



AMBROSIA

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Crystal Lunsford hates her body. On the anniversary of the death of her ex-boyfriend—who called her a "fat pig" before storming out and wrecking his car—it's especially difficult for her to keep the self-destructive thoughts away. So when an attractive stranger invites Crystal to a state-of-the-art "life-changing" fitness center called Mount Olympus, she can't resist the invitation. But it doesn't take long for Crystal to realize that there's more to Mount Olympus than meets the eye. Especially strange is their experimental sports/energy drink "Ambrosia," which provides seemingly supernatural strength and energy to all who consume it... but at a cost. As Crystal's addiction to Ambrosia intensifies, she loses all track of time, and her memories of the outside world and the difficult life she led there steadily fade away as she exercises obsessively. As Mount Olympus reveals its sinister nature, Crystal knows she must escape. But then again... is she better off in Mount Olympus, forever under the spell of Ambrosia?

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Chapter One

Fat pig. Fat pig. Fat pig.

I let Jace's ugly words roll around in my head while I try to tear myself away from the bathroom mirror. They echo throughout my mind, waking up feelings of self-hatred and disgust. I feel my soul sinking the longer I stare at the hideous figure in the toothpaste-splattered mirror, but I can't make myself look away.

Can't seem to shut off the voices from the past.

I came home from work early, only to find someone else's lithe arms coiled around his chest like a white snake. Upon seeing me in the doorway, her arms slithered off his skin as she sprung off the bed.

He rose, half-dressed. Stood next to her in solidarity. The fear in her eyes was absent from his defiant glare.

Normally I'm able to weaponize my destructive thoughts, normally able to use them as some sick form of "motivation" to drag myself to the gym every morning.

But today is March 3rd. The Anniversary.

Rage bubbled up in my chest, crawled up my throat and seized control of my brain, shutting down all functions but the message demanding me to fight, to harm, to kill.

"Get out," I told her through gritted teeth.

She sensed the danger in those uttered syllables and slipped out from under his arm. Quickly dressing, she flashed sad eyes at him before slinking out into the hallway and back into whatever dark hole she crawled out of to poison my life.

He stood firm, cross-armed. Unapologetic.

I press my fingers against my temples as if to draw the memory out with my fingertips. "No, not again..." My head swims as I try to suppress the flashback, but it's useless; The Anniversary is in control, an inexorable force that has hijacked my mind and its normal functions, driving me back into the dark.

"You asshole," I said as the rage and sorrow intermingled within me like water and blood.
"How could you do that to me?"

He raised a dark eyebrow. Looked at me like I'm an imbecile.

That look, combined with his damning silence pushed me over the edge. I stomped over to him and got up in his face, my hands twitching as I resisted the urge to slap him. "How could you? You son of a bitch!"

Fusing my eyelids together tightly, I try once again to push down the memory, but it's no good. The Anniversary has split my soul wide open, and the pain is fresh, raw. All I can do is ride it out, like a sickness.

See, happiness comes easy for some people. Others have to work for it. Then there are people like me, for whom happiness is a pipe dream, more impossible than immortality to obtain. Those of us in that third category have to find a way to live somehow, though. For me, it's distractions.

Throughout the bad years, I've burned through distractions like paper, to varying degrees of success. I went through a phase where I nearly drank myself to death. I've wasted away in front of the TV, shoveling food into my mouth until I don't feel anything at all. But through it all, I've just ended up hating myself more and more.

This year, I'm trying something different, though. Something more positive.

Because with the sadness that threatens to swallow my soul, distraction isn't enough.

I need an addiction. And for me, nothing does the trick like exercise. When my binging was at its worst, I made an impulse purchase: a basic membership at that hole-in-the-wall gym downtown. As much of a struggle as it was—and still is—for me to make it through a workout session, it didn't take long for the addiction to settle in. Once I get started the endorphins take over, and I *have* to move.

I move to purge my body of the shame of my binging.

I run to keep the demons out.

Up until now, my system has been working. In throwing myself into a new workout routine, I've found a suitable distraction, one that usually keeps the bad thoughts at bay.

Up until now.

"Can you blame me? I mean, seriously." He pushed me away. "It's not my fault you're such a fat pig."

The front door slammed, the sharp sound and his last words resonating in my head.

Imprinting.

Hours passed, and I cycled between feeling triumphant and guilty.

Had I gone too far? Had I pushed him away forever? Did I even care?

The phone rang. A police officer.

“There’s been an accident. I regret to inform you...”

Regret. There’s so much I regret.

I lean over the bathroom sink, gripping it hard to steady myself as the memory runs its course. I shake my head and grit my teeth, steeling myself against the shame and the rage and the grief that guts me just as much as it did one year ago today. It’s less painful, I find, to stare in the mirror and scrutinize my own appearance.

Ha. Where to begin? My stomach flab spills over the top of my sweatpants like dough from a busted biscuit tin. My face is dotted with pockmarks from an acne affliction that has lasted well beyond my middle school years. My babyface has yet to flatten out. My wanton curls are ensnared in a taut ponytail, but I know in a few hours this look will give way to a halo of tangled frizz.

I started working out a few weeks ago; I’ve lost only three pounds. Three measly, insignificant pounds from a repellant body that takes up far too much space.

While part of me knows I should know better than to be so impatient, I can’t help but feel tempted to give up altogether.

The longer I stare at my reflection, the more I hate the image staring back at me. Looking down, tears prick my eyes, and I surrender to that cruel voice I’ve always tried to snuff out. The voice that says: *It’s your fault. You killed him.*

I force myself to face my own reflection, my longtime enemy. With quivering lip, I whisper, “You killed him.”

I can’t rewrite the past nor untangle its complexities. I can’t rewrite myself into someone worth loving. But I can chastise myself, and somehow, that makes me feel better.

The alarm on my phone buzzes, reminding me I should have left the house by now. I turn away from the mirror, taking a few steps toward the bathroom door. I straighten up and sigh, my

breath fogging up the dirty mirror. Today is going to suck no matter what, but I know if I stay home I'll end up binging again. The thought of that makes my stomach swim.

No. Working out will be my coping skill, my distraction—and my penance.

I fidget with the little cross pendant around my neck. Eyes shut, I imagine strength flowing from the cool silver surface into my skin, coursing throughout my body. But when familiar memories begin to form in my mind, I release the pendant and return my glare to the mirror.

“Let's go, fatso,” I tell my reflection.

#

As soon as I step outside, the Central Arkansas humidity settles all over me like a wet, warm blanket. I instantly feel gross, even more so than I already had. As I'm opening the door to get in, my phone chirps in my sweatpants pocket, and my stomach drops when I retrieve it to see who's calling.

Dad.

My heart rate quickens and I just stand there listening to the phone ring, too baffled and shocked and happy and disgusted to make a decision.

It has been two years since anyone from my family has called me. Two years since that fateful Christmas Eve where my parents hit me with an ultimatum: it was either them or That Boy.

Not today.

My shaky grip tightens around the phone as if to crush it, to silence those shrill electrical alarms that have awakened a tangle of emotions I've tried so hard to ignore.

But there's also this stupid hope in the back of my mind, this childlike voice incessantly screaming *maybe, give him a chance, try, maybe.*

And I just can't. Not today.

With a light squeeze, I shut off the ringer and the phone ceases in its noise, abruptly, like a strangled songbird. I feel dizzy after going rounds with my own memories, and when I slide into the driver's seat, I sit there for a long time, trying to no avail to keep myself from thinking. From remembering. From wondering if I've done the right thing or if I've missed my last chance to restore a relationship I'm not even sure holds any value anymore.

As if on cue, my phone vibrates, and the screen lights up to reveal a message: *I missed call* and *I new voicemail*. I feel my heart go a little soft as I realize I can listen to my father's voice after two long years of silence from him.

I could do it if I wanted to.

But my mind won't shut the hell up about that one night. I feel weighed down as the pent-up shame and regret and disappointment is dragged up like water from a poisoned well. I sigh, realizing I can't do it. It's been so long, but the pain seems so fresh.

Because he and Julia had ganged up against me about Jace, snapping and condemning me for getting pregnant instead of helping me through it all.

Because I'd gone off on them, spewing hate and insults because I was so incredibly scared.

Because Julia had said, "*If that's what you think, then you're not welcome in this house anymore.*"

Because Dad had agreed with her.

And I'd clung to That Boy—that heartless, abusive boy—in part out of bitterness over being thrown out of the family. Out of the realization that I had nowhere else to go.

My hands curl around the steering wheel, uneven nails digging into it, making crescent moon shapes into its faux leather skin. Tears sting my eyes and I can't stop shaking my head because I didn't want to deal with this today, dammit. At last, I put the key in the ignition and switch on the radio. My cheap antenna only picks up static, but it's good enough for a while. Good enough to drown out the mental cacophony.

Not every day is like this. Most days I'm able to distract myself well enough, but today I'm weak. Switching on the car, I search for a functioning radio station; I settle on rap even though I'm not a fan, then peel out of the parking lot and into the street. A thick layer of fog has settled over Little Rock, so I drive slowly, to the chagrin of the little old lady following me way too close. She flashes her brights at me and waves a wrinkled hand in anger; I flick her off.

Little by little, I feel the weight of memories slide away and I can focus on the admittedly mundane present, but as I guide my car toward downtown, a familiar sense of exhaustion overcomes me. It's not easy fighting the past. Distractions help, but I crave for more. I want to slip

out of my own skin and leave my mind with its toxic memories behind, want to slide into another life, one without baggage and regrets and anxiety.

I want to disappear.

I want to forget.

Chapter Two

As I near the heart of the city, the fog steadily lightens, but I don't pick up the pace, partially because rain has begun to fall but mostly because Granny Road Rage is still flashing her brights at me. When I guide my car into the left lane to turn into the pharmacy, she blasts her horn at me; I flash her my best "bless your heart" smile and wave her goodbye before turning into the parking lot. I get out of my car and race into the corner pharmacy just before the rain begins to fall in sheets.

In the store, I waste plenty of time glancing over fitness paraphernalia. In my quest to look for a decent protein bar to eat after my session—because apparently that's what you're supposed to do, according to an article I read online—I become so overwhelmed with the options that I think *screw it* and snatch up the cheapest one on the shelves before starting toward the checkout line.

A throat clears behind me, stopping me in my tracks.

Turning, I see a young, attractive man who looks like he's in his early thirties or so. He's a bit taller than I am but far skinnier. Not scrawny, though; I can see the outline of his finely sculpted muscles through his black, long-sleeved compression shirt. *Damn. That shirt was made for him.* He's holding a protein shake in one hand and pointing at my protein bar with the other.

"Do *not* get PowerUp," he says, grimacing. He's got a distinct Southern accent, authentic and charming. "Has the worst texture. Not to mention, it's fake healthy." He tosses me a smile. "Trust me."

I'm so caught off guard that I can't think of a decent reply. I'm not sure whether I should be grateful for the tip or insulted by his unsolicited advice. In the end, I offer a weak laugh and put the PowerUp back on the shelf. My cheeks flush. "Thanks."

"Let's see." The stranger sidles closer, his gray eyes scanning the shelves, his hand hovering over the selections. His closeness makes my stomach flutter, and though the heat radiating from his body signifies I'm too close, it pains me to think of moving away. I back away slightly, hoping he doesn't notice my flushed cheeks or how loudly my heart is slamming in my chest. But his cute half-smile assures me that he does.

With his attention diverted, my eyes can't help but roam over him as I check Protein Shake Guy out. His crooked smile hints at mischief and I wonder if he's a player who sees me as the latest

victim in his game. His steel-colored eyes are magnetic, standing out brightly against his sandy, ruffled hair that makes it seem like he just rolled out of bed. There's a confidence in his stance that I envy and yet begrudgingly admire. I wish I were that comfortable in my own skin.

At last, he finds what he's looking for. Stooping down, he retrieves a thick chocolate bar wrapped in orange and gold.

"Now this one's amazing," he says, a little grin crawling up his face as he tosses the expensive-looking bar to me. "It's Paleo, which means it's great for building muscle after exercise. Not only that, but it tastes great."

"Thanks," I say through another awkward laugh.

He straightens up and smiles at me.

That *smile*.

"So you're an expert on this," I say, so he knows I'm capable of more than one-word sentences. I gesture to the intimidating aisle of workout gear and food. "This whole exercise thing."

He shrugs. "I dunno about that, I do all right for myself."

Yeah, you do.

I shuffle on my feet, suddenly feeling self-conscious under his stare.

"You just starting your routine?" he asks.

I nod. "Started about a few weeks ago."

"And you kind of hate it." It's a statement, not a question as if he's rooting through my thoughts with those intense eyes of his.

"Kind of, yeah," I say. "Some days more than others."

He nods, leaning casually on the edge of one of the shelves. "Sticking to a routine is rough. It helps if you have the right gym. Where do you go?"

I look at the floor and hesitate before answering. "Clarke's Gym, down on route 10."

As I had feared, he looks disgusted. His angular face gets all scrunched up and he says, "You poor thing."

"I know, I know," I say, holding up my hands. "It's depressing. It smells like mildew and weed. But ten dollars a month? You can't really beat that." The moment the words come out, I

wish I could take them back. It may not matter in the end what this stranger thinks of me, but for some reason, the idea of his knowing how poor I am makes me feel insecure all over again.

The grossed-out look vanishes from Protein Shake Guy's face. His eyes light up again as if he's had an epiphany. Setting down the drink, he holds up his index finger and moves a half-step closer to me. My breath catches, but thankfully he doesn't notice. He pulls a leather wallet out of his shorts pocket and rifles through it, eventually producing a crisp navy blue business card with bold yellow lettering.

He holds it out to me and I take it. Our fingertips brush slightly, and a surge of static electricity shocks me with the contact. It hurts, but I don't react, instead fixing all my attention on the card.

Mount Olympus Fitness Center, the business card reads. Below that, the slogan, *Be Strong. Be Fierce. Be Immortal.* Below that, a phone number and an address I'm not familiar with.

The words sent one message, that this fitness center would help me craft my doughy body into something more godlike. The card itself, with its thick embossed paper, communicated another: this place was expensive, far too expensive for a waitress at Hungry Harry's BBQ.

"This place," he says, pointing at the card. "It'll change your life."

I stare at the card, and I can't stop my face from revealing my own disbelief. Like, did he really just assume I'd be able to afford a place with a business card like this? He must not be aware of what Wal-Mart brand clothes look like.

He chuckles at my expression. "I know what you're thinking," he says. "Mount Olympus is pricey, but they'll work with you. They're new to the area, and you know how that is for businesses. They're in that stage where they're trying to look good for the community, you know? What I'm trying to say is, if you love it and want to be a member, they'll make it work for you." His eyes shine with excitement. "And you *will* love it. Trust me."

The stranger steps away, picking up his drink. Taking a few backward steps, he says, "Check it out. Maybe we'll run into each other again." And with that, he makes his way to the checkout line, rings up, and jogs out of the store, leaving me to ponder the bizarre encounter.

Trust me, he said. Twice. But that's the thing. I don't trust him. Don't have any reason to. Sure, he's nice, charming, hot as hell.

But that's how Jace was at first, too.

It'll change your life, he said.

I'm not going to deny I could use some change in my life.

But is this the right one?

#

Back in the car, I place my phone in the cupholder, slipping the fancy business card beneath it. No sooner than I've switched on the ignition does my phone go off again.

Dad, again.

Seriously?

And just like that, those troublesome thoughts flood my mind again, making my head spin and my stomach queasy. The phone seems to ring for ages, and just when I begin to toy with the idea of picking up, it stops. Soon, the screen lights up with a message: "2 missed calls and 1 voicemail."

I shake my head, and I'm about to pull out of my parking spot when the phone lights up again. A text message. My irritation is replaced with concern as I wonder why he's being so persistent. Has someone gotten hurt? Worse?

After a moment's hesitation, I reach for the phone. Flipping it over, I see a preview of the text: "Hey, Crystal. Just calling to see how you're doing. I know it's been a while. Worried about you. Love you."

I feel heat rise to my cheeks as conflicting thoughts rear up to do battle in my mind once again. My father has always been a liar, at least ever since he married Julia. He'd told me he would never let anyone replace me, that he would always be there for me. Yet time after time throughout my childhood, he would always side with her, even as she bullied me for my weight, for my interests, for merely existing. He was supposed to defend me, but he never took my side. Not even when I needed him most.

I know it's been a while. Yeah, no shit it has. And too much has happened.

No. He's not really worried about me. He's only clearing his conscience. This way he can say he tried and place the blame on me for not answering. That's just how he is. At least, that's what Julia has turned him into.

I know better than to fall for this. The words “I love you” are just some cheap mask he hides behind. And why now? After years of silence, how am I supposed to believe that he’s had a change of heart?

Forget him.

I put back the phone, flicking it to silent mode. My fingertips brush the business card, and I pick it up again.

My eyes rest on the text. *Be Strong. Be Fierce. Be Immortal.*

“Maybe,” I say as Protein Shake Guy’s testimonial replays in my head.

Because something tells me that at this point in life, I need more than a mere distraction.

I need a change.

Taking a deep breath, I pick up the business card and plug the address into my phone’s GPS, hoping for the best.

Chapter Three

The rain has let up, and I'm just nearing the outer edge of the city when my phone lights up again. I'm stopped at an intersection, and I'm half tempted to ignore it, thinking it's Dad again. I check anyway, though, and roll my eyes and groan when I see a text from Felicia, my boss.

9-1-1!!!

KAREN QUIT!!!

CAN U COME IN???? PLS!!!

I shake my head. Felicia always begins such texts with "9-1-1," hoping it will incite her employees to the same state of frenzy she's known for. I'm at the point where those numbers have lost the urgency they used to signify for me.

Good for Karen, I think, fantasizing about the day when I'll finally be able to bid farewell to Hungry Harry's BBQ for good. I knew she'd been flirting with the idea of quitting, but I didn't know she'd found a replacement job already.

The light changes and I turn off the GPS, pulling into the U-turn lane and heading toward home so I can change from my workout clothes into that dreadful pink and white Hungry Harry's uniform.

I guess changing my life will have to wait.

#

Despite my internally mocking Felicia's panic-filled text, the only thing I can think when I stepped into Hungry Harry's is *9-1-1!* The place is packed, uncharacteristically so for a gloomy Saturday afternoon like today. Teenage boys gather around booths, guffawing and stuffing their faces while the adults supervising them try to keep them in line. A few elderly guests, clearly not part of the group the teens belong to, shoot judgmental glares at the youths.

Felicia ambles toward me, strands of her dark hair sticking up everywhere and her worried eyes two wide, honey-colored disks.

"State basketball tournament!" she explains, chipped nails fiddling with the stack of menus she holds. "Of all days, Karen. She did this on purpose to get back at me, I swear."

That doesn't sound like Karen, but I know better than to argue with Felicia when she's feeling this way. "How can I help?"

She points to two separate booths, both populated by a cluster of rowdy teenagers; a middle-aged man, maybe a coach, is goofing off with both tables at once. Felicia hands me the stack of menus emblazoned with Hungry Harry's signature image: a smiling family of cartoon pigs sitting down to enjoy famous Hungry Harry's pulled pork sandwiches. Yes, it's messed-up and no, they're not going to change it anytime soon. These cute little pork-loving cannibals are plastered all over the walls of Hungry Harry's; one of the more ridiculous examples, a strangely sexualized female pig with big Dolly Parton hair and a short skin-tight dress, hung between the two tables I'm about to serve, winking. Just ew.

"You're a lifesaver," she says, sounding like she's on the verge of tears as she rushes to the back of the restaurant, tripping over her own feet in her hurry.

I look toward the group of boys, who are trying unsuccessfully to suppress their laughter; they'd clearly seen Felicia's act of clumsiness. The older man tells them all to knock it off, lightly smacking one kid in the back of the head for emphasis. This only makes the kids laugh harder, and more boisterously.

Why did it have to be teenagers? I grit my teeth and approach the booth, sticking on my best tip-winning smile. I greet them and take their orders.

One boy changes his mind several times before settling on the bacon cheeseburger platter. Another lets out a huge fart, which causes the other boys to fall into fits of hysterical laughter. The chaperone or whatever tells them to be quiet through his own laughter.

My grip tightens around the pen in my left hand. *Tip. Winning. Smile.*

After what seems like hours, I take their orders and disappear into the back room where Cici is manning the grill. I nod at her and hand her the order sheet.

"Karen picked a hell of a day to leave." With a flick of her skinny wrist, she flips a burger, then places a slice of cheese on it before moving onto the next one. "These teenagers, man. They can really get under your skin."

"Weren't you a teenager, like, two months ago?" For the first time today, I feel somewhat relaxed. Cici and her humor are always a breath of fresh air.

She ignores my observation and stares through the kitchen window toward the teens, shaking her head. “So rude. Sometimes I just wanna—”

“Spit in their food, I know.” Cici has this strange fixation on the whole stereotype about servers spitting in rude customers’ food. She’s never done this herself, but she sure likes to *talk* about doing it, at least when Felicia’s not in earshot. Such talk would surely result in a tirade from our boss.

“Just once!” The smell of burning meat makes Cici snap out of her disgusting revenge fantasy, and she begins flipping burgers again.

“Well, maybe this will be your lucky day,” I say as I leave the kitchen.

#

Not all of the teenagers are bad, to be fair. Certainly not bad enough for me to consider desecrating their precious pulled pork sandwiches. This shift is still a hot mess, though, and before long I’m feeling somewhat resentful toward Karen. I wait on what feels like hundreds of customers, zip in and out of the kitchen just trying to keep up with everything. At one point, I deliver the wrong order to the wrong table; they don’t yell at me, thankfully, but the irritation is evident, so much so that I can tell they’re not going to tip me.

And then there’s *that* table. The one with the basketball players and their man-child of a coach. In my haste to make everyone in the restaurant happy at once, especially Felicia, I neglect to refill their drinks promptly. And when the coach yells “Hey” and waves me over, I’m already on edge.

“How may I help you?” My tip-winning smile has disappeared, lost somewhere between the kitchen and the table with the perpetually crying twin toddlers, but I try my best to be friendly as I wait for this man’s criticism.

He doesn’t even give me the courtesy of telling me what I did wrong. Not with words, anyway. He simply points to his empty cups, staring at me with his hard, cruel eyes. The basketball boys flash each other meaningful looks, and my stomach churns as I realize that while I’ve been running around like a crazy person trying to keep this place afloat, these people have been shit-talking me.

I bite back the stream of angry words that threatens to spill over and begin collecting the plastic cups. “I’m very sorry, sir,” I say. Then I paste on my fake smile and decide to try diffusing the situation with humor. I’m too flustered to manage anything other than, “Hectic day, isn’t it? Everyone and their mother decided to come here today.”

The coach smiles, but there’s no warmth in it. A few of the basketball boys snicker. One rolls his eyes.

When I’m safely behind the walls of the kitchen, I close my eyes and squeeze my necklace for a few seconds until my head stops pounding. When the memories threaten to crawl back, I open my eyes and attempt to reintegrate myself into my surroundings; Felicia is berating Cici for not cooking fast enough. Cici is ignoring her, offering only “mhm”s and the occasional “yes, ma’am” as she mans the grill. The tension in the air is palpable as servers dash in and out of the doors, some muttering profanities under their breath, some making snide remarks toward customers, one crying and trying to hide it.

Thanks a lot, Karen.

As I make my way to the soda machine and refill my table’s drinks, I can feel myself unraveling. It’s an all too familiar feeling, one that made me lash out when I was with Jace. Made me binge eat shortly after his death. Made me make impulsive, idiotic decisions time and time again. I take a deep breath, trying to focus on the sound of the soda emptying into the cups. Trying not to think.

But then I glance out of the kitchen window, catching a glimpse of my table. They’re back at it again with their rowdy joking, and now and again they look toward the kitchen door, impatient.

I’m on the last glass when I notice it. One kid pointing at the wall—pointing at the “sexy” pig. I don’t think anything of it until the other boys—and the coach—erupt in laughter and one of them says “SHE TOTALLY DOES!” Everyone else at the table hushes him, a few casting nervous glances to the door.

My head swims. My face burns and I don’t know whether to cry or take Cici’s advice and spit in their food.

Because I know I’m not overreacting. I can tell when I’m being insulted behind my back.

I can tell when someone's mocking me for my appearance. My weight.

For years, it was all I knew.

When sweet tea overflows from the glass and covers my fingers, I snap out of it. I dump some of the tea out and arrange the glasses on a tray, trudging toward the serving room.

"Psst!"

I turn to see Cici, who must know I'm upset without knowing why. She holds up an empty plate and hocks an imaginary loogie into it.

I crack a smile, then step out of the kitchen.

#

As I cross the restaurant floor, I still feel unhinged, and with every step toward the kids and the man-child, I feel increasingly unstable. Breathing deeply, I tell myself to just ignore them, to let it roll off my back, that it doesn't matter what some random strangers think of me. *Tip-winning smile, tip-winning smile...* But deep down I know there's no chance in hell I'm getting a tip from these people.

But as I approach the table, they're all looking at me. Not in that expectant way some customers look at the person who is supposed to bring them their food. No, they're evaluating me. I can feel it, the weight in their gazes.

One kid glances from me to the sexy pig, and back to me. He nods to the kid next to him. Another quietly says, "Yeah, I see it." One says, "Y'all are childish," occupying himself with his cell phone.

But it's the coach that sets me off. He doesn't say anything. Just exchanges glances with the one who'd pointed out the sexy pig in the first place, then faces me. He laughs—a single, scornful note—and smirks like he's looking at the most pathetic creature on earth.

I feel like a pot about to boil over, but I grit my teeth and pass out their drinks. It takes every ounce of strength within me not to slam the cups on the table.

"Ex-cuse me," the coach says when he samples his drink. "This is supposed to be *unsweetened* tea, not sweet tea."

All eyes at the table look away as the coach scolds me like I'm a very young, very stupid child.

“I’m sorry, sir,” I say picking up the cup. I’m so flustered that I nearly knock over one kid’s Dr. Pepper in the process, though.

I can feel my mind shutting down.

“What is *wrong* with you?” The coach’s voice is soft, but dripping with disdain. “You really don’t know what you’re doing, do you?”

I know I should leave. I should tell Felicia to take over. Just apologize and get the hell out of here.

But there’s something about the coach’s voice that makes my feet stick to the floor. Something about the snark, the disgust. The pure, unadulterated haughtiness with which this man speaks to me. I feel chills, as though Jace himself is speaking to me from beyond the grave, using this random guy as his vessel. Even now, still criticizing.

Even now, still reminding me that I’m worthless.

The coach snaps his fingers in my face and I jump. “Hello! Wake the hell up and fix my order!”

The last cords holding me together snap. I smile, but not for tips this time.

“So sorry,” I say, not bothering to tack on a “sir” at the end. “Let’s get rid of this sweet tea.”

And I don’t spit in his drink, even though in my periphery, I can see Cici watching me through the kitchen window.

But I do dump the abhorrent sweet tea all over his polo and khakis.

#

Frantic Felicia has lost all her nervous energy. After dealing with a full house of customers, not to mention dealing with the stunt I pulled, she’s completely spent, and this makes me feel equally guilty and terrified.

Needless to say, the coach lost it when I dumped tea all over him. He jumped out of his seat quick enough to make his table shudder and tried to grab me, breathing out curses and threats all the while. A server stepped between me and him, though, and somehow, magically, calmed him enough to enable me to escape back into the kitchen. Felicia came over and handled the furious customer, taking over for me like I should have had her do in the first place. He didn’t give her a tip.

Now I'm sitting in Felicia's tiny, immaculate office at the end of the day, helpless as she rubs her temples and takes deep, long breaths. I know for a fact that it's over, that I'm doomed. Felicia is a firm believer that "the customer is always right." She's the type to bend over backwards for The Customer and his ridiculous requests and abuse, and she certainly expects her employees to do the same.

Just get it over with, I think, my fingers laced tightly together and my foot tapping at a nervous pace. *I know what you're going to say, just say it!*

"Why, Crystal?" Her voice is almost pleading, lacking its usual strain. "What on earth were you thinking?"

I can't meet her gaze because I know she wouldn't believe the truth. Wouldn't accept it.

"What could that man have said that was so horrible?" Felicia seems genuinely shocked that customers were *capable* of saying and doing things that warranted a good tea-spilling. Or worse.

"It's not so much what he said. It's how he said it." If this is to be my last conversation with Felicia, then she at least deserves to hear the truth. "It made me think of someone..."

Felicia's expression softens. "Someone who hurt you," she says.

"Yeah." *Someone who hurt me. Someone I hurt. Someone I killed.*

Felicia looks out the window as if to find the answer to her dilemma there. She looks thoughtful as she watches the raindrops chase each other on the glass.

"I'm sorry." The apology feels weak. I'm not really sorry for what I did, but I'm sorry for how it's affecting Felicia and her business.

"I know," she says. "And I'm not gonna fire you. I do think you need to...lay low for a while."

#

Turns out that "lay low for a while" is a nice way of saying "suspended without pay." For a week, to be exact.

Driving home after receiving my sentence, I ponder what this suspension means for me.

It means an interrupted routine.

It means time alone. Time to think. Time to get swallowed up in memories and regrets.

And I'm afraid.

I almost wish she'd fired me. If she had, I'd have to look for a new job, and the stress of that task would keep my mind off things.

The rain falls in sheets, and thunder makes the pavement shake as I pull into the parking lot of my apartment around 9:45 that night. As I gather my things, my fingers find the business card I'd forgotten about in the stress of the day. *Mount Olympus Fitness Center*.

I crack the driver's door open and the car floods with light. I look over the business card. Protein Shake Guy had said that Mount Olympus would "work with me" on the pricing, that they were trying hard to make themselves look good to the community. Maybe I won't be able to afford this place long-term, but maybe they'll offer me a free trial that will keep me occupied throughout my suspension.

Pocketing the card and my phone, I exit my car and rush through the storm into my apartment. Too tired to think, I collapse on my bed and dream all night of Jace and the sexy pig and the coach and dad and *fat pig, fat pig*.

But I wake up early the next morning, energized. Hopeful.

I have a plan.

THANKS FOR READING!

To find out what happens to Crystal, be sure to read *Ambrosia* when it's released on October 13, 2019, by Authors 4 Authors Publishing. For updates and more information, keep an eye out for newsletters, and be sure to follow Madison Wheatley on social media.

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