

SERAPH OF SORROW

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PROLOGUE: THE CORPSE

At the age of fifteen, Jennifer Scales cried for the first time over a dead woman's body.

The fresh corpse was already beginning to gray and chill. Her eyelids were relaxed, her hair splayed around unhearing ears. A graceful, hollow throat bore the only imperfection on the body: a large puncture wound above the collarbone.

Jennifer squeezed the tears from her eyes. She had seen death before, to be sure. But those deaths had been among the elderly...or among those she would deem evil.

This woman was young. Not evil. And not coming back.

And I'm responsible, Jennifer thought.

Her tears fell upon a cold, motionless hand. Then Jennifer saw something incredible, something marvelous. Something that reflected all the sorrows Jennifer felt, and more besides.

How does something like this happen, Jennifer wondered as she shielded her face.
Where does it come from?

PART ONE:
JONATHAN SCALES

Youth is a blunder; manhood a struggle; old age a regret.

- Benjamin Disraeli

CHAPTER ONE: SCHOOLING

At the age of fifteen, Jonathan Scales did not know or care about the powers of the crescent moon. He did not know or care about the people who turned into dragons whenever such a crescent hung in the sky. He did not know or care that he was one of these people, nor that his parents were. He did not know or care about a woman named Elizabeth Georges, a young woman bred to kill dragons who lived miles away, getting a different sort of education. And he did not know or care about the daughter he would have with this woman one day, a girl they would name Jennifer Caroline, after Elizabeth's mother and his own.

All he cared about at the age of fifteen was a girl named Heather Snow.

Heather Snow was not the prettiest girl at Fairville High. Nor was she the smartest, strongest, fastest, or funniest. She wasn't the nicest, or the tallest, or the most bubbly. She wasn't the one with the straightest teeth or best legs.

It didn't matter. She was an angel, he knew. *His* angel. His friends told him she resembled a koala bear with a broken jaw; but what did they know? He followed her with the passion of a disciple, and for several weeks she embraced him.

They did their geometry homework together in study hall, held hands on the way to and from the cafeteria, passed notes promising eternal love to each other, and kissed and groped in whatever soundproof practice chamber they could find near the band room.

It was in one of these tiny cells that she decided to crush his heart.

"Just friends." As he stared at the linoleum floor with wide gray eyes, he repeated her last two words. *What is it with girls and those two words?*

"Um, yeah. Sorry." He didn't check, but he knew she would be biting her upper lip and twisting her black curls with a long forefinger. She always did that when she got nervous. "So, um, are we okay?" One of Heather's feet took a step toward the glass door, and he panicked.

"No!"

"Jonathan, we can still be good – "

"Don't say *friends*," he snapped. Now he did look up at her, and he was suddenly furious to see that she didn't appear close to crying. *I can change that*, he dared himself. "Friends don't do...what you're doing. They don't screw around with other people's feelings. They don't break up for no reason at all."

"It's not 'no reason'. I need – "

"What? Space? Someone else? A good laugh with your obnoxious girlfriends?"

"*Stop* calling them obnoxious." *Finally, some emotion.* "And stop interrupting!"

"Gosh, Heather, I'm sorry I'm not being super-polite while you dump me. How rude of me. Please continue."

"Forget it. You're a jerk."

He was up and jamming the chamber door shut before she could open it. "*I'm a jerk?*"

"Yes, *you're* a jerk! Let me go."

He found he didn't want to. Why should he let her go? Where was his incentive, exactly, to let the door open and watch her slip into the hallway and out of his life?

"You can leave when you answer one question – "

"Let me go!"

It occurred to Jonathan that by keeping her here in this dark room against her will, he was probably crossing a line. Part of him was repelled by the thought of scaring her like this – but a small, mean voice within was relieved to see tears appear at the corners of her gem-blue eyes. *If you cannot keep her happy, you can at least keep her here.*

"Answer my question!" he insisted. Heather pulled against the door again. Now his full weight was on it. While more thin and wiry than the man he would become someday, Jonathan Scales was large enough to keep a teenaged girl inside a small room for as long as he liked.

She pushed fruitlessly against his chest. "Fine, what's your damn question?!"

See how she stays while she listens, the voice told him. "Yeah, okay, my question. Huh. How about this. Did you go out with me to bore me to tears with your endless stories about shoe shopping and your pet birds, or do you just get off on stringing a guy along for a few weeks without giving anything up?"

Finally, she slapped him. "You're gross. I can't believe I ever let you kiss me."

The awful voice inside finally let go. Blinking hard, he slumped away from the door. "Neither can I. Good-bye, Heather. I'm sorry I – "

She was already gone.

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"How was school today, ace?"

"Crap. How was farming stupid wildflowers and asinine sheep?"

Crawford Thomas Scales didn't miss a beat. "Don't forget the 'loser horses' and 'lame bees'. It was great, they're all great. You seem down – "

"I'm not going to talk about it, Dad."

"Huh." Crawford shifted in his porch seat overlooking the lake. He was often here on cool autumn afternoons, though to Jonathan there didn't seem to be any reason to stare out over the lake. "You want to talk to your Mom instead?"

"No. Speaking of which, isn't it about time you two handed me off to the Happy Fun Farm?" About twice a month for as long as he could remember, his parents would kick him out of his own house and make him stay at the neighbors' place, several miles down the road. There, he provided backbreaking (and, he couldn't help noticing, incredibly cheap) labor to upkeep the old and frail couple's household and their small apple orchard. The Grears were nice people, but they barely talked and never let him leave their sight – *wolves in the woods*, was the most they ever said to him. It did not explain all of the sounds he could hear coming from the forest.

"Actually, we think you should stay here this weekend."

"What, my era of human bondage is coming to an end?"

"In a manner of speaking. Your mother and I – "

"Where is Mom, anyway?"

"She went into town on a couple of errands, at the pharmacy and such. Listen, instead of work, how about spending the weekend relaxing with us?"

Jonathan's brow furrowed into a suspicious pattern. "With you? Doing what?"

Crawford began to sweat. "Um, hard to say. I hope you'll stay. Can you?"

"Actually, now that you say I'm free, a bunch of my friends are going to – "

"You need to stay with us."

"Dad! Why the hell did you ask?"

"I'm sorry, son. This is pretty important. You'll see – it's important that you stay here this weekend." The older man squinted wistfully into the sky – at what, Jonathan did not know or care. Other than a pale sunset, the only thing up there was a slowly slimming half moon.

Jonathan flipped his dark bangs out of his face and let out a sullen hiss. "Why can't you speak plainly to me? Why is everything a secret with you two? Secrets become surprises. I *hate* surprises!" The recollection of Heather Snow ambushing him in the practice room with her ridiculous *good friends* speech worsened his mood.

"Jonny." His mother's voice from the porch steps made him jump; he had not heard her drive up to the barn or get out of the car. "Please trust your father and me. We'd like you to stay here at the farm with us. And once this weekend begins, we think you'll want to stay, too."

As much as he hated to give in, Jonathan could not withstand his mother. He had more than a foot on her – but the slightest hint of sadness to Caroline Scales's smile, like the one she wore now, rendered him helpless.

"What are you doing carrying all that," he mumbled as he scrambled down the porch steps and wrestled two bags of groceries from her. "You're not supposed to be doing that. You should have waited for me to get home, so I could go with you."

"I'm not an invalid," Caroline snapped with a fire in her golden eyes. "Not yet."

"Fine, I guess I'll stick around this weekend. If it's so freaking important to you both. Next time, if I don't have to go to the Grears, I want to use some of that free time for myself."

"We'll see." Crawford's casual tone irked his son. "Don't forget your chores tomorrow after school; you've got to – "

"Hush, Crawford, don't lecture him. He knows tomorrow is Friday. Now tell me, Jonny, how was your day? How's that nice Heather Snow girl you're seeing?"

* * *

"Um...excuse me...do you have a pencil with an eraser?"

"No," Jonathan mumbled. He paused from his sketch of Heather Snow's face on the body of a dog, flipped the pencil around so he could erase part of the foreleg, and then flipped it back.

"Huh. Okay, champ." The sultry voice from behind was unfamiliar to Jonathan; he tried to place it. Who was in study hall with him on Fridays – Holly McNamara?

Kirsten Taylor? *No, whatever, who cares.* He added a swarm of curvy “waves” around Heather's mangy tail. This demonstrated her enjoyment of the still-beating human heart in her flea-ridden jaws. Nearby, a corpse with a steaming hole in its chest lay on the ground. It sported the same black, high-top sneakers Jonathan liked to wear.

"Mr. Scales." Ms. Templeton, who was also behind him, had an easy voice to place. "Art class comes later in the day. Surely you have *homework* you can do here in study hall?"

Still drawing, Jonathan gestured rudely behind himself with his free hand.

"Charming," Ms. Templeton spat. "I'm inspired by your eloquence. In fact, I think you should share your expressive gifts with the detention monitor this afternoon."

Jonathan's gesture did not falter, nor did he turn to face the teacher. Finally, he felt a tap on his tiring shoulder. "Um, Scales, is it? I think you can relax. She's nagging someone else."

Lingering curiosity made Jonathan turn around. He quickly put his arm down.

He was sure this girl's hair, cheeks, lips, and nose were extraordinary. Probably the rest of her, too. But he would have to take all that on faith: he could not get past the eyes.

They shifted from whimsical emerald to thoughtful indigo as she offered her hand. "I'm Dianna Wilson. Just moved here from the city. No offense to you country boys and girls...what do you all *do* for fun in this deadbeat town?"

"Ermmm..."

"Yeah, I thought so. Anyway, if I stay after school in detention with you, will you walk me home and show me a decent coffee shop? You know, one *not* attached to a gas station?"

"Guurp..."

"Let's call that a yes." She lowered her hand, released her hold on him with a slow bat of her lids, and set her voice high enough for the entire classroom to hear.

"Yeah, dude, you're absolutely right! Ms. Templeton *is* a frigid bitch with no chest and visible panty lines."

Detention together was paradise. Coffee at Professor Java's afterward, Jonathan decided, was the paradise that people in paradise got to go to if they lived a good afterlife.

Things are going my way, he congratulated himself as he watched this vision named Dianna delicately sip the caramel and whipped cream off a hot apple cider. She was giggling at all of his jokes, her irises sliding gently from cool silver to contented brown. *After this dumb, boring weekend with Mom and Dad, I'm going to start doing what I want, whenever I want. No rules, no hanging around with strange people...and no more damn surprises...*

Outside the window, behind clouds neither of them noticed, the sharp end of the thick crescent moon pierced the horizon.

END EXCERPT