

# *The Great Dempseys*

BOOK 1

BRIANNA MACMAHON

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Edited by [Brianna MacMahon]

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# *Content Warning*

Dear readers,

This book contains material that some may find potentially triggering or traumatizing, including:

- suicidal ideation,
- attempted suicide, and
- abuse.

I more than understand if you need to take breaks while reading this book. If the need arises, please check the resources at the back of the book.

Thank you so much, and please take care of yourself.



## CHAPTER 1

*Audrey*

GREAT GRAY

COMPLICATED. THAT WAS THE word Audrey would use to explain her relationship with mornings. For instance, she loved her and her father's tradition of waking up early on the weekends and, weather permitting, going for long walks along the Hudson. There was something magical about New York in the morning, something unknowable. In the early hours, while most still slept, Audrey could pretend the city was a secret only she and her father had discovered. He adored New York, more than Audrey ever had—or could. When she was with him, seeing the city through his eyes, she found herself appreciating New York a little more: its culture, its history, its people. And she loved that; she loved feeling more connected to a place that had never quite felt like home to her.

She didn't, however, love being unceremoniously awoken or going to sleep knowing she had to be up at a certain time. The city wasn't so magical then. No, instead, it was loud and obnoxious, with sirens, construction, and cars—not to mention people all screaming at each other over the most mundane things.

The morning of August 28, 1978 was the latter, as it was a morning when Audrey *had* to wake up early. It was her first day of school. Not just her first day of school but the first day of her sophomore year. And through some process

Audrey still didn't quite understand, she would now be attending Great Gray, one of the most prestigious private schools in New York.

It all started when Principal What's-His-Face from her middle school had put her name forward as someone who was "worthy" (whatever that meant) of attending Great Gray. No way, Audrey had thought. Impossible! Great Gray was an expensive school, for rich families—which the Niensens were not.

Apparently, though, Audrey didn't need to worry about this, as she hadn't secured one of the scholarship positions for that year. Instead, for her freshman year, she attended a public high school, and all returned to normal. Unbeknownst to her, however, her parents had applied for her to be transferred to Great Gray for her sophomore year. Her grades were solid, as were her extracurriculars, and against all odds, she'd managed to procure her spot as a transfer student—on a full scholarship.

Though her family was not destitute, by any means—they lived in a two-bedroom apartment in Greenwich Village—Audrey knew they could not afford the tuition of a place like Great Gray. Alexander, her father, worked as a shoe repairman—or, as he called himself, a cobbler. And while he earned enough money to support his two daughters and his wife, Sophia, he didn't have a lot to spare. Claire, the oldest of the girls, was attending New York University, which was enough of a financial strain. Adding Great Gray into the mix would be, in Audrey's estimation, too much. Besides, the economy was tanking, and everything was a mess.

At every turn, though—and despite all of her thoughtfully reasoned objections—Alexander and Sophia assured her they weren't letting her give up on such an "amazing, once in a lifetime opportunity!" Yes, Audrey agreed, attending Great Gray would be an incredible honor, but she didn't even know if it was something she wanted. She'd been going to school with the same kids since preschool, and she'd already finished one year of high school. At Great Gray, she'd have to make new friends, whose lives were as far removed from hers as Antarctica was from a tropical climate. What if she didn't make friends there? What if she didn't belong?

But her own feelings on the matter were inconsequential, apparently, as her

parents made the decision without even asking for her input. As soon as they'd heard that Audrey had, in fact, been offered one of the scholarship positions, they'd enthusiastically accepted on her behalf. She was now a member of Great Gray's Class of 1981.

"Isn't this amazing, sweets?" Sophia had asked her, her eyes twinkling with so much excitement that all Audrey could muster was a resigned nod.

And so, on the morning of August 28, Audrey wasn't in the best mood. Though months had passed since she'd learned about Great Gray, she still resented her parents for having made the decision without consulting her. Didn't her opinion matter? Didn't they know they were ripping her away from her comfort zone, her life?

"You'll make new friends," Alexander insisted at the breakfast table as he read *The Wall Street Journal*.

In many ways, Alexander was a mystery to Audrey; he was fascinated by the stock market and learned all he could about it, but he never dabbled. He was far too financially cautious to risk his money like that. It was the same reason he never went to casinos or bought a lottery ticket. Great Gray, however, was a different story; to him, it was not a financial risk but an investment in his youngest daughter's future.

"Maybe," Audrey said, shrugging. "Probably not, though."

"Don't say that. Of course, you will!" Alexander gave her a thumbs-up for extra encouragement, reminding Audrey of those horrid days when she had to run the mile, and the Gym teacher would cheer them on from the sidelines.

"Oh, thanks. That's real helpful. Just like that, all my nerves are gone. Poof. Like magic."

Alexander laughed. "Come on, Audie," he said, reassuringly touching her hand. "You're going to be just fine. Great Gray is an amazing school."

"Sure. But at the end of the day, it's just a school."

"A school that Supreme Court justices and senators have attended," he reminded her, as if either of those was a career path that interested Audrey.

Hearing all the noise, Sophia sauntered out of her bedroom, wrapped in her

favorite robe. She beamed when she saw Audrey, and she placed her hand to her chest.

“You look beautiful in your uniform, Audie,” Sophia said.

“Thanks,” said Audrey. “It’s not very me, but—”

“You look beautiful,” Sophia reiterated, nodding for emphasis. She walked over to Audrey, a wistful smile on her lips. “Oh, I remember when I used to have hair like yours,” she mused, running her fingers through Audrey’s carefully styled, Farrah Fawcett–inspired hair.

“Mom! Careful!”

“Sorry, sweets! Here, let me ... there. Good as new!”

Sophia always loved to mention how much Audrey favored her, with her honey-blond hair and green eyes. Every one of Audrey’s yearbook photos, it seemed, reminded Sophia of the youth she’d once possessed. And while Audrey was deeply flattered by the comparison, she couldn’t help but note a trace of sadness in Sophia’s eyes when she looked at her, as if in disbelief that she was old enough to have one daughter in college and another in high school. Children, it seemed, served as a constant reminder of the passage of time, the growing distance between the adolescents’ parents had once been and the adults they now were.

Alexander averted his attention to the clock on the wall. “But you better get moving, love. Don’t want to be late.”

Audrey gave him a look. “If I miss the subway, another will come along.”

“I know. It’s just ... you’re not all that familiar with Uptown, and it’s a bit of a walk from the station to Great Gray, so—”

“She’ll be fine,” Sophia said, exchanging a knowing look with Audrey.

“I’m pretty smart, you know,” Audrey piped up.

“Yes, I know,” Alexander sighed. “Just ... keep your wits about you, yeah?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be careful. I always am.”

Alexander smiled. “I’m just so proud of you, Audie.”

“Thanks, Dad.” Audrey kissed his cheek. “Love you.” She pulled Sophia into an embrace. “Both of you.”

“Bye, Audie!” said Sophia, waving as though Audrey were departing on a

transatlantic voyage.

Despite her father's fears, Audrey had little trouble navigating her way to Great Gray. She and her parents had visited the school over the summer, to scout out the area. ("Can't risk you getting lost, now, can we?" Alexander had teased, all too familiar with Audrey's embarrassingly poor sense of direction.) Audrey remembered joking whether they called it Great Gray because the building was big and constructed from—wouldn't you know it?—gray stone. No, her father had informed her with a chuckle; it was because the mascot was a great gray owl. And while Audrey had found that explanation to be lacking, Alexander had then pointed out the gray, black, and white crest above the front door that boasted what must have been a great gray owl in the center. (Audrey simply took her father's word for it, as her knowledge of birds was severely limited.) Thus, grudgingly, Audrey had to concede the point—but not without noting that the gray building wasn't coincidental.

Now, as Audrey gazed at Great Gray's exterior, she had to admit it was undeniably striking, with its polished stone and fenced-in courtyard. A few students were milling about, reacquainting before the start of a new year. Though Audrey had always been a social butterfly, she dreaded the prospect of having to make friends. Maybe she wouldn't be the only new kid; maybe some other sophomores were also transfer students.

"... out of this rat hole," a boy was saying to his four friends—or, more accurately, minions, as they struck Audrey as boys who had no existence outside of their appointed leader.

But their leader was certainly nothing to write home about, reminding her of every soon-to-be disgraced politician apologizing for his misdeeds. He would've been labeled a nobody at her old high school, but since his family was obviously wealthy—the boy proudly wore an expensive-looking, ill-fitting watch—he was probably one of the popular kids. Effortlessly, Audrey could envision him as that fifty-year-old man still telling stories about his high school glory days, living vicariously through his suffering son.

"But we're seniors now," the boy went on. "And you know what that means."



He removed a cigarette from his pocket, lighting it up with a clear aura of discomfort, as if it were something he'd never done before. "We can skip out whenever we want."

They all laughed at that, revealing just how pitiful their senses of humor were. One of the other boys called their leader Alistair, which cemented to Audrey that she'd truly entered another world. Only people with serious money were named Alistair. Perhaps naively, Audrey hoped these boys weren't indicative of the sorts of people she'd meet at Great Gray, but she wasn't all that optimistic. A part of Audrey had assumed that private school kids would be more well mannered than their public school counterparts, but clearly, regardless of their upbringing, teenagers were teenagers: entitled, boastful, and annoying.

Upon entering the school, Audrey saw that most of the students were already being escorted into the auditorium for what she assumed was the obligatory first day of school assembly. No doubt, they'd be subjected to the same speech they'd been given every year since kindergarten: bullying is bad, your teachers are here to help you, and detentions go on your permanent record. Audrey wasn't sure what a permanent record was, or if it even existed, but it'd been mentioned so many times she assumed it had to be real. At this point, Audrey could deliver the speech herself—and much more humorously, if she did say so herself.

"Name?" a student asked her, though it sounded more like a demand.

"Audrey Nielsen. I'm a sophomore, but—"

"Over there to the left."

Audrey scooted to the left. To her relief, most of the students around her looked just as nervous as she was. Hopefully, she would be able to find a good group of friends. She didn't want to feel like a pariah for too long.

Only one student stood in front of Audrey, and three were standing behind her. One girl with flaming red hair sat at the reception table, thumbing through the list of students and corresponding schedules.

"Next!" said the redhead, pointing at Audrey. As Audrey neared her, the redhead simply said, "Name?"

Were some of these "student helpers" planning future careers as drill

sergeants? They acted as though they resented Audrey for simply existing and going through the same rigmarole as everyone else. The redhead was clicking her gum, her eyes on the *Cosmopolitan* magazine she had unsightly placed underneath her list of student names.

“Audrey Nielsen.”

The redhead nodded distractedly, then handed Audrey her schedule. “This will tell you where your classes are. Do you have any questions?”

Audrey stared at the schedule, struggling to take it all in. Yes, as a matter of fact, she *did* have questions—lots of them. For one, how was she supposed to know where these rooms were? Some of the rooms had numbers, and others had letters. And why did she have two different classes listed at the same time?

“Here at Great Gray, we alternate between Gray and Black days,” the redhead explained. “Today’s a Gray day. So, for fifth period, you’ll go to Gym. On Black days, you’ll have study hall.”

“Oh, okay. That makes sense. Thanks!”

“Sure.” The redhead cracked her version of a smile. “The auditorium’s over there to your left. Principal Waverly will tell you more about what to expect here at Great Gray.”

Audrey was spellbound by the auditorium’s grandiosity. Four pillars lined the aisle, two on each side; windows flanked the left and right walls, reminding Audrey that the real world did, in fact, exist outside this place. The school crest hung above the stage, complete with some pretentious Latin words: *UIRTUS*, *VIRTUS*, *VICTORIA*. Audrey could hardly believe she was now attending a school with a motto—and a Latin one, at that.

She claimed a seat at the back of the auditorium, with no one immediately around her. Then, she surveyed the room. Everyone was wearing variations of the same outfit—black pants or a black skirt, with a white dress shirt and a gray-and-white checkered tie. Audrey found the ensemble to be dreadfully dull, with minimal room for self-expression. Some of the female students, though, embellished their outfits with the kind of jewelry Audrey had seen only in Fifth Avenue storefronts.

“Good morning, students. Good morning,” said Principal Waverly, with pseudo enthusiasm and a matching smile. He looked like he should have been a librarian and lived every day perplexed as to how he’d become a principal. “I’m sure you are all ready and excited to start a new school year. As the principal of Great Gray, it is my honor to welcome you—some of you again, and some of you for the first time. Yes, I see many familiar faces out there, and for those I don’t recognize, I look forward to getting to know each and every one of you—but hopefully not for the, uh ... unfortunate reasons,” he added with an awkward chuckle.

From her vantage point, Audrey could see the rest of the auditorium. Most students were engaged in their own side conversations, acting as though Principal Waverly wasn’t even there. Some students were even plucky enough to outright leave, and Audrey couldn’t blame them—and secretly wished she had joined them. Principal Waverly wasn’t a gifted public speaker, and he was delusional to think that teenagers—especially this early in the morning—would give him any of their attention.

“Here at Great Gray, we live by three words: *uirtus, virtus, victoria*,” Principal Waverly continued, seemingly unaware that very few students were actually listening. “For those of you who do not, uh, speak fluent Latin, those words mean excellence, virtue, and success. It is our, uh, most sincere hope that what you learn here at Great Gray will carry you through the rest of your lives ...”

As Principal Waverly droned on about school policies and expectations, Audrey reminisced about warm summer days biking in Central Park. She fondly remembered staying in East Hampton for the Fourth of July and her birthday, grilling and relaxing on the beach. This was the last place she wanted to be, in a stuffy auditorium listening to a middle-aged man trying to relate to her and her peers.

Audrey knew she was zoning out, but she was too lazy to zone back in. A few seconds later, she felt a swift breeze, then heard someone sit down on the open seat to her left. Instinctively, Audrey turned, curious as to who this latecomer was.

It took everything inside Audrey to not stare. He was outrageously handsome,

boasting what could only be dubbed movie-star good looks. While most adolescent boys opted for longer, feathered hairstyles, he did not; on the contrary, he sported an Ivy League haircut, with his dark-brown hair parted to the left. As he settled into his seat, his head turned slightly toward Audrey, and she caught a glimpse of his baby-blue eyes. He was zealously scrawling in his notebook, his hand racing across the paper. Audrey stared for a beat too long, as he finally felt her eyes on him and looked up.

“Hi,” he said, offering a smile, revealing yet another attractive feature—dimples.

Audrey had never struggled to make conversation before, but in his company, she balked, scrambling to invent a suitably witty response to his simplest of greetings. She understood the importance of first impressions, and she didn’t want him to think she was shy—or, even worse, boring.

“Hi,” she said at last, instantly regretting her uninspired choice. She sank into her chair, cheeks burning.

Before she could say anything more to him, Principal Waverly informed the room that next Friday, there would be a fair for all of Great Gray’s clubs and activities. Though many of the sports teams had already begun practicing, some were still open to new members. Audrey actually felt her eyes gloss over when she heard the word “sports.” And, to her shock, he mentioned there was a polo team. People under the age of forty played polo? Was Great Gray trying to prepare their students for lives of leisure as members of some ridiculously expensive social club?

“Please be sure to attend the fair so you can get involved in all that Great Gray has to offer,” Principal Waverly said. “Now, thank you all for your undivided attention,” he went on, without a trace of irony. “Let’s make this the best year yet! Please, at this time, make your way to your homerooms.”

Principal Waverly walked up the aisle, waving at students as though they were fans of his. Only a few desperate brown nosers waved back. Audrey wondered what Principal Waverly had dreamed of becoming—and what had happened in his life to lead him to this point, where he required the adoration of teenagers to be happy.

Audrey pulled out her schedule to see where her homeroom was. Of course, she had no idea which rooms were where, so she'd probably end up roaming the halls for twenty minutes. By then, she would already be late for her first class. Hardly a good way to demonstrate how grateful she was to be here.

"Are you a freshman?" the boy asked her.

"No, I'm a sophomore, but I just transferred here."

"Oh." He smiled warmly. "Well, welcome to Great Gray."

"Thanks." She smiled in return, proud of herself for maintaining her composure.

The boy leaned forward. "I know they don't give you much help on where things are. If you want, I could walk you to your homeroom."

To Audrey's delight, his accent was decidedly New York. It wasn't as strong as a Brooklyn accent, for instance, but she clearly heard it when he pronounced "walk" more like "wawk."

"That'd be great! Thanks!" said Audrey, delighted she had an excuse to spend more time with him.

He grinned. "I'm Bobby, by the way. I'm a sophomore too."

"Audrey."

"So, Audrey ... where are we headed?"

"Let's see ..." Audrey consulted her schedule with furrowed brows. "Room four eighteen."

They stood up, and Audrey was surprised by how tall Bobby was; he had to be almost six feet tall. As they walked, Bobby asked her if she was nervous about her first day. Audrey admitted she was, as she'd never been good with change.

"It's different from my old school," she said.

"I'm sure you'll be just fine," Bobby said, suddenly stopping. "Here we are. Four eighteen."

"Oh." Audrey was strangely disappointed they were already parting. "Well, thanks again."

"Of course." He shifted on his feet. "I'll, uh ... see you around."

"Yeah, uh ... see you too!" Audrey said, waving awkwardly.

Luckily, Bobby couldn't hear her pathetic response over the swell of students who had just arrived in the hallway. With her head hanging low, Audrey entered her homeroom, trying to refocus her attention.

The first day of school was always absurdly monotonous, with every teacher giving the same speech on expectations and time management. Some tried to strike fear into the hearts of their students, claiming that tardiness and late assignments would result in automatic Fs. Others assumed the opposite approach, trying to be all buddy-buddy with the students—with equally ineffective results. Going from teacher archetype to teacher archetype was a form of whiplash for which Audrey had not been prepared.

Thankfully, though, she had lunch sixth period, so she made her way to the cafeteria. All the tables were rectangular, with three seats on each side. She glanced around the room, knowing very well that her social future depended on where—and with whom—she sat. Unintentionally, Audrey could ruin her whole high school experience by sitting with the wrong people—or, even worse, sitting alone.

To her surprise—and endless relief—Cassandra Irvine, a girl from her Geometry class, stood up from her table and waved her over.

“Audrey! Over here!”

Audrey didn't exactly know why Cassandra wanted her to sit with her and her friends, but she wasn't about to refuse such a kind offer. Instead, Audrey walked over to the table. As she did so, Cassandra signaled for one of the girls to move over so Audrey could sit in the middle chair directly across from Cassandra.

“Hi,” Audrey said to the other girls at the table, none of whom she recognized from her earlier classes.

“This is Lisa,” Cassandra started, motioning to the girl on Audrey's left, “and this is Shelly and Barb.” She pointed at each girl in turn. “Girls, Audrey is new here.”

Disconcertingly, Lisa, Shelly, and Barb were almost spitting images of Cassandra, with their shoulder-length half-dos and accessorized uniforms. The girls leaned forward, as a unit, their curiosity piqued.

Lisa placed her elbows on the table. "New from where?"

"I went to a school in the Village," Audrey replied.

"Is that a different country?" asked Barb.

Audrey laughed. "Maybe to some people."

None of the girls laughed with her. Barb, for her part, seemed genuinely perplexed, and Audrey began to fear that Barb actually thought the Village was, in fact, a different country. Perhaps money didn't equate to a better education after all ...

"I thought the Village was for poor people," Shelly interjected.

Before Audrey could respond to that, Cassandra shot Shelly a piercing look. "Oh, is that where you live?" Cassandra asked, redirecting her attention to Audrey. "Greenwich Village?" After Audrey nodded in response, Cassandra asked, "So, what are you doing here?"

It sounded like an innocent question, but Audrey sensed an underlying, accusatory edge. The girls were staring at her, waiting for her answer. Audrey shifted in her seat. She felt as though she were being interviewed for a job: one she was, evidently, woefully unqualified for.

"I earned my place here," Audrey said, perhaps a bit too defensively.

Cassandra broke into a conciliatory smile. "Of course, you did. We *all* did."

Audrey didn't know what to make of that. *Had* they all earned their place here? Barb didn't even know where—or what—the Village was, and Shelly certainly hadn't learned anything about manners, as far as Audrey could tell. Not willing to rock the boat, however—or ostracize herself from this potential friend group—Audrey simply grimaced.

"I guess we did," she said flatly.

"Well, we're happy you're here now," Cassandra went on, "and the girls and I will be more than happy to help you ... fit in with the rest of us," she added, her eyes on Audrey's unadorned uniform.

"Oh. That's ... nice of you." As Audrey said these words, dread pooled in the pit of her stomach.

"Cassandra is *always* so nice and thoughtful," piped up Shelly, which didn't

do much to assuage Audrey's mounting doubts.

"I bought this dress one time," Lisa began, visibly eager to illustrate Shelly's point, "and Cassandra told me it wasn't my color. She was right, of course!"

Cassandra nodded sagely. "You look positively *garish* in yellow."

Audrey's eyes widened. Would this be her future—being told what to wear by some five-foot-two dictator? Maybe she would have been better off sitting by herself, if this was the alternative.

"Don't worry," Cassandra told Audrey. "I bet you look good in *every* color. Especially ..." She trailed off, absently stroking her many glittering bracelets. "... *green*."

"Jeepers!" gasped Shelly, eyeing Cassandra's bracelets. "Are those new?"

Cassandra shrugged. "Oh, these? Just a back-to-school gift from Daddy."

As the girls squealed with delight, Audrey took a large bite of her sandwich and, perhaps melodramatically, hoped she would choke.



THE LAST THREE CLASSES were much more enjoyable than the previous five. Audrey got to meet her English teacher, Mrs. Parker, who, though undoubtedly intimidating, possessed a dry wit that Audrey appreciated. And, dissimilarly to some of the other teachers Audrey had already met, Mrs. Parker did not allow her students to walk all over her. Within the first five minutes of class, Mrs. Parker sent some boy down to detention for flinging rubber bands at the back of a girl's head. He claimed he was just joking around, but Mrs. Parker wasn't in the mood for such juvenile antics. Audrey wished she had shown that same grit during lunch, that she'd called out Cassandra and her friends for their judgmental comments.

A little under an hour later, Audrey was back home. Her mother was in the living room, and as soon as Audrey walked through the door, Sophia sprung to her feet, peppering her with all sorts of questions about Great Gray.



"How was your first day? Did you make any friends? What are your teachers like? Do you already have homework?"

Audrey answered her questions as vaguely as possible, knowing very well she wouldn't mention Cassandra or the other girls. She knew how important it was to her parents for her to fit in, and she didn't want them to be worried about her. Audrey started giving Sophia her assessment of Mrs. Parker, the school's most daunting English teacher, and Alexander walked in.

"They say she fails students just to make them cry," Audrey told them. "I don't think I believe it, but ... she *does* have that look about her. I kind of like her, though. She's funny. Has that Aunt Trina sarcasm."

"Oh, no. There's two of them?" joked Alexander.

"Well, we're so proud of you, Audie," Sophia said, unable to suppress her palpable glee. That was one of the things Audrey loved most about her mother—her unwavering positivity. "Really, Dad and me ... we were saying this morning just how impressed we are by you. It's a big change, we know, but ... you'll do great."

"And don't forget, love," Alexander piped up, "high school is the best years of your life. So, soak it all up!"

Sophia added, "Oh, and next Saturday, we're all going out to dinner, to celebrate this new school year."

"*All* of us?" asked Audrey. "Including Claire?"

"Well, of course!" said Sophia, oblivious to Audrey's tone.

Though Audrey loved Claire, the two had never been particularly close. And Audrey would have been lying if she said that having Claire out of the apartment and in one of the NYU dorms hadn't been a dream. In fact, when their parents had decided a dorm would be worth the extra money to ensure that Claire had the whole college experience, Audrey hadn't protested. Now, it was just Audrey at home, and she'd already gotten used to having the bedroom all to herself.

"Right. I won't forget," Audrey said.

"Well, dinner's almost ready, sweets!"

After dinner, Audrey handed over all the paperwork to Alexander to sign. Predictably, he made the same joke he always did, remarking how he felt like Elvis

Presley signing autographs. Audrey laughed, as she always did, not wanting her father to ever think he'd lost his touch.

Eventually, the evening morphed into night. Because the apartment contained only one bathroom, they had devised a schedule for who could use it when. It was a routine they had down to the minute. The wonderful parents they were, Sophia and Alexander always let their daughters go first. With Claire out of the lineup, Audrey was the first one on the list.

The night before, Audrey had been racked with anxiety, stewing over every possibility, living through every worst-case scenario. Tonight, however, her anxiety was more centered, grounded in the reality of how her first day at Great Gray had gone. As she closed her eyes, she saw Cassandra Irvine and her posse laughing and pointing at her.

"You don't belong here," they said in chorus. "You never will."

A decorative border of light gray roses and leaves frames the top and sides of the chapter title area.

## CHAPTER 2

# Audrey

## THE STATUS QUO

**I**N MANY WAYS, AUDREY thought, the second day of school was more difficult than the first. It was the definitive realization that summer was truly over. The next nine months of her life would be spent attending classes, lugging around a backpack heavier than she was, and navigating the complicated politics of a private high school.

She'd arrived at school a little early, to enjoy the emptiness of the hallways and actually read the various flyers already posted around. She was impressed by how many extracurricular activities and clubs Great Gray boasted. There were, of course, the staples, such as yearbook, pep club, key club, and drama. Some of the clubs, however, seemed so niche she wasn't sure how many students could possibly be enrolled. For example, there was a group dedicated to dissecting and analyzing each *Columbo* episode, and, according to the flyer, they were encouraged—maybe even required—to wear trench coats.

Slowly, more students filed in, dispersing in all directions, with varying levels of energy. Audrey could have used a cup of joe to power her through the school day, but her parents thought she was too young—even though Claire had been drinking coffee since she was twelve.

As Audrey approached her locker, she tried—but failed—to stifle a yawn. Bobby, the boy she'd met at the assembly, entered the school. Instead of a backpack, he carried a black messenger bag. It was slung across his shoulder, making him look charmingly adult. He struck Audrey as the sort of person who had never acted his age; he had probably been one of those kids who was more interested in what the adults were doing. While most of his peers preferred to have their ties slung across their shoulders or their blazer unbuttoned, Bobby was the epitome of prim and proper. Audrey couldn't help but wonder how early he'd woken up, as his shirt and pants were wrinkle-free, and his hair was perfectly coiffed. A bit self-consciously, Audrey glanced down at her own attire, noting the creases in her skirt and blouse. Bobby neared her, and Audrey attempted to smooth her skirt with the palms of her hands. Her heart lodged itself in her throat as she was once again made aware of just how handsome he was.

To her delight, Bobby's locker was not too far away from hers. When he opened his locker, Audrey caught a glimpse inside and was impressed by how organized it was. Everything was color coordinated, most likely lined up in the order of his classes. Bobby grabbed a couple of notebooks, placing them gingerly in his bag. Not wanting to pry or come across as stalkerish, Audrey pretended to be fascinated by her locker's drab interior. She made a mental note to decorate it with some posters.

"Hi again."

Bobby's voice came from behind her, and in shock, Audrey slammed her locker, nearly crushing her index finger in the process. Audrey collected herself and turned to face Bobby, who was standing near enough that she could smell his lemony, woody cologne but not so near that she felt uncomfortable. He didn't seem aware of his attractiveness—or accustomed to talking to girls. Rather, his left hand tightly gripped his bag, his posture was stiff, and he offered Audrey a sweet—but adorably timid—smile.

"Hi," Audrey said, absently playing with her collar.

"How was your day yesterday?"

"It was good, yeah," she lied. "I think I'm getting the lay of the land." She

looked up and met his beautiful eyes. “Thanks again for walking me to my homeroom.”

“You’re very welcome.” He cleared his throat. “I was actually ... I’m glad I saw you. Some friends and I, we’re going to grab burgers after school, and I was wondering if you’d like to join us.”

Audrey knew it would have been the better move to play it cool—maybe even reject his invitation—but she was far too excited by this turn of events to feign aloofness. A cute boy was asking her if she wanted to hang out with him and his friends. No way was she going to turn him down.

“I’d like that,” Audrey said giddily.

“Great! Do you know Jack’s?”

“No.”

“Oh, okay. Here, I’ll meet you by your locker after school, and we’ll go together.”

“Sounds good!”

For the rest of the morning, Audrey had a noticeable pep in her step. Nothing, it seemed, could sully her mood. She’d been hoping she’d see Bobby again, and she was flattered he’d sought her out on his own—and that he wanted her to meet his friends. Maybe this could be the start of something. Maybe—

“Audrey.” Cassandra’s voice knocked Audrey out of her daydream, bringing her back to the cafeteria. “Are you even listening to me? You were pretty zoned out there.”

“Oh.” Audrey looked up and saw all the girls glaring at her. “Sorry about that. I guess I just ... do any of you girls know a Bobby?”

Cassandra’s face blanched. “Bobby ... Dempsey?”

Upon hearing that name, the other girls’ eyes widened. Audrey wasn’t sure where to direct her attention—or what to say. All the girls were staring at her as though she’d been speaking in a foreign language.

Audrey shrugged. “Maybe?”

“Well, what does he look like?” Cassandra demanded.

“He’s tall with brown hair, blue eyes, and—”

"That's him." Cassandra furrowed her eyebrows. "How did you ... how do you know him?"

"He sat next to me at the assembly. Actually, he was really nice and offered to walk me to my homeroom."

"*He* offered?"

"Well, yeah." A pit opened in Audrey's stomach. "Why? Does he do that a lot?"

Shelly snorted, and Cassandra quelled her with a quick look. Audrey nervously glanced between the two, trying to decipher this exchange. Was Shelly trying to warn her about Bobby, or had Cassandra possibly dated him before? It was difficult to tell why they were reacting this way.

"He's never offered to walk *me* anywhere," Barb lamented.

"Please. He doesn't even know you exist," Lisa retorted, and Barb hung her head in shame.

Audrey smiled sympathetically at Barb before continuing, "Well, he invited me to grab burgers with him and his friends after school."

"He must like you!" Shelly chirped, and in response, Cassandra smacked her shoulder—too forcefully to be in jest.

The pit in Audrey's stomach became occupied by butterflies, lots of them, fluttering about, all crashing into each other. Shelly's comment—whether genuine or derisive—had alleviated some of Audrey's concerns. However, Cassandra's eyes were daggers, threatening—but failing—to deflate Audrey's buoyed mood.

There was a manic look in Cassandra's eyes. "You can't go out with him," she told Audrey.

"Why not?"

"Because!" Cassandra slammed the table, startling Barb, who squealed and squeezed her juice box, some of which splashed onto the table.

With her napkin, Audrey wiped up the spilled juice. "Do you ... *like* Bobby?" she asked Cassandra.

Cassandra scoffed. "He's *Bobby Dempsey*. Of course, I like him."

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, I’m not going out with just him. I’m—”

“It doesn’t matter, Audrey! You can’t just come in here and ...” Cassandra trailed off, shaking her head. She tapped her finger against the table. “Do you even know anything about him?”

“Well—”

“He’s the son of Robert Dempsey—*the* Robert Dempsey. Surely, you know who *that* is?”

Audrey would have had to be living under a rock to not know *the* Robert Dempsey. He was the CEO of R.D. Dempsey Corporation, colloquially known as Dempsey Corp. Dempsey Corp was one of the largest, most influential conglomerates in the United States, if not the world. Audrey’s father was nothing short of obsessed with the Dempsey family and their exuberant, lavish lifestyle, comparing them to past dynasties such as the Morgans, Rockefellers, and Vanderbilts. Alexander had always fancied himself a history buff, and he was particularly interested in “great men who defined their age”—which, evidently, included Robert Dempsey. Originally, the Dempseys had made their fortune in transportation—something to do with railroads, if Audrey remembered correctly. Usually, she tuned out her father’s history lessons, finding talk of rich White men owning things to be incredibly boring. Still, despite her naivety about all things business and stocks, even she knew the Dempseys were a big deal. In fact, they were not only one of the richest families in New York but also in the nation, with an estimated net worth of well over one billion dollars.

“Of course, I know who he is,” Audrey responded.

“So, obviously, you can see why it won’t work out,” Cassandra pressed on, “seeing as you’re from the Village and all.”

Lisa and Shelly snorted, looking at Audrey with an infuriating mixture of superiority and pity. Barb, on the other hand, offered Audrey a wry, knowing smile. Audrey’s face was hot. She hadn’t expected Cassandra to try and embarrass her by using her socioeconomic status against her.

“Why should that matter?” Audrey countered, her voice steady despite her simmering anger.

Cassandra scoffed. “Because it does. It just does. End of discussion.” She then directed her attention to Lisa. “Did Alistair ever get back to you about where you’re going Saturday?”

Lisa beamed. “He’s taking me to P.J. Clarke’s.”

“Oooo!” Shelly clapped excitedly.

Audrey sat in silence. As far as Cassandra was concerned, the subject had been dropped, and Audrey wouldn’t be permitted to speak about Bobby anymore. But that didn’t stop her from thinking about him and their after-school meetup. In fact, throughout the day, Audrey found herself doodling his initials—BD—in the margins of her notebooks.

After classes finished, Audrey swung by her locker and gathered up her books. As he’d promised, Bobby escorted her to Jack’s Burger Bar. It was just a couple of blocks from Great Gray, but Bobby and Audrey made friendly, lighthearted conversation on the walk over. Jack’s was straight out of the 1950s, with black-and-white tile floors, a jukebox, and blue booths. The staff all wore those typical diner uniforms, complete with the little hats.

Bobby led Audrey over to the booth where four people—three girls and a boy—were already sitting. Audrey trailed behind his towering frame, not quite enthused at the prospect of meeting more Cassandras. She sincerely hoped his friends were nice.

“Hey, everyone,” Bobby said. “This is Audrey. She’s new here, so let’s make her feel welcome. Audrey, this is Sebastian,” he continued, gesturing at the only boy, who nodded politely at Audrey, “and this is—”

“I know you!” one of the girls piped up. “We’re in Geometry and Gym together, but we haven’t been properly introduced.” She stuck out her hand. “I’m Florie. Florie Washington. To remember, just think: like the president but better.”

Audrey smiled. “I’ll remember that.”

The girl with raven hair and bright red lips laughed. “Glad to know you’re actually taking an interest in American history, Florie.”

“Oh, come on, Sarah! You know how much I love history! Don’t forget we



saw 1776 together,” Florie retorted.

“And that didn’t help you much on the final, did it?”

“I almost passed! That should say something.”

Sarah rolled her eyes. “You can’t watch a musical and think that’s real history.”

“Oh, you mean our Founding Fathers *didn’t* sing at each other?” Florie asked, hand to her chest in mock indignation. “You learn something new every day.”

“History class *would* be better if they turned it into a musical,” Audrey agreed. “Mr. Schmidt isn’t exactly interesting to listen to.”

“Ooof, you have Mr. Spit? Lordy.” Florie shuddered. “I had him last year. Maybe sit in the back from now on. He tends to spray more than he says, if you catch my meaning.”

“Ew!” exclaimed Sarah. “That’s disgusting! We’re about to eat!”

“Well, that man ruined many a lunch for me, let me tell you. Having that class right before lunch? Criminal.” Florie scooted in, patting the seat next to her. “Sit next to me, Audrey, and I’ll impart more of my wisdom onto you.”

They all ordered burgers, fries, and shakes. As they chatted away, Audrey was surprised by how comfortable she felt in their company; it was a stark contrast to the two lunches she’d spent with Cassandra and her posse. The last girl, Helena, reminded Audrey of the activities and clubs fair next Friday, telling her it was a great way to meet new people and get involved in all that Great Gray had to offer. Audrey couldn’t help but think that Helena would be a fantastic spokeswoman for the school; she certainly seemed passionate about singing its praises.

“Let me guess, that’s where I can join the polo team?” Audrey joked.

“Well, we do have that,” answered Helena, oblivious to Audrey’s tone, “but, um, it’s just for boys.”

“Figures,” said Audrey, shaking her head. “The one thing I was interested in!”

“Did you play at your old school?” asked Bobby, playing along.

“You know, I did. I was the star player. I got all the ... goals. Or whatever they’re called.”

Bobby laughed. “Well, don’t worry. We have, you know, normal clubs, like the school paper, yearbook, soccer, all that.”

“And Chordially Yours!” piped up Florie. “If you join, you could hang out with me and Miss Sarah Songbird here all the time!” she added, slinging her arm around Sarah’s shoulder.

Sarah blushed, shaking her head. “You’re the one who always gets the solos,” she said cheerfully.

“Oh, is Chordially Yours a singing group?” asked Audrey.

“We are, indeed!” Florie boasted. “Best singing group Great Gray’s ever seen! And heard! Do you sing?”

“Not very good,” laughed Audrey.

“Music to my ears! Less competition for me, then,” Florie teased, playfully nudging Audrey.

“What *do* you like?” Bobby asked Audrey. “You know, besides polo,” he added, his eyes glinting spiritedly.

“I’m not sure yet,” Audrey said, shamelessly fantasizing about what it’d feel like to run her fingers through his thick, gorgeous hair. “I guess I’ll keep my options open.”

Audrey didn’t want to be too hasty, but she and Bobby seemed to be getting along especially well. Bobby asked all sorts of questions, including how she’d spent her summer. Later, Sebastian and Helena, the two seniors, complained about their SAT scores, fearing they wouldn’t be able to attend their dream schools.

“I might have to take the damn thing again,” Sebastian lamented. He then turned to Bobby and asked hopefully, “Maybe you could help me study this time, considering you’re the expert and all?”

Bobby smiled. “I’ll have to check my schedule, see if I can fit you in.”

Sebastian patted him on the back. “Good man.”

“You’ve already taken the SATs?” Audrey asked Bobby. “We’re only sophomores.”

Bobby shrugged. “I wanted to make sure I liked my score.”

“And did you?”

“I was happy with it.”

"Of course, you were," laughed Sebastian. "You got a fifteen ninety. Best score to come out of Great Gray since ... ever."

There wasn't any trace of envy or resentment in Sebastian's tone; rather, he sounded quite proud. Even now, he beamed at Bobby, who was clearly uncomfortable with the conversation being fixated on him; he simply claimed he'd "lucked out" with the questions.

"Jesus, Bobby," said Helena, her jaw dropping. "And here I was, happy with my twelve seventy."

"And that's a great score, Helena!" Bobby said earnestly.

"It's no fifteen ninety."

"It'll get you into Brown, and that's all that matters, right?" Bobby looked at Audrey, the intensity of his gaze nearly causing her to gag on her straw. "But, uh, whenever you're thinking of taking the SATs, I'd be more than happy to help you study too—you know, if you want."

Audrey stirred her milkshake with the straw. "Quite presumptuous of you to think I'd need any help," she teased.

In her peripheral vision, Audrey saw Florie and Sarah make eye contact and smile. Sebastian, who had been casually reclining in his seat, suddenly sat up with rapt attention; he propped his chin on his hand as he turned to Bobby in anticipation of his rebuttal.

Bobby, for his part, laughed, raising his hands in mock surrender. "All right, all right," he said affably. "If you change your mind, though, the offer still stands."

"I'll consider it," Audrey said, taking a delicate sip of her milkshake.

"*I'm* definitely considering it," Helena jumped in. "If you could help me with my cover letter to Brown, that'd be great."

"Sure," Bobby said. "As soon as I'm, you know, done writing the next great American novel."

At first, Audrey thought he was joking, but then she was brought back to the assembly. Bobby had been carrying a notebook, and as Principal Waverly droned on about school rules and policies and the polo team, Bobby had been writing away, his hand flying across the paper so fast Audrey hadn't been able to decipher

a word. The notebook, clearly, was well loved; he was only a handful of pages away from its end.

"Thanks, Bobby," Helena laughed. "I just want to make sure I don't shoot myself in the foot by ... oh, I don't know ... putting a comma in the wrong place or something."

"I can help with that."

"Oh, here we go," Sarah muttered, shaking her head.

"What?"

"You're gonna give us that whole speech about how commas save lives."

"They can!" Bobby argued, unable to suppress his preemptive laughter. "It's the difference between eating your grandmother and telling your grandmother it's time to eat!" While the others groaned, Audrey laughed. "Okay," Bobby conceded. "You don't like grammar jokes! That's fine! I guess Audrey and I are the only ones with taste here."

"You know, I might take you up on your offer after all, if you'll be telling jokes like that," Audrey said, and Bobby grinned.

Slowly, the group started to disperse, with Helena being the first to leave, followed by Sarah.

"Well," Florie said grandly, standing up, "back to hell for me—Hell's Kitchen, that is. Where you headed, Audrey?"

Audrey gulped as Bobby and Sebastian turned to look at her. "Um ... I'm down in the Village."

She waited for the inevitable gasp, but it didn't come. Instead, Bobby and Sebastian offered to walk Florie and Audrey to the nearest station. Florie, however, assured them she'd get herself and Audrey there "just fine, thank you very much."

"I like you, Audrey," Florie said the second they rounded the corner. "Not the way *Bobby* likes you, but still." She smiled slyly. "And *you* clearly like *him*. Don't even try to deny it! I saw how you laughed at all his jokes. Even that comma one, which was just plain dumb. No offense."

"It was cute." Audrey bit her thumbnail. "*He* is really cute."

Florie threw up jazz hands. "Bobby and Audrey. I can see it now!"

“Whoa! Slow down, there! It’s not like we’re dating or anything.”

“Yet. But just you wait.” Florie clicked her tongue. “I’d put money on him asking you out. Mind you, I’m not sitting on a Dempsey fortune—far from it—but someday, I’ll have so much bread they’ll think I’m a baker.” Audrey laughed, and Florie added, “See, unlike your future boyfriend, my jokes land. They’re funny. Gotta have a sense of humor to survive at Great Gray.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“Yeah, I saw you sitting with Cassandra and her clones at lunch. They wouldn’t know ‘funny’ if it came up and bit ‘em on the ass.” Florie pulled a face. “Sorry. Don’t mean to talk bad ‘bout your friends.”

“Oh, don’t worry. They’re not my friends. Cassandra made that *very* clear.”

Florie stopped in her tracks. “What’d she say to you?”

“Nothing much. She just, you know, let it be known she won’t ever be friends with a girl like me. And she kind of ...” Audrey trailed off, deciding Florie was someone in whom she could confide. “See, I’m on scholarship, which I guess makes me lesser in her eyes.”

“As I live and breathe! A fellow scholarship student! I wasn’t sure we actually existed!”

Relief poured over Audrey. “You’re one too?”

“Of course!” Florie grinned. “But, see, people like us ... we’re a rare breed at Great Gray. Most everyone there eats with forks made of gold and sleeps on linens English kings died on. And the rules ... they just don’t apply to them. Like Cassandra. See, last year, her daddy paid for the new library ‘cause she got caught smoking in the bathroom. No detention. Nothin’ on her record. Just the Irvine name on a plaque outside the library. Gotta love how money talks in this town.”

This news didn’t come as a surprise to Audrey, though it did turn her stomach just the same. She’d warned her parents these were the sorts of kids she’d be going to school with—privileged heirs who would never have to face any consequences for their actions—but they’d insisted she was exaggerating.

“Anyway.” Florie sighed. “At least we have each other.”

“Do Bobby and the others treat you differently because you’re a scholarship

student?” Audrey asked, hoping Florie’s answer wouldn’t disappoint her.

“No. Now, I don’t know Bobby that well—he’s more Sarah’s friend—but he’s always been kind to me. He’ll be kind to you too,” she added, as if reading Audrey’s mind. “I mean, he’d have to be, right? Seeing as he’ll be your boyfriend and all.” She winked at Audrey. “I bet by lunch tomorrow—’cause yes, you’ll be sitting with me and Sarah from now on—you’ll be telling us he asked you out.”