



DEAD GIRL WALKING

Linda Joy Singleton



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“I am so dead!” I groaned when the road ended at a decaying graveyard.

Slapping the steering wheel of my mother’s third-hand Toyota stung my palm and solved nothing. This could not be the right road. Where were the perfectly mowed, ginormous lawns and elegant homes of Gossamer Estates? Obviously I’d made a wrong turn, which—considering the importance of today—could be the most disastrous wrong turn of my life.

“Amber, um, are we lost?” asked a timid voice. Trinidad Sylvenski had been so quiet I’d almost forgotten she was in my passenger seat. Her slim shoulders hunched over as she peered out the window. She was a new student at Halsey High so I didn’t know her well, but if my career plans worked out we’d soon be better than best friends.

“Lost? Absolutely not.” An aspiring entertainment agent could never admit fear in front of a potential client. I flashed a grin that the book *The Cool of Confidence* promised worked in any stressful situation.

“Are you sure?” Trinidad bit her peach-shimmered lip. “You hit the steering wheel kind of hard and you seem really tense.”

“Me? Not even.” Another book, *Positive Persuasion*, advised to always put forth a positive attitude. “I know exactly what I’m doing. Could you hand me the map?”

“Sure. Here.” Trinidad’s whispery speaking voice was a huge contrast to her powerful singing voice. I’d only heard her sing once, but that’s all it took to be blown away. Finding raw talent in my own school was an amazing stroke of

luck. I'd expected to wait years—well, at least until college or an internship—to make my mark in the entertainment-agency biz. According to my books, an agent's age wasn't a factor; preparation and persistence mattered most, along with the ability to jump at an opportunity.

Checking the lavender-scented map printed in purple calligraphy, I could find where we wanted to go (Jessica Bradley's house), but not where we were (creepy graveyard). Like it was a wicked algebra problem, I knew the mysterious X answer but not the formula to get there. But I kept smiling, like I had everything under control.

"Shouldn't we turn around and look for Jessica's street?" Trinidad asked.

"Excellent idea. But we probably should call to let her know we'll be late." And to get directions out of this God-forsaken dead end. Trying to remember all those confusing turns made my head ache.

"Use my cell." Trinidad fished inside her dainty silver clutch bag and withdrew a rhinestone-decorated phone. I tried not to drool as she flipped it open.

"Oops." She frowned.

"What's wrong?"

"No power. Guess I forgot to recharge my battery—again. You got a phone?"

Don't I wish! But there was no extra money for frivolities (that's what Mom called anything I'd wanted ever since she had the triplets). So I had no phone, no car, no college fund—stuff that was handed to other kids like candy on Halloween.

I started to confess my non-phone status when I remembered that Mom always left her phone charging in the Toyota. It was a business phone, only to be used for emergencies. Well, this ranked as an "emergency" to me.

Only when I checked the cell, take a guess ...

Full battery. But no signal.

"Is your phone dead?" Trinidad's voice quavered.

"No, I just can't get reception inside the car. Not a problem. The signal is sure to be stronger outside. Once I get a signal, I'll call Jessica and we'll be on our way."

Trinidad stopped biting her lip and smiled in a stunning display of white teeth

and dimples. With my guidance, that mega-smile would shine from CD covers someday. Assuming we ever made it out of here.

Stepping out of the car, I searched for signs of life or even a street sign. But all I saw was a creepy landscape of headstones guarded by a rusty iron fence that stretched for miles. There wasn't a breeze, as if the wind couldn't find its way into this desolate place. I hated roads that ended when they weren't supposed to, but mostly I hated my sense of direction. It was like a metaphor for my life; even when I thought I knew where I was going, something usually happened to spin me the wrong way.

Today was supposed to have been my Big Chance.

Invited to a party by *the* Jessica Bradley. Not the most popular girl at school (that would be Leah Montgomery), but Leah's best friend—which would give me a toe upward on my career staircase. This was not about becoming popular. I mean, I'm not that shallow. It's just that my *Networking Works!* book said making it in Hollywood was all about connections. No fakeness allowed; just enhance your opportunities by getting to know influential people.

Jessica and Leah reigned as school glitterati. But even more important, Leah's father, as part-owner in Stardust Studios, had music industry connections.

This is how I wrangled an invite to Miz J's big party:

I was wandering around the halls, my arms wrapped around a huge HHC (Halsey Hospitality Club) gift basket to welcome the school's newest student, Trinidad Sylvenski. When I'd started the club my freshman year, we had three members. I was a senior now, and we still had three members. Everyone loved the baskets, but passed on joining the club. So our trio of membership included my best friends, Dustin Cole (a computer genius) and Alyce Perfetti (Diva of Basket Design), plus me.

It was part of my role as Official New Student Greeter to give Trinidad her "Hello Halsey!" basket. Lunch period was almost over when I finally found her leaving the cafeteria with Jessica. As I joined them, I overheard Trinidad say she couldn't go to Jessica's party on Saturday because her car was in the shop.

Be bold and take command of fortuitous opportunities (advice from one of my books).

I wouldn't have had the nerve to say even one word if Leah was around.

Blonde, beautiful, and rich in all definitions of the word, Leah Montgomery was a goddess among high school students. Whenever I got near her, all my confidence drained to painful envy. Fortunately, according to rumors, Leah had already cut school with her boyfriend.

Jessica recognized me—or perhaps my basket—right away. She told me she admired the work I did with the “basket club” and that it was “just so sweet” of me to welcome Trinidad. Then both she and Trinidad oohed over all the goodies inside the glossy, wrapped basket: snacks, fruits, coupons for local businesses, a “Welcome to Halsey!” booklet, and a cute stuffed toy of our school mascot the Halsey Hippo.

Before my fear gene could kick in, I told Trinidad, “You need a ride on Saturday? No prob. I can drive you.”

“I couldn’t let you do that—” Trinidad started to say, at the same time that Jessica said enthusiastically, “Oh, sure! What a great idea. And Amber, why don’t you stay for the party? We’ll be making plans to raise funds for a charity food drive and you can help. Of course we’ll have plenty of food there, too. Our caterer is totally brilliant. Come to my house this Saturday at noon.” Then she bestowed a map with directions upon me like a queen offering crown jewels to a mere peasant.

Here it was: Saturday, 12:07 P.M.

And Trinidad and I were hanging with ghosts in a graveyard.

I walked around with Mom’s phone held high above my head, checking for a signal. Around the car it was a total dead zone, but as I neared the tall, wrought iron cemetery gate, I got one bar. Excited, I lowered my arm—and the bar vanished.

“Amber, is the phone working yet?” Trinidad hung her head out the car window, her snaky black braid swaying inches above the ground.

“Almost,” I rang out confidently. “I’ll have a signal any minute now.”

“I hope so. I skipped breakfast so I could pig out at the party and I’m starving.”

“I won’t be long,” I assured her, but with less confidence.

Waving the phone, I rushed around searching for a signal. Dead air everywhere except by the cemetery gate. Even there, the bar only flashed for a

mega-second. Then I slipped my arm through a gap in the gate; two bars flashed. Hmmm ... the strongest signal was inside the cemetery. I stretched my arm up, the metal fence digging into my skin, and was rewarded with one more bar. Almost a full signal!

Now if I could press a few buttons, activate the speaker function, I'd be able to call Jessica. If she couldn't offer directions, I'd try Dustin. He was always at his computer, a click away from Google.

My arm ached but I kept stretching, contorting my fingers around the phone. A thumb tap and the screen lit up. All I had to do was hit seven digits and—

I dropped the phone.

"No!" I screamed, leaning forward and banging my head on the gate.

"What's wrong?" Trinidad called from the car.

"Nothing. Everything is fine!" I rubbed my head. "I'll just be a bit longer."

"Hurry, okay? This place gives me the creeps."

Me, too.

"I have it all under control," I shouted. Damn, my head hurt. "Why don't you listen to your iPod? I'll just be a few minutes."

I looked back to see where the phone had fallen—then slapped my hand over my mouth to muffle my gasp. Instead of falling straight down, the phone must have bounced off a shrub, then rolled down the slanted embankment of what was once a paved driveway. I could see a corner of it, poking up from behind a broken concrete slab. Totally out of reach.

Oh, whoops, I thought. Mom is going to kill me.

I had to get her phone back.

Even though the rusty gate appeared dilapidated, the lock was shiny new. I tugged and rattled and whacked, but it wouldn't budge. There were no breaks in the wrought iron fence. The only way over was to climb. Impossible. The gate was at least ten feet tall, twice my height, and gym was my worst subject.

Then I got this horrible flash in my mind. Of Mom's face when I tried to explain how her phone had gotten into a locked cemetery. That was scary enough to jolt me with a burst of Super-Amber Energy.

Sucking in a deep breath, I reached high and grabbed an iron bar. I managed to grasp another bar, then another, until my feet dangled a few inches above the

ground. But my arms were already giving out. So I kicked out with my right leg in a pathetic attempt to swing myself up. Clunk! My leg banged against the gate. I cried out in pain and my hands slipped. I landed flat on my butt.

Diagnosis: Bruised, a little battered, but not giving up.

I thought how girls like Trinidad and Jessica would just shrug off the phone loss. "I'll buy a new one," they'd say. Easy for them, I thought. It would be heaven not to worry about money and wave credit cards around like magic wands.

My life had almost been like that two years ago. I was the adored only child of professional parents and we lived in a condo by a lake. But when my parents decided to have a baby, they sold the condo and moved into boring suburbia. Mom quit her job, so money became tight. When I found out my parents had spent my college fund on fertility treatments, I walked around with the words "No Future" written in lipstick on my forehead. And I kept asking, "Would you like fries with that?" My friend Alyce accused me of being overly dramatic, and I never argued.

I couldn't count on anyone for my future. Except me.

So I brushed off my dusty backside and looked around. A ladder would have been nice, but no such luck. I spotted an old board propped against a scraggly oak. Gravel crunched under my open-toed sandals as I carefully pushed aside weeds. The board was filthy with bugs, moss and gross droppings I didn't even want to think about. I brushed off a corner with leaves, then dragged the long board through the weeds and propped it against the gate.

I half-walked/half-crawled up my makeshift ladder. When I reached the top, I swung up and straddled the curved iron saddle-style, with a leg dangling on each side. Holding tight, I huddled there for a moment, breathing hard.

When I could breathe normally again, I lifted my head to look around. Not so bad, even kind of cool if you were into old tombstones and monuments shaped like angels, saints and temples. There were no flower vases or other offerings from loved ones. Obviously this cemetery was so old even the loved ones were dust and bones. If Alyce were here, she'd snap pictures for her "Morbidity Collection." She gathered images of the grim side of life, and aspired to be a famous starving artist or get rich from publishing a best-selling photo journal.

But morbidity was not my idea of fun—and the ground seemed so very far away. On the cemetery side there were sharp chunks of concrete from a crumbling sidewalk. Jumping into the cemetery would be suicide. Mom could save up to buy another phone, but I couldn't buy a new body at Wal-Mart.

Defeated, I prepared to climb back down. But my leg swung too hard and banged into my board-ladder. The board wobbled, slid sideways, and landed on the ground with a poof of dust.

Now what was I going to do? Stranded high on the gate, I slumped against the cold iron. I'd lost my Big Chance. I'd never make it to Jessica's now, and she'd think I was a loser. Trinidad would never accept a ride or anything else from me.

Diagnosis: Depressed and ready to give up.

I should just jump, end it all now—except I hated messes and really hated the idea of ending up a concrete pancake. I could wait for Trinidad to notice I was in trouble or jump to the softer ground in front of the gate. If I landed on my ample butt, I had a fifty-fifty chance of survival.

I had almost worked up the courage to jump, when I heard a sound that would change the direction of my life forever.

Mom's cell phone!

Ringin!

Startled, I whipped around on my narrow perch toward the sound. Bad move. My hips shifted and swayed. I lost my balance. My leg shot out from under me, my hands slipped then flailed in empty air.

I was screaming as I fell toward the concrete.



When I opened my eyes, my first emotion was surprise. Somehow I had missed the concrete and landed in a scratchy bush.

Good news: I was alive.

Bad news: The bush was full of stinging nettles.

Pain kicked in like stabbing knives. I jumped away from the bush. Quick body inventory: no broken bones, but the mint-green shirt I'd bought with hard-earned babysitting money was mortally wounded. And tiny red bumps swelled in an ugly mass of welts across my arms and legs.

I couldn't dwell on it, though, with the phone ringing.

Was it my parents? Dustin or Alyce? Psychic police coming to my rescue?

Hobbling and itching, I eased my way down the sloping road. As I grabbed the phone, the ringing stopped with a silence more painful than the stinging nettles. The signal bar flickered on and off. For better reception, I needed to move higher. An angel statue atop a steep granite podium with stairs looked promising. When I reached the angel, the sun peered through dark clouds and Mom's phone flashed on. This had to be a good omen from the heaven—or from my Grammy Greta, who I often sensed watching over me.

Before I could dial an SOS, the phone rang again.

I hit the green answer button. "Who is this? Dustin? Mom, Dad, whoever—you have to help me!"

But the voice that replied wasn't familiar. Or human.

"Good afternoon, I'm calling from Ledbottom Mortgage International,"

droned a computerized recording, “and I can save you a ton of money by offering you a limited low rate to—”

I. Could. Not. Believe. This.

Punching disconnect, I started to call Jessica when I heard a scream. I looked over at the car and saw Trinidad yanking off her iPod and rushing toward me. She’d finally noticed I was in trouble—but too late.

“Ohmygod! Amber!” She stared through the gate incredulously. “What are you doing?”

“I have a phone signal.” I waved the phone feebly.

She gaped at my ripped, dirty clothes and the outbreak of red bumps. My too-curly brown hair was a disaster, too. I must look ridiculous, perched on the angel’s halo with my arms stretched out like a giant bird. Not the professional image I preferred.

“I’ll call my friend Dustin,” I said quickly to cut off any more questions. “He works part-time for a locksmith and can unlock the gate. I’m sorry we’ll be late for the party, but we should make it in time for dessert—which is always the best part of a meal, anyway.”

“Uh ... sure. The party.” She nodded at me like she was afraid to make any sudden movement that might send me completely over the edge. She reached down and plucked a leaf off her silver crossed-strap sandals. “Um ... I’ll go sit in the car and listen to my tunes until you’re ... um ... ready.”

Sighing, I leaned against the angel’s stone wing and called Dustin.

“Hey Amber.” He picked up right away, his monotone hinting at distractions. I imagined his gaze glued to one of his monitors as he swiveled in his chair, kicking aside discarded papers and snack wrappers in his self-named “Headquarters,” walled in with bookshelves overflowing with science fiction and political novels.

“Dustin, thank God you’re there!”

“Where else would I be? Wassup?”

“Me.” I stared far, far down to the ground. “Don’t ask.”

He asked anyway, and I told him.

“Okay, stop laughing,” I said. “This is serious.”

“Sure, sure,” he said, still chuckling.

“I mean it. Trinidad thinks I’m crazy.”

“Aren’t you? But in an interesting way.”

“Thank you very much for being so sympathetic.” My arm ached from holding the phone at an awkward angle.

“Oh, I’m completely sympathetic, but you have to admit it’s hilarious. Someday you’ll laugh about this, too.”

“Never. Stop laughing. Hurry and get me out of here!”

“Yeah, yeah. Already leaving my room and heading outside. Getting in my car. Starting the engine. Be there in twenty minutes.”

“You know how to get here?” I asked, astonished.

“Sure, the old Gossamer Cemetery. Used to be a historical landmark until *they* shut it down and rerouted the roads when *they* put in the Gossamer Estates.” *They* referred to politicians or the word that Alyce coined and Dustin preferred: “Corrupticians.” He loathed politicians and commented regularly on anti-government blogs.

Dustin kept talking as he drove, spouting street names that meant nothing to me.

Fifteen minutes later he arrived in his Prius. He simply walked over to the fence and pulled a huge key ring (bounty from his part-time locksmith job) out of his pocket. He tried over twenty keys before there was a click, and the cemetery gate opened.

Trinidad applauded. “That was amazing.”

“I told you Dustin would get me out.” I gave Dustin a quick hug. “Thanks for being my hero. If I ever win the lottery, I owe you half. Now we can head on to the party.”

Dustin just looked at me with a pitying expression. He didn’t make any jokes about my lack of direction or my appearance. But his gaze said it all—with footnotes. His blatant pity made me angry and tempted to point out his mismatched brown and black socks. But I’d never sink that low, especially since he worked so hard to hide his secret. He was colorblind.

“Do I look that bad?” I grimaced at my ripped jeans and dirt-stained shirt.

“Bad would be a compliment.”

“He’s right.” Trinidad pointed to my arms. “What are all those bumps? A

rash?”

“Nettles.” I rubbed my itchy arm. “Ouch.”

“You should see a doctor,” Trinidad said sympathetically. “You better get home right away. A party is no big deal—we can go some other time.”

“We’re going. I’m fine.” I made myself stop scratching.

“You’re going to a party looking like that?” Dustin asked with disbelief.

If we were alone, I would tell him honestly how important this party could be to my future. I might never get a chance like this again. Maybe he read my mind, because he sighed and offered to lead us to Jessica’s house. “I’m not risking your getting lost again and ending up on one of those missing-persons TV shows,” he said.

He also gave me the shirt off his back—literally. “It’s too long for you, but at least it’s clean and the sleeves will cover your bumpy arms.”

“Thanks, Dustin. You’re the greatest.” I rose on my tiptoes to give him a kiss on the cheek. Well, the chin, actually since I couldn’t reach his cheek. He blushed. We’d tried dating once, but it felt like dating my father. Dustin was unusually mature—like someone in his forties rather than seventeen, as if he’d aged in dog years.

The drive to Gossamer Estates was amazingly quick. I’d been much closer than I’d realized, only missing Jessica’s street by one left turn. Her home wasn’t a house—it was a gleaming white stone mansion with perfectly groomed lawns, shrubs shaped like animals, and a spouting, Grecian-styled fountain at the center of the circular driveway.

Dustin gave me a thumbs-up as he drove away.

I won’t lie and say I felt comfortable surrounded by wealth and elegance. But I could get used to it. Although if I lived in a house this big, I’d probably get lost on my way to my own bedroom, which meant a lot of walking—and I hated any form of exercise.

My smile was wide and confident as Trinidad and I climbed a mountain of polished granite steps. But once I reached Jessica Bradley’s door, my hands started to shake.

To hide my nervousness, I silently did a ritual that always calmed me: Grammy Greta’s Good Luck Chant. My grandmother had been gone for only a

little over a year, but I still missed her so much. Thinking about her made me sad, but happy, too, because she'd been so great. She'd said I could achieve anything, if I worked hard and listened to my heart. A week before she died, she told me she'd had a premonition that my dreams would come true.

"Impossible," I'd argued, because I'd just found out that my parents had used my college fund for fertility treatments. They'd promised to pay it back, but the cost of raising triplets was insane.

"Believe," Grammy Greta told me. "I have a direct line to wisdom on the other side, and know that great things are in your future."

Great things? Did she mean I'd get a scholarship to a prestigious university and become a successful entertainment agent? That I wouldn't be stuck living at home forever, taking care of the triplets or flipping burgers?

Then Grammy handed me a rainbow woven bracelet like something you'd pick up at a dollar store. "This is a lucky bracelet," she said with a mischievous wink. "Twist it three times and repeat the magical chant."

"What chant?" I'd asked, playing along.

She leaned so close I could smell her wintergreen mouthwash. When she whispered a familiar poem about a bear in my ear, I tried not to giggle. Only Grammy would choose such a corny chant: "Twist the bracelet twice to the right then once to the left, and seal the luck with a kiss."

I felt really stupid kissing a bracelet, but I did it for Grammy.

Then she reminded me that this was our secret and not to tell anyone.

"I won't tell anyone," I promised, "except Alyce."

Grammy chuckled. "Of course. Don't tell anyone except Alyce."

When we hugged, I had no idea it would be the last time I hugged my grandmother.

Now as I stared down at the bracelet I smelled roses—Grammy's perfume. I turned my bracelet to the right two times, the left once, whispered the chant, then turned my back to Trinidad so she wouldn't see when I sealed the magic with a kiss.

And it was the craziest thing—but I imagined I heard Grammy's voice saying "believe." I felt my courage rising.

After that everything was a glamorous blur.

A maid ushered us into an imposing “foy-yay” with gilt-framed portraits, a standing coat rack, and an elegant oval wall mirror. She checked our names off an official list, then escorted us across a gold-flecked marble floor, past a formal dining room with a crystal chandelier the size of a refrigerator. A curved mahogany staircase arched overhead.

The maid’s heels made hollow clip-clip sounds on the tile while my sandals clunked and left a dirt trail. Please, no one notice, I prayed.

We were led to a garden patio with lovely hanging flower baskets and golden crepe streamers. Round tables with white tablecloths and glowing candles were arranged on the faux-grass lawn. Buffet tables oozed with exotic delicacies and a sparkling pink punch waterfall. Way cool!

A band played on a cement podium where a few kids danced. Most guests were my age, but there were token adults, too. Everyone was talking and laughing in cozy groups, or sitting at the tables with heaping plates of food. I recognized some kids from school, either because we’d shared classes or I’d welcomed them with a HHC basket.

“Trinidad! Amber!”

I turned and there was Jessica Bradley, gorgeous in a sapphire-hued sundress that enhanced her blue eyes and smooth olive skin. Waving her multi-ringed hand, she glided over to us and air kissed our cheeks. I almost pinched myself to make sure I wasn’t dreaming. This so felt like some glam moment from a movie.

“You made it! I’m so glad,” Jessica said with a sincerity that put me at ease. Well, almost. I was more used to family parties held in a crowded living room. A mansion, maid, caterers ... *Wow!* Why couldn’t my real life be like this?

“Hi, Jessica,” I said, scratching covertly. “Sorry we’re late. It’s not Trinidad’s fault. I made a wrong turn and—”

“No need to explain.” Her black curls swayed as she shook her head. “Everyone is late. It’s unfashionably rude to come on time.”

“Anything not to be rude,” I joked.

Jessica turned to Trinidad. “You look great—that’s a Kiana original, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Trinidad replied. “Kiana is so new. I can’t believe you recognize her work.”

“I know all the designers that matter. I almost bought a similar outfit but they

only had it in yellow, which is tragic on me. Looks fabulous on you, though, and I love the glitter strands woven in your braid.”

“Thanks.” Trinidad flashed her future-diva smile, seeming totally at ease.

“Amber,” Jessica turned to me. “You ... um ... have such an original style. I’d never be brave enough to wear a guy’s shirt, but it looks so ... unique on you.”

“Uh ... thanks.” I think.

“I’m so glad you came. Not just because you brought Trinidad—which was incredibly sweet of you. With all your basket club experience I’m sure you’ll bring lots of creative ideas to our charity planning committee. It’s important to collect food for starving kids. I feel it’s our duty to do all we can. Don’t you?”

“Of course.”

“I’m going to introduce Trinidad around, since she’s new. Amber, feel free to hang out and help yourself to the buffet.” Jessica waved toward a table heaping with assorted dishes and platters. Then she rushed off toward this blond guy named Tristan I recognized from my trig class—an arrogant jerk who kept trying to cheat off my tests.

I poured a drink from the pink punch fountain and wandered around, smiling and reminding classmates who I was. I received blank stares. I never had trouble talking with Alyce and Dustin, and wished they were here. But they scorned “society”; this was definitely not their kind of party. I wasn’t sure it was mine, either—although the book *Becoming Your Destiny* advised to embrace new experiences.

The buffet was a delicious new experience. I nibbled on spicy chicken legs and oriental noodles while looking around for a friendly face. Across the lawn, in a gazebo, I spotted Trinidad with Jessica and some of her crowd. I started to go over until I noticed that the chairs were full. Could be awkward. So I plopped down next to a chatty woman with silver-blue coifed hair. Leisl, as she asked me to call her, was Jessica’s great aunt. After twenty minutes listening to her stories, I escaped to the dessert buffet.

Confession: I have a passion for chocolate. I crave, obsess, lust for chocolate—which is why my clothes are double-digit size. It’s a sinful obsession, a constant struggle. Once I start eating chocolate, abandon all hope. I *cannot* stop.

“Try the pecan truffles.”

I turned to find a medium-tall guy with tight brown curls and hazel eyes. Why was he so familiar? He must go to my school, although I couldn't think of his name.

"Okay," I answered, putting a pecan truffle in my mouth. Rich milk chocolate and crunchy nuts. The candy melted in my mouth.

The guy was nodding, and chewing on his own chocolate pecan. He pointed at a dish heaped with white squares dimpled with red specks. I nodded too, swallowed the chocolate bliss, and tried one of the white squares.

I moaned in delight. "Oh, this is *soooo* good."

"A true chocolate connoisseur."

"These desserts are amazing. So many in one place!"

His gaze swept the table. "Thirty-seven plates with approximately twenty-five candies on each plate, adding in variables of size, equaling approximately—"

"Nine hundred and twenty-five candies," I finished.

His hazel eyes widened, clearly impressed.

"I'm a math geek," I admitted.

"You, too?"

"Math just makes sense."

"When not much else does." He nodded.

"And being good with numbers will come in handy when I start my—" I covered my mouth, shocked that I almost confessed my secret ambition to a near stranger.

"Start your what?" He tilted his curly-brown head.

"Nothing."

"Come on ... you can't leave me hanging with an unknown equation. I won't be able to sleep tonight trying to figure out the answer."

I laughed, liking him even more. He had quiet dignity and intelligence; someone who could be trusted. Glancing around to make sure no one was watching, I lowered my voice. "I'm going to be an entertainment agent—dealing with diva personalities, contracts, finances."

"You'll be great at it, I can tell."

"You think?" I asked, ridiculously pleased.

"Definitely. But why an agent? Most people want to be the next American

Idol, not a person behind the scenes.”

“Because I’ve always loved music and ... well, I don’t know why I’m telling you this ... but to be honest, I have zero talent. I can’t sing, act, or dance. But I like to help people and I recognize talent when I see it.”

“Sounds like a cool talent to me, more exciting than selling cars like my dad—which is what my family expects.”

“But is it what *you* want?”

“No, but I don’t know what I want—except more chocolate.” He licked caramel off his lip and gestured at the dessert table. “There are nearly a thousand candies to choose from. What next?”

“I have no idea.”

“Let’s try them all.”

I summoned restraint and shook my head. “I have to stop. Or I’ll regret it later.”

“Why? Chocolate is the best thing about this party. Or at least it was.” He flashed this really sweet smile that lit up his otherwise average face. Um, was he flirting with me?

I glanced away, my heart fluttering a little, and pointed to a dish of black-and-white striped chocolates. “Okay ... just one more. But which one? These look like zebra candy.”

“Zebra candy?” He chuckled. “Good name.”

“Do you have a name ... I mean, I know you have a name, everyone does, what I mean, is what is it?”

“Eli. And you’re Amber.”

My cheeks burned. “Do I know you?”

“When my brother and I left this boring private school and started at Halsey, you gave us a cool welcome basket.”

“I did?” I studied him, but drew a blank. “I’m usually good with names, but I don’t remember—”

“I get that a lot when I’m with my brother.” He reached out for one of the black-and-white striped chocolates. “Try a zebra. They’re actually called domino dips, but zebra is better. That’s what I’ll call them from now on.”

He lifted the “zebra” to my lips. I got that fluttery feeling again, and hesitated.

Then I opened my lips slightly, curling my tongue around the candy. Sweet milky chocolate swam around my taste buds and slid down my throat.

“Good?” he asked softly.

“Ummm,” was my answer.

Our eyes met over the dessert table. We shared a moment of chocolate understanding. As cliché as it might sound, it was like we were the only ones at the party. The band’s music faded so all I heard was the quick beat of my heart, accompanied by the melting richness of chocolate.

Then he glanced down and flicked off some candy that had fallen on his black slacks. His elbow bumped against the table and dishes rattled. He rubbed at the spot on his slacks but that only blobbed it even bigger.

An odd look crossed his face. “I—I’ve got to go.”

Before I could even ask what was wrong, he turned and disappeared inside, through the French doors.

Why had he left? Had I done or said something to offend him?

Disappointed, I turned back to the dessert table.

And reached for chocolate.



With Eli gone, the glamour faded from the party.

I just wanted to go home—which surprised me. What happened to all my ambitions to make connections with influential people? In theory this sounded easy enough but up-close-in-action, it felt dishonest. I'd check with Trinidad and see if she was ready to leave.

As I neared the gazebo, I heard someone say my name. Curious, I paused behind a large floral arrangement. Peeking through the orchids, I saw Trinidad with Jessica and some of Leah's crowd: Kat, Tristan and Moniqua.

"... almost didn't come but Amber drove me," Trinidad said. She was sitting so close to Tristan that he practically shared her chair. What was that about?

"Is Amber the freak in the hideous guy's shirt?" Kat asked with a derisive laugh.

Didn't Kat remember two years ago when I'd welcomed her with a HHC basket, and she'd told me I was the nicest girl in the whole school? Guess not.

"Yeah, that's her," Jessica said.

"Ewww ... fashion nightmare." Kat's blonde ponytail flopped across her shoulder as she crossed her long denim-clad legs, her shiny cowboy boots glinting with rhinestones. "When she first walked in, I thought she was, like, a street person. I wasn't sure whether to call the cops or give her money for decent clothes."

"Donate money for the fashion impoverished," Jessica joked. "Our next charity project."

“Waste of time,” Kat said. “She’s obviously a lost cause.”

“Amber’s nice,” Trinidad put in defensively. “It’s not her fault she’s wearing an ugly shirt. She looked good when she picked me up, but then her shirt was destroyed when she fell in the cemetery.”

“Cemetery! Are you serious?” I recognized Moniqua’s voice because she always laughed loudest when I stumbled in gym. While Kat could be annoyingly “catty,” Moniqua was just plain mean.

Trinidad had the decency to look ashamed. “Can we discuss something else? I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“But you did and now we have to know,” Moniqua urged. “What was she doing at a cemetery?”

“Um ... I don’t think she’d want me talking about it.”

That’s for sure, I thought.

“But it’s only to us.” Kat patted Trinidad’s hand. “Trust me; we’ll keep any secret you share. Is it something illegal? Was Amber performing a satanic ritual?”

“Nothing like that! Well ... maybe I do need to explain.” Trinidad glanced uncertainly at the others, then shrugged. “We’re all friends, so it can’t hurt ...”

No! I almost rushed over and clamped my hand over Trinidad’s mouth. But it would have been too late anyway. Trinidad proved that singing wasn’t her only talent—she made my humiliating experience sound like a macabre adventure in stupidity. She laughed along with her new friends ... while I died inside.

“I’m not surprised she screwed up,” Tristan said as he scooted closer to Trinidad. “Amber is in my trig class and she keeps trying to cheat off my tests. Why did you invite her, Jess?”

“She’s was all ‘I want to help.’ So what could I say?” Jessica spread out her arms like a shrug. “She practically got on her knees and begged me. You know what they say about charity starting at home.”

“You’re *sooo* nice,” Kat gushed. “Leah would never invite a loser to her party.”

“Leah isn’t here, and she hasn’t returned my texts or emails.” Jessica pursed her lips spitefully. “I heard she and Chad ditched school, but you’d think she’d at least tell me. I don’t know what’s with Leah lately. She’s been so ... distant.”

“Not with Chad, I’ll bet,” Kat said, giggling.

“I couldn’t care less what they do. And Leah isn’t the boss of me, so if I want Amber on the fundraiser committee, she’s in.”

Moniqua groaned. “She’s so pathetic, though, how can we stand her?”

“No worries,” Jessica said cheerfully. “Amber can do all the messy stuff like painting signs.”

“Our own geek slave.” Kat giggled.

“That doesn’t seem fair.” Trinidad shifted uncomfortably in her chair. “But I guess Amber won’t mind since she volunteered to help. She’ll be great on your committee.”

“Yeah, a great bore.” Tristan snorted. “Really, Trinidad, how did you survive being stuck with her on the drive here? At least you won’t have to go back with her. I’ll give you a ride anywhere you want.”

“Ooh!” Kat clapped her hands. “Tristan and Trinidad, even your names sound like you were destined to meet.”

“What do you say, Trin?” Tristan smoothly slipped an arm around Trinidad’s tiny waist. “Ditch the loser and I’ll drive you home in my Hummer—eventually.”

“You have a Hummer? Wow ... that’s way cool. But I don’t know ... I mean ... I’ll have to check with Amber first. She’s been awfully nice to me.”

“She’s always nice in this earnest, revolting way,” Moniqua complained. “Makes me sick how she doesn’t have a clue what’s really going on. Her basket club is a big joke. She takes it seriously, but everyone is laughing at her club. Basket Cases, we call them.”

“Maybe inviting her was a mistake.” Jessica frowned. “But she’s so eager to please. We’ll keep her busy and out of our way.”

Out of their way? Like I was a disease!

Shame washed over me and I blinked back tears. I’d been so looking forward to this party. I’d used my babysitting money to buy my now-ruined shirt, and I’d prepared a list of fundraising ideas to impress Jessica. I endured getting lost, scaling a cemetery gate, and itchy nettles.

And for what?

Utter humiliation.

I wanted to turn invisible and slink away. But I couldn't abandon Trinidad, no matter how much she deserved it. Anger pushed me out of hiding. I stepped away from the potted plant, where anyone could see me, then stomped over to the table.

Folding my arms across my chest, I faced Trinidad.

"I'm leaving," I said in the calmest voice I could manage.

"So soon? Is something wrong?" Trinidad pushed Tristan's hand off her arm and stood. "Amber, are you sick?"

"Oh, I'm sick all right. Of fakeness."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not anyone's 'geek slave.' Go home with him." I pointed at Tristan, not wanting to say his name.

"Were you spying on us?" Tristan narrowed his eyes.

I glared, holding tight to anger so I wouldn't cry.

"You heard us?" Jessica sounded a little scared. "We were just messing around. I'm sorry, we didn't mean—"

"Save it, Jess," Moniqua interrupted. "Don't apologize to her. Eavesdroppers hear exactly what they deserve."

"Yeah," I agreed sadly. "The truth."

Then I left the party.



I could hardly see out of the windshield through my tears.

To shut off my thoughts, I amped my radio full blast and sang at the top of my lungs. I didn't even know the words to the song, so I messed up the lyrics ... like I'd messed up my life. I hoped a truck would smash into me or a bolt of lightning would strike my car. But there wasn't a cloud, much less a lightning bolt in the sky, and all the trucks on the road were wise enough to avoid me.

It was almost a surprise to make it home safely.

Only I couldn't bring myself to get out of the car. Why bother? My life was over. The fact that I was still breathing was a cruel irony.

There was no going forward or backwards, only sitting here in limbo land. I couldn't bear to talk to anyone, so going into the house was out of the question.

Mom would take one glance at my face, know I was upset, and pepper me with questions. Then she'd tell my father and insist we discuss it over a family meeting.

So I just sat there, with the car running, drowning in dark, hopeless thoughts. I glanced down at my lucky bracelet, tempted to rip it off my wrist.

Lots of luck it brought me—all of it bad.

By Monday morning, whispers and gossip would have spread around school. Basket Case ... Basket Case! Is that really what everyone thought of my club? Of me? Were Alyce and Dustin my only real friends? Was everyone just laughing like I was a pathetic joke? I could never return to school. I'd have to transfer to another school or drop out. But dropping out would mean never going to college and having a big career. If I asked Mom about home schooling she'd just say no, because she was already crazy busy raising the triplets. So what could I do?

I couldn't just leave school—yet how could I stay?

Hearing a car, I looked up at the mail truck slowing in front of my house. The mail lady, Sheila, saw me and waved. She and I had gotten to be friends after I'd sent off tons of scholarship applications that sent me rushing out to meet the mail truck daily. But I didn't want to talk to her today and hear about her chronic back pain and how her sister's husband was in jail again. So I hunched down in the car and prayed she'd leave.

Sheila waved again and called out my name.

Just what I didn't need.

But she kept shouting for me, and if I didn't go over my parents would come out of the house. I wiped my tears, arranging my hair so it partially hid my face. Then I walked over with a fake smile.

"Amber, check out my new wheels!" Sheila said happily.

"You finally got a new mail truck?" I said with forced cheerfulness. "Cool."

"Isn't it a beaut? Except that it's a manual and the gears are all wonky. I'm still getting used to it. But hey, enough about me." She reached for a letter on her lap. "I have good news for you! That scholarship you were waiting for!"

They're probably rejecting me, I thought, but I didn't want to ruin Sheila's upbeat mood. So I kept on smiling and took the letter.

“Well, open it up!” Sheila urged.

I hesitated, then shrugged and ripped into the envelope. The opening lines jumped out at me: *Congratulations! We are happy to offer—*

Ohmygod! I got the scholarship!

Next thing I knew I was jumping and crying for joy. Sheila laughed and congratulated me, and then said she had to finish her route. I heard an awful clunk of gears as her car jerked forward, tires squealing.

I read the letter, then read it again. *Congratulations! We are happy to offer you a scholarship to a California State University of your choice. We have evaluated your application ...*

I’m sure my eyes were as big and round as all those lovely zeroes. I nearly fell to my knees and kissed the pavement.

Totally, totally amazing! All my dreams come true and folded neatly into an envelope. Grammy Greta was so right. I did have a future—and a great one! I could go anywhere and be anything I wanted.

I was hugging the letter, poised to rush into the house and tell my parents the good news, when I heard an engine roar, the screech of wheels, and a scream.

Then Sheila’s brand new mail-mobile, which was careening out of control in reverse, ran right into me.

And I died.

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