

## THE WINSTONS

### Rebecca

Adam (m. Anna)

Evelyne (deceased)

### Adam's children

Marjorie (Twin, m. Jonathan) – children: Matt (34), Maggie (28), Jay (28)

Michael (Twin, m. Amelie) – children: Josh (26), Lily (26)

Gabriel (m. Emilie) – children: Ariel (32), Alex (32), Becca (19)



## PROLOGUE

“Come on, man, this is so not right!” Josh exploded, throwing his fork back onto the plate, which made his aunt, Marjorie, frown. She loved that set of dishes and feared the young man’s frustrations would sooner or later put a crack in them.

“You’re complaining, huh?” Maggie waved her fork at him in mockery and rolled her eyes. “You’re still fairly young compared to some of us and you have enough time ahead of you, so you shouldn’t be the one complaining!” she retorted angrily.

“He has the right to complain, Maggie, as well as any one of us!” Becka replied in support of her cousin. “So what if we are younger? We’re all in the same boat!” she punched the table with her little fist. “Auntie, can’t we do something about this?”

“I know you want to, pumpkin, but there’s nothing you can do about it,” Aunt Marjorie stroked her arm in an attempt to soothe her. “What has to be done, has to be done!”

“So, we have to pay for something that happened a hundred years before we were even born? How does that make any sense at all?” Alex snapped and joined the others in voicing his outrage, though it didn’t stop him from scarfing down another piece of pie.

“It’s less than a hundred, you nitwit!” Lily replied with disdain and punched his arm.

“Who the hell cares?” Alex retorted with his mouth full. He never did learn not to talk with his mouth full, try as his parents might, and, he wouldn’t have given a rat’s ass on such things, anyway, especially at home. “One hundred, two hundred, same shit, pardon my French. You know what? I don’t feel like paying for some jackass’s mistakes!” he ended his heated speech, his finger still pointed at Lily.

“So, what do you propose to do, then?” Matt, who had kept his mouth shut until then, asked with nonchalance. He had been sipping from his glass of whiskey quietly, with a detached expression on his face that suggested that nothing they discussed could affect him.

“Don’t tell me you’re okay with this!” Alex answered back in disbelief. “Come on, Matt! You’re the oldest, man, and you’ve only got one year left. You’ve got to be as angry as I am, if not more! Don’t pretend it doesn’t bother you because that’s not possible!”

Matt took a few moments of silence, sipped a little more from his glass, then looked at Alex and shook his head.

“Angry? Maybe. Can I do something about it? I don’t think so,” he replied to his cousin with his usual coolness, his eyes gazing steadily at him. “So why should I bother?”

No one had anything to say to that. They were all aware that there was one stipulation that they had to fulfill and only then they could get their trust funds and also reach their full potential. The worst part was that they had to do so before turning thirty-five, because once one of them turned thirty-five without fulfilling that condition, their share of the fund would be divided among the remaining younger ones who still had time to succeed or fail.

“You know what? I don’t really care about unlocking my powers,” Ariel said pensively, without addressing anyone in particular, “although, it would be nice to see what you can do if you use your full potential...” she continued, lost in her thoughts as always and her cousins gave her time to get to the point. They knew she had the bad habit of rambling on and on or getting lost in her own thoughts only to leave everyone hanging, but sometimes, if not most of the time, she could come up with some very interesting solutions if they had the patience to listen to her. “But I do care about doing something for myself. I’d like to open a little business...” Ariel finally said longingly.

“Keep dreaming, girl,” Maggie snapped, already bored with the way Ariel always liked to drag things out. She wasn’t one for patience and, unfortunately, that trait had some unpleasant results in her daily life. “Till you take care of your part of business, Ariel, girl, you won’t be able to open a shed.”

“Why are you always so mean to her?” Alex snapped at Maggie. “If she wants to dream, let her dream away. What else can she do? What else is there for any of us?” he asked, his infuriated gaze scanning each one of them to see their reactions.

“Beat the curse?” Marjorie asked softly, trying to defuse a potentially explosive situation.

“Not so easy, auntie,” Ariel said sorrowfully. “I tried, you know... Do you remember? I thought that guy, Eric, the one I met two years ago, would be the one. It wasn’t meant to be, you know... It’s not so easy, and you know it very well. You see how things are. There’s no real romance left in this world, I’m afraid, and if there’s no romance left, where can one find love?”

Marjorie nodded. She did know it. Finding true love wasn’t easy-peasy. She’d been in the same situation when it was her turn and she’d almost lost everything because of stubbornness and the family’s meddling.

“It’s never easy, dear, I know,” she answered and stroked her arm with love again. “But, Ariel, sweetheart, you have to keep trying. You can’t simply give up. Think about it! You will be able to use your powers and get your money, but only once you find your true love and commit to it. You’ll be happy then!”

Ariel turned her eyes to her plate on the table. She knew that her eyes would show everyone that she’d already resigned herself to never doing that and she was sick of hearing platitudes and encouragements whenever her family got wind of something like that.

Everybody around the table stayed silent for a few moments. Jay helped himself to some more of his mother’s amazing pie. Marjorie was the best cook in their family, which was why they always chose to meet at her house. Everything was easier to swallow if there was a good pie or cake on the table. At least, in Jay’s opinion.

“I think we should see if there’s any legal way to get out of this, guys. We need the money now, don’t we? It’s not like we can wait around forever!” Alex broke the silence, when the idea came to him suddenly. His eyes still analyzed them carefully and saw them nod their assent. “Look,” he continued, “I’m already thirty-two. I don’t have time for stupid things and games and all sorts of idiotic attempts at love! I want to do something for myself like Ariel said. Now, while I still can.”

Although almost everybody found themselves in agreement with him, they still looked at Matt. He was known to be the smartest guy in the family and they knew that any kind of solution should have come from him. Matt’s eyes shifted around the table, feeling their expecting gazes on him and finally shook his head.

“There’s no way out, buddy,” Matt put his glass on the wooden table at the same time and stood from the bench. “If you called us here just for this, then I’m out of here. I’ve got real things to do, places to see...”

“You don’t even want to try,” Becka cried out, jumping out of her seat. “You’ve just given up because you have so little time left and you don’t care anymore.”

“I tried, sweetie,” Matt told her with a sad smile.

Becka was his favorite cousin. Maybe because she was the youngest or maybe because she was unspoiled and funny and had a very big heart. His fingers stroked her cheek in a loving, yet sad caress and he kissed her forehead.

“Becka, I tried hard to find any kind of loophole in the wording of the trust funds papers. Believe me, there’s none. If I couldn’t find one, sweetie, then no one can, and you know it. There’s a reason I’m one of the best attorneys in the country, and all of you know that this isn’t just my vanity talking. Anyway, honey, these days, I content myself with making my own money the hard way and enjoying as much as possible of the little spare time I have left. I’ve stopped chasing such dreams. It’s not in the cards for me and that’s it.”

All of his cousins looked at him in shock. Only his sister, Maggie, understood him very well. She didn’t have any patience, especially with fools, but Matt was something special. She’d always looked up to him and she knew he wasn’t the kind of guy to give up on anything. Hearing him say that he’d resigned himself made her understand the depth of his anger, even though he hid it from them. She felt like taking him into her arms and never letting go. But she knew he wouldn’t like that – not very big on displays of affection, her brother - so she just lightly petted his hand and left it at that.

“Matt, you should try to use that time you have left to find a girl,” his mother said reproachfully and everyone’s attention turned to Marjorie, who continued, “You still have a chance, son, and I’m not talking about the money here, you know it. I know that sad affair with Velma’s left you afraid to commit again and I don’t like that in the least. That’s not the Matty I know. That wasn’t love, son, and you know it very well. Had it been true love, you’d have had your full powers by now even if you hadn’t gotten the money.”

“Mother, Velma’s been out of the picture for a decade already. She’s in the past. What’s the point in bringing her back into the conversation?” Matt retorted curtly, shaking his head. He couldn’t understand his mother’s reasons for bringing up bitter memories.

“Because she was the reason you stopped looking at women with hope,” Marjorie pointed out, shaking a scolding finger at her first born. “You think all women are like her and that’s why you just take everything you can take from them and then you move on. Another woman on the list! It’s like you’re keeping score: how many women can Matt score?” she reproached acidly, which wasn’t something that they’d witnessed before. Everyone’s eyes were riveted on her. “It’s not good for you, Matt! Even if you’ve already given up on the trust fund, which is stupid, by the way, you’re still alive and you still need a reliable woman in your life, like I’ve already said over and over again. You’ll grow old and alone and bitter!” Marjorie ended her unusual tirade by hitting her son’s chest with her finger.

“Thanks for the heads up, mom. It’s always good to know what your future will look like!” Matt replied sarcastically and removed himself from the path of her pointy finger.

Marjorie shook her head bitterly but chose not to continue that line of discussion. She knew her son quite well and she knew that when he was like that, there was no way to make him change his mind. It was like talking to a rock.

The silence stretched for a few minutes. Everyone was busy eating their pie or with their drinks, pretending nothing had happened between Marjorie and her eldest son. But mostly, they were busy avoiding each other’s eyes for fear that someone might say something hurtful again.

In the end, Alex, the most outspoken of all, couldn’t stand the awkward silence anymore and looked around the table, gauging everyone’s mood. Uncertain whether it was even worth it, he shrugged and decided to try a new line of conversation.

“You know, you are the old lady’s favorite great-grandson, Matt. Can’t you persuade her to finish with this foolishness? She can change the papers if she wants to. It’s not like the words are carved in stone!” Alex anxiously waited for his answer.

“Tried that too, Alex.” Matt sighed, shaking his head. “She said she did it for our own good, whatever she means by that. So... I can say I’ve tried everything and it’s time to limit my losses.”

Again no one said anything for a few moments and again they couldn’t bring themselves to look each other in the eye and the silence stretched on. Encouraged by the unusual silence, since such get-togethers were normally a very chatty and loud affair, Matt took his leave with a simple wave of his hand and started down the path to the kitchen door, whistling softly to himself.

Ariel, pensive as always, looked after him until he was out of earshot in the living room to take his car keys and leave, and said dolefully:

“It’s sad... It’s really sad. He’s the oldest and he’s already given up.”

For a few moments, everyone stared at her absolutely speechless. It was like she’d grown a second head during the last hour.

“Well, we’re close to that too, Ariel,” her brother Alex retorted angrily after a moment of disbelief. “It’s not like we have too much time left, is it? Just about three years, you dimwit! Once we turn thirty-five, everything will be gone: the money, the powers, everything. And we can’t do a single thing to stop this!”

“We can’t even cheat,” Jay intervened bitterly for the first time and the others burst into laughter.

“Oh, yeah, I remember,” Lily said. “You tried to pose as a fool in love and came with that simpleton. Camilla, I think her name was?”

Jay nodded smiling. He had already forgotten the ridicule he’d suffered at the time. His easy-going nature didn’t allow him to keep a grudge for long.

“Yeah, but it didn’t work, did it?” Josh said very matter of fact. “Those two fossils sniffed you out.”

“Well, they can read minds, so it was a piece of cake to sniff him out,” Aunt Marjorie pointed out with an enigmatic smile on her lips. “That’s why they’ve been appointed trustees, you know. No one can fool them. You shouldn’t have tried to cheat, Jay. The old lady hasn’t forgiven you for that yet.”



Jay knew very well where he stood with his grandma. He didn't think that she'd ever forgive him. The old bat was a real piece of work: resentful and bitter. Just a few of them could steal a smile from her and lately he hadn't been part of that group. After the stunt he pulled with that woman, grandma didn't even acknowledge him at the family dinners anymore.

He looked around and noticed that all the others had gone quiet, each of them thinking about the implications of what had happened to him. He truly hoped that he wouldn't go through a new period of veiled mean jokes or even innocent teasing. At which Becka was a master. He even flinched when she started speaking, expecting the worst.

"So, we only have to wait for them to die..." Becka tentatively began to say, her gaze passing from one to the other.

"Not so fast," Marjorie interrupted her hastily. "The rule says that if they pass away, two others will take their place. Same type of power, pumpkin, so no way to fool them either. You have to understand that there is no way around this. You have to play by the rules."

"Damn it!" Alex swore. "All this drama only because great-grandpa had the nerve to abandon great-grandma for another woman and then another idiot left aunt Evelyn at the altar and she killed herself!" he shook his head as if everything was unconceivable for him. "So, now, generation after generation has to pay for those two idiots! Where the hell is the justice in that?"

"Well, I think that it was a radical conclusion from my grandmother, as well," Marjorie replied conciliatorily, "but there's never been a way to change grandma's mind, unfortunately. I know my father tried hard at the time, but she wouldn't listen to him. He tried again when my happiness was at stake and still nothing. He didn't have any success. She wouldn't give in. Since the money was still hers, she had the right to decide what she wanted to do with it."

"But why the curse on our powers? I really don't understand that," Becka wondered.

"Same reason. Grandpa was a witch himself and he used those powers to entice a very young woman and leave grandma. And the man who left Evelyn at the altar was also enticed by a witch. She didn't want any other witch to misuse their powers."

"I wouldn't!" Becka cried out.

“I know that you wouldn’t, pumpkin,” Marjorie patted her hand tenderly. “Not all apples are rotten, I know that much. But grandma didn’t want to hear a thing, so... Here we are: now, everyone in my generation paid for that and yours has to pay, as well. However, if you succeed in finding your true love and get your trust funds, then at least the money problem will end and the next generations will have only the curse to defeat,” Marjorie tried to lift their moods, but with little success.

“Oh, just that,” Lily sighed and put her chin in her hand, fixing her dreamy gaze somewhere in the distance.

“I really wanted to open that nursery,” Ariel whispered inconsolably and her brother stroked her fingers, his eyes shining with deep concern for his sister’s dreams.

“Nothing is lost, sweetheart,” Marjorie said and stroked Ariel’s hand again. “You’ll see, you’ll find your soul mate. Everything will be fine.”

“Where? Where could I find my soul mate, auntie? The people that I deal with every day are not even lover material, believe me. I wouldn’t let them touch me with a ten-foot pole, so finding a soul mate is quite out of question. There’s no chance for me out there! I’ve looked around for years and nothing!” she said this time with tears in her eyes.

“Wait and see, things have a way of working out,” Marjorie whispered to her, then started picking up their plates to show them that the conversation ended. There was no point in debating something they couldn’t fix. There wasn’t anything more to add and whining wouldn’t help. She knew it well. Whining never helped. You had to roll up your sleeves and do something.

Although the others jumped out of their seats to help her, they were all still thinking about the conversation and a none-too-rosy future that looked pretty hopeless for them in that very moment.

## CHAPTER ONE

Becka left the coffee shop in a hurry. She was holding a hot coffee cup in one hand, while at the same time she was trying to stuff a muffin and a toasted bagel in her handbag with her other hand. She'd forgotten to ask for a hot sleeve for the cup and, on top of that, she'd also forgotten to take a napkin. Her head was in the clouds that morning, and now, the searing heat burned her fingers through the paper cup.

She couldn't go back anymore. She was already too late for her classes and the last thing she wanted was to miss the entire lecture on her favorite subject. She struggled still to make the muffin and bagel fit in her handbag, at which point she wondered why she'd left the house with such a tiny purse. The people and things around her became a blur the more she wrestled with the bag and the more she rushed toward the bus stop.

No more than a moment later, just as she turned around the corner, her eyes still on the tiny bag that wouldn't cooperate with her, she ran into a tall man and, as luck would have it, the lid of the coffee cup came loose and all the hot liquid spilled all over the giant's pristine, white shirt. Of course, Becka thought, things couldn't be any worse! Not only did she scald him but the damn shirt had to be white! Why not black? No one would notice a coffee stain on a black shirt!

"Oh, my God, I'm so sorry! Really, really sorry!" she blabbered and tried to clean his shirt with her bare hands, forgetting about the cup that was lying on the pavement, discarded like yesterday's news, all but empty, and also about her coveted breakfast, which was leaning precariously on one side of the handbag, ready to fall out as well.

Her hands shook the man's shirt as fast as she possibly could. Her meager attempts hoped to limit the burns at the very least. She knew that the hot coffee must have already penetrated his shirt and she didn't even want to think of what had happened to the skin beneath it, badly burnt by the freshly boiled brew.

“I think you’d better take your shirt off!” she cried out, without taking her gaze off the task at hand. Remorse drove her actions and images of the emergency room flashed at the back of her mind. Focused to a frenzy on her nearly catastrophic mistake, Becka never noticed the rest of the man to whom the chest belonged, much less the eyebrow that shot up as soon as she ordered him to strip.

“May I ask what exactly you’re trying to do?” he finally asked in a deceptively mild tone.

Until then, he’d simply looked at the top of her head completely shocked by the actions of the little woman before him.

Hearing his voice, she finally looked up and blinked. Not once or twice, but three times. The man she had in front of her wasn’t the regular polished and polite man she’d encountered in her life before. He was a far, far cry from that.

This man’s rugged face was set off by a long, pale scar on his left cheek that began somewhere close to the corner of his eye and continued to nearly the corner of his mouth, giving him a dangerous allure. He looked like one of the mercenaries she had seen in one of the documentaries about the civil war in former Yugoslavia.

His eyebrow was still raised scornfully and for a moment there, she asked herself how he did it. It wasn’t easy to pull off for so long, she imagined. She just about forgot her curiosity when she met his eyes, colder than the Arctic Ocean and she almost shivered. She blinked again, swallowed hard and tried to find her voice. She forced herself to be brave, refusing to even consider the thought of being a scaredy-cat. She’d always tried to face any danger, not run away from it.

“Hmm... I was thinking... you know... your shirt...”

“I heard that bit about my shirt, don’t you worry, but I really don’t know what difference you think it would make if I took it off now. With or without the shirt, my skin is still scalded, my morning’s still ruined and I’m still pissed off...” he said in a level tone that didn’t show the slightest hint of anger and that made her all the more fearful.

While it was true that he didn't sound mad, the complete clash between his words and his tone made her nervous. She couldn't even begin to think of how to talk to him. She swallowed again and bravely said, "Yes, I know that, but the coffee is mostly on the shirt, so if you take it off..."

"Now?" he mused, when he saw that she stopped without finishing her sentence.

"Well, yes," she nodded and stressed her words, in an effort to lend them more confidence than she had, to pretend that she knew what she was doing, although her face was burning in absolute embarrassment and shame.

It was the first time she'd ever asked a man to take his clothes off, even though it was only the shirt. On top of all that, his tone and attitude made her terribly uncomfortable and she was afraid that everything showed on her face. She couldn't say she had a poker face worth a damn. Every time she played cards with Jay, he would laugh at her best, yet failed efforts to bluff.

The man looked at her for a few seconds, but then, with a bold move, he took his shirt off.

"Do your worst!" he said and handed her the all but ruined piece of clothing.

However, Becca didn't take it. She didn't even notice that he was holding anything for her to take. She couldn't even find her voice to answer back. Her eyes were too busy taking in the expanse of a chiseled chest peppered with curly coarse hair, still wet from her coffee. She'd forgotten what she wanted or was supposed to do entirely.

"Earth to the moon?" he mocked in his grave voice and waved his hand before her eyes. Finally, he pulled her out of her reverie and Becca's eyes shot up to meet his in an instant.

"Sorry, just lost in thought for a moment there," she mumbled more than a little disappointed with her silly admiration of the male figure.

Finally, she took the shirt from his waiting hand and used it to dry his chest more vigorously than that was necessary. The coffee was already a dry sticky stain, but that wasn't on her mind and neither was the fact that she might take off a layer of vulnerable, burned skin, too.

None of those things dawned on her in that moment when Becca was brimming with embarrassment, upset with herself for her carelessness and every reaction that followed. Not only

had she poured her coffee all over a stranger but she'd been caught staring at the man's chest like a lustful, simple-minded woman.

"Yeah, I noticed," he replied amused, watching her expression while she cleaned his chest.

He enjoyed her train of thought. He could read it on her face with no effort whatsoever. It was refreshing to have someone like that before his eyes. He was tired of all the games played in society and wanted something new. After a few moments, he decided to ask, "Does any man's chest have this effect on you or just mine?"

There was a little malice in his voice that made her straighten up and look directly into his eyes. Then, she replied sulkily:

"I'm just trying to help, you know! Why are you acting like a jerk?"

His eyes became colder than they had been before when she snapped at him, and he yanked the shirt out of her hands.

"Yeah, with such help I wouldn't be surprised if I'm dead tomorrow!"

She tapped her foot in frustration, raised her voice a notch, and replied to him with her usual self-confidence:

"You're just pissed off because I ruined your shirt." Her voice mustered all the determination it could and she added a nod, for good measure, in the hopes that it would give her more of a knowledgeable air.

"But it was just an accident, you have to understand. It wasn't like I wanted to spill my coffee all over you!" she scoffed and shrugged her shoulders. She was standing tall before him, matching his confident, dominant attitude with her own, but spoiled everything when she continued in the tone of a stubborn and willful child: "I really could have used that coffee!"

Fascinated with the sudden change in her attitude, he looked at her more attentively. Only now he noticed her chocolate eyes for the first time, and especially her little mouth, arched like a bow, with rosy lips. A part of him was begging him to grab her already and just have a taste of her sweet, sensual mouth. The longer she talked, his interest in her lips only grew more to the point of an agonizing need urging him to lean in and claim what he wanted. He found them that much

more tempting when the tip of her tongue came out and nervously licked her upper lip. Something definitely stirred inside him in that moment and suddenly, his interest changed completely.

“You owe me,” he said so abruptly that it changed the atmosphere in an instant.

She opened her mouth in shock, but she couldn't make a sound for a few moments, too stunned by his sudden outburst and it almost felt like her mind stopped working.

He didn't clarify his statement or expand on it, but just waited for her to process his words and get back to him with a bold retort he was sure to get. He didn't have to wait for too long.

“What are you talking about?” she finally managed to say, with a touch of thinly veiled indignation, and her wide eyes held his own intently.

“What you heard,” he brushed off her harmless furor and continued, “You owe me.”

“For this shirt?” she asked incredulously, showing the shirt she held in her hand.

“Among other things.” His wolfish smile ran shivers down her spine, as her mind started dreading the worst and conjured unsettling scenarios.

“What other things?” Becka asked, although more than a little hesitation and uncertainty delayed her question.

Her eyes seemed to grow wider still and the tip of her tongue again touched her upper lip nervously, to torment him and make him more aware of his increasing desire for her. He couldn't understand this irrational, unlikely desire for a clumsy woman he'd just laid eyes on, but something in him wanted her, needed to have her, just like that.

She looked a bit young, maybe too young, that was true enough, but he knew that looks were sometimes deceptive. He still made a mental note to ask her about her age; he didn't want to fool around with jailbait despite how agonizingly drawn he was to her. He had a strict policy about going to jail; it wasn't a place he ever yearned to see on the inside, and even once in a lifetime was more than enough.

“You scalded me, ruined my shirt, and obviously, I can’t go to my appointment half-naked. And, please, note, it’s an important appointment, and I’m already late because of you,” he explained patiently, as if talking to a small child.

Of course, it was all just a ruse. He was only trying to see what kind of reaction he could draw from her.

She felt the blood rush to her face and she cursed her pale complexion that revealed too much and in the most inappropriate of moments. No matter how much she tried to appear sophisticated or cool-tempered, she always failed because her skin betrayed her. It was the curse of her life. Maybe not the only curse of her life but it made the top three list.

She thought of going a different way with him, to get herself out of the trouble that seemed to be brewing, and, very politely, said, “I’m very sorry for scalding you and for ruining your shirt. Of course, I’m sorry about your appointment as well, but I don’t see how I could...”

She never finished her sentence because she saw a naughty smile flourish on his lips that made her lose her train of thought.

“I think you owe me something and you can set it right by going on a date with me,” he finally specified his conditions in a tone that implied too many things that would better remain unsaid.

“A date with you.” she repeated automatically as if she weren’t able to grasp the concept.

“Yes, princess, a date,” he repeated in a tone that showed he meant it. “You know: that thing where we go somewhere, have something to eat, talk, that sort of stuff. It’s usually called a date. So, I want that: a date with you... Today. Not right this moment, I obviously can’t go anywhere without a shirt, but right after you go into that store over there and buy me another shirt. Don’t worry about it, though, I won’t ask you to pay for it. I’ll give you the money,” he waved his hand magnanimously, as if that were the problem.

“That won’t be an issue. I’m the reason you need a shirt, I can buy it,” Becka replied, offended by his condescending attitude.

“No need,” he dismissed her concern, took his wallet from his back pocket, and pulled a few bills out.



“Here, that should be enough,” he said giving her the money. “Now, go in, buy me a white shirt – keep in mind, white shirt, not blue, not black or green, or striped or whatever. Then we can go on our date.”

“No, I can’t,” she said stubbornly, with a shake of her head to make her refusal more evident and undeniable.

“Why not?” he asked, his face so rigid and serious as if it were set in stone. He didn’t seem to take her rejection too well. “As I said, you owe me. I can say you attacked me, you know.”

“Ha, good try!” she scoffed at him. “Attack by coffee! A deadly weapon! Don’t make me laugh. No one would believe that stupid thing and you know it full well. Everyone will see that it was a simple accident and nothing more.”

“So then, am I to understand then that you’re too good for the likes of me?” he frowned.

Becka scoffed again, and dismissed his silly, inconsequential words with a wave of her hand.

“Get serious! I haven’t even considered that. But since I don’t know a stitch about you or your life, it would be difficult to make such assumptions, don’t you think?”

“Is it my scar?” he asked peevishly now. “Do ‘stiches’ make you uncomfortable?”

She scoffed at him again, but refused to answer a question that she thought to be quite stupid and not worthy of her attention.

“You’re not legal, is that it?” he tried again, determined to get her to admit something.

“No, I am. I’m not jailbait, don’t you worry about that. Three months over nineteen already,” she replied, this time smiling warmly at him, which puzzled him a little more than her former, vague refusals.

“So? You have a boyfriend, then, and you won’t cheat on him,” he tried again. He’d already reached the point where he just wanted to find out the reason and end the conversation and walk away if she kept rejecting him. But finding out why was still a priority.

“No, I don’t. I do have a class right now and more later on. The point is that I really don’t want to miss any of them and I’m already so very late... But, if you still want to, then, I can see you in the afternoon...” she said and saw he was astonished she actually agreed to go out with him.

“And not because I owe you or anything, but because I’d like to see you again. I don’t owe you a thing! Just so we’re clear!”

His eyes searched her face thoroughly. He wanted to make sure that she wasn’t trying to string him along, but brushed it off after a second of thought. He was almost certain that she wouldn’t show up, but he didn’t have anything to lose, nor could he force her to date him. Anyone would have laughed if he said that he was attacked by a girl with a Styrofoam cup of coffee.

“All right,” he accepted. “When?”

“If you want it today, then it will have to be after four,” Becka answered cheerfully, visibly keen on the unexpected date.

“Dinner, at six?” he asked her.

“Why not? I do need to eat dinner.”

“This spot here, where we are now?” he asked again.

She nodded, a little amused by his way of asking questions, and turned to leave.

“Hey, you forgot my shirt!” he cried out after her.