

Chapter 2

It is useless for me to describe to you how terrible Violet, Klaus, and even Sunny felt in the time that followed. If you have ever lost someone very important to you, then you already know how it feels, and if you haven't, you cannot possibly imagine it. For the Baudelaire children, it was of course especially terrible because they had lost both their parents at the same time, and for several days they felt so miserable they could scarcely get out of bed. Klaus found he had little interest in books. The gears in Violet's inventive brain seemed to stop. And even Sunny, who of course was too young to really understand what was going on, bit things with less enthusiasm.

Of course, it didn't make things any easier that they had lost their home as well, and all their possessions. As I'm sure you know, to be in one's own room, in one's own bed, can often make a bleak situation a little better, but the beds of the Baudelaire orphans had been reduced to charred rubble. Mr. Poe had taken them to the remains of the Baudelaire mansion to see if anything had been unharmed, and it was terrible: Violet's microscope had fused together in the heat of the fire, Klaus's favourite pen had turned to ash, and all of Sunny's teething rings had melted. Here and there, the children could see traces of the enormous home they had loved: fragments of their grand piano, an elegant bottle in which Mr. Baudelaire kept brandy, the scorched cushion of the window seat where their mother liked to sit and read.

Their home destroyed, the Baudelaires had to recuperate from their terrible loss in the Poe household, which was not at all agreeable. Mr. Poe was scarcely at home, because he was very busy attending to the Baudelaire affairs, and when he was home he was often coughing so much he could barely have a conversation. Mrs. Poe purchased clothing for the orphans that was in grotesque colours, and itched. And the two Poe children-Edgar and Albert-were loud and obnoxious boys with whom the Baudelaires had to share a tiny room that smelled of some sort of ghastly flower.

But even given the surroundings, the children had mixed feelings when, over a dull dinner of boiled chicken, boiled potatoes and blanched-the word "blanched" here means "boiled"-string beans, Mr. Poe announced that they were to leave his household the next morning.

"Good," said Albert, who had a piece of potato stuck between his teeth. "Now we can get our room back. I'm tired of sharing it. Violet and Klaus are always moping around, and are never any fun."

"And the baby bites," Edgar said, tossing a chicken bone to the floor as if he were an animal in a zoo and not the son of a well-respected member of the banking community.

"Where will we go?" Violet asked nervously.

Mr. Poe opened his mouth to say something, but erupted into a brief fit of coughing. "I have made arrangements," he said finally, "for you to be raised by a distant relative of yours who lives on the other side of town. His name is Count Olaf."

Violet, Klaus, and Sunny looked at one another, unsure of what to think. On one hand, they didn't want to live with the Poes any longer. On the other hand, they had never heard of Count Olaf and didn't know what he would be like.

"Your parents' will," Mr. Poe said, "instructs that you be raised in the most convenient way possible. Here in the city, you'll be used to your surroundings, and this Count Olaf is the only relative who lives within the urban limits."

Klaus thought this over for a minute as he swallowed a chewy bit of bean. "But our parents never mentioned Count Olaf to us. Just how is he related to us, exactly?"

Mr. Poe sighed and looked down at Sunny, who was biting a fork and listening closely. "He is either a third cousin four times removed, or a fourth cousin three times removed. He is not your closest relative on the family tree, but he is the closest geographically. That's why—"

"If he lives in the city," Violet said, "why didn't our parents ever invite him over?"

"Possibly because he was very busy," Mr. Poe said. "He's an actor by trade, and often travels around the world with various theatre companies."

"I thought he was a count," Klaus said.

"He is both a count and an actor," Mr. Poe said. "Now, I don't mean to cut short our dinner, but you children have to pack up your things, and I have to return to the bank to do some more work. Like your new legal guardian, I am very busy myself."

The three Baudelaire children had many more questions for Mr. Poe, but he had already stood up from the table, and with a slight wave of his hand departed from the room. They heard him coughing into his handkerchief and then the front door creaked shut as he left the house.

"Well," Mrs. Poe said, "you three had better start packing. Edgar, Albert, please help me clear the table."

The Baudelaire orphans went to the bedroom and glumly packed their few belongings. Klaus looked distastefully at each ugly shirt Mrs. Poe had bought for him as he folded them and put them into a small suitcase. Violet looked around the cramped, smelly room in which they had been living. And Sunny crawled around solemnly biting each of Edgar and Albert's shoes, leaving small teeth marks in each one so she would not be forgotten. From time to time, the Baudelaire children looked at one another, but with their future such a mystery they could think of nothing to say. At bedtime, they tossed and turned all night, scarcely getting any sleep between the loud snoring of Edgar and Albert and their own worried thoughts. Finally, Mr. Poe knocked on the door and stuck his head into the bedroom.

"Rise and shine, Baudelaires," he said. "It's time for you to go to Count Olaf's."

Violet looked around the crowded bedroom, and even though she didn't like it, she felt very nervous about leaving. "Do we have to go right this minute?" she asked.

Mr. Poe opened his mouth to speak, but had to cough a few times before he began. "Yes you do. I'm dropping you off on my way to the bank, so we need to leave as soon as possible. Please get out of bed and get dressed," he said briskly. The word "briskly" here means "quickly, so as to get the Baudelaire children to leave the house."

The Baudelaire children left the house. Mr. Poe's automobile rumbled along the cobble-stone streets of the city toward the neighbourhood where Count Olaf lived. They passed horse-drawn carriages and motorcycles along Doldrum Drive. They passed the Fickle Fountain, an elaborately carved monument that occasionally spat out water in which young children played. They passed an enormous pile of dirt where the Royal Gardens once stood. Before too long, Mr. Poe drove his car down a narrow alley lined with houses made of pale brick and stopped halfway down the block.

"Here we are," Mr. Poe said, in a voice undoubtedly meant to be cheerful. "Your new home."

The Baudelaire children looked out and saw the prettiest house on the block. The bricks had been cleaned very well, and through the wide and open windows one could see an assortment of well-groomed plants. Standing in the doorway, with her hand on the shiny brass doorknob, was an older woman, smartly dressed, who was smiling at the children. In one hand she carried a flowerpot.

"Hello there!" she called out. "You must be the children Count Olaf is adopting."

Violet opened the door of the automobile and got out to shake the woman's hand. It felt firm and warm, and for the first time in a long while Violet felt as if her life and the lives of her siblings might turn out well after all. "Yes," she said. "Yes, we are. I am Violet Baudelaire, and this is my brother Klaus and my sister Sunny. And this is Mr. Poe, who has been arranging things for us since the death of our parents."

"Yes, I heard about the accident," the woman said, as everyone said how do you do. "I am Justice Strauss."

"That's an unusual first name," Klaus remarked.

"It is my title," she explained, "not my first name. I serve as a judge on the High Court."

"How fascinating," Violet said. "And are you married to Count Olaf?"

"Goodness me no," Justice Strauss said. "I don't actually know him that well. He is my next-door neighbour."

The children looked from the well-scrubbed house of Justice Strauss to the dilapidated one next door. The bricks were stained with soot and grime. There were

only two small windows, which were closed with the shades drawn even though it was a nice day. Rising above the windows was a tall and dirty tower that tilted slightly to the left. The front door needed to be repainted, and carved in the middle of it was an image of an eye. The entire building sagged to the side, like a crooked tooth.

“Oh!” said Sunny, and everyone knew what she meant. She meant, “What a terrible place! I don’t want to live there at all!”

“Well, it was nice to meet you,” Violet said to Justice Strauss.

“Yes,” said Justice Strauss, gesturing to her flowerpot. “Perhaps one day you could come over and help me with my gardening.”

“That would be very pleasant,” Violet said, very sadly. It would, of course, be very pleasant to help Justice Strauss with her gardening, but Violet could not help thinking that it would be more pleasant to live in Justice Strauss’s house, instead of Count Olaf’s. What kind of a man, Violet wondered, would carve an image of an eye into his front door?

Mr. Poe tipped his hat to Justice Strauss, who smiled at the children and disappeared into her lovely house. Klaus stepped forward and knocked on Count Olaf’s door, his knuckles rapping right in the middle of the carved eye. There was a pause, and then the door creaked open and the children saw Count Olaf for the first time.

“Hello, hello, hello,” Count Olaf said in a wheezy whisper. He was very tall and very thin, dressed in a grey suit that had many dark stains on it. His face was unshaven, and rather than two eyebrows, like most human beings have, he had just one long one. His eyes were very, very shiny, which made him look both hungry and angry. “Hello, my children. Please step into your new home, and wipe your feet outside so no mud gets indoors.”

As they stepped into the house, Mr. Poe behind them, the Baudelaire orphans realized what a ridiculous thing Count Olaf had just said. The room in which they found themselves was the dirtiest they had ever seen, and a little bit of mud from outdoors wouldn’t have made a bit of difference. Even by the dim light of the one bare lightbulb that hung from the ceiling, the three children could see that everything in this room was filthy, from the stuffed head of a lion which was nailed to the wall to the bowl of apple cores which sat on a small wooden table.

Klaus willed himself not to cry as he looked around.

“This room looks like it needs a little work,” Mr. Poe said, peering around in the gloom.

“I realize that my humble home isn’t as fancy as the Baudelaire mansion,” Count Olaf said, “but perhaps with a bit of your money we could fix it up a little nicer.”

Mr. Poe’s eyes widened in surprise, and his coughs echoed in the dark room before he spoke.

“The Baudelaire fortune,” he said sternly, “will not be used for such matters. In fact, it will not be used at all, until Violet is of age.”

Count Olaf turned to Mr. Poe with a glint in his eye like an angry dog. For a moment Violet thought he was going to strike Mr. Poe across the face. But then he swallowed-the children could see his Adam’s apple bob in his skinny throat-and shrugged his patchy shoulders.

“All right then,” he said. “It’s the same to me. Thank you very much, Mr. Poe, for bringing them here. Children, I will now show you to your room.”

“Good-bye, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny,” Mr. Poe said, stepping back through the front door. “I hope you will be very happy here. I will continue to see you occasionally, and you can always contact me at the bank if you have any questions.”

“But we don’t even know where the bank is,” Klaus said.

“I have a map of the city,” Count Olaf said. “Good-bye, Mr. Poe.”

He leaned forward to shut the door, and the Baudelaire orphans were too overcome with despair to get a last glimpse of Mr. Poe. They now wished they could all stay at the Poe household, even though it smelled. Rather than looking at the door, then, the orphans looked down, and saw that although Count Olaf was wearing shoes, he wasn’t wearing any socks. They could see, in the space of pale skin between his tattered trouser cuff and his black shoe, that Count Olaf had an image of an eye tattooed on his ankle, matching the eye on his front door. They wondered how many other eyes were in Count Olaf’s house, and whether, for the rest of their lives, they would always feel as though Count Olaf were watching them even when he wasn’t nearby.