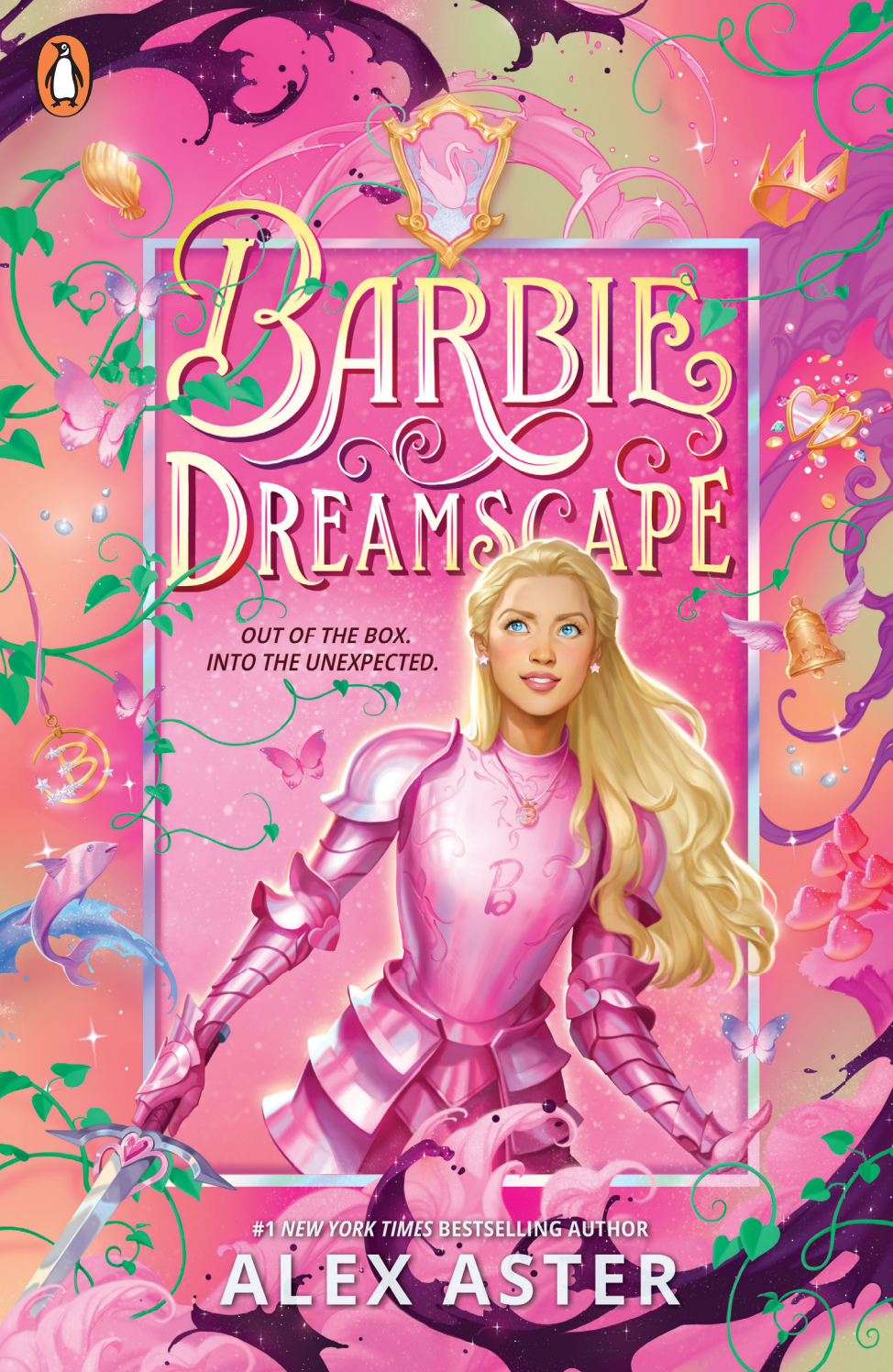

BARBIE
DREAMSCAPE
OUT OF THE BOX.
INTO THE UNEXPECTED.
#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ALEX ASTER



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ALEX ASTER

is a *#1 New York Times* and internationally bestselling author whose books have sold millions of copies and have been translated into over twenty languages. She studied creative writing at the University of Pennsylvania, lives in New York, and is never too far from a coffee shop.

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First published in the USA by Mattel Press 2026
This edition published in Great Britain by Penguin Books 2026
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Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–241–85193–7

All correspondence to:
Penguin Books
Penguin Random House Children's
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW



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For my mom—
Who always played Barbies with me
and never stopped believing in my wildest dreams

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Dearest Reader,

Playing with Barbie dolls was my first form of storytelling. Each of my dolls had a backstory, personality, and, for some reason, hair that was immediately ripped out of its ties. Countless hours of my childhood were spent sitting in front of a Barbie DreamHouse, bringing my stories and imagination to life. There was no adventure too great, no hairstyle I wouldn't try, no limit to my creativity. Though maybe there should have been, since when I got tired of my Barbie dolls' clothing, I would make new dresses out of paper towels (which would almost immediately rip).

My great-grandma was a hairdresser, and whenever she visited from Colombia, she would spend hours brushing all my Barbie dolls' hair, organizing the DreamHouse, and putting their various outfits back on (she was not a fan of the paper-towel clothing). Decades later, I would do the same for my little cousin when she got her first Barbie dolls.

Barbie transcends generations, trends, and (in this story) worlds. She represents hope, new beginnings, creativity, and versatility.

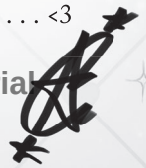
I'm honored to write what is the first-ever Barbie novel—but certainly not the last. Barbie contains multitudes (which is why we love her!).

This is my Barbie story, born out of my love for fantasy, adventure, and quests that are equal parts magic and self-discovery. I wrote the book I needed during times of change in my life. I hope it brings you the same bright (trademarked!) pink nostalgia I felt while writing it.

DREAM BIG. FAIL HARD. GET BACK UP AGAIN.

Step out of the box, and into the unexpected . . . <3

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1

Perfect

My life is a dream.

Rose-colored enchanted birds wake me up every morning with a warm cup of tea. They pull back my sunset-tinged, spun-from-clouds (yes, actual clouds) comforter, help me up from my pillow (also a cloud, sunrise dipped), then carry me by the ribbons on the shoulders of my nightdress to the bathroom to get ready, where a bath is already running, pearlescent bubbles foaming and effervescing.

They do my hair, then an enchanted wardrobe helps me get dressed, then I have a perfect day at school with my perfect friends and we all have fun and then go to bed and do it all over again.

Everything goes exactly as planned.

Things are fair all the time.

Hard work is *always* rewarded.

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Isn't life great that way?

Things are so good, even my *dreams* are just reflections of my normal days: Getting ever-flowing sundaes at the ice-cream room in the cafeteria; taking a boat down the pink canals of Heartland to see the nightly fireworks; raising my hand in class and always getting the answer right; earning a 100% on a test to add to my *You're the Best!* wall.

All things I do all the time.

But the dream I'm having this morning . . . it isn't like my life at all.

It's kind of . . . dark?

It takes place on Boxing Day, the most important day of my life, the pinnacle of everything I've worked so hard for, the culmination of my time at Swancrest Academy, when I get assigned my future role—and future happiness—by the all-knowing, all-powerful Fates . . .

It's a moment I daydream about often. Me, standing in front of all of Heartland, getting a Fate no one's ever seen before. Maybe even being the first person to get *multiple*.

But in this dream . . . the most awful thing is happening.

I keep getting Fates I hate.

In a loop. Over and over and over again.

It's more of a nightmare, really.

First, the Fates assign me the role of Beekeeper, even though I'm deathly allergic to bees.

Next, I'm assigned *Book*keeper, which sounds kind of fun, but I have recently learned it does *not* mean keeping a bunch of books.

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At least, not the kind I'd want to read in my spare time.

Then, I'm handed the role of Doctor, even though I'm one of those people who faints when they see blood.

My subconscious, it seems, is very creative, in a torturous kind of way. In every one of these scenarios, I'm given a future that's like squeezing my feet into any shoes that aren't heels—

They just don't *fit*.

And that's how I know this dream isn't real.

In real life, things *always* work out. Especially for me. This must be fake.

With that, I jolt awake.

My eyes open . . . and everything is as it should be.

"That was weird," I say to myself, frowning, an expression I don't often have use for.

Then, my wide-reaching smile—much better—overtakes my face. I bring my hands together excitedly.

"Is that . . . what nerves feel like?" My eyes widen. "Was I having . . . *anxiety*?!"

The idea of it makes me squeal. It's just so . . . relatable!

"Looks like my life . . ." I say as the birds—Misty and Bonbon—swoop toward me, a teacup held between them, ". . . might not be so perfect after all."

Wink.

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"Ow."

The birds are braiding my blonde hair into its usual immaculate crown, and the jolt of pain as they begin tightly winding the strands together pulls me out of rehearsing the look of surprise I plan to have on my face tomorrow, after my glorious Fate has been revealed.

Too nonchalant . . . and I'll look ungrateful.

Too shocked . . . and I'll look like I don't deserve it.

Too excited . . . and I'll look like I tried too hard. Which I'm told is the worst thing a person could possibly do ever.

But you know what? I *did* try hard. I did extra homework. I read outside the required reading. I did extra credit. I did extra extra credit. I finished my projects early. Sometimes, I would invent my own assignments and finish those too, just for fun.

Now, I know what you're thinking, and sure, I might not *be* fun. But I put school above everything else in my life, including having a good time.

If—*when*—I get a revolutionary Fate . . . I'll deserve it.

I lift my chin. Pull back my shoulders.

I'm ready for the next stage of my life I've worked so hard for. I'm ready to shed this season of life and bloom into someone new. Speaking of new . . .

"Do you think we could try something different today?" I ask, my voice polite even as my scalp is aching, looking at Misty and Bonbon hopefully in the reflection of my pink gem-crusted mirror.

They both ignore me. I shouldn't be surprised. The birds don't speak. But they listen—only to the Headmistress of Swancrest

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Academy, Robin, the woman who gave me a home after my mother died, when I was just a baby.

Without Robin . . . who knows where I would be? Definitely not at a place like Swancrest. No, I'd be an orphan, alone in the world and—

My shoulders hike up with a chill.

Gross. Sadness. I brush the negative thought away like a cobweb.

Anyway, Robin is why I've always worked so hard at school. She's the reason my life is such a dream. Pleasing her is the least I can do, in thanks for everything she's given me.

Misty and Bonbon finally finish their last pull of my braid, and I make my way back into my bedroom, my feet stepping from frosty strawberry-veined marble to warm wood. Buttery sunlight spills from my curtain-framed windows. The middle pane is stained glass and the rose-colored pieces filter the morning through them, bathing my room in pink light.

I told you . . . *dreamy.*

Now, time to get dressed.

As though on cue, Wardrobe—my beloved, and giant, closet—shuffles over from the corner of my room, the mahogany wood groaning with the effort. It settles in front of me, then opens wide, unfolding a half dozen compartments, drawers opening one after another in a glorious ripple.

I clasp my hands together. Time to see which shade of pink I'll wear today.

At Swancrest, we don't have a uniform—we can wear anything as

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long as it has the signature sigil patched on: the shape of a swan in a circle.

But I *always*, only and devotedly, wear pink, since it was my mother's favorite color.

The shade of pink that Wardrobe offers varies almost daily, usually corresponding to my moods: magenta when I'm feeling bold, dusty pink when I'm feeling reflective, bubble gum on Tuesdays, candy pink on holidays, lavender when I'm sad (never!).

Clothing has always been my armor. My mother made all my outfits. It was her talent. And when I stand before Wardrobe every morning, deciding how to present myself to the world, I can almost feel her, shining through satiny fabrics and intricate designs, cloaking me in love.

Pink is Robin's favorite color, too. She says it's a magical color, which is why she made much of Swancrest that same shade.

It brightens moods. Keeps away storms. Brings positive energy.

Which is good, because today . . . I need it. My final exam will decide who becomes our year's valedictorian. I've always been at the top of the class. This last distinction will be the ultimate proof to Robin that I've taken every one of her opportunities for the gifts they are.

I need to feel extra strong. Even more competent.

Wardrobe knows this (of course it does, it's enchanted). Which is why all my options look even more special than usual.

There's a dress made up of hundreds of cherry blossoms, a skirt and top with heart-shaped ruby buttons, fancy pants and a jacket in a

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foxglove shade, and—right at the end—a bright hot pink bedazzled blazer and skirt set.

I reach out, brushing the sea of thousands of gems.

This is the one.

Now . . .

Shoes!

The doors close again, then open in a flash, revealing rows and rows of options.

Heels, sandals, *heeled* sandals, booties, boots. I tilt my head as the wardrobe offers each one forward, the drawers twisting and expanding as it shows me its wares.

I purse my lips. "The boots," I say, and in a glimmering pink streak, each of my selections are thrown up into the air and caught by Misty and Bonbon, who always press and shine my clothing to perfection before I put it all on.

Lastly, Bonbon helps me with my most prized possession. A necklace with the letter "B," surrounded by a circlet of shooting stars, that belonged to my mother.

Wardrobe opens one final time to reveal a full-length mirror.

I inspect myself head to toe as the birds look on approvingly, every strand of hair in place, every inch of my outfit smooth and gleaming. I smile.

Pink and perfect.

Just like my life.

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2

Fate Is Final

"Staring at your breakfast isn't going to make it dessert, Barbie."

Maybe not. *But wouldn't that be nice?* I blink, realizing I've been staring at my bowl of pink puffed cereal for more than a few seconds, spoon floating halfway between the bowl and my mouth.

I was thinking about that dream from this morning again. Irritation rolls through me like thunder rudely interrupting a summer day. Anxiety, I've decided, is not for me. I'm going to banish it from my life immediately.

I take a hearty bite of cereal, the strawberry flavor instantly brightening my mood.

Robin and I have started our day together with breakfast in her office since as early as I can remember. While other Swancrest students begin dorming only for the final few years of our schooling,

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for me, Swancrest has always been home. My entire life has been contained within its hallowed halls—so many hours spent in this very room, playing, then studying, while Robin worked.

The fact that she eats her meals at her desk might be the ultimate sign that she has no sense of work-life balance (is there even such a thing?), but to me, it's just another reason I'd do anything to not disappoint her.

Her entire life is devoted to others. Robin is the only person in Heartland born with magic—and she's used it to make all our lives easier. Her selflessness is why she has been blessed by the Fates with the most important of roles in Heartland: As Headmistress, she's in charge of making sure all the students of Swancrest are prepared to receive their futures on Boxing Day. It's important work—the perfect balance of our land depends on everyone being trained for the role that the Fates determine they're meant to have in our society. Everyone has a purpose. It's why Heartland runs so smoothly.

Robin's work ethic has always inspired mine. The day I started school, I began studying in here, sitting in the heart-shaped chair in front of her, both of us working hard in companionable silence.

Now, she stares at me from across her desk, one arched brow raised. Even though she wears pink as I do, the rest of her office is made up of different shades of wood, from light cedar to the rich mahogany of her stately furniture, interrupted only by the glow cast from the pink staff she funnels her magic through.

Robin softens. "Breakfast doesn't become dessert . . ." She gives her closest approximation to a smile. "Unless you're me, of course."

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The light from the staff leaning beside her glows brighter, and in a cloud of glitter, my bowl of cereal transforms into my favorite food—miniature heart-shaped donuts with pink frosting and sprinkles.

"Breaking your own rules?" I ask, and pop one of the miniature treats into my mouth. Robin has rules that she always follows—and that she taught me. One of them is that breakfast should be nutritious, to give me the energy I need to be my best that day, which is why my cereal is made with oats for energy and always accompanied by slices of strawberries. "Not that I'm complaining, of course," I say, speaking around a mouthful of dusted sugar.

Robin throws back her shoulders, straightening her already stick-straight posture. Her dark hair is immaculately swept back in an elegant chignon. "Well, it's your last day of school. Tomorrow's Boxing Day. That's reason enough for celebration."

At her words, the previously evicted anxiety comes back knocking.

I try to ignore it.

I've worked hard for this. I refuse to let some stupid nightmare ruin my excitement.

Still, Robin misses nothing. "Is something wrong, Barbie?"

"No," I say quickly, because the dream I had obviously *isn't real*. And I don't want her to worry about *me*, when she already has so much to do before the culminating moment of our class's entire journey at Swancrest.

She looks unconvinced, so I add, "It's just . . . for a moment there, I was feeling a little . . . worried. About my Fate." I throw in a laugh to show I recognize how ridiculous that is.

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Robin just tilts her head at me. "Why would you . . . worry?" she asks, like the word is foreign on her tongue. That's because it is.

People in Heartland don't *worry*. Why would we, when there's nothing to worry about? The Fates tell us how to spend our lives, give us the tools to perform our roles, and guide us on how best to devote ourselves to Heartland so we always have everything we need in abundance. The town itself is *perfect*: Light pink rivers run between pastel-hued homes and shops stacked high along the canals. A pink mist of magic—created by Robin and her glowing staff—hugs our heart-shaped land's edges and keeps us safe from all the dangers beyond, the ones my own mother died defending us from.

We don't have to worry about the horrors my mom fought anymore. Here, thanks to Robin and the Fates, we're protected. There's nothing to fear. Nothing to stress over. As long as we stay put.

That's the one rule we all live by: No one leaves Heartland.

But why would anyone want to leave paradise?

I shake my head. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said any—"

"Don't be," Robin says, her voice patient, if a bit clipped. "There's no need to worry, though, Barbie, for the future has already been decided. Yours will be whatever it is meant to be. The Fates don't make mistakes; remember that."

"Right," I say, my voice bright. I believe it. Of course I do.

She reaches across the desk to take my hand.

"You know . . . your mother would be so proud of you," she says, and my eyes immediately prick. I look away, trying to push the sadness down. Robin's grip tightens. "Really, she would. You work so

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hard. You study all the time. You have the best grades. You're a great friend. You help everyone around you. She would be so, *so* proud."

She releases her hold on my fingers, pushes back from her desk, and smooths the pants of her perfectly pressed pink suit.

"But, Barbie . . ." I meet her gaze, now flat and serious. "Don't question destiny. That will only tempt it to change." Robin claps her hands, brightening. "Now off to your final. You don't want to be late."

My heeled boots click against the stone castle floor, in sync with my best friend Callie's stride. Sunny's on the other side of me, book open in front of him as he reads out the pages we're being tested on for our last final at Swancrest.

Celebration for the last day is everywhere. Lavender ribbons tied into giant bows hang across the lockers. Heart-shaped balloons pepper the ceilings, popping and releasing confetti in time with our steps.

"Why do we even need to take this test if the Fates already know what roles we're getting?" Sunny groans, shutting the book with a loud *thwack*.

Callie's brown eyes dart around as if the Fates could be watching us through those balloons. Her voice is quiet. "They could still . . . you know . . . be deciding . . ."

Sunny raises a brow at her. "Are you calling the Fates indecisive?"

Her eyes widen. "No, never! They're just likely . . . flexible. You wouldn't want to upset them and be . . . punished."

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Sunny gapes at her. "*Now* are you calling them *cruel*?"

Callie looks like she's going to pass out.

I roll my eyes. "Leave her alone," I say, winding an arm around my oldest friend and shooting Sunny a hard look. "You know she's nervous."

Sunny just grins wickedly. "We should all be, the way Callie's talking. *Punished?*" He tuts his tongue.

My eyes narrow. "Well, if anyone *should* be punished, it's you."

Sunny only smiles wider, agreeing with me.

On top of regularly questioning the Fates, treating homework as a suggestion, and overall maintaining an impressive lack of discipline, Sunny also has a destructive hobby.

He likes to take things apart, see how they work. Put them back together again.

Sometimes . . . not *quite* back together. On purpose.

For instance, four years ago, Sunny turned Teacher's desk into a soda machine that hurled cans whenever someone got an answer right. Which might have been a good incentive for focus, if they hadn't all burst open simultaneously. It took a lot of pleading with Robin not to get him expelled.

Did that stop him?

Sunny lowers his voice conspiratorially. "You'll never guess what Paige is about to walk into."

The answer is: no. Definitely not.

I sigh. "Really, Sunny? It's *the last day of school*."

Paige is Callie's roommate, and far from my favorite person at

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Swancrest. As children, I must have somehow entered into a one-sided competition with her, because she's always treated everything as a duel between us. She took a special sort of pleasure in being chosen as line leader or teacher's helper and, later on, rubbing it in whenever she scored higher on tests or projects. I thought she might warm up to me once she and Callie were placed together in the dorms, but in true Paige fashion, she's remained stubbornly dedicated to her mission of winning this imagined contest, treating me frostily at best, wickedly at worst.

Bottom line: She sucks.

But even Paige deserves to enjoy the last day at Swancrest unscathed by Sunny's idea of a prank.

Sunny looks unbothered. "Who cares that it's the last day? And you know what? I hope the Fates *are* watching." He shrugs. "Because then they'll see how cool I am."

Something explodes, just a few doors down.

"*SUNNY!!!!*" Paige's shrill voice echoes through the hall.

Sunny purses his lips. "That wasn't supposed to happen. Must have forgotten a screw or two or twenty . . ."

Teacher steps into the hallway, arms crossed over his checkered sweater vest, glaring daggers.

Sunny nods. "Yep. Right, then. I'll escort myself to Robin's office." He turns.

"It's *Headmistress*!" Teacher bellows at his back.

Sunny just looks over his shoulder. "No, no. We're on a first-name basis now. I think it happened after . . . the fifteenth visit?"

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Teacher just sighs. Sunny winks at us, then turns the corner, whistling.

"He is *so* getting the worst Fate," Callie says.

She's joking, but I wince, my mind careening back to that nightmare and all those Fates that I would deem the worst kinds.

"Barbie?" Callie says as we continue down the hall. "Can I ask you something?"

"Always."

She swallows. "You know I trust the Fates more than anyone, right?"

"Of course."

Her voice gets so low I can hardly hear her. "Well, it's just . . . I've been thinking . . . there are plenty of things I'm good at that I don't want to do every day for the rest of my life."

"Same." Though Misty and Bonbon rarely let me do my own hair, I can make a ponytail swoop that seems to defy gravity; that doesn't mean I want to make ponytails *professionally*.

She gnaws at her lip. "What if the Fates don't know that? Or what if they *do* know but don't take wants into consideration?"

Let's hope they do, considering I certainly don't *want* to do any of the roles from my nightmare.

But I remember Robin's steadying words this morning. She's always been right about everything. She's right about this, I'm sure of it. "The Fates make no mistakes. They know exactly which role we're meant to be in. They know best."

"Right, of course." Her voice lowers to the softest whisper. "But what if the Fates . . . *don't* always know what's best for us?"

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Everything goes silent. A flock of Robin's birds that were flying past us in the hall stall in midair. Students lingering in the corridors stop what they're doing, pivot toward us, stare. We're not outside, but I'm pretty sure the clouds stopped in their tracks, too. Even I look at Callie open-mouthed.

I take Callie's hand and drag her into an empty classroom, next to the one we were about to walk into.

Her face is red. She's trembling. She's always quiet and calm, but right now it's like she's a screaming kettle that's finally reached its boiling point. The words stream out of her in a hurried whisper. "What if they don't know I hate chemistry, even though I won that project? What if I have to spend the rest of my life in a *lab*?"

"Well, I—"

"What if they see that A in PE as a sign that I'm good at physical activity, when I was just running so fast because I was being chased by a bee?" That single menacing bee is the reason I got to skip all of PE, due to my allergy (thanks, bee). She goes pale with panic. "I should have just let it sting me!"

"Callie . . . are you okay?" I put a hand on her forehead. "Do you want to go to Nurse?"

As if on cue, Nurse appears outside the classroom window, because her job comes with the accessory Helicopter Ambulance, and the ability to sense she's needed before actually being called to assist.

"No, no." She shakes her head, giving a thumbs-up to Nurse, who nods and flies away.

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"Listen," I say, keeping my voice low. I grab her hands. "You're not alone in this . . . *turmoil*." I wince at the word. I've already quelled my nerves, but Callie's my best friend. I don't want her to feel like she's the only one experiencing pre–Boxing Day stress. "I just had a dream this morning that I got a bunch of horrible Fates."

Her eyes widen. "You did?"

I nod solemnly.

She frowns. "And you aren't—worried now?"

"No!" I exclaim, and it's true. I don't feel any of the nerves from this morning. They've all officially been exiled. "Everything *always* works out here. You work hard . . . and it's rewarded." I shrug. "Life is totally fair all the time."

Callie presses her palms to her eyes. "You're right. I don't know why I'm so scared . . ."

I grab her by the shoulders. "We've watched every Boxing Day ceremony since we were little kids, and every graduate has always been placed in the role they were meant to be in. It's always just made sense. Right?"

She nods, hands still against her eyes.

"Even Sunny is going to get a Fate that's right for him, Callie," I continue, laughing. "Whether he deserves one or not."

"You're right about that, too," she mutters.

Finally, her hands drop down to her sides. I wait for her face to clear, but she still looks troubled. "But don't you wish . . . do you ever wish you had a choice?"

A gasp pierces the room.

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It doesn't come from me. No, it comes from about a dozen other voices, gasping in sync. We blink, staring at one another, then turn around to see that there is a massive hole in the wall, one we didn't notice before, which must have been a result of Sunny's little experiment.

Our entire class is standing there, shamelessly listening to our conversation.

"How much did you hear?" I ask.

"Everything," the whole class says in unison, including Teacher.

I gape at him, and Teacher just shrugs. "Gossip is like life seasoning."

Paige is, of course, at the very front of the group, arms crossed. She gives us a withering look. Especially me, even though I barely said anything. "Your lack of faith in the Fates is *concerning*, Barbie," she says. She turns to Teacher. "Does that knock down her GPA?"

"No."

"At least a point?"

"No."

"She can't be top of the class and be entertaining these kinds of—"

"No."

Paige brightens. "Okay. So she's demoted, and I'll—"

"*No*," the whole class says in unison, because they are *tired*.

"Okay. Gossip time over," Teacher says, snapping his fingers, directing us all to our seats. Callie and I walk over the rubble of the *hole in the wall* toward our desks.

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"It's just Boxing Day jitters," I whisper to Callie from across the row as everyone gets their notebooks out for our final exam. "Tell me if you still feel like this in a few hours. We can talk more. Okay?"

"Yeah, okay," she says back.

But I don't get the feeling she'll bring it up again. I want to say something else, make her feel better, but I don't know how. Before I can keep trying, Teacher places the final on my desk, and our conversation fades away in light of the task in front of me.

Because if there's one thing I do know, it's how to take a test.

Exactly one hour later, the bell rings for the last time, a sound as familiar to me as Misty and Bonbon's rousing tweets.

I'll never hear that sound again, I think, with a pinch of mourning, as I turn in my final exam to Teacher.

No one else seems too torn up about it. I walk out of the room, only to see confetti made of paper from past assignments being thrown around the hall, and some of Robin's birds angrily squeaking at the mess.

"I'm so glad school is over, so my *real* life can begin," Paige says, smirking at me as I lean against the lockers closest to Callie. "Who cares about school, anyway?"

I roll my eyes at Paige's comment—if anyone has cared just as much as I have about school all these years, it's her—but her words sink into my chest, piercing like claws.

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