

Dear Amber Prescott,

Congratulations! It is our pleasure to inform you that you have been selected as a recipient of the Brewster Town Hall Scholarship in the amount of \$20,000. We commend you for your musical talents and contributions to the community.

To celebrate your achievements, we invite you to dine with Mayor Timothy Meinot and the other five scholarship recipients on Tuesday, February 4th, at 7 p.m. at the Chesterfield.

Again, congratulations, and we look forward to meeting you at the Chesterfield.

Sincerely,

Scholarship Chair

Brewster Town Hall Scholarship Committee

I spent the last hour wondering if I would die tonight.

You can drop dead from a heart attack at seventeen, right? The prospect of tonight's dinner party made my heart ricochet off my rib cage so fiercely I was convinced my days were numbered.

What's so bad about a dinner party? Let's start with the fact that my boyfriend, Robbie, was also invited to this little shindig, and we were on shaky ground. Our post-graduation plans were at odds, to say the least—and as senior year dwindled, the tension mounted. It didn't help that soon-to-be-valedictorian Diego scored an invite, too. Our friendship had recently morphed into something else—something that made my cheeks flush, my nerves tingle, and my heart swell like a submerged sponge.

Putting the three of us in the same room could be catastrophic. If Robbie suspected I liked the class nerd, he'd introduce Diego to his fist in front of everyone. I had bigger issues with Robbie than another boy. But strike a match in a room doused with lighter fluid, and you're bound to get burned. If I were even slightly capable of hiding my emotions, I might get through the night unscathed. Unfortunately, I'm a crap liar, so splitsville with a side of bruising was basically inevitable.

Yep. A heart attack was imminent. I just had to get tonight over with, and everything would work out.

Hopefully.

I cranked up the *Harry Potter* score in an attempt to quell my nerves and ransacked my wardrobe, quickly determining that everything I owned looked hideous. I could either go ultra-casual or concert black (or funeral chic, as Sasha liked to call it) and either option was downright depressing.

After most of my clothes were heaped into a pile on the floor—much to the delight of my cat, Mittens, who swiftly nestled in—I discovered an old emerald sequined number I wore to a piano recital years ago. The dress now ended well above my knees, but it was the only garment within reach that wasn't a complete waste of space.

"Amber, you look great!" Mom said as I raced up the stairs from my basement bedroom, tugging at the dress's hem.

"You're only saying that because you're my mom."

"Don't get all self-deprecating on me." She scrunched one of my red curls, which already threatened to go limp. Her own red, stick-straight hair was cut in a typical mom-bob. "You look sophisticated. Though that dress could stand to be a little longer—"

"Is Robbie here yet?" He was already ten minutes late. I peered out the front door's stained-glass window, searching for his black SUV while fidgeting with my amethyst bracelet. Mittens rubbed against my ankles, getting his white fur all over my black velvet peep-toe shoes.

"You're not allowed to date 'til you're forty-seven," Dad shouted from his office down the hall.

"Is this a bad time to point out we've been dating for like a year?" I said. Even Mom mirrored my exaggerated eye roll.

Just as I rattled off a text to Robbie, his headlights flooded the driveway. I dropped my phone into my purse, and Mom handed me a jacket and kissed my cheek before I could bolt out the door. "Text me when you get there."

"God, Mom." I wiggled into the coat. "In a few months, I'll be in college. Should I text you whenever I go anywhere then, too?"

"That'd be great, thanks for offering!" Her eyes twinkled mischievously, though with the flicker of sadness that never really left them. "Love you."

"Bye!" I called over my shoulder as I raced into the unseasonably muggy night and down the front walk, my unzipped coat flapping behind me. Mom wasn't *exactly* overprotective. She let me do whatever, as long as I constantly let her know I was still alive.

I couldn't say she didn't have a good reason.

Robbie tossed his baseball mitt into the backseat. "Hey, babe—"

"Fifteen minutes late, Robbie? Really?" I slammed the passenger door and clicked on my seat belt in one fluid motion. I wasn't usually one to pick a fight, but my nerves had me on edge.

"Amber. Chill. Practice went a little late." His go-to excuse. Robbie leaned over and kissed me, the sweet scent of soap and hair gel flooding my senses. He gripped the back of my headrest and backed down the driveway. Mom gave a little wave from the living room window, and the curtains fluttered shut as Robbie floored the gas. "Besides, I had

to stop at home to grab your present.” He reached behind my seat without taking his eyes from the road, grabbed a small box, and tossed it onto my lap.

“My . . . present? For what?”

“Open it.” He grinned, the corners of his gray eyes crinkling as dimples creased his cheeks. Curious, I plucked open the red ribbon securing the small white box and found a charm bracelet inside. Several tiny silver music notes dangled from an amethyst-beaded band. “I thought it’d go with your other bracelet.” He motioned to my grandmother’s amethyst bracelet on my right wrist.

My anger dissipated, replaced by a confusing mix of joy and dread. “But what’s this for?”

“What, I can’t get something nice for my girl for no reason?” His smile widened—that infectious grin that always made me feel like I was somehow the brightest star in his sky. It seemed genuine. Everything about Robbie was genuine. He wore his heart on his sleeve, which was a blessing and a curse—I never had to wonder how much he loved me . . . or how annoyed he was with me, especially recently. But the musical theme of his gift caught me off guard.

My music had been a sore point for us lately. Robbie wanted me to follow him and his baseball scholarship to Georgia Tech, as if ditching my dreams of studying music at USC or Berklee wasn’t that big a sacrifice. “But you can play music anywhere,” he’d insisted. A couple of months ago we had a huge fight about it, and he convinced me to apply to Georgia Tech, suggesting we put off the discussion until I heard back from them.

Then I got my acceptance letter. That’s when I knew we were going to break up.

I might’ve fallen in love with Robbie, but I’d been in love with music for as long as I could remember. I couldn’t let him tempt me into abandoning my dreams. Despite my resolve, I hadn’t figured out how to break the news.

But this was a shocking turn of events. I ran my fingers over the music note charms. It was such a thoughtful gift. Did he finally see my point of view? Was he willing to compromise?

As if on cue, he said, “I know we haven’t talked about school and stuff in a while.” School and stuff. How neatly all of my musical ambitions could be packed into one word. Stuff. He smoothed back his short dirty-blond hair. “Have you heard from Georgia Tech yet?”

My shoulders tensed. “No. Not yet.” Fortunately, the darkness obscured my flushed cheeks. I was so pale, my own blood always ratted me out: *Liar*.

“Well, it has to be soon. I want to be with you.” Keeping one hand on the steering wheel, he entwined his fingers with mine. “We can figure this out together. I love you, Amber.”

“I . . . me, too.” Oh, God. What should I do? He kissed my hand and released it, and I fumbled with the clasp on my new bracelet, securing it on my left wrist. I leaned against the window, watching identical two-story colonials whip by. We drove the rest of the way in silence until fat raindrops pelted the car, drowning out my thoughts.

“Ah, crap.” I zipped my jacket under the seat belt. Just like washing a car, using a curling iron on my hair pretty much guaranteed rain. If we moved to California, I could singlehandedly resolve the drought crisis.

The corner of Robbie’s mouth quirked up. “It’s only water.”

“Explain that to my hair, would you?” I brushed aside my bangs.

Robbie glanced at me as he slowed in front of the Chesterfield. “Hey. You look beautiful. Hair included.”

My cheeks flushed again. “Thanks.” I shook away my anxiety and scanned the street for a parking spot. The Chesterfield was an upscale restaurant in the basement of an old warehouse converted into high-end retail space. On the weekends, locals bustled around this area pretending they lived in a vibrant city, when in reality, three square blocks constituted our entire “downtown.”

There was no fooling anyone. We were lame suburbanites, through and through.

Fortunately, it was a Tuesday, and there were plenty of spots around the corner. Once Robbie parked, I unclipped my seat belt and bolted out the door. I held my hood over my head as I rounded the corner, careful to avoid any puddles. The sidewalk was deserted except for two middle-aged women dashing to a nearby car under huge black umbrellas. I hustled down the steep steps to the Chesterfield’s front entrance without waiting for Robbie to catch up.

God forbid he rush to anything besides home plate.

I shook the water from my jacket in front of the host podium. Beyond, crimson velvet booths lined either side of the dimly lit room, and a bar stretched across the opposite wall. A pyramid of wine and liquor bottles towered behind the bar, light streaming out between them to create a halo effect. Classical music flitted from speakers dotting the ceiling above the tables.

Empty tables.

The room was deserted.

“Are you sure this thing’s at the Chesterfield?” Robbie asked from behind me.

“Yeah. Look.” I pointed to a sign taped to the host podium. *Brewster Town Hall Scholarship Event in the Winona Room*. An arrow pointed to the right. “This way.”

“Where the hell is everyone?”

My heart fluttered as I stepped further into the room. “Probably in the Winona Room, where they’re supposed to be.”

“No, I mean everyone else—”

“Come on, let’s go.” *Let’s get this over with*. I grabbed Robbie’s calloused hand and led him across the empty dining room. A familiar throaty laugh floated through an open doorway next to the bar.

I walked in to find a smaller but equally elegant room. A long mahogany dining table stood over an intricate red Oriental rug, which covered most of the gleaming, almost black hardwood floor. Since most of the room was underground, there were only two small windows nestled close to the ceiling. Matching mahogany sideboards spanned the walls under the windows and next to the door. Two china cabinets filled with glasses and trinkets sandwiched a red brick fireplace on the left, reflected in a giant brass mirror hanging on the opposite wall. Faux candles flickered in a brass chandelier hanging low from the center of the ceiling. The room felt medieval, and positively claustrophobic.

Sasha Harris and Diego Martin were already seated, laughing over some joke that must have had nothing to do with her perpetual need to one-up him. Robbie coughed, and Sasha paused mid-chuckle, peeking around the back of her chair. Spotting me, her eyes lit up. "Hey, lady!" She zipped around her chair and stretched out her cheek, kissing the air on either side of my face. "Thank God you guys won this, too. Otherwise tonight would be such a drag," she said under her breath.

Sasha was everything everyone else wanted to be—cheer captain, drama club director, class president, and potential valedictorian. "Sleep" wasn't exactly in her vocabulary. In a bizarre twist of fate, she also happened to be my best friend at the moment. Tonight she wore a form-fitting strapless red dress, and her shining chestnut hair flowed in loose waves over her bare shoulders, not a single strand out of place.

"Getting to meet the mayor is kind of cool, though," I said. "Is he here yet?"

She released Robbie from a hug. "Nope, not yet. But he's the opposite of cool, just FYI. I mean, come on. Who grows up wanting to be mayor of Podunk?"

I shrugged off my damp jacket, hung it on the ornate coatrack next to the door, and smoothed back my bangs. The curls I'd coaxed into my hair already fell limp. Damn rain. "Ick. It's like an oven in here."

"Ugh, I know." Sasha flapped her hand like a fan. "C'mon, you're next to me." She pointed to the seat closest to the door. Eight high-backed chairs surrounded the table—three on each side, and one on either end. On my empty gold-rimmed plate sat a place card for *Ms. Prescott*. Hers had one for *Ms. Harris*. Fancy. I pulled out my tall chair and glanced across the table, locking eyes with Diego.

Oh, here we go.

Strands of black hair fell over his forehead, and as he held my gaze with his intense copper eyes, a smile slid onto his lips. "Hi, Amber." My mind flashed back to a few weeks ago, when those eyes were mere inches from mine. Let's face it—you could pretty much fry an egg on my face.

"Hi." The word came out like a breathy wisp of wind. I set my purse on the floor and sat, silently cursing myself for being so obvious. After all, nothing ever happened between us. It almost did a few weeks ago. But almost doesn't count.

"Congratulations," he said. "Let me guess . . . you won because of your music?"

I laughed nervously, fidgeting with the music note charms on my new bracelet. “Yeah. Mr. Torrente must’ve nominated me. I mean, I’ve basically been teaching his orchestra class for the last four years,” I rambled.

Oh, God. If Robbie caught wind of the weirdness between me and Diego, tonight would be a nightmare. I faked a cough and covered my mouth, trying to hide my flaming cheeks. Thankfully, Robbie was oblivious as he fiddled with his phone next to the coatrack, shaking his head.

“Can you believe they’d give Diego one of the scholarships?” Sasha whispered when Diego pulled out his phone. “Twenty thousand dollars must be chump change to him now.”

As if being ridiculously smart wasn’t enough, Diego was sort of a celebrity in our school. He’d invented a weird sponge that changed colors when it got wet, and was on the show *Bid or Bust*—a reality TV show where inventors try to win funding from wealthy entrepreneurs—the summer before our freshman year. After getting bids from all of the investors and securing a deal, he and his dad sold millions of SpongeClowns.

“Well, he’s *probably* going to be valedictorian,” I whispered back.

Sasha tilted her head and grinned, though there was fire in her eyes. “Not if I have anything to say about it.”

“I can’t get a signal in here.” Robbie took his seat next to me, unbuttoning the top button of his plaid shirt. “Is it just me, or is it like ninety degrees in here?”

I reached for my water and took a small sip. “Yeah, it’s hot.”

“Ugh,” Sasha groaned, and I followed her gaze over my shoulder—Priya Gupta walked in, scanned the room, and visibly cringed. Saying that Priya used to be my best friend was an understatement. She’d been like a sister to me. She avoided my gaze now, casting her doe eyes to the floor as she hung her jacket and tugged down the loose sleeves of her white boho dress. When Robbie greeted her, she merely grunted in reply. Grief settled on my chest like a pile of stones, but I remained silent as Priya took her seat next to Diego. They muttered their hellos, and she busied herself examining her fingernails.

“Hi, Priya,” Sasha said in a singsong voice.

Priya’s jaw set in a rigid line. “Hi.” I smiled at her, but she wouldn’t look at me. My throat constricted. Would she ever talk to me again? Didn’t she know how much I missed her?

“Congratulations! I had no idea you qualified for a scholarship,” said Sasha. Priya was no valedictorian, but her grades were stellar.

Priya quirked her eyebrow. “Oh, you mean you cared who else would win?”

Sasha’s smile faltered. “What’s that supposed—”

I elbowed Sasha. "Leave it." She scrunched her eyebrows at me. "You don't want the scholarship people to hear you fighting." Sasha nodded, and Priya made a *psh* noise and went back to scrutinizing her fingernails.

Diego met my gaze again, and my insides pooled into a puddle around my feet. Just then, Robbie reached for my hand under the table, and I jolted. He laughed. "Didn't mean to scare you." His hand was cool despite the warmth of the room, and he kissed my cheek as Diego watched. Oh, God. How was I going to get through this night?

"I'm starving," said Priya, fishing through her purse. "Ugh, I forgot to bring a granola bar."

Diego grabbed his backpack from the floor. "I have a candy bar somewhere in here. Want it?"

She waved him off. "No, no, it's fine. Thanks, though." As she eyed the ornate silver platters dotting the table, Scott Coleman—stoner extraordinaire—loped into the room. He wore his standard outfit—a black leather jacket over a black T-shirt and torn jeans, topped off with a black beanie.

Sasha gaped. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Same as the rest of you, methinks," said Scott. He grinned at Priya, who offered a shy smile in return.

"No way, man." Robbie scrunched his nose. Scott reeked of cigarette smoke. "You won a *scholarship*?"

Scott tugged at the collar of his leather jacket. "Seems so."

"Bullshit," said Robbie, and Sasha clucked her tongue.

Wow. Nobody was going to get along tonight, were they? "Guys. Be nice," I said, trying to lighten the mood. "Maybe he's a closet genius."

Scott winked at me. "Hey, Red. What's shakin'?"

"Bacon." This had been our customary greeting ever since we used to play together as kids, before we realized how little we had in common.

He nodded approvingly as he extracted a folded letter from his pocket. "I got this letter. It said to come here. So here I am."

"But how'd you qualify?" said Sasha, smiling sweetly. "Do you have some secret talent you've been hiding from us?"

"Nope." Scott shrugged and moseyed along the table. "But who the hell cares?" He plopped in the empty seat next to Priya and unwrapped a stick of gum. "Twenty kay is twenty kay. Besides, I had no plans tonight, and I like free food, so no rind off my orange."

Sasha cringed. "That's not an expression—"

The massive oak door behind me slammed shut with such force it reverberated through my chest, and the glasses in the china cabinets rattled. Everyone jumped, and a few people gasped.

“Wind tunnel?” I scooted my chair back and stood to open the door as thunder clapped outside.

“Oh, right.” Robbie’s shoulders relaxed. “The storm.”

As I squeezed past Sasha, she tossed her hair back and focused on Scott again. “Anyway, they don’t just arbitrarily hand out twenty thousand dollars.” Leaning on her armrest, she perched her chin on her fist, like the mere concept of Scott winning anything was utterly fascinating. “Like, Robbie has baseball, Amber’s a music prodigy, and I’m the director of the drama club. There has to be *some* reason you won.”

“Yeah?” Scott’s lips slapped with each chew. “Well, I’m director of the give-zero-fucks club. Maybe that counts for something.”

“Uh . . . guys?” I jiggled the doorknob. It turned in my grip, but the door wouldn’t budge. “I think the door’s stuck.”

“Seriously?” Priya glared at me, like being trapped in a room together was her version of hell.

“You’re just a little weakling.” Robbie strutted over and gave me a playful shove.

“I am not,” I muttered, returning to my seat. I fished my cell phone from my purse. No signal.

As Robbie fought with the door, I scanned the table. Diego was the only one not looking at his phone. He stared at one of the windows as lightning brightened the alley outside. Robbie cursed and gave the doorknob a final shake. “Dammit. It really is stuck.”

I rolled my eyes. “Told you.”

“Shit.” Sasha waved her phone above her head. “I have no signal.”

“Me neither,” I said.

“I haven’t had one since we got here.” Robbie took out his phone and shook it, like that would help.

“Same here,” Priya chimed in.

“Well, the mayor’s going to show up at some point, right?” asked Diego.

“Yep.” I nodded. “He’ll be able to let us out, or get help, or whatever.”

“Shouldn’t he be here by now?” Sasha checked her watch.

“He’s probably just running late,” said Diego.

Sasha eyed Robbie, who slammed his fist against the lock and jiggled the doorknob again. “But what if he had to cancel?” Her voice quavered. “What if he tried calling to let us know, but couldn’t get through? What if no one’s coming—”

“Sasha, chill out,” I said. Diego trained his eyes along the table with a frown.

“If he couldn’t get through,” said Scott, “his office would send some secretary here to tell us, right?”

“Huh, weird,” said Diego. “The table’s set for six.” Priya pointed at each place setting as she silently counted. Diego was right—there were eight chairs, but the ones on either end had no place settings, plates, or glasses laid out.

“Yeah? So?” said Scott.

Diego and I exchanged a look. “That’s bizarre,” I said. “If the mayor’s having dinner with us, why is the table only set for six?”

“Are you saying nobody’s coming to let us out?” Sasha said, an octave too high.

“Someone’ll be here to serve food and stuff,” said Scott. “A waiter or something?”

“It looks like they already did.” Diego motioned to the covered trays lining the table.

“But why would they serve dinner before we got here?”

Scott lifted the lid on the tray closest to him, revealing a whole roasted chicken and steamed veggies. “Is it just me, or is this kinda weird?”

“For once, it’s not just you,” Robbie muttered, uncovering a salad platter.

“Well . . .” Priya licked her lips, eyeing a bowl of roasted yams. “We might as well eat, right?”

“I guess so . . .” I bit my lip.

Robbie dropped the lid on the floor behind him. “Whatever. Let’s get this party started, shall we?” He uncovered another chicken platter. “They got any booze in this joint?”

“Yeah, but it’s all at the bar out there,” said Sasha, uncovering a platter of deviled eggs. “Gross. How long have those been sitting out?”

I stood and lifted the lid from the biggest platter in the center of the table.

Sasha and Priya both shrieked, making me almost drop the lid. My heart fell into my stomach as everyone gaped at the contents of the tray.

A syringe.

An envelope.

And something that looked an awful lot like a bomb.

“What the actual fuck?” said Robbie. A shiver coasted down my spine as I stared at the syringe. It was filled with a pale beige liquid, and the needle was uncapped, glinting from the chandelier lights overhead.

“What the hell is that . . . that *thing*?” Sasha cried.

A couple of plastic canisters the size of milk cartons were strapped to half a dozen brown logs wired to a small digital clock and stack of batteries. Each canister was half full of some sort of yellow liquid. The clock faced the ceiling, its red numbers counting down from fifty-nine forty-five. Fifty-nine forty-four. Fifty-nine forty-three. Fifty-nine forty-two.

“Looks like a bomb,” said Robbie, clenching his jaw.

“I started the timer . . .” I said to no one in particular, gripping the lid in both hands. “When I lifted the lid, I must have started the timer.”

“That can’t be real,” said Priya. “Can it?”

“And what’s with the syringe?” asked Sasha.

“It’s labeled.” Diego leaned over to read, “Botulinum toxin’—holy shit.” He blanched.

“What’s butool—what’s that?” asked Priya. She clutched his arm so hard her knuckles turned white.

Diego kept reading. “It says, ‘Warning: Avoid contact with skin. A single drop can be fatal. Full injection causes immediate death.’”

We all exchanged baffled expressions. “What’s in the envelope?” asked Robbie. Nobody moved.

Fifty-nine thirty. Fifty-nine twenty-nine.

I set the lid under the table and plucked the envelope from the tray, opened the flap, and pulled out a sheet of paper. Unfolding it, I cleared my throat and read aloud.

“Welcome to dinner, and again, congratulations on being selected. Now you must do the selecting. Within the hour, you must choose someone in this room to die. If you don’t, everyone dies.”

1 Year, 1 Month Ago
January of Junior Year

I'd spent the last three years avoiding bitches like Sasha Harris.

But I had a favor to ask of her, and my future depended on it.

As director of the drama club, she chose each semester's play, and I wanted to compose the score for the next one. It was my only shot to get into USC's film score program. Dad had recently broken the news that he couldn't afford to fly me to auditions in the fall, so I had to think of some way to impress the pants off the college admissions officers—something the other two thousand virtual applicants wouldn't attempt. With only three undergraduate film score programs in the country, the competition was fierce. Scoring our school play set to a live orchestra and sending in the recording was the best plan I could hatch.

But it meant I had to talk to *her*, Sasha freaking Harris, basically royalty at Brewster High—haughty, pretentious, and intimidating as hell, yet inexplicably revered. We hadn't met until freshman year; our town had two middle schools that merged into Brewster High, and Priya and I had gone to Crompond while Sasha and her friends went to Hampton. But I'd heard whispers of her mean streak, how cutthroat she could be. Had I witnessed her nastiness myself? No. Had I gotten close enough to? Don't be ridiculous. I wasn't about to risk being her next victim.

Until now.

So here I was on the first day back after winter break, watching her cross the cafeteria, plotting my approach. Her besties, Amy and Maria, hovered around her like gnats, wasting away the minutes by chewing over the latest gossip. I wasn't sure what scared me more: rejection from USC, or Sasha.

"My hands are shaking." I raised my hand to eye level, showing off trembling fingers. "Dammit, I can't do this."

My best friend Priya's posture relaxed. "Oh, thank God. Let's get out of here." She spun to leave, her long, shiny black hair whipping my arm.

"Wait!" I grabbed her wrist. "You're gonna let me wimp out that easily?"

"You're not wimping out—you're coming to your senses," she rationalized, darting a glance at Sasha and her crew. "You don't need to score the stupid play. I'm sure your recordings will get you into any music program you want."

"All the other applicants will have recordings, too." I wiped sweat from my upper lip as the trio finally settled at an empty table in the middle of the cafeteria. "But they'll all submit the standard stuff—you know, tracks for commercials, movie trailers, that sort of thing. I have to do something *epic*. Something to stand out."

Priya raised her eyebrows. "What, your ten thousand YouTube followers won't make you stand out?"

“Ten thousand’s nothing. Some other kids have way more. I *have* to do this.”

“What makes you think Sasha’s even going to *consider* it? They always pick some Broadway play, and the music’s already done. Asking Sasha to compose new music for the play is like asking if I could join the freaking cheerleading squad. It won’t happen.”

Priya had always wanted to be a cheerleader. Problem was, she never had the guts to try out. “If I get her to agree, you’re *so* trying out for the cheerleading squad.”

Her eyes widened like saucers. “I am *so* not. Sasha’s captain now. She’d never let me in.”

I glanced at Sasha again. How had she hooked her talons into everything? It was like the girl was determined to be the center of attention at all times. And nobody said no to Sasha Harris.

Now I had to make sure she didn’t say no to me.

Taking a deep breath, I paused before tugging out the earbud lodged in my right ear, soaking in a last bit of energy from an epic fantasy battle scene track. Some people needed liquid courage, but I only needed a shot of music. The powerful chords and crescendos made me feel like I was bravely facing my foe, ready for combat.

“I’m doing this.”

“I’m officially not letting you.” Priya clutched my elbow as I started toward them. “As your best friend, I can’t let you put yourself in Sasha’s warpath. Right now she barely knows we exist, and we should keep it that way. Remember what happened to your sister? Remember what people like Sasha can do?”

My throat constricted at the mere mention of my sister, and I yanked my elbow from Priya’s grip. “Like I need the reminder?”

My sister Maggie’s death taught me to avoid girls with mean streaks like the plague. I knew what it meant to be the brunt of their jokes, victim to their cruelty. I didn’t know what Maggie endured until things went too far—four years stood between us (she was a senior when I was in eighth grade), so we hadn’t attended the same school since elementary school. Guilt stifled me whenever I thought of Maggie, and how oblivious I’d been to those girls’ abuse.

By the time I learned the truth, it was too late.

After she died, I withdrew from my clique of girlfriends. Part of me was terrified they’d eventually turn on me, too. But mostly, I couldn’t stand their pity. Most people were awkward as hell around someone in mourning. They’d stare at me with these wide, sorrowful eyes, and their uneasiness made me feel like I should’ve been the one comforting *them*.

At the time, I couldn’t handle it. It was bad enough watching my parents grieve, and needing to be strong for them. Priya was the only one who acted normal around me, letting me pour my heart out without getting that disquieted look in her eyes, refusing to leave my side.

So instead of partying or flailing at school dances, we camped out in my room for movie marathons or “jam sessions”—I’d work on a song at my keyboard with huge red headphones glomming my skull, while she’d sprawl on the carpet with Mittens, reading a fantasy novel or learning David Thurston’s magic tricks from his Netflix show *Manic Magic*. As a textbook introvert, Priya was living her best life, but sometimes I missed being part of a big group.

“I’m sorry.” Priya’s voice was strained. “I just don’t want to see you get hurt.” She eyed Sasha and her friends huddled over their table, whispering animatedly. They seemed prepped for the runway compared to their neighboring table, where Becky Wallace and our old clique donned a mix of too-big glasses, sweatshirts, and poorly executed French braids.

Suddenly, Sasha slapped the table, threw her head back, and laughed heartily. I couldn’t imagine having such boisterous self-confidence. People turned to gape, like they wanted in on the joke. If Sasha Harris thought something was funny, it must be worth hearing.

As long as it wasn’t about you.

My stomach clenched. I could let fear rule my future and keep being afraid of girls like Sasha. Or I could rise above this petty high school crap and do whatever I could to get into music school and someday produce epic movie and TV scores.

I had to do this. I *had* to.

Besides, what was the worst that could happen? She could say no. She could make fun of me. Torture me. Turn me into an object of ridicule and make me want to—

“Oof.” Someone behind me collided hard with my arm, tearing me from my thoughts.

“My bad!” Zane Carter called over his shoulder as he headed for Sasha’s table.

As I rubbed my arm, Priya ogled him. “Oh my God. He touched you.”

“That’s kind of an understatement.”

Priya had worshiped Zane for years. He was the spitting image of her favorite magician, David Thurston. And with those blazing green eyes, shaggy chestnut hair, defined cheekbones, and perma-smirk, who could blame her?

Well, I didn’t get the appeal of the perma-smirk.

Either way, she turned wide-eyed and mute whenever he appeared, which made it kind of difficult to have any sort of meaningful interaction. I thought she’d finally forgotten about him over winter break (I certainly had) until a couple of days ago, when she went to the grocery store with her mom and spotted him examining a protein shake nutrition label in aisle seven. I knew it was aisle seven because Priya told me about it seventeen times.

“You know . . . if we go over there,” I said, “you might get to talk to Zane.” I had to get this over with, and it’d be much easier if I didn’t have to approach Sasha alone.

“*What?*” Priya gasped. “He’d never talk to me. No way.”

“Why not? I heard he broke up with his girlfriend last month.” I nudged her with my elbow. “Maybe he’ll be into you.”

“Yeah, right!”

“C’mon, let’s go see.” I grabbed Priya’s wrist and, ignoring her frantic protestations, dragged her to Sasha and Zane’s table. Zane typed on his phone, elbows on his knees, as the girls giggled over something. “Hey guys—”

Oh. Oh, no. Zane’s baseball teammate Robbie Nelson sat next to him, scribbling last-minute answers on a homework assignment. I hadn’t noticed him with his baseball cap shading his face. He glanced up at me, and my stomach gave a small lurch.

Robbie had one of those faces you couldn’t help staring at—well defined, with a high-bridged nose, angular jaw, and these wolfish gray eyes that made you go all deer-in-headlights when they landed on you. While I was invisible to Sasha, which was exactly how I wanted it, Robbie’s eyes would flick to mine in the halls, his head tilting like a question mark as he offered a shy grin. I’d always look away first, flustered to be caught gawking. Since we didn’t have any classes together, he probably didn’t even know my name.

But I couldn’t let him psych me out. I had to talk to Sasha.

“So, um, hey,” I started again. I tossed my hair back and flashed a wide smile, ignoring my wobbly legs. “How was your winter break?”

The five of them only offered vacant stares. I kept smiling, forcing down the heat threatening to creep up my neck. My mind went blank, and words seemed like an altogether foreign concept. All the scenarios I’d concocted in the shower this morning for what to say jumbled in my brain. What did popular people even talk about? Oh, hell. These people were the rulers of the roost, and we were like worms wriggling into their coop. What was I thinking?

Finally, Robbie broke the silence. “It was nice. You’re Amber, right?”

So he *did* know my name. Warmth spread through my veins. He reversed his cap, and his gray eyes sparkled under the fluorescent lights as he gave me his usual lopsided grin. His two front teeth were a little crooked, somehow making his smile even cuter.

He stood and swung over two chairs from a neighboring table like they were light as feathers. “I don’t think we’ve ever met before.”

“I know, crazy!” I said, taking a seat. “Our class isn’t *that* big. But better late than never, right? That’s, you know, a thing people say.” I was totally blabbering, and despite my best efforts, I blushed profusely. Priya, of course, had reverted to her mute state. She stared at Zane, practically drooling.

Amy’s and Maria’s smiles didn’t reach their eyes, betraying their suspicion. Why had we barged onto their turf? Before I could say anything else, Sasha reached over and ran a lock of my hair through her fingers. “Oh my God, I love your hair color.” Her voice was so melodic, I couldn’t tell if she was mocking me. “Which is it?”

“It’s . . . um . . . red?”

She laughed throatily. “Obviously. I mean the swatch. The dye you use.”

“Oh.” I smoothed my hair back. “I don’t dye it, actually.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Bullshit. That’s virgin hair?” I stiffened, biting the inside of my cheek. Did she think I was lying? She leaned back in her chair, draping her elbow over its frame. “You lucky bitch.” Her own chestnut hair fell in loose waves over her shoulders, sleek and shimmering, and the mole next to her left eye disappeared into the crinkles when she smiled brightly enough to warm the room. She was giving me a compliment. Snarky, but genuine.

“You guys, I’m having a brain fart,” said Amy, twirling a strand of shoulder-length blond hair. “Are cheerleading tryouts today or tomorrow?”

“Today.” Sasha cracked her knuckles one at a time. “I can’t believe Emily and Ellie moved to Wisconsin. What the hell’s in Wisconsin?”

“Potatoes?” Maria popped a bite of a muffin in her mouth and flicked a crumb from her periwinkle lace dress.

“That’s Idaho, idiot.” Amy looked down her sharp nose at Maria. “Wisconsin has cheese or whatever.”

Robbie rolled his eyes at them. “Either of you cheer?” he asked us.

Priya shook her head automatically, but I said, “Priya does.” Her eyes widened, the cords in her neck bulging. “Well, she wants to. She took gymnastics lessons for years.” I nodded at her encouragingly, but she seemed to be willing herself out of existence.

“Hey, so did Sasha,” said Amy, suddenly interested in us. “That gives you a leg up.”

“But Sasha qualified for the Olympics when she was *twelve*,” Maria chimed in, her brunette ringlets bobbing. She always starred in our school musicals, and once even made it to the final casting round of some singing reality TV show.

“Guys, stop it,” Sasha said bashfully, but her smile faltered. “You have to be sixteen to qualify; I just scored high enough to be able to.”

“Wow!” I said. “Will you compete?”

Sasha shifted in her seat and clenched her jaw. “No.”

“Why not? Seems like an amazing opportunity—”

“I can’t.” The words left her lips as a whisper. “I broke my leg in a car accident. Needed surgery.” Lines creased her forehead as she cringed at the memory. Suddenly it was like the girl who had everything had nothing at all. The transformation was staggering. I had no idea about her accident. By the time high school started, Sasha seemed on top of the world.

“It’s fine now,” she waved off my concerned look, “but it took a while to recover. I can do stunts and stuff again, but . . . it’s not the same.”

“Still . . . I’m so sorry—”

Zane suddenly tossed his phone onto the table. “Good news. My folks are outta town this weekend.” He pointed at himself with both hands. “Party at my place on Friday.”

“Nice.” Robbie bumped fists with him.

Sasha perked up, the glimmer returning to her eyes. “Do you have any booze? I thought your parents locked up their stash after last time.”

“Yeah, they did. We’ll have to get some.”

I cleared my throat, eager to sidle into their conversation again. “If you can’t, you could always have a game night or something. You know what’s hilarious?” I was about to say Apples to Apples, my favorite game, but thought better of it. “Cards Against Humanity. You can borrow my deck.”

“When’s the last time we had a game night?” said Sasha. “What were we, like, twelve?” Was she was mocking me or reminiscing?

“I love Cards Against Humanity.” Robbie grinned at me, dimples creasing his cheeks. “I’d be down for that.” His smile was infectious, and I found myself beaming back.

Zane punched Robbie’s arm. “Lame!”

“Whatever, man.” Robbie shook him off. “Better than sitting around staring at each other.” Zane shrugged and fiddled with his phone again. Robbie scooted his chair closer to me and wagged a finger between me and Priya. “You two should join. Bring over that deck yourself.”

Oh. My. God. Robbie Nelson just invited us to a party. My heart skipped about twenty beats. I should probably be dead. “Sure! We’re free,” I managed to say.

“Nice.”

“I guess we shouldn’t get too wasted, anyway.” Sasha snapped her fingers at Amy and Maria. “Don’t forget, my mom’s taking us to see *Phantom of the Opera* on Saturday.”

“On Broadway?” I asked. “I love that musical. It’s so sad.”

“Her sister dropped out of college to be one of the ballerinas,” Amy said to me, pointing at Sasha, “and now she’s understudy for the lead—”

“Can we *not* talk about my perfect sister right now?” Sasha rolled her eyes. “Bad enough we’ll have to fawn over her this weekend.”

“At least we have backstage passes,” said Maria.

Sasha nodded. “True. The guy who plays the Phantom is so hot.” She scrolled through her phone and leaned over to show me a picture of the dark, brooding Phantom.

“Oh my God, I’m so jealous,” I said. “Oh, and . . . speaking of plays . . .” My heart thrummed wildly, but this was a perfect segue. “I have a question for you. It’s about the

school play. You know, in the spring. I was wondering if you'd considered putting on a play with original music."

"Why would we do that?" Maria asked a little defensively. As the drama club's perpetual prima donna, she'd probably hate this idea. But Sasha was the one I had to convince. As director, she got to help the drama club supervisor, Mr. Norris, choose the play.

I swallowed hard. "I'd love to score the spring play. An entirely original score."

"Whoa, seriously?" said Sasha. "That'd be so much work . . ."

"Please, hear me out." I licked my lips. Sasha *had* to be stuffing her résumé to get into some Ivy League college. I knew what angle to take. "Directing a play with an original score and a live orchestra would be way more impressive on your transcript than putting on some Broadway play."

"Maybe . . ." Sasha groaned. "But the sheer amount of coordination that would take—"

"Sasha, chill," said Robbie. "Let her finish." He threw me a reassuring smile. Was it weird that I wanted to throw myself in his lap? Probably.

But I was on a mission here. I took a deep breath and focused on Sasha. "I'd compose all of the music myself based on your stage direction, and I'd coordinate with the orchestra. Mr. Torrente already agreed to this."

"What, you think you could compose an entire musical?" Maria crossed her arms and scrunched her brow. "Like, yourself?"

"Not a musical. It'd be a play, with an orchestral score—"

"Oh, hell no," said Maria.

But Sasha sat silent, arms crossed, glancing between me and Maria.

"We don't even have to do something *completely* original," I went on. "We could pick something like *A Streetcar Named Desire*, or *Romeo and Juliet*, and set it to new music."

"No way," said Maria.

"It's a great idea. Truly, it is." Sasha shook her head. "It'd just be too much work."

Frustrated, I huffed. "But now that you're the director, don't you want to do something unique?"

"I'm sorry," said Sasha, her tone uncertain. "But we can't." She watched Maria slump back in her chair, relieved.

"But—"

"She said no!" said Maria.

"Well, who the hell made her queen of the universe?" The words tumbled out of my mouth before I could stop them.

Oh, God. What did I do?

My cheeks reddened as Sasha frowned and tilted her head, narrowing her eyes at me. Maria's jaw dropped. Priya looked like she was literally about to start seizing. But Robbie looked impressed, and Amy struggled to stifle her laughter. Even Zane finally looked up from his phone.

After a moment so long it broke the laws of physics, Sasha threw her head back and burst out laughing. Everyone else followed her lead.

"Oh my God! The look on your face!" Sasha finally said, wiping her eyes with her pinkies, careful not to smudge her mascara.

I let out a nervous chuckle, gripping my quivering fingers in my lap. Sasha rested an elbow on the back of her chair, poking her cheek with her tongue, sizing me up. Maybe she was impressed I'd challenged her when everyone else sucked up to her all the time.

When everyone else quieted, Robbie said, "C'mon, Sasha, I think it's a good idea. Nobody wants to see *Bye Bye Birdie* anyway."

"That's true," said Amy. "That's some lame shit."

Sasha raised her eyebrows. "You said you loved *Bye Bye Birdie*!"

Amy slinked back in her seat a bit. "Er . . . I kinda lied. Sorry."

"Well," said Sasha, "I *do* love *Romeo and Juliet*. So dark and romantic. I'd be down for that."

Whoa. Might this really happen? Hope blossomed in my chest as Robbie threw me a conspiratorial wink.

"Yeah, I guess that'd be fun," said Maria unconvincingly. I felt kind of bad to deprive her of her singing glory, but she'd dazzle as Juliet.

"Can I play Romeo?" asked Zane.

Robbie scoffed. "Dude, you're not even in drama club."

The warning bell rang, and Sasha stood and draped her messenger bag over her shoulder. "Alright, alright. Let's talk. But we'll need to get the rest of the drama club on board . . . everyone loves doing Broadway." She snapped her fingers. "I have an idea."

"What is it?" My heart leapt into my throat.

"I'll invite them to Zane's party on Friday. And it'd be amazing if you could bring some booze. You know, loosen them up a bit. I'm sure they'll at least hear you out."

My stomach twisted in a knot. "Booze? You want *me* to bring alcohol to a party?" I had no idea where to get drinks.

"Tequila would be great."

"Or vodka." Zane smirked. "Off-brand is fine, we're not picky."

Priya and I exchanged a wary look. "But . . . I don't have a fake ID or anything." I stood and stumbled after them. "Where am I supposed to get booze?"

Sasha gave an exaggerated shrug. "I mean, you could show up empty-handed. But if you want to impress them, you'll just have to figure it out."

Chapter 3

My pulse raced as I stared at the syringe of poison and the bomb atop the gleaming silver platter. Within the hour, you must choose someone in this room to die. If you don't, everyone dies.

"That's one sick prank," said Robbie. "Who the hell would do this?" He grabbed the note from me, his eyes darting across the page. Diego leaned against the edge of the table, studying the bomb.

"Wait, wait, wait." Sasha clutched her throat. "Does that mean . . . if we don't kill one of us, that bomb will go off in an hour?"

Scott burst out laughing.

"What the hell is so funny?" asked Sasha.

He leaned back in his chair. "It's obviously a joke, and you fell for it like an anvil."

"Doesn't seem very funny to me," muttered Robbie.

"Who would do this?" Priya cried. "Who would think up something so awful?"

"Did anyone see who shut the door?" I asked. Priya and Scott shook their heads.

"No." Diego slumped back into his seat. "I didn't see anyone."

"Me neither," said Sasha. "I was too busy talking to that creep." She motioned toward Scott, and he scoffed.

"Someone probably stood behind the door and pushed it closed," said Diego.

Priya visibly shivered. "Does that mean someone was hiding behind the door the whole time?"

"And are they still out there?" My voice shook slightly.

Robbie slammed the note on the table and scooted his chair back with a screech, making me jump. "This is ridiculous." He rounded his chair and pounded on the door. "Hey! Unlock the door!" His jaw tightened when nobody replied. "This isn't funny. Unlock the door now!"

"Oh my God," said Priya. Sasha took slow, deep breaths, trying to keep calm, but her eyes darted around the room frantically.

"Robbie." I rushed toward him, grabbing his hand. "Calm down. It's just some morbid joke. I'm sure they'll get bored and let us out."

He shook me off and knelt, peering with one eye into the large keyhole below the doorknob. "There's no key."

"I didn't hear a lock click or anything," Sasha added.

“It all happened so fast.” I touched the oak door, the wood cool under my palm, and turned back to the group. “Think they’re still out there?”

Robbie shrugged. “Who the hell knows?”

“Hello?” I called out. “Is anyone there?”

“This is bullshit.” Robbie kicked the door. “What kind of sick psycho would—”

“Shhh.” I waved him off and pressed my ear against the door, but all I could hear was Priya muttering, “Oh my God, oh my God,” over and over again. “Priya, shut up,” I said. She clamped her lips shut, her eyes glassy.

I pressed my ear against the door again, straining to hear something. A voice. Footsteps. Someone breathing. Anything. But all I could hear were the muffled baritones and strings from the orchestral music playing in the main dining room.

“Nothing?” asked Diego.

I shook my head and knelt, peeking through the keyhole. My heart raced as I held my breath. Years of watching horror movies had trained me to expect an eyeball to appear on the other side. My whole body tensed, ready to leap backward.

But all I could see was one of the red-cushioned booths across the main dining room. There was no movement of any kind. “There’s nobody there.” I stood and turned back to the group. “I don’t see anything.”

“Damn, it’s so hot in here.” Sasha touched the back of her hand to her forehead.

“It really is.” I wiped my upper lip and scanned the walls. “Crap. The thermostat must be out in the main dining room.”

“It’s gotten worse since we got here.” Priya tugged on her hair. “I just want to go home.”

I gasped and bit my lip. Home. I forgot to text Mom when Robbie and I got here. “Oh, no.” I grabbed my phone from the table and raised it toward the ceiling, but I had no signal whatsoever. Sasha tried the same thing, stretching toward the windows facing the alley.

“Nothing,” she confirmed. “I can’t get anything.”

“Crap, crap, crap.” My chest tightened like a vise squeezing my heart. What if something terrible did happen here tonight? What was the last thing I said to my mother as I ran out the door? Did I tell her I loved her? When was the last time I told my parents I loved them? A chill tore through me despite the room’s warmth, and I shook the morbid thought away. This was just a prank. It wasn’t real.

“Oh my God.” Sasha hunched over, hugging herself around the middle. “This can’t be happening.”

“So what do we do?” asked Robbie.

Sasha straightened and rubbed her forehead with trembling fingers. “I can’t believe this is happening. What if we’re really going to have to do this? What if they really make us kill one of us?”

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