

Gemelle / Twins

by

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*Partial English translation
Chapters one and two, pages 7-41*

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Chapter 1

No, not that stuff! Help!

The cotton diskette soaked in foundation threatens the left side of my nose, the pasty cream touches my skin ... I grab my sister's wrist: I have to stop her before it's too late. She looks up from my nose, which she was beginning to cover with make-up. She eyes me, perplexed. "Not foundation cream," I say. "I'm begging you, at least spare me that. It's all sticky."

Celeste's lips ease into a smile. Ever since we started this make-up session she's been doing her best not to laugh: I think she's convinced that my comments are playful and my frowns of annoyance just a pose. But she should know that I genuinely *loathe* cosmetics!

Celeste moves the diskette away from my face and shows it to me: an awful mess of cotton and chemicals. "It's just a little cream," she says in justification, her tone reassuring. "Liquid foundation's never killed anybody."

"Then I take it that the powder variety has been racking up victims for years."

My palms press down on the arms of the pink chair parked in front of the little table covered with make-up – my sister's tools of torture. I have to get out of here.

Celeste stops me. She puts her hands on my shoulders and sits me back down. She sighs. "All right, no foundation. But I don't want to hear anything about the pencil and eye shadow. You promised."

"I already sacrificed my glasses for contact lenses. Isn't that enough to look cute on a first date?"

I steal a glance at Celeste's expression in the mirror hanging above the make-up table. But my words fail to move her to pity and she leans over to rummage through her case, in search of Sephora's latest inventions to torment me with.

I feel like crying.

"Don't you know," she says, "that boys go crazy for a little mascara?"

"And the world should care about that why?"

Celeste snickers.

"I'm sure Giuliano will appreciate the effort."

“Maybe, but my skin needs to breathe, too.” Time to try the conscientious beauty specialist card. “If you put on too much makeup, you’ll risk ruining it. And I have no intention of getting wrinkles at eighteen!”

“I’ve never seen you wear makeup before, so you certainly won’t have that problem.”

“What if I’m allergic? With all that stuff on my face I could go into anaphylactic shock.”

“Well, later tonight, if you aren’t dead already, we’ll use a little milk and toner to make you look good as new.”

Milk and toner? Celeste, you know me *so* well: I’ll come back home tonight and you can rub some more stuff on my face. Yeah, that’s going to happen.

I must have a really funny look on my face, because my sister bursts out laughing, the eye pencil in her hand. Her lovely face is framed by light-brown hair that’s so smooth and brilliant, with those blonde accents, it would be enough to make even those Pantene spokeswomen jealous. Getting my hair to look like that took a half-hour of conditioner in the shower, three passes with the flat iron, and a ton of hairspray. God only knows why my hair’s wavy. When we were little it was the only way you could tell us apart. Later on I got glasses as well, because I spent so much time with my nose in a book that I became near-sighted. Aside from that, my twin sister and I are identical.

Celeste moves her face in close to mine and goes to work with the pencil under my eyes. She meets my look of terror with a smile. A thin layer of lipstick makes her lips shimmer, and the mascara highlights the curves of her lashes. But Celeste looks gorgeous even when she’s just woken up in the morning. That’s why half the boys in school hit on her, and the other half would like to but don’t have the courage.

The pencil glides around my eyes and the tension makes me clench my muscles. Celeste fights back a giggle.

“Listen,” I say. “Can we end it here? I’m already doing you a big favor by agreeing to go on a date with that friend of yours.”

“Giuliano was thrilled when I told him.”

“That’s his problem. The fact is that if it were up to me, I ...”

“I know you. You’re just a little shy.”

“It isn’t shyness. It’s that I’m crabby. And cynical.” I push away Celeste’s hand, which is still armed with the pencil. “And I like being single.”

She sighs again. She puts down the pencil – I’ve fought off her attack, at least for now – but then picks up the blush brush. “Giuliano’s a really nice guy. And you look great. With a little make-up you’ll feel more confident.”

Since when am I not confident? Why would I be intimidated because Giuliano likes me? Don’t be ridiculous!

I huff in annoyance but keep very still. All I need now is for Celeste to jab that brush up my nose. But my fears are unfounded: my sister is an artist with make-up. Ever since she was a little she’s been fascinated by the idea of putting on nail polish and eyeliner. Every morning, before going to work, our mother would put her makeup on in the bathroom, in front of the mirror, and Celeste would keep her company; standing still on her tiptoes, elbows on the sink, carefully learning every one of Mom’s elegant gestures. I would keep her company, too: sitting on the bidet playing with my Nintendo DS, the Pokémon music turned up all the way.

Celeste nods at me to look up, and takes advantage to slop mascara all over my lashes. Better not to think about it. I concentrate on the wall, above the mirror: it’s littered with colorful writing, in fat letters in the style of graffiti artists. They’re the work of my sister’s friends, designed on banners and notebook pages. There’s everything from *Celeste, we love you* to a more flattering *Celeste, the hottest girl in school* to *BFF forever* –important, I think, to underline that the friendship will be doubly forever.

Framing these messages are the photos. Celeste is the most popular girl in school, and she certainly has no shortage of friends. But most of the shots are of her and Massimo, her boyfriend. A selfie with them kissing on the bumper cars at the fair that came to town last summer, him picking her up by her waist and rubbing his face into t-shirt while she laughs, her sitting on his lap in one of those old photo booths ... in every photo Massimo shows off his artfully tousled blonde hair – those rebellious tufts carefully arranged to fall just above his brown eyes – and that hunky expression that sends his Instagram followers into ecstasy. And let us not forget, his face always turned to the left – his best side – so his sculpted jaw really catches your eye.

Until not too long ago, there was even a poster-sized photo of Massimo on the wardrobe door. A photo Celeste took of him lying in a meadow. Massimo had that same doubtful look of the American models in those perfume commercials; the only thing missing was the comic-strip bubble next to his mouth: *Just how handsome am I? Well? Incredibly or amazingly? Someone please tell me, I can’t live without knowing.*

The poster's gone. There are still traces of the scotch tape, but blown-up Massimo has disappeared. Weird that Celeste took it down. But so much the better: it always made me so angry to see that photo. What does my sister see in such a moron? Massimo has the brains of a toaster oven, and he's so full of himself. Narcissistic, vane and conceited. I could even tell him so to his face, it's not like he would understand half the words I was saying!

"Giuliano's been asking about you for a month," Celeste says. She's taking advantage of my distraction to guide the point of the pencil above my eyelids. "Massimo confessed it to me. Giuliano won't leave him alone about it. He always wants to talk about you. Even in the locker room after water polo practice.

I can imagine the level of conversation in the locker room after practice. And being talked about constantly by that jerk Massimo gives me the creeps. But I avoid commenting. Celeste is used to my sarcasm, but I worry I cross the line sometimes in insulting her boyfriend. And right now I'm too afraid to speak anyway. Better to keep still with that pencil darting around my eyes.

"Giuliano must have fallen in love with you the night of our birthday." Celeste has finished with the right eye and is now starting work on the left. "At the pool party."

Right, of course. Our eighteenth birthday. The coolest party ever in the history of Borgobianco. I would have donated a kidney to get out of having to go!

But how can you refuse when your sister's boyfriend offers you the garden of his villa for the occasion, with a swimming pool for the guests to boot?

I could have killed him. Or killed myself. But Celeste insisted for months that we accept Massimo's offer, and she seemed so happy ... in the end I gave in and did what she wanted. I love her too much to deny her the party she wanted, no matter how justified I was.

Celeste had a good time. Me not so much, and, at the end of the evening, that jerk Massimo picked me up and threw me into the pool. It was March and still really cold, and I don't care that everyone else jumped in too: it's not my fault they're crazy! And I know why Massimo did it: Celeste had told him that I get sick easily during the winter, and he thought he'd take advantage of the opportunity. Like he hadn't had enough fun already teasing me the entire evening.

The next day I had nausea, a sore throat and a fever of 100.4.

Luckily I had my true birthday celebration with Paolo, a full ten days after the official date – the flu had tormented me for more than a week.

My best friend and I went to McDonald's and we laughed like crazy in commenting the party organized by Massimo. Paolo is at his best when I need cheering up, and he does amazing imitations, especially when he's making fun of Massimo the Macho Moron or Loopy Lorella.

Paolo. I still haven't heard from him today. He was not happy at all about us having to skip our weekly anime night – today we were supposed to finish watching the first season of *Little Witch Academia* – because of my date with Giuliano. He's been in a mood for days.

I reach for my phone in my jeans' pocket. Maybe Paolo's texted me on WhatsApp. But I can't look down to see if there are any messages: Celeste is holding my chin up with two fingers while she smears lipstick on me.

“E're ill ot inished?” I mumble.

“Just a little more around the corners ...”

My sisters' cobalt-blue eyes squint. She's super careful to lay down the dark-red gloss evenly. She looks funny with the tip of her tongue poking out from the corner of her mouth, deep in concentration.

She puts the lipstick aside and tears off a paper towel from the roll on the little table. She uses it to dab my lips. I vaguely remember her explaining to me one time that this way the lipstick's color takes on a more natural tone.

I appreciate that she's so nice, that she dedicates so much time to me, that she set me up on this date with Giuliano – who, as far as I've heard, is the second-best-looking boy in school after Massimo – and that she puts up with my sarcasm while helping make me look presentable. Really, I do.

But we've been here in front the mirror for an hour and I can't take it anymore. Celeste puts up with unpleasant things with a smile on her face, she suffers in silence. Not me, I get angry. And enough of this Justin Bieber and his whiny little voice already! He's been whimpering through the speakers connected to that iPod all afternoon. We could at least have a little variety, maybe some Pink Floyd.

“All set.” Celeste takes one more pass with the pencil to redefine the contours of my lips. “Now you're perfect.”

“Perfect for a water polo player as dumb as a doorknob,” I huff. “What more could a girl want.”

Celeste withdraws the pencil and gives me a shy smile. I bite my tongue. Damn, I hurt her feelings. I really need to learn to hold my tongue, or she'll think my criticism is directed at her, when it's actually only meant for her moronic friends. I'm convinced she'd be much happier hanging out with Paolo and me than that bunch of smug idiots with their Instagram obsessions.

"Let's just adjust these a tad." Celeste runs her fingers over the smooth locks of hair that curl down over my shoulders. "You'll see how beautiful you feel."

"I prefer being more *au naturel*."

My sister takes a step to the side and with a nod invites me to look in the mirror. I'm speechless. Reflected in the mirror are two Celestes: one on the pink chair, wearing a pair of dark jeans and a t-shirt with a skull on it; the other standing up, her hands resting on the first one's shoulders, wearing a light top and a short frilly skirt.

The seated Celeste has a look of shock on her face, the standing one a smile of satisfaction.

"So?" my sister asks me. "What do you think?"

I look from me to her, then from her back to me. We're indistinguishable. We haven't looked this identical in years. Without glasses and with my hair done like hers, we could be mistaken for the same person.

Celeste puts her face next to mine. We stare at the mirror with eyes wide open. It must be a strange sensation for her as well.

"It's incredible!" she exclaims, elated.

"It's disturbing," I retort.

Celeste laughs. "Come on."

I nod. "Any moment now I could just make you disappear and have your amazing life all to myself. I don't quite know how I'll be able to resist the temptation."

My sister shakes her head, continuing to snicker. She knows perfectly well I'd rather stick my hand into a wasps' nest than spend half a day with Massimo. And I'm allergic to wasps.

But seeing as Celeste knows what I think of him, I refrain from repeating the concept. I can survive even without being crabby every waking minute of the day.

I stand up and take a look at myself, from head to toe. "This face sure doesn't go with what I'm wearing."

"You mean the skull on your t-shirt?" Celeste studies the stylized cranium on my chest. "Or your onigiri earrings?"

“Well, pretty much any of it.”

I take another glance in the mirror. My face corresponds with Celeste’s, the face of a fairy tale princess. And Celeste has the personality of a Disney princess, too: optimistic in every circumstance, always acting in good faith. She must think I’ll really hit it off with Giuliano. She sees him as handsome, sensitive, athletic, charming. And Giuliano is cute, with those broad shoulders and chiseled muscles. Too bad that if he’s Massimo friend he must be cast in the same mold: a narcissist who thinks only about himself or about sex, and whose primary activity is tormenting those around him.

And for a second there I catch a glimpse of the Vera I know in that princess-like face: always ready to cast judgment from behind the lenses of her glasses, her lips bent downward in contempt.

Then I blink and Celeste and I are both princesses again. She seems content, with the air of someone who’s satisfied with their work. I bet she never doubted for an instant that she’d be able to turn me into her.

“Giuliano likes your personality,” she says. “And skulls and weird earrings are an expression of it.” She squeezes my hand reassuringly. “You’re perfect just the way you are.”

I’m not so sure ... right now the only thing I want to do is hole up here at home and have an anime marathon with Paolo. Dates with boys from the water polo team are not a part of my world, and I realize I’m beginning to feel a little uncomfortable. I’m nervous, and my hands are sweating.

When it comes right down to it, it’s not like anyone’s forcing me to go, right? If I ditch Giuliano, he’ll get over it and find some other girl before the night is over. Good-looking as he is, he could have anyone; even my sister, if she weren’t already taken. I’m about to tell to Celeste I’m having one of my sudden stomach aches and really don’t think I can go out, when her smartphone rings. She runs over to the desk and picks it up.

“Yep.” She smiles. “Oh, you’re already here. No, we’re finished. We’ll be right down.”

Damn.

Celeste’s fingers close around my wrist. “Let’s go.”

She drags me out of the room, and all I have time to do is grab the strap of my bag. We go downstairs and head toward the entranceway. Mom pops out of the living room.

“Girls, where are you off to?”

She's hopping around on one leg, trying to put on her shoe with one hand and fix her hair with the other. That usually means she's late for a flight.

"We're going out with Massimo," replies Celeste. She tugs at me, but I come to a stop.

I stare at my mother. "I thought you were leaving tomorrow."

"I am. But I wanted to run out and get something nice to eat for tonight. Dad's cooking, a nice family dinner. So we can say goodbye properly."

Behind Mom's back, Dad emerges. "I want you two home on time tonight."

He's still wearing his dress shirt and pants. He must have just gotten back from his studio in the city. "No phone calls saying you're staying out to eat." He loosens his tie knot and looks long and hard at Celeste. "I'm talking to you in particular."

"I might actually be sleeping over at Massimo's." Her voice is weak, and she's looking down.

Her fingers tighten around my wrist. They've gone cold. When Dad starts talking to her, Celeste's smile immediately vanishes. Her relationship with Dad is pretty well compromised at this point, and I fear it's partly my fault: I'm the dutiful nerd who never comes home late, and my sister looks lazy and irresponsible in comparison.

"Do you or don't you understand," Dad continues, "that your mother's leaving tomorrow and will be gone for three weeks?"

I open my mouth to come to Celeste's defense, but Mom gets there first. She straightens up and places her hand on Dad's hip. "Leave them alone, they're right to go out and have fun." She smiles at us. "Worse comes to worse, we'll say goodbye tomorrow morning. And anyway we'll talk on Skype as soon as I get to Dubai."

She leans over and gives us a hug. First me, then Celeste. It's a warm embrace that smells of roses, and I already feel the sadness of separation. Celeste's expression remains impassive, but I know that she's sorry Mom's leaving, more than she'd like to show. That's why she makes sure she's never home when it's time to say goodbye. And I'm sure she'd be happier if Mom insisted a little more for the family dinner; by leaving us free to do what we like, she makes it seem like deep down it isn't all that important to her.

I admire my mother – a high-powered businesswoman who works for a multinational oil corporation, in a sector usually dominated by men – and one day I hope to be like her: always

busy, traveling all over the world just for work. But Celeste just can't understand Mom. She wishes she'd never leave, or at least not as often.

Mom and Celeste finish hugging, and we say goodbye to her and leave. Just outside the door, Beatrice chills us with an icy stare. Our father's black cat is crouching on the windowsill, ears straight up, eyes reduced to two thin vertical slits. It's as though she felt it important to underline the concepts that Dad had already expressed. And even if he forgives us for disobeying, she won't.

Celeste always says that Beatrice gives her the creeps.

We traverse the short gravel path up to the gate. On the street in front of our house Massimo's car is waiting for us. Celeste quickens her pace, but I slow down and take a peek at my phone.

Paolo's checked in on WhatsApp.

CAREFUL YOU MUST BE, YOUNG PADAWAN.

Then:

GIVE IN TO THE DARK SIDE YOU MUST NOT!

All of which serves as the caption to an image of Darth Vader, proudly displaying a tray of chocolate-chip cookies. *Come to the dark side, we have cookies.*

I smile to myself. Classic. And I'm not unaware of a certain resemblance between the Imperial Stormtroopers and the members of the water polo team. The level of evil is about the same.

"You made it."

I lower my phone, and catch a glimpse of Massimo getting out of the car. Celeste goes to him and slips her arms around his neck. He presses his lips to hers, and sets about kissing my sister without any concern for my presence. When he's finally kind enough to notice me, he brings his face just far enough away from hers to tenderly caress her bangs.

He turns toward me and gives me one of his mocking sneers. He's wearing a tight-fitting sweatshirt to show off his biceps and jeans purposely lowered below the waist. His usual fake-casual outfit.

"So that's why you took so long," he says, putting his arms around my sister. "You had to fix the face of this hopeless case.

My lips broaden into a 32-teeth smile. "Even a miracle wouldn't be enough for yours."

"Come on, don't be like that. You came out almost decent."

I'm about to throw my phone in his face, when Celeste steps in and pushes Massimo toward the car. He takes his seat at the wheel.

"Don't listen to him," my sister tells me. "He's just jealous because Giuliano has a date with the smartest girl in school, while he has to settle for me."

I raise my eyebrows. I wonder whether Celeste is trying to follow in my footsteps in the fine art of irony, or if she's actually sincere when she says these things. If she wasn't joking, I'd have to say that, of the two of us, she's the one who's insecure.

My sister gets in the car, next to Massimo. I take a deep breath. If I get in too, I'll start down the path to the Dark Side. I suddenly remember Giuliano at my eighteenth birthday party. He was the one who pulled me out of the pool after Massimo's brilliant prank. He was nice about it, and didn't even mind that he got his shirt wet while helping me. He almost seemed embarrassed ...

Maybe spending an evening with him that's a little out of the ordinary might not be the end of the world.

Chapter 2

Massimo is driving hopelessly around the shopping center parking lot, searching for a free spot. Places to have a good time are few and far between in Borgobianco, so on Saturday nights the kids from our high school with a bare minimum of a social life all pour in here. The mere thought of running into those wonderful schoolmates of mine during my first date with Giuliano gives me the shivers.

First date. I knit my brow. Why do I consider it a *first* date? Am I already fantasizing about having a whole series of them? It must be all that stuff Celeste smeared on my face: I inhaled it, it's reached the brain, and I knew that it was going to be bad for me.

I sigh and lean back in my seat. The lights from the three floors of the shopping center reflect against the car windows. They look like Christmas tree decorations, even if it's only May.

“Ah, finally.” Massimo has spotted a car pulling out and hurries to occupy the space. He stops the car, turns off the engine, undoes his seatbelt and rubs Celeste's thigh in satisfaction. How he must be proud of himself for having managed to park.

My sister gets out of the car with him and I do too. I follow them toward the entrance of the shopping center. In front of the glass door, I realize that my hands are sweating, and I'm more nervous than I thought I'd be. Dante's verses pass before my eyes: *through me one goes into the town of woe, through me one goes into eternal pain, through me among the people that are lost.*

The doors of the shopping center open and I, escorted by Celeste and Massimo, step foot inside the first circle of the damned.

I shake my head. Okay, I'm exaggerating.

At the foot of the escalator leading up to the second floor, where all the nightlife is – the ground floor is all shops – Celeste breaks away from Massimo and takes my arm.

“Nervous?” she asks me.

“Why should I be nervous?” I don my usual haughty expression, which I hope is equally effective without glasses. “Giuliano's the one who should be nervous about appearing in my presence.”

“Poor guy!” Massimo comments, turning toward me with the usual scornful sneer on his lips. But his smile gradually disappears and he stands there in disbelief, staring at me next to my sister, his eyes flitting back and forth between my face and Celeste's. It must be quite a mystical experience seeing the exact copy of your super-sexy girlfriend appear before you all of a sudden.

Too bad the copy is sporting a skull on her chest, a studded belt around her waist, black army boots, and two miniature onigiri earrings. It's no surprise that Lorella, Celeste's best friend, nicknamed me “the Fashion Antichrist.”

Massimo gives me one last look and turns back toward the escalator. I'm afraid that's the normal reaction: boys turn tail and run to avoid being caught in public with someone like me.

I wonder if Giuliano will do the same. Maybe as soon as he sees me he'll think up some excuse to slip away ... Celeste loves me, and when she said that Giuliano likes my personality, she probably just wanted to reassure me.

But hey, in the end, what do I care? Why should I be concerned with Giuliano's opinion? Until a few days ago, before Celeste talked to me about him, I couldn't have cared less.

On the escalator I grab my phone and check if there are any messages. No new notifications. Paolo hasn't written me anything since his mention of the cookies from Dark Side. He's trying to be nice about it, but I think he's really hurt about today. And for good reason: I'd never missed a single one of our anime nights. And what's more, I'm going out with people he hates.

"The date's going to go great." Celeste's tender voice brings me back to reality. "You're really going to like each other and you're going to have a great time. That's a promise. And as soon as you say goodbye, you'll be dying to tell me everything."

I nod, but then let out a sigh of uncertainty. My heart's pounding in my chest, and it shouldn't be, because this is just a stupid date with a boy I don't know and don't want to know.

But I can still remember his smell. When he pulled me out of the pool at the party, and my chest pressed up against his t-shirt. Maybe I'm more like other girls than I'd like to imagine.

Celeste takes my arm and I'm grateful to her: her warmth makes me feel secure. We reach the second floor. To show my disdain, I hadn't bothered to ask Celeste where we were meeting Giuliano. Where the heck is he going to be? I could ask Celeste now, but my mouth is all dry. I bow my head and let my sister drag me along in silence, like a condemned criminal on the way to the gallows.

We pass in front of a pub with a decadent atmosphere: the music reverberates loudly and the neon tubes running along the edge of the bar pulse dark red. The waitresses are all dressed up, preparing the platters for the dinner buffet. On the sign, a tangle of tentacles encloses the name of the locale: The Octopus. I've never been, but everyone at school is talking about it: it just opened, and it's immediately become the coolest pub in the city. Not that there's much competition in Borgobianco.

I already imagine myself sitting on one of the stools around the black, shiny little tables. My legs are crossed, visible below my frilled skirt, my sheer top reveals the outline of my slim shoulders, and my lipstick, applied to perfection, brings out my lips in that crimson light. I would be perfectly at ease, lightly caressing my wrist and chatting and laughing with Giuliano.

If I were my sister, that is.

As for myself, I'd probably end up getting mistaken for the wallpaper, seeing as how darkly I'm dressed. And that would be just fine with me.

But we don't go into the pub. We continue on and Celeste stops in front of the next door down. "Here we are!" My eyes goggle. "A ... An ice cream shop?"

And not just any ice cream shop. This one's painted candy-pink from floor to ceiling, the windows decorated with designs of heart-shaped pastries bursting with chocolate, and slices of cake in pastel colors. The small white tables are festooned with fake swirls of whipped cream, and a life-size statue of Peppa Pig peeks out from inside the entrance, holding an ice cream cone.

I think I'm going to faint.

"Ice creams and frozen yogurts," Celeste specifies. "Giuliano was undecided until the very last, but then his sweet side prevailed."

My God... there are even balloons floating against the ceiling, as if a children's birthday party has just ended. How old would the little princess in question have to be? Five? Six?

I force myself to smile for my sister's benefit. "That's great."

I want to die.

With the corner of my eye I catch Massimo's expression: he, too looks as if he's fit to burst. With laughter.

I dart him a withering glance. I'll bet he was the one to advise Giuliano to bring me here. His smug face confirms my suspicions. Good heavens, how I hate him!

"Here at least you guys can talk peacefully," Celeste ventures.

She gives me an encouraging smile. She must have realized how much I dislike this place, and she's trying to find the silver lining in the situation. "Pubs are just so loud," she goes on. "You can't hear what people say. And that would be sad, on a first date. Plus, here you can garnish your frozen yogurt however you want."

"With white chocolate, too?"

"I specifically asked about that."

Hmm. This might not be a total disaster. And I appreciate Celeste's efforts. There is no denying she is the most considerate sister in the world.

"Look, he's here already." Celeste nods towards the shop's window. "I knew he would be early: he was just so keen to meet you."

I peek among the pastries drawn on the glass and see a black-haired boy sitting at the table closest to the entrance. He is tall, so much so that his knees kiss the underside of the table, making him look sort of funny. He rubs his hands together, then runs them over his jean-covered

thighs. Could he be nervous?

He raises his face and sees us. Our eyes meet, and he grins at me. He has a beautiful smile.

“And here we part.”

Celeste’s words come at me from far away, as if from another floor of the mall. I rouse myself. For a moment, there, I got distracted.

“Okay,” I whisper.

“Are you going to be fine?”

“Of course, all will be great.”

“And you’ll tell me if he behaves badly?”

I chuckle and caress the back of my sister’s hand, an affectionate gesture that we’ve shared since as long as I can remember. “Don’t worry. He slips up, I’ll straighten him out.”

Celeste smiles. “Well, we’ll just be at the pub. That way, when you guys will be done chatting it up, if you want we could all go out together.”

“Seriously?” Massimo butts in, annoyed. “Do we have to stay here and play the nannies? I thought we could have a little time on our own.”

Celeste sighs without answering.

“See you later then,” she tells me, popping a kiss on my cheek. She puts her arm around Massimo, who is affecting a wounded animal’s mien. Problems in paradise? That would be weird — usually these two lovebirds live immersed in an idyll of love.

Celeste starts toward the pub. Massimo hesitates for just a moment, then he follows her. They walk side by side.

“See you later” I call to them.

Celeste raises her hand and gestures to Giuliano, who is peeking from behind the window. She beams at him; it is a warm grin she reserves only for those with whom she has a special bond: myself, Massimo and very few others. Celeste’s smile is not for everyone; and yet I never saw her in the company of Giuliano, nor had she ever named him before this date.

I wonder what their relationship is.

I lay my hand on the door’s creampuff-shaped handle. Here I come, creamy world. Massimo’s voice stops me on my tracks.

“Hey, Morticia.”

I exhale a long breath and turn to him. “What is it?”

Massimo gives me an annoyed look, showing off the dimple on his chin. Now he’s trying to look tough, an Australian surfer picking a fight with a rival gang — or whatever surfers do in these cases.

“Treat him well,” he tells me. “He’s a friend of mine.”

“A good reason to be more astringent than bleach.”

I enter the shop without giving him time to reply. The scent of sweets invades my nostrils, a blend of melted chocolate, crushed hazelnut, candied citrus fruits and powdered sugar. An aroma so intense as to be intoxicating. If I were a fairy, I would already be drunk.

Giuliano is standing before me. “We’ve already introduced ourselves, but it was a bit hasty.” He smiles. “I am Giuliano.”

I shake his proffered hand. “Vera.”

I look in wonder at the way my fingers disappear in his. His hand is large and sturdy; it could crush mine with the slightest effort. Giuliano is a big guy; he’s taller than Massimo, but also stockier. You can see that he takes his water polo training seriously.

I draw my hand away and perch on the chair opposite to the one where he sat. It’s a children’s chair, small even for me.

“What would you like?” Giuliano asks.

I set my shoulder bag on my knees. “A double whiskey.”

He chuckles, but he looks uneasy. Perhaps he’s afraid that if he sits down again, his chair will fall apart. “I’m afraid you’re not crazy about this place,” he says.

“No, no, on the contrary, I’m so happy I could puke rainbows.”

Giuliano bursts out laughing, and I smile. He might not know his venues, but he’s got a sense of humor — laughing at my puns he’s already earned a few points. Usually the only ones who get my sarcasm are Paolo and Celeste. The others, like Lorella or Massimo, just shoot me puzzled looks.

The waitress is an elderly lady in a pink apron, her white hair in an updo. She approaches us to take our orders, and I give up on the whiskey and decide on a frozen yogurt. Giuliano does the same and sits in front of me.

He has a fresh face, his super-fair skin in stark contrast with his dark hair. His green eyes

are elongated, almost cat-like. A guy like him would not look out of place in the company of any Borgobianco girl, including Celeste. Why he would choose to importune yours truly is beyond me.

“Tell me something,” I say.

“Shoot.”

“By any chance, was it Massimo who suggested this place? This candy-pink ice-cream shop?”

Giuliano’s face betrays a guilty look, as in *I really messed up stealing those cookies*. “As soon as I saw you, I realized I shouldn’t have listened to him.”

“Was it the skull on my T-shirt?”

“More like your desperate look, as in *Please kill me now*.”

I chuckle. “Nah, that’s my normal look.”

“Then I’ll have to infer that you don’t mind being here with me.” He has caught me off guard, leaving me without a sharp retort. Luckily our cups of yogurt arrive, and I can concentrate on picking at the white chocolate pralines off the top of mine. I nibble them slowly, then sink the spoon into the white, creamy mountain.

Giuliano keeps looking at me. He peers at me adoringly, something I’m not used to at all. In order to dispel my burgeoning tension, I eat with ever-growing élan, and damn it, I knew I shouldn’t have. I fumble around in my shoulder bag, trying to retrieve a tissue before —

“Aat... shoo!”

I sneeze. And sneeze. And sneeze again. And again. I try to restrain myself, but I just keep sneezing until my eyes fill with tears.

“Excuse me,” I whisper, hiding behind the handkerchief. I cast a furtive look at Giuliano, who is watching me, amused. I roll up my hankie. “What’s so comical about a sneezing girl?”

“It’s just funny, that’s all. I noticed that you sneeze every time you eat too fast.”

How could he know? How could he have noticed? This is something that only my parents are aware of — and I wouldn’t even vouch for my father. It had taken me years to figure out the correlation between binge eating and sneezing. The culprit is my gastric reflux, one of the drawbacks of being sour to the bone. Sure enough, Celeste doesn’t suffer from reflux or post-lunch sneezing.

“You were very attentive.”

“I pay a lot of attention to pretty girls.”

The flattery makes me blush, something I can’t stand. On the other hand, I have to admit that Giuliano sounds sincere, even sympathetic. Perhaps after the ice-cream parlor we could really join Massimo and Celeste and go on with our date.

I feel a thrill of curiosity at the thought of spending a wild night, experiencing for a few hours what for Celeste is routine. And who knows, with Giuliano I might even enjoy myself, sociological experiments aside.

I should tell Paolo not to expect me tomorrow morning. We usually spend our Sunday mornings gaming, but if I’m late tonight, I already know I’ll be snoring until noon. I am allergic to alarm clocks.

I retrieve my phone in order to text my best friend. “Are you bored?” Giuliano asks me. I look up from my smartphone. “No, why?”

“Someone told me that when you get bored you start texting with Paolo.”

This snippet of information could only come from Celeste. Attentive observer of my prettiness, my foot — he’s got my sister to assist him. I place my cell on the table and pick up the last smear of yogurt with my index finger. “Actually, I wrote to him to tell him that —”

“If you want to recommend him a pimple cream, you can always wait until tomorrow.”

I stop with my finger on my lips. “Excuse me?”

“Nothing, it was just a joke. I’m not crazy about Paolo.” Giuliano shrugs. “It’s probably those loser pics he posts on Instagram. Have you ever seen them?”

“I’m not on Instagram.”

“Neither is he — not anymore.” He gives me a mean smile. “I think he closed his account because he doesn’t like irony.”

I am very much aware of the fact that Paolo no longer has an Instagram profile. It happened a couple of months ago. We were at school for our last class, which was PE and which I’d skipped with the excuse of my period. I’d absconded into the girls’ locker room to read, and as I was leaving I bumped into Paolo. I hadn’t seen him all day, so I thought he’d stayed home.

He didn’t say a word; he just hunched his shoulders, mortified. I asked him what the hell had happened, suspecting that once again our idiot classmates had used him as a target while playing basketball. Then he showed me the phone, his Instagram profile open on the screen.

Comments had multiplied under each and every one of his pictures. In the space of a

single day, half the school had started to troll him. They teased him without mercy for his skinny physique, for his glasses, for his geeky passions. A litany of *gross, sewer rat, loser*. Under a picture of him playing Minecraft, at least a dozen people had copied-and-pasted the same insult: *Is your dick square, too? You'll never get laid, asshole*.

What a bunch of bastards. Of course, Paolo was never very popular at school, but such an explosion of hatred didn't make sense to me. It was unjustified, and it came out of the blue. It took me a week to cheer him up. And now Giuliano is laughing, remembering what happened. My hands are shaking with anger.

"Actually, I saved a few pictures," he carries on, leaning toward me. "We can look at them together, if you want. I even saved the comments."

"I don't find that funny at all."

He straightens his back. "Please don't get mad. Paolo had it coming."

I grab the shoulder bag, stand up, stare down at Giuliano.

He looks astonished, as if he has only just realized how offended I am.

"Please don't leave," he says, his tone hesitant. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you."

"You did that extremely well."

"I..." Giuliano is about to say more, his lips parted. But he doesn't.

"Anyway, it wouldn't have worked between us," I proclaim. "I like smart people. And insulting the best friend of the girl you're hitting on is dumb."

I make as if to turn around, but Giuliano grabs my wrist. I glare at him. He looks contrite, which is a surprise. I slide my gaze from his face to his hand, and he lets go immediately.

"At least let me pay. I invited you. And then I ruined everything."

For a moment I falter. Giuliano didn't look like a bad guy; then why behave like that? It dawns on me that he could just be jealous, but suddenly I see again Paolo's teary eyes and the slew of insulting nicknames that was foisted on him. What guarantee do I have that Giuliano was not among the culprits? And at the time he wasn't showing any interest in me, so he wouldn't have had any reason to be jealous.

"Don't bother, I'll take care of it."

I leave a couple of bills at the cashier and exit the shop without waiting for my change, slamming the door behind me. I will never set foot again in this damned place.

Outside, the nauseating smell of sweets is replaced by the stench of fries and alcohol. As

I pass in front of the Octopus, a few guys raise their heads and look. Some of them point at me. Made up as I am, I look exactly like Celeste; they probably mistook me for her. I hope no one dares to approach me: just thinking that people like them — the same ones who harass Paolo on a daily basis — could speak to me makes me sick.

I need to rinse my face.

I pick up my pace and step into the mall's restrooms. I put my hands in the sink, under the jet of water. I splash some icy water on my face, then collect it in my cupped hands and dive.

I lift my head again, look myself in the mirror. The mascara under my eyes has melted into black rivulets. Now I really look like Morticia.

“Hey.”

Celeste's face has appeared beside mine on the mirror. Except that we don't look alike anymore. I'm a disaster. But at least I am myself.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

“Yeah.” I turn around. “Although just a few seconds ago I wasn't. That friend of yours is an idiot.”

“What did he do to you?”

“Nothing. He just told me... Nothing, nothing that I wasn't expecting.”

Celeste understands at once that I don't want to talk about it, and she doesn't ask any more questions. Massimo will tell her soon enough: surely Giuliano must have run crying to his best friend. One thing is certain: everyone has the friends he deserves. Not everyone is worthy of being pals with brilliant people like Paolo.

I grab a handful of tissues from the dispenser and scrub away my makeup. “I'll take the bus to get back home,” I say to Celeste's reflection.

“Not on your life.”

She brushes her fingers on the back of my hand. I'm afraid she feels guilty about setting up the date. But it's not her fault. My sister sees only the best in people, and I'm glad she's like that. There is nothing to gain from by being crabby and intractable like me.

“Massimo and I will give you a lift in his car. It's dark out, I won't let you go alone.”

I check my phone. “It's nine o'clock, not three in the morning.”

Celeste shakes her head. “You're coming with us.”

“Massimo won't be happy to ditch his friend just to drive me home.”

“Giuliano has a scooter, he can take care of himself.”

And thank goodness for that. All I needed was to have the jerk sit beside me for the whole trip home.

“Plus,” Celeste adds, “I’ve already told Massimo that either he drives us both or I’ll walk back with you.”

I sigh. “All right then.”

Celeste follows me out of the restroom and we head toward the parking lot. For the entire walk I keep my eyes down, staring at my phone. I don’t want to meet Giuliano’s gaze, or Massimo’s, or anyone else’s. I just want to hug Paolo and spend the evening with him.

I open WhatsApp and write to him.

SURE ENOUGH, MY DATE ENDED UP IN GASTRITIS. WHAT SAY YOU,
CAN WE RECOVER OUR ANIME EVENING?

His answer is immediate.

OF COURSE! ANIME AND GAMING. SEE YOU AT YOUR PLACE IN
FIFTEEN... BUT WILL CELESTE BE HOME?

Paolo’s “voice” makes me feel instantly better. It’s like stepping back into your room after a shipwreck and a week at sea.

Although it’s curious that he asked about Celeste. I’ve noticed it for a while now: Paolo always tries to avoid her. Surely my sister never insulted him; on the contrary, they’ve always been on good terms. Maybe it is precisely for this reason that Paolo can’t stand the idea of her hanging out with such scum. Seeing her in the company of guys like Giuliano and the like saddens him.

I glance at my sister, standing by my side on the escalator. She senses my gaze and turns toward me.

“What gives?”

“Nothing.” I smile. “I’m looking forward to being home. What are you gonna do later? Going back out with Massimo?”

“Yeah,” she replies wistfully. “I don’t feel like saying hi to mom.”

I nod and take the lead, advancing toward the mall’s exit and writing to Paolo as I walk.

CELESTE WON’T BE THERE. CAN YOU BRING PAPRIKA PRINGLES? MY
APPETITE IS STARTING TO COME BACK.

Instantaneous answer:

I THOUGHT YOU’D ALREADY DEVOURED WHATSISNAME, GIULIANO...

I give a hearty laugh.

Yes, it’s just nice to go back to my world.

My chick slides its shotgun back over its shoulder and lifts the coffer’s lid. A large-lettered inscription announces that the bounty is a lipstick. Who would ever hide a lipstick at the end of a fifteenth level dungeon?

“Careful!” Paolo warns me.

But I don’t move my chick fast enough: the coffer comes to life and lashes out. It bites the chick, bringing about 9999 damage points. Game over.

“I told you it was a bad idea to attack a castle of the witches’ team,” my best friend comments.

I shrug. “At least we’ve earned a few experience points.”

The Italian chart runs on the screen. With tonight’s points we are one step away from the Top 100, in 104th position, between Elodie01 and cristina84aa.

“I’ll show you how to play,” says Paolo.

“Yeah, right,” I reply. But I give him the joypad.

To be honest, he is seriously better than me. But only at *MondoPulcino*. And only because he spends on it at least twice as much time as me.

I watch him start a new game, a smile on his lips. He looks really cheerful, sitting cross-legged on the soft carpet in front of the giant TV screen we took down from its cabinet and connected to my notebook.

Paolo's chick materializes on the display and he straightens his back, suddenly focused. He is covered in chip crumbs: they are on his shorts, on his bony knees, on his shirt, on the frames of his glasses and even in his fiery red hair, disheveled by his furious gaming.

Paolo gets totally absorbed: whenever his chick moves, he follows it by with his body; when it stops abruptly he flinches, and as it opens fire he hits the joypad buttons with spasm-like gestures, as if he were pulling the real trigger of a real gun.

I smile to myself. I'm glad to see him happy when we are together.

Not that there is anything romantic between us. In middle school he had a crush on me, but now it's water under the bridge, and since then we have become best friends. All the same, I suspect he was a tiny bit jealous of my date with Giuliano.

"Since you're bent on collecting debacles," I say, "I might as well take the time to get into my hoodie."

I get up and retrieve the sweatshirt from the open wardrobe next to the bed. I pull it on and fall back onto the carpet at Paolo's side.

He glances at me, but as soon as he notices that I'm staring too, he brings his attention back to the screen.

"Were you ogling my boobs?" I joke.

"Don't be silly," he chuckles. "I was just admiring your hoodie's design. It's cool."

I extend the fabric to look at the image. A nice grinning skull. I love it.

Paolo tightens his grip on the joypad and adjusts his position on the carpet. His chick is at the dungeon's entrance, facing hordes of skeletons. As he shoots them down, Paolo darts his eyes from the TV to the smaller computer screen, which is configured to show the inventory. Now and then he looks up at the little doll perched on my laptop monitor: a zombie penguin with huge, glassy eyes. He gave it to me for my eighteenth birthday — and gave another one to Celeste. Except that my sister's is pink, and in place of its undead eyes it has two little hearts. She also keeps it on her laptop's screen.

The two twin penguins always make me smile. They truly reflect us.

"If you're cold, you can close the windows," says Paolo without taking his eyes off the quest.

He knows me well, and knows that often when I don't talk it's because I'm freezing. Even in summer, come evening I'm always cold. Paolo, on the contrary, is hot even in

December, and this is why the French windows on the balcony are wide open. Sometimes I imagine that a fire is burning my best friend up from the inside, giving a golden glow to his dark irises.

“Nah, let’s leave it open.” I point at the railing with my chin. “Beatrice is out on the balcony.”

My father’s cat sits upright on the balustrade, her tail encircling her hind legs. She is motionless, a black shape against the starry background, her snout facing the constellation of Orpheus’ Lyra. What thoughts are moving inside that diabolical mind of hers? I’m not sure I want to know.

Sometimes I think that I resemble this cat more than my twin sister.

Paolo shakes his head, bent over his joypad and ready to face the second wave of undead. “How could you call her Beatrice? Every time you mention your cat, I think you’re referring to a person.”

“Do you think I’d banish a girl on the balcony for the whole evening?”

“Actually, it doesn’t sound like you.” Paolo tilts his joypad forward, making the chick hit its fallen enemies with the butt of its rifle. “You’d have thrown her off the balcony hours ago.”

“Stop reminding me that I’m a bad person, please.” I sigh and stretch, then I lay back onto the carpet.

Paolo looks away from the TV. He turns to me. “Was the date really that awful?”

“Could have been worse.” I contemplate a thin crack on the ceiling, a faint gray trace in the uniform white. “A car accident could have happened on the way back, and I could’ve lost the use of my legs.”

“Ouch.” Paolo pauses the game and sets down his joypad. “Come on, let it all out.”

He leans over me, so close that I can make out every single one of the freckles that cover his nose like red snowflakes. He looks concerned.

Damn — I managed to worry him, and now he feels obligated to investigate. I bite my tongue. I’ve already decided that I won’t tell Paolo what Giuliano said about him. There is no reason why my best friend has to suffer again because of all that nonsense. I know he still feels bad for the Instagram thing; otherwise he wouldn’t have been so careful in dodging Celeste. As if my sister’s simple presence would have been enough to remind him of all the morons who go to our school.

No, there are no valid reasons why I should inform him of Giuliano's bullshit. Paolo has already taken enough flak without me sharing the nonsense of a brain-damaged water polo player.

I smile to my best friend. "Don't worry, I'm exaggerating as usual. Let's just say that to make up for it, some people should spend a week kneeling on chickpeas."

"Huh?"

"Just joking. Seriously, it wasn't all that bad."

"Sure?"

"Yup. It's just that I didn't like the guy." I tap my temple. "He's a little dumb. And you know I can't abide fools."

"What did you expect?" Paolo resumes the game and activates the little chick to liberate the screen from its monsters. "Only thing you ever get from that kind of people is insults. Best case scenario, they're just boring. I should've warned you not to go."

His tone is full of repressed anger and disappointment, but I'm not so sure my date could have gone only that way. I turn towards the balcony, towards the night sky, and I can't help imagining alternative scenarios.

I wonder if I'd have enjoyed changing my ways for once. If I'd have felt a rush of adrenaline running at full speed on Massimo's car, along with Celeste and Giuliano. If I, too, would have felt excited flitting from one party to another, from one disco to another until dawn.

And when the sun came up, a fresh wind would have disheveled my hair, and Giuliano would have embraced me, lest I should get cold.

I would've looked up at him, his feline green eyes so close...

"You still here?"

Paul's voice awakens me from my reveries. His chick is standing in the treasure room, surrounded by the corpses of its defeated enemies. I didn't even notice he had beat the dungeon.

I've got to stop thinking about Giuliano. Not to speak of that idiot Massimo, with his expensive car bought by Daddy's money.

I nod to the screen. "Let's see what's in the coffer, but then enough with feathers and beaks. I feel like watching a horror anime. "

"Of course, my Queen of Evil."