

The image is a book cover for 'Before Dawn' by Morgan Rice. It features a woman with dark hair, wearing a red corset with black lace-up details and black gloves. She is standing in a gothic archway, looking upwards and to the left. The background is a cloudy sky. The text 'morgan rice' is at the top, 'before dawn' is in the middle, and 'vampire, fallen--book I' is at the bottom.

morgan rice

before
dawn

vampire, fallen--book I

Vampire, Fallen

Морган Райс

Before Dawn

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Райс М.

Before Dawn / М. Райс — «Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»,
— (Vampire, Fallen)

ISBN 978-1-63-291610-5

In BEFORE DAWN (Book #1 of Vampire, Fallen), Kate, 17, hates her life. An outcast in her own family, who doesn't understand her, she is hated by her more popular and beautiful sister, and despised by her controlling mother, who favors her sister over her. Kate's only solace is her friends and her smarts. But even with that, her life seems destined for a dead-end—especially when her mother announces she will have to stay back from college to pay for her sister's tuition. But one day, all that changes. On her 17th birthday, one of the popular boys falls for her. At the same time, a mysterious new boy, Elijah, arrives at her school, and their connection is undeniable. All seems to be turning her way—when a terrible accident turns her life upside down. Kate is supposed to die. But on the verge of death, something happens, something which keeps her alive, which transforms her into something she was never meant to be. In the twilight between life and death, Kate becomes something no one has ever been before. The debut of a spectacular new series rife with love, loss, heartbreak and redemption, BEFORE DAWN offers a fresh take on the vampire genre. With its heart-pounding suspense and characters you will fall in love with, it will keep you reading late into the night and make you fall in love with fantasy all over again.

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Rice Morgan

BEFORE DAWN by Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice

Morgan Rice is the #1 bestselling and USA Today bestselling author of the epic fantasy series THE SORCERER'S RING, comprising seventeen books; of the #1 bestselling series THE VAMPIRE JOURNALS, comprising twelve books; of the #1 bestselling series THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY, a post-apocalyptic thriller comprising three books; of the epic fantasy series KINGS AND SORCERERS, comprising six books; and of the new epic fantasy series OF CROWNS AND GLORY. Morgan's books are available in audio and print editions, and translations are available in over 25 languages.

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!

Select Acclaim for Morgan Rice

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

-*Vampirebooksite.com (regarding Turned)*

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

-*Black Lagoon Reviews (regarding Turned)*

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

-*The Romance Reviews (regarding Turned)*

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

-*Paranormal Romance Guild (regarding Turned)*

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

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

-*The Dallas Examiner (regarding Loved)*

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

-The Romance Reviews (regarding Loved)

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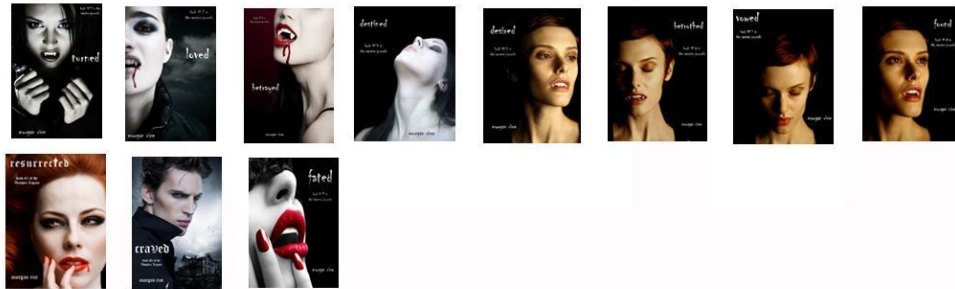
THE SORCERER'S RING



THE SURVIVAL TRILOGY



the vampire journals





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“Come, gentle night; come, loving, black-browed night;
Give me my Romeo; and, when I shall die,
Take him and cut him out in little stars,
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night...”

— *William Shakespeare*
Romeo and Juliet

CHAPTER ONE

Kate woke on the morning of her seventeenth birthday with a pit in her stomach. She wished she could be excited; but she knew, with a sense of dread, that there'd be no presents waiting for her, no special birthday breakfast, no cake. There'd be no cards. She'd be lucky if anyone in her family even remembered.

She felt the warm Santa Barbara sunshine on her eyelids, and she opened her eyes and blinked. Her room was still filled with moving boxes, a chaotic mess, one she could not bring herself to organize. Perhaps it was, she realized, because she didn't want to be here. She didn't want to be with her family – anywhere. Why would she? They hated her.

Kate pulled her cover up over her head, blocking the light out, desperate not to have to get out of bed and face the day. The best thing, she decided, would be to get out of the house as quickly as possible and head to school. At least she had her friends. They knew all too well about her home life, and they would make a fuss over her.

Kate finally pulled herself out of bed and dressed in her favorite comfy jeans and black T-shirt. Then she slipped on her battered red Converse and dragged a comb through her dark brown hair, just enough to get the kinks out but not enough to style it in any particular way. Since it was a special occasion, she put on a slick of mascara and rimmed her eyes with kohl. She stood back and regarded her appearance in the mirror. Her mom would hate her outfit. The thought made her smile.

Out in the hall, the smell of pancakes, bacon, and maple syrup wafted through the air. Her mom loved pretending to be the All-American Mother, with her Soccer Mom hairstyle. She was anything but. A phony. It was all fake. All-American Moms were supposed to love their kids – not choose one daughter to adore while making the other feel small and insignificant.

Kate already knew the pancakes wouldn't be for her. They'd be for her dad and for her sister, Madison, and brother, Max, but not for her. Her mom's jibes echoed in her mind.

If only you took up a sport, you'd be able to have a hearty breakfast too. But since you spend all day reading indoors you'll have to watch your figure.

Kate braced herself before going into the kitchen.

The kitchen in the new house was tastefully decorated, filled with all the latest gadgets. It looked like someone had clipped it out of a magazine. It was everything her mom needed to keep her charade of the perfect family.

Her dad was at the table, his eyes still red from last night's drinking session. He was staring mournfully into his black coffee. His pancakes were untouched beside him. Kate knew that meant he was too hungover to eat them.

Madison, also at the table, was busy applying her makeup in her little handheld mirror. Her dark hair had been styled with gentle waves over her shoulders and it glistened in the sunlight. She was complementing her look with bright red lipstick, making her look more like a college student than the high school senior she really was. From the outside, it didn't look like there was only eighteen months between the girls. Madison was more like a woman, whereas Kate in many ways still felt like a scrawny kid.

Kate shuffled into the kitchen and grabbed her bag off the floor. Max noticed and smiled at her. He was fourteen and by far the nicest person in Kate's family. At least he *tried* to care.

"Want some?" he said, pointing to his stack of pancakes.

Kate smiled. She knew Max loved pancakes and had probably had to employ every ounce of willpower not to devour them. She was touched by the gesture.

"I'm good, thanks," she said.

Just then, her mom turned around from where she'd been pouring juice by the kitchen window.

"No pancakes for Kate," she said. "It looks like you've put on a couple of pounds recently."

She looked Kate up and down, not even bothering to hide the revulsion on her face. Kate returned her glare coldly.

Max looked down at his plate, guilty to be the one to have caused his mom to start criticizing Kate.

“Don’t worry, Mother,” Kate said emotionlessly. “I know the rules.”

Usually, Kate was careful not to talk back to her mom. It only made things worse. But something felt different today. Maybe it was because she was seventeen now. She felt a little bit stronger, a little bit more powerful. At the back of her mind, she felt like she may be on the cusp of something exciting.

Kate opened the fridge and took out a plain yogurt. It was the only thing her mom let her have for breakfast at the moment.

She grabbed a spoon and began eating her yogurt, perched at the kitchen island, not wanting to join the rest of her family at the breakfast table.

Her mom walked over to the table with the jug of orange juice and poured a glass for everyone else.

Madison snapped shut her hand mirror and looked up at her sister.

“Want a lift with me and Max to school?” she said, her eyes roving from Kate’s battered shoes to her ripped jeans and unflattering T-shirt.

Kate glanced at Max. He looked even more guilty than ever. Max had always biked to school with her but since they’d moved to the new house and the journey had become even longer, he’d started getting rides with Madison in the car. She shouldn’t mind – it was an hour cycle to San Marcos Senior School from the new house, as opposed to barely fifteen minutes in the car – but she missed feeling that sense of solidarity with him. It was like by cycling together they were silently showing their disapproval of the pecking order in the house, of which Madison was clearly at the top. But now even that quiet protest had been severed. In her more paranoid moments, Kate wondered whether her mom had insisted on this house by Butterfly Beach just to split her and Max up.

“No rides,” her mom warned, though her tone with Madison was softer. “Kate needs the exercise.”

Kate looked at the four of them at the breakfast table and felt a pang of envy. Her family was completely dysfunctional but they were still all she had, and being separated from them was painful.

“I’ll take my bike,” Kate replied with an exhalation.

Madison shrugged. She wasn’t overly cruel to Kate but she never went out of her way to stick up for her sister. Madison was the favorite daughter in the house and she was pretty comfortable at the top. Associating with Kate too much could harm her. She’d seen firsthand what it was like to fall from grace in their mother’s eyes, and she clearly wouldn’t do anything to risk it.

Across the room, Max caught Kate’s eye and mouthed *sorry*.

She shook her head and mouthed *it’s okay*.

It wasn’t Max’s fault that he was always caught in the middle of everything. He shouldn’t feel like he was to blame for her mom’s injustice.

Max pointed to Kate’s bag and raised his eyebrows.

Kate frowned and peered inside her satchel. There was a powder-blue envelope inside. She gasped. It was clearly a card. She was overwhelmed with gratitude. He’d snuck a birthday card to her.

Kate’s head darted up and she made eye contact with him, as he smiled back sheepishly.

Thank you, she mouthed.

He nodded and his smile widened.

“Don’t you have practice today, darling?” their mom asked Madison, her eyes twinkling with pride as she looked at her beautiful, talented, eldest daughter.

The two began chatting on and on about cheerleader practice, cattily commenting on which of the girls were letting the squad down, or who had gained a few too many pounds recently. They were like two peas in a pod, her mom and Madison. Kate’s mom had been a successful cheerleader when

she was in high school and it was a huge disappointment to her when Kate had shunned the activity in favor of reading and writing.

Just then, their dad stood from the table. Everyone froze. He was a very tall man and loomed over them all, casting a dark shadow across the otherwise bright, sunny kitchen.

“I’m late for work,” he mumbled.

Kate tensed. The only place it looked like her dad should be going was back to bed to sleep off his hangover. He was in an absolute state, with his shirt untucked and stubble on his chin. Maybe his drinking problem was one of the reasons her mom was so critical of Kate’s appearance; maybe she was unable to control how presentable her father looked and so she took it out on her daughter.

The whole room was still and quiet as everyone held their breath. Their dad lumbered around, fishing his car keys out of the bowl on the island countertop, swiping his briefcase up off the floor. His movements were uncoordinated, and Kate worried about him driving to work in that state. She wondered what his colleagues thought of him. Did they know how much he drank in the evenings? Or was he as good at acting as her mom was? When he got to work, did he slip seamlessly into another man’s persona, a better man, a family man, a man who demanded respect? He’d been promoted enough times for them to move to this beautiful house in an enviable neighborhood so he must be doing something right.

Once the front door slammed shut and the car engine started up, everyone relaxed a little. But not much. Sometimes it was only Dad’s unpredictable temper that kept Mom in check. Without him there, she was the boss of everyone and everything, particularly Kate.

“So,” she said, turning cold eyes up to her younger daughter. “I’ve been looking at our bills since we moved into the new house, and it’s looking like college is off the table for you, Kate.”

Kate froze. Her whole body turned to ice.

“What?”

“You heard me,” her mom said. “This neighborhood is expensive and we can’t afford to send both of you. Madison will have to be our priority. You can work through your senior year, then take the next year out to help pay for Madison’s tuition.”

Kate felt her yogurt churning in her stomach. She was so devastated by the news she felt like she would throw up any moment.

“You...can’t do that,” she stammered.

Max hunkered down in his seat. Madison looked uncomfortable too, though Kate knew she wouldn’t stand up for her in any way.

“I’m your mother, and while you live under my roof I can do anything I want. Madison’s got into a great college and I’m not having you jeopardize her opportunity to excel.” Her mom’s expression was fierce. Her arms were folded tightly across her chest. “A congratulations would do, too,” she sneered. “I don’t think I’ve heard a single peep out of you since Madison got the letter. You didn’t even stick around for the cake.”

Her mom had thrown a celebration party for Madison on Monday when the letter had arrived. She’d baked a cake – though Kate had been told she wasn’t allowed a slice – and had even hung up a banner. Madison’s celebration party had been exactly like the birthday party Kate wasn’t going to get.

Kate’s heart was hammering. A red mist started to descend in her mind.

Suddenly, her mouth was running away with her.

“What about me?” she cried. “How about a happy birthday? You haven’t even acknowledged my seventeenth! Why does everything have to be about Madison? How about you caring about *me* for a change?”

Max’s and Madison’s eyes bulged with fear. Kate had never stood up for herself before and both were worried about what the fallout might look like.

By the expression on their mom’s face it was clear she’d completely forgotten Kate’s birthday was today. But she wasn’t going to admit her mistake – she never did.

“I’m not prepared to discuss this with you, young lady. You’re going to clean houses with me to help pay for Madison’s tuition and that’s the end of it.” Her tone was emotionless and cold. “If I hear any more lip from you, I’ll pull you out of school and you won’t even get your high school diploma. Got it?” She gazed at Kate with a look of pure revulsion in her eyes. “Now, aren’t you going to be late for school?” she added.

Kate stood there, fuming. Tears brimmed in her eyes. Other kids looked forward to gifts and parties on their birthdays. All she got was the news that her future had been taken away from her.

She slammed her yogurt carton down and stormed out of the house. It was May and the sun was burning hot, searing her pale skin. She grabbed her bike up from where she’d dumped it after school yesterday and began riding down the street, pumping her legs as hard as she could, trying to find a way to alleviate the anger pulsing through her.

She hated her mom. She hated her stupid new house. She hated her family. It was all a lie. The only thing that had kept her going all these years was the knowledge she’d one day escape from this place, from her awful, suffocating mother and her useless drunk of a father. That one day she’d be off to college. She wanted to go to the East Coast, to get as far away from them all as possible.

Now that dream was over.

CHAPTER TWO

Kate managed to bike to school in record-fast time. Usually she was overtaken at some point by Madison, but she'd been so angry she'd powered herself there in less than forty-five minutes.

Sweat prickled her back as she locked up her bike in the racks beside the parking lot. She knew, self-consciously, that her face would be crimson red and blotchy.

Just then, a car pulled up into the space just behind her and Tony jumped out.

"Oh God," Kate muttered aloud.

Tony was her crush. He played on the football team, hung out with all the cool kids, and yet somehow, despite that all, he was a really lovely person. He was the sort of guy who had time for anyone. He didn't see the kids at high school through the lenses of their cliques. Kate wasn't a fringe girl to him – she was just Kate Roswell. Sometimes Kate felt like he was the only person who didn't view her in comparison to her prettier, more popular, funnier sister.

"Kate," he said, slamming his car door. "How's it going?"

Kate couldn't help but feel awkward. She wished she wasn't standing there covered in sweat and looking exhausted.

"Good," she said, the only thing that came to her mind.

"Hey," he said with a slightly quizzical expression. "You look different today. You've done something to your eyes."

"Mascara," she replied, feeling even more awkward.

"It looks good," he said in a matter-of-fact way. "I hadn't realized how blue your eyes were before."

Kate's stomach swirled. If he wasn't meaning to flirt with her, he was doing a pretty bad job.

"Hey, am I right in thinking it's your birthday today?" he added.

She couldn't help but swoon. How had he known that? She didn't remember having told him.

"Uh, yeah, it is," she said.

Tony smiled, showing off his gorgeous, pearly teeth. "Happy birthday."

He leaned toward her and pulled her into a hug. Kate stood there stiffly. Her whole body seemed to buzz with electricity. She wanted to hug him back but was worried if she lifted her arms she'd expose sweat patches the size of China.

Tony let go and pulled back.

"Thanks," she mumbled, feeling like the biggest dork in the world. She wished she could play it cool. She knew Madison would never have freaked if her crush had just hugged her.

"Hey look," Tony said, his eyes darting over her shoulder as the football team sauntered into the parking lot. "I've gotta rush. Have a good birthday, okay?" He was already walking away, talking over his shoulder as he went. "If I see you at lunch I'll get you a cupcake." Then he was off, jogging away toward his friends.

Kate clutched her bag tightly, well aware she'd just made a total mess of that whole interaction. It had been the eyes comment that had thrown her. She couldn't help but wonder if Tony had been flirting with her. Maybe there was a little part of him that had a crush on her, too.

"Kate!" someone shouted, and she turned around to see her three best friends rushing up toward her.

Dinah Higgins, Nicole Young, and Amy Tan had been Kate's best friends since they all met in ninth grade. Dinah was African American and came from a big, warm family who seemed to have more time for Kate than her own did. She wore her hair in neat cornrows, with reds and white woven in. Nicole lived with just her dad; her mom had died from cancer when she was really little. She was Californian through and through, but tried to hide it under layers of black dresses and biker boots. Because her hair was naturally blond, she often went to town dyeing it all kinds of colors. At the

moment, the ends were bright orange. Amy was the girl that Kate felt the closest to of all of them. Her parents were both Chinese and had moved to America to give her and her brother better prospects. As a result, there was a huge cultural difference between Amy and her parents. They viewed her as a bit of an oddity, with her love of pop culture, obsession with reality TV, and goofy personality. It was for those reasons that Kate and Amy were so close. Amy felt like an outsider in her family, too.

The three girls grabbed Kate and wrapped her up in a bear hug.

“Happy birthday!” they all cried.

Many of the cooler kids in the parking lot were looking over with disgusted expressions – they were way too cool to behave like that in public. But Kate didn’t care. She loved her friends and how special they always made her feel, despite the fact she was plain and boring in comparison to Madison.

“We have presents!” Dinah beamed, pulling a badly wrapped gift from her bag and depositing it in Kate’s arms.

“Open mine first,” Nicole added, shoving a small box toward Kate.

“No guesses for what this is,” Amy said, handing her a book-shaped parcel.

Kate was weighed down by all the gifts. “Thanks, guys,” she beamed. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Just open them!” Nicole cried.

They went and sat on the grass beside the tennis courts. Kate opened all her gifts – a box of chocolates from Dinah, some skull-and-crossbone earrings from Nicole, and a secondhand copy of *Romeo and Juliet*. Kate loved Shakespeare and she loved romantic tragedies, and would spend all evening reading them if she could.

“You guys are the best,” she said, hugging each of them.

Amy nudged her friend. “So... what did Mother Monster say this morning? Did you get a happy birthday?”

Kate shook her head. “No.” It was then she remembered the card from Max. “Max was the only one who even acknowledged me.”

She pulled out the card. It had gotten a little crumbled in her bag. She opened up the envelope and saw a sparkly pink card with a flower on the front. It was the kind of card you got for a four-year-old, but she was still grateful. Max must have spent his pocket money on it; there was no way their mom would have lent him some.

The inside of the card read: “To my sister on her birthday.” He hadn’t written a message, just “Kate” at the top and “Max” underneath. Looking at the simple card made her heart clench again, reminding her of the painful, disappointing morning. Before Kate could stop herself, her bottom lip began to tremble.

“Kate!” Dinah cried, throwing her arms around her friend. “What’s wrong!”

Kate tried to speak through her tears but they were overwhelming her. All three girls knew how difficult her home life was – they’d listened to her and helped her through three years of anguish already – and felt nothing but concern for their friend.

“Mom said,” Kate began, sniffing hard, “she said that I can’t go to college. That I have to work to help pay for Madison’s tuition.”

Amy’s mouth dropped open. Dinah shot Kate a pained expression. Nicole squeezed her arm.

“She can’t do that!” Amy cried.

“That’s so unfair,” Nicole said, frowning hard. “You can always stay with my family if you need to get out from under her roof.”

“Or mine,” Dinah added. “My mom loves you. You know that.”

“Thanks,” Kate grumbled. “But I don’t know what I’ll do if I can’t get to college. That’s like my escape plan, you know?”

The girls nodded. They’d had many a conversation about college, even going as far as to discuss attending the same one so they wouldn’t have to be split up.

“I just don’t know what to do,” Kate added, succumbing once again to her tears.

“I suppose Madison didn’t stick up for you,” Amy said. She hated Madison for not supporting Kate and was always trying to tell Kate not to give her sister so much slack. As far as Amy was concerned, Madison should call their mom out for treating Kate so badly, rather than innocently lapping up her compliments and attention.

“No,” Kate replied, glumly.

“Hey,” Nicole said, wrapping an arm around her friend. “It’s going to be okay. You’ve got us, we’ll watch your back. Something will happen to turn it all around. I promise.”

Kate just didn’t know how she could be so sure. Nicole was always going on about things changing and working out eventually, but the only way things seemed to change for Kate was for the worst. Her dad’s drinking got worse, her mom’s hold over her life got stronger, Madison became more and more distant as her status as golden child became more and more elevated. Kate’s life seemed to be following a downward trajectory, and losing the possibility of going to college was about the last straw.

Nicole was still babbling on. “There’s the prom coming up,” she was saying. “Who knows what might happen there.”

“Oh, please,” Kate replied. “Boys are about the last thing on my mind at the moment.”

“Oh really?” Amy said with a raised eyebrow. “Because I thought I saw a certain Tony Martin giving a certain Kate Roswell a hug in the parking lot.”

Despite her sadness, the thought did lift Kate a little. She felt a smile tug at her lips. “Yeah. He, um, he said my eyes looked nice with the mascara.”

“Oh my God!” Dinah shouted. “He’s totally into you!”

Kate laughed and shook her head. “I don’t know about that. He’s nice to everyone.”

“Yeah, *nice*,” Amy said, “not flirty!”

Nicole was looking triumphant. “Didn’t I tell you things would be on the up again soon?”

Kate waved her hands, trying to temper her friends’ excitement.

“I really don’t think it’s like that,” she said.

“Maybe he’s going to ask you to the prom,” Dinah squealed.

The thought made Kate’s stomach flutter with excitement. Was there a chance he might ask her? Just then she remembered her mascara and how she’d been crying.

“Oh God, am I all streaky?” she asked, panicked.

“No, girl,” Dinah replied. “You’re looking good. But I’m going to glam you up at lunch time, as a birthday treat!”

Dinah loved makeup. Because of her big family she didn’t get to buy all the clothes and shoes she wanted to keep up with trends so she was forever modifying her clothes herself and creating makeup. She’d become incredibly creative. She always encouraged the others to experiment with their looks more. Nicole was the only other one who went all out with her appearance. Amy tried to stay neutral so as not to freak her family out, though she had a penchant for miniskirts and knee-high boots whenever she got the chance.

Kate was the only one who’d never really fully explored her identity through fashion. She felt like most choices she made were specifically to irritate her mom. Ever since she gave up wearing her mom’s silky, frilly, pastel-colored dresses and going to pageant shows, she’d become a tomboy. But she didn’t know if she was truly a tomboy or whether she just enjoyed knowing it pissed off her mom when she dressed like one.

Kate smiled. If there was any chance Tony might be thinking of asking her to the prom, she may as well give herself every chance in the world. She already felt a million times better than she did during her angry cycle ride this morning. She knew her friends would be there for her.

“And look, if Tony doesn’t ask me to the prom, it won’t be a big deal,” Kate added. “We can always go with each other.”

“I’m so glad you said that,” Amy replied. “I don’t think my parents will let me get in a car with a *boy!*”

They all laughed. It felt good to know they had each other’s backs, that they didn’t need to rely on guys to have a good time at the prom.

The bell rang and the girls stood and went in their separate directions. Amy and Kate both had math so they walked arm in arm along the corridors.

Kate suddenly felt Amy squeeze her hand. She looked up and realized Madison was hanging around the lockers with her cheerleader friends. She had her back to Kate and Amy, not knowing they were behind her, and was recounting some story that was making the girls roar with laughter.

“And then Mom was like, ‘Young lady, you’re going to become a cleaner like me so that Madison can go to college.’ Can you believe it? I was like, ‘Oh my God, she’s like, turning my sister into a slave!’ And this is all happening on her birthday! Like, I got a car for my seventeenth. She gets, like, nothing.”

She roared with laughter, as did the other girls with her. Kate’s stomach seemed to fall to her feet. How could Madison be laughing about her like that? She knew Madison didn’t exactly have her back at home, but she didn’t realize she’d gossip about her misfortune to her friends.

Amy clung to Kate’s arm, trying to support her, trying to keep her grounded. She helped steer Kate past Madison and the gang of mean girls. As Kate passed, she knew Madison would recognize her, that she’d realize she’d overheard her.

She looked back over her shoulder at her sister. They locked eyes and Madison was wearing a slightly shocked expression. But other than that, she gave no hint of acknowledgment that she’d trampled over Kate’s feelings. Then she broke the gaze, turning her full attention to her friends.

Kate trudged to class, feeling lower than ever before.

CHAPTER THREE

Kate made it through her first two classes, though her mood didn't improve. She was relieved when the bell rang and it was lunchtime and she could be reunited with her friends.

Kate stood in line with her friends in the crowded cafeteria and tried not to look too closely at the selection of food. It was pretty dire. Nicole, as a vegetarian, had the hardest time finding stuff she could eat. Today she was having potato waffles and beans, while Dinah and Amy were faring slightly better with chicken tikka masala and rice. Kate thought the curry looked a bit too fatty but Dinah, slightly bigger than average, didn't care because she was tall and well proportioned. Amy was stick thin and seemed to be able to eat anything she wanted without putting on weight. Nicole seemed to stay trim from her fussiness alone.

In the end, Kate opted for a salad. Though she knew her mom's taunts about her weight were unfounded, she still couldn't help but feel like maybe, if she did just lose those extra couple of pounds, her mom wouldn't be as harsh with her.

"Girl," Dinah said when she saw her plate, "don't tell me that's all you're eating. Dang, it's your birthday! Have a dessert at least!"

Kate lowered down in her seat.

"Actually, Tony said if he saw me at lunch he'd get me a cupcake," she said.

The other three girls all grinned and gave each other looks. Kate felt a little silly to have mentioned it.

"Oh my God," Nicole suddenly said.

Everyone stopped giggling and looked round to see what she was looking at.

A gorgeous boy had just wandered into the cafeteria.

"Oh," Kate said, turning back. "That's Elijah. He's a new senior, started about a month back. I've heard Madison talking about him."

"That heavenly man's been walking around the school for a whole month and this is the first I've ever seen of him?" Nicole said without a slight bitter tone to her voice. She seemed transfixed by him, like she couldn't tear her eyes away.

Dinah seemed to like the look of him, too.

"Oh hell yes. He's got that whole Leonardo DiCaprio in *Titanic* thing going on."

"But brooding," Nicole murmured. "Dark and brooding."

Kate took another look. Elijah was strikingly attractive. But from what she'd heard Madison telling her mom, Elijah was a bit of a loner. He never seemed to have anyone to hang around with. Madison had tried to get him to join her gang when he started a month earlier but he'd been reluctant, something Madison took as a slight. She'd since decided he was a bit of a freak and not worthy of her attention.

He did seem pretty elusive. In fact, this was probably the first time Kate had ever seen him in the cafeteria. San Marcos was a big school but someone like Elijah wasn't the type to get lost in a crowd. She wondered why she hadn't seen him more often.

"You know what we were saying about prom?" Nicole said. "I take it back. I'd ditch you three in a heartbeat if it meant I got to go with him!"

Everyone began to laugh. Except for Kate, that is. She'd been looking at Elijah, studying the way he moved through the crowds of people. He was so light on his feet it almost looked like he was floating. He had a graceful way of moving, like each step was part of a dance routine. It was mesmerizing.

Just then, he turned his head as though sensing someone looking at him. Their eyes met across the busy cafeteria. In that moment, Kate felt a sensation wash through her like nothing she'd felt

before. It was like a bolt of electricity striking her, like every nerve ending in her body had been set on fire.

A group of younger kids walked past Kate's table, blocking her view.

By the time they'd passed, Elijah was gone.

She craned her head, trying to see him exiting through the door he'd been headed toward, but she couldn't see him at all. He'd disappeared.

"Guys," Kate said to her laughing friends, "did you just see that?"

They all looked at her, confused.

"See what?"

"Elijah. He was there one minute, and then he completely disappeared."

She kept looking at the spot where he'd been a moment before. There was no way he could have left the cafeteria that quickly.

"Elijah," Nicole laughed, clutching her heart theatrically. Then she looked at Kate with mock aggression. "I will fight you for him, you know. Fists, hair pulling, nail scratching, the whole shebang."

The girls started laughing again, but Kate didn't join in. Her gaze was transfixed on the spot where Elijah had once stood. Her mind was reeling.

What had she just witnessed?

CHAPTER FOUR

Kate walked with the other girls back down the crowded halls, lost in her own world. Her mind was still reeling. The other girls didn't seem to understand why she was so shaken, and every time she insisted that Elijah had literally disappeared in front of her face they found some way to explain it away. She'd gotten tired of trying to make them understand and had ended up leaving lunch in a huff.

By the time the school day was over, Kate's stomach was groaning. All she'd eaten was a plain yogurt and a salad, and a couple of chocolates from the box Dinah had given her. Along with her emotional morning, the angry, fast cycle ride here, and the weirdness of Elijah disappearing into thin air, it was converging to make her feel weak and lightheaded.

She unlocked her bike and began her cycle ride home, making sure she took it easy; she didn't want to fall. Her bag, filled with textbooks and gifts from her friends, was heavy, making the ride even more exhausting.

The sun wasn't quite as painfully hot at three p.m. and there was a cool breeze coming up off the ocean. In the distance, Kate could see the mountains of Rattlesnake Canyon Park. It was one of her favorite places to go. She loved nature, the quiet, the beauty of it. She liked to go up there on weekends and think about life. It always reminded her that the world was vast and that her home life was just one tiny slither of experiences the earth had to offer.

Would she ever get to see the world though? Without college, how would she ever get to live the life she wanted? She couldn't bear the thought of being stuck in California for another year, cleaning rich people's houses like her mom did, stuck to her side like a shadow. It wasn't fair! Why should she have to earn money for Madison's tuition? Madison was nowhere near as studious as Kate; in fact, she probably only wanted to go to college to meet guys.

Kate decided then that she'd have to find a way to keep back some of her earnings so she could save up for a plane ticket to the East Coast and then just disappear one day. It seemed like a dramatic solution but what other choice did she have?

Kate was so lost in her thoughts she hadn't noticed the group of people ahead of her before she was almost upon them. They were senior guys from her school and they were milling all over the sidewalk and road, shouting and shoving in a jumble. Kate was about to steer around them when she realized that there was someone between them. A boy was being battered around like a beach ball, jostled back and forth, from one guy to another. She noticed the guy's dark hair and delicate features. It was Elijah.

"Hey!" Kate shouted, slamming on her brakes beside the group. "Leave him alone!"

One of the guys turned to her, scowling. "Run along, little girl," he said, cruelly. "I don't think your boyfriend wants rescuing from a girl."

Just then, Kate got a proper look at Elijah. He was downcast. There was a tear in the shoulder of his T-shirt. But as the boys ignored Kate and went back to pushing him back and forth, he didn't even stick up for himself.

"Elijah!" she shouted. "Fight back!"

He looked at her then, as though seeing her for the first time, but continued to walk. She couldn't understand.

But Kate wasn't about to leave Elijah to get his ass kicked because of some stupid masculine belief that girls couldn't stick up for guys. She had a bike, which meant she was faster, and she could use it as a battering ram.

She hitched her backpack off, heavy and lumpy with textbooks. She swung it and charged at the gang of guys, smacking one of them across the back with it.

"Hey!" he shouted, stumbling forward. "Get off, you lunatic."

He didn't seem too ruffled by Kate, though she hoped he was just trying to save face in front of his friends.

Maybe it was dumb taking on a group of senior boys with nothing but her bag and bike as weapons, but Kate had been overtaken by some kind of force, like a protective goose looking after her nest. She was standing up against Elijah's bullies in the way she wished Madison would stand up for her against their bully of a mom.

She doubled back on herself, cycling at them as fast as she could go, making them scatter all over the place.

"Who is that freak?" one of the guys was saying to another as he dodged out of the way.

"Isn't she Madison's sister or something?" another replied, laughing at the sight of Kate wielding her backpack.

"Ew, gross," the first said. "But Madison's so hot. She must be adopted, right?"

Fueled by their rude comments, Kate charged again. She smacked another guy with her backpack, so hard this time he staggered into another. They both fell to the ground in a heap.

Trying to save face, the guys began dispersing, like a bunch of kids leaving their ice cream to an irritating, persistent wasp. They'd clearly realized that Kate would make their attack on Elijah more hassle than it was worth.

Kate was panting hard from the exertion and anxiety, though there was a little bit of triumphant adrenaline coursing through her as well. She glared at the boys as they left, sauntering down the road, then turned back to where Elijah had been.

But Elijah had gone.

"Hey!" Kate shouted aloud. The least the jerk could have done was stick around to say thank you.

She craned her head around, trying to see where he'd gone. But the more she looked, the more it became apparent to her that there was no way Elijah had had the time to disappear from her sight. There were no houses or shops along this part of the road for him to go into, just a rocky mountainous patch on one side and a steep drop down to the roofs of the houses on the street below on the other. Where had he gone?

She looked around, squinting against the bright sunlight, but he was nowhere to be seen. Then she caught sight of a figure right down at the bottom of the hill, walking along in that graceful, precise way she recognized to be Elijah's. She had no idea how he'd gotten so far in such a short space of time. She wanted to put it down to the adrenaline messing with her perception, but an uneasy feeling was starting to overcome her. It was just like in the cafeteria. Elijah, she was certain, could move across distances faster than possible.

Kate wasn't sure what compelled her to chase after him. Maybe it was that whole being seventeen and not wanting to put up with so much crap from people, but she felt at the very least she deserved some gratitude from him for putting her neck on the line. She'd squashed the box of chocolates from Dinah while bashing the boys. They were seeping gooey pink sugar filling all over the inside of her bag. And her copy of *Romeo and Juliet* had a huge crease across the cover now.

She began pedaling in the direction of Elijah. It was a long road and at points it became quite steep. All Kate had to do was lean forward and let gravity propel her down the hill. She was usually a slow, careful cyclist, not much of a thrill seeker, and it felt good to feel the wind racing through her hair as she careened down the hill.

"Hey!" she shouted when she thought Elijah might be in earshot.

He turned and gave her a puzzled expression. Once again, the moment their eyes locked, a strange sensation swept through Kate. There was an intensity in Elijah's eyes, a haunted sort of expression behind them. If the eyes were indeed the window to the soul, Elijah's soul seemed to be old before its time.

Dazed by the sensations coursing through her body, Kate squeezed the brakes on her handlebars. But she was going way faster than she normally would, her bike was old, the brakes were a little worn, and they didn't engage as quickly as she would have liked. She was practically flying, approaching the end of the road at a crazy speed. At the bottom, she realized with dread, was the highway.

Kate's heart began hammering as she realized there was no way she would be able to stop in time. She was heading right for the road.

Time seemed to slow to a painful pace as she raced to the inevitable, unstoppable conclusion that she was about to die. Her bike passed the stop sign, her useless brakes screeching and making the smell of burned rubber permeate all around her. Then she flew right over the white markings in the road – and right into oncoming traffic.

Kate caught sight of an RV heading right for her. She saw the eyes of the startled driver – and then she felt the impact.

Kate's body slammed against the RV. She didn't feel any pain at all but she knew from the deafening crunch noise that she'd broken something. Possibly everything.

The car's horn began to blare as she bounced off the windshield, rolling up then back down again, all the way. Her bike was flying up into the air, then falling. She rolled off the front of the RV and hit the ground with a crash, head first.

Black stars danced across her vision. Her bike landed beside her, breaking into pieces on impact with the hard asphalt. Kate became aware of the sensation of numbness, of the metallic smell of blood.

But the pain didn't come. She knew it was bad. Bad that she wasn't moving. Bad that she wasn't feeling anything.

Kate's head fell to the side and her gaze found the glittering ocean in the distance. As though at the end of a long tunnel, Kate could hear the sound of cars braking, of car doors slamming and people crying out. She could smell gasoline and rubber and metal, and something burning.

Then, through all the chaos, she saw Elijah's face appear before her and felt herself being scooped up into his arms. He was saying something, but she couldn't make sense of the words. His expression was intense, panicked.

And just before her vision went black, she thought she saw fangs protrude from his mouth. She couldn't move at all, couldn't even scream. But there came the sensation of something sharp, hot, and wet on her neck, she was sure of it.

Then the world disappeared.

CHAPTER FIVE

The first thing Kate became aware of was an electronic beeping sound. She hadn't spent much time thinking about dying, but she was pretty sure it sounded like this. It was soon joined by another noise; a squeaking. And then she became acutely aware of the sensation of moving forward.

Wheels, she thought. I'm on a gurney.

Then came a strange, overly clean smell, like bleach and detergent.

I'm in a hospital, she thought.

So not dead then, she realized. At least not yet.

Kate felt something in her throat and something else digging into her arm. Not painful but irritating. She tried to raise a hand but nothing happened. She could hear strange noises coming from above her, like people talking through water. As the seconds passed the distortions became less pronounced, and she began to pick out voices and words.

"It's a miracle," someone said. It was a voice she didn't recognize.

"I've never seen anyone come back with these kinds of injuries," another voice said.

"We'll see if we can get consent from the parents to test her," the first said again. "Because she was flat-lining when they picked her up, then all of a sudden she was breathing again. They hadn't even had time to defibrillate her."

Kate wondered how long it had been since the RV had hit her. Had she just gotten to the hospital or had she spent years in a coma? The latter thought made her start to panic. What if she'd been knocked unconscious on her seventeenth birthday and only woken up again on her thirtieth birthday? Or fortieth? Or eightieth!

She began getting increasingly agitated at the thought of coming face to face with Amy, Dinah, and Nicole, all married with children. She knew she was lucky to be alive, but the thought that everyone had moved on without her was terrifying.

Somehow, as though fueled by her intense emotions, she managed to get her eyelids to open.

"She's waking up," someone said.

"That's not possible. She's in an induced coma."

"I'm telling you!" the first said again, more insistently. "She just opened her goddamn eyes."

Kate could tell by the tones of their voices that something wasn't right. The speed with which she'd been hit, the angle with which she hit the ground, the way her head had collided with the asphalt – she absolutely one hundred percent should have been dead.

Hearing their voices, knowing that she had somehow defied all logic to be still be alive, made her start to panic even more. She started blinking and began to be able to focus on her surroundings. White ceiling tiles were flashing above her and on either side were doctors and paramedics, all looking confused.

She tried to ask what was happening to her but she couldn't move her tongue properly. There was something in her mouth.

She reached out with a hand, trying to grab one of the doctors. As she moved, she noticed the line coming from her wrist. It was some kind of needle, a drip or IV. The sight made her feel queasy – she'd never liked needles. There was dried blood on her arm.

Kate realized then that it was very soon after the accident. There'd be no blood on her otherwise, and no paramedics. They wouldn't be rushing her down a corridor like this. If she'd been in a coma for years and years she'd be lying in some ward somewhere, completely forgotten by everyone, probably covered in dust and cobwebs.

Knowing that no significant time had passed calmed her down a little, but she was still unnerved by the doctors and the expressions on their faces.

At last she managed to reach out and clasp hold of one of the doctor's sleeves. He looked down at where her hand was gripping him, bunching the fabric up. His face paled, as if he were looking at a ghost. He looked up at the paramedic.

"I thought you said her bones were shattered."

The paramedic looked down at her hand, too.

"They were," he said.

All at once he stopped walking, as though so completely stunned he could no longer carry on. They left him behind and he disappeared from view.

Finally, Kate felt the gurney turn a corner, and at last she came to a rest. The doctors were fussing round her, attaching her to different machines, all making their own kind of bleeping noise. She was prodded and poked. But with every minute that passed, she seemed to regain another faculty, or control over another body part.

She tried to speak but that thing in her throat was in the way. So she reached up and felt a sort of plastic guard around her mouth.

"Hey, hey, hey," one of the doctors said, trying to guide her hand away. "That's helping you breathe. Leave it where it is."

She did as she was told.

"Let's increase her propofol," one of the doctors was saying to another. "There's still a chance of brain swelling. A coma will give her the best chance of reducing damage."

"She's had the maximum dose," the second said.

"Well then there's been a mistake," the first argued. "That paramedic seemed out of it to me. Probably wrote down the wrong thing. There's no way that girl's had the maximum dose."

"Okay, fine, if you say so."

Kate felt a tingling sensation from the place where the drip was inserted in her wrist. A weird feeling crept through her body, like the sort of tiredness you feel during a boring movie. It definitely didn't feel like she was being anesthetized.

The doctors were all looking at each other now.

"There must be something wrong with the supply," the first said. "Oh God, look into it, will you? The last thing we need right now is another lawsuit."

One of the doctors disappeared, leaving just two behind.

One of them leaned down. He shined a flashlight into each of her pupils.

"Are you on drugs?" he asked.

She shook her head.

He didn't look like he believed her.

"Because if you're on anything that might interfere with the propofol we need to know. No amphetamines?"

Kate shook her head again. She desperately wanted the tube out of her throat so she could speak to them.

The doctors looked at each other, completely at a loss as to what to do. Just then, another person walked over to the bed. It was a woman in a suit.

"We've got an ID for the girl," she said. "There was a card in her backpack. Kate Roswell from San Marcos Senior High School. The principal is going to get me the parents' phone numbers."

The doctors nodded.

"Or you could have just asked her yourself," one of them said, gesturing to where Kate was lying in bed, wide awake, blinking patiently.

The woman faltered.

"I was told she was being put into a coma."

"She was," the other doctor said.

The two of them gawked at her, and they seemed completely stunned.

“Can you excuse us for a moment?”

They walked off together, in a daze.

The woman turned to Kate.

“Kate, can you hear me?” she said.

Kate nodded.

“And you’re Kate Roswell, is that right?”

Kate nodded again.

“I’m Brenda Masters, I’m a social worker here at the hospital. Has anyone told you what happened?”

Kate shook her head. But she didn’t need to be told. She remembered everything. The RV as it slammed into her body, crushing her bones to pieces. The blackness creeping into her vision as she felt death closing in on her. And Elijah. Elijah with his fangs bared, sinking them into her neck.

“Typical doctors,” the woman said. “They never think to actually speak to the patients.” Brenda sat herself down in the seat next to Kate. “You were hit by an RV. You’re in Santa Barbara Cottage Hospital. I’ll be working with you and your parents while you recuperate. Don’t worry, they’re going to be here really soon.”

Brenda patted her arm.

But the last thing Kate wanted right now was her family. They’d find some way to blame her, surely. They’d say she was reckless for letting the brakes on her bike become faulty, or for riding down that hill too fast. She could imagine her mom now, laying into her. Worse, she might claim that Kate was attention seeking because of Madison getting to go to college and her not having a cake on her birthday. A million thoughts crossed her mind and tears brimmed in her eyes.

A small frown appeared between Brenda’s eyebrows. “You don’t want your parents here?” she asked.

Kate shook her head again and one of her tears fell down her cheek.

The woman seemed concerned by the revelation. She probably didn’t understand why a seventeen-year-old girl who’d been in a near fatal accident didn’t want her family around her. She’d probably never met anyone like the Roswells.

“Did you do something you weren’t supposed to?” Brenda said gently. “Because if you’re worried they’ll be angry at you then I’m sure that won’t be the case. They’ll just want to know you’re okay.”

Kate shook her head again. They would be angry, yes, but it wasn’t because of what she’d done specifically. It was because of her very existence.

Her tears began to fall in torrents.

“We have to inform your parents,” the woman said. “You’re legally a child.” Then her voice softened. “Kate, I’m going to ask you something important and I want you to really think about how you answer. Nod yes if you agree with what I say and shake your head no if you don’t. Kate, do your parents hurt you?”

Kate swallowed, her throat sore against the tube. How she desperately wanted to nod yes. But her life didn’t constitute abuse, not in the way that woman meant. At least, she didn’t think so anyway. But did abuse always have to mean punches and kicks, or could it mean being deprived of food, being ostracized for no reason, being ignored on your birthday? Kate didn’t fully know. And though she was aware that a simple nod of the head now could set a whole chain of events in motion, could perhaps even see her taken from her home and placed with people who didn’t despise her and wanted her to go to college, there was always Max to think about. She couldn’t put him through that kind of trauma, he was just a kid.

She shook her head.

The woman nodded, seemingly satisfied with the answer. She probably thought Kate was some silly teenage runaway. That she'd gone out thrill seeking and got herself nearly killed and was trying to avoid being disciplined.

"I'll make the call," the woman said, standing and smoothing down her skirt.

She left and Kate realized she was alone for the first time. The tube in her throat was absolutely maddening. It itched like crazy. And she desperately wanted to be able to speak. She needed to ask someone where Elijah was. She remembered being cradled in his arms. Why didn't he come with her in the ambulance? It must have been him who'd called it.

Kate managed to sit up in her hospital bed, finally getting herself a decent view of the ward. It was filled with other people asleep. She realized they were all in comas, just like how she was supposed to be. They'd wheeled her here expecting her to be out until whatever swelling that her brain may have had had gone down. But her body had completely rejected the drugs.

Her bones had healed too. That's what the doctor had said. Every bone in her arm –ulna, radius, humerus – had been shattered and yet she felt no pain at all. In fact, her arms were working perfectly well. She could rotate her hands in front of her and wiggle all her fingers. In fact... she reached to her mouth and found the strange plastic mouthpiece. She wedged her fingers under it and began to pull.

The tube started sliding up out of her throat. It was incredibly uncomfortable, but she kept pulling until the whole thing was out. At last she could take a proper breath for herself. She threw the tube to the floor, glad to be rid of it.

The next thing irritating her was the IV in her arm. She ripped off the plaster securing it in place and tugged the needle out. Blood appeared from her skin and she licked it up instinctively.

Without the tubes and wires, she felt much more comfortable, and much more able to assess the situation. Her body felt different but not in a bad way. There was no pain anywhere at all. The only discomfort she was aware of now that the tube was out was a gnawing sensation in her stomach. She was starving. Was that a usual thing to feel after a near death experience?

She touched her body through the thin paper dress. Everything was where it was supposed to be. She felt a little annoyed that they'd probably cut all her clothes off in order to check for wounds that weren't really there. But... how hadn't she sustained any injuries? No cracked ribs or punctured lungs. No ruptured organs at all. It was all so confusing.

She noticed then that her backpack had been wheeled in with her. She reached down and found her book from Amy covered in the squished chocolate from Dinah. Then right at the bottom she found her cell phone. She'd never been allowed a smartphone like Madison, so she had one of those cheap yet indestructible ones. Luckily, it had survived the accident.

She grabbed it and texted Amy first, partly because her name was quicker to get to and partly because she was her closest friend of the three.

Hit by car. Totally fine. Plz find Elijah.

She hit send and waited. A few seconds passed before she got her reply.

WHAT!?!?!?!?!?

Kate sighed. Clearly Amy wasn't going to listen to her when she said she was totally fine. She texted back.

Honestly, no big deal. Nothing broken. Plz plz plz find Elijah.

Amy's reply arrived moments later.

Ur clearly sick!! Where r u?

Frustrated, Kate put her phone down on the bed beside her. She desperately needed to find Elijah and ask him what was going on. She was certain he would know.

Just then, she noticed the doctors approaching the bed. They'd found another one, an older man with white hair, and they were striding purposefully toward her. When they saw her sitting up, with the tube on the ground and the IV drip lying on the bed, they stopped where they were.

"Is this some kind of joke?" the new, white-haired doctor said.

The others shook their heads emphatically. “I was with her the second she got out of the ambulance. The paramedics said she’d flatlined but when she came out of the ambulance she was breathing.”

“She’d had two doses of propofol,” the other added.

“How is she sitting up like that?” the white-haired doctor said.

Kate started to get very frustrated with the way they were talking about her rather than to her. She was the one who’d just been through a traumatic experience and they were treating her like a circus freak show act.

“Hi,” she said, relieved to find the tube had done nothing bad to her throat. “I think I’m feeling better now. Can I go home? I don’t see the point in worrying my family.”

She started to get up but the doctors ushered her down.

“No, wait. I’m sorry but you can’t go until we’ve tested you. You might have brain damage.”

“I’m pretty sure I don’t,” Kate said. “Want me to say the alphabet backwards or something?”

The doctor with the white hair looked at the others, astounded. Finally, he asked the question that was on everyone’s lips:

“What are you?”

CHAPTER SIX

Kate's parents didn't arrive at the hospital until several hours later. Her dad hadn't been able to (or hadn't wanted to) leave work early. Her mom, despite being the one to receive the initial call from the hospital, had been "too busy." It was around seven p.m. by the time anyone from her family came to see her. The hospital had even tried appealing to Madison, who at eighteen was the closest thing they could find to an "adult" next of kin. But she was too busy with an "important" cheerleading competition after school – clearly far more important than her sister's life – and she hadn't come.

During that time, various doctors and nurses had been in and out to see Kate, each as baffled as the last. In the end they decided that she was playing some kind of sick joke, that she'd faked the accident to get attention, a sentiment her parents shared when they finally arrived.

"There's nothing wrong with your daughter at all," the doctors told her mom and dad. "Not physically anyway. But attention seeking to this extent is suggestive of some type of psychological disturbance."

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