

SCAMMED

KRISTEN SIMMONS



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed
in this novel are either products of the author's imagination
or are used fictitiously.

SCAMMED

Copyright © 2020 by Kristen Simmons

All rights reserved.

A Tor Teen Book
Published by Tom Doherty Associates
120 Broadway
New York, NY 10271

www.tor-forge.com

Tor® is a registered trademark of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Simmons, Kristen, author.

Title: Scammed / Kristen Simmons.

Description: First edition. | New York : Tor Teen, a Tom Doherty Associates
Book, 2020. | Series: Vale Hall ; 2

Identifiers: LCCN 2019045325 (print) | LCCN 2019045326 (ebook) |
ISBN 9781250175830 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781250176349 (ebook)

Subjects: CYAC: Swindlers and swindling—Fiction. | Secrets—Fiction. | Political
corruption—Fiction. | Boarding schools—Fiction. | Schools—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.S591825 Sc 2020 (print) | LCC PZ7.S591825 (ebook) |
DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019045325>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019045326>

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use.

Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium
Sales Department at 1-800-221-7945, extension 5442, or by email
at MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

First Edition: February 2020

Printed in the United States of America

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CHAPTER 1

My grip tightens around the leather-padded wheel. My calf flexes as I press my foot down on the brake. Carefully, I check my mirrors and the windows for any sign someone might be watching.

In the passenger seat, Caleb Matsuki tightens the belt across his chest. His black hair is sticking out on the side from where he keeps scrubbing a hand through it, and the dark plastic rims of his glasses only frame the concern in his deep brown eyes.

“Five minutes,” he says.

Anxiety wraps hot tendrils around my lungs.

It’s not enough time.

I eye the last parking spot at the end of the row. We need to get the black SUV back there before anyone notices it’s gone. It’s not far, less than the length of a city block, but our path is impeded by a dozen cars sliding in and out of spots, and pedestrians carrying shopping bags.

Five minutes.

I ease off the brake, but the SUV lurches forward, and with a squeak, I slam my foot down again. Caleb rocks forward for the seventh—eighth?—time, and braces a locked arm against the dashboard.

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” He ratchets the seat belt strap tighter across his

waist. “I actually love whiplash. It’s right up there with bamboo shoots under my fingernails and people who eat tarantulas on nature survival shows.”

I bite my lip. “You see him?”

Caleb squints out the passenger window, through the autumn-kissed trees, toward the corner of the brick-and-mortar strip mall. On the opposite side of the building, Hugh Moore is in a coffee shop, removing the foam from his latte, or doing whatever stiff private school security guards do for fun, while our classmate Henry finishes his SAT at the testing site next door.

“No.” Caleb checks his phone. “He said he’d call when Henry was done.”

After we finished our tests, Moore gave us free rein of the shops, as long as we agreed to check in. He also gave me the keys to the SUV so I could stash my sweatshirt inside.

That was probably a mistake.

“Take your foot off the brake,” Caleb says. “Slowly this time.”

I check the side mirrors, hyperaware of the cars scattered around the lot. If I hit one of them, Moore won’t be pleased.

Then again, it’s not like he doesn’t have a whole garage of shiny sedans and SUVs to choose from.

I settle into my seat. My days of scamming for pennies are over. Devon Park is in my rearview; I’m high-class now. If I want a car, I’ll have my pick of them.

I just need to learn to drive first.

Gently this time, I ease off the brake, and the car rolls forward at a non-life-threatening speed.

“See? Pro,” I tell Caleb, grinning. “This driving thing is cake, like I—”

A car pulls out of the parking spot five spaces away and I slam on the brakes, sending Caleb hands first into the dashboard again.

“That was close,” I say under my breath.

“If forty feet away is close, then yes.”

“What are all these people doing out in the middle of the day? Don’t they have jobs?” I blow out a tense breath. “Who taught you to drive anyway?” The second the words are out, I regret them. Caleb’s mother takes the bus, and his dad’s laid out in a hospital bed in White Bank, his spine held together by pins and the gracious monetary donations of our school’s director.

“The one and only Dr. David Odin,” he says, all emotion hidden behind his careful con-artist mask.

I cock a brow his direction. “Aren’t you special.”

Caleb gives a one-shouldered shrug.

Vale Hall’s director doesn’t generally spend a lot of one-on-one time mentoring his students, even ones who’ve been enrolled as long as Caleb, in anything but lying. It’s career building and financial aid all wrapped up in a pretty package—we con his marks into spilling their deepest, darkest secrets, and in exchange Dr. O gives us free room and board, and a nice little scholarship to the university of our choice.

And, in Caleb’s case, medical care for his father.

Which all goes away the second we screw up.

Caleb points ahead to the bend in the lane. “Circle around the blue truck and go back to where we started.”

I mean to, but just as I’m taking my foot off the brake, a car from behind zips past on my left, close enough that it would take off my arm if I reached out the window. The driver shouts something I can’t make out, and though I only catch a glimpse of his sunglasses and raised middle finger, the familiarity is enough to cram my lungs up my throat.

Grayson Sterling.

On a gasp, I’m sucked into a memory I don’t fully own, one I’ve constructed lying in bed on sleepless nights.

The senator’s son, hunched over the wheel, chasing Susan Griffin’s car down Route 17.

I was just trying to get her to slow down. She wouldn't pull over, so I tried to get in front of her.

I didn't see the turn until it was too late.

The day he drove me to the crash site may have been three months ago, but I still remember every detail. The sweat staining the collar of his shirt. The way he kept taking his hand off the steering wheel while he told the story. He'd just wanted to talk to her, he said. He wanted to convince her to end the affair with his father.

He never meant to drive her off the road.

Still, I can hear him yelling through the window for her to pull over, his voice sharp as shattered glass and louder than the growl of his engine. I can see how he would've sliced his hand through the air to get her attention. How, frightened, she would have sped around the turn to get away.

I can picture her swerving off the road, losing control, the gravel potholes jostling her around the seat before she crashes head-on into a tree and snaps her neck.

"Brynn?"

Jumping in my seat, I blink at Caleb's face, warped in concern. My gaze drops to his hand, resting on my thigh. Another searing breath, and the clutch of that vision is ripped away.

We're not on Route 17. I'm not with Grayson. Susan is gone.

Those things are in the past, and I need to forget them.

Heat floods my collar.

"You all right?"

The edge in Caleb's voice grinds what's left of my composure, and I squeeze the wheel so he doesn't see my hands shake.

"Yeah."

"That guy almost took off your mirror." I follow Caleb's gaze to the edge of the parking lot and the beat-up black sedan pulling out onto the main street. It's nothing like Grayson would drive.

Now that I think about it, that guy didn't even look like the hard-edged boy Dr. O assigned me to con last summer.

"I'm fine. It's not a big deal." But these are lies. I'm not fine. I can't stop thinking about Grayson, and haven't been able to sleep since he took me to the crash site. But I can't tell Caleb this, because if I do, the rest of it might slip out—the truth, that no one knows but Grayson and me.

That I'm the reason he's missing.

If I hadn't told him to run that day, his father would've punished him for leaking the truth they'd worked so hard to cover up. Dr. O may have offered to help Grayson, but he would have taken that back once he realized who really ran his sister off the road that night.

Best-case scenario, Grayson would have been charged with vehicular manslaughter. Worst case, his father would have made him disappear to save his own political career. I set Grayson free to save him, and in doing so, I banished him from his own life. Now I have no idea where he is, or if he's even alive.

And I don't even know why I feel guilty, because he's the one who drove someone off the road.

Caleb gives my thigh a gentle squeeze. If he only knew that the weight of his palm was keeping me tethered to this seat.

I want to tell him everything about what happened that day, but I can't. It's not that I don't trust him, but if Dr. O ever finds out I let Grayson go, I'll be out of Vale Hall and back on the south side.

And I am *never* going back.

I shift my focus back to the turn at the end of the lot, moving my foot slowly from the brake to the gas pedal. We jump forward five feet, and Caleb laughs weakly.

"How'd you do on the test anyway?" I ask, trying to diffuse the tension in my chest. To come back to this car, with him, where it's safe.

He looks back at the corner of the building, his lips pulling in a straight line. “Okay, I guess.”

I was nervous, although admittedly Shrew—or Mrs. Shrewsbury, as she’s technically called—was just having me take the test as a baseline. It’s Caleb’s second time, and his score was pretty high the first round. Still, Shrew wants him to get into a prestigious college for premed, which means every point matters.

“Just okay?”

I glance again at his ink-stained fingers, reminded of the buildings he sketches when no one else is looking. A good score shouldn’t hurt if he goes out for architecture, either.

“Could have used Sam on the math section.”

Our fellow students have special abilities. Sam can score a perfect sixteen hundred on the SATs. We know this, because before Vale Hall, he made a nice little income taking it for other people.

Of course, it landed him in jail, but you can’t win them all.

Our original parking spot comes into view, only instead of it being empty like before, there’s a man standing between the white brackets wearing a black button-down shirt, slacks, and a look that spells certain doom.

I slam on the brakes.

A boy in dark jeans and a plaid shirt appears behind Hugh Moore, waving frantically and pointing toward the security guard as if we don’t already see him. Henry looks a lot cheerier than last night, when he was surrounded by wads of scratch paper and balled up chip bags, screaming at everyone to use their “inside voices” so he could memorize a few more word associations.

Caleb checks his phone. “So much for the warning call.”

A second later the driver’s door is ripped open, and Moore is standing in the gap, one open hand extended toward me.

“Keys,” he says between his teeth. I put the car in park and place them in his hand, now unable to remember why I thought this was a good idea.

“So . . .” I start, but Caleb interrupts.

“My fault, officer.” He leans across the seat, every part the cocky con I’ve seen on the job. “I told her she needs to get her license before we graduate.”

That’s actually what I told him when I jumped into the driver’s seat. By the look on Moore’s face, he’s guessed as much.

“Next time you decide to commit grand theft auto, take someone else’s car.” He juts a thumb toward the backseat, mad, but not get-us-expelled mad.

Caleb and I navigate to the back, keeping a good three feet between us. He crosses his arms and lowers his chin to his chest, the picture of repentance.

“Sorry,” I whisper.

His gaze meets mine, and I catch the smirk he’s hiding. It cues a lightness in my chest, a fluttering behind my ribs. Somehow, being in trouble feels pretty on-brand for Caleb and me.

Moore clears his throat in the front seat, and I fix my stare out the window.

“Did you have enough alone time?” whispers Henry, strawberry-blond hair cutting over one eye as he turns in the front seat. “I can go back and redo reading comprehension if you need a few more minutes.”

“Stop talking,” warns Moore.

“Yes, sir.” Henry salutes.

Half an hour later, we’re turning down the private driveway, beneath the black iron gate marked by twin ravens. The tree branches overhead weave together, creating streaks of shadow that splash through the windshield, and soon a stone fountain appears, spraying water in high, arcing streams.

Behind it rests the kind of mansion only movie stars should live in, and the sight of the stone walls, reaching up toward the castle-like spires, brings on the memory of my first time here, when I didn’t think this dream would be possible.

Vale Hall.

Inside those walls, I have my own bedroom, my own clothes and laptop and books. I have friends to laugh with, who have my back when I need them, and a kitchen where I can eat whatever I want, whenever I want. No matter how complicated our jobs are for Dr. O, this has become my home.

Moore lets us out in the circular drive, and Caleb and I hurry out of the car before he decides he doesn't actually forgive us after all. Henry chases us up the stone steps, and through the door into the foyer, and when he cuts in front of us like some kid sprinting to an ice cream truck, we all crack up.

But the laughter dies in our throats as Henry crashes into the person leaving Dr. O's office and repels off, nearly knocking us over.

My stomach sinks like a stone.

There before us, in jeans and a tattered gray hoodie, stands Grayson Sterling.