

CHAPTER 1

The world was on fire and her lungs were scorched with the heat and choked by the fumes. Her mind was as foggy as the air but she still knew that she had committed the most grievous of sins. Her hands were bloody and she looked down to find that they still held the axe.

His face loomed out of the darkness and she swung with hate driven by love. At the last second his face changed from the one of her tormentor to the face of her beloved. She was powerless to stop the swinging blade as it split his beautiful face in two. She ran in the darkness and was consumed by her own guilt and culpability. So much death and grief and she had played her part in it all.

She ran and every turn was wrong and every turn led her back to the town square and her shame. This landscape was one that she knew only too well. It was built on the blood and bones of her people and they were all to blame. She sank to her knees, exhausted from her fruitless attempts to escape him. He was here and he was eternal. His hands reached for her in the darkness and his vengeance was a desperate thirst. She opened her mouth to scream but her throat was clamped silent by fear as his eyes blazed and his fingers twisted into claws. They were claws that shredded her flesh and tore her skin open as he licked at her flowing blood.

Sara-Jane Mears woke into the night. Her nightdress was soaked through with sweat and her cheeks were wet with tears. She held her breath and listened intently to the sounds of the building, hoping that she hadn't woken anyone else with her nightmare. Once she was satisfied that she hadn't, she clambered out of bed and walked to the bathroom.

The overhead light was bright and buzzed annoyingly. She stared at her reflection in the mirror and wondered who the woman was staring back. It had been a little over 10 years since the events at Eden Gardens and the woman she was now bore little resemblance to the woman she had been. Gone were the curly blonde locks and bubbly personality; she was a woman with a heavy burden and a stern face. She was no longer Sara-Jane or SJ - now it was simply Sarah. She was a lot slimmer now, finding that sorrow served as an excellent diet technique. Her hair was short and brown, functional rather than styled, and her face looked immeasurably older than her 37 years. She bowed her head as she thought of her old life.

The town had been gutted by the fire and thankfully most survivors remembered little from that night, but Sarah-Jane hadn't been quite as fortunate. She remembered the monster that called himself Casper Christian and had at the end called himself Tolan. Tolan Christian had been the town's founder over 200 years ago. At the end, she had not been inclined to disbelieve Casper when he claimed to be his own distant relative. She had finally broken through the fog of his control to strike him down with an axe, only for him to somehow stay alive and become even more dangerous before Michael had managed to finish him.

Michael and Emily had been her friends, newcomers to town who had been the ones to finally stand against the monster. It had been Emily that had shown her the path of love to Dr Samuel Creed, a man who had been her one hope for the future. She didn't remember killing him exactly, but she knew that she had. It may have been Tolan's thoughts that clouded her mind and caused her actions, but it was her hands that were covered in Sam's blood.

Tolan Christian had run Eden for over two centuries and somehow he'd had the ability to fog minds and have people follow his orders. Eden had been a paradise, a gated community that was somehow oblivious to the perils and pitfalls of the world around it. Their weather was perfect, their crops grew tall and bountiful, and they lived in a bubble secluded from crime and loss. But there had been a price; Tolan had paid the bill in blood and sacrifice and whilst they hadn't known the details, they hadn't bothered to ask either.

That last night was shrouded in the mists of self-protection for her, but she saw enough when she dreamed to know that her actions were simply too little and too late.

She had stayed after the fire had gutted a large part of the town square and the buildings beyond. After Emily had led them to safety, Emily had told her that she now had a responsibility to help rebuild the town and community. She had done as much as she could, but in the end it hadn't been enough. The town still stumbled along but there was a bitterness in the air as they found that their perfection had been spoiled. She thought that people's memories of Tolan began to become skewed as he was viewed with rose tinted glasses. Because that final night was unclear for most, they forgot or couldn't remember just what price Tolan had demanded. Sara-Jane had stayed for as long as she could stand it but in the end she had felt their blame land on her shoulders. They didn't quite know what she had done, but they held her responsible when the sky rained and their investments fluctuated along with the rest of the world. She had tried to keep a close eye on Thom Bray, the brave young soul who had put her courage to shame. But Thom had grown into a self-reliant man, older than he should have been and she feared that he would end up being her shoulder to cry on instead of the other way round.

She had taken her teaching degree and bounced around the country, never laying down roots or letting her barriers down. She was a woman who carried her loss and guilt religiously, refusing to set it aside.

It had been 6 years ago when she had been given an offer to relocate. A private boarding school in the UK had been advertising for teachers and the idea of putting several thousand miles between Eden and her was certainly more than appealing. There was also a strange symmetry as Michael and Emily had moved from the UK so it seemed only fair for her to go in the other direction.

She had received a few letters from Michael in the beginning. She noted that he spoke of Emily's interest in her, but Emily had never written herself. She also wasn't surprised to find that Michael didn't include a return address in his correspondence. Emily had the baby without any complications and little Lily was doing fine. Sarah had been genuinely pleased for them; if anyone deserved happiness they did.

She splashed cold water on her face and checked the time; she wasn't surprised to find that the sun would soon be dawning. She rubbed her arms vigorously; perhaps the only thing she missed about Eden was the weather. The UK was renowned for its poor climate and in the 6 years that she had been here she was finding that it wasn't quite as bad as people made out, but it wasn't far off either.

Ravenhill Academy was a medium sized private boarding school in the north of the UK for pupils aged 8-13. There were only around 60 pupils and class sizes were deliberately small and designed for optimum learning. Sarah taught Art and English to classes of just 15 students. After leaving the school in Eden she had deliberately shied away from teaching younger children, choosing instead to enhance her teaching qualifications. There was too much joy in a class of kindergarteners; her life was one of austerity and self-imposed exile.

On the staff there were Maurice Duncan the caretaker, Hannah Marks the school nurse, and 4 other teachers including the Headmaster who doubled up as a Science teacher. Stuart Keaton taught Maths, Jemima King taught History, Sara was in charge of Art and English and Dora Tibbs taught PE. All six were live-in employees as Ravenhill was too far removed from civilization for efficient commuting from any large town or city. There were several auxiliary staff members on the payroll that lived in some of the small surrounding villages and who took one of the rickety old buses in every day.

The building itself was old like everything in the UK seemed to be. She had thought that Eden had a long history of over 200 years, but the Ravenhill building was twice as old as her whole town had been. It was a broad Gothic structure that conjured images of asylums and ghosts, but the inside was clean and well maintained and the only ghosts were the ones that she had brought with her.

The area was isolated with only a few surrounding villages for company, the closest being Bexley Cross. The weather made the phone and power lines temperamental and Ravenhill had to have generators installed to ensure that they neither starved nor froze. There was no cell phone coverage anywhere close to the school, but in the time that she had lived here she had yet to feel winter's pinch or be subject to the threatened isolation.

She walked to the window and sat in the chair arranged for just such broken-sleep nights as this one. She wrapped herself up in the thick blanket that she kept handy and waited for the morning to arrive.

Her view looked out over the endless fields that stretched off into the distance. At this time of year the winter mists rolled in and brought a chill that touched her bones even with the heating cranked up full. Maurice, the caretaker, was a gruff Northerner but with a tender heart beneath his grumbling exterior. He always maintained that Ravenhill would never be warm. She's a cold hearted bitch, he had once confided to her, clutching a glass of whisky at one staff party. She'll warm to the touch of no man, he'd said with a wink.

Maurice lived out in the grounds in a small cottage that would have been for the gamekeeper when the building was still a house. It was impossible for her to pinpoint his age as he was a ruddy-faced heavily bearded man who looked like he'd spent his entire life outdoors. She knew that the other teachers kept a watchful eye on the man, but she'd never found him anything but charming in his own gruff way.

Of the three other teachers plus the Headmaster at the school, only Jemima King was anywhere close to what she would consider calling a friend. She was in her early twenties and therefore a lot younger than Sarah, but she was infinitely louder and more boisterous. Sarah often wondered if Emily had found her as much of a whirlwind as she found Jemima. The teacher was a small package stuffed full of energy. She was of Irish descent with flame red hair that she was constantly brushing from her face. Jemima was a teacher by birth and taught history to a room full of attentive faces.

Sarah hadn't consciously decided to deny herself friends, it just kind of happened that way. She was distant and removed from other people, plus she had been continually on the move until Ravenhill.

Alastair Barnaby ran the school with meticulous precision. He was a man of a different time and placed obedience and respect above all else. He was **Mr.** Barnaby to everyone at the school, including all teachers and Maurice the caretaker. In 6 years, Sarah had never witnessed the man late or imperfectly dressed. He wore a three piece suit, even in the height of summer, along with a black teacher's cape. He was a man with a full military bearing, ramrod straight with square shoulders and a slim build. He had run Ravenhill for over 20 years, according to Maurice, and was the only man who knew the building as well as the caretaker.

Sarah rested her eyes for just a moment and knew that sleep would evade her for the rest of the wee small hours, or at least she hoped so. It was with some surprise that the next time she opened them her alarm was buzzing noisily and the bedroom was flooded with light.