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SHAWN SARLES

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FIVE YEARS LATER

## CHAPTER 1

### GRACE

The doors creaked shut behind her, groaning like the Cryptkeeper's coffin as Grace stepped off the school bus. She watched the other kids scatter in front of her, running to meet their friends, whooping and hollering like they hadn't seen one another the day before. Like they hadn't group-chatted all night long. Grace's hand fluttered to the necklace hanging around her neck, but she fought off the urge, pulling her backpack tight against her shoulders instead.

Freshman year of high school was supposed to be hard. She knew that. Everything was different. Her classmates and teachers. The building. All the electives and extracurriculars. There was a whole new set of rules for getting by. For just surviving. But she'd never imagined it would be this lonely.

Grace buried her chin in her chest and started walking, skirting between groups, trying her best to stay invisible but at

the same time—oddly—wanting to be seen. She made it to the entrance but stopped short as her reflection caught her off guard. There, in the depths of the glass doors, her big eyes stared back at her, a message primed on the tip of her mirror tongue.

*You'll never be pretty enough.*

And she wouldn't. Not with her round face. Not with the limp brown bangs hanging across her forehead. Not with her pudgy cheeks and shapeless body. She took a step back so she could see it all, running her palms over her rumpled Mistress of the Dark T-shirt, smoothing out Elvira's bouffanted head and bright red lipstick. But not even the Mistress could take away the sting, the ugly feeling of being ugly.

This time Grace couldn't fight it. Her hand flew to her neck and snagged on the thin silver chain. She fished out the locket and stared at it, the charm shining in the morning light. She rubbed her fingers against the smooth metal and then opened it.

A woman looked back at her from the miniature black-and-white photograph, sitting with her head tilted toward the camera, dark hair swooping into a neat updo, skin flawless, her cheeks shadowed by good bone structure.

This was beauty. And it was copied there in the tiny mirror opposite the photo. If Grace squinted, she could almost imagine it was her own reflection. Her own features, passed down from generation to generation.

But who was she kidding? She'd never look like that. Never be so thin and elegant. Never be pretty.

Grace snapped the locket shut and tucked it back underneath her shirt. Then she dipped her head down, making sure to avoid her reflection this time as she pulled open the school door and walked inside.

The halls bustled around her, charged with their usual rhythm and flow, completely oblivious to her. But there was something different in the air this morning. A crispness that Grace couldn't pinpoint. Then she spotted the flyers tacked up everywhere, the orange papers smoldering along the walls. And she remembered why she had broken out her Elvira T-shirt. It was October first.

She plucked a flyer off the wall and made her way to her locker, walking absently as she read through the info.

The Harvest Halloween Carnival.

The high school sponsored the festival every fall. Students put together booths to raise money for their athletic teams and after-school clubs and Winter Formal. It was open to the whole town, so Grace had gone many times with her dad, every year since her mother—

Her breath caught in her throat and a pain lanced into her chest. She pressed the locket underneath her shirt, and its presence grounded her. Kept those lonely thoughts away. For now.

She looked back at the flyer and memorized the dates. The carnival always took place the week before Halloween. And

while she'd been several times, she'd never gotten to go on opening night, when the carnival was reserved for the high school students only, letting them kick things off with a costumed blowout, minimal adult supervision. This was the first year she'd get to go, and she couldn't wait.

Carefully, Grace folded the flyer and bent over. She slung her backpack off her shoulders and slid the piece of paper into one of its pockets. She'd have to figure out a costume. And it'd have to be something good. Something that would make people notice her.

Halloween—monsters and ghosts and spooky stuff—it was kind of Grace's thing. In the dark, hidden under a layer of makeup and an over-the-top wig, costume jewelry swinging from her neck and studding her fingers, she could escape. She could be anyone and anything.

Zippering her backpack, Grace started to rise but froze halfway. A breath caught in her throat, but this time it was accompanied by a flutter in her stomach instead of a stabbing pain. Up ahead on the stairwell landing, a boy sat all by himself.

An outcast like her. A cute one. Calvin Lee. She'd had a crush on him ever since they'd shared a carpool in elementary school. But he hardly noticed her existence anymore. Or anyone's, really. He always had his nose stuck in his notebook, scribbling away, lost in his own world.

Not that Grace had noticed. It wasn't like she'd been watching

him for years. Waiting for him to say hello. To make a move. To fall in love with her.

She shook her head, but kept watching Calvin.

She knew that it was silly and probably all in her head, but she remembered that day. The day of the accident. The day her mother—

The day they'd taken turns standing in front of Elena's grandmother's mirror. Grace had spoken that name—Bloody Mary—into the mirror and she'd felt a chill run up her spine. She'd seen someone hidden there in the depths of her reflection. Recognized Calvin's face. Her soulmate.

Which meant she just had to wait. If she'd seen him, then he must have seen her. They must be destined for each other.

“Out of the way,” a voice crackled, ripping Grace out of her fantasy. She stumbled forward and barely managed to spring to her feet without face-planting. Clutching her backpack, she turned around and met the glossy lips and perfect blonde hair of her harasser. Her former best friend.

“I said move.” Elena waved her sparkly fingernails in front of Grace's face, snapping impatiently. “You're blocking my locker.”

The two girls flanking Elena had a good giggle as Grace shuffled out of the way, her shoulders hunched while her ears burned bright.

“What are you even wearing?”