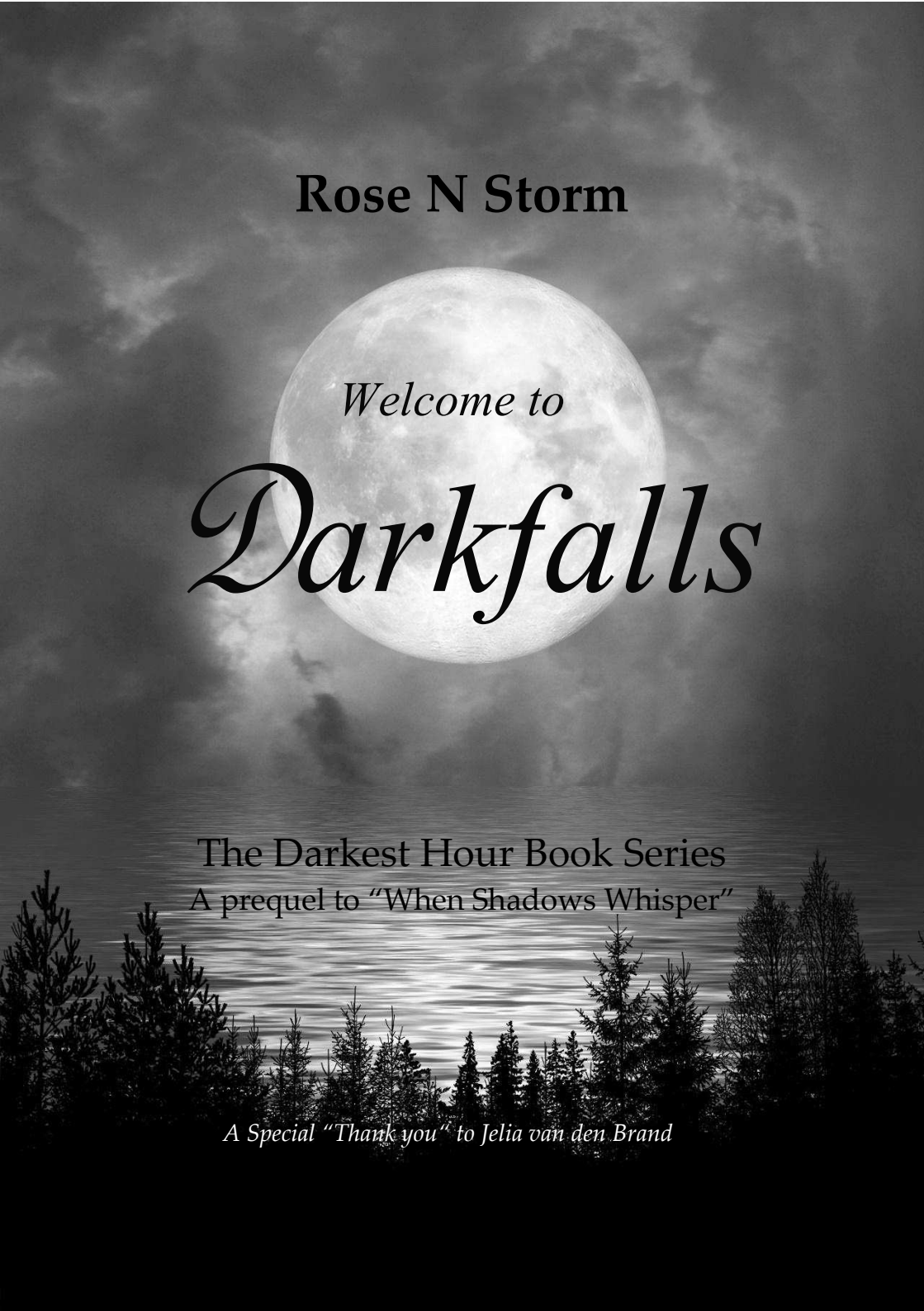




Rose N Storm

Welcome to

Darkfalls

The Darkest Hour Book Series

A prequel to "When Shadows Whisper"

A Special "Thank you" to Jelja van den Brand

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Young Adult



Prologue

Have you ever done something on a wild impulse and

immediately thought: Yeah... never doing that again?

A few days ago, I had one of those moments.

It started as just a random idea. My friend and I decided to hold a séance one night. You know, bring out a Ouija board, dim the lights, and see what would happen. My aunt had passed away not long before, and no one really knew what had happened to her. One moment, she was fine, and the next, she was gone. Suicide, they said.

I've always been fascinated by the afterlife. Seriously, I think I've checked out every paranormal book in the library at least twice. Ghost stories, witches, white magic, black magic, you name it, I devoured it. But weirdly enough, I never had the chance to read about how to actually use a Ouija board. I figured, how hard could it be? Light some candles, ask a few questions... easy, right? I thought I was ready.

Turns out, I had no idea what I was messing with.

Now?

Now I know better... now that it's too late...



Chapter 1

The moving truck had barely pulled away when Daniel found himself standing in the driveway, staring up at the house that would be his new home, at least for now. The place loomed in front of him, all peeling paint and shadowed windows, surrounded by trees so tall they swallowed the sunlight. Even in the middle of the afternoon, the backyard was draped in shadows. A shiver ran down his spine. This place was nothing like the city.

“Daniel, can you give me a hand?” his mom called from the doorway, juggling shopping bags as she nudged the front door open with her foot.

“Yeah, coming, Mom.” Daniel sighed, dragging himself toward the house. He hated this. His mom knew he didn’t want to move, but she insisted they needed a fresh start. So here they were, stuck in a town called Darkfalls.

“Oh, honey... don’t stress so much,” she said as he reached for one of the bags. “It’s just temporary. You wanted a fresh start too, remember?”

Daniel snorted under his breath. “No, Mom. *You* wanted a fresh start. I hate this stupid move. Why’d it have to be here, in this dump?”

Another chill skittered down his spine as he glanced at the trees towering behind the house. There wasn’t a single ray of sunlight breaking through the canopy, only

thick, heavy shades. It made the whole place feel cold, even now. No wonder the house was still on the market. “You’ll get used to it. You’ll make new friends, start school... I heard there’s even a pizza place in town,” his mom offered with a hopeful smile.

“Well, at least something decent exists in this dead town,” Daniel muttered, shaking his head.

His mom laughed softly and carried another bag inside.

“See? It’s going to be fine.”

But Daniel wasn’t so sure.

As he turned to grab another bag, a sudden gust of wind swept through the yard, rattling the trees. For a moment, it felt like someone was standing right behind him. He spun around, heart jumping, as he nearly collided with a girl standing just a few feet away. She had a wriggly bulldog at her side.

“Whoa!” Daniel stumbled back, clutching his chest.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you,” the girl said, flashing a sheepish grin.

“Well, you failed at that one,” Daniel laughed, shaking off his surprise. “I’m Daniel.” He held out a hand.

“Salina. And this little guy is Buster.” She gave the bulldog’s leash a gentle tug. “We live just down the street. I saw you moving in and figured I’d say hi.”

“Yeah, that’s us. Hopefully just temporary.”

“Oh...” Salina’s smile faded for a second.

Daniel glanced away, feeling a little awkward. His mom had promised they wouldn’t be here long, but he didn’t know how to explain that to a stranger.

“Need a hand with the bags?”

He snapped back to reality “Sure, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all! And maybe afterward, I can show you around? If you want.”

“Sure, why not?” Daniel shrugged. Anything was better than being stuck inside that gloomy house.

Salina picked up a bag and followed him in.

Inside, his mom looked up in surprise when she saw Salina in the doorway. “Wow, that was fast. We just got here and you’re already making friends.”

Salina laughed. “I’m Salina Walker. I live a few houses away.” She gestured toward the street.

“I’m Claire, Daniel’s mom,” Claire said warmly. “So, pizza tonight?”

“Sure,” Daniel said, shooting his mom a thumbs-up.

“Shall we head out?”

“Oh, Danny, maybe Salina wants to stay for dinner?”

Salina shook her head with a polite smile. “Thanks, but maybe another time. I promised my parents I’d be home for dinner. Nice meeting you, ma’am.”

“Call me Claire, otherwise I’d feel old.”

Daniel smirked. *Old? She was thirty-seven.*

“Back by seven, okay, Danny?” Claire reminded as they headed out.

Outside, the sudden cold hit him again, crawling under his skin. The wind danced through the trees, whispering against his ears. Daniel told himself it was just the forest, the branches, the rustling leaves... but the unease coiled in his chest anyway.

“Daniel?” Salina nudged him, snapping him out of his thoughts.

“Huh? Sorry, what?”

“Where’d you go just now?”

“Uh, nowhere. Just tired from the drive, I guess. What did you say?”

“I said your mom’s pretty cool.”

“Oh. Yeah, she’s alright.” Daniel kicked at a can on the ground just as a car roared past. “So, where exactly are we going?”

“I want you to meet some friends. And I’m pretty sure they’ll want to meet you too.”

Daniel hesitated, then gave a small nod. He didn’t want to seem like a total loner, especially not to Salina.

They turned a corner and reached a small playground where a handful of teens were hanging out.

“Look, there’s Salina!” a girl with a high ponytail of blonde curls called out, bouncing over.

“Hey, Heather! I brought someone,” Salina said cheerfully. “Figured you guys might want to meet him.” Daniel offered a shy wave.

“This is Daniel. He’s just moved in, temporarily,” Salina explained.

“Cool! Where are you living?” Heather asked, curious.

“The old Anderson place.”

A blond guy lounging on the bench stood up, draping an arm around Salina. “Hey, babe. Missed you,” he murmured, pulling his shoulder-length hair into a messy knot.

“Daniel, this is my boyfriend, Jess,” Salina introduced. Jess shook Daniel’s hand with an easy grin. “Welcome to Darkfalls, man.”

Heather added with a smirk, “He’s my stepbrother.”

Another guy, darker-haired, leaned against the fence.

“Who’s the new guy?”

“His name’s Daniel, Aaron,” Salina said with a hint of annoyance. “Where have you been? Mom was looking for you.”

Aaron vaulted the fence effortlessly. “Mom can wait, Sal. We were chilling at the lake.”

Salina crossed her arms, shaking her head.

Daniel chuckled softly. “So, you two are siblings, huh?”

“Unfortunately, yeah.” Salina shot Aaron a playful glare and shoved his shoulder.

Heather’s blue eyes flicked over Daniel with a mischievous sparkle. “I’m Heather. Nice to meet you.”

“Yeah, I got that,” Daniel replied, smiling as they shook hands, feeling a bit awkward under her gaze.

Aaron helped a girl with chestnut hair over the fence.

“Careful, Carrie.”

The girl grinned at Daniel. “I’m Carrie, Aaron’s girlfriend,” she said brightly, shaking his hand.

Daniel liked her immediately, warm, open, easy to talk to.

“Don’t mind Heather. She always does this,” Carrie whispered with a teasing smile.

Heather rolled her eyes.

“Come on, I want to show you something,” Salina said suddenly, tugging Daniel’s sleeve. “Your turn to watch Buster, Aaron!”

Aaron groaned, but Salina ignored him, planted a quick kiss on Jess’s cheek, and pulled Daniel along. “We’ll be back soon!”

“Hey, better keep your hands off my girl, Daniel!” Jess called after them, laughing.

“Don’t worry, I’ll behave!” Daniel shouted back.

Salina giggled as Jess shook his head, and they slipped out of sight.



As they wandered down the street, Daniel glanced around curiously. The town felt quiet, still. Maybe too still. But it *was* a weekday; most people were probably at work, so it made sense.

Salina chattered away, pointing out shops and hangouts, though Daniel only half-listened. She was cute, sure, but wow, she could talk.

Eventually, they reached the edge of town.

“There it is!” Salina said, motioning toward a lake in the distance.

They plopped down in the sand, gazing out over the water.

For the first time all day, Daniel felt his shoulders relax.

“Jess seems cool,” he said, glancing at her.

“Yeah, he is.” Salina’s eyes softened as she stared at the rippling lake. “I’m surprised Aaron didn’t start something earlier. Maybe because of Jess. Aaron knows better than to push it when Jess is around. Not that he’s scared, it’s just... they’ve promised me they won’t fight anymore. There used to be a lot of bad blood between them.”

“Heavy stuff... how long have you and Jess been together?”

“Almost three years.”

“Wow. So you guys started young.”

“Yeah, we were, like, twelve. Total puppy love.” She giggled. “Not that it’s surprising, Heather’s my best friend, and Jess is her stepbrother.”

Daniel grinned. “Okay, so we’ve got Heather, Jess, Aaron, Carrie... I’m definitely going to need flashcards for all these names.”

Salina laughed. “You’ll get the hang of it.”

“So... what do you think of Darkfalls?” Daniel asked, glancing sideways at her. A part of him wondered if she ever felt the same strangeness he’d felt since arriving.

Salina shrugged. “It’s okay here. Why?”

Daniel hesitated. “I don’t know. I’m just more of a city guy. It’s... really quiet here.” He looked at her again, noticing how the fading sunlight made her dark eyes glimmer with hints of amber. She seemed lost in thought.

“I know what you mean,” she murmured. “People here don’t talk much.” She stood, brushing sand from her jeans, then held out a hand to pull him up. “Come on, we should head back. It’s getting dark.”



Chapter 2

The playground was still filled with laughter when they got back. The cool evening air carried the sound, but the sky had already deepened into a rich indigo.

Aaron grabbed his jacket and slung it over his shoulder. Buster trotted after him, tail wagging, tongue lolling as he caught sight of Salina.

Salina rubbed her arms and gave a small nod, glancing up at the darkening sky. "Hey, we're gonna head out," she called to the others, waving.

Jess, Heather, and Carrie looked up from where they lounged on the swings and benches.

Daniel figured his pizza was probably on its way as well, and honestly, the chill was starting to bite at his skin. "I'll walk back with you guys," he said, waving goodbye.

"Aww, already?" Heather pouted, flipping a curl over her shoulder.

"It's getting late," Salina said with a small smile. "We'll see you guys tomorrow."

Jess got up and wrapped his arms briefly around Salina, pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead. "See you tomorrow, babe."

He shot Daniel a friendly grin. "Hey, Danny-boy, you coming to Zack's party?"

The invite caught Daniel off guard. "When is it?"

"The day after tomorrow. We're all going."

Heather clapped her hands, eyes lighting up. “Can’t wait!”

“Of course Daniel’s coming,” Salina said, glancing at Aaron. “Let’s go.”

Aaron gave the others a salute. “Later, losers,” he said with a grin before kissing Carrie goodbye.

Daniel laughed quietly and fell into step with them as they headed down the street.

Aaron nudged Daniel’s shoulder with a smirk.

Daniel rolled his eyes, refusing to react. Guys like Aaron always wanted to act like jerks.

“Seriously, Aaron?” Salina muttered, pulling him away by the arm.

Daniel noticed she kept glancing at her watch, her steps quickening as they neared their street. Every little rustle in the trees made her shoulders twitch, and more than once she glanced over her shoulder, eyes flicking to the shadows.

“Is everything okay?” he asked softly when they stopped in front of his house.

Salina hesitated, chewing her lip.

For a moment, Daniel thought she might actually tell him something.

“Yeah... Here...” she pulled out her phone. “I’ll give you my number, just in case you need anything.”

Aaron smirked, slinging an arm over Daniel’s shoulder.

“You know... if you need anything,” he teased, wiggling his eyebrows.

Predictable. Daniel gave a half-smile, shaking his head.

Salina rolled her eyes and smacked her brother’s arm.

“Grow up, Aaron.”

They exchanged numbers quickly. As Daniel was about to say goodnight, Aaron made a fake phone call gesture behind Salina's back.

"Booty call!" he snickered as they walked away.

As Daniel sighed, watching them disappear into the dark, a cold breeze rattled the leaves on the ground, and for a second it felt like the shadows along the street were following them.

He narrowed his eyes, then decided to go inside. "Mom, I'm home!" Daniel called as he tossed his jacket onto the coat rack. He paused for a moment when he didn't get a response back.

The house was dead silent. The TV flickered in the living room, casting pale flashes of light across the walls, so he knew she was home.

Cautiously, Daniel peeked inside. His heart nearly jumped out of his chest, when he saw his mother was sitting on the couch, perfectly still, staring at the screen like she'd been frozen mid-thought. "Mom?"

A jolt of panic shot through him when she didn't react. His brain scrambled through a hundred awful scenarios at once. He crept forward and gently touched her shoulder. His mother jolted upright with a gasp, twisting toward him.

Daniel stumbled back, yelping, and that's when he saw her face: Green. Thick. Slimy.

It looked like a swamp monster had taken his mom hostage.

"Holy shit!" The cry slipped out before he could stop it, and he staggered backward.

Something soft brushed against his foot; without him noticing, Kit, his cat, had silently crept up behind him.

“Meow!” the poor creature shrieked sharply, as Daniel accidentally stepped on its tail, shooting across the room like a furry rocket.

Daniel slapped a hand to his chest, wide-eyed. “What the heck, Mom?! Are you trying to kill me?”

His mom pulled out her earbuds, equally startled.

“Daniel, calm down! It’s just a face mask.” She touched her cheek, then gave a sheepish laugh. “Sorry, I think I fell asleep. I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Uh... yeah, sure... I *totally* knew that,” Daniel muttered, swallowing the rock-sized lump in his throat. He shot a look at the green goop on her face. *And they call that a beauty mask? Who came up with that genius marketing plan?*

His mom raised an eyebrow, completely unaware of how terrifying she looked. “Jeez, Danny, what’s gotten into you?”

“Nothing. Just... a bit on edge, I guess,” Daniel mumbled, rubbing the back of his neck. “Are the pizzas here yet?”

“Not yet, but they should be soon. I’m gonna go wash this off before I give you nightmares for life,” she teased, standing from the couch.

“Yeah, please do,” Daniel muttered under his breath, still trying to slow his heartbeat.

As she disappeared, the floorboards creaked upstairs.

Daniel froze. For a second, it sounded like soft footsteps crossing his bedroom floor. His skin prickled. It couldn’t be his mother, because she took the bottom floor bathroom.

He let out a slow breath. *Old house noises. That’s all.*

The doorbell rang, sharp and sudden, making him jolt once more.

A Pizza Planet car idled in the driveway, headlights glowing like two lazy eyes.

The delivery guy stood with his back turned, humming something that sounded like a sad dying accordion.

Daniel cleared his throat loudly.

The man turned, revealing a pale, wrinkled face with sunken eyes and wild white hair.

Daniel's brain short-circuited. For a split second, he was convinced some kind of crypt keeper had shown up with his pepperoni. Then he noticed the rubber seam at the neck. *A mask. Of course. Because normal pizza promos apparently weren't weird enough.*

"Free mask for new customers!" the guy chirped. His voice had a hollow, slightly robotic edge. "Two pizzas, one mask!" he said as he gave Daniel the mask.

"Uh... wow. Thanks. That's... definitely what I was hoping for tonight. More masks..." Daniel deadpanned, handing over the money.

The delivery guy lingered for a moment, his head tilted just a little too far to the side. "Pretty quiet around here, huh?"

"Yeah... super chill," Daniel muttered, trying not to imagine himself becoming tomorrow's true-crime podcast episode.

The guy gave a stiff nod, then awkwardly power-walked back to his car like even *he* wanted to get out of Darkfalls.

Daniel shut the door, and nearly collided with his mom again.

"Mom! Can you stop sneaking up on me?!"

She smirked at the hideous mask dangling from his hand.

“Charming.”

“You’re joking, right?” Daniel smirked back.

“Let’s just hope the pizza’s better than their fashion sense.”

They settled on the couch, pizza boxes open, the scent of melted cheese and peperoni filling the room. For a moment, Daniel let himself breathe, the warmth of the food cutting through the tension.

“Mom, I really don’t want to stay here,” he blurted between bites.

“We just got here.”

“I hate Darkfalls. It’s not the city. No lights, no music, no people. Just... crickets. And poltergeists.”

“I think it’s kind of romantic. And hey, Salina seems nice, right?”

“She has a boyfriend, Mom.”

“Oh. Well, she seems like your type anyway.”

Daniel gave a half-laugh and stood, brushing crumbs off his lap. The mask slipped off the table and plopped onto the floor, its empty eyeholes staring up at him like it was plotting his demise. He picked it up, wrinkling his nose.

“Maybe I should hang this thing in my room, to ward off the demons.”

“Or in the toilet. That’ll scare *the crap* right out of people,” his mom joked.

Daniel grinned. “For sure. I’m tired. Heading upstairs,” he said, giving his mom a kiss on top of her head. “Good night, mom.”

“Good night, sweetie,” he heard his mother say, before he headed up the stairs.

In his room, it was freezing cold. Daniel shut the window, shivering. “Where should I put you?” he muttered to the mask. A lone nail stuck out of the wall above his desk. *Perfect*. He hung the mask, gave it a tug to check, and turned to double-check the window. A soft tap sounded behind him. He looked back over his shoulder. The mask lay faceup on the desk, its empty eyes staring up at him. The nail was still in the wall. “Great... so now gravity’s broken too?” he huffed, shaking his head with a crooked, uneasy grin, trying to convince himself he wasn’t totally freaked out. Suddenly, the window slammed open with a deafening bang, rattling the walls as the wind burst in like a living thing, cold fingers clawing through the room and sending the curtains snapping wildly like sails caught in a storm. Daniel stumbled back, heart hammering in his chest so hard it felt like it might punch its way out. “Oh, come on!” he shouted, half in panic, half in pure frustration, as he lunged forward, fighting against the icy gusts to slam the window shut. He fumbled with the lock until it clicked into place. Breathless, he rehung the mask, casting it a glare as if daring it to pull another stunt. He then took his guitar and walked to his bed.

For a while, he didn’t move. He sat on the edge, elbows resting on his knees, guitar balanced across his lap. His fingers drifted over the strings, coaxing out soft, aimless notes. It wasn’t really a song, just a quiet tangle of sound and memory.

His gaze slipped toward the window, where the glass reflected his pale face and the faint glow of his bedside

lamp. Outside, the trees swayed gently against the night sky.

Without meaning to, his mind wandered to his dad.

It had been months since the funeral, but the ache still sat quietly in his chest, a dull weight he'd learned to carry.

His dad had been the one who taught him to play the guitar. Hours spent on the couch, laughing through clumsy chords and broken strings. Now, here he was, in a strange town, in a strange house, where even the shadows on the walls felt unfamiliar.

His mom had called it *a fresh start*. But to Daniel, it sometimes felt like they'd run too far, like they'd left something behind they weren't meant to outrun.

He let his fingers slide over the strings one last time, drawing out a soft, lingering chord that hummed in the stillness. His shoulders dropped with a quiet sigh.

Carefully, he set the guitar aside, brushing his thumb over the worn edge of the fretboard. As he stood and stretched, his eyes fell once more on the mask hanging on the wall.

Its hollow eyes stared back at him, pale and still in the dim light. "Don't go falling down again." A faint smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth. Then, with a deep breath, Daniel turned off the light and slid under the covers, pulling the blanket up to his chin as the room settled into shadows. When he cracked one eye open, the mask was back on the desk, propped up as neatly as if someone, or something, had placed it there on purpose. Daniel let out a slow, shaky breath, his fingers tightening around the edge of the blanket as he yanked it over his head. The idea that he'd ever get used to this place? *A total joke, no question*. And then there was this creeping,

gnawing sense that something was off, that something in the house was watching him, waiting for him to let his guard down perhaps? *Yeah... that wasn't going anywhere.*

Sleep tugged at him, heavy and irresistible, And for the first time in a long while, Daniel's dreams were haunted by shadows, slipping through the corners of his mind like a silent storm.



Chapter 3

That night, Daniel was tormented by a nightmare. He saw Salina sitting in the garden, a book balanced in her lap as the last pale light faded from the sky. The wind tugged playfully at her hair, whispering through the towering trees at the edge of the yard, their dark shapes creaking as if trading secrets in a language only they understood. Overhead, clouds thickened, hinting at an approaching storm. Somewhere in the distance, Daniel heard a low, rhythmic hush, like water lapping gently against wood. For a moment, he thought it was the lake. But that was impossible. The lake was all the way across town. The wind picked up, rattling the branches until Salina sighed and closed her book with a quiet snap. She glanced at her watch: *11:00 p.m.*

But as soon as she stepped inside, Buster erupted into sharp, frantic barking.

Daniel recognized the dog from earlier that day; his stubby legs planted firmly as he snarled into the shadows, his little body trembling with every bark.

Salina froze, her eyes sweeping the darkened yard. Nothing but the restless trees and the faint glow of Daniel's house across the street. Yet Buster's barking turned shrill, almost panicked.

"Ssssh, Buster!" she whispered, rushing over to him.

Buster paused just long enough to tilt his head and give her a wide-eyed, innocent look.

“Don’t give me that look,” Salina murmured, her mouth twitching into a half-smile. “Come on, you’re going to wake up the whole neighborhood. That’s no way to win friends.” Her gaze went toward Daniel’s house again, and for just a moment, her lips curved into something soft and thoughtful.

Then came the whisper. It brushed past her ear like a thread of cold breath, thin and fleeting, twisting into the wind. Salina stiffened. Her eyes darted to the trees, the fence, the shadows creeping along the edge of the garden. “Aaron, cut it out,” she called over her shoulder, her voice tight. “I thought you were going to bed?”

No answer.

Salina frowned, the unease crawling under her skin. She took a step back toward the house. Just then, a figure lunged out from the dark.

“BOO!”

Salina let out a sharp, panicked scream.

Aaron doubled over with laughter, clutching his stomach as Salina’s terror twisted into fury. She pushed him hard enough to make him stumble into the side of the house.

“What the hell is wrong with you, you jerk?!”

“Relax, sis! It’s a good thing Mom and Dad aren’t home,” Aaron cackled. “So, what were you doing out here? Spying on your new boyfriend?”

“Daniel is *not* my boyfriend!” Salina’s voice cracked with frustration.

“Mhmm. So you *were* spying on him. Caught you red-handed!” Aaron’s grin widened, clearly entertained.

“Ugh, you’re impossible.” Salina stomped past him toward Buster. “I was checking on the dog so he wouldn’t wake up the whole block.”

“Yeah, yeah, blame the dog.” Aaron nudged her playfully.

“Whatever. Believe what you want.”

Aaron snickered as he turned back to the house. “Wonder what Jess would say if he knew you were eyeing the new guy.”

“Seriously, Aaron. Enough!”

“Alright, alright, I’m going to bed. Don’t forget your tissues. Y’know, for the drooling.”

Salina couldn’t help it. A surprised laugh burst out of her.

“You’re such an idiot. Go to bed.”

She watched him disappear into the house, the soft slam of the door echoed through the silence. The moment he was gone, the garden seemed to fall into a deeper stillness.

“Alright, Buster,” she murmured, crouching to stroke his head, “calm down now. We don’t need the neighbors showing up at our door.”

Then came the creak: Sharp, soft, unmistakable, the sound of something heavy shifting on an old branch. Salina’s breath caught in her throat. She straightened slowly. “Aaron, I *know* you’re still out here,” she called, glancing over her shoulder. “Come on, grow up.”

Silence...

Suddenly, from the trees, a shadow dropped down, swift, silent, and unmistakably *wrong*.

Salina barely had time to scream.

Daniel bolted upright in his bed. Breath ragged, sweat dripping down his back as if he’d just run a marathon. His heart thudded wildly. *What was that dream?* His eyes darted to the corners of the room, the window, the faint outline of the mask resting on his desk. *Why... did it feel*

so real? And why, somewhere deep in his chest, was there a feeling that it hadn't just been a dream?



Chapter 4

The next day, Daniel woke up early. Or at least, that's

what he thought. But when he glanced at the clock on his nightstand, he saw it was already nearly half past four.

Startled, he shot upright and jumped out of bed.

Outside, the shadows of the tall trees had already taken over the streets. The sun was nearly gone, swallowed up by the forest. No wonder he hadn't realized how late it was. No sunlight could pierce through the thick branches. Perfect for those who liked to sleep in, but not for early birds like him.

His eyes drifted to the spot above his desk, and he wasn't surprised to see the mask was gone. It kept falling down the night before. However, what did surprise him, was the fact that it was now lying near the window, on the other side of the room.

He grabbed some clothes from his closet and threw them on. Then he picked up the mask, placed it back on his desk, and rushed downstairs.

The smell of freshly baked meat filled his nostrils.

Usually, Daniel liked the scent, but not right after waking up. His mother was in the kitchen, placing the meat onto a small plate.

"Good morning, sunshine, or should I say good afternoon?"