

ERIN DOOM



A GRIPPING TALE  
OF IMPOSSIBLE LOVE.



THE  
TEARSMITH

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## The Tearsmith

Erin Doom is an Italian author whose debut novel *Fabbricante di lacrime* (*The Tearsmith*) shot to the top of the charts in 2022 and has since sold over half a million copies. Her second and third novels, *Nel modo in cui cade la neve* (*The Way the Snow Falls*) and *Stigma* (2023), are also bestsellers. Doom studied law and currently resides in Italy.

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# The Tearsmith

ERIN DOOM

*Translated by* Eleanor Chapman



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*For those who have believed from the beginning.  
And until the very end.*

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## Prologue

We had many stories at The Grave.

Whispered tales, bedtime stories . . . legends flickering on our lips in the glow of a candle. The most famous was the one about the Tearsmith.

It told of a distant, far-away place . . .

A world where no one could cry, and people's souls were empty, stripped of all emotion. But hidden far from everyone lived a little man cloaked in shadows and boundless solitude. A lonely artisan, pale and hunched, whose eyes were clear like glass and could produce crystal teardrops.

People went to him in order to cry, to feel a shred of emotion – because tears encapsulate love and the most heart-wrenching of farewells. They are the most intimate extension of the soul. More than joy or happiness, it is tears that make us truly human.

And the Tearsmith fulfilled this desire. He slipped his tears and all that they held into people's eyes. And so it came to be that they learnt to cry: with anger, desperation, pain and anguish.

Excruciating passions, disappointments and tears, tears, tears – the Tearsmith corrupted a world of purity, tainting it with the deepest and darkest of emotions.

'Remember, you cannot lie to the Tearsmith,' they would say, to finish the tale.

They told us this story to teach us that every child can be good, *must* be good, because no one is born evil. It is not in human nature.

But for me . . .

For me, it wasn't like that.

For me, it wasn't just a story.

He was not dressed in shadows. He was not a pale and hunched little man, with eyes as clear as glass.

No. I knew the Tearsmith.

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## I. A New Home

*Dressed in sorrow, she was still the most beautiful and radiant thing in all the world.*

‘They want to adopt you.’

These were words I never thought I would hear.

I wanted it so much, had wanted it ever since I was a little girl, so for a moment I thought I must have fallen asleep and be dreaming. Again.

But this wasn’t the voice from my dreams.

It was the gruff bark of Mrs Fridge, her voice infused with the usual contempt.

‘Me?’ I gasped incredulously.

She sneered at me with a curled upper lip.

‘You.’

‘You’re sure?’

She gripped her pen with her pudgy fingers, and I flinched under her glare.

‘Have you gone deaf?’ she snapped. ‘Did all that fresh air block your ears?’

I hurried to shake my head, my eyes wide in disbelief.

It wasn’t possible. It couldn’t be.

No one wanted teenagers. No one wanted older children, never, not under any circumstances . . . It was a proven fact. It was like in the dog shelter – everyone wanted a puppy, because they were cute, innocent, and easy to train. No one wanted a dog that had been there its whole life.

This had been a difficult truth for me to accept, having grown up under that roof.

When you were little, they would at least look at you. But gradually, as you grew up, those looks would become fleeting glances, and their pity would carve you into those four walls forever.

But now . . . *now* . . .

‘Mrs Milligan wants to have a little chat. She’s downstairs waiting for you. Show her round the institute and try not to ruin everything. Keep your head out of the clouds and with a bit of luck you’ll be out of here.’

My head was spinning.

The skirt of my good dress fluttered against my knees as I climbed down the stairs, and again, I wondered if this was just another of my daydreams.

Surely, it was a dream. At the bottom of the stairs, I was greeted by the kind face of a mature woman, clutching an overcoat in her arms.

‘Hi,’ she smiled, and I noticed that she was looking me directly *in the eyes*. That hadn’t happened in a very long time.

‘Hello . . .’ I exhaled.

She told me that she’d noticed me in the garden earlier, as she was coming in through the institute’s wrought-iron gates. She had seen me in the long grass, lit by the shafts of sunlight filtering through the tree leaves.

‘I’m Anna,’ she introduced herself as we started to walk.

Her voice was velvety, mellowed by age. I gazed at her, enraptured, wondering if it was possible to be electrocuted by sound, or to be so enamoured by something you’d only just heard.

‘What about you? What’s your name?’

‘Nica,’ I answered, trying to contain my emotion. ‘My name is Nica.’

She looked at me curiously, and I was so keen to hold her gaze that I didn’t even look where I was stepping.

‘That’s a very unusual name. I’ve never heard it before.’

‘Yes . . .’ My gaze became evasive and shy. ‘My parents named me. They . . . well, they were both biologists. Nica is a type of butterfly.’

I remembered very little of my mom and dad, and what I could remember was hazy, as if I was looking at them through a dirty window. If I closed my eyes and sat silently, I could just about make out their faces looking down at me.

I was five years old when they died.

Their tenderness was one of the few things that I could remember – and what I most sorely missed.

‘It’s a really lovely name, “Nica” . . .’ Her lips rolled around my name as if she wanted to taste how it sounded. ‘Nica,’ she repeated decisively, with a graceful nod.

She looked into my face, and it felt like a warm light was beaming down on me. It seemed as if my skin was glowing under her gaze, as if a single glance from her could make me shine. This was a big deal for me.

Slowly, we wandered around the grounds of the institute. She asked me if I’d been there long, and I replied that I’d basically grown up there. The sun was bright as we strolled past the climbing ivy.

‘What were you doing before . . . when I saw you over there?’ she asked during a lull in the conversation, pointing towards the shoots of wild heather in a distant corner of the grounds.

I quickly turned to look where she was pointing, and without knowing why, I felt the urge to hide my hands.

*Keep your head out of the clouds.* Mrs Fridge’s warning flashed through my mind.

‘I like being outside,’ I said slowly. ‘I like . . . the creatures living here.’

‘Are there animals here?’ she asked, a little naïvely, but I knew I hadn’t explained myself very clearly.

‘Little ones, yes . . .’ I replied vaguely, taking care not to step on a cricket. ‘Often, we don’t even see them . . .’

I blushed a little as we caught each other’s eyes, but she didn’t ask me any more questions. Instead, we shared a gentle silence, listening to the jays chirping and children whispering as they spied on us through the windows.

She told me that her husband would arrive at any moment. *To get to know me*, she implied, and my heart felt so light I felt like I could fly. As we went back inside, I wondered if I could pour those feelings into a bottle and keep them forever. Hide them under my pillow and bring them out to watch them shine like a pearl in the darkness of the night.

I hadn’t felt so happy in a long time.

‘Jin, Ross, no running,’ I said good-naturedly as two children rushed past, jostling my dress. They snickered and ran up the creaky stairs.

I turned to look at Mrs Milligan and realised that she had been watching me. She was gazing deep into my eyes with a touch of something that seemed almost like . . . admiration.

‘You’ve got really beautiful eyes, Nica,’ she said unexpectedly. ‘Do you know that?’

Embarrassment gnawed at me. I didn’t know what to say.

‘Everyone must tell you that all the time,’ she prompted tactfully. But the truth was that no, no one at The Grave had ever told me anything of the sort.

The younger children would sometimes innocently ask me if I saw colours like everyone else did. They said my eyes were ‘the colour of a crying sky’ because they were a strikingly light, speckled grey. I knew that many people thought they were unusual, but no one had ever told me they were beautiful.

At the compliment, my hands began to tremble.

‘I . . . no . . . but thank you,’ I stammered awkwardly, making her smile. I discreetly pinched the back of my hand and felt the slight pain with an infinite joy.

It was real. It was all real.

That woman was really there.

*A family*, for me . . . A new life, away from all of this, away from The Grave . . .

I had thought that I would be trapped inside those walls for much longer. For another two years, until I turned nineteen – that’s when you legally become an adult in Alabama.

But now, perhaps I wouldn’t have to wait to come of age. I had given up praying that somebody would come and take me away, but now . . . perhaps . . .

‘What’s that?’ Mrs Milligan asked suddenly.

She was looking around, captivated.

Then I heard it too. A beautiful melody. Deep, harmonious music was reverberating through the cracks and flaking plaster of the institute’s walls.

An angelic sound floated through The Grave, as bewitching as a siren’s call. I felt my skin crawl.

Mrs Milligan wandered towards the sound, entranced. There was nothing for me to do but follow her. She reached the arched doorway into the living room and came to a stop.

She stood, bewitched, staring at the source of this invisible wonder.

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The upright piano was old, clunky and a bit out of tune, but despite all of that, it still sang sweetly.

And, of course, those hands . . . those pale hands and those sculpted wrists, flying fluidly over the keys.

‘Who is he . . . ?’ Mrs Milligan breathed after a moment. ‘Who is that boy?’

I clenched the skirt of my dress in my fists. I hesitated, and at the other end of the room, the boy paused.

His hands came to a gradual stop. His squared shoulders were a stark silhouette against the wall.

Then, gradually, as if he had been expecting it, *as if he already knew*, he turned around.

His hair was a dark halo, as black as a crow’s wings. His face was pale, with a sharp jawline and two narrow eyes that were darker than coal.

There it was, that fatal charm. The seductive beauty of his pale lips and finely chiselled features made Mrs Milligan fall silent at my side.

He looked over his shoulder at us and his hair flopped over his lowered, shining eyes and high cheekbones. Trembling, I was certain I saw him smile.

‘That’s Rigel.’

I had always wanted a family, more than anything else in the world.

I had prayed that there was someone out there for me, ready to come and take me away with them, to give me the chances that I had never had.

It was too good to be true.

If I stopped to think about it, I still couldn’t believe it. *Or maybe . . . I didn’t want to believe it.*

‘Is everything all right?’ Mrs Milligan asked me.

She was sitting next to me in the back seat.

‘Yes . . .’ I made myself say, forcing a smile. ‘Everything’s . . . great.’

I clenched my fists in my lap, but she didn’t notice. She turned back around to look out the window, and every now and then would point out a feature in the landscape rushing past.

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But I was hardly listening to her.

Slowly, I turned to look at the reflection in the mirror in front of us. In the passenger seat next to Mr Milligan there was a shock of black hair brushing against the headrest.

He was staring indifferently out the window, his elbow propped against the car door and his head leaning on his fist.

‘That’s the river down there,’ Mrs Milligan said, but his dark eyes did not look at where she was pointing. Through his black eyelashes, he blandly observed the landscape.

As if he’d heard my thoughts, his eyes suddenly met mine in the mirror.

His gaze was piercing, and I quickly looked away.

I refocused on what Anna was saying, blinking, nodding and smiling, but I felt his eyes burning into me, holding me captive.

After a couple of hours, the car slowed down and we pulled into a leafy neighbourhood.

The Milligans lived in a small brick house, identical to the others on the street. It had a white picket fence, a mailbox, and an ornamental windmill amongst the gardenias.

I glimpsed an apricot tree in the back garden and strained my neck to get a look at it, genuinely curious about that little patch of green.

‘Is it heavy?’ Mr Milligan asked, as I picked up the cardboard box containing my few belongings. ‘Do you need a hand?’

I shook my head, touched by his kindness, and he led us inside.

‘Come on, this way. Oh, the path is a little worse for wear . . . watch out for that slab, it sticks up a bit. Are you hungry? Do you want something to eat?’

‘Let them get settled in first,’ said Anna softly, and he pushed his glasses up his nose.

‘Oh, yes, of course . . . You must be tired, right? Come.’

He opened the front door. I saw ‘Home’ written on a doormat on the threshold and felt my heart racing.

Anna tilted her head. ‘Come in, Nica.’

I took a step forward and found myself in a narrow entrance hall.

The smell was the first thing that struck me.

It didn’t smell like the mouldy walls or damp ceilings of The Grave.

It was an unusual smell, deep, almost . . . intimate. There was something special about it. I realised suddenly that it was Anna's smell.

I looked around with shining eyes. The wallpaper was a bit shabby in places. There were a few picture frames dotted about on the walls, and a doily on the table, next to the key bowl. It all felt so lived-in and personal that I was frozen in the doorway, unable to move a muscle.

'It's quite small,' Mr Milligan said, scratching his head in embarrassment, but I didn't even register his words.

*God, it was . . . perfect.*

'Your bedrooms are upstairs.' Anna started climbing the narrow staircase, and I took the opportunity to steal a furtive look at Rigel.

He was holding his box under one arm and looking around with lowered eyes. His gaze swept swiftly from side to side. His expression gave nothing away.

'Klaus?' Mr Milligan called, looking for someone. 'Where's he got to . . .' I heard him bustling away as we headed upstairs.

We each settled into our own rooms.

'This used to be another little living room,' Anna told me, opening the door to my new bedroom. 'Then it became the guest bedroom. You know, if we had a visit from a friend of . . .' she hesitated, freezing for a moment. Then she blinked and forced a smile. 'It doesn't matter. Anyway, it's yours now. Do you like it? If there's something you'd like to change, or move, I don't know . . .'

'No,' I whispered, standing in the doorway of a room that, finally, I could call all *mine*.

No more shared bedrooms, or roller blinds that let the morning sun through. No more freezing, dusty floors, or dreary, mouse-grey walls.

It was a lovely room, with wooden floorboards and a long, wrought-iron mirror in the far corner. There was a breeze coming in through the open window, softly fluttering the linen curtains, and the clean bedsheets gleamed white in contrast to the warm, vermillion bedcover. I found my fingers brushing the snow-white corner of the sheets as I approached the bed, with my cardboard box still under my arm. I checked that Mrs Milligan had gone, then

hurried to bend over and smell them. The fragrance of fresh laundry flooded my nostrils and I closed my eyes, taking deep, inebriating breaths of it.

It smelt so good . . .

I looked around, unable to believe that all this space was just for me. I put the box on the nightstand, opened it and reached inside. I took out my little caterpillar plushie and placed him on the middle of the pillow. He was a bit grey and tattered, the only memento I still had of Mom and Dad.

I looked at the pillow with shining eyes.

*Mine . . .*

I took my time sorting out my few belongings. One by one, I hung up my shirts, my lumpy sweater and my pants. I checked all my socks and shoved the ones with more holes to the back of the drawer, hoping they'd go unnoticed back there.

Before I headed back downstairs, I took a final look at my room from the doorway and wondered with anticipation if the smell of it would soon start clinging to me, too.

'You're sure you don't want anything to eat?' Anna asked later, looking at us with concern. 'Not even a quick bite . . . ?'

I declined, thanking her. We had stopped for fast food on the way, and I still felt full.

She seemed uncertain. She gazed at me for a moment, then looked over my shoulder.

'What about you, Rigel?' She hesitated. 'Am I pronouncing it right? Rigel?' she repeated, pronouncing it as it was written.

He nodded and, as I had, declined.

'Okay . . .' she gave in. 'There are cookies, and the milk's in the fridge. Anyway, if you want to go and get some rest . . . Oh! Our bedroom's the one at the end of the hallway, if you need anything, anything at all.'

She was worrying.

*She was worrying*, I realised, with a light fluttering in my chest. *She was worrying about me, if I'd eaten, if I hadn't eaten, if I needed anything . . .*

She really cared, and not just about passing inspections like Mrs

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Fridge had, on the occasions when Child Protection came to tick off that we were all clean and had full stomachs.

No. She genuinely cared . . .

As I went back upstairs, trailing my hand along the banister, I toyed with the idea of coming back down in the middle of the night and eating cookies at the kitchen counter. It could be like the movies we used to steal glimpses of through the crack in the door when Mrs Fridge fell asleep in the armchair in front of the television.

As I reached my bedroom door, the sound of footsteps made me turn around.

Rigel appeared at the top of the stairs. He turned away from me, but I was sure that he'd seen me.

I suddenly remembered that he was also a part of this beautifully embroidered tapestry. That this new reality, however precious and coveted, was not all sweetness and light, warmth and wonder. No, it was tinged with darkness around the edges, like a burn, like the scorch mark from a cigarette.

'Rigel,' I whispered, and I heard his name as if it had leapt spontaneously out of my mouth. He was standing still in the middle of the empty hallway, and I wavered, uncertain.

'Now . . . now that we're . . .'

'Now that we're *what*?' he asked in a harsh, venomous way that made me flinch.

'Now that we're here, together,' I went on, looking at his back. 'I . . . want it to work out.'

*I wanted all of it to work out* and there was nothing I could do about it. The tapestry included him, that sooty stain. In a burst of desperation, I prayed that he wouldn't destroy the delicate stitching of this lacy dream, that it wouldn't all unravel before my eyes.

He paused for a moment, then, without a word, started walking away towards his room. My shoulders slumped.

'Rigel . . .'

'Don't come into my room,' he spat. 'Not now, not ever.'

I looked at him anxiously, feeling my hope melt away.

'Is that a threat?' I asked quietly, as he turned the door handle.

I saw him opening the door, but at the last moment he hesitated. With a jerk of his sharp jaw, he turned to glare at me over his

shoulder, and just before he closed the door, I saw his lips viciously curling into a sneer of condemnation.

‘It’s advice, *little moth*.’

## 2. A Lost Tale

*Sometimes destiny is an unrecognisable path.*

The institute was called Sunnycreek Home.

It stood at the end of a decrepit, dead-end road, in the forgotten outskirts of a little town in the south of the state. It housed unfortunate children like me, none of whom I ever heard call it by its real name.

Everyone called it The Grave, and it didn’t take long for me to understand why: everyone who ended up there seemed condemned to a fate of *decrepit dead-ends*, just like the road that led to it.

I felt like I was living behind bars in The Grave.

I spent every day longing for someone to come and take me away. For someone to look me in the eyes and choose me, over all the other children. For someone to want me as I was, even though I wasn’t all that much. But no one had ever chosen me. No one had ever wanted me, or even noticed me. I had always been invisible.

Not like Rigel.

Unlike many of us, he hadn’t lost his parents. No tragedy had befallen his family when he was little.

They had found him in front of the institute’s gates in a wicker basket, with no note and no name, abandoned in the night with only the stars to watch over him like great sleeping giants. He was only a week old.

They named him *Rigel* after the brightest star in the constellation of Orion, which was shining that night like a diamond web spun on a bed of black velvet. With the surname Wilde, they filled the void of his identity.

For all of us at The Grave, that was where he was born. It was obvious even from his appearance that the night shone through his skin, as pale as the moon, and his black eyes stared with the steadiness of someone unafraid of the dark.

Ever since he was a child, Rigel had been the jewel in The Grave's crown.

'The son of the stars,' the matron before Mrs Fridge had called him. She adored him so much that she taught him to play the piano. She would sit with him for hours, with a patience that never extended to the rest of us, and with note after note she transformed him into an impeccable boy who shone out against the grey walls of the institute.

Rigel seemed as good as he looked. He had perfect teeth and got good grades. The matron would sneak him candy before dinner.

He was the child everybody would have wanted.

But I knew that he wasn't really like that. I had learnt to see *beneath*, beneath his smiles, his pale lips, the mask of perfection he wore with everybody else.

I knew that he harboured the night within him, and that hidden in the folds of his soul was the darkness he had been plucked from.

Rigel always acted . . . *strangely* with me.

I had never been able to explain it. It was as if I had somehow done something to deserve that behaviour, his distant, silent glares. It all started one normal day, I don't even remember exactly when. He knocked into me, and I fell, grazing my knees. I brought my legs up to my chest and brushed the grass away, but when I looked up, I saw no trace of an apology on his face. He just stood there, staring at me, in the shadow of a cracked wall.

Rigel would yank at my clothes, pull my hair, untie the bows at the ends of my braids. The ribbons would flutter to his feet like dead butterflies, and through my tears I would see his lips curl into a cruel smile before he ran away.

But he never touched me.

In all those years, he never once made direct contact with my skin. Just the hems and material of my clothes, my hair . . . He would pull me over by my sweater, and I ended up with baggy sleeves, but never bruises. It was as if he didn't want to leave any evidence of his guilt on

me. Or maybe he just found my freckles disgusting. Maybe he despised me so much that he didn't want to touch me.

Rigel spent a lot of time by himself, rarely seeking out the company of other children.

But once, when we were around fifteen, a new boy came to The Grave, a blond boy who was transferred to a foster home about a week later. He immediately took to Rigel – the one boy who, if possible, was worse than he was. They would hang out, leaning against the crumbling walls, Rigel with his arms crossed over his chest, his lips twitching and his eyes shining darkly with amusement. I never saw them argue about a thing.

Then, on a day like any other, the new boy came down to dinner with a black eye and a puffy face. Mrs Fridge glared at him unkindly and in a thundering voice demanded what in God's name had happened.

'Nothing,' he mumbled without looking up from his plate. 'I fell over at school.'

But I knew full well that it wasn't 'nothing'. When I looked up, I saw Rigel lowering his face so that no one would see his expression. He had *smiled*, a thin sneer had cracked his perfect mask.

And as he grew up, he grew into his beauty in a way that I struggled to admit.

But his beauty was anything but sweet, soft or gentle.

No . . .

It scorched you to look at Rigel, but your eyes would be drawn to him, like to the frame of a burning building or the carcass of a destroyed car on the side of the road. He was viciously beautiful, and the more you tried not to look at him, the more his twisted charm wedged itself behind your eyes and got under your skin until it infected your entire body.

He was seductive, solitary, sinister.

A nightmare dressed like your most secret daydream.

The next morning, it felt like I had woken up in a fairy tale.

Clean sheets, that divine smell and a mattress with no springs poking through. I didn't know how to want for more.

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I sat up, my eyes bleary from sleep. That comfortable room, all mine, made me feel luckier than I ever had before.

Then, as if a black cloud was passing over me, I remembered that that was only half the fairy tale. There was also that dark patch, that scorch mark, and nothing I could do to remove it.

I weakly shook my head, and roughly rubbed my eyes with my wrists, trying to push those thoughts away.

I didn't want to think about it. I didn't want to let anyone ruin it, not even him.

I knew how these things went well enough not to delude myself that I'd found my forever home.

Everyone seemed to think that adoption was just a happy ending, that your new family would take you home and after only a few hours, you'd automatically become one of them.

But it wasn't like that at all. It only works like that with pets.

Actual adoption was a much longer process. First of all, there was a short stay with the new family, to see if everyone got on well enough for cohabitation to be possible. This was called a 'pre-adoptive placement'. During this stage, it wasn't unusual for incompatibilities or problems to arise that would disturb the family harmony, so it was very important for the family to use this time to decide whether or not to proceed. Only if everything went smoothly, with no glitches, would the parents eventually finalise the adoption process.

That's why I couldn't really think of myself as a proper member of the family yet. This fairy tale that I had found myself in was beautiful, but fragile. It could shatter like glass in my hands at any moment.

*I'll be good*, I resolved. *I'll be good, and everything will be fine*. I would do everything in my power to make it work. Everything . . .

I went downstairs, determined not to let anyone ruin my chances.

The house was small, so I didn't have much trouble finding the kitchen. I heard voices, and tentatively stepped towards them.

When I arrived in the doorway, I was lost for words.

The Milligans were sitting around the kitchen table in pyjamas and slightly tatty slippers.

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Anna was laughing, her fingers wrapped around a steaming mug, and Mr Milligan was pouring cereal into a ceramic bowl, a sleepy smile on his face.

And right in the middle of them sat Rigel.

It was like a slap in the face, his black hair a bruise in my line of vision. I blinked a few times to make sure I wasn't imagining it. He was in the middle of telling them something. His shoulders were softened and relaxed, and his hair tousled around his face.

The Milligans were watching him with bright eyes, then suddenly, simultaneously, they burst out laughing at something he had said. Their laughter rang in my ears as if I had been torn asunder and each part of me flung to the far ends of the world.

'Oh, Nica,' Anna burst out. 'Good morning!'

I slightly raised my shoulders. They were all staring at me and somehow I managed to feel like a spare part, even though I had only just arrived and hardly knew them. Even though it should have been me sitting there between them, not him.

Rigel looked up at me. His dark eyes found mine instantly, as if he already knew, and I thought I glimpsed the corners of his mouth curling coolly. He tilted his head and smiled angelically.

'Good morning, Nica.'

My blood ran cold. I couldn't move, I couldn't speak. I felt more and more gripped by that icy dismay.

'Did you sleep well?' Mr Milligan pulled out a chair for me to sit down. 'Come and have some breakfast!'

'We were just getting to know each other a little bit,' Mrs Milligan told me. I looked again at Rigel, who was gazing back at me like a perfect painting with the Milligans either side of him.

I sat down reluctantly. Mr Milligan filled Rigel's glass and Rigel smiled at him, perfectly at ease. I felt like I'd sat down on a bed of thorns.

*I'll be good.* I watched Mr and Mrs Milligan chatting with each other in front of me, and the words *I'll be good* flashed through my head like scarlet lightning bolts. *I'll be good, I swear I will . . .*

'How are you feeling on your first day, Nica?' Anna asked, so gentle even first thing in the morning. 'Are you nervous?'

I struggled to push my clamouring worries far away.

‘Oh . . . no,’ I tried to relax. ‘I’m not scared . . . I’ve always liked school.’

It was the truth.

School was one of the only chances we got to leave The Grave. Walking along the road to the public school, I would look up at the clouds, pretending I was just like all the others. I would dream of getting on an airplane and flying away towards distant worlds of freedom.

It was one of the only times I almost managed to feel normal.

‘I’ve already called reception,’ Anna told us. ‘The principal will see you as soon as possible. The school has got you on the register, and they’ve assured me that you can start lessons right away. I know it’s all very quick, but . . . I hope it will all be all right. You can ask to be put in the same classes if you want,’ she added.

I met her eager gaze and tried to hide my unease. ‘Oh. Yeah . . . thanks.’

I sensed I was being watched. It was Rigel’s dark, narrow eyes staring right at me from under his arched eyebrows.

I snapped my eyes away, as if I’d been scalded. I felt the visceral need to get out of there, and with the excuse of going to get dressed, I got up from the table and left the kitchen.

As I was putting walls between us, I felt something twisting in my stomach, the way he had looked at me infesting my thoughts.

‘I’ll be good,’ I whispered to myself, shaking. ‘I’ll be good . . . I swear . . .’

He was the last person in the world I wanted to be there.

*Would I ever be able to ignore him?*

The new school was a grey, blocky building.

Mr Milligan pulled up, and a few kids ran past the front of the car in their rush to get to class. He rearranged his heavy-framed glasses on his nose and awkwardly placed his hands on the steering wheel, as if he didn’t know what else to do with them. I realised that I enjoyed watching him. He had a meek, nervous personality – that was probably why I sympathised with him so much.

‘Anna will come and pick you up later.’

The idea of someone being out there waiting for me, ready to take

me home, gave me a stronger surge of pleasure than ever before. I nodded from the back seat, my shabby backpack sitting on my knees.

‘Thank you, Mr Milligan.’

‘Oh, you can . . .’ he started to say as we got out of the car, his ears a little red. ‘You can call me Norman.’ I stood, watching the car disappear down the road until I heard footsteps behind me.

I turned around and saw Rigel walking alone towards the entrance.

My eyes followed his slender body, the relaxed swinging of his broad shoulders. There was always a hypnotic, natural quality to the way that he moved. He strode surely and confidently, as if the ground would shape itself to his footsteps.

I entered the building after him, but my bag strap got caught on the door handle. I suddenly stumbled wide-eyed into someone who was entering behind me at just that moment.

‘What the hell,’ I heard as I turned around. An irritated boy jerked his arm away, clutching a couple of books.

‘I’m sorry,’ I whispered faintly, and his friend gave him a nudge.

I tucked my hair behind my ears. He met my gaze and seemed to re-evaluate me. The irritation disappeared from his face. He stood stock still, as if my eyes had struck him with lightning.

Then, out of nowhere, he dropped the books he had been holding.

I looked at them heaped on the floor, and when I didn’t see him bending to pick them up, knelt down to retrieve them myself.

I held them out to him, feeling guilty for having bumped into him, and realised that he’d been staring at me the whole time.

‘Thanks . . .’ he smiled slowly, letting his gaze wander all over me in a way that made me blush, which he seemed to find entertaining, or maybe intriguing.

‘Are you new?’ he asked.

‘Let’s go, Rob,’ his friend urged. ‘We’re really late.’

But he didn’t seem to want to go anywhere. I felt a stinging on the back of my neck, a stabbing sensation, like a needle piercing through the air behind me.

I tried to shake off the feeling of foreboding. I backed away from him, and with my face downturned, I stammered, ‘I . . . I’ve got to go.’

I got to reception, which was just down the corridor. I saw that the door was already open and hoped I hadn't made the receptionist wait. It was only after I'd crossed the threshold that I noticed the silhouette lurking to one side.

I almost winced.

Rigel was leaning against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest. One leg was bent, the sole of his shoe against the wall, and his face was slightly lowered, his eyes looking at the floor.

He had always been a lot taller than everyone else, and significantly more intimidating, but I didn't need that as an excuse to immediately take a step backwards. Everything about him frightened me, his appearance and what lay beneath.

What was he doing loitering there, right next to the doorway, when there was a line of chairs just there on the other side of the waiting room?

'The principal will see you now.'

The receptionist called us through from the principal's office, bringing me back to reality.

'Come in.'

Rigel moved away from the wall and walked past me without so much as a glance. We headed into the office and the door closed behind us. The principal was a young, attractive, austere-looking woman. She gestured for us to sit down in front of the desk while she checked our files. She asked us a few questions about the syllabus in our old school, and seemed particularly interested in what was written in Rigel's file.

'I spoke to your institute,' she said. 'I asked a few questions about your academic performance. I was pleasantly surprised by you, Mr Wilde.' She smiled, turning the page. 'Good grades, impeccable behaviour, not a toe out of line. Truly a model student. Your teachers could only sing your praises.' She looked up, satisfied. 'It will be a real pleasure to have you here with us at Burnaby.'

I wondered if there was any possibility that she knew how wrong she was, if she realised that those glowing reports didn't reflect reality, because the teachers never saw *underneath*. They were exactly like all the others.

I wished I could find it within me to say something.

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But Rigel just smiled in his charming way. I wondered how people managed not to notice that his smile never reached his eyes, which stayed dark and impenetrable, glinting like knives.

‘The two students waiting just outside will take you to your classes,’ said the principal. ‘But as of tomorrow, if you’d like, you can ask to be put together.’

I had hoped to avoid this. I gripped the sides of the chair and pushed myself forwards, but he spoke first.

‘No.’

I blinked and turned to look at him. Rigel was smiling, a lock of dark hair falling over his forehead.

‘There’s no need.’

‘You’re sure? You won’t be able to change your minds later.’

‘Oh, yes. We’ll get plenty of time together.’

‘Very good,’ the principal declared, seeing as I kept silent. ‘You can start class. Follow me.’

I tore my eyes away from Rigel. I got to my feet, picked up my backpack, and followed her out of the office.

‘Two seniors will be waiting for you outside reception. Have a great day.’

She retreated into her office and I crossed the room without looking behind me. I had to get away from him, and I would have done so, had a different urge not taken over at the last minute. I couldn’t stop myself from turning around to confront him.

‘What did you mean?’ I bit my lip. I didn’t need to see his raised eyebrow to realise what a stupid question it was. But I didn’t trust his intentions, and I couldn’t believe that he would turn down an opportunity to torment me.

‘What?’ Rigel looked down at me, his towering presence making me feel even smaller. ‘You didn’t *seriously* think . . . that I would want to be with *you*?’

I pursed my lips, regretting having asked. The intensity of his gaze made my stomach quiver and his stinging sarcasm scorched my skin.

Without replying, I turned the door handle and made to leave. But something stopped me.

A hand appeared from over my shoulder and pushed the door shut.

I froze. I saw his slender fingers on the doorframe, and every one of my vertebrae became alive to his presence behind me.

‘You stay away from me, *little moth*,’ he ordered. His hot breath tickled my hair and I stiffened. ‘You got that?’

The tension of his body so close was enough to give me chills. *Stay away*, he said, but it was him who had pinned me against the door, breathed all over me, prevented me from leaving.

He moved past me, and I watched him go through narrowed eyes, without moving an inch.

If I’d had my way . . .

If I’d had my way, I’d have forgotten him forever, along with The Grave, with Mrs Fridge, and the pain that had marred my entire childhood. I didn’t want to end up in the same family as him. It was a catastrophe for me. It felt as if I had been condemned to bear the burden of my past, as if I would never truly be free.

How could I make him understand?

‘Hi!’

I hadn’t realised that I’d robotically walked out of reception. I looked up and found myself greeted by a radiant smile.

‘I’m in your class. Welcome to Burnaby!’

I saw Rigel striding confidently along the corridor, his black hair swishing as he went. The girl who was with him seemed like she was hardly paying any attention to where she was going. She was staring at him, bewildered, as if she was the new student. They both disappeared around the corner.

‘I’m Billie,’ my new classmate introduced herself. She held out her hand, beaming, and I shook it. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Nica Dover.’

‘Micah?’

‘No, *Nica*,’ I repeated, stressing the N, and she put a finger to her chin.

‘Oh, short for Nikita!’

I found myself smiling. ‘No,’ I shook my head. ‘Just Nica.’

Billie’s curious gaze didn’t make me feel uncomfortable, like the boy’s look earlier had. She had a sincere face, honey-coloured curls, and bright, passionate eyes.

As we walked along, I noticed that she was watching me intently,

but it was only when our eyes met again that I understood why. She too was fascinated by the unique colour of my irises.

‘Because of your eyes, Nica,’ the younger children used to say, when I would ask why they were looking at me in that alienating way. ‘*Nica’s eyes are the colour of a crying sky, big and shining, like grey diamonds.*’

‘What happened to your hands?’ she asked.

I looked down at my fingertips, which were covered in Band-Aids.

‘Oh,’ I stammered, awkwardly hiding them behind my back. ‘Nothing . . .’

I smiled, trying to change the conversation, and Mrs Fridge’s words barged into my head again: ‘Get your head out of the clouds.’

‘It’s so I don’t bite my nails,’ I burst out. She seemed to believe me, because then she lifted her hands proudly to show me her nibbled nails.

‘What does it matter? Mine are down to the bone at this point!’ She turned her hands over and started inspecting them. ‘My grandma says I should dip them in mustard, “Then you’ll lose the taste for them,” she says. I’ve never tried it, though. I find the idea of spending an afternoon with my fingers in mustard a bit . . . perplexing. What if the mailman knocks?’

### 3. Differences of Opinion

*Our movements, like the planets, are governed  
By invisible laws.*

Billie helped me settle in.

It was a big school, and there was a lot going on. She showed me the classrooms for all the different subjects and took me from one lesson to the next, introducing me to all the teachers. I tried not to be too clingy and weigh her down, but she said that she was actually happy to keep me company. My heart soared like never before. Billie was kind and generous, two qualities you didn’t often come across where I came from.

When the bell rang to mark the end of class, we left the classroom together and she looped a long, leather strap around her neck, then shook her curly hair loose.

‘Is that a camera?’ Curious, I inspected the object that was now dangling from her neck, and her face lit up.

‘It’s a Polaroid! Haven’t you seen one before? My folks gave me this one ages ago. I love photography, my bedroom’s covered in photos! Grandma says that I’ve got to stop cluttering the walls, but every time I find her whistling while dusting them . . . and she ends up forgetting what she said.’

I was trying to keep up with her chattering and, at the same time, trying not to bump into other people. I wasn’t used to such bustling crowds, but Billie seemed oblivious – she kept rattling on, bumping into people all over the place.

‘I like taking photos of people, it’s interesting to see their facial expressions immortalised on film. Miki always hides her face when I try to take her photo. She’s so pretty, it’s a shame, but she doesn’t like it. Oh, look, there she is! Over there!’ She waved euphorically. ‘Miki!’

I tried to catch a glimpse of this mysterious friend who she’d been telling me about all morning, but I didn’t have time before she started dragging me through the crowd by the strap of my backpack.

‘Come, Nica! Come and meet her!’

I awkwardly tried to follow her, but just ended up getting under her feet.

‘Oh, you’ll really like her, just you wait!’ she declared excitedly. ‘Miki is really so sweet, and so sensitive! Have I already said she’s my best friend?’

I tried to nod, but Billie gave me another yank to get me to move. After we’d finally barged most of the way through the crowd to her friend, she ran the final stretch and did a little leap in front of her.

‘Hey there!’ she trilled. ‘How was class? Did you have gym? This is Nica!’

She pushed me forward, and I almost ended up slamming my nose into an open locker.

A hand appeared on the metal and pushed it away.

*Sweet*, Billie had said. I prepared a smile.

In front of me was a girl with an attractive, slightly pointy, heavily made-up face and thick black hair. She was wearing a baggy hoodie and had a piercing on her left eyebrow. She was chewing gum.

Miki looked me up and down indifferently, then hitched up the strap of her backpack and slammed the locker shut, making me jump. She turned her back on us and headed down the corridor.

‘Oh, don’t worry, she’s always like this,’ Billie chirped, as I stood rooted to the spot and staring. ‘Making new friends isn’t her strong suit. But deep down she’s a big softie!’

Deep down . . . *How deep?!*

I looked at her, slightly scared, but she dismissed my concerns, encouraging me to carry on. We headed through the chaos of students, and when we got to the exit, Miki was there watching the shadows of clouds dancing on the asphalt yard, smoking a cigarette and looking deep in thought.

‘What a beautiful day!’ Billie sighed gleefully, drumming her fingers on her camera. ‘Where do you live, Nica? My grandma can give you a lift home, if you want. She’s making meatballs for dinner tonight, and Miki’s coming over.’ She turned to face her. ‘You are coming over, right?’

She nodded unenthusiastically, taking a drag of her cigarette, and Billie smiled happily.

‘So? Are you coming with –’

She was interrupted by someone running into her.

‘Hey!’ Billie protested, rubbing her shoulder. ‘What sort of manners are those? Ow!’

Other students were rushing past us, and Billie shrank towards Miki.

‘What’s going on?’

Something wasn’t right. Students were running back inside, some with their phones out, some with a terrifying fervour in their eyes. There was an excited atmosphere, and I flattened myself to the wall, frightened by the frenzied crowd.

‘Hey!’ Miki shouted to a boy who was buzzing with excitement. ‘What the hell’s happening?’

‘There’s a fight!’ he yelled, pulling out his phone. ‘Over by the lockers!’

‘A fight? Between who?’

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‘Phelps and the new boy! God, he’s really beating the shit out of him! Out of *Phelps!*’ he squawked. ‘I gotta film it!’

He leapt away like a grasshopper and I found myself against the wall, arms stiff, eyes staring into the void.

*The new boy?*

Billie squeezed Miki like a stress ball.

‘No! Not violence, please! I don’t want to watch. Who would be crazy enough to go for Phelps? Only a *moron . . .* hey!’ Her eyes opened wide in alarm. ‘Nica! Where are you going?’

But her voice got lost in the flood of students. I overtook people, barging past shoulders and backs, like a butterfly in a labyrinth of plant stalks. There was something crackling, almost suffocating, in the atmosphere. I heard the distinct sound of thumping, the clanging of metal and then something hitting the ground.

I got to the front of the crowd, the shouting and screaming pounding in my temples. I ducked under somebody’s arm and, finally, could see what was happening.

The two students were wrestling on the ground in a blind fury. It was difficult to make out who was who in their frenzy, but I didn’t need to see their faces. That unmistakable black hair stuck out like a blot of ink.

There was Rigel, the other guy’s shirt gripped fiercely in his fist, his knuckles pink and raw as he thrashed the body underneath him. There was a mad glint in his eyes that made my bones tremble and my blood run cold. He dealt brutal, fast punches in a frightening rage. The other boy tried furiously to hit him back, but there was no mercy in Rigel’s eyes. I heard the crunch of cartilage as screams filled the air, clamouring, chanting . . .

Then, suddenly, everything stopped.

Teachers parted the crowd, and literally threw themselves on the fighting boys. They managed to pull them off each other, and one of them tackled Rigel and tore him away by the collar, while the others swooped down upon the boy on the ground, who was now looking at him with wild eyes.

My eyes froze on him. It was only then that I recognised who he was – the boy from that morning. The one I’d bumped into in the doorway, the one with the books.

‘Phelps, suspended again!’ a teacher shouted. ‘This is your third fight, you’ve gone too far!’

‘It was him!’ the boy cried, beside himself. ‘I didn’t do anything! He punched me for no reason!’

The teacher shoved Rigel aside, and I saw him looking down, his hair dishevelled and a sneer cutting across his face.

‘It was him! Look at him!’

‘Enough!’ the teacher shouted. ‘Straight to the principal! Both of you!’

The teachers pushed them by the shoulders, and I saw Rigel letting himself be escorted away, utterly compliant. He turned his face and casually spat into a water fountain, while the other boy hobbled behind him in the teacher’s grasp.

‘And the rest of you, get out!’ they screamed. ‘And put those phones away! O’Connor, you’ll be expelled if you don’t get out of here this instant! You lot too, get on! There’s nothing to see here!’

The students shuffled off, listlessly dispersing towards the exits. The rabble quickly thinned out, but I stayed put, feeling soft and vulnerable, the shadow of him still in my eyes, relentlessly punching, punching, *punching* . . .

‘Nica!’

Billie ran up, dragging Miki by her backpack strap behind her.

‘Heavens, you scared me! Are you all right?’ She looked at me with wide, distressed eyes. ‘I can’t believe it, your brother!’

I felt a strange shudder. I stared at her speechless and dismayed, almost as if she’d slapped me. Bewildered, I realised that she was referring to Rigel.

Of course . . . Billie didn’t know. She wasn’t aware that we had different surnames, she only knew what the principal had told her. Basically, from her perspective, we were from the same family, but the way she referred to him felt like nails scraping down a blackboard.

‘He . . . he’s not . . .’

‘You should go to reception,’ she interrupted me, agitated. ‘To wait for him! Heavens, a fight with Phelps on your first day . . . he’ll be in a bad way!’

I was pretty sure it wasn’t Rigel who would be in a bad way. I

thought of the other boy's swollen face when they had torn Rigel's fists off him.

But Billie pushed me forward anxiously. 'Let's go!' And they both came with me to the school entrance. I found myself wringing my hands. How could I pretend to be just a little worried, when I was completely disturbed by what I'd just witnessed? I remembered the rage in his eyes with glaring clarity. The situation was absurd.

Raised voices were coming through the door.

The boy who was being accused was shouting like a madman, trying to make his own side heard, and the teacher was shouting even louder than him. There was a hysterical exasperation in Phelps's voice, probably because he had got into yet another fight. But what caught my attention most was the shocked, incredulous way that the principal was speaking to Rigel. He was so well behaved, so perfect, he wasn't the sort to do this kind of thing. He would never have started anything 'as serious as this'. The other boy protested even louder, swearing he didn't do anything to provoke him, but Rigel's silent indifference screamed innocence.

After half an hour, the door opened, and Phelps came out into the corridor.

His lip was split and his face was blotchy. He glanced at me distractedly, taking no notice, but the next moment he turned back, as if he'd suddenly just realised who I was. I didn't have time to interpret his distressed expression before the teacher dragged him away.

'I think they'll expel him this time,' Billie murmured as he disappeared at the end of the corridor.

'About time,' Miki retorted. 'After the *incident* with those freshman girls he should have been thrown in a pigsty.'

The door handle turned again.

Billie and Miki fell quiet as Rigel came through the door. His veins were bulging in his wrists and his presence was so magnetic that everyone fell silent. Everything about him made him difficult to ignore.

It was only then that he noticed us.

Well, no. Not *us*.

'What are *you* doing here?'

The surprise in his voice didn't escape me. I felt him looking at me and realised I didn't know how to reply. I didn't even know what I was doing there, waiting for him as if I genuinely was worried about him.

Rigel had told me to stay away from him, had snarled it at such close range that I could still feel his voice echoing in my head.

‘Nica wanted to make sure you were all right,’ Billie intervened, drawing attention to herself. She gave a crazy smile and lifted a hand. ‘Hi . . .’

He didn’t reply, and Billie seemed intimidated. Her cheeks reddened, embarrassed by the raw magnetism of his black eyes.

And Rigel noticed. *Oh, he noticed all right.*

He knew full well how attractive his mask was, how well he wore it, the reaction it sparked in others. He flaunted it arrogantly and provocatively. It gave him a sinister charm, a seductive, devious and one-of-a-kind appeal.

He sneered, bewitching and mean. It almost seemed as if Billie shrivelled.

‘You wanted to . . . *make sure*,’ he mocked, looking me up and down, ‘that I was . . . *all right*?’

‘Nica, won’t you introduce us to your brother?’ Billie chirped, and I looked away.

‘We’re not related.’ The words burst out of me, almost as if someone else had said them. ‘Me and Rigel are getting adopted.’

Billie and Miki turned to look at me, and I firmly, courageously held his gaze.

‘He’s not my brother.’

He was staring back at me with a thin smile, darkly amused by my efforts.

‘*Oh*, don’t put it like that Nica,’ he said sarcastically. ‘You sound like you’re *relieved*.’

*I am*, my eyes flashed at him, and Rigel looked down at me, scalding me with his dark irises.

Suddenly, someone’s phone started vibrating. Billie took hers out of her pocket and stared at the screen.

‘We’ve got to go, my grandma’s waiting for us outside. She’s already tried calling me . . .’

She looked up at me and I nodded.

‘So . . . see you tomorrow?’

She smiled at me, and I tried to do the same, but I could still feel Rigel’s eyes on me. It was only then that I realised Miki was staring at

him from under the shadow of her hood. Her worried, attentive eyes were scrutinising him.

Then she turned around too, and they both headed off down the corridor.

When we were alone, his voice slid slowly and sinuously, like fingers over silk. 'You're right about one thing.'

I lowered my chin and dared a glance up at him.

He was staring at where the others had disappeared, but he wasn't smiling any more. He turned his gaze on me, a hail of bullets.

I could have sworn that I felt his eyes drilling into my skin.

'I am not your *brother*.'

That day, I decided to erase Rigel, his words and his violent glare, from my mind. I distracted myself by reading late into the night. The lamp on my nightstand emitted a soft and comforting light that drove my worries away.

Anna had been amazed when I asked if I could borrow their beautifully illustrated encyclopaedia. She had been surprised that I was interested, but I was fascinated by it.

As my eyes ran over the illustrations of the little antennae and the crystal-clear wings, I realised how much I liked to get lost in that bright, colourful world.

I knew other people thought it was unusual.

I knew I was different.

I cultivated my strangeness like a secret garden that only I had the keys to, because I knew that most people couldn't understand me.

I traced the rounded shape of a ladybug with my index finger. I remembered how many wishes I had made as a little girl, watching them fly away from my open palms. I would watch them flying free in the sky, and found myself hopelessly wishing that I could do the same, that I could burst into a cloud of sparkles and fly away from The Grave . . .

A noise caught my attention. I turned towards the door. I thought that perhaps I had imagined it, but then I heard it again. It sounded like something scratching wood.

I carefully closed the encyclopaedia and got out from under the covers. I slowly walked towards the door, then turned the handle and

stuck my head outside. I saw something moving in the darkness. A shadow was flitting on the ground, quickly and stealthily. It seemed to pause and wait for me, watching for what I would do. It disappeared down the stairs, and I gave in to my curiosity and followed it.

I thought I had glimpsed a fluffy tail, but I hadn't been quick enough. I found myself on the ground floor, silent, totally alone and unable to see it anywhere. I sighed, ready to head back upstairs, but then I noticed that the light in the kitchen was on.

Was Anna still up? I approached to check, but soon wished I hadn't. When I pushed the door open, I encountered a pair of eyes already fixed on mine.

Rigel's.

It was him, sitting there. His elbows were perched on the table and his head was slightly lowered. His hair fell in long, precise brush-strokes over his eyes. He was holding something in his hands. It was ice, I realised, a few moments later.

Finding him there stopped me in my tracks.

I had to get used to this, to the constant possibility of running into him. We weren't at The Grave any more, there wasn't as much space as in the institute. This was a small house and we were living in it together.

And yet, the idea of getting used to him seemed impossible.

'You shouldn't be awake.'

His voice, amplified by the silence, sent a long shiver down my spine.

We were only seventeen, but there was something strange about him, something that was difficult to explain. A merciless beauty and a mind that could captivate anyone. It was absurd. Everyone made the mistake of letting themselves be manipulated by him. He was born for this – for bending people to his will. He scared me, because he wasn't like other kids our age.

For a moment, I tried to imagine what he would be like as an adult, and before my eyes appeared a terrible, corrosively alluring man with eyes darker than the night . . .

'Enjoying the view?' he asked sarcastically, pressing the ice onto the bruise on his forehead. He seemed relaxed now, but with that air of absolute control that always made me want to run away.

Before I could come to my senses and get away from him, I opened my mouth to speak.

‘Why?’

Rigel raised an eyebrow. ‘Why what?’

‘Why did you let them choose you?’

His eyes stayed fixed on mine.

‘You think it was my decision?’ he asked slowly, watching me closely.

‘Yes,’ I replied cautiously. ‘You made it happen . . . You played the piano.’

His eyes burned with an almost annoying intensity, and I said, ‘You, you’ve always been the one that everyone wanted, but you never let anyone adopt you.’

Few families ever came to The Grave. They would look at the children, studying them like butterflies in a display case. The little ones were always cuter, more colourful, and more worthy of attention. But then they would see him, with his clean face and polite manners, and they would seem to forget all the others. They would watch this black butterfly, enchanted by the rare cut of his eyes, his beautiful velvety wings, how elegantly he flew above the others.

Rigel was unmatched, the prize of the collection. He wasn’t dull like the other orphans, but he cloaked himself in their greyness to make himself seem all the more enchanting.

And yet, every time someone expressed the desire to adopt him, he had seemed to do everything within his power to ruin it all. He would cause some disaster, disappear, misbehave. And eventually people would leave, unaware of the magic his hands could conjure on the perfect ivory teeth of the piano.

But that day had been different. He had played the piano. He had sought attention rather than spurned it.

*Why?*

‘You’d better get off to bed, *little moth,*’ he said coolly and derisively. ‘Tiredness is playing tricks on you.’

That’s what he did . . . He *bit* me with his words. He always did.

He would tease me and provoke me, then crush me with a smile, until I was full of doubt and unsure about everything.

I should have despised him. Despised his personality, his appearance,

how he ruined everything. I should have, and yet . . . some part of me just couldn't do it.

Because Rigel and I had grown up together. We had spent our lives behind the bars of the same prison. I'd known him since he was a little boy, and I'd seen him so many times that some part of my soul couldn't be as coolly detached as I'd have liked. I was used to him, in a strange way. You sympathise with someone you've shared something with for so long.

I had never been good at hating. Not even when I had good reason for it.

Maybe, despite everything, I still hoped that this new life could be the fairy tale I so yearned for . . .

'What happened with that boy today?' I asked. 'Why were you fighting?'

Rigel slowly tilted his head to one side, maybe wondering why I hadn't left yet. I got the impression that he was weighing me up.

'Differences of opinion. Nothing to do with you.'

He stared at me, urging me to leave, but I didn't.

I didn't want to.

For the first time ever . . . I wanted to take a step forward instead of back. To make him understand that, despite everything, I wanted *us* to move forward. To try. And when he pressed the ice to his forehead, so hard it must have hurt, I heard the memory of a distant voice inside me.

*'Tenderness, Nica. Tenderness, always . . . Remember that,'* the voice said softly.

I felt my legs carry me forward.

Rigel stared at me as I finally stepped into the kitchen. I went up to the sink, took a piece of paper towel and dampened it with cold water. I could feel his eyes drilling into my back.

Then I stepped towards him and looked at him candidly. I held out the paper towel.

'The ice is too hard. Put this on the wound.'

He seemed almost surprised that I hadn't run away. He examined the paper towel, unconvinced, as wary as a wild animal. When he didn't take it, filled with a sudden compassion, I moved to put it on his forehead.

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Before I managed to get close, his eyes opened wide and he jerked

away. A lock of his jet-black hair fell over his forehead as he glowered at me.

‘Don’t,’ he warned me with a threatening look. ‘Don’t you dare touch me.’

‘It won’t hurt . . .’ I shook my head and stretched my hand out further, but this time he pushed me away. I brought my hand to my chest and met his eyes with a jolt. He was glaring daggers at me, fury pulsing icily from his eyes.

‘Don’t just touch me like that – *ever*.’

I clenched my fists and held his punishing gaze. ‘Or what?’

A violent bang from the chair.

Rigel was abruptly towering over me, and I jumped, taken unawares. I made myself step backwards, a thousand alarm bells blaring under my skin. I tripped and knocked into the kitchen cupboard. I lifted my chin, my shaking hands gripping the marble countertop.

I felt his eyes pelting me like stones. The closeness of his body made me shudder. I was hardly breathing. I was utterly engulfed by his shadow.

Then . . . Rigel bent over me. He stooped his head closer, and his breath burned like venom in my ear.

‘Or . . . I won’t be able to stop myself.’

My hair fluttered as he shoved me out of the way.

I heard the thud of ice on the table and his footsteps disappearing as he left me there, immobile, petrified against the marble.

*What had just happened?*

## 4. Band-Aids

*Sensitivity is a refinement of the soul.*

*The sun wove threads of light through the trees. It was an afternoon in spring and the fragrance of flowers filled the air.*

*The Grave loomed like a colossus behind me. Lying in the grass, I watched the sky with my arms spread wide as if to embrace it. My cheek was puffy and*

painful, but I didn't want to keep crying, so I gazed up at the vastness above me, letting myself be cradled by the clouds.

*Would I ever be free?*

*A little noise caught my attention. I looked round and glimpsed something moving in the grass. I got up and decided to carefully approach it, nervously twisting a lock of hair around my fingers.*

*It was a sparrow. He was scratching the dust with his spindly feet and his eyes shone like black marbles, but one of his wings was stretched out at an unnatural angle and he seemed unable to fly.*

*When I knelt down, he let out an extremely high-pitched, alarmed chirp, and I sensed that I'd scared him.*

*'Sorry,' I whispered, as if he could understand me. I didn't want to hurt him – the opposite, I wanted to help him. I felt his desperation as if it was my own. I was also unable to fly, I also wanted to escape, I was also fragile and powerless.*

*We were the same. Small and defenceless against the world.*

*I stretched out my hand, wanting to do something to save him. I was just a little girl, but I wanted to give him his freedom back, as if that would somehow bring mine back to me.*

*'Don't be scared . . .'* I reassured him. *I was young enough to believe that he really could understand me. What should I do? Could I help him? As he withdrew, terrified, I felt something resurfacing in my memory.*

*'Tenderness, Nica,' my mother's voice whispered. 'Tenderness, always . . . Remember that.'* Her soft eyes were imprinted in my memory.

*I gently took the sparrow in my hands, careful not to hurt him. I didn't let him go, not even when he pecked my fingers, not even when his little legs scratched my fingertips.*

*I held him close to my chest and promised him that one of us, at least, would get our freedom back.*

*I returned to the institute and immediately asked Adeline, an older girl, for help, praying that the matron wouldn't discover what I'd found – I feared her cruelty more than anything else.*

*Together, Adeline and I took a popsicle stick from the garbage to use as a splint, and for the next few days I smuggled crumbs from our meals to the hiding place I had found for him.*

*He pecked at my fingers many times, but I never gave up.*

*'I'll make you better, you'll see,' I promised him, my fingers red and painful. He ruffled his breast feathers. 'Don't you worry . . .'*

*I spent hours watching him, a little distance away so as not to scare him.  
'And you'll fly,' I whispered. 'One day, you'll fly, and you'll be free. Just a  
little longer . . . just wait a little longer . . .'*

*He pecked me when I tried to check on his wing. He tried to stay away from  
me. But every time, I persisted with tenderness. I made him a bed out of grass  
and leaves and whispered to him to be patient.*

*And the day he got better, the day he flew away from my hands, was the first  
time in my life I felt a little less dirty and dull. I felt a little more alive.*

*A little freer.*

*As if I could breathe again.*

*I found within me the colours I didn't think I had. The colours of hope.*

*And with my fingers covered in multicoloured Band-Aids, not even my life  
felt quite so grey.*

Slowly, I pulled off the blue Band-Aid. My index finger was still a bit swollen and red.

I had managed to free a wasp from a spiderweb a few days ago. I had been careful not to break the fragile weaving, but I hadn't been quick enough, and she'd stung me.

'Nica and her creatures,' the other children would say when we were younger. 'She's there with them all the time, among the flowers.' They were used to my peculiarities, maybe because in the institute, oddness was more common than normality.

I felt a strange empathy with everything that was small and misunderstood. The instinct to protect creatures of all shapes and sizes had been with me since I was a little girl. It had coloured my strange little world and made me feel free, alive and light.

I remembered Anna's words from the first day, when she had asked me what I was doing in the garden. What must she have thought? Did she think I was strange?

Distractedly, I sensed a presence behind me. I opened my eyes wide and with a start, jumped away.

Rigel's hair swished as he turned to see me jerk away. I stared up at him, still frightened after our last meeting.

He was unphased by my reaction. On the contrary, his mouth sharpened into a crooked sneer.

He stepped past me into the kitchen. I heard Anna greet him, and

my shoulders shuddered. Whenever he was near, I got the shivers, though this time there was an obvious cause. I had spent all day replaying what had happened the night before, but the more I thought about those indecipherable words, the more they tormented me.

*What did he mean by 'I won't hold myself back'? Won't hold himself back from . . . what?*

'There you are, Nica!' Anna greeted me as I cautiously entered the kitchen. I was still lost in thought when an explosion of colour, a fiery violet, flooded my eyes.

An enormous bunch of flowers was on display in the middle of the table, their soft buds springing from a crystal vase. I gazed at them, entranced, overcome by their beauty.

'They're wonderful . . .'

'Do you like them?'

I nodded in response, and Anna smiled. 'I brought them back this afternoon. They're from the store.'

'The store?'

'My store.'

I looked at her genuine smile. I was still struggling to get used to it.

'You . . . sell flowers? Are you a florist?'

*What a stupid question!* I blushed slightly, but she nodded, simply and sincerely.

I loved flowers almost as much as I loved the creatures that lived in them. I stroked a petal with the tip of my index finger and it was like touching cool velvet.

'My store is a few blocks away from here. It's a bit old and out of the way, but I still get customers. It's nice to see that people still like to buy flowers.'

Anna and I were made for each other. I wondered if she had seen something in me, when she noticed me that day at The Grave, that linked us together even before our eyes first met. I wanted to believe it . . . in that moment, as she looked at me through that jubilant bouquet, I really wanted to believe it.

'Evening!'

Mr Milligan entered the kitchen dressed in a peculiar outfit. He

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was wearing a dusty blue uniform with heavy-duty gloves sticking out of his pocket. Various contraptions dangled from his leather belt.

‘Just in time for dinner!’ Anna said. ‘How was your day?’

Norman must have been a gardener. Everything about his outfit seemed to suggest it, even the shears dangling from his belt. I thought that they couldn’t be a more perfect couple, until Anna put her hands on his shoulders and announced: ‘Norman works in pest control.’

I choked on my saliva.

Mr Milligan put on his cap, and I saw the emblem above the visor. A graphic of a massive, stiffened bug was ostentatiously overlaid with a no-entry symbol. I stared at it with icy eyes, my nostrils unnaturally flared.

‘Pest control?’ I bleated after a moment.

‘Oh, yes,’ Anna stroked his shoulders. ‘You’ve got no idea just how many critters infest the gardens around here! Our neighbour found a couple of mice in her basement last week. Norman had to go and prevent an infestation . . .’

Those shears weren’t quite so appealing any more.

I stared at the image of the beetle with its legs folded like it had swallowed something poisonous. It was only when they both looked at me that I made an effort to somehow move my lips, feeling again the urge to hide my hands.

Beyond the vase of flowers, from the other side of the room, I was sure I could feel Rigel’s eyes on me.

After a few minutes, all four of us were sitting around the table. I was uncomfortable hearing Norman talk about his work. I tried to mask my discomfort, but having Rigel sitting next to me didn’t calm me down at all. He towered over me even sitting down, and I wasn’t used to being that close to him.

‘Seeing as we’re getting to know each other a little . . . why don’t you tell us a bit about yourselves?’ Anna smiled. ‘Have you known each other for long? The matron didn’t tell us anything . . . Did you get on well at Sunnycreek?’

A piece of bread fell off my spoon into the soup.

Next to me, Rigel had also frozen.

Was there a worse question she could have asked?

Anna met my eyes and suddenly, the fear that she could see

the truth made my stomach turn. How would she react if she knew that I struggled to even be near him? Our relationship was sinister and unclear, the furthest thing possible from a family. What if they decided it wouldn't work out? What if they changed their minds?

Panic took me over. Before Rigel could say anything, I blurted out something stupid.

'Of course.' I felt the lie sticking on my tongue and hurried to smile. 'Me and Rigel . . . we've always got on very well. We're pretty much . . . like brother and sister.'

'Seriously?' Anna asked, surprised, and I swallowed, as if I'd just fallen victim to my own lie. I was sure that he would do all he could to contradict me.

I understood my mistake only too late, when I turned and saw his tense jaw.

I had called him my *brother* again. If there had ever been a way to make the situation worse, to make the situation *with him* worse, it had just come out my own mouth.

With an unnatural calm, Rigel looked up and his gaze crossed with Mr Milligan's. Then, with an artful smile, he announced, 'Oh, absolutely. Me and Nica get on fantastically. We're *close*, I'd even dare say.'

'How wonderful!' Anna exclaimed. 'That is really just amazing news. You must be happy to be living here together then! Such good luck, isn't it, Norman? That they get on so well?'

As they exchanged satisfied remarks, I noticed that my napkin had fallen into my lap.

It was only after a moment that I realised that *my* napkin was actually still on the table.

The one in my lap was Rigel's, and his hand had landed on my thigh to retrieve it. He squeezed my knee and his touch had a staggering effect on me. It felt like I could feel it on my bare flesh.

My chair scraped along the floor. I found myself on my feet, with my heart in my throat and Mr and Mrs Milligan staring at me, flabbergasted. I wasn't breathing.

'I . . . I've got to go to the bathroom.'

I slunk away with my head lowered.

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I was swallowed by the dark of the hallway, and carried on until I turned the corner, where I leant against the wall. I tried to calm my racing heart, to contain myself, but I had never been good at hiding my emotions. I could still feel the imprint of his fingers as if he had scorched me. I could still feel him on my skin . . .

‘You shouldn’t run away like that,’ a voice behind me said. ‘You’ll make our so-called parents worry.’

In the end, Rigel was the one spinning this tale, he was the spider of this web. I saw him there, leaning against the wall. His venomous charm was infectious. *He* was infectious.

‘Is this a game for you?’ I burst out, shaking. ‘Is this all just a game?’

‘It was all your doing, *little moth*,’ he replied, tilting his head. ‘Is that how you think you’ll win their approval? With lies?’

‘Stay away from me.’ I pulled away with a shiver, increasing the distance between us. His black eyes were like bottomless pits, they had an indescribable, frightening power over me.

Rigel looked down at me inscrutably, taking in my reaction.

‘*That’s* what our relationship’s really like . . .’ he muttered harshly.

‘You’ve got to leave me alone!’ I burst out, quivering. I directed all the bitterness I could find within me at him, and an unfathomable shadow passed behind his eyes. ‘If Anna and Norman saw . . . if they saw . . . *if* they saw how much you despise me . . . that you just run away from me . . . that it’s *not* as perfect as they think . . . they could change their minds, couldn’t they?’

I stared at him, wide-eyed. It was as if he could read my thoughts. I felt incredibly exposed. Rigel knew me so well, understood my simple soul, saw in me the sincerity that he’d never had.

All I wanted was a chance, but if they knew the truth, if they saw that it was impossible for us to live together . . . they could take us back there. Or maybe just one of us. The doubt nagged at me, gnawed at my thoughts – *which one of us would they choose?*

I tried to tell myself my doubts were not reality, but it was useless. As if I hadn’t noticed the adoring way that Anna and Norman looked at him. Or the wonderful piano in the living room, polished with incredible care.

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As if I didn't know that they would always choose him.

I pressed myself against the wall. *Stay away from me*, I wanted to scream at him, but my doubts crushed me and my heart started racing faster.

*I'll be good*, drummed in my throat, *I'll be good, I'll be good*. Nothing on this earth would have convinced me to return to The Grave. I remembered the echoing screams and still felt trapped there. I needed their smiles, their looks, the fact that for once in my life I had been chosen. I couldn't go back, I couldn't, no, no, no . . .

'One day they'll see who you really are,' I whispered feebly.

'Oh yeah?' he asked, unable to hide his amusement. 'And who am I really?'

I clenched my fists and glared up at him accusingly. Quaking with anger, I looked him straight in the eyes and spat out, 'You're the Tearsmith.'

There was a long silence.

Then Rigel threw his head back and burst out laughing.

His laughter made his shoulders shake alarmingly, and I knew that he'd understood.

*He was laughing at me*, the Tearsmith was laughing at me, with his bewitching lips and gleaming teeth. The sound of his laughter pursued me as I walked down the landing. Even once I'd shut myself in my room, alone, with walls between us.

And there, my memories started flooding in . . .

*'Adeline . . . have you been crying?'*

*Her blonde hair stood out against the cracks in the plaster. She was curled up on her back, small and hunched – the position she always assumed when she was sad.*

*'No,' she replied, but her eyes were still red.*

*'Don't lie, or the Tearsmith will take you away.'*

*She hugged her knees to her chest. 'That's just a story they tell to scare us . . .'*

*'You don't believe in it?' I whispered. Everyone at The Grave believed in it. Adeline threw me a worried look and I understood that she was no exception. She was only two years older, and she was like a sort of older sister to me, but some things never stop scaring you.*

*'I told a boy at school about him today,' she confessed. 'He's not here at The Grave with us. He told a lie so I said to him, "You can't lie to the Tearsmith."*

*But he didn't understand. He'd never heard of the Tearsmith. But he knows something similar . . . he calls him the Bogeyman.'*

*I watched her, not understanding. We had both been at The Grave since we were tiny, and I was sure that not even she knew what this meant.*

*'And this Bogeyman – he makes you cry? He makes you upset?' I asked.*

*'No . . . but he scares you, he said. He also takes children away. He's terrifying.'*

*I thought about what scared me. And a dark basement came to mind.*

*I thought about what terrified me. And She came to mind.*

*And so, I understood. She was the Bogeyman for me, and Adeline, and many of us. But if a child outside of the institute spoke of it too, it meant that there were others like Her roaming about the world.*

*'There are lots of bogeymen,' I said. 'But there's only one Tearsmith.'*

I had always believed in fairy tales.

I had always wanted to live in one.

And now . . . I was inside one.

I walked through the pages, following the paper paths.

But the ink had spilt.

And I'd ended up in the wrong fairy tale.

## 5. Black Swan

*Even the heart has a shadow  
That follows it wherever it goes.*

*I was sweating. My temples were throbbing. The room was small, stuffy, suffocating . . . And it was dark. It was always dark.*

*I couldn't move my arms. I was scratching at the air, but no one could hear me. My skin was burning, I tried to stretch my hand out, but I couldn't do it. The door closed and the darkness swallowed me up . . .*

I woke with a jolt.

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I was still surrounded by the darkness of my nightmares and it took me an interminable amount of time to fumble for the light switch. I was still gripping the bedcovers.

Light flooded the room, revealing the corners of my new home. My heart was still pounding in my throat.

My bad dreams had come back. Well, in truth they'd never gone away. A new bed wasn't enough to drive them away.

I weakly touched my wrists. The Band-Aids were still on my fingers, their colours comforting me, reminding me I was free.

I could see them, when it wasn't dark. *It wasn't dark, I was safe . . .*

I took deep breaths, trying to calm myself down. But that sensation was still crawling over my skin. It was whispering at me to close my eyes, it was crouched in the dark, lying in wait for me.

*Would I ever truly be free?*

I pushed back the covers and got out of bed. I rubbed my face with my hand and headed towards the bathroom.

The light made the white, clean tiles shine. The mirror was bright and the towels were as soft as clouds, helping me to remember that I was far away from those nightmares. It was all different. This was another life . . .

I turned on the faucet and doused my wrists with cold water, slowly recovering my inner calm. I stayed there for a very long time, trying to get my thoughts in order, until the light came back to illuminate even the darkest corners of my mind.

It would all be fine. I was no longer living in my memories. I didn't have to be scared any more . . . I was far away, safe. I was free. And I had a chance at happiness . . .

When I left the bathroom, I realised that morning had already broken.

We had biology first thing that morning, so I made sure I wasn't late. The biology teacher, Mr Kryll, wasn't well known for his patience.

The sidewalk in front of the school was teeming with students. I was very surprised when I heard a voice in the crowd shout, 'Nical!'

Billie was in front of the gates, her curls swinging as she waved excitedly. She was smiling radiantly and I found myself staring at her, lost for words, unused to so much attention.

‘Hi,’ I greeted her shyly, trying not to show how happy I was that she had spotted me in a crowd of so many people.

‘So, how’s your first week at school going? Feeling suicidal yet? Kryll drives you crazy, right?’

I scratched my cheek. In truth, I’d been fascinated by his classification of invertebrates, but the other students spoke about him as if he’d instigated some sort of reign of terror in his classroom.

‘Actually,’ I started tentatively, ‘I didn’t think he was too bad . . .’

She burst out laughing as if I’d just told a joke.

‘Sure!’ She gave me a friendly nudge, making me jump.

As we walked along together, I noticed that she had a tiny, crocheted camera dangling from the zipper of her backpack.

A moment later her face lit up. She ran forward euphorically, stopping when she reached Miki, who she hugged from behind.

‘Hello!’ she exclaimed joyfully, her arms around Miki’s backpack. Miki turned around with a zombie-like expression. She had dark circles under her eyes and her face looked drained from exhaustion.

‘You’re here early!’ Billie trilled. ‘How are you doing? What lessons do you have today? Do you want to go home together later?’

‘It’s eight in the morning,’ Miki protested. ‘Stop pummelling my brain.’

She noticed that I was there too. I lifted a hand to wave hello at her, but she didn’t respond. I saw that she also had a tiny, crocheted keyring dangling from her backpack. This one was a panda’s head, with two huge black patches around its eyes.

At that moment, several girls passed by us, squealing excitedly, and joined a dense throng of students outside a classroom. One of them strained her neck to look inside, the others covered their mouths with their hands to hide their conspiratorial smiles. They looked like a crowd of praying mantises.

Miki stared at the little crowd, looking bored. ‘What can they be mewling at?’

‘Let’s go see!’

Together we headed towards them, or rather, Miki headed towards them, and Billie followed, but not before grabbing me

happily by the strap of my backpack. We reached the little crowd of girls and I also tried to take a look inside, curious now.

I understood only too late that it was the music room.

I was paralysed.

Rigel was there, his profile like a perfect portrait. A dim light flooded the room, illuminating the black hair framing his striking face. His slender fingers were stroking the piano keys, producing ghostly melodies that dissolved into the surrounding silence.

*He looked gorgeous.*

I tried as hard as I could to push that thought away, but to no avail. He was like a black swan, an unbearable angel who could unleash mysterious, unearthly sounds.

‘Do boys like him really exist?’ one of the girls whispered.

Rigel wasn’t even playing a piece of music. His hands were moving through simple chord progressions, but I knew what they were capable of conjuring when they wanted.

‘He’s so hot . . .’

‘What’s his name?’

‘I didn’t catch it, it’s an unusual name . . .’

‘I heard that he got away with just a detention for that fight!’ they murmured with bewilderment and excitement. ‘He didn’t get suspended!’

‘I’d take detention every day for a guy like him . . .’

They giggled a little too loudly, and I felt annoyance in the pit of my stomach. They were gazing at him as if he was a god, letting themselves be charmed as if he was a fairy-tale prince, not realising that he was the wolf. At the end of the day, hadn’t the devil once been the most beautiful of the angels?

Why did no one seem able to see it?

‘Shh, he’ll hear you!’

Rigel looked up.

And they fell silent.

It was maddening. Everything about him was perfect, his pure, delicate features, and *that* gaze. It burned your soul, literally. Those black, penetrating, shrewd eyes stood out against his face in a way that took your breath away.

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Realising that he was no longer alone, he got up and stepped towards us.

I shrivelled, looked at the floor, and murmured, 'It's late, we should get to class.'

But Billie didn't hear me. She was still holding my backpack strap, and the girls behind me didn't even move to let me through. They were all frozen, as if bewitched, subjugated by the mysterious charm that emanated from his violent beauty.

Rigel got to the door and made to close it, but one of the girls boldly flung an arm out and held it open.

'It would be a real shame if you stopped,' she said, smiling. 'Do you always play so well?'

Rigel glanced scornfully at the hand holding the door open.

'No,' he replied with a cool sarcasm. 'Sometimes I play seriously . . .'

He took a step forward, looking straight at her, and this time, the girl was forced to take a step backwards. He gave her a lingering look before moving past her. And then he left.

I looked away as suggestive glances flew around the group, refusing to participate in their collective excitement.

After that evening in the hallway, I had started doing what I had always done at The Grave – keeping as far away from him as possible. His laughter was permanently echoing in my mind. I couldn't free myself from it.

'Your brother seems like he's come from another planet . . .'

'He's not my brother,' I snapped brusquely, as if the words had burnt my lips.

They both stared at me, and my cheeks stung. It wasn't like me to respond like that, but how could they really think that we were related? We were complete opposites of each other.

'Sorry,' Billie replied hesitantly. 'You're right, I . . . I forgot.'

'It's fine,' I reassured her in a softer voice, hoping to put things right. Billie's expression turned calm again and she glanced at the clock on the wall.

'Heavens, we've got to get going or Kryll will have our skins!' she burst out, her eyes wide. 'Miki, see you later, enjoy class! Come on, Nica.'

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'Bye, Miki,' I murmured before following Billie. She didn't reply, but I felt her gaze watching us leave together.

Did she see me as an intruder?

'How did you become friends, you and Miki?' I asked as we reached the classroom.

'It's a funny story. Because of our names,' Billie replied, entertained. 'Mine and Miki's names are a little . . . well, out of the ordinary. The first day of elementary school I told her that my name was quite strange and she replied that it couldn't be any more unusual than hers. We only use our nicknames now, but ever since that day we've been inseparable.'

I sensed something unusual about Miki. I couldn't really say that I knew her, but I couldn't doubt her fondness for Billie. She acted cool, but there was a shining intimacy in her eyes when they spoke to each other. Their friendship was like a pair of comfortable shoes that you've worn with confidence and familiarity your whole life.

At the end of the school day, I felt tired but happy.

'I'm coming, Grandma!' Billie said into her phone. We headed outside as our classmates piled into the yard, chatting excitedly.

'I've got to go. Grandma's double parked the car and if she gets another fine she'll be apoplectic. Oh, wait . . . do you want to swap numbers?'

I slowed to a stop, and she did the same beside me.

She giggled, waving her hands in the air. 'I know, I know. Miki says I'm a pain. Just because one time I sent her a seven-minute-long voice message she calls me a chatterbox . . . but you don't believe her, do you?'

'I . . . I don't have a phone,' I confessed eventually. I felt a burning sensation in my chest that took my voice away. I would have liked to tell her that I didn't care that she talked a lot. That she was great as she was, because when she spoke to me so familiarly, I felt less strange and different. I managed to feel *normal*. And it was wonderful.

'You don't have a phone?' she asked, gobsmacked.

'No . . . ' I murmured, but the sudden honk of a car horn made me jump.

An old woman's head appeared through the window of a massive Wrangler, wearing a huge pair of black sunglasses. She screeched something at the man in the car behind, whose mouth fell open, offended.

'Oh my God, they're having a go at Grandma . . .' Billie ran a hand through her curly hair. 'Sorry, Nica, I've got to go! See you tomorrow, okay? Bye!'

She scuttled away like an insect and disappeared into the crowd.

'Bye . . .' I whispered, waving my hand. I felt incredibly light. I took a deep breath and, stifling a smile, headed along the road towards home.

It had been a long day, but all I could feel was a tingly sort of happiness.

Mr and Mrs Milligan had apologised that they weren't able to pick us up from school every day – Norman was out at work until the evening, and the store needed Anna's constant attention.

But I liked walking. And also, seeing as Rigel had detention, I had the whole house to myself in the afternoons.

I took care not to tread on a line of ants crossing the sidewalk. I stepped over the apple core they were feasting on and turned the corner into our neighbourhood.

The white picket fence soon filled my vision. 'Milligan' was written on the mailbox. I approached, calm and content, but with a pounding heart. Maybe I would never get used to having somewhere to return home to . . .

I entered the house, and was greeted by a welcoming stillness. I tried to memorise everything: the cosiness, the narrow hallway, the empty frame on the sideboard that maybe used to have a photo inside it.

In the kitchen, I swiped a teaspoon of mulberry jam and ate it near the sink.

I was crazy for jam. At The Grave they only let us have it when there were visitors. Guests liked to see that we were treated well, and we would parade around the institute in our best clothes pretending that jam was a normal occurrence.

I gathered some things to make myself a sandwich, humming a little tune to myself. I felt peaceful. Happy. Maybe I'd already made a

friend. Two good people wanted to give me a family. Everything seemed light and sweet, even my own thoughts.

When the sandwich was ready, I noticed that I had a little guest.

A gecko was climbing up the wall, behind the row of cups. He must have come in through the open window, enticed by the smell.

‘Hi,’ I whispered to him. There was no one watching who could judge me, so I didn’t feel ashamed. I knew that if anyone saw me they would probably think I was mad. But this was normal behaviour for me. Secret, but instinctive.

Some people talked to themselves, but I talked with animals. I had done so since I was a little girl, and sometimes I was certain that they could understand me better than other people could. Was talking to an animal really that much stranger than talking to yourself?

‘Sorry, I haven’t got anything to offer you,’ I informed him, drumming my fingertips on my lips. His flat fingers gave him a foolish, harmless look, and I cooed, ‘You’re such a little thing . . .’

‘Oh,’ a voice sounded behind me. ‘Nica!’

Norman appeared in the kitchen doorway.

‘Hi, Norman,’ I greeted him, surprised that he’d come home for lunch. Sometimes I happened to cross paths with him in the daytime, but only very rarely.

‘I just came by for a quick bite to eat . . . Who were you talking to?’ he asked, rummaging about for a bowl, and I smiled.

‘Oh, just with . . .’ but I faltered. The emblem of the dead beetle loomed before my eyes.

I quickly turned towards the little gecko and blanched when I saw him tilting his head and looking back at me. Before Norman looked up, I lunged for the creature and hid him behind my back.

‘. . . no one.’

Norman looked at me, confused, and I shrugged my shoulders with a nervous giggle. I felt the gecko wriggling in my hands like a little eel, and my wrists stiffened when I felt him nibbling one of my fingers.

‘Okay . . .’ he stammered, as my eyes darted from one side to another, searching for escape routes.

‘I’ve got a big job this afternoon. A client called this morning, I’ve

got to pass by the warehouse to pick up . . . heavy artillery. If you catch my drift . . . Mrs Finch is going crazy, she swears she's got a hornets' nest in her -'

'Oh, heavens!' I burst out, pointing behind him. 'What's that?'

Norman turned around, and I took my chance. I hurled the gecko out the window. He whirled in the air like a spinning top and then landed somewhere on the lawn.

'It's a lamp . . .'

Norman turned back around, and I beamed at him. He looked at me, concerned, and I hoped that he hadn't caught on to my crazy trick. By the looks of his expression, the opposite was true. He asked if I was all right, and I reassured him, trying to seem at ease, until once again he left me alone. I heard the front door close and let out a breath, a little disheartened.

Would I ever manage to make a good impression? To be liked, despite my slightly strange and unusual ways?

I looked at the Band-Aids on my hands and sighed. My nightmares came to mind, but I pushed them away into a far corner before they could ruin everything.

I washed my hands and ate calmly, relishing every second of that normal moment, in that normal house. As I ate, I silently watched the little bowl on the floor in the corner of the kitchen.

I had heard scratching outside my door the past few nights, but when I told Anna she had just waved her hand.

'Oh, don't worry about it,' she had said. 'It'll just be Klaus. He'll decide to show up sooner or later . . . He's a solitary sort.'

I wondered when he would let me get to know him.

After washing up the plates and cutlery, I checked that everything was as tidy as Anna had left it, went upstairs, and spent the rest of the afternoon studying in my room.

I got lost in algebraic equations and the dates of the Wars of Succession, and it was evening by the time I finished my homework. I stretched, and I realised that the finger the gecko had nibbled had gone red and was throbbing. Maybe I should put a Band-Aid on it . . . *A green one, like him,* I thought, as I left my room.

Lost in thought, I headed to the bathroom and reached for the door handle. Before I could even touch it, however, it turned.

I looked up just as the door opened. I found myself pinned under two magnetic, black eyes. I shuddered in surprise and jumped back.

Rigel had calmly appeared in the doorway. Plumes of steam rose from his shoulders – he must have just taken a shower.

Once again, his presence gave me a visceral feeling of discomfort.

I had never managed to be indifferent towards him. His black eyes were two deep pits from which it was impossible to hide. They were the Tearsmith's eyes. It didn't matter that they weren't pale like in the legend. Rigel's eyes were dangerous, even if they were the opposite colour to what the tale told.

He leant his shoulder against the edge of the door, his hair brushing against its frame. Rather than moving out of the way, he crossed his arms and stood there, staring at me.

'I need to get past,' I informed him stiffly.

The steam was still billowing around him, making him seem like a demon at the gates of hell. I shuddered as I imagined stepping into that mist, letting myself be engulfed by his scent . . .

'Come on in,' he invited, showing no sign of moving.

I hardened my gaze and stared at him reproachfully. I knew what he was doing.

'Why are you doing this?'

I didn't want to play this game, I wanted him to stop it, to leave me in peace.

'Doing what?'

'You know full well what,' I said, trying to sound tough. 'It's what you've always done.'

It was the first time that I had dared to speak to him so directly. Ours had always been a relationship of silences, of things left unsaid, of sarcasm and naïvety, snaps and flinches. I'd never wasted time trying to understand his behaviour, I'd always steered clear of him. Strictly speaking, you couldn't really call what we had a relationship.

The corner of his mouth curled up into a mocking sneer.

'I can't resist.'

I wrung my hands.

'You won't do it,' I burst out, as resolutely as I could. My voice sounded loud and clear, and I saw his expression darken.

'Do what?'