyle sneered back, and the man’s expression changed. At six foot five, with massive shoulders, and huge features, Kyle was not a man to challenge. The man, despite his size, quickly turned and kept walking. He knew better.

Bumping the man made him feel a bit better, but Kyle’s rage still flared. He would catch that girl. And kill her slowly.

But now was not the time. He had to clear his head. He had more important things to attend to. The shipment. The wharf.

Yes, he took a deep breath, and slowly smiled again. The shipment was just blocks away.

This would be his Christmas day.

Five

Sam woke to a massive headache. He opened one eye, and realized he had passed out on the floor of the barn, in the straw. It was cold. None of his friends had bothered to stoke the fire the night before. They'd all been too stoned.

Worse, the room was still spinning. Sam lifted his head, pulling a piece of straw out of his mouth, and felt an awful pain in his temples. He'd slept in a weird position, and his neck hurt as he twisted it. He rubbed his eyes, trying to get the cobwebs out, but they weren't leaving easily. He had really overdone it last night. He remembered the bong. Then beer, then Southern Comfort, then more beer. Throwing up. Then some more pot, to ease it all out. Then blacking out, somewhere during the night. When or where, he couldn't really remember.

He was hungry but nauseous at the same time. He felt like he could eat a stack of pancakes and a dozen eggs, but also felt like he'd puke the second he did. In fact, he felt like throwing up again right now.

He tried to piece together all the details of the day before. He remembered Caitlin. That, he couldn't forget. It was what really messed him up. Her showing up here. Her taking down Jimbo like that. The dog. What the hell? Did all that really happen?

He looked over and saw the hole in the side of the wall, where the dog had gone through. He felt the cold air rushing in, and knew that it had happened. He didn't really know what to make of it. And who was that dude she was with? The guy look like a NFL linebacker, but pale as hell. He looked like he just stepped out of the Matrix. Sam couldn't even really tell how old he was. The weird thing was, Sam kind of felt like he knew him from somewhere.

Sam looked around and saw all his friends, passed out in various positions, most of them snoring. He grabbed his watch off the floor, saw that it was 11 AM. They'd still be sleeping for a while.

Sam crossed the barn and grabbed a bottle of water. He was about to drink from it, when he looked down and saw it was filled with cigarette butts. Revolted, he set it down, and looked for another. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a half-empty jug of water on the floor. He grabbed it and drank, and didn't stop drinking until he downed nearly half of it.

That felt better. His throat had been so dry. He took a deep breath, and put a hand on one temple. The room was still spinning. It stank in here. He had to get out.

Sam crossed the room and slid opened the door to the barn. The cold morning air felt good. Thankfully, it was cloudy today. Still bright as hell, though, and he squinted against it. But not nearly as bad as it could've been. And snow was falling again. Great. More snow.

Sam used to love the snow. Especially snow days, when he could stay home from school. He remembered going with Caitlin to the top of the hill and sledding half the day.

But now he mostly skipped school, so it didn't really make a difference. Now, it was just a giant pain in the ass.

Sam reached into his pocket and withdrew a crumpled pack of cigarettes. He put one in his mouth and lit up.

He knew he shouldn't be smoking. But all his friends smoked, and they kept pushing it on him. Finally, he'd said why not? So he started a few weeks back. Now, he was kind of liking it. He was coughing a lot more, and his chest was hurting him already, but he figured, what the hell? He knew it would kill him. But he didn't really see himself living that long anyway. He never had. Somewhere, in the back of his mind, he never really believed he'd make 20.

Now that his head was starting to clear, he thought about yesterday again. Caitlin. He felt bad about it. Really bad. He loved her. He really did. She had come all this way to see him. Why was she asking him about Dad? Had he imagined that?

He couldn't believe she was here, too. He wondered if their mom had freaked out that she'd left. She must've. He bet she was freaking out right now. Probably trying to track them both down. Then again, maybe she wasn't. Who cares? She'd moved them one time too many.

But Caitlin. That was different. He shouldn't have treated her like that. He should have been nicer. He was just too stoned at the time. Still, he felt bad. He guessed there was a part of him that wanted things to go back to normal, whatever that was. And she was the closest thing he had to normal.

Why was she back? Was she moving back to Oakville? That would be awesome. Maybe they could find a place together. Yeah, the more Sam thought about it, the more he really liked the idea. He wanted to talk to her.

Sam whipped out his cell and saw the red light blinking. He pushed the icon, and saw that he had a new Facebook message. From Caitlin. She was at the old barn.

Perfect. That's where he'd go.

* * *

Sam parked, and walked across the property, to the old barn. The "old barn" is all they had to say. They both knew what that meant. It was the place they always went when they lived in Oakville. It was at the back of a property with a vacant house for sale that had been on the market for years. The house just sat there, empty, asking way too much. Nobody ever even came to look at it, as far as they could tell.

And in the back of the property, way back, there had been this really cool barn, just sitting there, totally empty. Sam had discovered it one day, and had showed it to Caitlin. Neither of them saw the harm in hanging out in it. They both hated their small trailer, being trapped in there with their mom. One night they stayed up late in it, talking, roasting marshmallows in its really cool fireplace, and they both fell asleep. After that, they'd crash in it every now and again, especially whenever things got too crazy at home. At least they were putting it to use. After a few months, they began to feel like it was their place.

Sam walked across the property, a bounce in his step, as he looked forward to seeing Caitlin. His head was really clearing now, especially after that large Dunkin' Donuts coffee he gulped down in the car on the way over. He knew, at 15, he shouldn't be driving. But he was still a couple years away from getting his license, and he didn't want to wait. He hadn't been pulled over yet. And he knew how to drive. So why wait? His friends let him borrow their pickup, and that was good enough for him.

As Sam approached the barn, he suddenly wondered if that big dude would be with her. There was something about the guy...he couldn't quite place it. He couldn't figure out what he was doing with Caitlin. Were they dating? Caitlin had always told him everything. How come he'd never heard of him before?

And why was Caitlin suddenly asking about Dad? Sam was pissed at himself, because there was actually news he'd wanted to tell her. About the other day. He'd finally gotten an answer to one of his Facebook requests. It was their Dad. It was really him. He said he missed them, and wanted to see them. Finally. After all these years. Sam had already responded. They were starting to talk again. And Dad wanted to see him. See them both. Why hadn't Sam just told her? Well, at least he could tell her now.

As Sam walked, snow crunching beneath his boots, snow falling all around him at an increasing rate, he started to feel happy again. With Caitlin around, things might even get back to normal. Maybe she'd showed up at the right time, when he was so messed up, to help snap him out of it. She always had a way of doing that. Maybe this was his shot.

As he reached into his pocket for another cigarette, he stopped himself. Maybe he could turn things around.

Sam crumpled up the pack and threw it in the grass. He didn't need it. He was stronger than that.

He opened the door of the barn, ready to surprise Caitlin and give her a big hug. He would tell her he was sorry. She would be sorry, too, and things would be great again.

But the barn was empty.

“Hello?” Sam called out, knowing, even as he did, that no one was there.

He noticed the dying embers of a fire in the fireplace, one that must have been put out hours ago. But there were no signs of any possessions, of anything that would show they were still there. She’d left. Probably with that dude. Why couldn’t she have waited for him? Given him a chance? Even just a few hours?

Sam felt as if someone had just punched him as hard as they could in the gut. His own sister. Even she didn’t care anymore.

He had to sit down. He sat on a stack of hay, and rested his head in his hands. He could feel his headache returning. She really did it. She left. Had she gone for good? Deep down, he felt that she had.

Sam finally took a deep breath. All right.

He felt himself hardening up. He was on his own. He knew how to handle that. He didn’t need anyone, anyway.

“Hey there.”

It was a beautiful, soft, female voice.

Sam looked up, hoping for a second that it was Caitlin. But he already knew, from the second he heard it, that it was not. It was the most beautiful voice he had ever heard.

A girl stood in the entryway to the barn, leaning casually against the wall. Wow. She was stunning. She had long, wavy, red hair, bright green eyes. A perfect body. And she looked about his age, maybe a few years older. Wow. She was *smoking*.

Sam stood.

He could hardly believe it, but the way she stared at him, it looked like she was flirting, like she was really into him. He’d never seen a girl look at him quite like that. He couldn’t believe his luck.

“I’m Samantha,” she said sweetly, stepping forward and extending one hand.

Sam stepped forward and placed his hand in hers. Her skin was so soft.

Was he dreaming? What was this girl doing here, in the middle of nowhere? How did she even get here? He didn’t hear a car pull up, or even hear anyone walking towards the barn. And he’d just got there. He didn’t understand.

“I’m Sam,” he said.

She smiled wide, revealing perfect, white teeth. Her smile was incredible. Sam felt his knees going weak, as she looked directly at him.

“Sam, Samantha,” she said. “I like the sound of that.”

He stared back, at a loss for words.

“I saw you out here and figured you must be cold,” she said. “Want to come in?”

Sam racked his brain, but couldn’t figure out what she meant.

“In?”

“The house,” she said, smiling wider, as if that were the most obvious thing in the world. “You know, it has walls and windows?”

Sam tried to comprehend what she was saying. Invite him inside the house? The one that was for sale? Why would she invite him in?

“I just bought it,” she said, as if responding to his thoughts. “I didn’t have a chance to take down the For Sale sign yet,” she added.

Sam was shocked. “You *bought* that house?”

She shrugged. “I had to live somewhere. I’m going to Oakville High. Have to finish my senior year.”

Wow. So, that explained it.

So, she was at Oakville. And a senior. Maybe he'd go back to school, too. Hell, yeah. If she was there, why not?

"Yeah, sure, whatever," he said, as casually as he could. "Why not? Love to check it out."

They turned and walked together, back towards the house. As they did, Sam walked passed his crumpled pack of cigarettes, reached down and picked them up. With Caitlin gone, who cared?

"So, then, are you, like, new here?" Sam asked.

He knew it was a stupid question. She'd already told him that she was. But he didn't know what else to say. He was never good at conversation.

She just smiled. "Something like that."

"Why here?" he added. "I mean, no offense, but this town sucks."

"Long story," she said mysteriously.

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