

THE STORMS
COME LIKE
CLOCKWORK



THE STRICKEN

MORGAN
SHAMY

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MORGAN SHAMY



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*For Aaron,
Without you, none of this would be possible.*



CLEAN SLATE

y footsteps pounded down the sidewalk, my heart pumping fast. Wind bit my cheeks, and gray clouds roiled overhead, heavy in the sky. I glanced at the town clock.

M

The Storm would be here any minute.

People scattered from the sidewalks and streets, tending to their own business. Children darted around their mothers' legs, murmurs low in the air. Like always, they had no idea it was coming.

I pushed my way through the crowd and dashed into the restaurant where Mom worked. Soft lights lit the room; the tables were full, though no one spoke. Complete silence. Mom was behind the bar, wiping the counter.

"Mom!" I yelled.

The sea of customers didn't flinch. They ignored me, like always, looking through me as if I were a pane of glass.

You're not going to make it.

I gritted my teeth together. "Wanna bet?"

I crossed the restaurant, welcoming the wave of warmth his voice sent through me. Even though urgency thrummed through my veins, the feel of him inside my head was like chocolate. Smooth, comforting.

It isn't safe for you to be out. You can't do anything for your mother.

I shook my head, shoving his voice to the back of my brain. I had lost Dad to the Storm—I wasn't going to lose Mom, too.

I dug my fingers into Mom's shoulder and forced her to face me. The usual look of confusion traveled over her before her eyes lit up in recognition.

"Clara, what are you doing here?"

"No time to talk." I dragged her from the restaurant like a mad bulldozer, ready to flatten anything in my path.

It's here, he said, his voice clear in my mind. *Clara, you need to run.*

I looked over my shoulder and froze. The familiar dark cloud moved toward us, gliding down the street. It crawled over the sidewalk, its tendrils stretching like poisonous claws. It surrounded cars, swallowed up buildings, circled around the clock in the middle of the square in dark wisps.

No one ran. No one screamed. The people on the street stood frozen, waiting for the dark storm to overtake them.

I gripped Mom's wrist and yanked.

"Come on!"

We raced down the sidewalk, our car parked up ahead. Every inch of me buzzed as the feeling of the Storm seeped into me. It was too close.

I shoved Mom into the car, my hair standing on end. Within seconds, the dark fog immersed us, the chaos churning, curling along the windshield. Outside, people stopped. Faces slackened and eyes went blank.

"Clara, what are we—" Mom broke off and crumpled like an empty soda can. My stomach hollowed at the look on her face. She was fading, just like Dad right before he disappeared. She couldn't take too many more of these attacks.

I wrenched the car into gear and floored it. The car screeched down Main Street, speeding through the dark haze. I swerved around the lifeless people still trapped in the chaos. I took turn after turn, zooming through the streets, until the Storm lightened. The road disappeared beneath our wheels, and houses stretched on either side of us, gray sidewalks lining dead grass. Air blew in from the open windows, cooling the sweat off my neck. The dim clouds departed fully, and the sun streamed down.

It was over.

For now.

My fingers relaxed on the steering wheel.

The Storm never affected me. I didn't know why. The worst it did was leave me with a bad headache. The Storm came every day, erasing the short-term memory of everyone in town, slowly taking away their sanity until they disappeared.

Completely.

I hiccupped, Dad's handsome face flashing to mind. The way his eyes creased when he smiled. The way he always enveloped me in a warm hug. The way he'd laugh and tell corny jokes. No. I wouldn't think of him now.

The sunlight was bright as I continued to drive, my heart slowing. I peeked over at Mom, sunbeams sparkling on her golden hair. She stared out in front of her, her eyes blank.

The car rumbled to a stop as I pulled into our driveway. Our old white house towered over us, our lawn dried and brown. Mom groaned, her eyelids fluttering. She'd be all right for now, but I cursed myself for not getting to her sooner. I'd maneuvered her around the Storm for months. Life had started to come back into her eyes, and now I had lost the ground I'd gained.

It isn't your fault, Clara.

I jerked, the sound of his voice startling me. Even though he had been with me for as long as I could remember, sometimes his presence surprised me.

"Yes, it is," I said. "It is my fault."

I wish you wouldn't be so hard on yourself. You're doing the best you can. You're saving your mother from the Storm. You're keeping her safe.

"It's not good enough," I mumbled, my throat thick.

He fell silent.

He always went silent when he disagreed with me. I closed my eyes and wished for the hundredth time that I knew his name or why he spoke to me—but every time I asked, he'd disappear for days, leaving me scared he wouldn't return. I'd learned to enjoy whatever time I had with him.

The thought of being crazy had crossed my mind but then fizzled because I was saner than anyone else in this town. I also rationalized that having him inside my head had become a part of me. Even though he was just a voice, he was more real than any physical person I had ever met.

I linked Mom's arm around my neck and hefted her up our front steps. She looked high, with a dazed, goofy expression on her face. I cursed myself again for not getting to her sooner. Our schedule had been working. The Storm came at the same time every day, and since Mom's memory was shot from the daily storms, it was easy to lug her around the town, staying just enough ahead of the brain-eating monster. The rest of the town wasn't so lucky. They were so far gone, caught in the routine of their daily lives, they never realized when the Storm came.

Cobwebs hung from the ceiling, stretched out over the peeling wallpaper. The wood floor creaked beneath our feet as I helped Mom into her bed. The pillows squished out around her, and I pulled the covers up to her chin.

"There you go," I said, fluffing her pillow. I lingered for a moment, my hand hovering over her shoulder. Her body relaxed into slumber; her lips parted slightly. How much time did I have left with her? When would the Storm take her completely? Tears burned the backs of my eyes, but I blinked them away and glanced up at the ceiling. I would be strong. Dad would've wanted me to be strong.

I tiptoed across the floor and took one last glance at her before I shut the door quietly.

Only twenty-three hours.

Twenty-three hours until the next Storm came.

GIRL INTERRUPTED

moved back down the hall and into the kitchen, past the garbage that spilled from the can, a putrid smell hanging on the air. I crinkled my nose and peered out the window at the forest that lined our backyard. *S* Deep shadows filled the spaces in between the branches, and a mesh of pine boughs and leaves scattered the area. Forcing myself to exhale, I snatched my journal off the counter and stepped outside.

I headed through the forest, my feet crunching on sticks and leaves. The towering scent of pine tickled my nose, and I let it fill my lungs. This was my safe place. My haven. I'd never seen the Storm come out here.

Though I was never safe from myself.

Sometimes, when I was alone, a darkness snuck in, filling my heart. It swirled inside my chest, heavy, like my own personal storm. Sometimes I felt as if the darkness would burst from my fingertips, right before it would swallow me whole. I didn't know what this darkness was, all I knew was that whenever I felt it, I wasn't myself. I felt angry, depressed, and I didn't trust my own mind.

It's why I cared about *him* so much. He gave me a light and peace no one else did. Like he filled the wound in my chest, calming the storm and spreading warmth through my veins.

If only I knew who he was.

If only he knew how I felt about him.

I continued to walk for a time, reminiscing about the times we'd had together. He'd first visited me when I was seven. The storms weren't as bad

then, but he'd still been my constant companion. The adventures we had together: him teaching me how to climb trees, him teasing me about how uncoordinated I was, him comforting me when I was sad.

But then my feelings changed. As I grew older, I knew he meant more to me than a friend.

I clutched my journal tight in my hands.

Today was the day.

I would tell him how much he meant to me. If Mom disappeared, he'd be the only person—only thing—I had left. He needed to know how I felt.

I moved deeper into the forest, weaving around the large pines. My usual rock sat up ahead, tucked against a shaded tree. I lowered myself onto the ground, my back pressing up against the cool boulder. I set the journal on my lap, my fingers digging into the leather binding. He was the reason I'd been late getting to Mom. I'd gotten so caught up in writing about him, I'd lost track of time.

A breeze drifted over my face, and the air seemed to change, to move somehow—and he was there, hovering like a shadow in my head.

How are you holding up?

My shoulders relaxed, and the immediate comfort he carried washed over me.

My mouth twisted at the corners. "You really need to ask that?"

His presence shifted from one side of my head to the other. *You're doing the best you can. You shouldn't be so hard on yourself.*

I held quiet for a moment, nodding. "Well, I don't want to think about that now." My fingers continued to dig into the leather journal. "I want to play a game."

His presence stirred. I could sense his discomfort.

"I need a distraction," I said. "Please."

The energy in him softened. *What do you have in mind?*

"There's so much I don't know about you," I said. "And every time I've asked, you've shut me down. Can you be real with me? Just for today? Then we can go back to our usual routine."

His demeanor changed. It almost felt as if he were . . . smiling.

All right. What do you want to know?

“Your name,” I blurted out. “You know how many times I’ve asked you.”
He paused, still hovering, but then he relaxed.

It’s Cael.

My heart jolted, and I straightened against the rock. Cael. Like kale. I rolled the name around inside my head. I didn’t think he’d actually tell me.

My turn, he said.

“Your turn?” I asked.

You asked me a question, now I get to ask you.

My eyes widened. Another surprise.

“Okay,” I said tentatively.

What’s your favorite color?

I blinked, my brows drawing together. “Seriously? That’s what you’re going to ask? My favorite color?”

I’ve always wondered.

I held back a smile. “It’s blue. Like the ocean. Though I’ve never seen it.”
I’d never left this town. “My turn again?”

His presence shifted up and down, like he was nodding.

“What is your dream?” I asked. “I mean, everyone wants something in this life. What do you wish you could have more than anything else on the planet?”

He stilled, frozen inside my head. It took him a long while to answer.

*I’d like to undo a mistake I made years ago. It’s haunted me ever since.
I’d like to go back in time and fix my wrongdoings.*

An uncomfortable silence settled between us. I didn’t expect such an honest answer. It was the first real thing he’d ever told me.

“What did you do?” I whispered. My mind was spinning. I’d known him for years, and I’d only felt goodness from him, but did he actually have a past? One that I should be worried about?

My turn, he said quickly. *Same question to you. What do you wish you could have more than anything else on the planet?*

I peeked down at my journal. That was an easy question, but did I have enough courage to be honest? I ran a hand over the front cover. I decided to

be brave.

“A kiss,” I said before I could stop myself. “I’ve never been kissed. I want to know what it’s like. And . . . and I want *you* to do it.”

He became deathly still—so still my own thoughts froze for a moment.

“You had to have known,” I whispered. “We’ve spent all this time together. How did you not know that I had feelings for you?”

He remained quiet, a statue in my mind.

“You need to know how I feel, Cael.” My hands shook as I peeled the journal open. I cleared my throat and began to read. “He’s the only real family I have.” I turned another page. “I feel something *more* than family to him.” I turned another page. “I wish I could touch him, see him, be with him —”

Stop!

I clamped my lips together. His voice was clipped, angry, fiery in my head.

I don’t want to hear anymore. Just . . . stop.

“No,” I bit back. “I know you’re real. Somehow. Please, I’m seventeen and I’ve never been kissed.” I hated the desperation in my voice. “You *have* to feel something for me, too. Why would you have stayed around all these years?”

Heat burned inside my head, growing, expanding.

This game is over.

I felt him shoot out of my mind, leaving a sudden hollowness.

I sat motionless for a few heartbeats, embarrassment sweeping through me. I sagged against the rock, clenching my eyelids shut. How could I have been so *stupid*? I’d ruined everything. He’d probably never come back again. What would I do if I lost him? What if I never heard from him again?

I kept my eyes sealed closed, the sun hot and red through my lids. Anger surged, and I slammed the journal shut before I chucked it out in front of me, not seeing where it landed. Humiliation and regret and insecurity all coursed through me. I would never leave this spot. I couldn’t. I could never face him again.

But in an instant, everything went dim behind my eyelids, like someone was standing in front of me, shading me from the sun. I stiffened, my back pressing harder against the rock.

Someone was there. All my humiliation fled, replaced by fear.

Leaves crackled on the forest floor as this person approached. Was it him? No, impossible. He didn't have a body, did he? But somehow, I knew it was him. He lowered himself down in front of me, but I still couldn't open my eyes. Fear held me paralyzed, except for my heart that was beating in my throat. He drew closer, until his breath skimmed along my cheek. I still couldn't move. What was happening? Why couldn't I open my eyes? Was I in danger?

And then a strange pressure pushed on my lips. Tingles prickled on my skin, and I held pressed against the rock, a rush of warmth surging through me. He hovered in front of me for a few seconds, a net of power pushing and pulling between us. I wanted it to be Cael. Was it Cael? It had to be. But then the presence disappeared.

My eyes shot open.

My heart pounded.

The darkness lifted.

I was alone.

FACE TO FACE

ur town high school stood tall against the sky, gray clouds moving fast behind the towering

structure. Kids filed in like zombies, backpacks slung over their shoulders, eyes glued straight in front of them. They marched into the building, faces slack, not aware of one another.

Mortification still stung in my chest. I hadn't been able to shake the feeling of regret and embarrassment from yesterday. It burned heavy in my heart, sinking deeper into my stomach with each passing hour. Cael hadn't spoken to me since. The conversation played over and over again in my head.

I want a kiss.

I don't want to hear anymore. Just . . . stop.

Wind blew my hair over my face, the strands tickled my skin, and I focused back on the school before me. I came here whenever I needed to have the illusion of normality. I remembered when school had been a place of learning, back when the storms weren't as bad. The memories were faint, but I remembered when my peers' eyes sparkled with life, when I laughed with them, when I talked with them. But now, it's been years since I've had any human contact.

Once again, I had successfully carted Mom around the Storm today, staying just ahead of the massive cloud until it dispersed. She was now back at home, mindlessly going through her routine. I squeezed my eyes shut, her

delicate features in my head. More angst built up within me. Any day now could be my last day with her. Were my efforts to keep her safe only prolonging the inevitable?

I rubbed my hands together. Students brushed past me, some bumping into my shoulders. An itch tickled in the middle of my back, and I spun around, peering across the street. About a block away, a few kids hovered outside a coffee shop. One kid, Daniel, wearing baggy jeans and a hoodie, chomped on the same blueberry strudel he did every morning. Sometimes, when I looked at his face, he seemed familiar—like someone I knew more personally than just another student at school. The girl next to him wore the same pink shirt she sported every day. They chatted, though it was most likely the same conversation they had yesterday. Their minds were so far gone, they weren't aware of the conversations they were having.

Angela Cummings headed up the steps in front of me, her black braids swinging over her smooth, dark skin. Her mom had disappeared yesterday. I knew because she walked her dog down our street every morning. She hadn't been there today. Did Angela have any idea? Would she ever see her again? Would I ever see my dad again?

The thought of Dad only reminded me of the family we'd once had: Mom, Dad, and me. Right before the storms got bad, Dad told us he had a child from a previous marriage. The kid was going to come live with us. I was excited. I'd always wanted a brother. But then Dad disappeared, and I never met the kid. I always wondered where he was, if he was okay, and if the Storm had gotten to him, too.

I blinked away the memory.

Angela passed by, zombielike, and I sighed, following into the school after her.

Inside, the hallways stretched long and dark. Someone had forgotten to turn the lights on again. Bodies moved mechanically, lockers slammed, doors opened and closed. I flipped the light switch, and no one flinched. They continued onward as if nothing were out of the ordinary. I hefted my backpack higher on my shoulders and headed to my first class.

I'd be able to think here. I'd find some peace after the disaster yesterday. I could pretend I was in school, and for a moment, everything would be fine.

The door creaked when I walked in.

Mr. Tompkins sat at his desk, nose in a book, a few water bottles scattered around him. He was more like an accessory to the classroom than a real teacher. He was young—mid-twenties—with tousled hair and wire glasses. Muscles stretched through his collared shirt.

The regular kids were there, backs stiff, eyes glazed over. My gaze swept over the room and stopped on the dark-haired girl in the corner. She was small—maybe five-foot-nothing, with a pointy nose and thinly muscled arms, wearing the same purple tank top she wore every day. My eyes lingered on her for a moment. Like Daniel, she seemed different from the rest of the kids here. Sometimes, I felt as if her eyes were on me, like two invisible weights pressing onto my skin, but they never were. Whenever I looked at her, her head was straight forward, face bland.

I slid into the wooden desk at the front of the classroom and allowed the silence to settle in my chest, but it didn't help. Embarrassment still filled me. I lifted my fingers and traced my lips. There'd been *something* in front of me yesterday. And I had felt some sort of pressure on my lips. Had I been kissed? What if it *was* Cael? Maybe things weren't horrible between us. But the anger in his voice had been palpable. He might not *ever* come back. I groaned and covered my face with my hands.

Mr. Tompkins slammed the book down onto his desk, and I flinched.

"The concept of parallel lives is a tricky one," he said, picking up a piece of chalk. He approached the chalkboard and drew two circles, one on top of the other. "Many believe if you are rich now, you lead a parallel life in which you are poor. If you are happy now, in your other life you are lonesome."

I froze.

What?

Mr. Tompkins hadn't taught a class for years. And he was a *math* teacher.

"Sleep is considered a parallel life," Mr. Tompkins went on. "In fact, a lot of cultures consider dreams a myth. What if our spirits do walk to another life while our bodies sleep?"

I gripped the desk. He *couldn't* be talking about something different from math. I'd never heard him venture off topic. This wasn't real.

A tickle ran down my spine, and the dark-haired girl's gaze pressed in on me again. I slowly forced myself to turn around, uncurling my fingers from the desk. Was she also aware that Mr. Tompkins was speaking? She stared straight ahead, face empty, but I swear I saw her jaw clench.

"Maybe we transport to one life or the other when our bodies sleep. Is it possible that we are either in one life or another?" He looked at me for a moment before he glanced away. My lips parted. Did he just look at me? With *coherency*?

"For those who believe in parallel lives, it is said there are Noble bloodlines assigned to keep the knowledge of these two lives hidden—for the protection of each life. These Nobles have the power to travel back and forth between their lives at will, while the rest of the population doesn't."

I couldn't rip my gaze away. Mr. Tompkins was *talking*. He appeared as if he were coherent. And he had made eye contact with me—while talking about Noble bloodlines and parallel lives.

My mind couldn't keep up. Too many thoughts clashed with one another. But something in his words began to resonate deep within my bones, like a forgotten memory on the verge of realization. Something about his words woke something in the back of my brain, which didn't make any sense.

A movement at the door caught my attention. Through the opaque glass, a silhouette hovered outside. My pulse spiked, thinking of *him*, but a young man walked in dressed in ratty jeans and a T-shirt. The guy was thin, bone thin. Long greasy hair hung around his face, framing a crooked nose. He marched right up to me, stopping in front of my desk. I started, leaning back against my chair.

"Which is why," Mr. Tompkins said, his eyes connecting with mine again, "I've brought Robert to connect you to your other life, Clara."

A jolt shot down through me, and I blinked. "E-excuse me?"

"It's time," Mr. Tompkins said. "We've waited long enough. Robert, go ahead."

Robert's dark gaze connected with mine, gripping me. I'd lived so long without any real human contact, I simply sat there, stunned.

"No!" The dark-haired girl in the corner jumped up from her seat. "It isn't fair. Not like this."