

THE LOST CAMPAIGN

Written by Alex Block

Chapter 1

The day started with my usual dilemma. Getting out of bed should be easy, right? You just stand up. So, why can't I get up? Already, I felt like a failure. I tried my best every day, but I'm never good enough for anybody. I might as well not be here or anywhere for that matter. Why am I here?

Suddenly, my mattress was lifted and I came pouring out. In a scramble, I ripped off my sheets to see a familiar outline walking down the rows of bunk beds towards the door.

"Kid, you're one tardy away from being expelled." Detective Hart urged in mild frustration.

"You didn't finish high school." I mumbled. The floor of the orphanage was comfy enough to call it a day and so I laid back down for sleepy time.

"And you don't need to be like me. Let's go." Detective Hart stormed out the door with her 911 coffee from Dutch Dudes. She's a private investigator, not a police detective.

Hart was an interesting choice in mentor given her demonic appearance: tail, wings, horns, she had them all. I'm not sure if she was an actual demon or dressed like one year round. "You can't see your friends if you don't go to class." Hart taunted me. At last, I had the strength to stand.

We could have left then, but Hart was adamant about me brushing my teeth and wearing my shoes. Part of me was glad Hart was here, but it also made the times where she avoided me hurt more. A muffin and a reckless motorcycle ride to school was not enough of an apology.

At Riverside High, everyone was already gathering inside the main building. I know my friends were in there, but the task of taking a step forward was too overbearing. Noticing me, Hart's tough exterior softened with genuine emotion. "I'm sorry I haven't been around much."

"Why do you care now?" I mumbled.

"I always cared about you. Things are just complicated, and I'm- you're not ready." A thought terrorized her. It was the first time I saw her scared.

"I don't give a crap about what world ending thing you have in mind. I just want to hang out with you and eat pizza like we used to." My words comforted her. She tried to hide her smile, but I could see it there.

"I promise things will get better. How about if you're not late to school today, I'll have my shit figured out by your 16th birthday and we can hang out the whole day. Deal?" She offered her hand in demon fashion. Underneath it all, I always saw the kind person she truly was.

"Deal." I pulled her in for a hug. She didn't know it, but I had a plan, and she just gave me the courage to enact it. The loud shriek of the warning bell kicked me into high gear. I only had a few minutes to fulfill my end of the bargain.

Bursting through the doors of Riverside High, I dashed through the halls left and right until I saw it: First Period Chemistry. The classroom door had already begun to shut. I sprinted like a madman being chased by a dragon. Only inches from impact, I strafed through the door's

small crack and into the classroom. I ushered a grand sigh of relief when I heard the bell ring and the door shut behind me. Shiitake, Yes!!

"You're late again, Amanda." An old man grumbled from his desk. That dream crusher is none other than Callahan, my teacher. I assumed his ill-temper turned his hair gray.

Playing it cool and cocky, I argued, "Not according to the student handbook, which states a student must be in the classroom before the second bell rings." I picked that up from Hart.

Taking his baggy eyes off the computer, he said, "My classroom, my rules."

"Got it." I gave him a thumbs up. "You're going against the school district's rules, which are clearly outlined in the student handbook."

"As a teacher, I know the rules like I know the back of my hand." He asserted.

"Then let's see how well you know your hand." I began pulling out a thick yellow book from my pack.

"We wasted enough time. I won't put you down as tardy if you take your seat," and so, I got away with it. Shoving my Algebra II textbook back into my bag, I skipped to my seat in celebration.

Cheerfully, I sat down and threw my feet up on my desk in a loud thud.

"Ah!" My lab partner shrieked as she tossed her pencil into the air.

"Sorry Bell, I forgot you startle easily."

"I-it's fine; i-it h-happens all the t-time." Bell stuttered anxiously as she fumbled for her pencil. Bell was my freckled nose best friend, who I assumed was related to a leprechaun given that she's merely four feet tall and has red hair tied back into a neat ponytail. She has gotten more comfortable with me over the years, but she still hides behind her face mask. "Ar-are you ready for t-today's lab?"

"Only if we get to play with fire," I enthused.

"That's against sk-school policy, and it would be really messy. I-I mean remember your volcano from the science fair years ago?" Aw, that was a great day, minus the hours of clean up I had to do in detention.

"At least we know the sprinklers work." I said to which Bell may have chuckled at. It's hard to tell with her face mask. *Psst. Bell's in a good mood, ask her your question.* "Hey Bell, will you-"

"Alright class, today we will be learning about melting points." Callahan stole Bell's attention from me. It's fine. I can ask her later. This is usually when I space out and imagine my favorite crime show, The Supernatural Adventures of Detective Hart. Time flies quicker that way. One second, Hart sacrifices her mind to a mindflayer to save her ex-girlfriend, and the next, Bell is waking me up for today's lab. I was excited to melt butter, margarine, and candle wax over a bunsen burner until I got yelled at for running my fingers through the flame. While the wax had all the fun with the fire, I figured now was my time to ask Bell.

"Here, read this," I slipped my message to her. After a glance, Bell gave me a queasy look. Uh, maybe I shouldn't have written it while imagining disturbing witness intimidation stuff. "Sorry. I mean can you meet at the tree house after school?"

"D-do we have to meet there? Not that it's nothing special! I-I mean it's highly unstable and dangerous." Bell nervously crinkled the note.

"I thought it would be fun," I exclaimed. "I have a super cool surprise planned."

"I-I don't know. I have homework and studying and " Blah blah blah. There are always a million reasons not to do something.

"Come on, Bell; it's Fri-Yay!" I swiped her agenda. Pushing everything onto Saturday, I showed her, "You can skip today and hang with me."

"Mandy, I-I'm not like you." Bell tried to erase my permanent marker. "I can't neglect homework. Not to be rude, but how did you get into this AP class?"

"Bell, please? When was the last time we all hung out together?"

"Well, we uh..." Bell couldn't recall, but I could. My plan was in motion. Things were going to get better, and that starts today with Bell saying, "What are you two doing? This doesn't sound like chemistry at all!" Callahan's voice yelled right over our shoulders.

Anxious, Bell started with the words, "We were just um..."

"Not working on the lab." Callahan finished for her. "Amanda, this is your third time today. See me after class. Miss Wood, I suggest you get back to work."

"Y-y-yes, sir." Bell gulped as she frantically began noting observations of melting fat. I pretended to work until the warden's glare drifted elsewhere.

"Offer is still on the table." I nudged Bell.

"Mandy, I-I don't want to get in trouble again." Bell whispered.

"Then answer my question. Pleeessssssse." I begged.

"I-I don't know. What's worth skipping academics?" She responded with her eyes on the experiment.

"What makes it worth it?!" I shouted. "The adventure, the thrills, the hair raising danger! That's what makes it worth it!" Springing to action, I bolted out of my chair and up onto the table. Bell stopped shushing me to prevent the bunsen burner from tipping onto her paper notes. My eyes never strayed from her face as I declared, "Why waste away in a daily routine, when you could be out exploring the unknown? Or skipping in the sunlight? Or, like Fiyero once sang, *Dancing Through Life?!* " With that transition, I inhaled a deep breath, preparing for the number. And one, two, three-

"Mandy, please don't break into song again." A small shaky voice pleaded.

"Uh... yeah, uh I wasn't planning on it." I nervously brushed off. Okay, fast forward. "Life doesn't happen if you just let it pass by. Everyday's a new day; one that is full of life to live. So don't let this opportunity pass you by again! Take it! Deviate from your cycle, and I promise you'll find a smile you can't wipe away. THAT is what makes it worth it! Sincerely, me," Going in for the finale, I jump-spun around to yell, "Amanda SchyuAAHH!!" Right on the landing, my foot slipped on the butter. Tumbling onto the floor, I heard my classmates laughing with their phones out to capture it all. I glanced at Bell for help, but she was busy hiding in her shirt. Eventually, the school bell saved me. No one wants to be in class longer than they have to.

As the last to leave, Bell whispered, "s-sorry Mandy," before vanishing into the hall rush. Bell was trying her best to be nice, so... it's fine. *You can always try again on Monday when you see her next.* True, thanks Flanny. Now, if only I can get up without slipping. Curse my butter-coated hands; stop sliding and just grip something.

"Need a hand?" Someone offered. Hovering over me was Callahan.

"Maybe." I pleaded. Quickly, Callahan hoisted me up. "Thanks," I griped while wiping my dirty-buttery hands on my seam-ripped jeans.

"Amanda, why are you in my class?" Callahan asked me. Ah yes, the after class private talk where he asks the same questions and I give the same answers. I took a seat, anticipating this to take a while.

"I got the grades to be here." I muttered.

"However, you lack the enthusiasm to learn unlike the rest of the class." Acting calm, Callahan twiddled his grading pen between his fingers. "Your conflicted interest has become too much of a problem and not just in my class. Your other teachers have complained about your behavior as well."

"Since when is hanging out with friends a crime?" I argued.

"Amanda, you're a major distraction to your peers. You're costing them their grades"

"Grades don't matter. No one looks at them."

"Colleges consider them, and most of my students plan on attending Ivy League universities. If you want to help your friends be successful, you should re-evaluate your time in high school."

"Hey, I make classes worth attending." I retorted. Sometimes if I annoy him enough, he lets me go. And it seems like it may be working.

Irate by my response, Callahan sucked in a deep breath. "Okay, this is the fourth time we had this talk and clearly nothing has or will change with you." The tired old man rubbed his temples. We both knew this talk was a waste of time. However, things were about to end differently. Gathering himself again, he said what he always wanted since I joined his class. "Amanda, the principal and guidance counselor has given me and your other teachers permission to drop you from our classes. Starting Monday, you will follow a different schedule."

"Y-You can't do that!" I shrieked in fiery rage. "I'll just show up here anyway!"

"Security will be here to escort you to the office." He informed. "We also received guardian approval from Ms. Hannigan." That traitor! I should have known Hannigan was in on this given that she's been sleeping with Callahan. I hate Callahannigan! [Editor's note: Hannigan runs the orphanage.]

"I don't consent to this! If I had my rape flute, I would be blowing it right now!" I attempted to whistle, but all that came out was spit and weird noises. I forgot I don't know how to whistle.

"Okay, stop whatever that is this instant." Callahan awkwardly ordered. "Amanda, I get your upset, but it's not the end of the world."

My anger erupted as I roared, "FOR YOU IT ISN'T, BUT FOR ME, IT WILL BE!!" Just as I cracked the tile beneath my foot, the bunsen burners suddenly spewed flames, startling me into reality. Thank shiitake, they extinguished themselves right away. Wait, was there- I could have sworn I saw a shadow duck out of the door way.

"Amanda, cool it!" Callahan commanded in an authoritative tone. "It's time for you to take responsibility and stop playing the role of the mentally disabled thieving urchin. This weekend you need to get your act together and show up Monday as a different person. Understand?!" He yelled. Snapped out of my rage, I realized there was no use in arguing; my fate was sealed.

Ominously, I gave Callahan a round of applause for this one. "Congrats Callahan, you win. However, don't expect it to last. For I, Amanda Schuyler, always have an ace up my sleeve." I warned him.

"Please close the door on your way out." Callahan sighed as he cautiously examined the nearest bunsen burner. He was afraid to point it at his face.

"Oh, just you wait, Burr. Just you wait." I smirked out the door.

"Where's my pen?" was the last thing I heard before the school bell rang for homeroom; I was running late... again.

Luckily, Norbury was kind enough to let me in. How nice? It's as nice as the classroom doors being locked during classes. At least, I had a great time in math; I had the best nap in there. Well, actually I didn't, but only because I found Callahan's pen. It's hard to break old kleptomaniac's habits.

As I twiddled his pen, I could hear Callahan's voice taunting me. With my schedule changing, this could be my last chance to invite Brad and Peter. I already blew it with Bell. I can't mess up again. Besides Brad and Peter have to say yes, right? I do have ADHD, but we're friends and they don't see me as some mentally disabled thieving urchin. I'm sure Peter would testify to that.

Peter Samson was my gaming buddy. He even owns one of the most popular channels on the internet, RayRagerGames. He has merch and wears it whenever he can to self-promote. However, under that billboard, he's still the same nice guy who befriended me all those years ago. As a matter of fact, we're in the same AP English class, and the bell just rang. Bolting out of my chair, I dashed out the door and around the corner to where he was: head deep inside his locker. Approaching him with a skip in my step, I loudly greeted, "Hey, Peter!"

"Top of the morning, Manster." He yawned. Hm, that seems a bit out of character; he's usually more upbeat and loud. Sleep deprivation, maybe?

"You good?" I asked

"No," Peter complained, "my homework's hiding from me again." He shuffled through the piles of old papers overflowing his locker.

"You can have mine." I happily suggested. Pulling his head out of his locker, Peter checked to see if I was joking. To prove I wasn't, I handed him my homework with a smile. Instead of seeming excited, he gave me a weird look and pushed my hand away.

"Uh, no thanks, bro. I don't want you to go through the trouble--"

"Tis no trouble at all." I assured him. Quickly, I replaced my name with his on the assignment and handed it back. "It might even raise your grade to a B."

One last time he sorely said, "Manster, I appreciate what you're trying to do, but I don't think it'll raise my grade."

"Why would you get points off for something that's graded for completion." I snickered.

"Bro, it's for participation?!" He gasped. His tune immediately changed when I happily nodded yes. Without hesitation, he snatched up my homework and shoved in his pocket.

"Thanks, bro. You're a lifesaver."

"Anything for a friend," I promised. Now that I had his attention, I asked, "how about you pay me back by coming to the tree house after school?"

"No can do." Peter buried his head in his locker.

"Why? What do you have going on this afternoon?"

"I'm a busy boy. Gots videos to record and edit."

"As a Gamegler, aren't you your own boss? Can you just put it off till tomorrow?"

"Nope. Last time I missed an upload, I nearly lost thousands of viewers to the algorithm." Peter grieved. Shiitake, that's the thousandth time he's used that excuse, but it's

fine. I'm not mad. These aren't fist of anger; they're fist of friendship. Blowing me off or setting me aside is okay, especially now that we won't have the same class. It's fine. It's Fine. IT'S-

"OW!" Peter jumped out of his locker while suckling his finger. Then without thinking, Peter tried to close his locker. The second his hand touched the metal, Peter flung it away, howling "WHY IS IT HOT!! Locker, what did I ever do to you?!" While he was flailing his hand about like a trout, something about me caught his eye. "Amanda, how can you lean against the burning locker like that?!"

"I don't feel anything." I shrugged. How could Peter burn his hand on his locker? It's not that um... ah... as I was mid-thought, a wonderful wave of heat warmed my back. "Actually, it feels nice like sitting in a hot car with the engine off and windows up." Shiitake, that was an amazing June 21st when Bell's dad forgot me in the back of his cop car.

"Bro, I will never understand why you find that so comforting."

"I just do, like how I feel so cozy thinking about lying down on a scorching hot coal walk." By the way Peter glanced at me, I think he could beg to differ. Just before my weirdness drove him away, I closed Peter's locker and we made our way to class.

There was one other way I could convince Peter to come, but it was deceitful. "I guess it will just be me and Bell tonight."

"Wait, Bell? Alone with you?" Peter asked with sudden concern. "On second thought, I might be able to swing by, but I'll have to check." Did... did he just say yes? Gasp, I think he did! Shiitake, this is so exciting! *Wait, Amanda calm down. You don't know if he said yes for sure*, but I think he did.

"So, you can come?" I hastily asked.

"Probably, but no promises." Peter agreed.

I nearly squealed from the rush of excitement overrunning me. Finally, after two years he said PROBABLY! I got potentially one person to come tonight! *Wait, Amanda calm down or you'll scare him away*. Right, thanks Flanny. Playing cool, I scoffed. "Uh sure, yeah, whatever-"

"**Hey, RayRagerGames!**" Shoving me out of the way, fans rushed up to Peter, begging, "**Can you please do the thing?!**"

"Heck yeah!" Peter hollered. Eager to meet some fans, Peter shoved his backpack into my gut to do his loud, annoying iconic opening to his videos. When he finished, the fans wanted a selfie, which he happily posed for.

"**This is so cool!**" His fans freaked as they admired the photo until one of them saw me. "**Hey, are you dating Schuyler?**" He asked with a strange look.

"Who? This person?" Peter glanced at me. "No, I don't know this weirdo. I gotta get to class. It was nice meeting you all." He said before grabbing his stuff and taking off. Shiitake wait! He's walking to class without me! Immediately, I hurried after him.

By the power of pushing and squeezing through the crowds, I managed to shrink the gap between us. For a brief second, it seemed like I was going to make it until time ticked to one minute before the bell. It was then that huge waves of teens flooded the halls. Soon as they hit, I was swept away in the tsunami of achene and body odor. Over and over again I was trampled until the bell rang and the hall cleared.

Okay, so I didn't make it: no big deal. Picking myself up, I stumbled over and reached the classroom. Locked: that's fine. I'll just wave at Peter to let me in. Shouster, he's hiding behind

his hand again; Peter? Peter?! And the teacher just shut the window blinds. Grr, *it's fine, Amanda. You're just overreacting.* Thanks Flanny, I needed that. Oh, I forgot to introduce him, didn't I? Sorry, I got carried away.

Flanny is my talking green flannel who cheers me up. *That's right, and Amanda, this incident with English just means you have computer lab early.* Yeah and it's with Brad, my other friend. I'll tell you all about him while I wait for the next period.

Brad was the fine arts celebrity at our school. Gifted with a deep voice, Brad spent years perfecting his five octave vocal range that could steal any show. Alongside his voice, he also had the muscle and endurance for any choreography no matter how outrageous. When not in the spotlight, you can recognize him as the big guy with baby blue eyes and beard as nicely combed as his blonde hair. Altogether, he was the perfect star. And there he is, the text walker. Entering the computer lab, Brad strolled down the red carpet over to the unoccupied seat next to me. He was early as usual, giving us a few minutes to talk.

"Hey, you know how Ricky didn't get a role in the school musical?" Brad started today's rant.

"Yeah."

"Well, that didn't settle well with the diva, and he practically begged to be casted in the play. Ms. Darbus pitied him and gave him the title understudy of the ensemble." Brad sneered.

"That's not even a thing!" I shrieked in bitter outrage. As a thespian at heart, I couldn't stand what I was hearing. You can't beg for a role; it has to be earned through discipline and hard work, or at least that's what Brad told me when he stopped me from doing the same thing as Ricky.

Equally enraged, Brad snarled, **"To top it all off, that pathetic wannabe asserted himself as a 'leader' and tries to tell me and everyone else what to do. That tone-deaf diva is all twinkle twinkle I'm a star."**

"I hate people like that. They're like popsicles with their nose stuck up their butt."

"People like him are the reason why people like me need medication." Brad concluded. With that out of his system, Brad settled down to check posts on immedia.

"Well, if you want to take your mind off theater, why not meet me in the tree house after school?" I nervously slipped into the conversation.

"Sure, I don't have rehearsal tonight anyway." He agreed without looking up from his phone.

Suddenly, I caught a great case of overwhelming excitement. "Thank you, thank you, thank you. I promise you won't regret it!"

"Oh my god." My ecstatic reaction almost knocked the phone out of his hands. **"You're more jittery than Bell the first time she had soda, and it was caffeine free."**

"Sorry, it's just that you're the first person to give me a solid yes today." I explained.

"At least, Peter and Bell know about it; they might stop by." Brad comforted. For as sassy as he was, Brad was also nice, but only if he liked you.

"Yeah, I guess you're right." I agreed as his kind words lifted my face.

"That should be a fact at this point." Brad quipped. Hey, while he's not on his phone this might be a good time to get something off my chest.

"I'm not sure if you noticed, but I've kinda been feeling neglected lately."

"Uh huh."

"I mean, Bell's been either forgetting or canceling our tutoring sessions, and doesn't talk to me outside them."

“Uh huh.”

“And just today, Peter pretended not to know me. Could you believe it?”

“Uh huh.”

“Brad? Brad, can you hear me?” I sang that last part and almost all of *Waving Through a Window*. When he didn’t sing along, I knew he wasn’t listening. He just sat there chin in hand, admiring Harrison sitting a few rows in front of him. Shiitake, not this again. Before someone noticed, I pulled the mouse pad out from under his elbow, knocking him down.

“Hey, what was that for?” Brad yelled.

“You were staring at some good looking computer again.” I eyed his crush. “Brad, you can’t stay hidden forever if you want a relationship.”

“Wow, dating advice from the girl in an abusive relationship.” Brad playfully teased. “Amanda, I’ll fully come out when you get a restraining order against that pompous weirdo, Mason.”

“Deal.” I shook his hand as we were both stupid with love. And then the class started. It seemed worthless to do work for a class I won’t be in soon, so what to do? Hm, I could research the internet for my special case, it’s a secret for now, and that’s how I spent my next forty-five minutes. I found nothing.

After the computer lab was lunch where Brad and I had to split ways for he had an emergency dress rehearsal. I hung out in the forgotten stairwell for the time. Due to budget cuts, the school could not afford to finish the Western stairwell and closed them off; however, the yellow tape and gates never stopped me. It was a nice spot away from the world. I always invited my friends here, but they were always busy. However, eating alone wasn’t so bad. I’ve got Flanny here to keep me company. He’s a great conversationalist, right Flanny? *Sure thing, Amanda.* Hey Flanny, I don’t want to go to Social Studies. *Hey, that’s okay. Naps are nicer anyway.* Gee thanks Flanny: great idea!

Laying down, I used my pack as a pillow and plugged in my earbuds to my old MP3; it may be trash, but it always helped me. Wishing to forget life for a while, I let the notes carry me into a dream. I was on an adventure run by some girl; she was much taller than me and always dictated what happened like she was fate. Right before she decided if I won or died, BRRRING, the school bell rang. Yawning, I saw it was the end of the day and I didn’t care, but then it hit. Brad! Potentially Peter! They’re coming over!

Thrilled, I jolted to my feet and ducked out under the tape. Shiitake, I couldn’t wait for tonight; all I need is the case file. Sprinting down the hall, I rushed to my locker where I kept it. Yes, I see it in the distance! It’s right there and now I’m there! I forgot the combination, but I could pick the lock faster anyways. Now, to just throw open the door and—! Huh?!

It’s-it’s not here? Panicking after five seconds of searching, I cried, “SHIITAKE! Where is it?! Where Is It?!! WHERE IS IT?!!!”

“Salutations, fiend.” A cocky masculine voice made my heart flutter. Ecstatic he was here, I jump-spun around to greet the handsome face of my teenage crush, a.k.a. Mason.

Mason had swoopy shiny black hair I always dreamed of running my fingers through. He also had a mini firefly jar around his neck that was as cool as he was. As for the rest of his body, it was fairly slim with a six pack under his shirt, or at least that’s what I fantasized is under there. Mason was also a year older than me, which is great since I dig mature men.

“Hey, Mason. You look cute today.” I complimented.

"Trashmanda, rivals of dark and light don't complement one another." Mason angrily reminded me. Aw, he's even cuter when he makes that I-hate-you-face.

"I can't help it; your hoodie shows off your figure as much as those dark jeans show off your butt." I smiled at him.

"Repeat those words once more and I'll break your arm in two."

"Gasp, that would be the closest we've been to holding hands!" I excitedly squealed.

"Errrrr." Mason grumbled into his hands.

We have so much in common! For starters, our birthdays are on the same day. OH! We also live together! In the same orphanage for the same reason: both our dads were brutally torn from us at a young age (at least according to his file). The fate of our moms is unknown. It's like we're soulmates. I couldn't take my eyes off him as he teased, **"You cannot conceive what item I possess."**

"I'm not ready for kids yet but I'll be happy to *conceive* your child someday."

Disgusted, Mason rushed to switch topics. He pulled out my binder with the case file.

"Aw, you found it! You're the best slash cutest rival a girl could ever have." I rewarded him with a hug to which he rewarded with a punch in the gut.

"Hold your horses," Mason warned. **"What forbidden secrets do you stow in this infernal folder?"** YES! HE'S INTERESTED IN ME!

"Well, I have been granted permission by my mentor to pursue the Price case. How cool is that?!" I eagerly bragged.

Quick to judge, Mason scoffed, **"Olive, I know you better than you know yourself, and I'm certain Hart would never entrust a mere low-down scoundrel on a solo pursuit."**

"Okay, I may have overheard a conversation she had with Dr. Pomatter about a certain case. I'd figured that I'd solve it and surprise her. I may have also invited a few friends to help and if they want to continue hanging out afterwards-"

"Classic Dumanda idea," Mason cackled. **"You can work as diligently as you desire, but you can't escape your true familial bonds. What sensible being would enlist with an urchin from crooked descent?"**

"Well, Brad and maybe Peter accepted the invitation." I countered, but to Mason it was a pathetic rebuttal.

"Degenera, to them and the masses, you and that whorish dyke-tective are laughing stocks to spit upon." He chuckled.

"Detective Hart is not a whorish dyke," I exclaimed. "She's a proud lesbian queen who just flirts the truth out of people. And Brad, and Peter are my friends. In fact, we were going to investigate the crime scene tonight."

"You'll be investigating alone as a trembling candle-flame besieged by a vast void and snuffed out by darkness." Shiitake, he has such a way with words.

"Mason, my handsome rival, I'm Amanda Schuyler. Nothing scares me." I boasted.

"If that were the truth, why do you quiver at the sight of a measly pool?"

Shiitake, I wish I knew him as well as he knew me. You think he likes s'mores? I bet he does. "You got me. I'm aquaphobic, but I'm not nyctophobic, if you're into that."

"Never was, never will," He grinned with wickedness highlighting his guyliner. Tension between us spiked when he stared into my soul. **"You know, the dark is a perilous realm. It forbids**

the light's protection, thus it conceals the shadows as they stalk their naive prey." Meanwhile, our whole future together played in my head as I got swept up by his shiny, enchanting, gray eyes. I didn't wake until I felt an abrupt slap and saw Mason red in the face. **"For once, could you behave like a proper opponent and hate me as much as I hate you."**

"Right. Yes, my love. Ahem. Interesting story, but alas it has failed to tremble thy spirits. For thy is sure any person that lurks behind thy shall be detected by thy ear. How was that?" I eagerly asked.

Mason face-palmed hard. Throwing the binder at me, he howled, **"Enough of these childish games! I demand you spend your meaningless existence elsewhere, like the library!"**

"Wow, that's a great idea." I gratefully thanked him. As a detective, I needed all the resources I could get, and I trusted Mason no matter what. It's why I always fell for his trust fall trick where he "forgets" to catch me. Aw, painful memories.

Suddenly our eyes met again and I felt the warmest feelings. Without thinking, I heard myself blurt out, "Do you want to help me with this case? I could arrange it so it's just you and me alone under a full harvest moon." Shitake, I'm crazy to think he would say yes, but I'm cursed with hope. He has to say yes. We're soulmates!

I couldn't tell if I was gassy or excited, but either or, it didn't lessen the blow. **"Dumanda, why would I, the prince of darkness, Mason Chad Doe, be smitten by a brainless flame. I despise you. I find everything about you revolting. I pray the gods would banish you from this plane of existence. I will never perceive you more than my incapable mortal enemy."** Mason cackled as he left my view.

It's... it's fine. There's no reason to cry... Stupid emotions... Well, uh... better um check out the Library.

I scanned the Library for anything regarding the Prices. So far, no good; I searched high and low on every shelf, but no records on the Price Family were found. Not even the Librarian proved to be of any help. All she did was praise some guy named Kyle and hand me an old newspaper about a bus crash. I was prepared to walk out when I heard-

"Mom, where are you?" Bell? Peeking through the bookcase, I saw her pacing back and forth on the phone. **"I thought Sherlock's award ceremony was last month... Another one? That's so like him... No, you didn't forget anyone important... Okay, love-"** A tear slipped down her face when she heard the long beat on the other end. She didn't even finish her sentence or pretend to hang up this time. Collapsing by her pile of books, she cried into her palms. Usually she just sucks it up, but it had been one too many times.

I hate it when they do this to her. At least, I know how to fix it. All I needed was scrap paper and a pen. When my masterpiece was done, I slipped it through the bookshelf. Curious, she read, **"The Bestest Friend Award is hear by presented to Bell Woods."** Wiping her eyes, she said, **"Mandy, grammar."**

"You're right." I took the award back. "It should say, The Bestest and Smartiest Friend Award." I rewrote the certificate and handed it back. Smiling Bell accepted it along with the prize, a tissue. I sat by her as long as she needed me.

When she could speak without choking, she asked, **"Is that offer still on the table?"**

"Never took it off."

Then for the first time in two years, Bell finally said, **"yes."**