

WEDNESDAY

A Novelization of Season One



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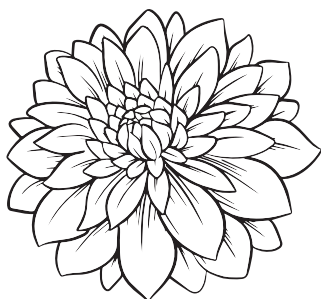
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A Novelization of Season One



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Based on *Wednesday* Season One Episodes

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Based on the Characters Created by Charles Addams



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FROM THE DESK OF WEDNESDAY ADDAMS

Ask any problem child how they feel about being dumped at their eighth school in five years and you'll get about the same answer.

I'm no exception, though I like to think my expulsions (as well as my taste in curses) tend to be a bit more creative than your average bully's. I can't overstate how little I wanted to be dragged to Nevermore Academy (my parents' alma mater) on the fateful fall day that our family hearse wound up the drive. In my eyes, any institution that could produce my mother's smug superiority or my parents' nauseating obsession with each other was a place to be avoided at all costs.

But as any investigative genius will tell you, it's important to be able to admit when you're wrong. And I was. About Nevermore Academy. About almost everything that happened there that year. In my defense, however, who could possibly have predicted that a campus notorious for housing your garden-variety outsiders and weirdos would play host to a monster mystery so deep, so twisted, that even *I* would be surprised by its conclusion?

If I could go back in time and tell that younger, more naive version of me one thing—well, I probably wouldn't. Pure, unforeshadowed terror is one of life's few true diversions, after all, and I know she'd be furious with me for ruining the surprise.

Instead, let me take you back to the beginning of a story in which I, Wednesday Addams, find a purpose and a home in the very last place I ever expected to find either. Don't worry, it's not a feel-good story. If you should know one thing about me going into this, it's that I detest a story without at least five brutal murders.

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Months earlier . . .

My parents are kissing passionately in the seat across from me. It's a good thing we drive a funeral vehicle, because I'm seconds from expiring. Cause of death: pure revulsion.

I'm convinced a coffin six feet under would be a preferable destination to the one I'm heading for. *Nevermore Academy*. The very campus I swore, as a child, I would never set foot on. Anything that makes my father misty-eyed is something I reject summarily—including my mother, who surfaces for air and turns her imperious gaze on me.

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“Darling, how long do you intend on giving us the cold shoulder?” she asks.

I don’t turn my gaze from the window. “Lurch,” I say in an even tone, addressing the family’s monstrous butler in the driver’s seat. “Please remind my parents I’m not speaking to them.”

Lurch moans, as he’s wont to do. Right now I prefer it to the conversation my parents have been trying to have with me since we left home this morning. I know my father understands the warning in his tone, but he ignores it.

“I promise you, my little viper, you’ll love Nevermore. Won’t she, Tish?” My father is incapable of having an opinion my mother doesn’t share. It’s unnatural, and it only increases my nausea.

“Of course,” my mother says. “It’s the perfect school for her.”

These words grate against my already frayed nerves. I abhor a cliché, but certain adolescent experiences, I suppose, are universal, and there’s nothing I detest more than being told who I am or what’s good for me by my mother.

“Why?” I snap, breaking my silence against my will. “Because it was the perfect school for *you*?”

She doesn’t even deign to respond, just smirks in that way of hers, nonverbally suggesting that everything she thinks is objectively correct. Baiting me with that knowing silence.

And I bite. Which only makes me more furious at the both of us.

“I have no interest in following in your footsteps,” I say. “Becoming captain of the fencing team, queen of the Dark Prom, president of the Séance Society.” I try to infuse these accomplishments with as much disdain as possible, but of course she looks even more smug.

“I merely meant that you will *finally* be among peers who understand you,” she says. “Maybe you’ll even make some friends.”

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This I don't dignify with a response. Friendship, in my experience, requires opting into a series of identifiers that I have never had any interest in. Psychologists say adolescent friendships are made and broken almost entirely on being in or out of a group. And I've never been part of any group. I don't intend to start with one that would have my parents as members.

Besides, I don't believe my mother has ever had a friend. She's had followers. Sycophants. She's been trying to get me to join their ranks since I was born.

"Nevermore is like no other boarding school," my father says, gazing at her, utterly proving my point. "It's a magical place. It's where I met your mother and we fell in love."

You'd think I would be used to that moony look on his face, the way he takes her hand in his and sighs like the car is powered by his personal carbon dioxide emissions and not fossil fuels that are burning the planet and everyone on it at an alarming rate.

I know there's no use trying to interrupt them. Even my most carefully sharpened verbal barbs have always failed in that endeavor. Instead, I turn back toward the window, taking refuge in the last memory that brought me peace.

I can almost feel the cheap linoleum flooring of Nancy Reagan High School beneath my Mary Janes. See the half-closed locker barely containing my brother, who spills out, red-faced and humiliated, an apple jammed in his mouth. I touch his arm and it happens. A vision. A jolt of past or future that violently overrides my circuitry. It's hard to explain how it feels . . . like electroshock therapy without the satisfying afterburn.

These visions had been plaguing me the past few months. But this one showed something actionable, at least: the identity of my

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brother's tormentors. From there, vengeance wasn't hard to obtain.

It took me a few days to get the piranhas. My guy at the exotic animal store dragged his feet until I unearthed some photos of him and his current mistress that considerably dampened his curiosity about what I wanted them for.

The memory of standing at the edge of the pool during water polo practice carries me all the way up the drive to Nevermore. The amusement turned panic in the culprits' eyes. The sleek silver bodies of the fish streaking through the overchlorinated water. The way they somehow *knew* to go straight for the family jewels.

I'll never forget the way the vivid red blood contrasted with the blue of the water, or the screams filling the water sports practice center. I couldn't have set the stage better—incredible acoustics.

They lived, unfortunately. My one solace is that their parents didn't press charges for attempted murder. Imagine a lifetime of anyone looking at your record knowing you'd failed to finish the job.



The Nevermore principal's office is exactly the kind of academic self-importance fest I most loathe. Leatherbound books and furniture, polished mahogany and bronze. The kind of room that makes stupid people feel intelligent and intelligent people want to vomit.

I sit in one of the leather chairs between my parents as the principal examines my file with a pained expression on her face. I know the file contains my transcripts. Probably some warnings from past teachers and counselors. Nothing out of the ordinary—unless you're not used to vigilante justice.

"Wednesday is certainly a unique name," she says at last,

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latching on to what is potentially the sole inoffensive detail in the tome. “I’m guessing it’s the day you were born?”

“I was born on Friday the thirteenth,” I correct her, keeping my stare level to show her this means exactly what she fears it does.

“Her name,” my mother cuts in, pacifying, “comes from a line in my favorite nursery rhyme. *Wednesday’s child is full of woe.*”

The one time she ever really understood me, I think.

“There’s that unique Morticia perspective,” the principal says. “Did your mother tell you we were roommates during our time at Nevermore?”

Suddenly, Larissa Weems is more than just a barely distinct talking head to me. I try to imagine her young—was she this prim and uptight then? I wonder. She can’t have been popular if she’s working here now. In-group adolescents almost never return to the scene of the crime.

So she’s reliving something, I deduce. And she doesn’t seem to be a sycophant of my mother’s, which means she was at least partially immune to the legendary Morticia Addams charm even back then, when it was most concentrated. Perhaps there’s something I can learn from this woman after all. Not that I’d give her the satisfaction of telling her that.

“Impressive,” I say in my most neutral tone.

“What is?” she asks politely.

“That you graduated with your sanity intact.”

Is it my imagination, or does she take another look at me too? If so, she has the good sense to stop before my mother takes notice.

“You’ve certainly had an *interesting* educational journey,” she says, returning to the file. “Eight schools in five years, each tenure ended by an . . . incident of note.”

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“I’m a strong believer in vigilante justice.”

She presses on, ignoring this. “Nevermore doesn’t usually accept students in the middle of a term, but you’re clearly a bright girl, and your family has a long history with the school. The board understands that students who thrive here are often . . . underserved in other educational environments. We’ve made an exception in the hopes that will prove true for you as well.”

“They haven’t built a school yet that can serve me,” I parry. “Or one that can hold me, either. I don’t imagine this one will be any different.”

“What our daughter is trying to say,” my father interjects with a pointed look in my direction, “is that she greatly appreciates the opportunity.”

“Yes,” my mother agrees. “And she’ll prove it by being a model student, as well as attending her regular, court-ordered therapy sessions.”

“Ah, that brings us to my next point,” Principal Weems says brightly. “Many of our students require extra psychological support. We have a relationship with an excellent practitioner in Jericho who can meet Wednesday twice a week.”

My stomach clenches at the thought of *therapy*. I avoided the requirement during my last seven expulsions, but this time it was either counseling or juvenile detention. Pity they let my parents decide. I’ve always been fond of stripes.

“We’ll see if your therapist survives the first session,” I say.

Principal Weems isn’t fazed. It’ll take more than a few one-liners to put her off, I see. I’ll have to work harder—but I enjoy a challenge. I make a note to find out her worst fear and exploit it before I make my escape. Assuming there’s time.

The principal gets to her feet. She’s tall. Much taller than I

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expected. She and my mother look like giants, and I curse my father's genes for my diminutive size.

"I've assigned you to your mother's and my old dorm," she says in that forcedly bright tone—which sounds even more condescending from her twelve-inch altitude advantage. "Ophelia Hall."

My mother gasps, delighted, and claps her hands. I loathe Ophelia Hall on principle before I even set foot in it, but setting foot doesn't improve my judgment one iota.

Later, as we stop in front of what I assume to be my dormitory, I ask my mother, "Ophelia's the one who kills herself after being driven mad by her family, isn't she?"

Principal Weems interjects before my mother can answer—not that she would have bothered. "Okay!" she says with a toothy smile. "Let's meet your new roommate!"

Roommate.

Just the word makes my blood run cold. No one mentioned a roommate. I'd pictured myself in some try-hard, moody room with arched windows, ravens circling overhead. Playing my cello. Writing my next great novel. Plotting my inevitable escape.

I hadn't pictured doing any of that with an audience.

"Here we go!" Principal Weems says, tapping twice before opening the door.

My first thought upon entering the room is that I would have preferred there to be a victim in a pool of blood. A centipede infestation. A cloud of poison gas that causes excruciating pain before it eventually hijacks your nervous system and causes complete organ failure.

Anything but the explosion of *light* and *color* that assaults my eyes as I step into my new residence.

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My alleged roommate has papered our round floor-to-ceiling window with a literal rainbow, its glow backlit by the gloomy day outside. The room has been collaged from the kind of magazines that make women feel bad about their bodies in order to sell pink razors and cloying scented soaps and antiperspirant. Her bed is covered in an array of stuffed animals.

“Oh my,” my father mutters from behind me. “It’s so *vivid*.”

I’m about to enumerate for the tenth time the exact ways in which they’ve betrayed me by sending me here, when a humanoid figure bounces up to me, blond curls flying, smile showing all her teeth—and not in the predatory way I prefer to view incisors.

“Howdy, roomie!” she says, cementing in those two words the fact that we will never, ever be friends. In case I needed further proof, she steps forward in an attempt to embrace me. A stranger. I step back before I can stop myself.

“Wednesday,” says Principal Weems. “This is Enid Sinclair.”

“And *you’re* not a hugger,” says the Enid in question. “Got it!”

“Please excuse Wednesday,” my mother says with a smirk that says she pities Enid and her rainbow as much as I do. “She’s allergic to color.”

I’m trapped in a horrible internal battle now, where both outcomes feel like defeat. Either I force myself to like *Enid Sinclair*, or I share an opinion with my mother.

“Oh, wow, allergic to color,” Enid is saying now, looking at me with true concern. “What happens to you?”

I stare back at her unblinkingly. “I break out in hives and then the flesh peels off my bones.”

“Well!” Principal Weems says, stepping in with that diplomatic smile. “Luckily, we’ve ordered you a special no-color uniform.

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Enid, why don't you take Wednesday to the registrar to pick it up along with her schedule. Then you can give her the grand tour while her parents and I fill out some paperwork."

She says *schedule* like "shed-dule" and makes doing paperwork with my mother sound like the highlight of her day. Surrounded by adults, I doubt anything less than ritual sacrifice will get me out of this. And at a place like Nevermore Academy, even that might be too pedestrian to work.

"Lead the way," I say, but not before turning and glaring at my parents.

Enid is only too happy to oblige. She insists on giving me a tour, even though I do my best to convince her it's unnecessary. I don't need to know the school was founded in 1791. I plan on taking that many minutes or less to escape from its on-the-nose, Poe-soaked-aesthetic confines.

"Why do you want to leave?" Enid asks when I tell her as much. "This place is great! Way better than normal school."

"This was my parents' idea," I say, noticing a photo of my mother with the fencing team on the wall of the entrance hall. She's wearing her uniform. Her hair is down, a flirtatious smirk on her vivid red lips. "They've been looking for any excuse to send me here. It's all part of their completely obvious plan."

"What plan is that?" Enid asks.

"To turn me into a version of themselves," I say with a sigh. It's the worst fate I can imagine. Except, perhaps, living in the rainbow room for the rest of my life.

"Okay, as long as we're sharing?" Enid says. "Maybe you can clear something up."

"I doubt it."

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She plows ahead, undaunted. “Well, rumor has it you killed a kid at your last school, and your parents pulled strings to get you in here even though you’re, like, a danger to yourself and others.”

“Totally wrong,” I say in a bored tone.

Enid looks visibly relieved.

“It was two kids. But who’s counting, right?”

For a minute, she seems torn between terror and amusement. Eventually she chuckles, a weak sound that says she hasn’t picked a side.

Luckily for her, we’ve reached what appears to be the social hub of Nevermore Academy, and the sight of this many seething bags of hormones dulls my wit just long enough for her to strike.

“Okay, the layout of campus you can get from your map, so let me give you the tour that really matters. A who’s who of Nevermore’s social scene.”

She seems genuinely thrilled to impart this information, and as overwhelmed as I am by the crowd, I can’t give her the satisfaction of receiving it. “I’m not interested in participating in tribal adolescent clichés,” I manage.

“Great!” Enid replies, with what I think is a hint of genuine sarcasm. “You can use it to fill your obviously bottomless pit of disdain!”

Touché, I think, and wave for her to continue. It seems better to get it over with quickly.

“So, the four main Nevermore cliques are as follows: Fangs, Furs, Stoners, and Scales.”

My pattern-hungry brain has them all mapped out before she can begin to gesture, despite the pedantic nicknames. The Fangs, or vampires, sit at a table out of direct sunlight, looking morosely

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at their smartphones. I wonder if an immortal life of high school is enough to drive a person mad and vow to find out at my first available opportunity.

“Some of them have literally been here for decades,” Enid informs me before waving to a group of people who seem as obsessed with neon as she is. “Those are the Furs, aka werewolves. Obviously that’s my crowd.” She howls at them, then flashes her retractable claws in my direction.

“I’m sure full moons are a riot around here.”

“Already got you some noise-canceling headphones,” she says with a grin. “Hope you like pink!”

“Pass. I’m assuming Scales is your little nickname for sirens?”

“Yup,” Enid confirms, gesturing to a group of ethereally beautiful people gathered around a water fountain. “That girl in the middle, Bianca Barclay, is basically Nevermore royalty. No one crosses her. Although her crown’s been slipping lately.” Enid leans in, lowering her voice. “The rumor is that she’s vulnerable after she and Xavier Thorpe mysteriously broke up at the beginning of the semester.”

“Enid!” comes a voice from behind us, and I turn to see a tall boy in an oversized hat approaching us. The hat seems to be concealing something bulky on his head.

I don’t exactly hide behind Enid, but I’m obscured from the boy’s view and I do nothing to remedy that. Far be it from me to turn down the gift of invisibility when it presents itself.

“Ajax,” Enid says in that flirtatious way people sometimes do. Drawing out the last vowel. I try to get a good look at him without revealing myself, searching for the answer to why she finds him worthy of altered vocal inflection.

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My first glance gains me nothing. He appears average in every way. And when you factor in Enid's above-average appeal—calculated by facial symmetry; smoothness, and tone of her skin; ratio of visible skin to clothing; and mastery of beauty product usage—they seem an unlikely match.

"You're not gonna believe what I heard about your new roommate," Ajax says, oblivious to my presence. "She *eats* human flesh. Chowd down on that kid she murdered. You better watch your back."

I sigh quietly, aware that I'm now honor bound to relinquish my convenient observer status.

"Quite the contrary," I state as Enid steps aside to reveal my presence. "I actually fillet the bodies of my victims, then feed them to my menagerie of pets." I hold eye contact with the below-average boy until he drops his gaze. A victory.

"Ajax," Enid says with what sounds like a suppressed giggle. "This is my new roommate, Wednesday."

"Whoa," he says. "You're in black-and-white."

I cross *superior intellect* off my mental list of potential reasons Enid is humoring him, leaving me with exactly zero remaining options.

"Ignore him," she says, turning away with a wave of her hand. "He's cute but clueless. Gorgons spend way too much time getting stoned."

I can appreciate the pun. Enid appears pleased.

"The rumors will clear up once we get you on social media," she says. "There's not much online about you, so people feel free to fabricate. Tell me you at least have an Instagram?"

"I find social media to be a soul-sucking void of meaningless affirmation," I reply.

Enid nods, not knowing what to say. I walk back to our dorm in silence, alone.

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My parents and Pugsley leave before dinner, which I consider to be the one positive in an otherwise miserable day. I stand with them in the school's circular driveway, doing nothing to disguise my impatience for them to be gone.

"Why don't you boys wait in the car?" my mother asks the rest of my family after I've said goodbye to them. "Wednesday and I are in need of a moment."

If only to hasten her departure, I swallow my assertion that we have never had—and most likely will never have—any interaction that could be described as a *moment*.

When they're gone, she turns a decidedly unsentimental eye on me. "I want you to know I've told every family member to alert me the moment you darken their doorstep. You have nowhere to go. Try to make the best of this."

Inwardly, I scoff. As if a *family member* would be my first stop. "As usual, you underestimate me, Mother."

She ignores this, reaching into the little purse my father usually carries for her. "I got you a little something."

The necklace she extends is studded with black stones. A silver W—or an M, depending on which way one turns it—hangs in the center of the pendant. It's hideous.

"It's made of obsidian," she says. "The Aztec priests used this stone to conjure visions. It's a symbol of our connection."

At the word *visions*, I feel myself recoil inwardly. I refuse to acknowledge this emotion as fear, but I'm even more determined not to show it to her. Whatever it is.

"I'm not you, Mother," I say. "I will never fall in love, or be a housewife, or have a family."

She sniffs, as if it's possible to injure her. "I'm told girls your age say hurtful things. That I shouldn't take them to heart."

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“Fortunately, you don’t have a heart.”

At this, my mother smiles. “Why, thank you, my sweet.”

She then gives me a bulky crystal ball in a bag and promises to call me at the end of the week (despite my protestations), and then they’re gone. I stand in the wind, relief coursing through me. Nevermore isn’t the place for me, I know that. But at least without them hovering I won’t feel forced into the little box they insist on placing me in.

Immature child. Future psychic. Rebellious daughter. *Addams*. I plan to transcend every one of these labels, and soon.

Lost in my fantasies of escape, I’m unaware that right down the road a mystery is already unfolding. One in which I’m destined to play a part. I don’t learn the details until much later. Won’t see photos of a hiker’s limbs scattered through the trees on the day of my arrival or the cause of his death.

I won’t learn of the Jericho sheriff’s deeply held belief that this murder—already one of a string of murders—is connected to Nevermore Academy, or the reason for his prejudice.

In the morning, the newspaper will run a mostly sanitized story of a bear attack. I’ll take inspiration from the grisly description for a scene in my novel. But the truth, as it so often does, will prove much stranger than the fiction.

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Enid and I are already bickering when Ms. Thornhill, our “dorm mother,” taps on the door later that evening.

My roommate is upset that I’ve taken the rainbow transparencies off my half of the window. I’m irritated by her intrusion into my writing time. Enid’s claws are out, and I’m considering which of my decorative medieval torture weapons will be the most functional in an actual combat scenario.

“Girls?” Ms. Thornhill calls as she opens the door, surveying the standoff. “Is this a bad time?”

Enid retracts her claws with a glare.

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"I'm Ms. Thornhill. I'm sorry I wasn't here when you arrived. I was out on the grounds dealing with a foliage . . . situation." She gestures down at the mud covering her bright red boots.

"Riveting," I say dryly.

"I trust Enid has been giving you the Nevermore welcome!"

"She's been *smothering* me with hospitality," I say, not breaking eye contact with my flush-faced roommate. "I hope to return the favor. In her sleep."

Ms. Thornhill chuckles as if I'm joking. She steps forward with a plant in a pot. I have to admit it's gorgeous. Dark green leaves and a large bloom that's the perfect shade of freshly spilled blood. "I brought you this as a welcome present. It's from my conservatory. I try to match the right flower to each of my girls."

"The black dahlia," I say, surprised. Almost impressed.

"You know it?" she asks, smiling with an embarrassing amount of eagerness.

"Yes," I say. "It's named after my favorite unsolved murder. Thank you."

I mean it as a compliment, but she falters, setting it on the desk next to my typewriter and then moving toward the door. "Well, before I leave, I have to deliver the house rules. Lights off at ten, no loud music, no boys. Ever."

I fight the urge to scoff at the idea.

"Also, Jericho is a twenty-five-minute walk from campus. There's a shuttle on the weekends if you want to shop, or hang out, or whatever the cool kids are doing these days." Ms. Thornhill laughs. I don't. "The locals are a little wary of Nevermore, though, which means no claws, sleep smothering, or any other stereotypical Outcast behavior while you're there. Are we clear?"

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I turn back to my typewriter. Enid flicks her claws out again and begins sharpening them with a purple nail file.

“Great talk,” says Ms. Thornhill—clearly a paragon of authority.



When I arrive at the Fencing Hall for my first class, I am forced to admit the facilities are adequate. And more than that, a few of my temporary classmates don't appear altogether hopeless at the art.

The same skills that make you a good amateur investigator also make for a quality swordsperson. You must be light on your feet, have a keen attention to detail, and be skilled at quickly discovering your opponent's weakness. If the sport didn't keep me in shape for my true goals, I wouldn't have bothered for my mother's sake.

Everyone is wearing white, of course, so my all-black attire stands out. People stop their bouts to peer at me curiously. I wish I had put my mask down. Instead, I make a mask of my face, refusing to let them see that I feel at home here. That I like the feeling of the blade within reach.

The bouts continue as if the other students haven't noticed my arrival. I recognize Bianca Barclay immediately—her luminous dark brown skin shines even through the mesh of her mask. Her opponent is new to me. Short. Fifteen years old, I'd wager.

He has terrible form. His steps are wild, desperate. He moves his arms too much. Economy of movement is the hallmark of a good swordsman, and this boy's is worse than a toddler's.

Bianca, on the other hand . . .

The boy goes crashing to the floor. “Coach! She tripped me!”

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he calls out, pulling the mask off to reveal his brilliantly pink and sweaty face.

I'm not much for sentiment, but in this moment he reminds me a bit of my brother, Pugsley, shoved halfway into a locker and trying not to cry.

"It was a clean strike, Rowan," comes the ruling from the coach.

"Maybe if you whined less and practiced more, you wouldn't suck," Bianca says. Loud enough for everyone to hear. "Anyone *else* want to challenge me?"

She says it like she's sure no one will be stupid enough to agree. Or if they do, they'll be sorry. I have no desire to upset (or even participate in) a social hierarchy, but I have a problem with people who punch down, and I didn't bring this foil here to look menacing. I might as well get a workout.

"I do," I say, stepping forward. Someone actually gasps.

"So," Bianca says, circling me, sizing me up for weaknesses. "You must be the new psychopath they let in."

"You must be the self-appointed queen bee," I observe, matching her step for step. "Interesting thing about bees: pull out their stingers and they drop dead."

Another gasp. This one is collective. Bianca's expression says she's surprised by my retort—which tells me people usually lie down and let her trample all over them. That's one of her weaknesses, I can already tell. She's been spoiled for lack of worthy opponents.

The other one is how aware she is of her audience. She turns to them now.

"Rowan doesn't need you to come to his defense," she says, speaking at me, but to them. "He's not helpless. He's lazy."

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I draw my weapon. The flicking sound it makes against the air is satisfying. “Are we doing this or not?”

“En garde,” Bianca says. But she’s still paying too much attention to what everyone thinks. It leaves her wide open.

The thing I’ll never tell my mother is that there are times when I love this sport. For someone like me, getting out of your head isn’t always possible. But in a bout, I can transmute my mental energy into physical force. There’s no surrender. It’s all about tactics. Control. Like dancing with a deadly edge.

I’ve always preferred an opponent to a partner, anyway.

A few seconds in, I get my first touch as Bianca considers her angles. Abruptly, she’s furious.

“Point to Wednesday,” the coach says, sounding almost offensively surprised.

I knew Bianca was good the moment I saw her against Rowan. This is the moment I know she’s dangerous. Her whole body seems to home in on me, as if she’s taking this seriously for the first time. She *knows* her weakness, I realize. She’s just not used to being held accountable for having it.

When she goes on the offensive, I’m barely matching her steps. The fluid feeling of my mind and body connecting is gone. I’m a half step behind.

Bianca’s foil makes contact. I barely hear the coach say the score is even. I’m in trouble. Bianca is clearly the superior athlete, but perhaps I can still best her with psychology.

“For the final point,” I say from behind my mask. “I would like to invoke a military challenge. No masks. No tips.”

A third round of gasps. This time even the coach joins in.

“Winner draws first blood.”

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I remove my mask. With her queenly face visible, I think, she'll be too aware of the optics. The anonymity of the suit will be gone. Perhaps she'll slip.

"It's up to you, Bianca," the coach says. I can hear the eagerness in her tone for some diversion from the usual hum of competitive teens.

Bianca takes off her mask and begins the bout with a confident lunge. I know in her first step that my trick didn't work. She's more ferocious than ever. Faster. The siren moves like the water that she draws her strength from. She's everywhere and nowhere.

I know I won't beat her without taking a risk, so I do. Leaving myself open. Hoping.

But she parries, takes expert advantage of the ploy. I feel the sting along my forehead that means it's over.

"Word of advice," Bianca says, her tone mean-girl scathing as she revels in my badge of humiliation. "Stay in your lane, which is as far away from me as possible."

I stare at her. There's no doubt Bianca's a worthy opponent. And I'm left wondering if I've underestimated Nevermore's queen in more than just swordsmanship.

The infirmary is empty save for Rowan and me. Coach insisted we be examined, though I tried to explain I've walked away from far more gruesome injuries without faux maternal affection and a Band-Aid.

"You're Wednesday, right?" Rowan asks when the nurse bustles away, leaving me with an embarrassingly large synthetic bandage across my forehead. Broadcasting my defeat to anyone who glances at my face is a dastardly form of torture. I vow to remember it for next time I need to induce humiliation in a foe.

"Rowan?" I reply, and the boy nods. That trembling chin. The

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weak, bird-boned frame. He's utterly, almost obscenely helpless.

"I know how you feel," he says.

"I guarantee you don't."

"My mother promised I'd finally fit in somewhere," he continues, scattering his pressure points like confetti. He'd better hope we never find ourselves at odds. "I never thought it was possible to be an Outcast in a school full of Outcasts. But it looks like you're gonna give me a run for my money."

I don't bother to answer. People like Rowan always assume my "out-group" status has been forced on me. No one who's involuntarily alone can understand someone who chooses it. It's impossible to explain, so I don't try.

"Uh, sorry about the . . ." He gestures to the place on his own forehead where I'm currently wearing a neon sign that says *Bianca Barclay Was Here*.

"No good deed goes unpunished," I reply, and I walk out of the room before he can make any further attempts to commiserate.

Outside, it's beginning to pour. Typically, I'm not one to try to control public perception, but I take a less traveled path back to my room. I don't want people to know Bianca bested me before I have a plan to even the score.

I'm weighing my options between an insect infestation in her room and a horse head shipped to her dorm when the scraping of stone from high above catches my attention. It's a gargoyle—slightly on the nose as far as decoration goes—but at the moment I'm more concerned with the fact that it seems to be scraping toward the edge of its perch.

And the fact that I'm directly below it.

There's little time to act, and while quick decision-making is

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typically my forte, I find myself tangled up in the knots of my previous defeat. I experience a moment of self-doubt. And that's enough to snuff me out like a candle. The last thing I consciously think is that the impact is coming from the wrong direction, and then everything goes dark.



The next thing I know, I'm awakening in the infirmary with an awful pain radiating through my head. I've been taught to weather extremes. It's nothing I can't handle. And yet I can't help but wonder how I survived at all.

"Welcome back," says a slightly raspy voice from somewhere to my left.

I sit up quickly, aware that my prone position leaves me at a disadvantage.

"The nurse said you don't have a concussion," the voice continues. "But you probably have a hell of a bump, huh?"

Beside me is a boy. Tall, thin, long hair pulled back. He has a delicate bone structure and sympathetic eyes that look a little haunted—though perhaps performatively so.

"The last thing I remember is walking outside, feeling a mixture of pity, rage, and self-disgust," I say, more to myself than my companion, whom I've already profiled. Not a threat or an ally. "I don't think I've ever felt exactly that cocktail of emotions before."

"Losing to Bianca has that effect on people, I think."

I refuse to acknowledge that my fencing defeat is already school-wide knowledge, but the rest of my memory of the incident is returning to me, and my curiosity is piqued. I turn to look the boy

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in the eye, hoping to unsettle him into telling the truth.

“When I looked up and saw that gargoyle coming down, I thought, ‘At least I’ll have an imaginative death.’ But the force of the impact came from the wrong direction, which means *you* tackled me out of the way. Why?”

He appears amused by the question. As if people do unselfish things more than 2 percent of the time on average. “Call it instinct.”

“I didn’t want to be rescued,” I say, irritated by his nonchalance and the throbbing in my temples.

“So I should have just let that thing smash all your bones?”

“I was taking care of it.” I acknowledge this as a lie. In fact, I remember having distinctly failed to react in a timely fashion, which had contributed to my feelings of self-loathing. “I’m quite used to saving myself.”

The boy has the nerve to scoff. “Good to see you haven’t changed,” he says unnervingly. “If it makes you feel any better, let’s just say I returned the favor.”

At these words, I’m forced to examine him again. There’s nothing familiar, and I pride myself on maintaining an accurate catalogue of names and faces.

“Xavier Thorpe?” he supplies. This does ring a bell, but only from Enid’s insipid social-hierarchy speech. I note with mild interest that this is the boy who mysteriously ended his relationship with Bianca Barclay, and then consider bloodletting to rid myself of the impulse to care.

“What happened?” I ask.

“Puberty, I guess?” he replies. “Last time we met, I was about two feet shorter. Cute little chubby cheeks.”

“I mean, what happened the last time we met,” I clarify.

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Xavier leans back in his visitor's chair, as if reliving the memory. I wish, not for the first time, that I could simply read minds. Much more useful than my mother's visions, and it would save so much obnoxious chitchat.

"It was my godmother's funeral," he says. "She was friends with your grandmother. We were ten. We got bored. Decided to play hide-and-seek. *I* had the inspired idea to hide in her casket and the top got stuck on the way to the crematorium."

At last, I remember. The funeral. I'd begged my mother to let me come. I loved the scent of a decaying rose wreath. The grating sounds of grief, like music. The peaceful presence of death so close.

"I heard muffled screams," I say as I recall the details. "I just figured your godmother had cheated death and was trying to claw her way out." I leave out that this was one of my most cherished funereal fantasies, and one I've yet to cross off my list.

Xavier smiles. In it, I see a bit of that round-faced boy. I've always had a soft spot for the underdog. "Well, either way, you hit the big red button and saved me from being flame-broiled. So now we're even."

I don't tell him, but this does actually make me feel slightly less humiliated.



Once I'm finally released from the clutches of the school nurse, I make my way back to my dormitory, delighted to find Enid out and the room deserted. I'm behind two days on my writing, and the familiar clacking of my typewriter soothes me.

I'm deep in this installment of girl detective Viper de la

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Muerte's story when I catch a whiff of something familiar. A smell that should be nowhere near Nevermore Academy, because it belongs back at home.

Following my nose, I tiptoe over to the bed, ripping off the quilt dramatically to reveal a severed hand, which cowers predictably in fear as I stand over it, triumphant for the first time today.

The hand in question bolts, making for the iron bed frame, clinging on with three desperate, traitorous fingers. But I've caught bigger rats, and soon this one is clutched in my own hands, trembling in a way I know denotes pleading.

"Hello, *Thing*," I say conversationally. "Did you think my highly trained olfactory sense wouldn't catch the whiff of neroli and bergamot in your favorite hand lotion?"

He struggles, as if I wasn't already overpowering him like he was a toddler in a pram. I tighten my grip.

"I could do this all day," I warn, slamming him down onto my desk. "Surrender?"

Thing taps three times, the signal. I let him up, but I keep my eyes on him. He's a squirrely one. Presumably that's why he's here.

"Mother and Father sent you to spy on me, didn't they?"

He declines frantically. Protecting them even now, in the hour of his defeat.

"I'm not above breaking a few fingers," I threaten.

Thing begins signing as quickly as he can. I get as far as the word *worried* before I roll my eyes.

"Oh, Thing, you poor, naive appendage. My parents aren't *worried* about me. They're evil puppeteers who want to pull my strings even from afar."

He doesn't sign anything more, but I can tell by his posture

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that he disagrees. It doesn't matter. He can underestimate me along with them. They'll all be sorry in the end, but I won't be undermined. I seize my desk lamp and turn it on him.

"The way I see it, you have two options," I tell him before pulling open the top desk drawer. It's shallow. Sturdy. Lockable. "Option one, I put you in here for the rest of the semester, and you go mad trying to claw your way out. Ruining your nails. And your smooth, supple skin. We both know how vain you are."

He trembles, and I know he's picturing cuticle damage. Wrinkles. Sagging knuckle skin.

"Option two," I offer magnanimously. "You pledge your undying loyalty to me."

Instantly, he drops to his middle and pointer finger in an unmistakable kneel. The perpetual chessboard in my mind reorients, a new piece beside the queen on the board. My petty loss to Bianca today suddenly seems trivial. The unsettling encounter with Xavier even more so. I meant what I said to Principal Weems during our first meeting. This school could never hold me.

"Our first order of business," I say to Thing. "Escape this teenage purgatory."

Thing begins to sign in response, and I scoff, rolling my eyes.

"Of *course* I have a plan," I say as all its different elements start to become clear in my mind's eye, connections forming, possible futures shifting and settling. "And it begins now."



CHAPTER FOUR

For my entire life so far, I've avoided being truly psychoanalyzed. As I'm sure you can imagine, it hasn't been easy. Someone with my aesthetic and sensibilities seems easy fodder for the bottom-feeders of this profession.

Typically, the plan is simple and effective. Control the narrative from the outset. Prey on the obvious wounds they offer up along with the introductory small talk. Shock and awe so they're too busy reacting defensively to see that you're blocking their attempts to dredge up some petty childhood trauma to earn their bloated paycheck.

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This time, things will need to be slightly different. I can't imagine someone whose client list is filled with Nevermore students would be as easy to spook as the guidance counselors I've tried it on in the past. I can't count on her leaving the room screaming, so I'll have to do the leaving part myself.

Dr. Kinbott's office is your classic quirky-neutral space. Probably put together by some office designer. I wonder if these "personal touches" are even personal to her or just things to prompt comment.

"So, Wednesday," she says, coming in and closing the door behind her. "I read the notes from your school counselor."

"Mrs. Bronstein," I offer. "She had a nervous breakdown after our last session. Had to take a six-month sabbatical."

Dr. Kinbott appears unfazed by this. She gestures for me to sit, and I do. If only to lure her into a false sense of security. It's part of phase one. "How did you feel about that?" she asks.

Really reinventing the wheel here, I think. "Vindicated," I say. "But it's not like someone who crochets for a hobby is really a worthy adversary."

She sits down across from me. Blond, thin, dressed in business comfortable. Pretty, but her stare is a little too intense.

"Well, Wednesday, I hope you don't think of *me* as your adversary," she says. "I hope we can forge a relationship built on trust! And mutual respect!"

I scoff. As if I could ever respect someone who coordinates her watch band and loafers.

"This is a safe space, Wednesday," she enthuses. "A sanctuary where we can discuss anything! What you're thinking, feeling, your views on the world, your personal philosophy!" She smiles

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at me after this, as if she's offered me a real treat.

"That's easy," I tell her. "I *think* this is a waste of time. *The world* is a place that must be endured. And my *personal philosophy* is kill or be killed."

To my extreme annoyance, her eyes light up at this. "Yes, for instance, when someone bullies your brother—your response is to dump piranha in the pool."

How dare she. I'm well aware that my proclivity to protect Pugsley and the other sweaty, inept misfits who remind me of him is my one identifiable weakness. But to bring it up in the first five minutes is bad form, even for a shrink.

"The point I'm trying to make is that you assaulted a boy," she says, "and showed no remorse for your actions. That's why you're here. Because I believe you have deeper feelings than the judge understands. That maybe you're hiding them. From the world. From yourself."

This assessment makes my skin crawl. "He was a vicious, stupid bully," I say. "If you're wondering about my hidden emotions on the subject, allow me to enlighten you. He lost a testicle. I'm disappointed he didn't lose both. It would have been a favor to the world. People like *Dalton* shouldn't procreate. Now I've answered all your questions." I get to my feet.

"We're not done yet," Dr. Kinbott says. There's a thread of steel in her voice that makes me weary. This is going to be harder than I thought.

I sit back down, mentally diagramming a new approach.

"Therapy is a valuable tool to help you understand yourself," she says, back to her kindergarten teacher voice again. "It can help you build the life you want."

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“I know the life I want,” I say, shaking my head.

“Then tell me about it,” she offers, leaning forward. Smiling again. “Everything said in these sessions is strictly confidential. Maybe your plans involve becoming an author? I was sent your manuscripts as part of your evaluation. Do you want to tell me about them? About Viper de la Muerte?”

The intrusion of this stranger knowing about my books, about Viper, is enough to make me fast-track my plan. I give her the bullet points as I look for the exit.

“What about the relationship between Viper and her mother? Dominica? Maybe that would be a good place to start.”

“Maybe it would,” I say with a smirk. “But would you mind if I use the powder room first?”

In the baby-blue-wallpapered room, I open my bag.

“Nail file,” I tell Thing, who passes it to me obediently. I get the window open, near-silently, and squeeze through it onto the roof. By the time Dr. Kinbott calls out to see if I’m okay, I’m already shimmying down the drainpipe to the sidewalk. I will Morticia to stay upstairs with the good doctor. Carrying her around has never done me any good.

I know for a fact Principal Weems is waiting for me out front. She offered to take me for *hot chocolate* after my session. The only reason someone of her pay grade would be personally escorting me to therapy is to prevent an escape attempt. Even *she* wouldn’t expect me to get out within eight minutes, though. That gives me a head start—if only a small one.

Luckily, Jericho is the size of a postage stamp. I see the dinky little café she mentioned just up ahead. The Weathervane. I’ll get a jolt of caffeine and get some townie to call me a taxi. It doesn’t

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