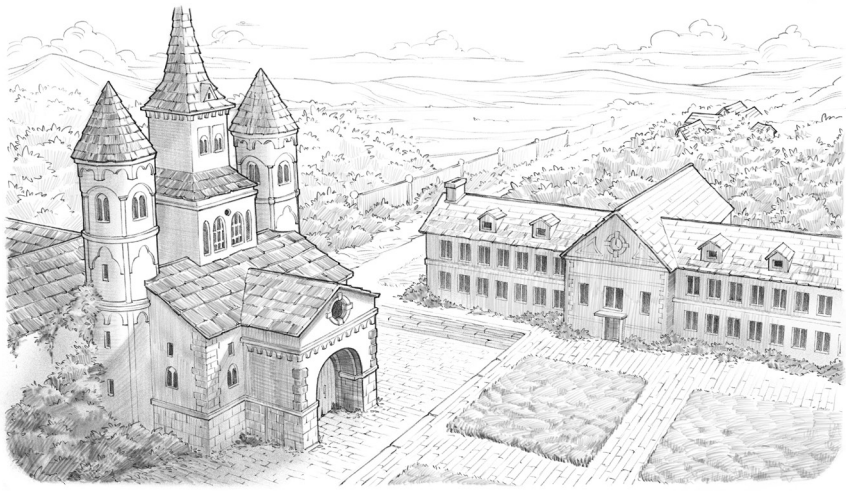

Splitterkristall
The Shadow Chronicles
Volume I
Excerpt
Michael S.V. Preis
vielsein



A new life

By the time the black Jaguar turned into Rosenstrasse, it was already dark, the weak light of a streetlamp casting a beam on the abandoned pavements every few metres.

Mira was sitting in the back seat of the car, buried in thought, watching the facades of the old houses with growing doubt. At the same time, her fingers were typing nervously on her mobile phone screen, the same album playing through her headphones for the umpteenth time. The sinister sounds of electronic music accompanied by the vocals of a low female voice underlined the heavy feeling inside her.

"Everything all right, love?" the voice of an older man broke through to her. Mira looked away from the window

and forward into the rearview mirror. The driver's dark eyes glanced briefly at her before facing the road again.

A pained smile flitted over Mira's lips. She reached for one of the small earphones and pulled it out. "How long until we're there?"

The man in the driver's seat took a quick look at the navigation display on the dashboard. "Twenty minutes, then we've made it."

"Then I still have a bit of time left," Mira observed glumly.

"I'm sure your mother only wants what's best for you."

"Whatever…" The earphone bud disappeared into Mira's ear, and she shifted her gaze back outside again. She really did like Nikolai, but not even he could help her right now. Her mother had decided to send her to this abandoned place. Away from her friends and far away from everything that could have given her a sense of normality. Mira was aware that things weren't always plain sailing with her. She was stubborn and had most definitely not always made her mother's life easy, but she could never have imagined that she'd go so far as to send her daughter away from home. To boarding school, somewhere in the middle of nowhere.

The song was getting to its instrumental climax, the electronic sounds accentuated by the fine playing of a violin. Heavy with emotion, the female voice sang: "You can't see me, and you never will. I'm outside the mirror, and the glass is about to break."

Mira let her head sink onto the cold window and stared into the night. At that moment, she felt really quite alone.

"You can't be serious." Nikolai's voice ripped her from her melancholy. "This useless thing is sending me down the same street again." The car slowed down, and Nikolai steered into a bus stop.

"What's wrong?" Mira leant forward.

"The stupid sat nav keeps sending me in circles. The street that is supposed to take us to the school doesn't seem to exist."

"What a shame. In that case, maybe we should just turn around and drive back."

"Stop it. That's not funny. We're already far too late because of the accident on the 48. The lady on the phone didn't sound exactly delighted when I told her that we'd be getting there after dark.

"So what?" Mira said back. She couldn't care less about what people's first impressions of her were in the place she would now be living, and she threw herself back into her seat.

"And you can't see anything on these ridiculous maps either," Nikolai carried on cursing, wildly tapping his mobile phone.

Mira could definitely have helped; she knew that Nikolai wasn't the most resourceful when it came to modern technology. Yet putting off the inevitable a little longer calmed her down.

“I’ll just make a call.” The cool night air drifted in as Nikolai pushed the driver’s door open.

Mira undid her seatbelt and leant forwards towards the screen. The blue arrow on the navigation system was clearly pointing left. Following a scrutinising look out of the window, Mira saw that rather than a street, the only thing to be seen was an old building. It fitted seamlessly into the other terraced houses either side of it, although the doors and windows were boarded up, and a “For sale” sign hung prominently on the little wall in the small front garden.

Mira stared at the display again in thought. Of course streets changed every now and again, and Nikolai most likely didn’t have the most up-to-date version on his phone. But this house didn’t look as though it had been built recently. It must have really been a mistake in the mapping data. A short flash of light turned Mira’s gaze back to the house. Had she just imagined it, or had someone just switched on a light behind the panels? Mira inspected the boarded-up windows. There it was again! A quick flicker on the top floor. Her heart started beating faster. Was there going to be something interesting here after all? She had run away from home several times in the last two years and had made friends on the street. That’s how she also knew that it made sense to find shelter with a roof for the colder times of the year. And empty old houses were a welcome camp for the night in that scene. Mira had always felt at home when she was with runaways -

like part of a real family. Something it seemed her mother would never understand. Mira felt the people there were less shallow, less arrogant than most of the people in her mother's world.

"We can get moving again," Nikolai got back in the car. "Must be a mistake in the sat nav. But I know the right way now."

The thought of there being a possibility to escape from school, should she not be able to bear it there, had awakened a glimmer of hope in Mira. As Nikolai went into reverse and drove out of the bus stop more energetically than he meant to, Mira's long, shoulder-length hair fell onto her face. The white streak that flashed through her hair had been there since birth. It was a pigment disorder, most people said. Mira had been subjected to a few stupid comments because of it, but she wasn't one to care about other people's opinions. While the car was driving back onto the road, Mira turned around again and took a last look at the house with the number 16 on it.

Nikolai and Mira went over two more crossings, past the "Leaving town" sign, and turned onto a country road. There weren't any street lamps anymore. A few minutes passed, then it went from country road to a bumpy, unsurfaced lane, which led straight into a bit of woodland. A glance at the sat nav told them that there was a big lake not far from the forest track, though you wouldn't have known

it in the dark. Anything around at all had to be left to the imagination when you looked out of the window. The golden autumn leaves falling to the ground that Mira had observed when they left sparkled all around in the blaze of the headlights. Mira normally looked forward to this time of year as the days got shorter and the air cooler. Yet right then, it only intensified her depressed state of mind. The drive through the forest dragged on for a good ten minutes before the dark weave of the treetops gave way again to the moonlight.

Mira could finally make out the words “House guests” and “P” for “Parking” on a sign that was lit up. The arrow next to it pointed right. Nikolai ignored the directions and steered the car over a gravel driveway up to an imposing pair of iron gates.

He put the window down, leaned out, and pressed the button on the intercom. A shrill sound rang out.

Mira felt a growing unrest building up inside her. There was no going back now. Not that that had ever really been an option, but at least the drive here had given her the chance to pretend it wasn’t all really happening. But it all felt very real now.

“Yes, hello, how can I help you?” sounded the distorted voice of a man through the intercom.

“Mira Rother, you’ve been expecting us…” Nikolai had barely finished his sentence when they heard a loud creaking and both gates opened very slowly inwards.

"Well he's a chatty chap," Nikolai joked, aiming it at Mira. Mira just shrugged her shoulders briefly. She didn't feel like joking. She felt her stomach tightening and started to feel a bit queasy.

The car passed through the gate and followed down the street, which quickly made a sharp bend right, past several garages on the left and greenhouses on the right. Nikolai and Mira then found themselves in a big square, bordered by a few different buildings, where Nikolai parked his Jaguar and switched off the engine.

Mira's gaze wandered. It was hard to recognise the buildings in their entirety out of the car. Mira took her earphones and her mobile and stuffed them both into her trouser pocket. Then she grabbed her coat, an oversized olive green anorak, breathed in deeply, and opened the door.

To her left, some wide stairs emerged in the darkness, leading to a forecourt. Three large, monumental towers belonging to a majestic church soared against the moonlight. It was a building made up of six open arches on each side and a large one in the middle. The entrance was surrounded by two sturdy columns. Although Mira wasn't at all religious, buildings like this did have a spellbinding effect on her. She let her gaze wander further. A long, light building stretched out directly in front of her. The entrance was reached through a porch with a short flight of stairs leading up to it. The main building was situated on the right and had a dark roof. A narrow tower with a round

clock rose directly above the entrance. To the left of the stairs, you could read the words “Cloister” and “Door”. A sign reading “Boarding School Entrance” had been put up underneath it.

Nikolai had come over to Mira. “Come on, let’s go inside. It’s pretty cold out here.” He gave her a friendly pat on the shoulder. She nodded tentatively. Her legs felt heavy walking up the six stone steps to the boarding school entrance. The burning sensation in her stomach was getting stronger with every step. At the top of the stairs there was another short flat area in the building, with a bronze door at the end, flanked by arches.

As soon as Mira and Nikolai reached the door, it creaked open loudly. An older man appeared, eyeing up the two latecomers sternly.

“The Rother Family?” he greeted them curtly, followed by a: “Follow me, please.”

Mira darted a questioning look at Nikolai. But he simply raised his eyebrows briefly before trying to keep up with the man.

They crossed the entrance hall together and then turned left into a long corridor. The dark parquet flooring was made up of one-by-one metre squares, fitted so that the grain was always offset. The walls were dressed in a rough, ivory-white stone. There were windows interspersed between the pillars at regular intervals, and opposite them were paintings of old men, evidently priests or cardinals. Mira didn’t know

very much about that sort of thing. Where on earth had her mother dumped her? Mira didn't even know this place existed until now. The only certainty to come out of their last big argument was that Mira's mother was going to send her to boarding school. But no one said a word about where it was going to be. The fact that her mother had kept her decision to bring Mira to a place somewhere in the middle of the forest from her was, Mira decided, a mean attempt of her mother's to assert power over her daughter. Sometimes Mira thought her mum must actually hate her. Although this thought did seem a little harsh to Mira too. But just then it was hard for her to believe anything to the contrary.

The corridor was separated by a construction made of glass and wood, with a door in the middle of it. The older man opened it and let Mira and Nikolai step into the hallway behind it.

"Pretty impressive," Nikolai tried some small talk, but the old man just let out an incomprehensible grunt. "I mean, it's quite big," Nikolai added.

"The headmistress's office is just over there," the man muttered. He finally came to a stop in front of an unlikely, inconspicuous wooden door on the right of the hallway and knocked.

"Come in," sounded a female voice behind the door.

The interior was clearly an office. Inside, a solid timber desk was framed by ceiling-high shelves and cupboards. The furniture was antique and the air was filled with the

smell of old wood and paper. There weren't any windows. An uplighter, standing right behind the desk, gave the place some light, its modern look not quite in keeping with the overall impression of the room.

Sitting behind the desk was an older lady, her short, grey hair combed straight back. Her glasses were sitting right at the end of her thin nose, making her gaunt face look extraordinarily severe.

"Thank you very much, August. Do go to bed. I'll take care of our new arrival."

The headmistress beckoned Nikolai and Mira over whilst the man left the room without a goodbye.

"Good evening, Mr Mazurek, Miss Rother. Please take a seat." She pointed at the two chairs standing in front of the desk. "First of all I'd like to point out that I do not appreciate tardiness, although I did notice that you contacted us in good time, meaning we were at least prepared for it."

"Please let me express my sincerest apologies again. As I said on the phone, there was an accident on our route, Nikolai tried to apologise.

"Let's leave it at that," the headmistress nodded briefly and turned to look at Mira. "My name is Mrs Diekmann. I'm the headmistress of this historic institution, and I wish you a very warm welcome to our school. Because it's so late already…" looking down at the clock on the wall confirmed that it was already just after 11 pm, "We'll postpone the full induction to tomorrow morning. School doesn't start until

10 am for you. I expect you to be in my office at 7:30 am sharp, Miss Rother."

Mira was overwhelmed by the whole situation. It all felt like a film happening in front of her eyes, one in which she was unable to take over the story. She was used to controlling things, even if - or perhaps because of - the very fact that her cheekiness had often led her to some tricky situations. But what was happening here escaped her control.

"Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, 7:30," Mira stammered.

"Well, Miss Rother. Now I would kindly ask you to get your luggage and meet me in the entrance hall, and then I'll show you to your room. Will you find the way?"

"Yes, thank you very much," Nikolai jumped in, thanked the headmistress, and left the office with Mira.

"Everything ok?" he wanted to know, once they were alone again.

"No, nothing's ok! What a load of bullshit!" it all suddenly burst out of Mira. Her tension, her fears about everything here, and her anger towards her mother. "What am I doing here, Nikolai? What the hell is this? I do not want to stay here!" Mira had tears in her eyes. She hated it when she cried, but she just couldn't hold it back.

"Oh, love. I know. I'm so sorry. If I could…" He tried to take her in his arms, but she pushed him away.

"Leave me alone." Clenching her hands into fists, she

ran off. Through the partition door, down the corridor all the way to the entrance hall, tearing the bronze door open with one hefty swing. The cold night air hit her. She tried to slam the door shut behind her but it didn't work. The mechanics of the door were designed to make the door fall quietly closed on its own.

"Stupid thing! Even that doesn't work!" Mira shouted at the door and kicked the metal. She stopped briefly. All she wanted was to carry on running. But if she was being completely honest with herself, she knew that running through the forest in the middle of the night wouldn't get her very far.

By the time the front door opened again and Nikolai caught up with Mira, she was already sitting on the steps, staring down at her worn-out Converses in silence.

"There you are. I was worried you were up to something silly." Nikolai sat down next to her. "What a shit show. But maybe it won't be so bad after all. At least you might meet some new people here."

"Well isn't that just great. Probably the exact same sort of elitist idiots as at the other schools. Nothing but snobs and spoiled children."

"Why don't you just wait before ruining it for yourself." And if it really is as bad as all that, you know where I am. Then I promise I'll speak to your mother. And now off with you, otherwise we'll both catch our deaths sitting on these cold stairs."

Resigned, Mira stood up and trotted to the car. The boot jumped open and she grabbed hold of her backpack. Nikolai carried the heavy bag with the clothes in it. They made their way back up to the entrance area together where Headmistress Diekmann was waiting as promised.

"Follow me, please."

The hall was a good twenty metres long. At the other end, there was a double door with glass inserts in it, clearly leading to a courtyard. It was surrounded by two wide staircases, winding up and meeting at the top on a common landing.

"The common rooms are downstairs. Dorms are on the upper floors. Teaching staff, apart from those who live off-site, have their living quarters in the west wing. That's also where the classrooms are," the headmistress explained while showing Mira and Nikolai out.

"Seems quite old already," Nikolai thought aloud. Realising that the headmistress was looking at him sceptically, he quickly added: "Please don't take it the wrong way, I mean in a good way."

"Indeed. A historically significant estate. The cloister was built in 1903," Mrs Diekmann explained, after they had reached the top floor. "Of course it's been renovated several times every now and again over the years. Until a few years ago the resident monks here were still living in the rooms. The buildings over there are still run by them today." She gestured through a glass door, behind which, as on the ground floor, there was a glimpse of a courtyard.

Mira could make out the front of another big building at the bottom of the garden in the moonlight.

"Crossing over into most of those areas is strictly forbidden for teachers and pupils - unless they're planning on joining the Church."

Mira looked at the headmistress in amazement. Was that a hint at a glimmer of humour? Mrs Diekmann had not given off the impression of being a particularly funny person, and she didn't bat an eyelid.

"Anyway, let's go on. It's late enough as it is." The headmistress turned away from the glass door and pointed in the other direction. "Dorms for the boys on the left, girls on the right. We attach great importance to separating boys and girls."

"It just gets better and better…" Mira murmured.

"Did you say something, young lady?"

"Never mind."

The headmistress opened the door to the right wing. There was a long corridor behind it. This one was less elegantly furnished and considerably narrower than the one downstairs. The floor was brightly tiled; on it lay a long red carpet that looked noticeably worn in several places. On the right-hand side of the corridor, there was a row of doors next to each other. Each one had a golden sign with a number on it. Opposite them were windows. Round lamps hung from the ceiling from long sticks that threw a weak light onto the hallway.

“This is your room,” Mrs Diekmann pointed at door number 132. “Please be quiet when you go in, your roommate will most likely be asleep already.”

“My roommate?” Mira looked at Nikolai in utter dismay. “They’re twin rooms. Always two to a room. Didn’t you know?” Mrs Diekmann raised an eyebrow. Mira was boiling with rage. Her mother had kept her in the dark about that too.

“In any case, before I bid you goodnight, I must ask you to hand me over your mobile phone.”

That was it! Who did she think she was? “No! I most certainly will not give you my mobile.” Defiantly, Mira turned to her side.

“Not with that tone, young lady. We have clear rules here and I’m horrified that your parents don’t seem to have talked to you about that beforehand.”

“My mother.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“It was my mother - not my parents. And I will not be giving you my mobile.” Mira persisted. Nikolai attempted to reconcile the situation: “Could you perhaps make an exception? It’s late and we’re all tired.”

A sigh could be heard coming from the headmistress. Given it’s so late and the unfortunate circumstances I am prepared to postpone this talk until tomorrow.”

Mira was taken aback. She was just starting to get warmed up, ready to carry on this argument.

"Then I hope you have a good first night," Mrs Diekmann went on suddenly. "I'll see you tomorrow morning." "And you, Mr Mazurek, I wish you a good journey home."

"Thank you. Good night to you too," Nikolai answered. Mira just twisted her lips into a brief forced smile.

The headmistress left the dorm area through the door purposefully, back to the staircase, leaving Nikolai and Mira alone.

"Don't say it!" she warned him, seeing his worried look. "I've got myself into enough of a tizz today. I'll go into this stupid room and then see what's in store for me tomorrow."

Nikolai couldn't help but smile. "That's the spirit."

"Are you driving straight back?" Mira asked, thinking about the fact that Nikolai now had a several-hour journey ahead of him.

"I'll make sure I get a hotel room somewhere. It's been a long day and I do not want to end up in a ditch. I'm exhausted." Nikolai beckoned Mira over. "Well, come here. Let me hug you. Look after yourself. And if you need anything - call me."

Mira gratefully accepted Nikolai's invitation. In all the unfairness and chaos of this world it felt good knowing she had a few constants at least. Unlike most of Mira's mother's other employees, Nikolai had been with them for many years already and had won a place in Mira's heart. Even if he wasn't really a father substitute, he was a good friend at least.

Mira felt her eyes tearing up again. She quickly pulled away from Nikolai's arms and wiped her eyes on her sleeve. "Right, enough of all this sentimental stuff now. Get home safely. I'll be in touch."

"Take care," Nikolai briefly raised his hand to say goodbye.

When he had disappeared from sight, Mira opened the door very slightly, took a last deep breath, and stepped inside.

As expected, the room was dark.

"No mobile," Mira thought gloomily, putting her suitcase next to the door and reaching into her pocket. "How else am I supposed to be able to see anything?"

Following a short swipe of the screen and a click of the torch symbol, the room lit up with the mobile's white light.

There were two beds against the wall, on the left and right respectively. In between them there was a desk and chair. The wardrobes were directly in front of the beds. Immediately next to the door Mira could make out a small alcove with a basin and mirror in it. She could smell sweet perfume in the air.

Mira curiously got closer to the bed on the left. So that's where her roommate was sleeping. You couldn't make out very much. The girl was lying on her side, facing the wall, her long, light hair shining in the mobile phone light.

"Turn that off and lie down," she murmured all of a sudden.

“I need to get changed,” Mira replied tersely, turning around and walking to her suitcase.

“Then come on and hurry up, will you! I want to sleep,” said the girl, annoyed.

“All right.” Mira rolled her eyes. She quickly opened her suitcase and rummaged around in it. It took her a moment to finally find her XXL sleeping jumper, comfy cotton jogging trousers, and her toothbrush and toothpaste. One look at the floor told her that she had quite a bit to sort out tomorrow - which wasn’t particularly new to her. Being tidy wasn’t exactly Mira’s strong suit.

An annoyed groan confirmed that the process wasn’t moving fast enough for her roommate, but Mira pretended not to hear it. She got changed and then inched to the basin in her socks to brush her teeth.

“Are you finally done?” the girl clearly couldn’t resist making more acid remarks.

But Mira didn’t worry about it, she washed her mouth out, and wiped it dry on her sleeve. Having got into bed, she grabbed her mobile and switched the torch off. Then She opened the music app and chose the album she’d already listened to a few dozen times on the way there. She hesitated for a second, then tapped on the photo app. She felt a stabbing in her chest as her finger brushed over the ‘Favourites’ album. The only pictures in the folder were two polaroid photos. Both pictures were of a young man. He was alone in one of them. In the other, there was a little

girl with a light streak in her dark hair sitting on his lap. The photo was of Mira and her father. “Why did you have to leave me alone?” she whispered.

The screen got darker, but Mira didn’t react. It wasn’t until the light had completely gone out that she sank back into the bed with her earphones in her ears and closed her eyes.

Every beginning ...

"For crying out loud…" murmured Mira, turning onto her side, restless. In all the excitement of the last hours she had completely forgotten something: no one had told her where the toilets were, and she had to retaliate now. Sleeping was out of the question. She had to do a wee so badly.

She took her mobile and pushed the duvet to the side. She just used the weak light of the screen this time. Her roommate's regular breathing made her think that she was asleep by now - and Mira wanted to keep it that way. She crept quietly into the corridor on the soles of her feet. The icy cold of the tiles went through her thin socks to her feet.

Luckily, the lights seemed to be on all night in the corridor, meaning Mira could put her mobile back in her pocket again.

Mira was sure that there must be a bathroom here somewhere. At least the headmistress had mentioned the fact that girls and boys were strictly separated - implying that both must have bathrooms too. She didn't have that many options

to choose from; the only thing to the left was the stairway, so she carried on down the corridor. Realising with every step that she was starting to get really quite desperate, she moved faster. The corridor split into two again at the end. On the right were more dorm areas. Fortunately, Mira found herself in front of a door with “Shower/WC” on it. Feeling grateful, she pushed the heavy door handle down and scurried inside. In the front area there were basins attached to the wall with a sign just behind them pointing to the showers, changing rooms, and the longed-for toilets.

Feeling very relieved, Mira washed her hands a few minutes later. She found herself gazing absently into the mirror, lost in thought. Her facial features, normally soft, seemed tired and exhausted, a state that surely had a lot to do with the time of day, but also the tiring last few weeks. Mira’s relationship with her mother had reached a new low. They had always fought a lot. It was especially since Mira’s father had died in a lab accident almost five years ago that it had got a lot worse. Mira’s mother had always been very focused on her career. She was director at a private research institute, which was where Mira’s father had also worked part time, and so she was rarely at home - they had never had the chance to build a real mother-daughter relationship. The complete opposite from her connection with her father. Things changed a lot when he died. So Mira’s mother had taken a clear step back and worked a lot

from home. Mira was constantly very aware, however, that it wasn't what her mother would really have wanted in life. Moreover, her mother had given her the feeling that Mira was responsible for things changing for the worse. Her mother could never have given her what Mira really needed throughout that difficult time - someone who took her in their arms, comforted her, and helped her get through her loss.

Mira let cold water run through her folded palms and plunged her head into it. The coolness was comforting, and the slight burning sensation on her skin chased away her nostalgia. Without a towel to hand, she dried her face on her sleeve.

Back in the corridor, she hurried to her room so she could get into the warm bed. She was halfway there when something steered her attention to one of the windows. She could see a bright pillar of light in the dark of the night. It extended like a long ribbon somewhere in the distance from the ground up to the sky, meaning Mira couldn't make out where it ended. She had seen something like that before in front of clubs, laser beams directed at the sky, but this light was different. It was so bright, as if Mira were standing right in front of it, and it didn't get any dimmer the higher it reached. Mira imagined that she could feel the warmth of the light on her face, which was impossible of course. There were probably several kilometres between the source of the column of light and her. While Mira was still thinking about

the strange phenomenon, the light flickered and then died away again. Mira stared out into the dark a bit longer, perplexed, then she pulled herself away from the window and carried on pensively but without any further interruptions.

The next morning began for Mira just as chaotically as the previous day had ended. She was woken up by a loud clatter, and she needed a moment to orientate herself before she realised where she was. She looked at her watch quickly and saw it was already after seven.

"Fuck!" Mira cursed loudly. "Overslept. Shit, why didn't I set an alarm?"

She could hear someone clearing their throat. Only now did Mira remember that she wasn't alone in the room.

End of the reading sample

Find out what happens next in the first volume of Splitterkristall from December!

"Imagine you open the door to a mysterious magic world. Would you close it again?"

15-year-old Mira is absolutely horrified: her mother has suddenly decided to send her off to boarding school, miles away from anywhere. Their relationship may have been strained for years now, but living a life of strict rules away from the city is unthinkable for a free spirit like Mira!

It comes as no surprise, then, that she quickly becomes known as a notorious troublemaker at school. Discovering a mysterious glow in an abandoned house, however, sparks her curiosity. What's behind the mysterious light? Surely it can't hurt to take a quick look ...





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