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Chapter One - *Scarlett March*

He's following me.

About time. I had to walk past the old train depot five times before this one caught the scent of my perfume on the wind. I feign obliviousness to the sound of his dull footsteps in the darkness behind me and tug my crimson cloak tighter around my shoulders. I give a fake shiver as a breeze whips through my glossy hair. That's right...come along now. Think about how badly you want to devour me. Think of how good my heart will taste.

I pause on a street corner, both to be certain that my stalker is still behind me *and* so I can appear confused and scared. There's nothing like a lost teenage girl on the bad side of town to get their blood pumping. The streetlamps make the wet pavement glittery, and I avoid the light as best I can. It would ruin the whole charade if they saw the bumpy, jagged line where my right eye should be. The eye patch covers some of the mark, but the scar is still obvious. Luckily, the wolves are too focused on the red cloak to care all that much.

I turn sharply and head down an alley. My stalker turns as well. This side of town reeks of stale beer from the restaurants that have become bars now that the sun is down, but I suspect the man following me can smell my perfume above the booze. If you can call him a man. They slowly lose their human souls when they become monsters. I walk faster—one of the first tricks I learned. Run from an animal, and it chases you.

My fingertips skim the worn handle of the hatchet hanging at my waist, hidden by the

flutter of the red cloak. It serves multiple purposes—the color of passion, sex and lust is irresistible to the wolf, and the fabric hides the instrument of their death. And perhaps most importantly, wearing it feels *right*, like I’ve put on a uniform that turns me into more than a scarred-up orphan girl.

“Miss!” my stalker calls out just as I emerge on the alley’s opposite end.

Gotcha.

I gasp and turn around, careful to not let the red hood slip off my head. “You scared me,” I say, clutching my heart—the only part of my body untouched by Fenris jaws. My hands are scarred, just like my face, but the marks are so small that I count on him overlooking them in his fit of hunger. It’s easy enough to make a wolf notice my hair, my long legs, my waist, but hiding the scars took practice.

“So sorry,” he says, stepping out of the alley. He looks normal. Nice, actually—mahogany-colored hair and a firm jaw speckled with facial hair, like a high school football star in his prime. He’s wearing a pale blue polo shirt and jeans. If I didn’t know any better, I’d easily believe he just stepped out of one of the bars. That’s all part of the illusion, of course; it’s hard to lure young girls to their doom if you look like a psychopath. You have to look kind, put together, clean-cut. Show them pretty hair and stylish clothes, and most girls won’t look close enough to see that your teeth point in a very canine way, or recognize that its *hunger* your eyes are lit with.

He glances down the road. There are a few shady characters hanging out on the street corners several blocks away, small town thug-wannabes smoking, shouting at one another. No good; he doesn’t want to kill me where people can see, and I don’t want to fight him where someone might intervene. The wolves and I both prefer to stalk our prey under the

cover of darkness—if possible, anyhow. I'll take killing a wolf in daylight over letting one escape alive any day.

He takes a step closer. He can't be much older than I am, really—twenty-two, absolute tops, though they stop aging once they change, so it's hard to tell exactly. Once they've transformed, they're ageless—unless, of course, someone kills them. He smiles, white teeth dazzling in the night. A normal girl would be drawn to him. A normal girl would think about touching him, would think about kissing him, about wanting him. A normal, stupid, ignorant girl.

“A lovely girl like you shouldn't be out so late, alone and all,” he says calmly, though I can hear the panting in his voice as his eyes run across the red cloak. I notice the hair on his arms has started to grow; he's too hungry to totally control his transformation for long. I'll never kill a Fenris if he hasn't transformed. It's not worth the risk of killing a person, putting someone through the same agony that my sister and I went through. I'd be nothing more than a murderer, so even though I've never been wrong, I always wait.

I shuffle my feet with pretend nervousness. “I'm lost,” I lie. I meander across the street, swaying my hips. “I was supposed to meet a friend here...” Just a little farther, and the row of pawn shops on the cross street will hide us. He laughs, a deep, growl-like sound.

“Lost, huh?” he says, walking toward me. “Why don't you let me show you the way back?” He extends a hand. I look down. There's a black tattoo-like mark on his wrist, a flawless image of a coin. A member of the Coin pack, out this far? Odd. I take another step away from him. I'm hidden from the civilians' view now, and if he comes just a tad closer, he'll be as well.

“I...I'll be okay,” I mutter. He grins. He thinks he's scaring me, and he's relishing it.

It's not enough to just slaughter and devour girls. They need to frighten them first. I turn my back to him and start to walk quickly, letting my cloak billow out in the wind, taunting him. Come along, follow me. Time to die.

“Hey, wait,” he calls out. His voice is dark now, almost guttural. He's fighting the transformation, but his hunger is winning, I can *feel* it somehow. His bloodlust hangs in the air like a fog. He wants to tear me apart, to dig his teeth into my throat. I stop, allowing the hood to slip down and my curls to wave in the breeze. I hear him groan with disgusting delight as I grip the familiar grooves of the hatchet's handle. Don't turn around, not yet. He hasn't changed, and if he sees the scars on my face my cover will be blown. Can't risk him running and getting away—he has to die. He deserves to die.

“All I'm saying is—” he chokes on the words as the mutation begins to overpower his vocal cords “—people might get the wrong idea, a pretty girl like you out alone on a corner like this.”

My lips curve into a grin as I draw the hatchet from my belt. There's a swish as his clothes hit the ground, then the clicking sound of claws on pavement. “I'm not worried,” I answer, unable to suppress a sly grin. “I'm not that kind of girl.”

When I spin around there's no man behind me; only a monster. Some call them werewolves, but they're so much more than a wolf. The Fenris's fur is dark and oily looking, and fades to gray-mottled skin by his enormous feet. He growls and brings his long snout to the ground, tensing his jaw and clacking his yellowed teeth. The streetlight illuminates his enormous frame and casts a shadow that overtakes the ground at my feet. I raise an unimpressed eyebrow at him, and his eyes find the gleaming hatchet in my hand.

He leaps.

I'm ready.

His powerful shoulders launch him through the air at me; he snarls, the sound like rocks being shredded. I whip around toward him, low to the pavement. He begins to sail over my head but twists back in midair. I snap the hatchet up at the last possible moment. The blade makes contact and skims his front leg, then I spin the hatchet to the left and manage to slice into the top of his back leg before the Fenris even hits the ground. Blood showers me.

The Fenris howls and collapses onto the pavement behind me. Try again, wolf. Don't run away yet. You can't let them run, once you've started a fight. They'll be starving from the expended energy, slaughter twice as many in half the time. It can only end one way: with the wolf's death. This one isn't a runner though. He still wants to devour me.

Saliva drips from his lips and his eyes narrow. The Fenris paces in front of me, shoulders rolling with every step. He curls his black lips back and bares his fangs.

The Fenris darts at me again. I sidestep and swipe at him—miss. He doubles around. No time to draw the hatchet back. I lift it like a shield in front of me and let my body relax. When the Fenris slams into me, I hit the pavement—hard—but he's run his chest into the hatchet, the weight of his body driving it in. I brace my legs against his abdomen and kick up, sending the monster flailing away behind me. Back to my feet. I grimace as a wave of dizziness rushes over me as blood runs down the back of my shoulders, scrapes from hitting to asphalt. Get it together, come on.

I blink. The wolf is gone. No, not gone—I can still smell him in the air. I hold my breath, ears straining.

Wait for it. He's here. Wait for it—

The Fenris crashes into me with all the force of a bus. My right side, my blind side. His claws pop through the skin on my waist, sharp, stinging pain that makes my eye water and my vision blur. I hit the ground again and lose my grip on the hatchet. The wolf's weight bears into me, his breathing heavy and labored. I don't struggle—it makes them happy. Blood from his chest wound pools on my stomach, and as he presses his face closer to mine, I can only see one raging eye.

Wait for it. He'll relax. He'll make a mistake. You'll only get one shot to get him off of you, make sure you take the right one. Flecks of his fur catch in my nose and mouth, and grime from his body sticks to my sweat. I could try to reach the hunting knife on my waist, but both of my hands are locked in place by his front feet. I choke as he lowers himself even farther against me, heavy on my lungs, gagging as he exhales almost directly into my throat.

Then a thick, dull sound echoes through the night, surprising enough to distract both me and the wolf. Footsteps? Before either the Fenris or I can react, a solid hit to its side throws the Fenris off my body, and I gasp for air like I'm surfacing from water. Get up, get up, quick. I roll to my stomach. Out of the corner of my good eye, I see a man, shadowed by the night but with a familiar, lanky gait. He turns his head from me to the Fenris, who prowls a few yards away.

"You'd think after all these years, you'd know to keep a Fenris from getting to your blind side," the intruder says. I grin, standing up. The Fenris growls at us; I lean to one side as it leaps forward, and swing my hunting knife into his front leg. The wolf manages to shred part of my cloak as he stumbles away.

"I could have gotten him. I was waiting for my moment," I answer. The boy laughs, eyes sparkling gray-blue even in the darkness.

“Would that moment have come just after we carved 'Scarlett March' on your tombstone?” the boy snickers.

The Fenris rears back and snarls. It knows it's too late to run. It's kill us, or be killed. I join the boy, grabbing my hatchet off the ground. He licks his lips nervously. He's rusty at hunting, obviously. I wonder how long it's been?

“You know,” I say, smirking, “if you aren't up to all this, I can handle it for you. You know, if you aren't man enough.”

He narrows his eyes, but a smile tugs at the corners of his thin lips. We turn toward the Fenris as it lowers its shoulders to the ground, eyes focused and furious. The boy draws two knives from his belt. I flip my hatchet in my hand.

“He's gonna come at you first,” the boy says.

“I know,” I answer. “You go to his—”

“I will,” he replies, grinning. I shake my head. Nothing's changed. We don't need words, not when we're hunting together.

The wolf charges us just as we take the first few running steps toward him. The boy reaches it first. He leaps high over the Fenris's arched back and sinks both knives into his sides. That should do the trick, but I won't let him take the credit. I skid to a stop and release the hatchet toward the Fenris. It lassos through the air before sinking into its chest with a squelching thud.

The Fenris collapses to the ground, its eyes glimmering in a mix of hunger and hatred as I step toward it. It snaps at my legs once or twice uselessly. There's nothing human about it now, nothing canine, only a dying creature both bestial and disgusting. Its rotting garbage-

meets-sour milk scent makes me gag. I've lost track of how many Fenris I've hunted, but the smell gets to me every time.

"When did you get back? And where's your ax?" I ask the boy without taking my eye off the Fenris. Best to wait until you know it's dead.

"About an hour ago, and I didn't exactly expect to be hunting straight off, hence no ax. Figures I'd find you out here before I even get back to my house. You need some hobbies, you know?"

I shake my head as the Fenris takes a few final raspy breaths. Its tongue lolls out of its mouth and with a final growl, it dies. The dead Fenris bursts into darkness, an explosion of nighttime. Shadows flit over walls, into the cars, between blades of grass like coal-colored fireworks scattering across the world. I look toward the boy.

"Good to see you, Silas."

Silas grins and shakes the Fenris blood off his knives before sheathing them. "You too, Lett."

"Good to see a *real* hunter in action again, you mean," I quip.

He steps forward and hugs me. I tense—I *like* being hugged, but it doesn't happen too often. Something about a girl that's missing an eye turns people off to touching her, I guess. Silas has known me since before the scars, though. I give in and put my arms around him.

Silas releases me and frowns at the bloodstains on his jeans. "There are some parts of hunting that I really didn't miss," he grumbles. "Are you okay, by the way?" he asks, motioning to the wound on my chest.

“It’s nothing,” I say, waving it off. “Are you saying you didn’t hunt the entire time you were in San Francisco?” I run my hatchet along the hem of my cloak. The Fenris’s blood barely shows up on the crimson fabric.

“Forgive me for trying to spend some time with my uncle!”

“Yeah, yeah,” I sigh. It’s hard to understand how he can just *not* hunt for such long periods of time, but the subject has always been a losing battle for me. “So how is Uncle Jacob these days?”

Silas shrugs. “Okay. I mean, for a forty year-old man who’s practically a hermit.”

“That’s not his fault though,” I say as we meander back through the alley. “Your brothers and sisters still riled up about your father giving Jacob all the inheritance money?”

“Yep. Even angrier about him giving me the house here,” Silas mutters. Silas finished high school instead of taking a woodsman apprenticeship, something his brothers found fairly dishonorable and his triplet sisters found emasculating. Combine that with the fact that Pa Reynolds gave him and Jacob his worldly possessions before going senile...they can really hold a grudge, it seems.

“I’m sorry,” I offer. I try to imagine my life without my sister, but it’s impossible; if she were gone, my life would stop. I give Silas what I hope is a sympathetic smile. He nods in response.

At the end of the alley there’s a car without hubcaps or a front bumper, the driver’s side door flung open. The back is piled high with duffel bags and fast food cups.

“That thing made it to California?” I say, frowning.

“Not only that, but I managed to make it run off vegetable oil while I was there,” he answers.

“All the way to California and not a single Fenris...” I sigh.

Silas grins and wraps an arm around my shoulders. “Lett, really, you've got to get a hobby. Come on, I'll give you a ride home.”

I climb into the passenger seat, knocking a few empty soda bottles to the floorboards. I have the window rolled down before Silas can even get to the driver's side—maybe it's because I don't ride in them often, but cars make me claustrophobic. Silas slides in beside me and fiddles around with a few wires that stick out by the ignition, and the car grumbles to a start.

“What about here though? I didn't realize packs were starting to prowl around Madison again,” Silas says.

I shrug. “It's been kind of recent. That one had been here a while, I think. He was Coin. No sign from Arrow or Bell,” I answer. What are packs like on the West Coast? As large as the ones in the South, as fierce? Is there anyone there to destroy them like I do here? How much more could I accomplish if I were in California instead of small town Georgia? I can't believe he didn't hunt even *once*...

“Also, thanks for saying 'Happy Birthday',” Silas interrupts my thoughts.

“Oh, wow, Silas, I forgot. I'm sorry. So you're old enough to drink finally?” I ask.

“It's not as exciting as you'd think,” he grins. We sail past the edge of town and into the night. A few scattered farmhouses glow like stars on hills, but other than that, there's nothing but the dim glow of Silas's single working headlight. I double check that there's no

blood on my hatchet or hunting knife, then wrap both up in my cloak. I flip down the sun visor and grimace. I lick my fingers and try to smooth my hair, which is shooting out like I've been electrocuted.

“Well, looks like Madison hasn't changed much—hey, since when do you care about your hair?” Silas asks.

“Since now,” I answer quickly. I adjust my shirt and tuck the cloak and weapons under my seat as we turn down an unpaved road. Tall grasses line either side, and the shrieks of crickets and locusts become deafening through the open window. I wipe away the moisture on my forehead.

“Wait, are you...you're trying to hide the fact that you were hunting!”

I sigh. “Look, I told Rosie that she could go hunting on her own for the first time, but that Fenris—”

“You *stole* a solo hunt from your sister?”

“No! I mean, *yeah*, but it's a good thing I did. That wolf was harder than I predicted. I don't know. She's not ready and I had to go hunting or lose my mind...”

“Scarlett...” Silas starts in a serious tone. He started using “the tone” when we were kids to remind me that he's older than I am. It annoys me just as much now as it did then, only now it's less acceptable for me to push him into the mud for it. “She's supposed to be your partner.”

“No, she's supposed to be my sister. *You* were my partner, before you up and abandoned us—”

“Hey, I still am, I’ve just been away—actually, *no*, I’m not getting into this argument again. Why can’t Rosie be in on this partnership too?”

“Look, I’m not going to wait for my sister to finish grocery shopping while the Fenris slaughter people left and right,” I snap as we take the right fork in the road, toward Oma March’s house. It doesn’t matter how long she’s been dead; I’ll always consider it *her* cottage. The left fork goes to Silas’s house. The only other thing close to us is the back side of a massive cow pasture. “It’s our responsibility,” I add. “We know how to kill them. We know how to save people’s lives. We don’t take nights off or vacations to California for a year.”

“Ouch,” Silas says, but I can tell my words roll off him. It’s hard to get Silas riled up, unfortunately. “All I’m saying,” he continues, “is that you can’t keep Rosie locked up forever.”

I sigh in annoyance as the cottage appears in the distance like a lit oasis in the dark. “She’s just not ready,” I mutter. “And I don’t want her to end up like me.” Silas nods knowingly and traces his thumb over the scars on my arm as the smell of jasmine flowers wafts in through the air. We ride along in silence for a few moments.

Finally, Silas’s car growls up to the edge of the gravel drive. The front door swings open, sending a long stripe of light through the yard.

“Wow,” Silas says softly as he kills the ignition. I follow his stare out the windshield—Rosie is standing in the kitchen doorway, arms folded and eyes sparkling in anger. “Rosie looks...different.”

“Yeah. ‘Different’ as in mad,” I sigh, throwing the car door open. “Stay here for a second.”

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Sisters Red will be available in-store from 12th August 2010.

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