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[PIZGACZ]

START a FIRE

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Original Polish language title: Start a Fire. Runda pierwsza

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Cover image: Shutterstock

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ISBN: 978-83-8322-030-7

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Prologue

I have long believed that everything would work out. It was perhaps the first time I cared about something so much in my life. And it wasn't that life without you wouldn't make any sense anymore. I just no longer wanted to be selfish. I thought that everything would snap back into place after many hard and turbulent moments.

Unfortunately, that didn't happen. I don't know why this happened to us specifically. After all, we deserved happiness. Everyone deserves it, so why not us? We started with a fire that went out of control. Now we must pay for our sins.

We are damned and we will end up in Hell. I know this because you said it many times and I stubbornly denied it. Now I know you were right. We're all going to hell. Especially the two of us.

Because hell awaits us.

CHAPTER 1.

Pledge

As I stood in front of the brown door leading to the most hated room in the house, there was only one question on my mind, one that revisited me quite often. It first appeared the moment I touched the gilded door handle with just my fingertips, with the intention of stepping inside. *On a scale from one to ten – how much will I want to pull all of my brother’s hair out?* Living with him taught me to expect the unexpected because the answer was sixteen. Every day I dreamed of someone up there finally taking pity on me and changing that number to a strong twelve.

“If you’re not up in eight seconds, I swear I’ll scalp you,” I snarled dryly as I swung open the door to his room and the wooden slab thudded against the white wall.

The silence I got in return was quite an eloquent signal that my dream was worth shit.

Everyone starts their day with a certain activity. For some, it’s a refreshing shower, which it’s impossible to function normally without. A fresh cup of coffee while reading the latest issue of the daily newspaper or browsing online forums, or going for a walk with one’s dog. For me, on the other hand, this involved waking up my brother, who is always late to school, and who had been playing computer games all night long again. For nine months, Monday through Friday, I had to be his private alarm clock every morning. And this was not a job I would kill for.

“Get up, you freakin deadbeat!” I repeated even more angrily.

Theo’s room was as dark and filthy as usual. It smelled of must and spoiled food. Navy blue blinds covered the windows, and piles of books,

CDs, and clothes were on the floor as well as other things which, for my own good, I preferred not to touch. He lay in between all this. Wrapped in a duvet and spread across the mattress, he cared for nothing at all. He didn't even move at the sound of the door slamming against the wall and of me screaming. His long, bony limbs casually dangled down, his nose pressed into the pillow.

"There's the door you came in through," he grunted softly, waving his hand at random. "Let me know when you exit through it."

"If you make me late again today and get a detention after class, you'll regret it," I threatened, walking over to his bed. My brother didn't even muster a response. "I'll make you go on foot."

"With the way you drive, I'll get there before you anyway."

I rolled my eyes at his sarcastic tone that was still drowned out by the pillow.

"I mean, girl, who gave you your driving license?"

"The same institution that has already refused you several times."

I smiled cunningly. I liked reminding that moron that he had already failed the exam four times. After all, I knew he had at least twice as many to fail since the examiner told him he was "a road hazard to society as a whole". I couldn't disagree with that, seeing how mom had to replace the entire bumper after our parallel parking exercise.

Without a word, I leaned over him and grabbed his brown hair sticking out from under the pillow. It was a bit long and somewhat curly, so I easily got my fingers in the curls and pulled on them with full force. This had an immediate effect – he howled quietly and cursed under his breath.

"If you don't get up in five seconds and mom scolds me again for not waking you, you can be sure everyone in school will see your nude childhood photos," I muttered. "And we both know all too well how much you liked taking a bath."

"This is blackmail."

"Funny thing, you just sounded like you thought I cared." I burst out laughing drily. "Wait until I get to the real threats."

I watched with quite some satisfaction as my brother muttered something under his breath, then sat up in seven seconds. He moaned softly, rubbing his tired face. As he looked at me, his brown-green eyes showed only a profound dislike. And it was this sight that made me grin from

ear to ear, showing my teeth. This upset him even more. My threat was childish, so I could enjoy it just like a child would.

“You make me hate the world even more every day, and the bar is quite high,” he said.

“I don’t know who I killed in my previous lifetime, and now have to repent so hard and put up with you,” I said, turning away ostentatiously. “But believe me, if we could choose siblings, you’d be my last option,” I added, feeling his eyes on me. I was pretty sure he was just rolling his eyes at me. “You have five minutes, Theo,” I pointed out clearly.

I left his room and slammed the door behind me.

I hated that I was the one who had to worry about us getting to school safely. Of course, I could leave him then and there and make him take the bus. I did several times, but then I was scolded more than him because Theodore was mummy’s beloved son and he could not possibly use public transport. While in truth, he was a lazy asshole.

I grabbed the black purse from my room and walked down the stairs to the first floor. As soon as I stepped into the kitchen, a large Newfoundland rubbed against my legs and nearly knocked me over. At the last moment, I managed to grab onto the cabinet next to me, cursing under my breath.

“Watch out, Cat!” I scolded the pet as I regained my balance. With a sigh, I looked at the thirty-pound black dog wagging its tail, panting heavily. “I had to deal with Theo. Be at least a little less obnoxious than he is.”

“You’re running late.”

I looked up as a melodic soprano reached my ears. Cat, who sat right next to my legs yawned loudly and nudged my knee with his head. I didn’t focus on him, however, but on the woman who wasn’t even looking at me. She was sitting in her usual spot at the long oak table in the dining room. She was slowly sipping coffee from her favorite beige mug as she read the morning paper. Her blue eyes followed the text closely from behind the round lenses of her black-rimmed glasses. Her ash-blonde shoulder-length hair was pulled up in a sloppy bun with a few strands sticking out.

I raised an eyebrow. I knew she felt my gaze on her, but still did not flinch, flipping stoically through the pages of the newspaper. There was a slight smile at the corner of her slim mouth, and her entire face looked amused.

“It’s not my fault that idiot never gets up on time,” I said in my defense. “If he continues to behave like this, he will really be riding the bus.”

“He can’t, Victoria,” she muttered, seemingly serious, but her tone had a cheerful note to it.

“And why might that be?” I asked defiantly, folding my arms over my chest.

That was when my mother raised her head slightly and her piercing gaze fell on me. Sometimes I really hated how she looked at me because when she did, I thought she knew everything that was going on in my head. I’ve always been too proud, so I didn’t budge, staring at the azure shade of her irises. They were lovely, as was the rest of her. We remained silent for a few seconds. As I was trying to understand what she might be talking about, her thin raspberry lips curved into a slight smile.

“You know he couldn’t even buy a ticket,” she replied with slight mockery, and as soon as I got the sense of what she was saying, I couldn’t help but snort a little. “And if he did, it would take him a month to figure out which stop to get off at.”

“Dear God, you’re a terrible mother...” I shook my head in amusement, spreading my hands helplessly.

Mom gladly returned to the newspaper she had been reading.

“I’m learning from you.”

“Such praise from Joseline Clark herself, and it’s not even ten o’clock yet.” I sighed theatrically, placing my hand on my chest. “I will take it as an incredible compliment.”

“I’ve always wondered who you inherited your mean personality from,” she muttered, and I rolled my eyes as I turned on the coffee maker. “Victoria, he’s your brother, so the two of you could stop arguing,” she added.

“And it is precisely because we are siblings that our arguments will never end,” I said bluntly.

“Amen!” screamed Theo loudly, while bustling in the hall upstairs, echoing throughout the house.

Joseline looked up at the ceiling with the corner of her mouth raised as I poured coffee into a mug, tapping my long fingernails on the marble countertop.

“After seventeen years of having to listen to these arguments, it has become really tiresome.”

“Well, I didn’t make you give birth to that thing.” I grabbed the purple mug in both hands, giving her a telling look. “You were the one who wanted twins. I would be just fine as an only child.”

And perhaps I would never have said the words aloud had there not been something magical about these mornings. Maybe they were not special and no different from mornings in a million other households, but in a weird way I liked the chaos and noise, and little arguments. I liked having a little chat with my mom who looked so casual before we left for school. Due to her high social status and the fact that she had been the head of the city council for several years, she usually had to look her best. And I loved seeing her in her morning variant. As she sipped her favorite coffee in an oversized bathrobe, her hair carelessly done up, and no makeup on her face, and wearing glasses instead of contact lenses. When she was just mom. Not *a lawyer working at the best law firm in town*. Not the *mayor’s right hand*. Not the *respected Joseline Arabella Clark*. When she was just mom.

“If I had argued like this with Uncle Garry every time, he would probably not be with us today,” she sighed, remembering her brother.

She put the paper aside, sipping her coffee.

“You were the one who gave birth to that thing, let me remind you,” I muttered, pointing to the second floor where Theo was still messing around. “He’s annoying. And I usually eliminate annoying things, so should anything happen, it’s your fault.”

“Thank you for your kind words, little sister,” my brother growled as he ran down the stairs.

I glanced his way nonchalantly, not caring that he had just heard me. All in all, it made me glad.

“Can I eliminate your face, since we’re debating the annoying stuff?” he added.

“Not funny.”

He was dressed in black as usual, which did not surprise me at all. This wouldn’t surprise anyone who knew him even a little. My brother loved that color. I had no idea if there was anything in his wardrobe that wasn’t black, but I honestly doubted it, since I had been borrowing his clothes on occasion and never came across such a find. Admittedly, he used to dress a bit differently, but as soon as he turned

fourteen, his style changed drastically. According to my hated aunt Theodore, like most teenagers, had to undergo this “mystical teenage rebel stage.” This is how adults have often justified sudden changes that occurred in young people. I’ve always considered it utter nonsense. It was not a rebellious stage; it was growing up and discovering our own paths, abandoning those shown to us by society and our educators. With Theodore, this manifested itself in a change in his dressing style. And, while he no longer wore Gothic patterns as he did when he was fifteen, some things stayed with him for good. Black boots, black sweatshirts, black tracksuits, black sweaters, black leather. An inseparable element of his wardrobe was beanies which he never parted with. He had several, and I knew they were more valuable to him than I was. They, too, were black.

“You’re scaring children away with your face,” he snapped.

“We’re twins,” I said calmly, putting my empty mug down in the sink. “By insulting my beauty, you are also insulting yours.”

And as much as I denied many things about my brother, this I really couldn’t. It was obvious at first glance. The same olive complexion and the same chocolate brown hair. Our features were also similar: we had the same high cheekbones, full lips, and slightly upturned noses, although there were a few small freckles on his. But what was identical in us, so much so that even strangers would immediately see we were related, were the large brown-green eyes. I honestly hated it. Fortunately, we were alike only in appearance. We had different personalities – my brother was a completely arrogant and self-centered idiot. I was just arrogant and self-centered.

“You’re the uglier version of me, so I wouldn’t be so sure,” he snapped back with a pitying smile, at which I also grinned mockingly, murdering him with my glare.

“Luckily, I inherited my intelligence. I would share with you if I could, as I see that you’re not exactly rolling in it.”

“I’m afraid if you shared, you would have none left.”

“You’re already draining all my life energy anyway, so I would cope.”

“Please, get out of this house now,” my mother groaned, getting up from the chair and interrupting our exchange.

I fell silent, looking away from grumpy Theo.

“You didn’t go to school for the last two weeks, which resulted in me having a mental breakdown. The eight hours you are not here... I really need them.” Having said that, mom turned to the sink and put the mug in it.

For a moment I watched her slim figure as she fiddled gracefully rummaged around the kitchen cabinet. She was quite tall and bony with long, spindly arms and legs, but it all strangely harmonized.

I looked at Theo, who smiled cynically to himself and gave me the middle finger. I rolled my eyes, whispering a soft curse under my breath. I was sure he got the message.

“You guys do realize I can see your reflections in the canopy?”

Mom’s quiet question made Theo lower his hand immediately, and I pursed my lips into a narrow line. The woman sighed, turning to face us again. She gave us a pitying look, folding her arms over her chest.

“You two really are detached from reality.”

“And are you not our mother by any chance?” Theo asked, frowning. “Can mothers even talk like that?”

“We can,” she replied bluntly. Sometimes I wondered if my mother insulting us like this was even legal. “If you don’t leave now, you’ll be late and I’ll have another breakdown. In both cases, you will be the ones losing.”

“Yeah, we’re going,” Theo and I said almost simultaneously.

I grabbed an apple from the metal basket on the counter and headed for the front door. When I was passing by mom, I leaned over, as usual, and kissed her briefly on the pale cheek that was the color of snow. For as long as I could remember, I have been amazed at her porcelain complexion. It was my quiet dream to look like this at the age of forty-four. Not a single wrinkle!

All in all, this shouldn’t surprise me, given the prices of the creams she used.

“I’m making risotto tonight, so don’t eat out,” she muttered, and I widened my eyes and kissed her three more times.

She laughed softly, tipping her head slightly.

“You are the woman of my life!” I called out.

Mom snorted mockingly, and I started toward the exit. Theo was right behind me, and Cat ran in front of us, barking happily.

When we got a dog for our twelfth birthday five years earlier, we thought it would be a good idea to call him Cat. We got to tell everyone that we have both a dog and a cat at home. In hindsight, that was a very silly concept.

I sighed, shuffling my boots against the brown panels. The soles of my black Vans bounced off the wood. The noise mingled with the sound of my brother's sloppy footsteps shuffling in his heavy boots. I glanced at the beige and brown lounge visible from the hall before I went to the door.

I liked our house. It wasn't the biggest, but I couldn't say we were barely scraping by either. As a lawyer and member of the city council, mom made a lot of money. The two-story building was elegantly furnished with a sense of style. The interiors were finished in shades of brown, beige, and gold, looking both dignified and cozy. The house had five bedrooms, a spacious kitchen with a dining room and a living room, three bathrooms, a laundry room with a drying room, as well as an attic and garage. As Theo and I had one bathroom, we had to share it. This often caused arguments.

I casually ran my hand through my long, half-back hair that resolved to live a life of its own that day. Dissatisfied, I looked at my brother's curls hidden under the beanie. I would give anything to make mine curl so perfectly.

"You're not getting any prettier, so get a move on," Theo muttered, poking me with his elbow to open the door and step outside.

I spared no effort and smacked him upside the head, taking advantage of our similar height. We were both quite tall. I was five feet nine inches. Theo was perhaps two inches taller, but his bony and a rather asymmetrical build made him seem seven feet tall. Like mom, he had a slender body and long limbs. Moreover, his wearing oversized black clothes made him seem even thinner. We were different in structure, me being a bit fuller. I had wide hips, thighs, and shoulders.

Theo elbowed me on the shoulder in retaliation. After a little scuffle, we gave each other contemptuous looks and left the house. It really wasn't that we didn't like each other. From the outside, it might have seemed that we just hated each other's guts and made each other's lives difficult at every turn, and that was roughly the truth, but wasn't

that what being siblings is all about? Too many times have I heard how wonderful it is to have a brother who supports and protects you. I sincerely doubted it, on account of my many years of experience. It was as if Theo would have thrown me under the bus if he could. And vice versa.

I ran down the three steps to the porch and walked over to our black two-thousand-sixteenth Mercedes, which my brother was already seated in. I tossed my bag onto the backseat and got inside. Culver City, California, was famous for having a lot of traffic on the streets at this time. And because the Arnolds' family home from *The Wonder Years* was located here. Even though it was not a big city – only thirty-nine thousand residents – it was crowded and there were tourists all over the place. Admittedly, although I never understood it, Culver City was quite a popular place. To me, it was East Bumblefuck.

We argued all the way to school about who was supposed to clean the bathroom that day. And that didn't even surprise me. We would mostly argue about cleaning and weeding the garden. And about food. And about access to the living room TV. And about the front seat when we drive with mom. Well, we fought about a lot of things. I was very stubborn, so I won most of these quarrels. Sometimes I looked like a jackass- and Theo loved using that term, but in a completely different sense. It's true, I'm not one to let go easily. It was irritating even for me, but pride often won over sense. So was the case this time around.

I was beyond calming down. Or *there was no one to do it*.

Seven minutes before the bell rang, I was parking in front of the building complex that made up Culver High School. The place was currently my nightmare, it was ingrained into my mind so much that I could draw it from memory. I didn't miss it. Lots of people hung around in the square in front of the entrance, getting ready for the first class after spring break. The students' faces showed that going back to the school's reality was not something they enjoyed. That didn't surprise me. A few days earlier I myself was basking in the sunny Dominican Republic. I have managed to get used to everyday school life. After all, this year our spring break lasted two weeks because we managed to convince mom that it is worth leaving a week earlier and staying together longer.

Theo didn't even wait for me to turn off the engine. He immediately got out of the car and slammed the door behind him. Without a word, he

walked toward his friends who were standing under a large, sprawling tree. My brother was one of those typical let-down kids who didn't see the point of staying alive. According to him, the world was flooded with commercialism, he noticed corruption and the machinations of the elites at every turn, and he was convinced that nuclear weapons were being developed, which was to end with the outbreak of World War Three. And on top of that, he didn't feel like doing anything.

Mentally preparing to return to the hated facility, I also got out of the Mercedes. I sighed, then pulled out my bag, and from it my sunglasses. We lived in fucking California – the sun here shined more often and stronger than anywhere else. I put them on and started walking toward the entrance to the building. On my way there, I greeted a few friends whom I hadn't seen for several days. Not that I missed them too much, but either way, I smiled, nodding my head, having no time for anything else.

As soon as I walked in, the familiar scent that only prevailed there hit my nostrils like a bullet from a machine gun. I wanted to head back to the car and then straight to the Dominican Republic, where nice waiters in short shorts served me tropical drinks with umbrellas. White lockers on either side of the hall, hideous food in the cafeteria, and Ben Staller in a piranha costume as the school's mascot were integral parts of Culver High. It definitely wasn't an easy return.

When I realized that I had my first class of the day with Professor Roth, who was yelling and moaning all the time that she might have gone to Italy with a wealthy Frenchman twenty years ago, the vision of being uneducated did not seem so bad. I hated this woman with a passion. I squeezed through the crowd of sleepy students to finally get to my locker.

“How come you're not late?”

I didn't even jump up when I heard a well-known female voice next to me.

I quickly suppressed the involuntary smile that crept on my face. Sometimes I felt like tearing out the windpipe from the owner of that voice, but not today – I haven't heard it live in about fourteen days. Only by phone and Skype, because while I was spending my spring break in the Dominican Republic, Mia Roberts was buying out the assortment of clothes stores in Paris.

With an unshakable face, I packed the needed textbooks into my bag without looking at them.

“My mentally exhausting brother managed to style his bangs faster,” I muttered.

“Whoah, such enthusiasm in the morning,” she chirped sarcastically as she sipped her coffee in a plastic cup.

Dear God. I missed her so much.

“I’m still surprised,” she added.

“About what?” I raised an eyebrow curiously, finally glancing at her out of the corner of my eye.

The girl pushed her golden hair back off her shoulder without emotion.

“That you didn’t just leave him behind in the Dominican Republic.”

And that was that. As soon as we looked at each other, identical smiles appeared on our faces. Without a word, I dropped my bag on the floor as the blonde girl opened her arms, nearly hitting some poor first-grader with her hand. I burst out laughing at the gesture and snuggled into her body quickly, inhaling the soothing scent of vanilla and hot chocolate. Mia Roberts might have been a slut like no other. Yes, sometimes I felt like taking her to the woods and feeding her to wild animals, but being away from her for more than a few days was unbearable.

“God, you’re even more tanned than before,” she commented as we finally pulled away from each other.

I quickly picked up my bag and finished packing as Mia nonchalantly leaned her shoulder against the locker next to mine, staring at my profile.

“So? Did you pick up anyone in the sunny Dominican Republic?”

“Mia, you know full well I didn’t.” I rolled my eyes. “We talked every day. Nothing interesting was going on,” I said, and a grimace appeared on her face.

“Meh, and here I hoped to hear a story about you and a hot lifeguard who taught you to swim,” she muttered sarcastically and wrinkled her little nose.

I looked at her indulgently.

“This isn’t a movie, Mia. And I already know how to swim,” I reminded her, but she only waved her hand and then adjusted the silver watch that was always on her left wrist.

“I would also accept a sexy bartender.”

At her words, I burst out laughing and shook my head as I closed the locker.

Mia fucking Roberts. There were many things I could say about her, and not all of them were flattering. There would probably be some offensive words, and a bundle or two of curses. And that's perhaps why we were friends since elementary school. Since childhood, we went to the same schools, so we saw each other practically every day. We also stayed at each other's place on weekends. The exceptions were vacations and winter breaks that we would spend with our families, usually outside the United States. Such a break was always quite a shock, and while for the first few days I would thank the heavens that I could free myself from her, and constantly send her texts saying: "God, I'm so glad you're not here, I'm never coming back to you, I have a wonderful life, bye", then at the end I would call her twice as often, complaining that I was already bored and wanted to see her. Not that she wasn't doing the same.

I fucking missed her face, and it was something to miss because Mia Roberts could fall into the same category as my mother. She was gorgeous. Her hair was shoulder-length. Cut straight, and in a shade of cool blonde. It gave her that charm that made me want to puke. She never put it up but spent a lot of time straightening it because it naturally curled into cute springs, which she hated. In her blue eyes, I saw a flash that I hated at my worse moments. Mia had a sharp gaze, just like my mother. And no moments were worse than those when they taunted me with it at the same time.

Mia was taller than me, but despite her considerable height, she loved to wear high wedges and wide heels. I often objected to wearing such shoes, because I towered over many representatives of the opposite sex while wearing them. Maybe it was stereotypical, but I felt quite insecure then. Mia had no such problem. I could see that sometimes she even liked it. Her long legs and slim figure made her look like a Victoria's Secret model. And she knew it. She always got attention because she loved being in the spotlight. I preferred standing aside and laughing at all the meaningless drama that was going on around me. I liked watching stupid people.

One thing was for sure – Mia was a go-getter. She was one of those people who could easily approach a random boy and get his phone number. She always led the group she was in. She charmed others with her

words and expression, making herself the center of attention. She had that “je ne sais quoi” about her that attracted people. She liked being adored and never played innocent. She never faked a thing. When she wanted something, she usually managed to get it. She was narcissistic, self-centered, outspoken, sometimes shallow, and incredibly irritating, although she hid more than what she showed others. And never in my life would I trade her for anyone else.

“God, Liam is staring at you all the time,” she grunted in disgust, contorting her perfectly made-up face.

I smiled slightly, shrugging my shoulders.

“He’s cute,” I said.

Unable to contain myself, I glanced in the direction Mia was looking. And as expected, the blonde, of medium height, who was standing a bit further by his locker, was stealthily peeking my way. As soon as he saw I caught his eye, however, he quickly looked away and slung his backpack over his shoulder embarrassedly, then disappeared into the crowd of students. I laughed softly at the sweet reaction. That’s Liam Wood, alright. The boy I went to English with and who lent me pens a lot. And yes, it might sound narcissistic, but I knew he liked me. That really flattered me. He was sweet, slightly goofy, and always helpful. Besides, he belonged to the school council.

“Cute?” Mia asked with disgust, interrupting my thoughts about him.

I looked at her as she raised an eyebrow, her blue eyes staring coldly at where Liam had disappeared. At times like this, Mia reminded me of the Ice Queen. With a flawless pale complexion, narrow pink lips, and aristocratic features. She could be terrifying.

“His face reminds me of a cross between a falafel and a potato,” she added.

I didn’t comment on that, although her choice of words made me want to smile. By some miracle, I maintained my composure.

“Oh, come on,” I grunted. Mia loved to dramatize. “I’m not the paragon of beauty either, so I don’t have any excessive requirements,” I snorted. “Liam is very nice and he is fun to talk to. He is helpful and that makes him attractive.”

The blonde girl rolled her eyes theatrically, looking as if she was listening to a boring lecture. And perhaps it was so.

“But he’s not handsome.”

“So who do you think is handsome?!” I asked in an irritated tone, slowly getting tired of this exchange. I felt as if my gray matter was dying.

Mia thought for a moment, looking carefully around the corridor. I sighed, folding my arms over my chest. I looked at my long black nails without much interest. I really didn’t feel like playing those silly games again. Plus, the bell was to ring in under a minute, and I wasn’t really ready for a history class.

I looked at Mia out of the corner of my eye as she remained silent. That pleased me because it meant she hadn’t been able to single out anyone. She was quite the picky sort. Just as I thought I had won and we were going to end this silly spectacle, her gaze stopped, her eyes twinkled slightly, and her lips curved into a smile worthy of Garfield himself. She bit her lower lip, flashing her white, even teeth.

“Him,” she murmured softly, looking somewhere behind me.

Reluctantly, I turned to look at the person Roberts had picked. The person who just walked in through the main door.

Of course.

He was walking slowly down the corridor. Though no one did it ostentatiously, most people gave him tense looks. The reason was what happened over a month earlier. He was suspended for two weeks before the winter break and therefore nobody saw him at school for almost thirty days. No wonder his return caused quite a stir. Not that he came in regularly before then.

He walked alone, as usual. I wasn’t surprised, as he didn’t hang out with anyone at Culver High. He had those suspicious friends of his who were older than us. Most of the students would get out of his way due to the negative emotions he evoked. I could safely say that he was the terror of our high school and nobody wanted to mess with him.

He was dressed in black jeans, a T-shirt of the same color, and a leather jacket. He had neither a backpack nor a bag. He was holding a phone in his large hand. His thick brown hair was slightly disheveled, and he wore sunglasses even though he was indoors. That was incredibly dumb, but it did make him seem oddly attractive. And although I knew I’d swallow my tongue rather than say it out loud, I’d be lying if I said he wasn’t handsome. He was. He was really

handsome. Which was probably why a few girls and a couple of boys watched him with googly eyes.

“That’s what I’m talking about, Vic,” Mia said happily, making me shake my head, snapping back to reality. My friend was still watching the boy with that sly smile of hers. “He finally came back. After they suspended him, I had nobody to look at.”

“Yeah, but I think I’d rather let it go,” I admitted, scratching my neck. Not that I stood a chance anyway. “And you should too. Anyone with half a brain should.”

“It’s Parker,” she sighed, bouncing off the locker. “Even if you want to let him go, you just can’t.”

I knew Mia liked Luke Mitchell, whom everyone called Parker for some unknown reason. Who wouldn’t like him? A tall, broad-shouldered, handsome boy with chocolate-golden eyes and hazel hair. He was a senior, although he should have graduated from high school the year before. Unfortunately, he had to repeat senior year due to fights and absences. A mysterious boy from the last row, with an overwhelming smile and dangerous friends. It all sounded nice, but the reality was a little different. This wasn’t a movie, and every normal person knew to stay away from people like that.

“He’s someone better not to be friends with,” I muttered as the bell sounded to announce the start of the first class.

With a groan, we headed toward the right room. Mia scowled at me.

“You believe the rumors too?” she asked, snorting under her breath. “I wouldn’t have suspected.”

“This isn’t about rumors, Mia. You know very well he is some shady character. Best to stay away from such people,” I said. “He has a beef with the police, and he hangs out with some bad company.”

Mia sighed but nodded meekly. She knew I was right. After all, appearances are not everything. We could admire Parker’s good looks, but that didn’t change the fact that he was what he was, and came from where he came from. These sorts of people were simply not worth dealing with for one’s own safety. Besides, people like him were also not eager to be friends with us. And it wasn’t that we were very different. This is just the way it was. Everyone knew Parker hated this high school and the people attending it, most of who came from well-to-do homes, and

whose parents had something to do with secret services or politics. Mia realized that too. She might have dreamed of a hot romance with this dangerous boy, but she was still the daughter of one of the best doctors in the city, who went golfing with the mayor every Saturday.

Finally, we entered the room which I did not miss at all. We took our usual seats. After a while the teacher entered, wearing a long brown skirt, white shirt, and black jacket. Her bleached hair was slicked back in a high bun, and she wore her glasses, the lenses of which resembled coke bottles.

“My favorite class is complete again after spring break,” she snapped, sitting down in the chair. “With our beloved Victoria Clark at the helm,” she added with satisfaction, looking straight into my eyes.

Professor Roth hated my guts since I first entered his history class. I had no idea why. All in all, it could have something to do with the not-so-nice sign on the bench that I carved in the first grade after my first F on a test. Okay, maybe “I’m pissing on you, you emotionless bitch” wasn’t the pinnacle of modern poetry, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t enjoy this childish antic. I was not pleased, however, with the reprimand I got for it, though I regretted nothing.

“We never skip history class, teach,” said Jason flatteringly, being our classroom apple polisher. “Especially not me.”

“But you do skip hairdresser visits,” someone next to me muttered, making me smile under my breath.

“Stop with the brown-nosing, Hillary,” the teacher grumbled. “It’s April, which means we have three months of school left. After vacation, you’ll start your final year and exams, so let’s get to work.”

Here comes the brutal return to reality.

For the next fifty minutes, I chewed on my pen, doodled on the cover of my notebook, which had already lost most of its pages, and counted down to the end of this goddamn lesson. Relieved, I finally left the room and stood in the crowded corridor. Mia had disappeared a while earlier, and I had to get to my locker. When I got there, I didn’t even dial the code, when someone’s frail arms hugged me tightly. I was pulled bearishly against a male torso and almost lost my balance. I avoided an encounter with the floor at the last second.

“Try making an attempt on my life after the fifth lesson, because today they are serving fries in the cafeteria,” I suggested resigned. Having

lived among hyperactive people, there were few things that could really scare me.

I untangled my arms and opened the locker, then put my purse inside. He was hugging me really tight, crushing my lungs. The familiar scent of the forest reached my nostrils. I really missed him. Him and the warmth he emanated.

“Do you prefer the electric chair or the traditional rope?” he asked, finally letting go of me.

I calmly turned to look at the merry hazel irises.

“Is that all you got?” I asked, raising an eyebrow defiantly.

The black-haired boy thought for a moment, running his long fingers over the thick curls on his head.

“I’ve had a rough time with my ideas lately,” he huffed, taking a dramatic stance. He was a master at it. “I must be getting old.”

“You’re seventeen. Better start arranging for a coffin,” I mocked, at which he wrinkled his nose, squinting at me.

I laughed softly and leaned toward him, placing a gentle kiss on his plump lips, which calmed him a little. A smile flashed on his beautiful face again. And it was this smile that he was known for. Chris Adams was undoubtedly a walking bag of giggles, silly ideas, and drama. And I really missed it. He looked at me, tensed slightly, and with a cheeky smile rested his back against the locker next to us, putting his hands in the pockets of his tight jeans.

“You can hardly blame me,” he muttered. “My mind is still on the beach watching the hot waiters. And waitresses.”

“How was Ibiza?” I asked although I knew most of that anyway.

As with Mia, I talked to him every day and the three of us chatted frequently. After all, Chris Adams was musketeer number three and a wonderful friend of mine since our pre-school days. That skinny bean-pole, who always wore designer clothes, drove the latest Jaguar model, and whose lovely curls were taken care of every month by a hairdresser who cashed in three hundred per hour, was definitely a ray of light illuminating our boring, gray days. I wasn’t sure there was anyone in all of Culver City who even slightly resembled him.

Chris was bursting with confidence and charisma. It was probably not without significance that his name was high on the list of the richest

families in California, and his mother was an icon in the fashion world, which meant that he was rolling in money. But what I loved about him the most was that while he could buy his own fucking island, he didn't care about any of that crap. He was simply Chris Adams. The man who paired Gucci clothes with Adidas shoes, threw the best parties in the whole school, and owned all the NSYNC albums.

"It was hot. Lots of clubbing, too," he replied satisfied.

I looked at him with a tiny smirk.

"One of the best holidays I've had," he added. "Did you hear that Parker is back?"

"Yup," I muttered, uninterested. "Mia has already recited a litany about how handsome he is."

"Well, he is," Chris snorted as if we were talking about something completely obvious.

He folded his arms over his chest as he watched the other students walk wearily down the hall, their eyes fixed on their phone screens.

"Must everyone repeat that?" I asked irritably, searching for some non-expired drink among the little bottles that sat in my locker.

"I scream internally whenever I see him, okay? It's a reflex."

"Don't you prefer redheads, by any chance?" I asked nonchalantly.

He didn't care for it much. He shrugged and straightened the collar of his Lacoste shirt.

"I can change my priorities for him," he smiled in satisfaction, which made me lift the corner of my mouth, shaking my head in pity. "But my dream guy is probably one hundred percent straight."

"I don't care," I mumbled. "Got it!" I snapped with satisfaction, finding an unopened can of some energy drink. I took a sip with relief.

"Never mind. Better tell me..." he started but didn't get to finish because at the same time another voice sounded.

"Please help me."

I frowned and turned my head to Theo, who had just come over to us, adjusting the backpack over his shoulder and folding his hands in a pleading gesture. He was staring straight at my face, his eyes looking like those of a homeless puppy that was begging for someone to finally feed him. The beanie slid slightly off his head, making him look even more haggard. But he was still my brother, so I took a sip

of my drink with an unfazed expression, staring at him as if he were an intrusive fly.

“Fuck off,” I replied coldly, then turned to the amused Chris, who was still leaning against the lockers. “You were saying?” I asked, ignoring Theodore.

“Vic, it’s a matter of life and death,” he cut in again, grabbing my arm and quickly turning me to face him, which made me almost spill my energy drink.

I huffed under my breath as I balanced the can, then narrowed my eyes ominously.

“What do you want?”

“Lend me the car,” he asked on the exhale.

For a moment I just stared at him, hoping it was just a bad joke. I wanted to give him a moment to pull himself together, but he continued to stare at me with grim seriousness. Before a moment passed, I burst out into rude laughter.

“No way.” I shook my head.

I was going to turn to Chris again, as I considered the conversation over, but Theo still wouldn’t let me.

“Vic, please,” he whined like a wounded mutt, grabbing my shoulders.

I had to grasp the can more firmly to keep it from spilling out when he shook me. “They’re opening the public library in fifteen minutes, and Daniel Abraham himself will be there signing his new book. I gotta be there. I won’t make it on foot.”

“Then take a bike.”

“Vic, I’m begging you. I never do that, so say yes this once. You know I can drive, I just always fail theory. I’ll do whatever you want!” He begged, still looking at me with those puppy dog eyes. And with each passing moment, that damn gaze was more and more convincing.

I hated that about our relationship. We almost always argued, fought, and insulted each other, but there was something about us that made us agree when either one needed something very much. Even when we didn’t want to. Even when there could be serious trouble. I had no idea if it was some sort of damn jinx between twins, but it didn’t suit me very well. Theo got in trouble more than once when I would sneak out to parties at night and he covered for me. That’s why I knew I couldn’t refuse him.

“A month of cleaning my room, doing the dishes, and taking out the trash, and if mom finds out about this, I’ll fuck you up, you got it?” I asked seriously, taking the keys out of the pocket of my red hoodie. Within a second, they were in my brother’s palm.

“God, I love you!” he exclaimed happily, and a few people closest to us gave us puzzled glances.

With a smile that didn’t appear on his face often, Theo grabbed my head and placed a kiss on my forehead. I grimaced in disgust as he ran toward the door.

“Oh, how I adore your love,” said Chris ironically in a sweet little voice, laughing to himself. “A true sister-brother relationship.”

“Yes,” I mumbled with disgust. “Very true.”

The rest of the classes passed relatively calmly. There was only one hot topic at school that almost all students were talking about. Everyone was talking about Mitchell’s return to school. Of course, it was an opportunity to gossip, because we remembered the situation from over a month ago when Parker had beaten up a sophomore so badly that he ended up in the hospital. From what I could gather, a criminal investigation was to be launched. Even in the cafeteria, where I was sitting at a table surrounded by my friends, everyone was just babbling about it. And I was growing sick of it. After all, why bother with someone like that?

Besides, I myself had a more serious concern. From the beginning of the last class, I tried to call my brother, who had not returned to school yet. He made a habit of ignoring my calls, and I thought I was going to explode when I left the classroom after class was over and read the message saying that he was at some fan meeting with this whole Daniel and that he wouldn’t be able to get my car back on time. *Just fucking great.*

Annoyed, I opened my locker after trying to reach Theo for fifteen minutes until he switched off his phone. I was seething. The last class ended some time ago, and most of the students had already left the school grounds. I was the only one standing in the right-wing hall. Mia had skipped biology with Chris an hour earlier, as usual, and I had to sit there until half past four. I was five miles from home, so if I wanted to make it, then I could. I’d get there on Thursday evening! And to make matters worse, I didn’t even have cash for a cab, and most of my

friends had already gone home. Mom was at work, and I couldn't call her anyway, because how would I explain not having the car?

"Great," I grunted as one of my notebooks accidentally fell from my purse onto the floor. A dozen or so pages stuck in it scattered around. I growled, lifting my eyes skyward and clenching my fists.

I crouched down and started picking them up. I was pissed off. Even in such unimportant and insignificant things, my life has been a string of failures. I didn't know if it was in my genes, but I had enough.

I frowned when I suddenly saw the black combat boots whose owner stopped in front of me. I was surprised to see their owner crouch down and help me pick up the pages. Confused, I looked at the long fingers that dexterously picked up one sheet of paper after another. Several silver rings stood out against tanned skin. I swallowed, then looked up uncertainly and was speechless as I saw Luke Mitchell saying nothing, just helping me out. *What the...*

I scolded myself when I realized that I was staring at him. I quickly got a hold of myself. I must have looked like a moron. Trying to ignore the strange feeling in my stomach, I picked up the rest of my notes and straightened up. He did, too. I didn't know how to react, so I tightened my fingers on the notebook.

"Here," he said suddenly, handing me a stack of printed pages.

His voice was low but oddly pleasant. It had a specific cheerful note to it, which did not suit him at all.

"Thanks," I muttered, taking my belongings from him and shoveling them back into my bag. I could feel his eyes on my hands as I quickly gathered my things.

"You're Victoria Clark," he said suddenly, which threw me off slightly and made me look up in surprise, making eye contact.

Up close, the gaze of his chocolate-golden eyes was even more intense. Well, maybe it was always like that, but this was the first time we stood this close to one another. Bah! This was our first interaction at all. In the three years I attended that high school, he never even so much as looked at me. No wonder I felt a little uncomfortable with the way he watched me closely. Besides, I was positive that he did not even know about my existence. How would he? Okay, perhaps my last name wasn't unknown, on account of my mother. A lot of people knew me in our

school, some because I was friends with Adams. But Luke didn't strike me as the sort to listen to high school gossip.

"Yes," I nodded my head.

There was something strange in his eyes. Something that betrayed how seriously he was hesitating.

"And you're Luke Mitchell," I added.

"Parker," he corrected me.

I nodded.

"Well, Parker. Thanks for your help," I muttered, feeling even more awkward. *What the fuck? Am I talking to him just now?*

"Since we already know our names, it's time to say goodbye.

"I think so too. Bye," I said, closing the locker as fast as I could. I didn't even look back at him as I briskly walked away to leave the school.

Okay, that was probably one of the stupidest and most pointless conversations I've ever had. This even topped Chris when he was telling me his erotic dreams.

It wasn't until I stepped outside that I realized how tense my muscles were. It was Luke who had that effect on me. I didn't like him, and his notoriety didn't make it any easier. I breathed softly as I started walking toward the bus stop. I had no money, my phone battery was low, and it got freakin' cold, so maybe that monthly ticket tucked into my wallet just in case could help. The stop was right around the corner and I was there in a moment. I looked at the timetable and groaned softly under my breath, seeing that the next bus wasn't due for forty-six minutes.

"Yet another day in the life of Victoria Clark," I muttered, taking a seat on the bench next to me. I lowered my head and sat there for a while until I felt the first drops of rain soak my black jeans. "Come on, lightning, just fucking strike me!" I shouted, looking at the dark blue sky.

I counted to ten in my head to calm down at least a little, and once I did, I looked away again; my gaze almost immediately met that of the old lady across the street, who was looking at me visibly confused. I just looked at her for a moment, blinking slowly.

"Sorry," I finally said, loud enough for her to hear me, and cleared my throat in confusion.

The old woman just shrugged her shoulders and walked toward the city center, holding a pink umbrella.

I threw the hood of my sweatshirt over my head. There was nothing left for me to do but wait for that goddamn bus. I didn't know yet if I'd rather it give me a lift home or just run me over. To make matters worse, it was starting to rain harder and harder, so I felt like jumping under the nice oncoming Audi.

To my surprise, the car began to slow down next to the stop I was waiting at. As it stopped next to me, the tinted glass slowly slid down. Confused, I watched what was happening, and my surprise turned to shock when I saw none other than Parker inside the car. Parker looked at me with his eyebrows raised.

"I don't know if you're aware, but it's raining," he said very intelligently, which made me want to roll my eyes, but I stopped myself at the last moment.

"I noticed," I grunted softly, hoping for him to leave soon. I might not know him, but I really didn't like him.

"I don't know, you need a lift?" he offered casually, which made my stomach clench into a small ball.

I swallowed hard. Was I supposed to go somewhere with Luke Mitchell? The notorious Parker was offering to drive me home? I had no idea if I was on Candid Camera or if he was just making fun of me. Until the last moment, I was convinced that after this offer, he would burst into laughter and leave. Surprisingly, however, he was still there. And he was looking at me urgently.

"Nah, thanks. I'll wait," I declined, trying to sound confident.

It wasn't my fault his presence made me feel a strange sort of fear, though he never really did anything to me. But that didn't change the fact that he could.

"Come on, I won't kill you," he muttered, rolling his eyes as if talking to a dull child. "Nor will I kidnap you."

"I'd rather not see for myself," I muttered under my breath.

As soon as I realized what I said, I widened my eyes and stared at his face, expecting an outburst of anger. I expected him to drive away and leave me in this goddamn rain. To my surprise, he shook his head heavily and – I could have sworn – a slight smile lit the corner of his mouth. I was able to amuse Parker. This day couldn't get any weirder.

“You’re a stubborn one,” he muttered, and it really surprised me how much he persevered.

Anyone would have given up long ago, especially since we were nothing special to each other. Bah! This was just the second time we ever chatted with one another.

“Didn’t your mom teach you not to get into a car with strangers?” I asked, sniffing. I was really cold already, so I stuffed my hands deeper into my hoodie pockets, but it didn’t do much.

“We’re not strangers,” he said a little louder, as the rain started drowning out our voices. “You already know my name. I know yours. This makes us non-strangers.”

“Yeah, we can rob a bank together,” I growled, staring up at the dark sky. “Listen, thanks for the offer, but you really don’t have to.” I had barely finished the sentence when suddenly there was a loud roar of thunder and I jumped fearfully onto the bench.

“Get in the damn car,” he growled finally, and there was no sign of the oddly nice Luke from a second ago. Now he was looking at me vexed, and something in his eyes said that he would rather leave me there.

Damn it.

Without thinking, I got up from the bench, taking my bag. I quickly walked over to the car and got into the passenger seat, then closed the door behind me. The heat hit me right away, which I was fucking happy about since my fingers were starting to go numb. And as I sat there, breathing quietly and staring out the windshield, I realized what I had done. I swallowed hard and slowly turned my head toward Luke, who rolled the window up indifferently without even looking at me.

“Give me the address,” he muttered softly.

I did as he said, and then there was silence between us. He started to drive, and I pulled the hood off my head and ran my fingers through my damp hair.

I sighed, glancing at the boy next to me out of the corner of my eye. The situation was so abstract I couldn’t help myself. Was I just in the same car with Luke Parker Mitchell? Oh my god, I was such an idiot. At that moment, the only thing I could do was pray that we would get there quickly, that nothing will happen along the way, and that we would part ways and never run into each other again.

The awkward silence was only broken by Guns N' Roses' *Welcome to the Jungle*, which I liked very much. It played softly from the car's speakers. I tapped the rhythm on my knee almost silently, staring at the landscape outside the window.

"Hard rock fan?" he asked with a slight sneer, which made me shudder a little.

I looked at the silhouette of his face as he stared at the road intently.

"You can say that," I said, unfazed. "It's a classic. Everyone knows it."

"You look more like someone who listens to mainstream shit," he muttered, and I raised an eyebrow.

Was he just trying to insult me?

"Well, if you must know, I listen to that too," I replied a bit gruffly. "It's not like you only have to stop at one. You can find something good in mainstream music, too."

"I doubt that," he said, and I huffed under my breath with a dry laugh.

I looked at him frustrated. The corner of his mouth was slightly raised. That was weird. To see him like this. Back at school, he looked like he wanted to slaughter half the population.

"I don't get people who listen to this. It's not good," he added.

"What isn't good, in terms of any kind of art, is to be a dick who thinks only he is right and all that is popular is wrong," I muttered through my teeth without even thinking over my words. "Even if you don't like it, don't generalize," I snapped, sharper than I wanted to.

I swallowed, waiting for him to finally yell at me and tell me to get out of the car or something. But life surprised me yet again because instead he just smiled crookedly and nodded gently as he pondered something. His face still showed a strange amusement, and that was so unlike him. This wasn't what he showed every day.

"You're a talkative one," he said quietly.

I folded my arms over my chest and squeezed into the armchair, watching the view outside the window. I had no intention of talking to him anymore.

"That'll get you in trouble."

I rolled my eyes, stopping myself from huffing. Yes, I was talkative when someone talked nonsense and acted so... haughty. That was frus-

trating. However, if I had known more then, I would have probably shut up. At least Luke wouldn't be right about that.

The next moments passed in silence when his phone vibrated suddenly. He took it out of his pocket and unlocked it, then read the message. He sighed softly and tossed the device onto the dashboard.

"I need to see a buddy of mine real quick," he said quietly. He seemed so tense and moody again. I frowned as he turned into an alley. "Five minutes."

"Sure, I can go on foot now," I replied, trying to sound confident. Everyone knew what kind of company Parker hung out with, and I really didn't want to go there.

"Take it easy, it's only a moment. You'll wait in the car," he replied firmly as if nothing else was an option.

I started to get a little worried about his behavior. He was again evoking unpleasant emotions in me, and something in his eyes showed that he was not happy with this turn of events.

Moments later, he parked in front of an old, abandoned building. My eyes immediately fell on the car that was standing nearby. The red Mustang, with raindrops dripping down the body, looked wonderful. It was one of those iconic older models, but it was in great shape. I could tell that the owner took great care of it. And it was probably him who was leaning on the mask of this miracle. He had his back to us.

It wasn't raining that hard anymore, just drizzling, so I had a good view of him. The guy, dressed in black fitted jeans and a sweatshirt of the same color, whose hood fell loosely over his back, looked quite large. His shoulders were broad, but he was rather lean. His dark brown hair was slightly damp and nicely trimmed. With the sleeves of his sweatshirt rolled up to the elbows, I could see the tanned skin of his forearms. He was really tall.

I hadn't even realized when Parker got out of the car and slammed the door behind him. I leaned my head against the headrest, swallowing nervously. I watched as he walked over to the strange guy and shook hands with him, patting him on the back. I still couldn't see the Mustang owner's face. The stranger kept his back to me and didn't throw a single glance my way, though I was pretty sure Luke must have told him he

wasn't alone. Mitchell took something out of his pocket, and moments later they both started smoking.

I narrowed my eyes, catching myself staring at the movement of Parker's friend's hands. The cig smoldered between his fingers. He had large hands. Every time he took a puff, smoke curled around his head and then disappeared. It was weirdly magnetizing. I still couldn't make out his profile.

"Come on," I muttered as I was still in the car after seven minutes.

It had stopped raining, and they didn't look like their conversation was about to end soon.

I slung my bag over my shoulder, got out of the car, and closed the door behind me. The noise made Mitchell turn to face me. The other guy was already smoking another cigarette and didn't even look at me. As if he didn't care who was behind him. I ignored it and put on a nonchalant demeanor, making eye contact with Parker. I had no idea why or if I had imagined it, but at that moment I saw one thing in his chocolate-golden eyes. *An apology.*

"Thanks a lot for the ride, but I'll take a walk from here," I said finally, to get rid of those stupid thoughts.

"Okay, then," he nodded and looked away with a shrug. He was acting weird.

"Thanks again," I muttered, and turned to leave when *that* voice suddenly rang out.

And it was *that* voice that turned out to be my first *sin*.

"I had no idea you started picking up the younger ones now."

The soft mutter made me stop in place, and then I automatically turned to face the guys.

Parker still wasn't looking at me, but I wasn't paying attention to him anyway. I focused on the stranger who was still standing with his back to me. It was he who said the words. I couldn't look away from his neck and I could hear the echo of his voice in my head. It was low and extremely hoarse. As if sore from cigarettes, screaming, and alcohol. So intriguing. The guy spoke softly and slowly, making his every word sharp as a razor. Damn it. The voice sounded so frighteningly cold and empty, as if the guy had just risen from the grave. I watched as the stranger raised his hand nonchalantly and threw out the cig-

arete butt, then stubbed it out with a black shoe with a dark Nike badge on the side.

“I just gave her a ride,” Luke replied softly.

“No doubt,” the stranger spoke again, his tone even sharper.

That sensation faded, however, as his body twitched and he slowly turned to face me. Then everything was gone.

The first thing I noticed was his eyes. Surrounded by a fan of thick eyelashes with slight dark circles under them, as if he hadn't slept in a long time. This alone made me feel chilling uncertainty. But it's those deadly eyes that were my final doom. Pitch black. I couldn't focus my eyes on anything else. I have never met a person with eyes in such an unusual shade. But it wasn't their color that was the worst. For the first time in my life, I saw someone look at someone the way he looked at me at that moment. And with such frightening sophistication and coldness. His black eyes were chillingly empty and impassive. *Dead.*

The guy didn't take his eyes off me even for a second. He stared into my eyes with a blank expression, which made it seem like he was scanning me in every possible way to reveal my every secret, no matter how small. I had an unpleasant feeling that he knew everything about me after just a few moments. I felt an unpleasant cold sweat on the back of my neck. And if someone asked me why I didn't turn my head then and instead kept looking into those eyes, I wouldn't be able to answer. Even though I felt shivers all over my body and for some strange reason the stranger raised negative emotions in me, I still stared. And I felt worse and worse.

“You know girls like her aren't very smart,” he suddenly said in a flat tone, turning to face Luke and thus finally breaking our eye contact.

I breathed a silent sigh of relief. It felt as if someone had finally restored my ability to breathe. But a moment later I realized the meaning of his words. I frowned at his silhouette. That was striking. The guy with icy eyes had incredibly prominent cheekbones and very noble features. His straight nose was almost perfectly proportioned, his eyebrows even and dark, matching the brown strands on his head. His damned jawline could cut through paper. I've never seen anyone even of remote resemblance to him. He looked as if carved by Michelangelo, not in marble, but in gold. He couldn't be a living person. No human looked like that. No human sounded like that. No man stared like that.

“Like me, meaning?” I started without even thinking that I was saying something.

Fully absorbed by the guy and his earlier words, I watched as a smile crept to his perfectly tailored, but not overly full, pale lips. That was no ordinary smile. Oh no. It was a smile that made every hair on my head bristle and I felt like throwing up. The left corner of the guy’s mouth rose slightly upwards, which made his face appear full of mockery, cynicism, and simply... angry. He wasn’t smiling in a good way.

I swallowed and, showing no fear that settled on me like dust, folded my arms over my chest and clenched my jaw. I watched as the stranger, in his early twenties, turned slowly toward me again, his black irises lingering on my eyes. And that’s when I started to fear a lot more. *He wasn’t anyone good. He was bad. Very bad.*

“Did I offend you somehow?” he asked suddenly in a slightly pompous tone, as if mocking me.

This baffled me, but I didn’t show it.

“That depends on how you answer my question,” I replied confidently, raising my head slightly and looking at him with a haughty look.

I had no idea where I was getting all this courage from, but I knew I couldn’t bow to him. I couldn’t give up. I felt Parker’s eyes on me, full of tension, but I didn’t focus on him. I focused all my attention on the stranger. The guy, clearly amused by my behavior, raised his eyebrows in a slight surprise, as if taken aback by my fighting stance.

“You’d better go home and stay out of trouble,” he muttered suddenly and turned back to Parker.

Mitchell, who had so far been listening to our conversation in silence, reacted strangely again. He closed his eyelids calmly, breathing a sigh of relief.

“Girls like you don’t end up well in places like these. Unless you are stupid, and something tells me that you are,” added the black-eyed man, ignoring me. As if I were irrelevant dust. “Girls from good homes stay in good homes.”

And that was what fucking triggered me. I hated that phrase. *Girl from a good home.* Whenever I had a serious argument with someone, they always had to pull that card. *You’re rich and set for life, you don’t know what problems are.* And had he not added that I would probably

have walked away without saying a word and never saw him again. Even though he called me stupid. Had he not said that I wouldn't have answered. Everything that followed was because of that one sentence.

I've never been a shy person. Of course, I never liked being the center of attention or focusing only on myself, but if anyone started insulting me for no reason, I couldn't stand by and do nothing about it. Or perhaps I should have learned that. Perhaps sometimes it was better to put my pride aside and do nothing.

Exactly. *Perhaps*. I didn't know him. I had no idea who he was, but since he was hanging out with Luke, something told me that he wasn't one of those who lived in harmony with the Culver City authorities. That and the mockery in which he spoke about *girls from a good home*. So I didn't think. I just spoke.

"Wow, you're being so nice," I snapped, folding my lips into a fake smile that hinted at a pinch of mockery.

Surprised that I carried on with the conversation after he had finished it, the guy frowned and looked at me as if he didn't understand anything.

"You in a youth group of the city council? Something like that? Because with that idiot thinking and that fucking inferiority complex you judge people by, even though you don't know them, you'd be a great fit. So if you run for president, you have my vote."

Everything happened in slow motion after I said that. Luke closed his eyes, perhaps praying silently for time to turn back. At least that was what it looked like. The stranger, on the other hand, said nothing. He just stood there and looked at me with a frighteningly cold expression, his gaze piercing my heart and brain. And although I didn't show how frightened I was, right then and there I began to regret my words and the fact that I hadn't run away sooner. He looked like a statue. I didn't even know if he was breathing. He just stared, and I realized I had hit a nerve.

"But hey, what do I know? I'm just a stupid girl from a good home," I added, mentally slapping myself for not being able to shut up. I lifted my head proudly, watching him silently with a sense of *superiority*. Since he was judging me, I could judge him. And he was *nobody*. "Anything else?"

"Victoria, you need to go now," Mitchell whispered broken, and this was the first time I'd ever seen him so uncertain. And that should be a clear sign.

“Have you ever read Goethe’s *Faustus*?” the stranger suddenly asked indifferently, which surprised me again. He asked a pointless question again. God, he was so weird.

“No,” I grunted truthfully, and he lifted the corner of his mouth ominously, and again I felt shivers all over my body.

“In this book, *Faustus* signs a pact with the devil. It’s a sentence,” he almost whispered, his voice like the eye of the storm. A hurricane raged about, and chaos and disorder reigned. And inside it was quiet and empty. His voice was like that. Quiet and empty in the middle of chaos. “That’s what you just did, *Victoria*.”

My name sounded ominous in his mouth. It was like dying in paradise.

“*Victoria*, go right now,” Luke growled, and I wasn’t going to argue. I quickly turned around, still feeling the guy’s gaze on my back. “Come on, let it slide, Nate,” he muttered, much more quietly, which made my heart stop suddenly.

Nate. No. That couldn’t be true. No, no, no. I felt my legs start shaking and my stomach clench violently, so I headed for the exit from the alley as fast as I could. It was only after a dozen or so seconds that I got rid of that heavy gaze from my head, but I still didn’t take a breath. I started walking home. I thought someone had placed a hundred-ton stone on my lungs. It was hard for me to breathe. My hands were shaking and the lump in my throat kept growing. That definitely could not be Nathaniel Shey. No. That had to be another Nate.

I almost ran home, stepping into puddles left behind after the down-pour several times. Once in my neighborhood, I took my phone out of my pants pocket with a trembling hand. I quickly dialed Mia’s number and waited for her to answer. I nervously unlocked the house door with the key I pulled from my purse.

“What?” she asked, her voice distorted by the food she was eating.

I slammed the door shut behind me. I threw my purse on the cupboard and took off my wet shoes on the run.

“We gotta talk. Now,” I exhaled, hanging up on her.

Nobody was home. Only Cat, who heard the noise, ran up to me from his spot by the fireplace. He rubbed against my legs, wagging his tail, but I was too pumped up so I quickly dashed to my room, nearly killing

myself on the stairs. I stormed into my bedroom. I quickly logged into my laptop that was sitting on the desk. A Skype window popped up almost immediately, notifying me that Mia was calling. I pressed the green receiver button and sat down in my chair, panting.

“What is it?” she asked.

She was sitting on the bed eating ramen. Chris was right behind her, looking at something on his phone.

“Do you recall what Nate Shey looks like?” I blurted out, which made her stop eating and gave me a surprised look.

Chris also stopped staring at his iPhone and looked at me with a frown, straightening up.

“What do you need to know that for?” she began cautiously, putting aside her food to focus on the conversation as much as possible.

Both looked slightly concerned with my behavior.

“Just tell me. You’re the one who knows all these people,” I muttered.

Mia had many friends outside of school. She often partied in all sorts of interesting places, and yes, I was mostly there with her then, but I had a goddamn problem remembering faces. Sometimes I had to think really hard to remember what some of the people in my year looked like. Mia must have known Shey. And even if she had never seen him, she must have heard the rumors as the number one gossip girl at Culver High. She just had to tell me it couldn’t be him. It’s not him.

“Er, yeah. I saw him at some party at this new DEATH club recently,” she muttered, trying to remember. “But he was far away and with many people. All I remember is he’s very tall. Somewhere around six feet. Well-built. Brown hair and dark eyes from what I remember. Fucking hot. And he hangs out with Parker. People say they’re good friends.”

“Oh, fuck,” I groaned, banging my head hard against the desk top. “I made a huge mistake,” I whispered as I slowly began to realize what I had just done.

Having said that, I heard a murmur, and the next thing I saw on the screen was Chris’s nostrils.

“Did you do lines of coke with Albanians on New Year’s Eve in Times Square?” he asked dead seriously, which made me frown and look at him like he was a moron.

“No.”

“Then you don’t know what a huge mistake is,” he replied, and Mia looked at him in surprise.

“When the hell did you do that?” she pulled the thread. “And how do you know Albanians?”

“Those were dark times,” he whispered dramatically, staring blankly at one point, at which Roberts rolled her eyes and pushed him back onto the bed. She focused on me again.

“Tell me what happened.”

“Well, he called me a stupid girl from a good home so I may have told him he has quite the inferiority complex and should run for youth club president at the city council with that idiot behavior,” I muttered and when the situation replayed in my head, my stomach almost exploded.

There was a moment’s pause as I nibbled at the edge of my desk, hoping they’d come up with something. Or laugh it off and say nothing happened. I was really hoping for it, but after another ten seconds the silence was still there, I looked up uncertainly at my friends, who were staring at me with wide-eyed eyes. Chris’s jaw was nearly as low as the floor. Just like my life.

“Vic...” Mia began but stopped because she didn’t know what to say.

Chris did, on the other hand, and finished eloquently:

“You’re fucked.”

I was, because the one I had insulted so vividly was none other than Nathaniel Shey. Nathaniel fucking Shey who was very famous in our high school and all over goddamn Culver City. And unfortunately not because he was such a wonderful person.

Every city had its hallmark. Usually, it was something good that one could boast about in the papers. The largest tomato plantation, the only zoo in the state with endangered species, or the annual best stew competition. But such a hallmark could also be enterprises that nobody wanted to talk about and which high-ranking people fought with. And Culver City had something like that as well. The fucking hallmark of this backwater town brought down to the underground. Illegal fights. The goddamn illegal boxing fights that this shitty city lived by more than anything else. And one of the top fighters was none other than Nathaniel fucking Shey.

I had insulted a guy who was one of the best, and perhaps the best. The guy was known to everyone from the stories, even if they hadn't seen him. Just like me. The guy was hated by the police and anyone who lived by the law. Fights, cops, vandalism, and no stops.

I definitely shouldn't have gotten into Parker's car.

CHAPTER 2.

Silence

“Oh, come on!” Mia moaned, more irritated by the second, pulling my hand toward the school. “Nothing’s going to happen to you.”

“He’s going to kill me!” I cried, regretfully, putting my feet down. Several students in the schoolyard watched us in surprise, but neither of us was going to give up. “Either him or Luke. One of them for sure.”

Mia rolled her eyes, gripping her fingers tighter on my wrist. She jerked my body with quite some strength and we found ourselves in front of the building’s door. I whimpered softly as she straightened up, brushing her hair out of her face.

“Vic, I don’t want to insult you in any way, but he probably forgot about it already. I bet he doesn’t even remember you,” she schooled me like a child when I folded my arms over my chest.

I frowned, still unsure. Okay, perhaps I was acting foolish since I didn’t think anyone in their right mind would attack me in such a crowded place, but that didn’t change the fact that I could still be scared. I had been thinking about it all the time since the unfortunate incident starring Shey and myself the day before. I really wasn’t going to mess with Mitchell’s friends, and I certainly didn’t want anything to do with Nathaniel Shey.

“You can never be one hundred percent sure with these types,” I muttered.

“Vic, you didn’t say anything wrong to him.” Mia sighed wearily. “It was stupid, even to me, which is already a feat. And you know it well.”

“Apparently so, but...” I started, but the voice of our friend who had just come over to us interrupted me.

“Hi,” Chris greeted us. His face was tired as usual, as Adams really hated getting up before ten. “Anything interesting come up?” he asked as if nothing had happened, eating his green apple.

“Maybe you can explain it to her somehow because I don’t know what to do anymore,” Mia growled slightly irritated, to which Chris, not understanding anything, frowned evenly and began chewing his breakfast slower. “She’s terrified that something will happen to her now that she and Shey had a clash yesterday. And she doesn’t want to go to school.”

Chris looked surprised, first at Mia and then at me. He was silent for a moment until he swallowed a bite of the apple.

“Look, Vic,” he began calmly after a moment’s thought, “I don’t want to offend you, but don’t you think Shey has better things to do than chase a high school girl because she threw some stupid lines at him?” He asked, which made me relax a little. “You didn’t even call him any names, and he has no idea who you are. This isn’t a movie, and you may be overreacting a little.”

“Thank you,” Mia sighed and, taking advantage of my moment’s hesitation, pushed me again.

I did little to protest but walked in first anxiously. As we entered the school hall, surrounded by a crowd of people, and still no one attacked me with a cleaver in hand, Roberts smiled.

“See? You’re alive, so come on.”

Maybe I believed the rumors too much, but Shey was notorious in the town for a reason. All it took was to hear a few stories. He was the type of a man whom it was better not to have any contact with. He hung out in dubious company, took part in some illegal shit, and was said to be very fond of all sorts of stimulants. I didn’t know how much truth there was to it, but there had to be something there. I heard about him and his antics many times. From what Adams told me, he was twenty and had never attended any school in Culver City, since he had studied in institutions outside the city from an early age.

The very thought of the man terrified me. Maybe I shouldn’t have believed everything people said, but that was stronger than me. I somehow stepped on his toes. I may have done nothing wrong, but I might

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We started a fire we couldn't keep in check

Victoria Joseline Clark had never been a particularly prudent girl, though she could not be accused of lacking smarts. For the seventeen years of her life, she considered herself to be an average person and led an average existence at that. Studying at a renowned high school, constant quarrels with her annoying twin brother, frequent parties with friends, and family dinners in the company of her caring mother and faithful dog were her daily bread. Her parents had one goal: to raise their children to be upstanding citizens. Since she was little, rigid rules were instilled in her, which she followed blindly, convinced that they would protect her from the problems her mother would tell her about. Unfortunately, the girl was not ready for the fact that her biggest nuisance may turn out to be a tall boy with a dead gaze and a cold smile. A few poorly chosen words and being in the wrong place at the wrong time was all it took to start a fight she wasn't ready for. Everything spiraled out of control when this black-eyed, jaded boy turned out to be the favorite of the illegal boxing matches that her mother, the mayor's right-hand woman and trusted friend of the police officers, had hated for years.

Victoria wishes she could turn back time; whenever she looks into those eyes black as night, she mentally begged never to see them again. He was a problem she couldn't solve. The chaos that had come. The darkness she would cling to. The eighth deadly sin she wanted to commit. She begged for absolution that never came.

Because they were both too great sinners.

Will you be brave enough to open your eyes?

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