

Prologue

The evening sun bathed the sky in a sea of orange and purple. I remember the sound of cicadas chirping loudly as my mother and I walked side by side to a nearby park. My small hand held onto her tightly. She towered over me as she walked briskly, pulling me after her, but not in any way that hurt. But it felt like a sense of unspoken urgency lurked over us, chasing close behind like at any moment we'd be swallowed up by some invisible monster that followed us from right behind our heels.

"Is daddy not coming to the park with us, mommy?" My voice puffed as I struggled to catch my breath. "Mommy?"

Her long blond hair blew in the wind as we walked, but if she answered it must have been carried off by the roar of the cicadas. Looking back I wish things had stayed like this. Even with the way things are now, I stand tainted by my sins. But it's these red sin-stained hands that connect me to you. I remember stepping into the park, as we passed by the playground to my surprise, and approached a black unmarked car. My mother opened the back door and gestured for me to sit inside, I looked up at her unsure but crawled onto the dark leather of the car's interior.

"This the boy?" The driver's voice was rough and deep. I couldn't see his face, but the smell of cigarette smoke lingered heavy in the air.

"Yeah, this is him." My mother answered, her usually warm and gentle voice seemed laced with anxiety. "Thank you for doing this George. I know you're really putting your head on the line for us."

"Anything for you miss, it was only a matter of time until something had to give after all. But are you sure, that a normal life is gonna be possible for him? I mean if he-"

My mother shushed the man and put her finger up to her lips. "Not here, George. Please." The man glanced into the mirror.

"You're right, miss. I apologize."

My mother moved back to me, placed a warm soft hand on my cheek, and smiled her usual bright smile. Her misty gray eyes glinted in the sunlight like sunrays peering through a cold and cloudy day.

"You can trust this man, Tristan. George is a kind man, he's going to take you somewhere safe I promise."

I felt a chill run up my spine as I whimpered. “Mommy, you’re coming with me, right? Don’t leave me, please!”

My mother shifted forward and placed her forehead against mine. “Listen, Tristan. My blood runs through your veins, so I will always be with you. You are my entire world, I would never leave you.” My mother took my hand and rubbed it with her thumb. I felt tears begin to burn my eyes. “Then why does it sound like you’re leaving?”

“It’ll only be for a little bit, Tristan. I will find you.”

“Mommy!”

The car door slammed shut, as my mother looked over at the man named George and ordered him to leave. George nodded, as the car’s tires screeched and we lurched forward. I twisted in my seat and leaned over the seat staring out the car’s back window.

“Mommy, please!”

My mother stood in the empty parking lot as she slowly waved goodbye. Her other hand clenched at her side. Suddenly, six vans pulled up around her as tens of men in suits stepped out, forcing her onto her knees. My mother struggled but was ultimately forced onto the ground. One of the men placed an object on the back of her head.

“Sit down now, Tristan!” George shouted.

“Mommy!” I screamed as I squeezed my eyes shut.

And a loud pop shook my whole world.

If I had known that things would have ended this way, I wonder if I would have done anything differently. Could I have done anything differently? I stand now, in the flames of my childhood home, surrounded by glowing embers. Did I make the right choices? Did I even have a choice to begin with? If my story had been written for me since the beginning, could I have rewritten it? None of that really matters now. My skin is dusted with ash, like my dead heart. My humanity had long been sold. Even now, as I stand here with sirens blaring in the distance I can’t help but think one thing:

I’m so fucking stupid.

Chapter 1

The sky was a pale blue as clouds drifted overhead on a warm August afternoon. I’d think it was calming if my face wasn’t in searing pain, with half my vision obscured by my swollen black eye. As I lay on my back, I felt the grass press into the skin of my hand. Two

figures stood over me, one was of a boy named Lance. He seemed kind of shy and didn't really talk much. He just watched as the other boy, Jake, cracked his knuckles. Jake looked down at me and sneered, he was huge with the body of a mountain. With a total athlete build, I wouldn't have been surprised if he wound up as a professional football player. Too bad he wasted all his time on assaulting others, doing drugs, and being a general dickhead.

"I got a D- on our last math test. I allowed you to get on my good side, by getting me a good grade from cheating off you, and this is how you repay me? I thought you were smart, man."

"What gave you *that* impression?" I sneered back.

Jake's massive log of a foot smashed into my stomach ripping all the air from out of my lungs. My chest screamed as I curled up desperately trying to take in air in deep gasps.

"Don't talk back to me shit stain!" Jake pressed his foot into my head pushing it deeper into the ground. It felt like my head was going to explode from the sheer pressure. He reached down and picked me up by the collar of my dirtied uniform. "I'll give you another chance to show you've got a brain inside that skull of yours. How about you get down on all fours, and bark like a dog for me?" Jake smiled a toothy grin. "If you do that, I might give you another shot on the next test."

I chuckled while staring into his eyes. "Great, how does a D sound? I'll take that minus off you, free of charge. Any higher and the teachers might question how you grew some brain cells." Why do I do this to myself?

Jake looked away from me and laughed lightly. Suddenly his grip on my neck tightened as his other arm pulled back. "Grit your teeth, asshole."

I didn't even get a chance to take his advice. The impact of his fist on my face rattled my head so hard, I could barely think. All I knew was the horrible jolt of pain that shot through my entire body. I yelled in pain and grabbed at my face as he dropped me. I landed on my knees as I doubled over pressing my palm into my other eye. Well, there goes the rest of my vision.

A familiar voice rang out. "Jake! Will you knock it off already? What if the student body council catches you again? They might actually ship you off this time!"

I felt a soft and petite pair of hands gently touching my face. "Hey are you okay, Tristan? Why do you keep provoking him like that?"

"Victoria? I can't see you."

"Yeah, no shit dummy."

I heard the loud thump of Jake's footsteps approach me as Victoria's hands were quickly pulled off me. "J-Jake!? Let go of me, we need to take him to the nurse's office."

"He'll be fine, Vicky. This is what he gets for being a worthless shitstain that doesn't know how to talk to his superiors." I heard Jake huff in frustration as Victoria yelped. "Why do you care anyway?"

A short moment passed before I heard Victoria speak again. "I-It's I mean, he's just kinda pathetic. Like a hurt puppy, you know?"

Ouch.

I heard Jake sigh, and the grass ruffle under their feet. "Ow! Jake, you're hurting me!"

"Go! Don't worry about this idiot, you're too nice Vicky. Losers like him will take advantage of you."

"Come on, Lance."

"Yeah."

I heard the three walking away as I sat in darkness. After a moment or two, I heard another pair of footsteps walk up to me.

"Mr. Cross?" It was a deep unfamiliar voice. A teacher? "Here take my hand, I'll bring you to the nurse to patch you up."

I took his hand and we began walking in silence to what I assumed was the nurse's office. During the walk, not once did he ask me why I looked like this, or what happened to me. I mean why would he? He doesn't give a shit, none of the teachers do. They all just watch as we rip each other apart.

This is a school for criminal youth, after all. Everyone here is a criminal, me included. Thanks to this school, we lowly criminals get a chance to redeem ourselves in the eyes of polite society as we're prepared to live straightforward lives. I'd roll my eyes right now if I could. What a joke, this school is nothing more than a torture pit, dressed up like a luxury private school. Thieves, sadists, rapists, drug dealers, you name it. This is a school of demons. If they're young and are seen as being possibly redeemed, they're brought here. The Amber Academy for Troubled Youth.

On the surface, it's a pretty nice school. The rooms we stay in are pretty nice, we have tons of amenities, sports teams, and a private park, and the food is good too. We're even given the option to leave the school in free time. The problem lies in the students themselves, and the lawlessness that's baked into this school. The teachers don't correct anyone, and just let shit

pass. The headmaster is a figurehead, with most of the power run by the school's student body council. Which consists of students, i.e. criminals. To be fair, the best-behaving criminals. Obviously, if the prisoners are running the prison, things aren't going to end well for anybody. Who's bright idea was this, anyway?

I sat on the nurse's cot, with a bag of ice pressed into my face. The cooling sensation seeped into my burning skin and I relaxed as I leaned back into the bed. "Whatever keeps me out of prison, I guess."

I first arrived at this school a year ago, after I was charged with manslaughter. At first, when I made myself at home, I thought this place was paradise. Much better than the street I'd grown up on. I love my friends in the crew, but this school really seemed like a place I could better myself. At least until I got to meet the locals, especially Jake. For whatever reason that asshole decided to make me his personal punching bag. Every day for the following year, he beat me senseless for the stupidest shit. He often forced me to buy him food, he's tried drowning me and he's even stripped me and threw me into the girl's locker room. This guy has basically made my entire experience in this school hell, single-handedly.

I really fucking hate him.

After some time, the swelling in my eyes had gone down enough that I was able to see again. The pain was still there, but with enough painkillers, I should be fine. I thanked the nurse and made my way down the hallway, to head back to my dorm room. As I walked down the hallway, I decided to stop by the restroom to take a piss. I stood over the urinal and released, after a bit, I washed myself up and began drying my hands. I looked into the mirror to see my battered reflection looking back at me and I froze. Jake stood leaning against the bathroom wall, in his hand was a small wire cage. Suddenly one of the stalls opened up, and a shorter kid wandered out. The kid looked Jake in the eyes, as Jake pointed to the door with his thumb. The kid didn't hesitate and shot past him out the door.

I sighed. "We're doing this again, so soon?"

"Again? The way I see it, we weren't finished. Vicky interrupted us, and now I don't think anybody will be getting in our way."

I stared at Jake for a moment before turning my attention toward the small cage he was holding.

"What's that?"

Jake lifted up the cage and smiled. "A hamster."

"Oh, a hamster. I see."

I shot forward and sprinted for the door, but my collar bit into my neck as I was pulled backward, and slammed onto the ground. My body jolted in shock as the force of the impact shot through me. I felt Jake place his entire body weight on top of me. Jake's left hand pressed into my neck, pinning the back of my head onto the bathroom floor. His right hand reached for the cage and he struggled for a bit to get it open, but eventually, he managed to reach in and cupped the small rodent inside.

Jake pulled the hamster out and carried it toward my face. Jake's right hand let go of my neck, allowing me to move my face as far away from the hamster as possible. However, his hand grabbed my cheeks pressing them inward, forcing my mouth open. My eyes widened in horror, as I realized what he was trying to do.

"Pleash... Don't do dish..." I begged. "Why? Jush cush of shome tesht?"

"Test? Oh, no. no. This is because you had the nerve to let Vicky touch you. For some reason, she cares about you and I can't have that. She's with me, got it?"

"Okay. Okay. I got it."

"No, I don't think you do. But, you will." Jake moved the hamster toward my mouth and squeezed it in, covering my mouth with his hand.

I felt the hamster claw the inside of my mouth as it desperately looked for an exit. It wasn't long before I felt its sharp teeth begin biting into the soft insides of my mouth as I tasted copper. I shook my head wildly trying to free my mouth from Jake's grasp, but that only pissed the hamster off as it began to bite my mouth furiously. I felt the hamster begin clawing its way toward my throat, as I coughed and screamed trying to keep the hamster from clawing its way down.

Oh my god, Jake is really going to kill me.

Jake laughed. "Did you know that the human jaw has enough strength to break bone? I wonder, how would a hamster fare against the human jaw?"

Tears and snot began to stream down my face, as I fought against the rodent. I shook my head and screamed a muffled plea.

"Do it. Bite down."

I clenched my eyes shut and prepared to close my jaw. As I did, the face of Lily popped up in my head. My younger sister had a hamster once. One time it escaped from its cage and I had to wheel Lily all around the house as we looked for it.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

I screamed and bit down. I felt and heard a sickening crunch and pop inside my mouth. Jake grinned and stood up.

"There, was that so bad?"

I rolled over on my side as I began to vomit. My stomach clenched tight as my body shook. Blood, stomach contents, and one dead hamster pooled onto the floor.

"Now, I think you understand. Don't go near Vicky, again. Okay?" Jake kneeled next to me and smiled. "Nod, if you understand."

I nodded.

"Good boy." Jake ruffled my hair and stood up to leave but stopped to look over his shoulder. "Oh yeah, before I forget, for tomorrow's lunch, I want spaghetti."

I nodded.

Jake laughed and walked out the door.

After a few more wretches, I shakily got back up to my feet and began washing my mouth with water. The water stung my shredded mouth as blood drained into the sink. Fuck this. I can't take it anymore. I can't take another day with that fucking psychopath.

I looked out the window looking over the front of the school, and stared at the roof of the other wing of the school. "The roof, huh?"

I stumbled out of the bathroom and began making my way down the hallway. Fuck going to my dorm, fuck tomorrow's lunch, fuck this school, and fuck this town. I walked down the hallway and moved up the stairs. If every day is going to be like this, it's not worth it. Nobody is going to save me, I'm going to have to end this myself. I eventually made it to the top floor and began making my way up to the rooftop stairs, as I moved up those final steps flashes of Lily popped up in my mind again. I remembered her face as she smiled pulling my arm. I remembered the small hospital room she lay in and the sound of medical equipment beeping.

I'm sorry your big brother is so weak, Lily.

Now that I think about it, the rooftop door is probably locked to prevent people from jumping. So this whole climb was for nothing. I'm so stupid. I gripped the doorknob and sighed. I came up here, so I decided it was at least worth a shot, and turned the knob. I expected harsh resistance, but instead, the door popped open easily. My eyes widened in surprise, as I creaked the door open and stepped out.

Did they forget to lock it?

As I was questioning the school's lack of door safety I noticed the figure of a girl standing on the edge of the rooftop staring over the front schoolyard. The girl had long straight black hair floating gently in the breeze and perfectly accenting her red and black school uniform. As I stepped forward to look closer, the girl turned around. Her eyes were a striking violet, and she had a small beauty mark over the left corner of her upper lip. The girl smiled gently, and it felt like the whole world froze. She was probably—no definitely—the most beautiful girl I had ever seen.

It was as if a goddess was standing right in front of me.