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LIMERENCE

HC DOLORES

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CHAPTER ONE

I t's taking every bit of self-control I have to avoid gagging right now.

My stomach is in perilous territory, and if I even *think* about it...

You can do this.

I take a deep breath, steel my stomach, remind myself that I've eaten much worse, and take another bite of my soup.

And manage not to spew it across my empty lunch table.

On Tuesdays, the cafeteria serves gluten-free, meat-free, lactose-free (and any other dietary 'free' restriction that comes to mind) split pea soup. It's a shade darker than vomit green with the texture of warm yogurt, and I eat every last bite.

It's half the price of the other lunch options, so I shovel it into my mouth with distaste and try to avoid thinking about all the pepperoni pizza slices two tables over, currently guarded by the Lacrosse team. Or the array of chocolate muffins being sold by the marching band as some sort of team fundraiser.

I briefly consider stealing one.

A chocolate muffin, that is. The marching band kids don't have as much muscle on them.

Even a trip to the salad bar would be a major step-up, but I can't justify the three-dollar up charge for a handful of leafy greens and zero-calorie Ranch that'll leave my stomach growling before lunch is over.

“Oh, shit!”

The Lacrosse players guffaw with laughter as their goalie tries flinging a pizza slice across the cafeteria like it’s a frisbee, missing the trash can. The slice lands with a *thwack*, cheese and grease oozing out onto the school’s two-hundred-year-old hardwood floors.

“Dude, that was *so* close!”

It was, in fact, *not* very close. Freddy Rook missed the can by at least three feet, so I doubt there’s an NBA career looming in his future.

It’s a little embarrassing to admit the slice in question – now seasoned with a fresh layer of dirt and dust – *still* looks more appetizing than my soup.

A second teammate tries and makes the shot, earning a chorus of whoops and hollers from the rest of the table, and I briefly wonder if any of them have ever had to pay for their groceries in nickels and dimes. Or skipped a meal entirely.

I stare at the discarded slice.

No, probably not.

At Lionswood, money rarely comes in a form that isn’t a shiny black card winking in the light.

Speaking of consumerism.

Sophie Adams breezes by, elegant salad in hand, and commandeers one of the large wooden tables in the center of the cafeteria. She’s wearing the same navy-pleated skirt and white-button down I am, but it might as well be an entirely different outfit on her impossibly thin, willowy frame.

Sometimes I wonder how she doesn’t crumple up like a paper napkin under the weight of her Burberry backpack.

“I can’t decide,” Sophie sighs to the girls on either side of her. She picks at her salad with all the enthusiasm of a house cat pawing at day-old dry

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food. “And all this stress is making my cortisol levels go haywire. I can *feel* a break-out coming.”

Her voice carries like she’s two seats down from me, not two tables. That’s the singular perk of the empty corner of the cafeteria I’ve carved out for myself – it picks up sound waves like their magnets.

Not that I suspect most of these kids would notice – or *care* – if I was hovering over their shoulders and breathing down their necks.

I’m a ghost here.

A living, breathing ghost.

Completely invisible but still subject to the whims of my human digestive tract.

“Both dresses would look amazing on you, Soph,” says Penelope from Sophie’s right-hand side. Over the past four years, Penelope has mastered an impressive ability that’s promoted her to the leagues of Sophie’s inner circle: the art of talking without ever saying a word.

That, and her entire family’s a power-suit-wearing combination of high-risk publicists and defamation lawyers.

“Well, *obviously*,” Sophie snaps and brushes a stubborn strand of auburn hair out of her face. She’s got the sharp cheekbones, pouty lips, and big, green eyes that’d be reserved for a *Bratz* doll anywhere else.

But this is Lionswood, home of the genetic lottery winners, land of the best plastic surgeons. You could make a party game out of guessing which physical features came from which.

“I like the Prada dress better,” Ava chimes in from the left. “It looks hot. Really accentuates your figure.” Ava’s dad runs some Chinese tech company, but her mother’s a celebrity stylist, so her opinion tends to hold more weight with Sophie.

“Of course you do,” Sophie says. “Leather is *your* aesthetic.”

Granted, I've rarely seen Ava Chen out of our school uniform, but her glossy, black bob, heavy eye makeup, and knee-high platform boots aren't making it a hard sell.

"This is about more than just looking good," Sophie continues. "It's about which dress Adrian is going to prefer." Her green eyes widen like she's just divulged a terrible secret to them, though I can't imagine it's a surprise to *anyone*, least of all her friends.

If I had to guess, most of Sophie's looks – and probably half the student body's – were curated with Adrian Ellis' opinion in mind.

"You could just ask him," Penelope says. "Some guys like that, you know. Picking out their girl's outfit." She shoots Sophie a particularly toothy smile as she says it, showing off the pearly white veneers her parents got her as an early graduation present.

It's the wrong thing to say, though. I know it, and so does Sophie. She whips around to face Penelope, eyes narrowed to slits. "I can't just *ask* him," she retorts. "If Adrian thinks I'm dressing just for him, it'll make me look desperate and clingy. Guys *don't* like that."

Penelope has the gall to look embarrassed, but my Primetime people watching is momentarily interrupted when some Lacrosse player accidentally knocks his elbow into my lunch tray and sends my cup of water flying across my navy skirt.

"Hey!" I call out, but he's already on the way to his table, unaware he just soaked my thighs with ice-cold water.

Ugh. Great.

It's already begun seeping through the skirt and thick tights.

Irritation bubbles up as I try to staunch the spill with the flimsy napkin attached to my tray. I don't have time to run back to my dorm and change, so I guess I'll be wearing a giant wet spot to History class.

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I glare at the back of the Lacrosse player's head. Asshole didn't even notice.

"Here," a new voice says. "I've got some extra napkins."

I glance up, shocked that anyone saw the incident, but smile gratefully as I take the clump of napkins from his outstretched hand. "Thanks, Mickey."

"No problem." Mickey Mabel shifts awkwardly on his feet, looking like he wants to be anywhere but here while I finish dabbing at the wet spot. He's a tall, gangly kid with arms too long for his navy blazer and a frizzy collection of curls he never seems to know what to do with. "I'm actually glad I caught you before lunch is over, Poppy."

It's a challenge to keep the surprise off my face. I'm not sure anyone here has *ever* been glad to catch me.

"I'm not sure if you saw the email, but Dean Robins is moving up the scholarship presentation," he explains. "He wants us to give it to tonight."

The pea soup sloshing in my stomach somersaults. "Tonight?"

No, I definitely *didn't* see the email.

I fumble with my phone and see that Mickey is telling the truth: the Dean has rescheduled our bi-annual scholarship presentation to tonight, 6 PM, in the auditorium.

The presentations are *supposed* to be a formality. A song-and-dance we give to school faculty to prove that Mickey and I aren't wasting our full-ride scholarships by slacking off or partying.

But, more than anything else, these meetings serve as a reminder.

Because, while Mickey and I might've been the only two students in the country with high enough scores on the SSAT to garner a full-ride scholarship to Lionswood, we're *still* outsiders that need to prove we belong here.

It's my least favorite part of the semester, and though I've given these presentations six times with Mickey, the anticipatory dread never forgets to rear its head.

He shuffles one foot in front of the other. "It's something 'bout scheduling changes. My part of the PowerPoint is done, so I just need you to finish yours. Do you think you could have it done, like...preferably before 5:59 PM? And with no typos this time?" I can tell he's trying *not* to sound annoyed with me, but it sneaks into his voice anyway.

We both know I'm the eternal weak link in these presentations.

I give him a strained smile. "Yeah, no worries, Mickey. I'm sure I can finish by then."

As long as I start directly after lunch, that is.

It's fine.

Totally fine.

I would've had to give this same presentation in a week, anyway.

"Okay," he nods, and for once, he looks more nervous about this presentation than I do. "Thank you."

"Yeah, no. Of course."

I push a split pea around with my fork and clear my throat. "Hey, that history paper last week was pretty intense, right? I mean –"

"I should get some food before the kitchens close," he cuts me off. "I'll see you tonight, Poppy." And then he makes a bee-line in the opposite direction, presumably before I can hold a gun to his head and force him into more small talk.

I mash a pea beneath my spoon.

I don't blame Mickey for icing me out the same way everyone else does. In any other context, coming from families who coupon probably wouldn't be enough to warrant a friendship, but here...

I used to think it'd make us friends.

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Two moon-eyed freshmen who'd watch each other's backs as they tread the same shark-infested waters.

Except, Mickey's managed to tread these waters much better than I have. If you squint, you can almost imagine he's one of them.

And hanging around me has the opposite effect.

Just one more year.

I can survive one more year here.

I'm still sulking when the cafeteria doors swing open, and the room seems to take a collective pause as Lionswood's golden boy steps through.

After four years, I should be used to the sheer amount of attention that Adrian Ellis' presence commands, but it still feels surreal. Every head turns his way. Conversations halt. People pause mid-chew.

It might as well be a ticketed event.

"Hey, Adrian! We'll see you at the game this Friday, right?"

"Your hair looks so good today, Adrian. What products do you use?"

"You're welcome to sit with us, Adrian!"

"I saw your meet last week, Adrian. You were awesome."

"Can I buy you lunch, Adrian?"

If the praise or admiration fazes him, it never shows. He accepts the compliments humbly, making rounds to wish the Lacrosse team luck and joke with the theater kids. He asks Roddy Locke if he's recovering from his broken leg alright. He takes a detour by the chocolate muffins to purchase one – and drops five hundred dollars into the donation box while he's there.

"Thank you so much, Adrian!" The marching band kids sing, mouths agape. It's like watching Lionswood's very own Mother Teresa in action.

One of them tries handing him the entire basket of chocolate muffins in return, but he just shakes his head with an easy smile. "No, that's alright.

I just wanted to support the team.” Even his voice is annoyingly perfect – smooth and low like velvet against the skin.

“Adrian!” This time, Sophie’s voice rings out over the rest. She gestures him over with a smile and a wave of her fingers. “Come eat with me?” The entire table, including Sophie herself, shifts down by one chair so that the center seat is free for Adrian.

“Of course,” he says and strides over with all the effortless confidence of someone who only understands rejection by definition, not example.

Sophie lights up like a Christmas tree when he nears and folds his long legs into the offered seat. He’s so tall I can only imagine his knees bump into the bottom side of the lunch table, but he manages to make the movement look graceful.

I’ve never been starstruck by Adrian Ellis – and certainly not enough to ask if I can *buy* his lunch – but I can’t say I’m completely immune either.

After all, I’ve got eyes, and handsome’s a painfully inadequate word for Adrian Ellis.

He’s so pretty it makes my teeth hurt.

The dark curly hair that kisses the nape of his neck, long, thick lashes, and a wickedly sharp jawline are a dangerous combination on their own, but with his tall swimmer’s build cultivated from years as Lionswood’s swim team captain, his looks are downright deadly.

An aristocrat as recognizable by the slope of his nose as he is by the Rolex on his wrist.

He’s also an Ellis, and even in a school full of trust fund babies, he’s operating in a league of his own. He’s the one percent of the one percent of the one percent – which means, one day, he’s going to inherit more money than God.

So, I can't blame the student body for jumping at any opportunity to try and shimmy into his good graces. Though good looks and wealth aside, there's one thing about Adrian Ellis that's always given me pause.

His eyes.

You'd think someone who regularly volunteers his time at the local hospital, heads up the school-wide anti-bullying commission, and probably, for all I know, climbs into trees and rescues kittens, would have the warm, kind eyes to reflect his altruistic lifestyle.

But you'd be wrong.

His eyes are empty. Devoid of kindness, light, of any kind of human warmth – and so dark it's unsettling. If eyes are supposed to be the window to the soul, Adrian's soul is looking pretty hollow from where I'm sitting.

"I'm excited about your party this weekend, Adrian," Sophie tells him, leaning in close and tugging on his bicep. I think it's meant to be a loving gesture, but with her pointed acrylic nails, it looks more like a claw closing around its prey. "I actually planned the Adams Banquet last year. We held it in London. My cousin was there, you know. Duchess Camilla."

Right.

Duchess Camilla.

A *second* cousin by marriage, and dubious as her connection to the British monarchy might be, she's never hesitated to lord it over the rest of the student body.

She spends another two minutes listing off her party-planning qualifications and Adrian gives an Oscar-worthy performance of pretending to care.

Maybe I've just got an active imagination – the guy's clearly a saint.

I take another begrudging bite of pea soup, and watch as Mickey snags a tray and heads straight for Sophie's table. Lionswood's best and brightest