

Chapter 1

On The Bench

My knuckles were bruised. At least I hoped they were. The last thing I needed after everything that had happened was to spend the next few months in a cast. My hand was puffy and red. I flexed my fingers. I could bend them all, albeit with some pain. But surely the fact that I could bend them at all meant that I was gonna be fine, right?

Who was I kidding? Even if my hand was perfect, I wasn't going to be fine. I let out a deep sigh and sank deeper into the wooden bench outside of Principal Heyliger's office. It was after lunch on a drizzling day in November, 1975. Across the hall, I could see into a few of the classrooms. Mr. Connor, one of the History teachers, was prattling on about Prussian battle strategy while a chipped tobacco pipe hung from his lip. I gave myself a mental kick. I'd forgotten to do the rest of the homework for that class. Of course, that was the least of my problems now. After what had happened at lunch, I'd be lucky to avoid suspension, if not worse.

I didn't really *mean* to hit the guy, but how much can a kid be expected to take? I could still picture the moment: his sneering, sniveling face, the greasy words belching out past his crooked teeth. The kid had asked for it, that was certain, but nobody would see it that way. Not with my track record. I could already imagine what kind of discussions Principal Heyliger was having with my mother. Would they try to put me back on medication? That hadn't worked last time. No, odds were they'd just transfer me again. Big whoop. Last year I'd set a personal record: two expulsions in a single year. Maybe this year I could go for three. I wanted to laugh at the idea, but my face was too heavy. So instead I just sat there, rubbing my bruised knuckles and waiting for the call.

At last, the door opened up. I sat straighter as Principal Heyliger stepped out. He was a tall, lanky man with a stiff collared shirt, skinny necktie, balding hair, and horn rimmed glasses. He always stank of pipesmoke and wintergreen mints.

He gave me a stern look down his nose. "You may come in now."

My shoulders slumped. Time for my sentencing. I rose, and faced the music. Inside, the Principals office was small and old. The whitewashed, cinderblock walls had yellowed, a rusty fan swirled lazily in the corner, and the stench of stale coffee nearly made me gag. Principal Heyliger's desk was a typical piece of government property, with a powderboard top and metal sides. Behind it, a window gave me a good view of the carpool lot, where students from one of the other lunch periods were just now sitting down, trays in hand. A few seniors were lighting up cigarettes, and it seemed that all the commotion from my little incident had long since faded.

Before the desk were two wobbly chairs. In one, sat my mother, garbed in her usual attire: a dark skirt with matching blazer, high heels, and perfectly curled, blonde hair. She had her pocket mirror out, and was touching up her eye liner. But as I stepped in, she turned and gave me a scornful glare, the kind of look only an angry mother could produce. I'd long since gotten used to it. She was still dressed in her work clothes, and next to her was a briefcase with some drafts of various architectural designs. I could only roll my eyes. Of course she'd brought those. God forbid she go even a moment without working.

"Well, Mr. Parker," the principal sighed as he headed back behind the desk and collapsed into his chair. "Your mother and I have had a very nice discussion regarding your behavior."

"This is unacceptable," my mother snapped, as if unable to wait any longer. "Do you have any idea what this kind of thing does to our family reputation? Your father is in the running for a slot on his company's Board of Trustees. That means every facet of our life is under constant scrutiny, and if they learn that his son is a burgeoning delinquent, how do you think that's going to reflect on him? Are you listening to me?"

I pursed my lips, a swell of annoyance bubbling in my gut. It took all my strength to keep from saying the wrong thing. "He started it."

"We don't care who started it," the principal juttred in. "You've already been warned twice, Mr. Parker. I'm afraid I don't give third chances."

"Mr. Heyliger," my mother sighed. "Surely we can discuss this—"

"No, ma'am, I don't think that would be proper. Mr. Parker's record has gotten long enough. Detention and suspension clearly haven't had enough effect. I am afraid that for the sake of the safety of my students, I have to expel Mr. Parker, effective immediately."

Mom let out a slight groan. "Oh come now, Mr. Heyliger. That's excessive, don't you think?"

"Ma'am, the family of that poor Owen Rogers is liable to sue if they don't think we've taken proper measures. I think, given the circumstances, this is a very proper course of action."

"But expulsion—" Mom gave an exasperated grin. "Mr. Heyliger, I know my Kyle has been quite a trouble maker. He's already been expelled from Grovers Mill and West Creek High Schools—"

"Well, ma'am, I apologize, but I must add to that list. There is, of course, still Carter High School, in the city."

"Carter?" She nearly gagged. "You know that school's reputation? It's nothing but junkies and—" she hesitated, glancing around as if to make sure no one else was around. "*Blacks*. I mean, you don't really intend for us to send a *Parker* to a place like that?"

Even I had to shudder. Everyone in school knew the horror stories about Carter. Druggies taking LSD and Heroin in the football fields after school, daily fights, even muggings. People even claimed that the janitor had fucking killed a guy.

Principal Heyliger nodded. "Well, Ma'am, I assure you he cannot stay here. Although, if you're concerned about the quality of education, perhaps I can make a recommendation." He pulled out a pamphlet and slapped it on his desk. Just looking at it made me want to groan. On the cover was a kid dressed in a goofy gray uniform holding a drill sword to his face. "Lakeview Military Academy." The principal tapped the pamphlet. "My own son attended there. They specialize in cases like your son: unruly kids who need the occasional bop on the nose to set them straight. You send your son there, and you'll have a shipshape young man in no time."

My guts twisted themselves just listening to his words. Already I could imagine it: a thousand pushups before breakfast, reciting dump slogans and phrases before bed, stiff collars, tight neckties, and worst of all: buzzed hair. A slight swell of panic rose up in my throat. Surely mom wouldn't send me there, right? I mean...yeah, I'd gotten into a few fights, but Lakeview? What could I possibly have done to deserve *Lakeview*?

Thankfully, my mom's disquieted expression hadn't changed much. "Mr. Heyliger, I appreciate the recommendation. I just...well, I'm sure you understand the intricacies of modern office dynamics. For a woman in as unique a position as I, having a son attending a...reform school is not a very good look."

The principal raised his hands. "You asked for my opinion. Ma'am. The way I see it, this is the best option."

She pursed her lips. "What about that other academy? The one on the island?"

"Atticus Clay?" He chuckled. "With all due respect, ma'am, they'll never accept your son. Not with his record."

"But they're known for their discipline, aren't they? Strict schedules, physical activity—"

"Oh yes, ma'am, of course. But again," he gave a nervous chuckle and shuffled in his chair. "Atticus Clay Academy prides itself on selecting only the best and brightest. They make congressmen and ambassadors there. I'm sorry, ma'am, but the way I see it, Mr. Parker's odds of being accepted are about as good as him being selected for the astronaut program."

"Well." She smiled and rose, slinging her pocketbook. "I suppose that's what *charitable donations* are for. Thank you, Mr. Heyliger. Please let the Owens family know that we will pay for any and all medical bills my son has caused."

"Of course, ma'am." He rose and extended a hand. Mom shook it, then stormed out the door.

"Unbelievable," she snapped as we headed down the front steps of the school.

"Un-fucking-believable."

"He started it, Mom."

"I don't care." She whirled around, looking at me like I'd lost my mind. "Do you know how many times I've wanted to slap someone? I'm resisting the urge right now. You just don't do these things, Kyle. Your actions could have serious repercussions on your father's career, not to mention mine. Do you know how rare it is for a woman to reach the sort of position I have? You don't think there's a thousand Suits all looking for a way to drag me back down? No. All you think about is yourself." She grumbled into her pocketbook and dug out a cigarette.

Her words washed over me like a hose. It wasn't anything new, and it landed with just as little impact as the last few times. At the foot of the cement steps, right along the curb, two jet black, brand new Lincoln Continentals were parked. Miss Jennie, my long term Au Pair, stood outside one of them.

"You don't even know what he did," I grumbled.

"I don't need to." She lit the cigarette and took a deep hit. In the process, she checked her watch. "Son of a bitch. I'm late. Go with Miss Jennie. There's leftovers in the fridge, and you're grounded until further notice. I want you in your room, and you're not to leave until dinnertime. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," I grumbled. Mom whirled around, and stormed over to the other Continental. As she approached, the chauffeur stepped out and pulled open the door for her.

Adjusting the straps on my bag, I kept my head low and shuffled over to Jennie's car.

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Our house was massive. Located a few miles from the city, it was nestled into the hills and had all the bells and whistles two corporate executives could ask for. A massive library that my father had barely ever stepped into, a pair of dining rooms where the china had never been eaten on, and a large swimming pool that only I had ever been in.

I wasn't ashamed to be well off. I mean, it wasn't something I necessarily took a ton of pride in, but I didn't see any reason to feel bad about it either. My room was located in the loft of the eastern wing. There, I had plenty of space. A bed, a big screen TV, my own turntable and stereo system, a cozy little sitting area, and plenty of shelves for books, knickknacks, and anything else I wanted. If there was anything mom and dad were good at, it was *stuff*. They'd never failed to get me something for Christmas or my birthday, even though they pretty regularly failed to actually *be* there. Last year, Dad had a shareholder's party and got home so late that when he woke me up to tell me 'Happy Birthday', I checked the clock and realized it was already the next day.

Mom was a little bit better. She took half a day off and brought me into the city to see a movie. After lunch, she'd even arranged for her driver to take me back home. Because she always had to be back in the office.

But anyways. They were good at buying stuff, at least.

Miss Jennie stayed over to make sure I followed my mom's orders. All the rest of the day I lounged in my room. I played some Atari, figuring that once my parents got back home they'd remember I had it and take it away. Once that got boring, I switched over to cable and let the NBC Nightly News fill the silence. I paced back and forth, thinking about everything that had happened.

I didn't really regret anything, especially now that I was pretty certain my hand wasn't broken. I don't care what mom or the principal had said: Owen Rogers had deserved it. You don't say what he said without getting punched in the mouth, end of story. Just thinking about it now made my blood boil.

As I paced back and forth, I noticed something. On one of my shelves, a polaroid photo sat. Just looking at it made me nauseous. It was of me and *her*, from one of our earliest dates. We were at the park in the city, riding together on a carousel. She was smiling; it was the kind of look that would've made my

heart melt only a few weeks ago. Even now, there was some ghost of that feeling fluttering in my chest. But I snuffed it out, then picked up the photo and tore it in two.

Again, Owen Rogers' words trickled back into my brain. *I heard you couldn't take care of her. That's probably why she came over to me-*

My knuckles throbbed, but I couldn't help but smile. That punch had been the best in my career. It had landed him flat on his ass like something out of a Loony Tunes cartoon. Even if my parents did end up sending me to Lakeview, I don't think I would regret anything. I would savor the sensation of my fist on his jaw for a lifetime.

On my bed, a promotional pamphlet that Miss Jennie had picked up on the way home lay. I flitted through it. It had a few photos of the campus, revealing tall, gothic buildings, dark, gnarled forests, and craggy island coastline. A shudder ran through me. Everyone had heard of Atticus Clay Academy, but few people really knew much about it. It was all by itself on an island just off the coast. They didn't have a football team or a baseball team, but oddly enough they had a fencing team, debate society, and a rowing club.

In the photos, the students were all dressed like total squares, like something out of the last century. Gray, three-piece tweed suits, ties of various colors, all underneath long, jet-black coats. I couldn't help but roll my eyes.

"And in other news," one of the anchors on TV was saying, "At Atticus Clay Academy, a well respected boarding school in New England, the search for a missing student by the name of Colton Roy has been called off."

I perked up at the familiar name. On the screen, images of the campus I'd just been looking at flashed by, this time with police tape strewn around and detectives wandering about.

"Roy went missing in January of this year, and now the county coroner's office has announced that they are declaring the boy as deceased, although the student's family remains hopeful that some sign of him may soon turn up."

I chill ran down my spine. I had to check and recheck the headline, just to make sure I wasn't somehow mistaken. *That* was Atticus Clay Academy? My mind swirled. What was I getting myself into?

Down below, the front door slammed. My blood ran into my feet. Scrambling to the TV, I hit the power button, and NBC disappeared with a flash. Pounding footsteps echoed all the way up to my room. "Where is he?" my father barked. "Kyle Vincent Parker, you have thirty seconds to get down here. Now."

Here we go. Tossing the pamphlet aside, I turned and headed for the steps that would take me down to face my judgment. At the bottom, the steps spilled into a hallway that led right to the kitchen. There, my father and mother stood, arms crossed. I checked the time. He was home early. It was only 9 PM.

"Well, well, well," my father barked. "Look who it is, our little sociopath."

I bit my lip, and kept my anger down. Dad stormed forward.

"Hey," he snapped. "Look at me when I'm talking to you. Do you have any idea what you've done to me? I was in a personal meeting with the board director, when I got the call. Do you know how embarrassing it is to have to excuse yourself from something like that just to hear that your own son damn near killed somebody?"

"It was just a punch-

"Don't talk back. You broke his nose. We'll be lucky if his family doesn't sue-

"Kyle and I have talked about it," Mom said. "He's well aware of what he's done, and he's very sorry."

"Yeah," I muttered, halfhearted. "Sorry."

My father cooled, but only slightly. "Oh you'll be sorry," he grumbled. "I can promise you that. What's this new place we're sending him to?"

"Atticus Clay Academy."

“Jesus. One of my fraternity brothers went to Clay.” He pushed his hair out of his eyes. “Look, Kyle, here’s the deal. If it was up to me, you’d have your bags packed and be on your way to Lakeview tonight. Thankfully for you, your mother talked me out of it. So here’s the deal: you’re not going on the Christmas trip with us anymore-”

“What?” I gasped, my jaw dropping.

“Moreover, Atticus Clay Academy doesn’t start accepting new students until next semester. So for the rest of *this* semester, we’re going to have to find one of those ‘homeschool’ teachers to keep you on track to graduate. That means that until you report to Clay, you will either be working, or studying. Nothing else.”

“But Dad, you said-”

“I don’t care what I said. You assaulted a student and you might’ve cost me my position on the board. I’ll have to pray that Doctor Livingston saw some kind of humor in all this.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Dad had scheduled that trip as a way to make amends. Because he’d been fighting for a slot on the Board, he’d spent even less time at home than usual. Those two weeks were supposed to be time back so we could at least *pretend* to be a normal family. But was he seriously saying that I was *off*? I couldn’t wrap my head around it. So they were still going, just without me?

Dad kept blabbering on and on, but I didn’t hear it. My fists clenched, and my temperature rose. I wanted to hit him. No, it was stronger than that. Every nerve in my body was twitching. Suddenly my dad was Owen Rogers laughing and taunting. I just wanted to raise my fist and knock his lights out.

“Do I make myself clear?”

I squeezed my fist tight enough to make a knuckle pop. “Yes sir.” Without waiting, I turned and stormed my way back upstairs. There I slammed the door shut, and crumpled into a sitting position, my head in my hands. My world spun. Looking around at my room, a foul swell of disgust filled my soul. I hated this place. I hated my room and I hated all my ‘things’.

Despite all my bitterness, though, I couldn’t help but laugh. Maybe going to Atticus Clay really was the best thing for me. It would at least get me out of here. I laid my head back and stared up at the ceiling.

Eventually, I even fell asleep that way.