

PROLOGUE

HOW TO SOLVE A MURDER

I guess all it takes is for some wrinkly bag of bones and her so-called fortune to wreck your life. Not only that, to force you to solve a murder—with a dipshit.

Look. I was in a play, *Romeo and Juliet*, which—for the record—I didn't want to be in. Let's talk about the "cast." By "cast," I mean the suspects who could have killed my sister, Emily. Consider this the suspect list. I'm practically doing your job for you. Let's talk about the elephant in the room: the dead body, the victim, my sister, Emily. Emily and I did everything together—she was like a mini-me. We had been close. My mother really had bonded us. OK, more like forced us to be closer to each other. Her and I had a huge fight, though, before she went missing, and I didn't have it in me to admit that I was in the wrong.

I want to point out who she had been associating with, that was another reason we fought. Emily had been "friends" with Rebecca. I say that

because it seemed Emily had been tied up with her and her shenanigans. She insisted she wasn't that close to her, even going as far as denying she had anything to do with the rumors she spread. That leads me to Rebecca.

Rebecca is our "Gossip girl," our "Regina George." Always the center of attention. I don't even know how she came upon our group, but she did. I never really did like her; I hated how she hid behind a screen and messed with peoples' lives. It was wrong. She posted about everyone and their secrets and thought it was funny.

Then, Lance. Lance is our wannabe bad boy. Look. The deal is, he isn't a bad boy at all. He thinks he's slick, thinks he's clever, but he's not. He has a rivalry with Mrs. Rochester that is overly dramatic. Calls her the "Wicked Witch of the West." He is an idiot. Gets caught doing anything and everything wrong.

Now, Abby is the queen bee of our class. She's super artistic. The only problem with that is that it has made her a perfectionist. She always seems to have the newest clothes, which obviously points out that she has a shopping problem. Her mother's a lawyer, and a successful one at that. So, whatever her mother brought home for paychecks, Abby got a fourth of that. I also want to mention that, for some

reason, she seemed to dislike me. Maybe she hated how I may or may not tell her how spoiled of a brat she is. But that's just a "may or may not be."

Julia, Abby's girlfriend, hadn't been with Abby for very long. They started dating about a month and a half ago. Julia's parents are highly traditional, so when they found out about who she was into, they weren't too happy. Julia is very quiet—doesn't talk much. Sometimes, I forget she's even there. Ever since she started dating Abby, she had been clinging to her arm. I don't get why anyone would like Abby.

Phoebe, the busy bee out of all of us, was our AP student. She's going to be valedictorian for our class and then give a speech about statistics. She does everything. Physics, chemistry, biology—OK, I guess it's almost everything science-related. Phoebe is great. The only thing that catches me off guard is how socially awkward she is. She doesn't know how to invite herself into a conversation.

You're probably wondering, "Who's the dipshit?" It's Dipshit Daniel. As much as I hate to say it, he was helpful. Detective Dumbass actually had good ideas, questions, and opinions, which in the end helped me figure out who did it. You'll come to find out later how annoying he is.

Daniel is also related to Phoebe, so perhaps that's where he got his smartness.

Those are the people you should be keeping an eye out for. Those are the players on the team, and one is cheating.

CHAPTER 1

THE OLD HAG AND HER FORTUNE

I sat at the round, worn-down table that was placed in the middle of the room. A deep purple cloth lay flat, most likely to cover the transparent layer on the table that was slowly flaking off, leaving a sticky residue. It reminded me of home when my father—who had passed away a while ago—used to polish and coat the dining room table. That was years ago. Now the varnish has been chipping away with each dinner. To our luck, nobody knows how to fix it.

I glanced around. The room had been sketchier than an abandoned warehouse where, like in the movies, drug dealers did their drug deals and weapons for money trades. The room had a strong odor of perfumes that I couldn't quite place. Maybe it was to mask another smell.

Sitting on the dresser was a collection of trinkets: magical orbs and what the “Houdini” called a magical lamp.

Carmine curtains covered the window, keeping the light away. A mandala rug was placed on the Tasmanian wood planks right in front of the door that had a stained window—bits of yellow, blue, and a variety of colors depicted the image of flowers.

On the shelving, the books had been lined unevenly, several bindings worn out from being “used” to make one believe that the Houdini here knew what they were doing.

I wasn’t one to believe in the Houdini bullshit, though. In fact, I wouldn’t have been if my school hadn’t been putting on the play, “Romeo and Juliet.” I still can’t believe our school picked this particular spot to host money for some shitty play. I try not to ask Mr. House too many questions on the subject, seeing as how the last two plays were shit shows.

Anyways, my sister went missing about two months ago. I should have known the date, you would think. I have to admit, I was never really good at remembering what was going on, let alone what the day was. I’m sure if I asked my mother, she would tell me, but I didn’t want to bring it up. What I did remember was that she called me a liar before

she went missing. And maybe me pushing her down the stairs. Very much a key part of that fight. Probably not how I wanted to end things. I'm spiraling. Why, may you ask, is her disappearance so relevant? Well, she had the starring role, Juliet. So when she went missing, Mr. House was in a scramble trying to find a replacement. That was Rebecca.

What I find funny is that when my sister had gone missing, the police had done nothing other than help put out fliers, which in total was about five. The police in River County, Colorado, had been like the cops not only on television, but also like the ones in books where the main character tells the chief that something's wrong and they do nothing except for chow down on doughnuts from Casey's.

The old hag draped in a purple hood brought me back from my rambling thoughts with the snap of her thumb and middle finger. Then, she continued waving her wrinkly hands around the orb in front of me. "The one you know as Emily," she paused, looking around like an idiot before returning to me. "Was taken by bloody fingertips. And she won't be the last. Someone else in the near future will be, too."

How sure are we that this bag of wrinkles wasn't on cocaine? I mean, she had to have been at least a little high.

My sister was missing, maybe dead, but there was no way in hell she had been murdered. She wasn't; she couldn't have been murdered. For one, there hadn't been a body. And somebody else was going to die? That's absurd. This old hag had me wanting to rip her hair out. It was already falling out; why not help with the rest?

"Are you insane?" I hissed at the old lady, my gaze pointed at her face. Her pupils were dilated. "No, don't answer that," I said, stopping her quickly. "We both know you are."

"I'm just telling you what I see; the visions are real," she confirmed, her voice slow and slurred a tad. She had soft but easily noticeable bags under her eyes that looked heavy and in need of sleep. Or it could have been from the drugs.

"Bullshit," I countered boldly. "You're bullshit; the whole place is bullshit! It's just a bunch of lies to get paid. You probably waste the money you *do* earn on the drugs you have in the back room." I gave her a look. She gave me a look. She blinked once, then again.

I knew I was right.

"You don't get to come in here with accusations!" Her masked expression was folding in on her. "Besides, what I do is none of your business."

"It became my business when you started spreading the rumor that my sister was murdered,

not missing. Not to mention that someone else is going to die? I think your delusional."

"I never said that; I just said 'she was taken by bloody fingertips and that someone else will be, too.' It's all about how you take in that information."

"I think 'bloody fingertips' kind of implies murder."

She entwined her fingers together, pressing them towards the table. "Again, all about perception. Now, give me my money and go. The payment is \$35.99; that includes tax and the struggle you've given me." She untied her clasped fingers and held her hand out, palm up.

"No. I'll pay you what it says on the cardboard sign in front of this fucking beat-up trailer. Or, I can just leave and give you nothing."

She let out a huff and spat, "fine."

I reached into my pocket, pulling out a twenty. I almost handed her the payment, but movement in the back room caught me off guard. I saw a glimpse of a black bag being shoved into a cabinet before the old hag distracted me, waving her hand, seeming to be desperate for the money.

"Who was that?" I pulled back, money still in my hand.

She glanced towards the back before turning to face me. "It was nothing," she answered quickly,

her hand still held out. "The payment?" she reminded me, pursing her lips.

"The person back there?" I replied, mocking her.

"It was nothing," she repeated like a broken record player. "I need the payment now."

"*Want*," I corrected her before standing quickly.

"Fine. I *want* the money, you little brat."

"Well, I'm not giving it to you. I *wanted* to know who was in the back. Guess we don't always get what we want." I turned the brass doorknob, walked out the door, and slammed it.

Standing in the doorway, I leaned my ear against the door. I couldn't look through the window. I also couldn't just leave until I knew what was going on.

No, I'm not nosy. I just needed to talk to either the old hag, or the person who was stalking us from the back. Besides, I never really got good customer service from the bag of wrinkles, so I had to find it elsewhere.

"Did you get the money?" an urgent voice said. I recognized it as the bag of bones who was very insistent about getting paid.

"Yeah, came in about an hour ago," someone else said.

"And?"

“One-hundred-thirty-five dollars like they promised,” the other person said. “Don’t you think it’s a bit odd...” they started, then paused, probably looking for the right words. “Don’t you think it’s a bit odd to tell that girl that her sister had been, well, murdered?”

“Look, I couldn’t care less about that brat’s feelings. It’s a business, not a therapy session. Now, you need to go before someone sees you.”

A few minutes later, I fell back, and the person, whom I had assumed had been the other voice, practically fell into my arms.

She caught my gaze and pulled herself up, brushing her shirt. “Thanks.”

“Yeah, no problem.”

It was a problem. This was the person who was in the back—had to be. I should have slid to the side, letting her fall instead of catching her. The only problem was that if I did that, I couldn’t ask her questions about what the hell happened inside—about the bag. It would have been a big fall for her if I had moved to the side. Good thing she wasn’t Humpty Dumpty.

I looked her over once more. A woman, maybe mid-thirties. She had long hair that cascaded along her shoulders, half up in a ponytail, held by a clip; the rest fell against her neck.

“So,” I started, “what was that about?”

She looked surprised, which I assumed was because she had been caught committing a scandal. She diverted her gaze around.

“Doesn’t matter,” she spat, her tone being the opposite of what it was a minute ago when she thanked me for catching her.

“Yes, it does,” I argued, my tone simple.

“It’s confidential.”

“I’m sure it will be *real* confidential when the police get involved,” I opposed. That was a lie. They would probably do nothing.

“You wouldn’t.”

“I would,” I confirmed. “You two have something to do with that ‘fortune.’” I gestured an air quote around the word. “So you either start talking to me, or, I start chit-chatting with Chief Hawkins. Your pick.”

“We have a google form where people give us information about people and then based on that information, we give fortunes.”

“So, this relates to my sister, how?” I narrowed my eyes, searching her face for deceit. Finding none, I continued. “Let me guess, this happened for my sister too?”

“Yes,” she answered, validating my conclusion. “The difference was, the person said they’d pay us.”

"And the same thing happened with someone else going to be *supposedly* murdered?"

"Yes."

"And you didn't think to tell the police?"

"Erica—I mean the 'Great Houdini'—just said that it didn't matter. As long as she got paid, it was worth it." She looked around before focusing back at me. "They gave us a lot of money."

"Who in their right mind would give money to this place?" There were nothing but sketchy buildings around the area. Hell, this beat-up trailer had broken wooden boards that cloaked the missing-shingled roof. This dump was cornered in an alley, which, to my luck, had no cameras around to figure out what psycho paid for the damn fortune.

"They never gave a name. They gave us the information over the phone and left the money on our back doorstep."

"So no name," I listed with my fingers. "No face, and no cameras, and all you got was just a bag of money. Did they have a number that you could call back?"

"Yes, but Erica threw it away. Called it 'getting rid of evidence.' The number was useless anyway."

"Why was it useless?" I asked.

"Because I—behind Erica's back—tried to call, but the line went dead. Seemed to me like the phone was shut off."

"And why couldn't the police look into that? You know, trace the phone as they do in the movies?"

"If we went to the police, they would start asking us questions about our business, more so, how we are making so much money."

"You mean committing tax fraud," I countered. "So pretty much all Erica was worried about was saving her own ass."

Narcissistic much?

"If anything, I was worried too. Erica said that if the police knew, our business would sink."

"You mean the lack thereof? You get what, five people a day, at most six?"

She gave me a scornful look but continued. "We charge them more than what they owe us."

"That seems to me like that's still fraud," I commented. "Look, the police could have done at least something."

"Like what? What could they do that would ensure that we wouldn't get caught?"

"Just go in and say, 'Hey, someone left their phone; we need help finding the person who did and giving it back to them.'"

"Look, even if that worked, which wouldn't have since the phone had been shut off, the thought

of going to jail for fraud scared me. I have two children at home, alone. There's no one else to take care of them, so if I had to choose between my children and going to jail? Damn right—I'd choose my kids."

I let out a sigh. I didn't know that feeling personally, but I saw it in my mother when she lost my dad, and about two months ago with my sister.

"I won't tell," I promised. "Thank you for telling me what you know."

She gave me a nod. "I need to go."

Before I could say anything else, she had retreated to her car, driving off.

I let out a breath I didn't know I had been holding. Something about her talking about her kids like that got to me. I stepped off the steps that led to the beat-up trailer, walking home. I didn't have a car, which is sad, being a junior.

It wasn't all that bad, though. We lived in a small town where everything was pretty much conjoined together. If I ever did need a ride, I had Phoebe to call. I could call Abby, but I don't trust her behind the wheel. It's a shit show. I also think she hates me, which might put me in danger. She could purposely have us T-boned on my side.

I walked along the sidewalk, vehicles going by in a blur. Reds, blues, blacks, whites, all went by. Time passed as I went over the whirlwind of

thoughts. Someone had paid to say such things. But why? What makes that so relevant to share? It could be the truth—it could not be. I wanted it to be the second one.

My mother and I had put flyers on every wooden post. If she had been murdered, which was a big if, someone would have to know something. It's not like murder happens out of the blue and no one sees it. It had to be a prank. Why would someone prank about someone else being murdered, though. This is some messed up shit. This had to be simply be nothing. It had to be. I'm not going to let my emotions get the better of me. I have to shut them off.

Shut them down.

I reached my doorstep, picking the key out of my back pocket. I hooked it through the lock, opened the door, and went inside, leaving the rumors' thoughts alone for now.

CHAPTER 2

AUGUST 22nd

The U-Haul and my mother's van had been full of boxes, which I found funny since there were already dozens of boxes in our new living room. This was Day One in a new home. And instead of spending it looking around, I had to help move those boxes. I did peek outside to see that there was a tree house in the backyard of our next-door neighbors' house.

I lifted boxes to my room, which smelled of old paint. I guess it made sense, though. Paint had been chipping away at the walls. I made a note to paint over it at some point.

Mother had made us take a break, forcing my sister and I to make cupcakes for our neighbors. My mother seemed to be getting along quite nicely

with our next-door neighbor. I never really cared for social interaction. Honestly, I hated it. That is what sucked about the fact that we were going to be the new kids on the block. And if I'm honest, we weren't the cool kind.

"C'mon," my sister, Emily, said. "We have to get these cupcakes out of the oven and frost them!"

My sister had been more cheerful than I had been. Saw the glass half full.

I grabbed an oven mitt and pulled out the cupcakes. "Are they supposed to be brown?" I asked.

"Probably not, but it's too late now," Emily answered nonchalantly. "Let's just get them frosted."

I grabbed one of the piping bags, filling it with the frosting from the mixer.

"You don't think this is a little too sweet?" I asked, licking a dollop of frosting off my finger.

"It will counteract the burntness. Is that even a word?"

"Yeah, I think it is," I replied, shrugging.

"How should we frost them? Spirals?"

"Does it really matter?" I put a heavy dollop of frosting on a cupcake with the piping bag. "See, perfectly fine."

Emily and I put on the frosting, got them in separate containers, and secured the lids.

"Off we go?" I grabbed a stack of containers.

“Yeah, I saw a house across the street that looked really nice! We should go to them first.”

“Alright,” I said with a sigh, eager to get this over and done with.

At the front doorstep, a girl with black hair opened the door.

“Can I help you?” she asked, blowing a bubble with her gum, then popped it.

“Yes, we brought cupcakes,” My sister Emily said, holding up the container.

“Thanks for the offer, but I’m on a diet. No sugar, no carbs, no meat. What’s your name?”

“I’m Emily,” she answered.

The girl told us her name was Abby.

Abby looked Emily up and down, then took her gaze to me. Well, I guess more so my outfit. “Do you always dress like a hobo?”

“Do you always chew gum loudly?”

She stared at me. “Do you know who I am?”

“Yeah, you told us you’re ‘Abby’.” I countered.

“I’m Abby Hawkins, daughter of Jessica Hawkins, who is, in fact, the best lawyer in the state of Colorado.”

“I’ve never heard of her,” I said, crossing my arms.

“That’s because you live under a rock.”

“And *you* live in a house that has no personality.”

“Hey now,” Emily said gently. “No need to fight.”

“Then tell your lookalike to learn some manners.”

“There’s no need to fight,” my sister said again.

“Emily, stay out of this. This is between me and the brat.”

“Emily here, shouldn’t even be your sister with how rude you are. Sorry you’re caught in the middle of this, Emily.” She checked her phone. “I have to go. Emily, you’re welcome here any time.”

After she closed the door, my sister scolded me. “Why do you have to be such an ass all the time? We could have been friends with her.”

“You go right ahead and be besties and ride off into the sunset. I am not going to be friends with her.”

“Let’s just go to the next house,” my sister said with a huff. “It looks nice. They may even have a kid.”

We walked across the street, and the house was indeed nice, as Emily had said it was.

The siding was a light yellow, and a tall white fence lined one of the sides, roses and vines wrapping around the openings. The front porch was clean,

honestly looking like it had been recently painted. Hanging plants hung from the ceiling hooks.

And then I saw the garden and retracted my statement. Someone had been digging big holes where the flowers were.

We stepped in front of the doorstep, cupcakes in hand. A boy answered. I would definitely call him a boy, given how childish he looked. Dirt on his face and hands, hair ruffled, and to my surprise, he had no pants on.

My sister gave me a look. "Hello, we've brought cupcakes."

The boy looked at the cupcakes, then scanned us. "God has brought hot chicks to my doorstep! My wish came true!" the boy said. "Ladies, I'm Lance for ya'," he said with a head nod.

"We've just brought cupcakes, you pervert," I sneered.

"Mom says I can't have sugar—it makes me too hyper." He gave a cock-eyed grin. "But no one says she has to know I have them. Two containers will do."

"I don't really think we should be giving a little kid cupcakes when they don't even have pants on."

"Hey, I'm seventeen years old—don't call me a little kid!" he pouted.

"Well, you sure act like one," I remarked.

“Do you do laundry?”

“Nah,” Lance said, still grinning. “My mom does the laundry. She keeps threatening to throw me to the curb, though, if I don’t do it on my own at some point.”

“Lance Fieldman!” I heard a woman’s voice yell from inside the house. “If I find one more of your Legos on the living room floor, I’ll be putting you in the basement!”

“Mommy dearest calls. Don’t worry, I’m sure you’ll be at my feet, begging to hook up in no time.” Then, he went inside, popping out a second later to grab two containers of cupcakes before closing the door again.

“Well, that was... something?” my sister said.

“Definitely. Now we know we have a fool for a neighbor.”

“Oh yeah,” my sister agreed. “I think we should split up.”

Standing at the door of our next-door neighbors’ house, I waited. My sister ditched me to go to the other houses after the encounter we had with a guy named ‘Lance,’ who apparently gets scolded and yelled at by his mother a lot. I think she got uncomfortable. Me, on the other hand? I knew it was common, especially coming from a dweeb.

The door opened, and a kid, a tall kid, looked at me, then to the cupcakes.

"They look a little burnt, don't you think?" the boy said.

I wouldn't really call him a 'boy' as he seemed to be more my age. Strawberry blonde hair that had looked like he had stuck his finger in a light socket. He was at least 6'2, so the height difference was definitely there. I was 5'4—not like that matters.

"Just take the damn cupcakes. A little brown won't hurt you. Besides, the frosting counteracts that," I said, my tone a bit harsh.

"So the girl speaks. Got a name?" He asked, running a hand through his frazzled hair.

"Does it really matter?" I retorted.

"Well, it does, but I guess I could just call you Cupcake. It has a nice ring to it, don't you think?"

"I prefer you don't call me that."

"Too late."

"So what should I call you?" I asked. I tried to think of an insult, but none came.

"Daniel," he said. Then, with a grin, he said, "see you around, Cupcake." Then the door shut.

Dipshit Daniel. So be his nickname.

CHAPTER 3

SCHOOL DRAMA IS THE WORST DRAMA

My alarm clock buzzed. I threw my hand to the left, shutting it off before closing my eyes again. Five more minutes. That's all I need. Then reality hit. If I say "five more minutes," it would really turn into an hour, or it could end up being one in the afternoon. So either way, I had to get up, or I'd be late to school.

I bolted up, pulling off my comforter, my eyes still adjusting.

My room was a mess, though, I had no intention of cleaning it. When we first moved in, it was obviously clean. But after we painted my room, it slowly became the disaster it is today. Phoebe had informed us of the benefits and effects of a messy room. One of them? Memory. I desperately needed to find a way to remember more.

Getting changed, I checked myself in the mirror. I never really did care about how I looked or what the new trends were. The only thing that mildly mattered was my bangs—well, I guess it really mattered more to my mother. My bangs were wild. I knew I was a crazy sleeper, I'll admit that. Over time, I've come to find out that my bangs aren't really compatible with the way I sleep. I grabbed a comb, brushing them down. My hair was mid-length. Easy to take care of. I hated how light brown it was though. I've been asked too much in the summertime if I was really a blonde.

A lot of people comment on my eyes since they *apparently* match my hair. 'They are so pretty' or 'they suit your face so well'. I always found the comments odd. My eyes were hazel, and my face was average. Slim nose, average-sized lips, and squinty eyes. Somehow, I have a resting-bitch-face, which I've been told by several people.

I pretty much fell down the stairs, my hand on the railing, keeping me from giving in to my tiredness.

My mother, who was on the chipper side today, greeted me as I landed a spot at the dining room table. "Morning, hun'."

"Morning," I answered, my tone on the other side of the scale.

Her go-happy-lucky attitude reminded me of how it used to be before the shitshow of the dead and of the missing. My father's death hit her hard. Then my sister went missing? She fell apart. Recently, things had started to become normal. Some days were better than others. I wasn't willing to tell her about what I had found out yesterday. Just the thought being planted in her mind would ruin.

"Made you some eggs and bacon. Eat up before it gets cold." She slid bacon off the flat spatula and onto the plate with eggs. "Ready for school?" She looked me up and down. "You could dress normally, you know. You look like you just fell down the stairs."

I could have if I wanted to.

I answered her comment about school, but ignored her comment on my fashion sense. "I guess," I said in between bites. "It's all just the same. Gossip, football games, guys who are idiots," I counted off with an irritated sigh.

"You mean like Daniel?" She gave me the look.

Daniel's mother was my mother's best friend, so the obvious point would be that they would talk to each other about us behind our backs. They knew we hated each other—I guess it was more so I hated him. I think they had doubts about the matter, though. That's how they punished me. Daniel, on

the other hand, was hard to punish since whatever they did, he didn't really care about.

I remember about a month ago, I had taken—OK, more like stolen—money out of my mother's purse. Daniel is always getting in trouble—he had tagged along with Lance for one of his schemes—so they killed two birds with one stone, and locked us in a room together. The two birds? Pissing me off and making Daniel clean the room.

I was about to kill him instead. *He would have been the bird, and there would have been feathers everywhere.*

"Do you have to bring him up? The reason I come home is to get away from him."

"Well, you won't be getting away from him tonight. His mother is coming over for dinner, and she can't trust him alone."

"You're shitting—"

My mother gave me the "mother" look again. She hated my sailor's mouth. Look, I didn't cuss that much. At most, it was "shit" or "dumbass" or "dipshit"; none of those are that bad. Sort of kid-friendly. OK, maybe I lied. I do use the 'F' word too, but these days, who doesn't?

"Does he have to?" I corrected my language. I can save that set of words for when people—like Dipshit Daniel—piss me off.

"I just said he had to, didn't I?"

“I’ll just stay in my room then.” I countered.

Do you know how rude that is?” Her tone went an inch higher. “To not be at the dinner table when we have guests coming over?” she scolded, pointing an accusing finger at me.

“Don’t expect me to talk to him.”

“You will play nice! I don’t need you two to have a cat fight at dinner.” Her mother side was slowly coming out of its shell. “Am I clear?”

I knew what that meant. I’d better behave, or my ass would be grass. When my mother gets serious, she doesn’t hold back on punishments. I know it sounds cruel, but it’s how I was raised, so I’d be well-mannered. It worked—for the most part.

“Fine. I’ll play nice.”

“Thank you.” Her voice went sweet again as she started scrubbing the dishes and placing them in the dishwasher.

“Well, I have to go, or I’ll be late.” I shoved a spoonful of eggs into my mouth as I grabbed my bag.

“Have a good day!” She shouted after me.

I can only try. But something tells me I’ll end up bashing my head against the wall before the end of the day.

I walked through the hallway, which was the highlight of my day—sarcasm if you didn’t catch that. The line of red lockers blurred past me as I

scrambled to get through the chaos. From down the hall, I could see a fight breaking out. A lanky, blonde-haired boy was now being crushed into a locker by one of the jocks. The jocks were assholes. Mr. Hitchman, one of our history teachers, had been trying to break up the fight. He has always been a hothead. He doesn't do bullshit, and part of me admires that about him. Keyword: part of me. The other part of me hates him because of the asshole he can be. Add "*asshole*" to the dictionary of curse words.

"Henry Allen!" Mr. Hitchman's voice boomed down the hallway. The fight broke up just barely, but resumed once Mr. Hitchman was out of sight.

"Clarissa!" A voice I recognized as Rebecca's called me from down the hallway over the disorder.

Pushing past the crowd, I met up with Rebecca, who was grinning ear to ear, her chipped, brace-covered teeth displayed.

"Morning!" She greeted, her smile never fading.

"Morning," I said blankly, not really in the mood to be awake. I also wasn't really in the mood to talk to Rebecca.

My eyes followed past Rebecca and over to Abby, who was drawing in her sketchbook, graphite all over her hands. Her knotted blue bracelet that had

specks of bright orange paint from her painting class had ruined it. Well, I think it was orange. I never did get a close look at it. Anyways, she had one for herself and one for Julia. Julia wore it everywhere.

The two of them hadn't been dating for very long. Julia seemed over the moon in a way, which I don't get since Abby is a bitch. I mean, Abby's nice to Julia, I think. I also think the reason Julia was happy about the relationship was that Abby had been a bitch. In a way, it meant that Abby stood up for herself, which I think Julia admired.

"Hey, Abby," I said to her nonchalantly. Even though she hated me, and I might have hated her, my mother always told me to *kill them with kindness*.

Abby was—I don't know if I would say pretty? I might be biased, though, since she hated me. She always had makeup on, eyeliner better than I could ever do. She was a perfectionist. Which, because of that, I hope it took forever for her to do her hair. Every day, her jet black hair—which I'm sure she dyed—was straighter than I could ever get my hair. Also, I'm sure her blue eyes turn red when she meets the devil. I think that sort of took a turn.

"Don't talk to me," she muttered, a dirty look came across her features while she drew.

So much for the kindness act.

Abby was almost always like that with me.
What was her problem?

"Where's Julia?" I asked Abby.

"She's in Mrs. Rochester's room. She has another reassessment to take. She needs to focus," Abby complained, then said, "and you need to worry about yourself."

"Golly, might I be concerned for someone?" I threw both my hands in the air dramatically.

"Yeah," Rebecca started, agreeing with me when I didn't need—nor want—her to. Rebecca set her new handbag on the ground, letting go of the golden chain that went along the side of it, which complemented the deep red color of the bag. She got it within the last month. Ever since then, Abby has been overly jealous of it because her mother won't get it for her—or let her get it—since she already has so many bags.

"And where are Lance and Austin?"

As if on cue, they both appeared. "We *were* supposed to be in morning detention, but I decided to skip," Lance grinned, a cockeyed smile. "Look, here's the deal; if we are stuck in detention, how can we talk to all the hot babes?"

"That is a very good question, Lance," Austin said, backing him up. "The hot babes *need* us."

"Precisely," Lance confirmed with a nod.

"Look, I hate to break it to you, Lance; you have absolutely no clue how to approach a girl," I said.

"Oh yeah? Let me prove it." He cleared his throat, making his voice deeper. "Are you a parking ticket? Because you have *fine* written all over you."

"That was heartbreaking," Abby commented. "And pathetic."

"OK, what about this one? Am I obese? Because every time I look at you, my blood sugar rises."

"That's stereotyping," Abby groaned.

Looking over my shoulder, I saw Phoebe approaching.

"Hey Phoebe—"

Rebecca cut me off.

"What the hell, Phoebe!" You were supposed to help me study last night. Where were you?" Rebecca's smile faded.

"I was preoccupied with something pressing," Phoebe answered, getting straight to the point. "Something urgent came up." She pushed her metal-framed glasses up.

"What could be so 'pressing'?" Rebecca confronted.

"IT needed help with the cameras again. They keep going in and out."

"Does it really matter? Half the time they are offline!"

"Drama," Lance mouthed to Austin, who, in return, gave two thumbs-up.

Phoebe is the smart one in our friend group. She has more common sense and brains than all of us put together. She has been taking AP classes since sophomore year and now has the chance to graduate early. That might explain why she's always dressed so professionally. Now that I think about it, her hair is professional too—strawberry blonde strands swept back in a bun. She really was the opposite of her brother.

"I couldn't care less!" Rebecca exclaimed, Phoebe's basic explanation obviously hitting a nerve. "I needed you! We have a test today, and I know I'm going to fail it, and it's your fault."

"You're catastrophizing again. It's a cognitive distortion," Phoebe stated blankly, putting her hands behind her back.

"What?" Rebecca gawked. "Remember, we speak English."

Phoebe blinked, then went over her words for a minute. "You're overthinking too much."

"And you couldn't have said just that?"

"You two, for the love of the lord!" Abby closed her sketchbook.

Julia appeared next to Abby. "Hi guys," Julia voiced softly. She sat right beside Abby, clinging to her arm. "Hi Abby."

"Yeah, hi," Abby said simply.

Seems she was in a mood.

“Hey, Julia, ” I greeted Julia, then I looked over to Lance, who was doing a headstand in the middle of the hallway. I guess it wasn't really a headstand when he was practically about to fall over.

“What are you doing, Lance?” I hissed, like a mother trying to get her child away from the candy aisle.

“I'm *trying* to see how long I can do a headstand for. Duh.”

“Well, knock it off before you fall over onto someone.”

He gave me a pouty expression, then got back to his feet. I still can't believe they let this idiot move onto his junior year. Maybe it was because they wanted to get rid of him faster.

Next time, you do a head stand and see if *you* can do it without falling over.”

“I'm not doing that,” I told Lance.

“I bet I could do it longer than you.”

“I'm not saying yes to your challenge, Lance.”

“So we can't have a ‘Naruto and Sasuke’ battle?”

“No, we can't.”

“Hey, Ms. Procrastinator,” Rebecca interrupted, joking to Julia. “Ever finish the fifty missing assignments? Or is it still on your to-do list?” she continued.

"I don't really think you have room to talk, Rebecca," I said. Abby had pulled out her sketch book again, ignoring all of us.

"I can't help it," Julia said. "Mrs. Rochester just keeps adding assignments to my already stressed pile, and you and your posts about high-schoolers failing their class because of missing assignments aren't helping. It's just adding wood to the already burning bonfire."

"Fine, fine. I'll lay off the posts," she said. "All I was trying to do was entertain the people."

"Well, could you spread the word that I trashed the girls' bathroom? Put a lot on my rep." Lance grinned.

"Yeah, and say I helped," Austin peeped. I think Austin just wanted to fit in. From what I heard, last year he bleached his hair to match Lance. Parts of his natural brown hair were still noticeable. It was a 'I wanna be just like you' kinda situation. The bleach was slowly fading.

"I'm just going to lay off the posting," Rebecca said again. "

Julia looked at Abby, watched her for a minute, then brought her gaze to me. "How was Mystic Arts?"

I wasn't going to say much, and what I would tell them wouldn't be the full truth. It was a joke, a crude joke. Why should I tell them? Although it was

the mysterious psycho that got to me. They paid the old hag to tell me something that wasn't true and something that wouldn't happen. No. I brushed the thought out of my mind. It didn't matter to me. At least, I told myself that. No. I need to stop thinking about it.

Shut it down.

"It was fine. Sketchy, but fine."

"Sketchy? I thought it was mysterious," Rebecca chimed in.

"Oh? What fortune did you get?" Julia faced her.

"They said," she cleared her throat, then dropped an octave, "'you will find yourself soon down your path'."

That was better than mine.

"I got 'I'm a real good bad boy.' How crazy is that?"

"Nobody cares, Lance. Especially when we know that's not true," I commented with a scowl. "Are you trying to make me suicidal with your nonsense?"

"You mean like how Rebecca was suicidal?" Lance said back.

"I was!" Rebecca exclaimed.

"Yeah. Sure, you wrote a note." Lance crossed his arms. "I think it was all for attention."

The one time Lance might have been right. About two months ago, Rebecca had put a post on her story about how she was so-called “done” with it. Wrote a note and everything. She’s never been suicidal; in fact, it was probably the people she humiliated that were.

“Can we just drop it? Austin, what about your fortune?” Rebecca asked him, changing the subject.

“Mine was the same as Lance’s,” he said.

Typical.

“Phoebe, what was yours?” I asked, focusing on her glasses. I suspected she’d give us an academic response.

“I don’t believe in such psychics,” she voiced flatly. “I won’t stop you from being convinced of such preposterous things.”

“Let me guess, you don’t believe in love either,” Rebecca snorted. “You’re just a geek.”

Phoebe gave Rebecca a disappointed expression. “No, I do believe in the ideology of love. Plato proves the concept of love in the dialogue Symposium. It consists of Eros—the physical attraction—and the other is Philia—the friendship, the intellectual side—”

Rebecca cut her off. “Yeah, Ms. Philosophy. We get it.”

She then faced Julia. "What fortune did you receive?"

Julia gulped. "I got that 'I'll find something I never suspected.' You, Abby?" She deflected the attention.

"I didn't go. I just had my mother pay for most of the money that you guys need for the play. You're welcome."

"Look at that. Ms. Rich over here is 'above everyone' to go," Lance snickered.

"Shut up, Lance," Rebecca said, finally acknowledging that he was even there.

I rolled my eyes. Abby is a bragger—and it didn't help that gets everything she wants just by asking her mother and/or father.

Abby caught my eye roll. "Just because you don't have money like I do, doesn't mean you have to get all hostile about it, Clarissa," she said, the same dirty expression reappearing from before.

"I'm not the one being hostile, Abby. For the last month you've been a snotty brat."

"You better watch out," she retorted, trying to keep her cool.

"Oh, I do love a good threat from Ms. Abbitude over here," Lance said.

Ignoring her, I posed, "so, Lance and Austin, what were you in detention for now?"

“Oh I am so glad you asked. I tried to put chemicals in the witch’s plants. She was not very happy about that. All I was trying to do was see if they would change colors!” Lance said loudly.

“All they had to do was alter the amount of carotenoids in a plant. That could affect the pigments, turning them yellow or red.” Phoebe looked at our gawked faces. “You guys didn’t know that?” She shook her head in disbelief.

“Not all of us are nerds like you are. Such nerds help us little people who are failing to do their homework.” Rebecca clenched her jaw.

“I’m not a ‘nerd’; I’m just intellectual,” Phoebe said simply.

“I’m not a nerd either, yet people still ask me to do their homework,” Lance said with a clueless expression.

“They want you to help them cheat, Lance,” I said.

“They could just study,” Phoebe shrugged.

“You mean how you could have helped me study?” Rebecca argued.

“I’m really not in the mood for your drama, Rebecca. It’s too early, and overall aggravating,” I added.

“The only reason you’re not in the mood is that you don’t stress; you’re always prepared,” she snapped.

That was a lie. I wasn't fully prepared to be told my sister was murdered, only to have some fortune teller profit from it.

"And that's not my fault, is it?" I gave her a knowing look.

She knew I was right.

"I'm retreating to class." Phoebe pushed up her glasses again, a frequent occurrence. Phoebe always knew when to leave when things were heated. It was her way of trying not to get involved. She stuck to science, not fights.

The bell rang shortly after, which meant I had to deal with a dipshit.

From the corner of my eye, as I was walking away, I saw Rebecca and Austin talking.

CHAPTER 4

NICKNAMES PISS ME OFF

Walking into English was like a hurricane that hit Florida, which left people dead and condos ruined. This group of idiots couldn't be tamed, much like the hurricanes I am referring to.

I pushed through the flooded aisles of people, getting to my seat. Fifth row. Third column.

I set my bag next to the uncomfortable seat I had to sit in. The hard plastic that I had to sit on for a block made my legs numb after a while. Shaking them didn't help much. Daniel Fucking Hocker, an imbecile in my eyes, slid into his assigned seat next to me. Then, like clockwork, he flashed me his cocky grin. It was like he had just won the lottery and was bragging with his facial features.

“Hello, Cupcake.” He leaned his face onto his elbows, inching it a little closer to mine.

That fucking nickname clung to my nerves as a leech does to skin, slowly draining blood. In this case, it was slowly sucking out my patience.

“What do you want now, *pretty boy*?” I said, the last word obviously being sarcasm. He never did his hair for one thing. “I know you only magically appear when it’s to ruin my day.”

“What can I say, Crabby Clarissa? I’m like a genie in a bottle, and might I add that I am flattered at the insult?”

I scowled, quickly hiding my annoyance. If he knew I was ticked off by him, it would make his ego so big it couldn’t fit through the door. My first mistake was calling him a “pretty boy,” when it was the complete opposite. Maybe if he cleaned the dirt off his shirt, he might look halfway decent. I guess I can’t really say he’s a trashboy when ninety-five percent of the female population in our school was drawn to him.

Other students began to slink into their desks, still chattering, and the plastics still gossiping. Rebecca was one of those girls; posting online anonymously. No one really knew that but me. I know I should care, do something about it. But to me, A) it wasn’t my business—and B) half of them

she talked about were flat out evil too, so it cancelled out both sides.

“Class,” Ms. Myers spoke, trying but failing to get their focus on her. “Class!” She hissed boldly, slamming a book on her decent-sized desk. She pulled a Mr. Hitchman.

That worked.

“Your assignment today is a reflection. Grab out a slip of paper.” She waited patiently for students to follow through. “Your prompt is to explain how you have grown and what you plan to do—or change—in your growth before your senior year.”

She never listened to our conversations, probably because there were so many of us. Not only that, but a lot of them were lunatics and never actually did the assignments. Instead, they let the F they had alone until the end of the semester. That’s when they cared.

I figured I’d make up some random answer. I would rather not share about the disappearance of my sister and how I would never really grow from that. I knew I couldn’t say I grew over schoolwork. If I did, Dipshit Daniel would call me a teacher’s pet.

Let’s do ‘I changed my attitude’ and leave it at that. I know it’s a lie, but a little white lie never hurt anyone.

Ms. Myers thumped the book against her desk again after about twenty minutes, getting some

attention. "You may share now. Please sort your desks into groups of four, particularly with the people closest to you."

That was Daniel Hocker, Isabelle Frank, and Thomas Reed.

Isabelle was more on the soft-spoken side. Opposite of me. Her red, frizzled hair reminded me of Rebecca's. Though Rebecca kept it more neat and crisp. She looked over her sheet of paper, green pupils squinting at her writing. Then she looked at us.

"Should I start?" Her voice was serene. She was a soprano for sure.

I nodded.

"Well," she gulped, aiming her gaze at her paper. "I said that I'm growing in my academics. Specifically history. I think I'm going to ask Ms. Waller for help with my studies."

She placed the paper down. "Who's next?"

I raised my hand. She gave me an acknowledging nod.

"I changed my attitude."

Daniel scoffed. "You? Change your attitude? Are you sure your nose didn't grow a little?"

"Well, what's yours? That you're going to stop being such an entitled Trash Boy?" I scolded.

Thomas and Isabelle gave each other a look, but stayed quiet, perhaps to stay out of it.

"Not really, but good guess, Cupcake."

“Yeah, that would be a great guess if you could actually change, wouldn’t it?”

“Oh, I can change; I just prefer messing with you. It’s the icing on my cake.”

“Listen here, buddy boy, you could still go missing.”

“And you would never be able to get away with it,” he countered smoothly.

“And how sure are you about that, Hocker?”

“Well, you already have a decent motive, as I am sure you are implying that you want to murder me. People will think you did it out of love. Which, by the way, I wouldn’t blame you.”

“I did it out of love?” I scoffed, my eyebrow arching an inch higher.

“Yeah, you know. If I can’t have you, no one can. A classic motive.”

“And can you tell me why I would even want you for even a second?”

“My good looks. Haven’t you heard? I’m basically the new Regina George. It’s a lot of pressure,” he retorted.

“Your good looks? Please. You look like you rolled around in the dirt and stuck a fork inside a light socket.”

His smirk faltered, but was back up within seconds. “Well, I’d definitely say that that analogy is a first.”

“What, you haven’t been told you aren’t pretty yet? Is that a first for you?” I mocked.

“Might I first say, you did call me a Pretty boy. Two, some people actually enjoy my charm.”

“One, that was sarcasm. You look like a hill billy. Two, you would have to actually have charm first,” I snarked back with a smug grin. “And I’m sure as hell not seeing any.”

“You really know how to wound me,” he grinned.

I rolled my eyes. “Look, Dipshit Daniel, as much as I wish to pick your eyes out with a fork, Thomas still hasn’t gone.”

“You mean the fork that I stuck inside a light socket?”

I ignored the comment. “Sorry, Thomas, you can go now.”

“Are you sure you’re done scolding Daniel, or should we stay quiet and let you finish your figurative boxing match?”

“No, we’re fine.”

I gave Daniel a deliberate look of *you better shut the hell up, or I’ll take you to the parking lot after school and rough you up.*

Hopefully, he got that.

“Good,” Thomas communicated, then scanned over his paper. “I learned to make friends.” He saw our stunned expressions. “Better,” he added.

“I learned how to make friends better,” he assured.
“Now I have a lot, and we’re pretty close.”

The bell chimed through the classroom. I packed up my things and got to my feet.

“Bye, Cupcake.” Daniel shot me a wink before rushing out of the classroom, his ego higher than the Statue of Liberty.

I scoffed, following the line of students like a duckling, moving on to my next class.