

CHAPTER THREE

AMBER POV

Shopping for the Winter Prom should have been fun. At least, that's what Vic had insisted when she dragged me out of the house and into her car with promises of "the perfect dress" and "a magical night."

But now, standing in the brightly lit boutique, surrounded by racks of glittering gowns and overenthusiastic staff, I was starting to regret my life choices.

"Amber, stop looking like someone dragged you to a dentist appointment," Vic scolded, hands on her hips. Her sleek black ponytail swayed as she turned to survey the racks. She looked effortlessly athletic, as always, her pale skin almost glowing under the uorescent lights. Next to her, I felt like an awkward giraffe.

"I just don't think this is necessary," I muttered, brushing my ngers over a silver sequined dress. "I could wear something I already have."

Vic whirled on me, her dark eyes narrowing. "Absolutely not. This is your rst prom, Amber. You're not showing up in some faded church dress or those frumpy cardigans you love so much. You're going to look *stunning.*"

I sighed. There was no arguing with Vic when she got like this. "Fine. Let's just nd something quickly, okay?"

She grinned, grabbing my wrist and pulling me toward a rack of dresses. "Now you're speaking my language."

The next hour felt like a marathon. Vic had me trying on every dress in the store—or at least, it felt that way.

First, there was the red satin gown. It clung to every curve and made me look like I was auditioning for a spy movie. Vic loved it. I hated it.

"Nope," I said, shaking my head. "I look like I'm trying to seduce someone's dad."

Vic snorted, but she let me take it off.

Next was a lilac tulle monstrosity that made me feel like a Disney princess—if the princess were attending a three-year-old's birthday party. Vic vetoed that one before I even stepped out of the dressing room.

We cycled through emerald greens, navy blues, deep burgundies, and even a daring black number that Vic swore made me look like a "mysterious goddess." I wasn't buying it.

Finally, I tried on a golden dress Vic had picked out.

The moment I slipped it on, I knew this was different. The fabric hugged my body in all the right places, the shimmering gold complementing my honey-toned skin. The neckline dipped lower than I was used to—far lower—but the effect was undeniable. It brought attention to my blonde hair, which tumbled down my back, and my bright blue eyes seemed to pop against the warm hue of the dress.

When I stepped out of the dressing room, Vic's reaction said it all.

Her jaw dropped, and she let out a low whistle. "Oh. My. Goddess. Amber, you're a *bombshell.*"

I dgeted, smoothing the fabric over my hips. "It's too much, isn't it? I mean, the neckline is practically nonexistent, and—"

"Stop." Vic held up a hand. "You look amazing. Seriously. This is the one. If you don't buy this dress, I'll never forgive you."

I bit my lip, glancing at my reection in the mirror. It was a beautiful dress. But I couldn't shake the unease creeping up my spine. "Someone's going to make fun of me, Vic. I'm not like you. I don't have that kind of condence."

Vic rolled her eyes and stepped closer, placing her hands rmly on my shoulders. "Listen to me, Amber. You're gorgeous. Anyone who says otherwise is just jealous. And trust me, when Christian sees you in this dress? His eyes are going to pop out of his head. You're going to have your rst kiss in that dress. Mark my words."

My cheeks ushed at the mention of Christian. The thought of him seeing me like this made my heart race—though whether it was excitement or panic, I wasn't sure.

"Fine," I said softly. "I'll get the dress."

As we were heading to the checkout counter, the door to the boutique opened, and I froze. A group of girls from Moon Crescent High strolled in, their laughter echoing through the store. Among them was Rose, the queen BIT.CH—the triplets' stepsister and one of the most notorious bullies at school.

My stomach twisted into knots. "Vic, we need to leave. Now."

"What? Why?" Vic turned to look, her expression darkening when she spotted Rose. "Oh, great. Just ignore her. She's not worth it."

"Easier said than done," I muttered, clutching the dress like it was a shield. I started to step behind a rack of gowns, hoping to stay out of sight, but it was too late.

Rose's sharp hazel eyes landed on me, and a cruel smile spread across her face.

"Well, well, well," she said, sauntering over with her posse in tow. "If it isn't little piece of TRASH, the Delta's daughter."

I tried to back away, but Rose closed the distance in two quick strides, shoving me hard enough that I stumbled and fell onto the oor.

"Oops," she said, feigning innocence. "Clumsy, aren't we?"

Laughter erupted from her friends, and I felt my face burn with humiliation.

"Rose, back off," Vic snapped, stepping between us.

Rose ignored her, crouching down to look me in the eye. "What are you even doing here, TRASH? Trying to play dress-up? Newsash: no amount of glitter is going to make you look like anything other than the awkward little nerd you are."

I clenched my sts, biting back the urge to say something. Vic wasn't so restrained.

"Jealous much, Rose?" she shot back. "Amber looks amazing, and you know it. You're just mad because she's prettier than you'll ever be."

Rose's smile faltered, but she quickly recovered, standing up and brushing imaginary dust off her jeans. "Whatever. Just don't embarrass yourself too much at the prom, Amber. It's not like anyone's actually going to ask you to dance."

With that, she turned on her heel and sauntered off, her friends trailing behind her.

Vic helped me to my feet, her expression erce. "Don't listen to her, Amber. She's just a bitter cow with nothing better to do."

I nodded, but my heart was still racing. Rose's words stung more than I wanted to admit.

"Come on," Vic said, looping her arm through mine. "Let's get your dress and get out of here. You're going to rock that prom, Amber. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

As we walked to the counter, I tried to shake off the encounter with Rose. This was supposed to be a fun day, and I wasn't going to let her ruin it.

But as much as I wanted to believe Vic's words, a small voice in the back of my mind whispered that Rose might be right.

After the heated encounter at the boutique, Vic insisted we stop for a coffee before heading home. She said it was to "cool down and regroup," but I suspected she just wanted to keep me from spiraling after what Rose had said. Not that I was complaining—I wasn't eager to face Alan again. If he was still at the house, gaming with my brothers, I'd be stuck dodging his snide remarks and, worse, those unsettling moments when he looked at me like...well, like I wasn't just the nerdy Delta girl.

The scent of coffee and sweet pastries hit me as we walked into Luna's Cup, the coziest little café in town. Strings of fairy lights twinkled from the ceiling, and soft indie music played in the background. It was warm, inviting, and exactly what I needed after the disaster at Moon's Gowns.

Vic ordered a caramel macchiato and a double chocolate mun, while I opted for hot cocoa with whipped cream and a sprinkle of cinnamon. She nudged me toward a table by the window, where I sat clutching my golden dress in its protective bag like it was my lifeline.

"I swear, if I ever see Rose again, I'm going to shove her into a snowbank," Vic muttered as she took a bite of her mun.

I chuckled weakly, stirring my cocoa. "You don't have to ght all my battles, you know."

"Someone has to. You're too nice, Amber. You let people walk all over you." She leaned forward, xing me with a stern look. "One day, you're going to have to stand up for yourself."

I glanced down at my drink, the frothy whipped cream starting to melt into the cocoa.

"Easier said than done."

Vic sighed, reaching across the table to squeeze my hand. "You'll get there. In the meantime, that dress is going to blow everyone away at the prom. Especially Christian. Trust me, he won't be able to take his eyes off you."

A icker of warmth spread through my chest at the thought of Christian. Could Vic be right? Could he actually kiss me at the prom?

I didn't have long to dwell on the thought. The bell above the café door chimed, and a gust of cold air swept in, sending a chill down my spine. I didn't need to look up to know who had just walked in.

The atmosphere seemed to shift, the warm coziness of the café replaced by a tension that made my pulse quicken. Slowly, I glanced toward the door.

Aaron.

His light green eyes locked onto mine the moment he stepped inside, his gaze sharp and unreadable. Just. Freaking. Great. Could this day get any worse?