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Ghostgirl: Lovesick

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Published by Headline

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Chapter 1

I Touch Roses



Memento mori.

Some people live their lives as if each day will be their last. Some approach love the same way, in a desperate attempt to outrun the tiny changes or huge ones that are always looming on each of our horizons. But the sense of urgency that comes from wanting to experience life and love to the fullest can force decisions that are not always in your best interests or anyone else's, for that matter. In fact, sometimes facing the consequences of your choices can be even worse than death. You may live only once, but you don't necessarily want it to feel like forever.



carlet Kensington knew what she was in for when she walked through the doors of Hawthorne High and was quickly overpowered by a sickly sweet floral aroma—the kind you smell only in a hospital room or funeral home.

"Valentine's Day," she sighed, partly from relief, partly from dread.

As she made her way to her locker, she couldn't escape the eye-watering aroma wafting from the cafeteria-tables-turned-makeshift-flower-markets, stationed like military checkpoints in every single hallway, alcove, and orifice. Students were selling "love" by the bunch. The fact that the flower sale was a fund-raiser only barely made it okay.

The girls were lined up buying the white roses, to give to their friends, and the guys were buying up the pink, mostly

so they wouldn't convey too much to the recipients, or more importantly to their "bros." They were more or less decoy roses for their on-the-down-low red ones. That was, unless they were lifers like a bunch of the business-track kids were—red roses sort of went hand-in-hand with school rings and pre-engagement pendants.

Valentine's had become more a season than a day, it seemed. Like Christmas and Halloween, it started earlier and earlier every year. In the past, Scarlet preferred to downplay it, viewing it as another irritating and overblown marketing ploy. She and her boyfriend, Damen, didn't need a prescribed day to declare their affection and exchange cards or candy, she had always thought.

Still, her feelings about it had softened lately. Even the scent of cheap flowers was slightly less offensive to her this year. It was a sweet tradition, after all, and, begrudgingly, she'd come to see the value in it. She was even smarting, ever so slightly, from the fact that Damen wouldn't be coming home from college to be with her, but this year Scarlet had another reason to partake in the lovefest.

Still, after a long day of seeing girls either scream with delight, huddle with their friends in giggle fits, or cry in the bathroom, Scarlet was ready for last period. She dumped her things in her locker and grabbed her anatomy textbook just as the bell rang. She headed to class, and because everyone was in a frenzy to purchase roses, she was one of the first to arrive. In the lab room, the floral smell, now mixed with formaldehyde, was nothing short of nauseating.

Her teacher, Mrs. Blanch, was pulling wet, dead cats from plastic bags, hence the smell of Valentine's Day dissected. Mrs. Blanch looked like a cat herself, with her dark eyeliner, pulled face, and salt-and-pepper beehive hairstyle. It was sort of like the way some people look like their dogs, Scarlet guessed. Science teachers sometimes resembled their experiments.

As class began, and Scarlet stared at the preservative-slick coats and long, uncertain incisions on the felines, all she could think of was how dead the cats really were, and yet they were still there. Present. She didn't think that the dissection thing was gross or even creepy necessarily, but it did seem undignified, especially considering this crew of rocket surgeons preparing to dig in. Who could forget the time Freddy Kunkle was suspended for eating a dead kitty kidney on a dare? So much for higher learning. And dead cats.

The band horn section was outside practicing "Lose Yourself in Me," by My Bloody Valentine, and provided just enough distraction and inspiration for Scarlet as she tuned out the junior varsity veterinarians and sat by the window doodling song lyrics in her notebook. She pretended to analyze the cat innards, poking at them like brussels sprouts whenever Mrs. Blanch was looking, and then returned to her notebook to jot down not scientific observations, but verses. The bell rang and she was first out and first in line at the flower table just outside the classroom.

She stopped and spent a few moments looking over the amateurish bouquets and corsages, then noticed a gorgeous,

heart-shaped wreath of garnet roses hanging behind the salesgirls.

"Hey, Marianne," Scarlet said to the girl manning the table.

"Hi, Scarlet." Marianne smiled cheerily. "What can I get for you?"

Marianne Strickland was Hawthorne's leading band fundraiser and an expert in chirpy, superficial sales-speak. In fact, she carried around candy cartons more often than her instrument. So it was no surprise to Scarlet she'd be drumming up flower sales to purchase much-needed spit valves for the brass section. She took her responsibilities very seriously, and Scarlet admired her dedication.

Before Scarlet could get another word out, Lisa McDaniel, who was voted funniest girl in the senior class, popped up from underneath the table. Lisa irked Scarlet because the girl was much more annoying than funny; she was *yearbook funny*, Scarlet liked to say. In other words, she met a very low threshold of funny.

"Take my plants…please," Lisa, in an outfit as dated and goofy as her material and breath smelling of egg salad, joked eagerly. Scarlet was tempted to hiss out a rim shot but resisted and just ignored her.

"I love this wreath," Scarlet said warily. "How much?"

They were Ingrid Bergman roses on the wreath, Scarlet's favorite. Dark red fragrant hybrids with a bud that was almost black. She loved the hint of purple they picked up as they aged, but more importantly, she loved that they tended to live

quite a long while after they'd been cut. They were as beautiful and timeless as their namesake. Scarlet felt like a museum curator coming across a priceless antique brooch at a local flea market. She was sure these flower girls had no idea how special their flowers were.

"We made up that wreath to promote the sale," Marianne shot back in a no-nonsense tone, the imminence of a transaction wiping out her cheer. "We made it big and elaborate, so it would cost a lot if we were to sell it."

"I've only got thirty dollars with me," Scarlet said.

"We were thinking more like forty," Marianne said, involving Lisa in the negotiations, even though Lisa clearly had no clue.

"Can I get the rest to you tomorrow?"

Despite the fact that Scarlet's popularity had unwittingly grown to unfathomable proportions and she was now off the scale when it came to cool, she knew already what Marianne's response would be.

"Scarlet, if I do it for you," Marianne explained judiciously, "I'd have to do it for everyone and I can't spend my days chasing down money."

"I got your back!" Lisa McDaniel exclaimed, laughing herself into a tizzy as she dropped ten dollars into the till.

"Thanks, Lisa," Scarlet said with genuine surprise.

Scarlet handed the rest to Marianne and tossed the wreath over her shoulder like a handbag. For a band-made arrangement, it was lovely. There must have been a hundred roses packed tightly together in an infinite, lush heart.

Anywhere else, one of these would go for seventy-five bucks, at least.

"For Damen?" Lisa asked sheepishly, hoping for a little gossip in exchange for her loan.

Scarlet looked at the girls, smiled knowingly, and walked toward her locker to grab some things and then leave. The flowers *were* for Valentine's Day, but they weren't for Damen.

Winter had nearly run its course, but not completely. There were few telltale signs of changing seasons, at least none that were external or obvious—still no grass growing, trees greening, or flowers budding. The ground was still soft and sloppy from recent downpours, the air damp and cold, the mid-February sky cloudy and gray.

The breeze was cold against her skin, but luckily she was dressed for it. Scarlet, toting her floral wreath across town, was shawl-ready, wrapped from shoulder to knees in a black and violet plaid Scottish wool throw. It was a good thing too; the wind always picked up at the cemetery.

She approached the enormous, black wrought-iron gates at the end of town that sported the Greek letter alpha on one side and omega on the other. They were open just wide enough to let a person pass, and Scarlet walked through, her sharp black-clad silhouette seeming almost to become part of the ironwork. She continued up the dirt path, occasionally sloshing through small puddles left by the rain.

The first thing she noticed was that she was alone except for the groundskeeper, which affected her in a deeper way than

she would have expected. Given the weather, and the fact that visiting hours were nearly done for the day, it was not surprising, but the sudden sense of solitude was very noticeable.

There are two kinds of people, Scarlet immediately thought—those who visit graves the way she did and those who don't. She didn't think any less of those who don't. Usually they had very good reasons, most of them having to do with wanting to remember the person as he or she had lived. At least that's what they said, but more likely it was due to the inconvenience of the trip.

Scrapbook people, she considered them, who preferred to flip through photos of the deceased at home and reminisce rather than trek out to the boneyard. They were generally the same people who sent longwinded computer-printed notes on homemade stationery with their Christmas cards. People who appeared to be overly sentimental, but were just hypocrites, as far as Scarlet was concerned. They were only in it for the attention.

Of course there was always the most obvious and often unspoken reason: they were just afraid. Scared of the rows and rows of neatly organized corpses and the mounds of loose dirt that covered them. And, ultimately, frightened of the inevitable truth that the cemetery represented their own fragility and mortality. It was all about them in the end, she thought, not the poor soul who'd gone to rest. But then, what wasn't?

As she trod through the rows of marble, her feet sticking slightly in the mud, she could see, a short distance away at the very back of the cemetery, a clearing, or at least a much less

crowded patch of ground. Scarlet walked directly toward it, leaving the road and cutting across the graves, apologetically patting each headstone as she passed.

As her shadow, enlarged and elongated by the setting sun, crossed the graves, Scarlet saw the inky outline of her A-line skirt, and her cape blowing. Her hair had grown out from an asymmetrical razor-cut bob to a long, flowing Bettie Page. She appeared, to herself, so streamlined, so adult.

She was wearing her vintage Wellies with a gorgeous drab, smoky teal tulle dress from a local thrift store. Scarlet made it her own by cinching it together with a big thick men's leather belt. She was still a feminine hipster all the way, straight out of a magazine, the other kids would whisper; but she knew she was different now, inside and out. Gone were the strategically ripped leggings, ragged skirt, layered tees, bright red matte lipstick that once defined her style. They were all gone. Gone like her anger and cynicism. Gone like Charlotte.

It had happened slowly, imperceptibly, like the Freshman Fifteen. It was as if her closet was at war with itself, the older, edgy pieces losing ground to the tailored ones. A genuine style-off: The Karen O against the Jackie O. Scarlet hadn't taken sides in the wardrobe war, but Damen seemed to be Jackie O all the way. Though she hated to admit it, that kind of positive reinforcement and approval from him was atypically influential these days. Ever since her sister Petula's near-death experience from her pedicure-induced coma and Scarlet's own adventure on the Other Side, Scarlet had really come to value

the people around her. Even her big sister. And what they thought mattered to her.

Scarlet slowed as she approached the single white marble headstone just a few yards before her. Unlike the other headstones in the cemetery, this one hadn't tarnished yet. She was relieved to find it in such good condition because she hadn't seen it since before the holidays. The truth was, Scarlet was one of those nonvisitors until recently. Until she'd spent the entire fall raising money for this headstone for Charlotte.

It was even more beautiful than when she'd ordered it, she thought, bending slightly to run her hand across the engraving of Charlotte's name and legend. She stood upright again, eye-to-eye with the sculpted portrait she'd commissioned to sit atop the stone. It was an ethereal image of Charlotte that Scarlet had designed—eyes gazing thoughtfully, lips smiling slightly, long hair flowing.

It was only fitting, she thought, that Charlotte be memorialized in this way. Pictures in the school lobby and yearbook, classroom tributes by ghost-hunter-obsessed teachers were not permanent enough to commemorate Charlotte, Scarlet remembered thinking at the time. It was the least she could do, since Charlotte never really had a proper funeral, given her whole family—or lack thereof—situation.

Damen was so proud of Scarlet for doing it, and she even drummed up a lot of unexpected support from the student body, comprised mostly of students who wouldn't have known Charlotte if they'd tripped over her. Even Petula made a

small personal donation, which was very unlike her, but much appreciated, given her massive popularity. The Wendys, her sister's two-faced toadies, were the last to contribute, and they made a single donation in both their names, which was both obnoxious and fitting. Scarlet figured they were afraid of being haunted and ponied up as a sort of investment in their shared peace of mind.

Scarlet concentrated on the carving for a long while, trying to determine how much it actually resembled Charlotte. She ran her hand gently and deliberately along the chiseled curves of Charlotte's cheek, her brow, her nose, her lips—features she literally knew like the back of her own hand. She wondered what Charlotte would think of the tribute.

Charlotte's life really had been short, and she was going to miss all the changes that, for better or worse, are a part of growing up and growing old. It occurred to Scarlet for the first time since she'd visited Charlotte on the afterlife intern campus that this might be the only place she'd ever see Charlotte again.

It seemed as good a place as any to leave Charlotte, well, mail, Scarlet thought, pulling a damp, sealed white no. 10 envelope from her bag. A stamp seemed unnecessary. She was pretty sure that Charlotte was one place the post office wouldn't deliver. Instead, she put it in a plastic bag and tied the bag tightly to one of the thorny rose stems. Good enough.

She raised the heart-shaped arrangement, framing Charlotte lovingly in the center of it, gently draped the wreath

around her swanlike neck, and stepped back to admire the beauty of both. Scarlet bent down, as if to pray, but instead pressed her hand down, leaving her handprint in the moist soil.

"I hope you're okay," she whispered sincerely, then got up and plodded away.