



CONFESSIONS
of a DANGEROUS
GIRL

DAN BIRK

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are
either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously,
and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses,
companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental, except for the
part about the boarding school that secretly trains teenage assassins,
which is completely true.

*For my grandmother, Edith
Because I owed her a story*

My name is Emma Garthright. I'm sixteen years old, and I was born in Maryland. I have blonde hair and gray eyes, which I'm told is a striking combination. I like cross-country skiing, and skydiving, and expensive sneakers, and nature shows. When I was six years old, I tried to strangle my little brother with the pull cord from the blinds on our living room window.

Ever since, I've lived at the Early Institute for Children and Teens, a boarding school for kids diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder, the polite term for what most people call psychopaths. The Early Institute is named after its founder, Dr. Warren Early. It's located in the middle of nowhere in Wyoming, which is an entire state located in the middle of nowhere. Dr. Early thinks it's good for us to be close to nature, and away from

distracting influences. And our parents like that we aren't too close to other people. Or to them. I have my own room, which is a privilege I earned through good behavior and seniority. Most of the kids here have to live with roommates so that they can learn to consider the wants and needs of others. It doesn't always work out well for the roommate.

Right now, I'm sitting in class. Mr. Dragovich is droning on about something at the front of the room, pointing to a diagram on the chalkboard, but I'm not listening. I have a note in my hand. I found it in my bag, but it was unsigned. The note was crisply folded, and my name was written on the front in beautiful purple calligraphy. The paper is just the right heft, substantial but not too heavy, and the ink is brushed with a light dusting of gold. The message on the inside is scrawled out in the same beautiful handwriting and sparkling purple ink:

You're ugly, and I'm going to kill you.

"Emma? Care to share with the class?"

I look up. Mr. Dragovich is standing over me. He's a short, lean man with wiry muscles that strain against the tight black t-shirt he always wears tucked into his jeans. A scar shaped like an eagle's talon runs across the top of his balding head. He speaks English well but with an obvious Serbian accent. Today, though, he's speaking in Russian. We speak Russian on Tuesdays.

"Um, no thanks," I say.

There's some scattered laughter from the class.

Mr. Dragovich beckons for the note with his hand. Reluctantly, I hand it over. He opens the note and reads it aloud. A couple of titters, and a loud guffaw from one of the boys in the back corner.

Looking up, Mr. Dragovich casts a stern eye about the room. "Who wrote this?"

No one responds, but I can guess who it was.

"I said, who wrote this?" he repeats, the words coming out in a menacing growl.

Still no answer.

Mr. Dragovich's gaze seizes on something a couple of rows back. I turn and watch as he walks over to Isabelle Kamper's desk and picks up a pen, the transparent body showing the ink inside, purple flecked with gold.

"Izzy, did you write this note?"

Isabelle Kamper (Izzy to her friends, of which I am not one) doesn't meet his gaze. She's not very good at lying. Or at hiding evidence, apparently.

Still holding the pen, Mr. Dragovich walks back to the front of the room and turns to face the class. "So, tell us, Izzy. How are you going to kill Emma?"

Now Isabelle does look up. She's a reasonably pretty girl, seventeen, with raven-black hair and startling green eyes. But her mouth is too small, in my opinion, and a bushy unibrow dominates her face. A good waxing would fix that, but I'm not sure what anyone could do about her personality.

"I'm going to make it slow," she says. "And painful.

Drip snake venom onto her lips while she's sleeping, and then gag her so she can't call for help."

Isabelle is clearly still mad about what happened in Cyprus. And I think she's jealous of me. She has a thing for Edgar.

Mr. Dragovich looks at Isabelle for a moment, then nods. "Creative."

I snort. He turns to me.

"Is there a problem, Emma?"

"It's B.S.," I say in English.

"You wish," mutters Isabelle.

"What is Bee Ess about it?" Mr. Dragovich asks, drawing out the syllables in an almost comical fashion.

"How is she going to get the venom, for starters?"

"*Na russkom Pozbaluysta.*"

I repeat myself, in Russian this time. "How will she get the venom? Buy it online? Capture a rattlesnake, and then milk it? Good luck. And she's assuming that she could enter my room at night unnoticed, without waking me, and could get close enough not only to feed me the venom, but also to gag me, all before I wake up and start struggling." I turn around to face the rest of the class. "And that's not even the biggest problem."

"What's the biggest problem?" Isabelle says, arms crossed and pretty green eyes narrowed (a little like a viper's, come to think of it).

"The biggest problem, *Isabelle*, is that you have to

inject snake venom for it to work. It isn't toxic when you drink it."

Isabelle flushes a deep crimson. I turn back to face Mr. Dragovich, a smug smile on my face.

"Emma is right, Izzy," he says. "Your plan is creative, but unrealistic. And too complicated. Assassination is about speed and simplicity. The fewer components to your plan, the better. You want slow and painful? Become a dentist."

The class laughs, everyone except Isabelle, whose thin lips look to be caving in on themselves. Mr. Dragovich walks to the front of the classroom.

"Always think through your plan," he says to the class. "Every detail. Here, it's the difference between an A and an F. In real life, it's the difference between life and death. But more than that, you are not, under any circumstances, allowed to kill another student. You are at this school to train, but not on each other. We all serve the same organization. We are not murderers. We are assassins. We kill on orders only. The CIA has no use for those who put their emotions ahead of their missions. And useless things get discarded. Do you understand, Emma?"

"Yes, sir." I do understand. Not that I even want to kill Isabelle in the first place. She's not worth the effort. Still, I may put a dead snake in her bed, just to give her a scare. It wasn't a very nice note.

"Do you understand, Izzy?"

Isabelle glares at him.

“I said, do you understand?”

For a long moment, she just keeps glaring at Mr. Dragovich, like she’s considering how best to carve out his heart. Mr. Dragovich stares back, like he’s daring her to try. Finally, she relents and nods.

“Good girl,” he says. Then the bell rings.

I gather my things and stand up to leave.

“This isn’t over,” Isabelle says, brushing past me on her way out.

I know.

So, I know what you’re wondering. Just what kind of school is this?

Remember how I said that, as far as the outside world and our parents know, the Early Institute teaches kids diagnosed with psychopathy to become better people? Well, that’s true, more or less. Dr. Early is a real doctor, and his school really does teach us how to function in the real world. In fact, he’s helped a lot of children—including me—achieve significant improvement over time in their interactions with others. We learn to control our impulses and to not do things that will cause other people, or ourselves, a lot of trouble.

But what our parents don’t know is that Dr. Early is also in the CIA. And the Early Institute is also a CIA training center for teenage assassins. The younger kids

don't know anything about that. They just go to regular classes, and to group therapy, and get rewards for good behavior. They get trained in wilderness survival and martial arts, and if they're good they get to do things like go skydiving, drive dirt bikes and four-wheelers on the off-road track, and go to the firing range. Dr. Early tells us and our parents that these activities get out our extra aggression and provide a useful rewards system. Psychopaths need to experience a higher level of excitement and risk than most people.

But some of us, the special ones, are selected for a higher calling, and all those reward activities then take on a deeper purpose. The special ones, like Isabelle and me, are kept on as teenagers, after the children who don't make the cut are sent back home. Then the CIA instructors start to teach us the really good stuff: classes on sniper strategies, weapons and explosives, escape driving, that kind of thing.

After morning classes, I eat lunch alone. I always eat lunch alone. If you had to choose between eating alone and eating at a table full of dangerously antisocial sadists, you might become an introvert, too. But don't go assuming that I'm unhappy at the Early Institute because of that. In fact, I love it here. I don't want friends. I don't need them.

The weather is still nice in early September in Wyoming, and I eat outside on a rock. Soon, the leaves will change, and the harsh winds will come, and then the

snow, but for now it's glorious. I try not to touch the swill they serve at the cafeteria if I can help it. Instead, I'm eating an apple, and some slices of a hard cheddar cheese. I like to put the cheese on an apple slice and eat them together. Then I have some gummy bears, which I eat by dismemberment, taking bites out of their bear bodies one arm, leg, or head at a time. Sometimes I have them plead for their lives in little high-pitched bear voices, but their pleading is futile. Gummy bears have a purpose in this world, and I am destined to help them fulfill it.

When I finish eating, I'm tempted to lean back on the rock and take a nap in the sun, but I don't think it's a good idea right now. It didn't seem like Isabelle really absorbed Mr. Dragovich's lesson about us not being allowed to kill each other. So instead of napping I go for a walk in the woods behind the school. I've earned grounds privileges, so I can go anywhere I want. Once I'm on the grounds, no one keeps too close an eye on me. There's not a town within fifty miles of here.

Besides, why on earth would anyone want to leave?

AFTER LUNCH, I have hand-to-hand combat. The instructor, an ex-member of Mossad named Golan with short, spiky blonde hair, drills us in Krav Maga, a grab bag of fighting techniques developed for the Israel

Defense Forces. It's not about looking pretty. It's quick, dirty, and deadly.

"Line up for sparring," Golan says, then she assigns us partners. "Garthright," she says to me, "You're with Madero."

That would be *Edgar* Madero. He's two years older than me and about six inches taller, with a broad, muscular back and shoulders and long, powerful arms. He has stubble on his face—not the mouse fur some boys try to grow but an honest-to-God five o'clock shadow—and beautiful, intense eyes the color of the deepest brown. He's also my on-again, off-again boyfriend and one of the reasons Isabelle wants to cancel my subscription to life on planet Earth.

"What are you looking at?" he asks as we start to warm up, pushing hands and stretching. I'm not making eye contact with him, gazing instead at a point near his midsection. The eyes can lie, especially Edgar's. The body never does.

"Noticing your weaknesses." I make a sudden move and throw Edgar off balance, knocking him down.

Did I mention we're "off" right now?

"Good one," Edgar chuckles, but his easy laughter conceals a perceptive and dangerous intelligence, and instead of getting up, he catches me by surprise with a sweep kick that sends me sprawling to the mat.

I push myself back up just in time to block another attack. The instructors call Edgar the Tiger, because of

his size and how quickly he can strike. Sometimes I think I'd rather fight a real tiger. Golan often pairs Edgar and me together. We're the best fighters in the school. But while I'm better than Edgar at technique, the truth is that I can never beat him. He's just too fast, and too strong.

He attacks again, and again. I block them both, but he's pushing me back towards the edge of the mat, and I'm running out of room. Desperate, I launch a counter-attack of my own, a flurry of punches and kicks that Edgar will block but which I use to conceal my true goal: to edge around to the side for a takedown.

It works. Using his striking arm as a lever, I fling myself into the air, wrap my legs around his neck, and flip him to the ground. But Edgar doesn't fall as I had intended. Incredibly, he keeps spinning until he can regain his footing, and then throws me off his neck. Grabbing me from behind, he puts me into a chokehold. I struggle and flail, but he's too strong. My oxygen is gone, and I have to tap out before I go unconscious.

"Silly Em," Edgar whispers in my ear as he lets me slip to the ground. "I have no weaknesses."

"Garthright," I hear Golan say as I'm trying to recover my breath. "Dr. Early wants to see you."

Ignoring the "ooohs" from the other students, I stand up, bow to Golan, and head to the changing room.

I can tell something is wrong when I walk into Dr. Early's office, because my parents are on the television screen. My mom is saying something to Dr. Early, but she goes quiet when she sees me.

"Emma," Dr. Early smiles warmly. "Have a seat."

Suspicious, I sit down in one of the leather chairs. It's a nice office, spacious and tastefully decorated. Enough Western touches to make it feel like Wyoming, but not too overboard. No antlers or rifles on the walls or anything. "You will feel safe leaving your child here with me," the office says.

Dr. Early gives off the same vibe. He's in his mid-50s, handsome, in an old guy kind of way, with a square jaw and straight white teeth. He wears glasses, which makes him look more trustworthy.

"Hey sweetie," my mom says on the screen. My dad

waves. A few years ago, Dr. Early installed a big TV on a side wall for video conferences with parents. I know my parents like it, and I'll bet the other kids' parents do, too. It's hard to get to the Early Institute, and it can be unpleasant to be here. Some of the kids like to do things to scare visitors. My parents stopped coming when I was ten. They hire a driver to take me to the airport in Jackson when I fly home for Christmas.

"Your parents and I have been discussing your extraordinary progress," Dr. Early says. "They're very impressed."

I'll bet they are, I think to myself. Something isn't right. What's this about?

"I've told them that I think you're ready to try living back home."

I gape at Dr. Early, then at my parents, then back at Dr. Early. "In Maryland?"

"Consider it an experiment. An opportunity to prove yourself."

"But I like it here." I try to remain calm, but on the inside, I'm freaking out. Is Dr. Early really sending me home?

"Are you sure she's ready?" my mom asks, a little too quickly, it seems to me. "Maybe another year . . ."

Out of view of the webcam, Dr. Early hands me a note. "Play along," it reads. Then, to my parents, he says, "The only way Emma can progress further is if she's challenged in a non-clinical setting. With other kids her age,

with authority figures who aren't trained in working with people with her . . . unique challenges."

"And it could be fun," my dad says. "Get the old band back together." I assume he means this metaphorically. I don't even like listening to music, much less playing it.

"You've been here most of your life, Emma," Dr. Early says. "You've learned everything we can teach you."

I give a short laugh. Dr. Early looks at me severely, the warmth gone from his face, but only for a fraction of a second, too quick for anyone but me to notice. Then the smile returns.

"How will we know if she's integrating?" my mom asks. I've been in sessions like this since I was little, with a lot of different doctors. By now I'm used to them all talking about me in the third person, as if I wasn't in the room with them.

"We're looking for the absence of undesirable behaviors, not the presence of desirable ones. Don't observe her too closely. Let her find her own way, in school and at home. Have you set up a system for positive reinforcement, as we discussed?"

My parents nod.

"Good. And remember," Dr. Early says, turning to me. "This is just an experiment. You can always come back if it's not working. This will always be your home, too."

When my parents disconnect, I unleash on Dr. Early. "What the hell was that?"

Dr. Early chuckles. “I’m sorry for the surprise. But I wanted to get a genuine reaction out of you for your parents’ sake.”

“You can’t send me home!” I think of all the classes I’m going to miss. Sophomore year is where you get to some of the really good stuff: Undetectable Poisons. Advanced Electronics and Codebreaking. Disguises. A winter *Ninjitsu* seminar!

“I can, and I will. I have a mission for you.”

“Is this a punishment? For Cyprus?”

“It’s an opportunity. To redeem yourself.”

“But Cyprus wasn’t my fault!” I say.

It really wasn’t. Ever since I was selected for further training, Dr. Early has sent me to tag along on missions, to observe and sometimes help out an older student or teacher. I haven’t personally killed anyone yet. The mission on Cyprus was supposed to be my first, but things went wrong, and the contract went unfulfilled. Isabelle and I were going after this Russian banker with ties to the Syrian government, but I could tell something wasn’t right. A suspicious van parked down the street. A café patron who seemed a little too interested in our movements. The banker knew we were coming, I was sure of it. So, before we went in, I tested the trap. I paid a drunk to sneak into the banker’s apartment building using the same route we planned. Sure enough, the drunk was swarmed by private security as soon as he went in, and

a half dozen police cars arrived almost instantaneously.

We had to abort the mission, obviously, but Isabelle thought I screwed things up by sending in the drunk, when I could have been more discreet had I gone in myself. And she's not the only one. Also, Isabelle sort of got detained by the Cypriot police in all the chaos, and she's not too happy about that.

"My superiors in the Committee are concerned," Dr. Early says.

"You mean they think I'm soft?"

"They think you're hesitant."

"I'm not hesitant!"

"Emma, you're my best student. You don't need to convince me. You need to convince the Committee."

I slump back in my chair, pouting. "Why do I have to go *home* to do the mission? Can't I just stay in a hotel?"

"It's a long-term undercover assignment. You need to go to high school."

"High school? Who's my target? The prom queen?"

"You don't need to know the target yet. Your goal for now is to act like a normal student. Go to class. Fit in. Get good grades. And join Model UN."

"Model UN? Are you kidding?"

"I never kid. You must join the school's Model United Nations team, and you must ensure that you travel with the team to a conference taking place in New York City in November."

“I don’t understand.”

“You don’t need to understand. You just need to follow orders. Like you should have done in Cyprus.”

“But I don’t know anything about Model UN!”

“Then you’d better learn. Tryouts are in one week.”

“One week?”

“Six days, to be precise. You’ll leave for Maryland tomorrow morning. I believe in you, Emma.”

“How inspiring.”

He ignores the sarcasm. “In the meantime, I may have a small job for you. Keep an eye out for instructions.”

I GO through the rest of the day in a daze. I fail the pop quiz in Undetectable Poisons because my mind won’t focus, and I don’t even show up for tennis. This can’t be real. It can’t be!

But it is, of course. One of the orderlies brings a stack of boxes to my room after dinner for me to pack my stuff in. Not that I have a lot, except for my shoes. I like shoes, and I spend much of my considerable earnings from missions shopping for them online: Alexandre Birman sandals, Jimmy Choo 100 heels, Gucci velvet slippers, Dolce & Gabbana leather ankle boots. The Nike Zooms are for running, the Lacostes are for tennis, and the Classic Puma Suedes and Converse Glitter Chuck 70 High Tops are for ordinary wear. My newest are a pair of

apricot-colored Adidas Ultraboost T's by Stella McCartney. I'm going to wear those home tomorrow.

I've taken down my posters and thrown them in the trash. I only had them because Dr. Early said normal teenagers have posters on their walls, so I ordered some off the internet. The only thing I like is still hanging on the wall. It's a picture I took of a small mountain lake when I was hiking in the Wind River Mountains a couple years ago. The lake is high up, higher than trees can grow, and there's mostly just rocks and patches of grass around it. That high there's still snow sometimes, even in the summer, and the air is fresh and bracing. It's quiet, too, except for the sound of a bird maybe. When I look at that picture, I feel peaceful somehow.

Looking at the picture even helps me calm down now. Maybe this won't be so bad. I'll get to do a couple of real missions. And it's only for a few months. If I do it right, I can be back at the Early Institute before Christmas.

I decide to leave the picture up until morning.

When I get bored of packing, I walk into the common room to watch TV. A kid named Arvind is already there, playing a video game. Arvind is thirteen, tall for his age but thin and bony. He always wears tank tops and Air Jordans that he keeps unlaced for some reason. As if it's not worth lacing up until he has a basketball game or something. He turns his head to look at me when I enter.

"You're leaving tomorrow," he says. Not a question.

He's playing one of those games where you go around stealing things and killing people while trying to carry out missions for the mafia. Not my kind of thing. I don't like video games.

"Yes," I say.

"Good."

"Aww," I say, making big doe eyes at him. "I'll miss you too."

"No, you won't."

I plop down on the side chair. "Turn this off. I want to watch TV."

"I have rights."

I groan. When someone has rights, they get to use the common TV however they want for as long as their rights last. "How much time do you have left?" I ask.

"The rest of the night." On the screen, Arvind's character shoots a woman in the groin. She doubles over in pain and then falls to the ground. "Dr. Early awarded me fifty points because I kept all the gerbils alive this week."

I don't say anything, but I'm actually impressed. That's not easy, at least not for Arvind. Animals tend to die around him. But the only thing more boring than playing video games is watching someone else play video games.

It's no use trying to charm him. Arvind hasn't been here long, but we know too much about each other already for that to work. I think about ripping out the

cord of the PlayStation, but one of Dr. Early's lessons comes to my mind before I do: "Play the tape forward."

I play the tape forward and see the fight, the orderlies, the lecture in Dr. Early's office. I don't know exactly how it will go, but it doesn't end with me watching TV peacefully, I can tell you that much.

But then I get a different idea.

"Arvind, I'll give you the rest of my points if you let me watch TV tonight."

"Bullshit. You can't give away points." On the screen, Arvind's character now has stolen a car and is roaring through the streets, knocking over pedestrians. Several cop cars are chasing him, the consequence of his indiscriminate driving.

"When you leave you can. Harold signed his away for extra dessert last year."

"Bullshit," he says, but he takes his eyes away from the screen for a split second.

I shrug my shoulders and get up to leave. "Suit yourself. I'll go see if Portia wants them."

As I'm walking away, I hear Arvind say, "How many points do you have?" and I know I've got him.

"Four hundred and twenty." I watch his face. I can almost see the dimwitted calculations going on in his brain. Four hundred points can buy a lot of PlayStation time. And there's no way he'd be able to save up that much on his own. He doesn't have the patience, and the Institute doesn't have enough gerbils.

“OK, deal,” he says. “But I want you to sign.”

I write it up with a crayon (no pens or other sharp objects are allowed in the common room) and sign my name. Arvind looks at it. “What does ‘bequeath’ mean?” he asks.

“It means give.”

He nods, satisfied. Then he snatches the paper up in his hand and walks off. “Smell ya later.”

“Clever,” I call after him. I sit down on the couch and switch the input on the TV to cable. I put on BBC Earth and settle in. Alaska. A grizzly bear is trying to build enough fat to last her and her cubs through winter, but a wolf is stalking them, waiting for the mama bear to move far enough away that he can snatch one of the cubs.

I love nature shows. It’s a constant battle for survival, stripped of morality and judgment. Animals just act according to their nature, according to their instincts. They’re pre-programmed by biology to act the way they do. No one blames the wolf for trying to get the cub, just as no one blames the bear for trying to catch and eat the salmon swimming upstream to spawn, or the salmon for eating a smaller fish. That’s just what they do. It’s how they survive. No one thinks they should change.

It’s like with me. If you asked me, for example, why I tried to kill my brother when I was six, I couldn’t really give you a good answer. I mean, I know why I wanted to do it at the time. I didn’t like having a little brother, and I thought my life would be better without him. He was

annoying. He cried all the time, and ever since he had been born two years before, my parents had given him all their attention. I didn't like that. I had learned that people die if they can't breathe, and that people can't breathe if you choke them. It all made perfect sense to me at the time.

But, you might ask, why would any six-year-old try to kill somebody? Even if they're not told that it's wrong, most children simply don't even entertain the idea of ending the life of another person, much less the life of a sibling whose greatest sin was throwing a tantrum in the middle of *Caillou*. That was the question that really bothered my parents. They took me to doctor after doctor—pediatricians, psychiatrists, neuroscientists, child psychologists, you name it—but nobody could tell them what was wrong with me. Many of the doctors even accused my parents of abuse or neglect, which I can tell you right now wasn't true.

Then they found Dr. Early. They flew me out to Wyoming, and I spent two days there undergoing examination. He asked me questions, gave me brain scans, and had me watch some videos. When he was done, Dr. Early told my parents that he had an answer.

“Your daughter is a psychopath,” he said.

My mother let out a cry. My father scoffed. “A psychopath? That's impossible.”

“The technical diagnostic term is antisocial personality disorder,” Dr. Early said in a soothing voice. “But

that's not a very useful diagnosis. It applies to too many types of behavior. I've evaluated Emma using a variety of tools, and psychopathy is a more precise description of her personality type."

"So, what are you saying?" my father asked. "That Emma is a serial killer? That she's Hannibal Lecter?"

Dr. Early chuckled. "You watch too much TV, Mr. Garthright. Just because someone is a psychopath doesn't mean that they're going to be a serial killer. In fact, we estimate that up to one in a hundred people would qualify as a psychopath to some extent. Some of those turn out to have violent tendencies, but others exist quite peacefully in society, becoming things like salesmen or corporate executives."

"But—but don't they say that people become psychopaths because they've been abused?" my mother said. "We've never hurt Emma."

"I know you haven't, Mrs. Garthright. That's another common misconception. Some children develop psychopathy as a result of severe physical or emotional abuse, but studies show that some are just born with it. I've scanned Emma's brain. She was just born with it."

Dr. Early gave them a long explanation. I didn't understand it then, but he's talked to me about it since, and I understand it now. Have you read *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*? You know how Dr. Seuss says that the Grinch's real problem with Christmas is that his heart is a couple sizes too small? It's kind of like that.

There's a part of my brain—called the amygdala—that's smaller than it's supposed to be, and because of that, I don't feel empathy for the suffering of other people, and I don't have what you would call a conscience. Plus, I'm impulsive, and superficially charming, and manipulative, and lie pathologically.

It sounds kind of bad when you list them all together like that.

Dr. Early told my parents that what I had done wasn't necessarily an indication that I would ever murder in the future. The fact was that I was just too young to understand the full consequences of such an action, and because of my unique brain structure, merely being told that it was wrong to kill somebody wasn't enough to stop me.

“Can you cure her?” my father asked.

Dr. Early spread his hands. “It's not really about curing. Her brain is what it is. Emma's not capable of changing on the inside. But we can manage her, guide her, control her. We can teach Emma behaviors that other children know instinctively.”

“We've tried everything,” my mother said. “We tell her it's wrong to do something, we take away treats, we send her to her room. Bill even spansks her sometimes. Nothing works.”

“Punishments never do, Mrs. Garthright. It seems that psychopaths are entirely immune to negative consequences. That's why so many of them are in jail.”

“So, what do you do?”

“We use positive reinforcement—systems of rewards for appropriate behaviors rather than punishments for inappropriate ones. We’ve found that children with Emma’s diagnosis have responded very well to this type of treatment, but it requires intensive, full-time therapy to really take hold. She’d have to come live here.”

“For how long?” my mother asked, but they were already sold.

I GET LOST in the show, but just as the wolf is about to get one of the cubs, I hear a zap and the screen goes black.

“Hey!” I shout, turning around. Edgar is there, holding the power cord to the TV in one hand and a black rectangular box in the other.

“What’s up, dummy?” he says.

“Plug that back in.”

He drops the cord and sits down next to me. “TV rots the brain.”

“You would know,” I say, but I can’t help smiling a little.

“Oh, Em, what am I going to do without you?”

I shrug. “Find some other girl to torture?”

Edgar smiles, a flash of white teeth, and leans towards me. “You know I only want to torture you.”

Things with Edgar and me are complicated. I

wouldn't say we're in love. According to Dr. Early, neither of us is really capable of loving another person. It's more like we're magnets with opposite poles. We're drawn to each other, no matter how much we—or I—try to stay away.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

“I have something for you.” Edgar hands me the box he's been carrying.

“Ooh, a present?” I look over the box. “What is it?”

“Open it up.”

I do. Inside I find a strange sort of knife blade, made out of black steel, and a bunch of metal pieces.

“It's a Spetsnaz ballistic knife,” Edgar says. “Russian special forces use it.”

This is something really special. I've heard about ballistic knives, but I've never seen one before now. “Aw, you shouldn't have.”

“Here, let me show you how it works.” Edgar takes the pieces out of the box and starts assembling them. “The blade goes on top of the spring, like so, then you put in this pin to keep the blade from firing. Now you cover it up with this metal tube.” When he's done, it looks kind of like a miniature police baton. He hands it to me.

I take the Spetsnaz in my hands, feel the weight of the cold steel. It has a nice heft. I take off the cover and point the blade at the wall.

“Now remove the pin,” Edgar says.

I take out the pin, and Edgar guides my fingers to the trigger. “And then you just press it.”

I press the trigger, and *bam!* The blade shoots out and sticks in the wall with a *thwang*, like in one of those throwing knife tricks that magicians do. I can see the appeal.

“Damn,” I say.

“Careful who you use it on,” he says, smirking.

“Now are you going to plug the TV back in, or do I have to kick your ass again?”

“Again?”

“I was going easy on you.”

“Maybe we should go to your room to settle this.”

“Bad idea,” I say. And it is a bad idea. Things never go well when Edgar and I are together. We’re too similar, and the differences aren’t good. Edgar is dangerous. Real dangerous. That’s why I broke up with him. He’s killed before. I’ve seen him do it. I ran support for him on a mission in Hong Kong. But that’s not what bothers me. What bothers me is I think he killed another student. Another older boy named Austin. He fell off a cliff while rock climbing with Edgar. The official verdict was that it was an accident, a broken rope, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that Edgar was involved somehow. I even confronted him about it, and while he didn’t confess, he didn’t exactly give a convincing denial, either.

Edgar leans in a little closer. I should draw back, but I don’t. “When has that ever stopped you, Em?”

He has a point there. Dr. Early says I have a problem with impulse control. It's been a primary area of therapeutic focus.

I put a finger to his lips and stand up. What could it hurt? I'll be gone tomorrow anyways. "One last time," I say.

We head to my room, sneaking past Ms. Sellars, the supervising nurse. Packing can wait until tomorrow.

IN THE MORNING, I do one last sweep to see if I left anything. The room looks strange now, the walls bare without my drawings, the desk empty, the bed stripped of sheets. I don't linger long.

I walk down the hall to the elevator. There are a few people in the common room, but no one comes to say goodbye. There's no one I want to say goodbye to. The elevator door opens, but as I'm walking in, Arvind runs out of his room towards me. He's angry.

"Hey!" he shouts. "You lied to me!"

I look at him innocently. "What do you mean?"

"Ms. Sellars says you can't give away points. And I can't get back the fifty I used last night either!"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Arvind. It doesn't matter much. I didn't have any points left anyways."

Arvind shouts and lunges at me, but he trips on the untied laces of his Air Jordans and falls onto the carpet. "Smell ya later," I say as the elevator door closes.