Chapter One

“That was the best prom ever, man.”

Brian lies awake in his bed, unable to fall asleep despite the lights being off for hours. Though his roommate, DJ, hadn’t spoken for nearly that long, Brian can tell he’s still awake, though DJ fakes a loud snore to make him believe otherwise. Brian responds with an even louder snore to make it clear he isn’t falling for DJ’s act.

“I don’t know,” DJ says, abandoning his facade. “It was great, but the best ever? There’s been a lot of proms, a lot of dances. This school has been around for 250 years, you know.”

“Why can’t you take a win, man?” Brian asks. “Everybody rooted for you to fail after you became president of the student council, and you proved all of them wrong.”

“Still plenty of time to prove them right.”

At a loss for words, Brian simply stares at DJ, who himself is staring at their ceiling. Brian wonders how DJ Hanover, descendant of the great Robert Hanover, who founded the prestigious private school Hanover Academy, which happens to be the school that he, DJ, and over a thousand other students attend, could be so glum. His last name made him a celebrity the moment he stepped foot on the preparatory school’s grounds. None of the other students, even the ones who obviously hate DJ, dare to criticize him in public, and most of their teachers seek to be on his good side as well. It was rare for an Upper (third year student) to run for student council president, but not only did DJ choose to run, but he won the presidency in a landslide.

Brian can tell that DJ wants to change the subject, and though he’s not as quick as everyone else at the school to give him what he wants, he acquiesces.

“So, how are things going between you and Rebecca?” Brian asks.

DJ sits up, making it clear he approves of this topic much more.

“They’re going great!” DJ says. “It’s only a matter of time before we’re back together.”

“Are you sure that’s what you want, though? The last time you two were together, it ended pretty badly,” Brian says.

DJ shrugs.

“Maybe I’m just a masochist,” he says. “Or maybe I really believe that if we try again things will be different.”

“I’m betting on the former.”

Brian takes his phone out of his pocket and notices the little battery icon in the top right of his screen is red. He plugs the phone into the charger he has plugged in beside his bed, but it does nothing.

“That’s weird,” Brian says. “I just got a new charger.”

“That’s why you need to stop buying that cheap crap online,” DJ says. “Give it to me. I’ll charge it.”

Brian tosses his phone to DJ, and DJ plugs the phone into his own charger, but it still does nothing. Frustrated, DJ gets out of bed and flips the light switch, but it also does nothing.

“That explains it,” DJ says. “A blackout.”

“So it wasn’t that ‘cheap crap’ I bought online, after all,” Brian says in a mocking tone.

DJ rolls his eyes and gives Brian his phone back. As Brian slides the phone into his pocket, he hears a knock on the door.

“I’ll get it,” Brian says.

“Well, I certainly wasn’t going to,” DJ retorts. “You’re closer to the door.”

“Mr. Pine was right. You *are* lazy,” Brian says as he heads to the door.

Brian opens the door to find their house counselor, Mr. Rodney, standing outside their room.

“Hey, Mr. Rodney!” Brian says. “You don’t need to tell us about the blackout. We know alr-”

Suddenly, Mr. Rodney grabs Brian and latches onto Brian’s left ear with his teeth. Brian tries to pull away, but he’s unable to do anything as Mr. Rodney’s grip tightens.

“What are you doing?” Brian hears DJ scream behind him.

Brian is unable to speak himself as the pain in his left ear consumes him. Everything goes white, and Brian loses the feeling in his legs, falling to the ground when Mr. Rodney finally lets him go. As the white clears from his vision, Brian is able to make out Mr. Rodney chewing a severed ear – his ear – and swallowing it.

“Bro, you just *ate* my ear!” Brian says with the little energy he can muster. “That is *not* cool!”

Mr. Rodney looks down at Brian with eyes that don’t seem to be the eyes of a human, staring at him unblinking with red stuff drizzling from his mouth like spit from a baby who hasn’t learned to swallow it yet. He gets on his knees with Brian right under him and puts his hands on Brian’s neck.

“DJ...please...help,” Brian is able to say through a gasp as Mr. Rodney strangles him.

Brian hears the loud clang of silverware falling in the kitchen, and he manages to turn his head just enough to see DJ approaching Mr. Rodney with a steak knife.

“Let go of him,” says DJ. “Now!”

Mr. Rodney ignores DJ, continuing to stare at Brian with his blank, unmoving eyes as the color drains from Brian’s face. DJ raises the knife with a trembling hand and shoves it into Mr. Rodney’s back. Mr. Rodney lets go of Brian’s neck after that and turns to DJ slowly.

“Get out of here,” says DJ. “Get out of our room and leave us a-”

Mr. Rodney pushes DJ into a table, causing him to hit his head and fall unconscious. Mr. Rodney then pulls the steak knife out of his back and studies it. Brian can tell that what will happen next won't be good for him, so he tries to stand up before falling to the ground again. He stares at DJ, who is still unconscious, and then he stares at Mr. Rodney, who is staring back at him like a lion would stare at a wounded deer. Brian cries as Mr. Rodney gets on his knees with Brian under him again, and Brian forgets the pain in his ear for the first time since Mr. Rodney bit it off.

The pain comes back in new places, however, as Mr. Rodney stabs Brian again and again with the steak knife.

Eventually, that pain subsides, too, as Brian no longer feels anything at all.

Chapter Two

One week before The Event

DJ had just finished putting on his clothes when he heard a knock on the door.

“Come in!” he said.

Mr. Rodney walked into DJ’s room with the large smile and friendly eyes that made him DJ’s favorite among the house counselors.

“Where’s your partner in crime at?” Mr. Rodney asked.

DJ turned to Brian’s bed, which was empty and hadn’t been made up despite several house counselors reminding them their beds always had to be made up before they left. Mr. Rodney pretended he didn’t notice when DJ turned back to him.

“He’s already downtown. Told me to text him once I was in the city so we could meet up,” DJ said.

“I rarely see you two apart. You’re like twins! I’m afraid if I pinch one of you the other one will cry out!” Mr. Rodney said.

DJ laughed.

“Just got tired of waiting for me, I guess,” he said.

DJ and Brian always took the shuttle downtown together on Saturday mornings, but as DJ’s nights got longer, Brian’s patience began to wear thin. Still, he hadn’t left for the shuttle without DJ once since they became roommates. Not until today. DJ couldn’t help but feel a little betrayed even if he understood Brian’s reasoning. His decision to pursue the student council presidency was one Brian clearly didn’t approve of, but DJ wanted it as a way to get out of his father’s shadow. Dean Hanover, DJ’s father, had a long list of accomplishments during his time at the school, but not even he dared to run for student council president as an Upper.

DJ’s name was short for Dean Junior, and since he was a toddler, his father made sure that everything he did reflected well on the family name. His father claimed that being a Hanover came with an innate responsibility, a responsibility to maintain their public image so that future generations can be as successful as the generations that came before them. That meant frequent visits to social functions he didn’t have the option of saying “no” to, having posts to all of his social media accounts vetted by the family’s PR firm, and any new friends or girlfriends that the family discovers vetted just as closely. Brian told DJ he was interviewed by at least five different well-dressed men and women the day after he found out they would be sharing a dorm room together and that he was certain his phone and computer were being tracked to this day.

The responsibility was something DJ never wanted even if he didn’t mind the benefits that came with being a Hanover. He wanted to be allowed to live his life, to be allowed to screw up and learn from his mistakes instead of having people watching his every waking moment to ensure he didn’t make those

mistakes in the first place. He knew he could never have that, though, so he hoped that by doing a really good job as president, he could get the other students to respect him for something other than things his ancestors did hundreds of years before he was born. So, he worked as hard as he could, looking up vendors, musicians, and even limo drivers, messaging with people late into the night, most nights for the last few weeks, and somehow finding time to do schoolwork amid all that.

DJ sat on his bed and slid his feet into a pair of sneakers, a limited-edition pair that a rookie for the Boston Celtics sent to him for free in exchange for DJ promoting the shoes on his Instagram page.

"Well, you two have fun," Mr. Rodney said before flashing his large smile again. "Just don't do anything I wouldn't do. And *definitely* don't do anything I would do!"

DJ laughed again. "We won't."

DJ reached the shuttle stop a few minutes after leaving his dorm. There were a few other students there, who all waved at him and exchanged pleasantries. It was almost noon by then, and with the first shuttles out at 10 in the morning, DJ had already missed out on hours of city time. He checked the shuttle's tracking app on his phone, and he sighed with exhaustion when he realized the next shuttle wouldn't get to him for 20 more minutes.

Most of the third-year and fourth-year students simply drove downtown on the weekends instead of taking the shuttle, and DJ expected that he would be among them when he got his driver's license the summer before. His father had even bought him a car as a reward for passing the road test, one of the new electric vehicles that could be fully charged in less than a minute, but DJ wrecked it a few days after he got it in a street race with his friend Jared. Dean yelled at him for what felt like an hour despite DJ doing his best to explain to his father that Jared would have teased him for the rest of the summer if he backed out of the street race. Though the police were too afraid of invoking his father's wrath to punish DJ themselves, his father still took his license away from him and prohibited him from driving until he graduated. DJ didn't think it was fair, since Jared, whose car made it out of the race unscathed, was still free to drive his, but as usual, his father's decision was final, and he just had to go with it.

When the shuttle finally got to them, DJ climbed into it with the others. He texted Brian to let him know that he was on his way, and Brian responded with a thumbs-up emoji. DJ looked around at the other students on the shuttle. A few were by themselves like he was, but most were in pairs, talking to each other, laughing, and showing each other what they had on their phones. DJ hoped one of the kids who had nobody to sit with would sit with him, but he knew it would never happen, as even if one of them did want to speak with a stranger, a stranger who could destroy their life with one social media post would not be that person's first choice.

The shuttle doors closed, and the shuttle started moving again. It reached its destination around 15 minutes later, a shuttle stop in the downtown area of Greenside, Massachusetts, the city Hanover Academy was in. Since there wasn't much to do around the actual school, students often drove or took the shuttle downtown to watch movies, eat at restaurants, or take advantage of any of the other activities Greenside offered the students to separate them from their parents' well-earned money. DJ found Brian and Jared waiting at the shuttle stop.

"Jared?" DJ said with surprise. "If you were hanging out with us today, why didn't you just pick me up?"

"My parents said I couldn't hang out with you anymore, remember?" said Jared. "They say you're a bad influence on me."

“Yet here you are.”

“They have eyes all over the school, but they don’t have any here, I don’t think.”

“Well, it’s good to see you again, anyway,” DJ said. “It’s not as good to see you, Brian.”

“Come on, man,” Brian said. “I waited as long as I could.”

“Why didn’t you wake me up?” DJ asked.

“The last time I woke you up, you nearly strangled me to death.”

Jared laughed. “You do like your beauty sleep, DJ.”

“Where are the girls at?” DJ asked.

Brian checked his phone.

“They’re at the ice rink,” he said after opening a text from his girlfriend Maeve.

DJ, Brian, and Jared walked to a large, air-conditioned building a few blocks away. It was one of the most popular spots to go to as the frigid New England winter settled into a warmer spring, with a food court, arcade games, and an artificial ice rink for patrons to skate on. They saw Rebecca and Maeve waiting in line at the food court when they entered the building. Maeve was staring at her phone as usual, but it didn’t take long for Rebecca to see the boys, and she motioned for them to join her in line. The people behind them in line hurled swears at DJ, Brain, and Jared as they took their places behind Rebecca and Maeve, but the boys simply ignored them.

“So, how have you two been?” Jared asked.

“Great!” Rebecca responded.

“Alright, I guess,” Maeve said, not bothering to look up from her phone.

Rebecca turned to DJ and Brian, and DJ instinctively looked away.

“I see he’s still taking the breakup hard,” Rebecca whispered to Brian.

“You dumping me didn’t take away my ability to hear!” DJ said with annoyance.

“Maybe she would have liked you more, then, considering her parents,” Brian said.

Rebecca rolled her eyes, and Maeve took her eyes from her phone for the first time since the boys arrived to shoot Brian a dirty look.

“Make a joke like that again, and you’re the next one getting dumped,” Maeve said without a hint of irony in her voice.

“I’m sorry. Really,” Brian said.

Maeve looked down at her phone again.

“I wish you gave me as much attention as whatever’s on your phone, though,” Brian said.

“Try being as interesting as what’s on my phone, then,” Maeve quipped.

As the five of them reached the front of the line, Rebecca studied the menu carefully.

“Are the animals you use in your hot dogs raised in cruelty-free farms?” she asked the woman at the counter.

“I wouldn’t know,” the woman said.

“Would you be able to find out?”

The woman sighed.

“There’s a lot of people in line, miss,” she said.

“And I’m sure a lot of those people would love to know, too,” Rebecca said.

“No, we wouldn’t! Just hurry up and order something!” the man behind them in line shouted.

“Excuse my friend. She’s an Aquarius,” Maeve said.

The five of them bought their food, including Rebecca, who settled for a hot dog despite not knowing how the animals that made it up were treated, and they sat at the table closest to the ice rink. Jared checked his phone, hoping to see a new text from his ex-girlfriend Elizabeth, but their message history remained a string of blue bubbles without a single gray response.

“I don’t know how you and Rebecca do it,” Jared said to DJ.

Rebecca, who nibbled at her hot dog without any condiments, shot Jared a curious glance.

“How we do what?” DJ asked.

“Stay friends,” Jared said. “I’ve been texting Liza for weeks, but she’s been leaving me on read.”

“That’s because you can’t be ‘just friends’ with a girl,” Maeve said. “We know it, and Liza knows it, too.”

Jared shrugged.

“Maybe I can be,” he said.

Brain laughed so hard that the soft pretzel he was eating nearly lodged in his throat.

“Fine! I can’t be,” Jared admitted. “But there aren’t any other girls I want to be ‘not just friends’ with.”

“You literally broke up with her so you could mack on her younger sister,” Rebecca chided him.

“Once I got past the resemblance, it just wasn’t the same,” Jared said, rolling up his pizza before taking a bite out of it.

“The reason DJ and I can stay friends is because keeping the choom gang together is more important to us than being super comfortable all the time,” Rebecca said.

The choom gang was Hanover Academy’s most admired as well as its most hated social group, featuring Uppers DJ, Brian, Jared, Rebecca, Maeve, and formerly Elizabeth. They determined what was trendy and was what passé, who was cool and who wasn’t, affecting more of the campus’s day-to-day life than any other group. The choom gang formed when its members were all first-year students, or juniors, and though they had a hard-and-fast rule against dating within the group initially, it didn’t take long for Jared and Elizabeth to break it. DJ and Rebecca paired up during their second year, and as soon as Maeve found out, she pressured Brian into dating her to form the school’s newest power couple. As she effectively ran the group’s public relations, Maeve thought about how what they did would appear to the rest of the school before anything else, which was why she switched from being opposed to dating within the choom gang to being in favor of it as a way to keep the rest of the students talking about them and why she pushed harder for Elizabeth to stay in the group than anybody else, including Jared.

“Look at the skates on her! Those are super cute,” Maeve said, pointing to one of the women on the skating rink.

“How can you tell?” Brian asked. “She’s moving too fast to see them that well.”

“I have an eye for these things,” Maeve said. “Yeah, I’m definitely getting skates like that. And you’re getting yellow skates, too, Brian, so we match.”

“But I don’t like yellow!”

“I’m not telling you again.”

Brian huffed before eating the last soft pretzel in his basket.

“Now remember, we’re each getting a picture in our skates and uploading it to our stories. If you forget again, Jared, you’re getting booted like your ex,” Maeve said.

“I won’t,” Jared said. “But in addition to our solo pics, maybe I can do a picture with just Rebecca. That would drive all *kinds* of speculation.”

“Absolutely not!” Rebecca said.

“Screw you, Jared!” DJ said.

DJ knew this was just a ploy by Jared to get Elizabeth jealous enough to finally start speaking to him again, but he worried that Maeve would like the idea enough to go through with it. Though DJ was the choom gang’s de facto leader, he and the others knew that Maeve was really the most important person in it, so they never went against her.

“Nah,” Maeve said after thinking about it for a moment. “It’s not that I don’t respect your advice, Jared, it’s just that...I don’t respect your advice.”

After everyone finished eating, they rented their skates, posed for their photographs, then got onto the rink. Jared didn’t say a word during any of this, which DJ noted was uncharacteristic of him. As Brian and Maeve skated hand-in-hand and Rebecca skated beside Maeve, laughing with them as Maeve shared the latest gossip, DJ stayed behind with Jared, who trailed the other three.

“You okay?” DJ asked.

“I guess I have to be, since I’m so lucky to be in this choom gang of yours, aren’t I?” Jared growled.

“Listen...the Liza situation sucked...you won’t hear any arguments from me about that...”

“No, we suck. We suck! This whole choom thing was cute when we were juniors, but how long do you expect this to last? 20, 30 years? Are we going to have choom reunions?”

“Why not?”

Jared scoffed before speeding up, passing DJ, Maeve, Rebecca, and Brian.

Chapter Three

Phineas wakes up to the sound of silverware hitting the floor on the opposite side of the wall behind them.

“Ugh,” Phineas whispers. “What are DJ and Brian cooking this late?”

Phineas grabs his cell phone from the desk beside him and checks the time. 2:36 am. He rolls his eyes.

“Mr. Rodney’s definitely hearing about this in the morning,” he mutters.

He hears a thud, like somebody getting thrown into furniture.

“Huh?” Phineas says. “Are they fighting?”

Moments later, he hears screaming.

“Oh my God!” Phineas exclaims.

Phineas rushes to the bed of his roommate Noah, who is a much heavier sleeper than he is. He shakes Noah until he wakes up.

“What are you doing?” Noah asks, annoyed.

“Listen,” Phineas says. “There’s screaming coming out of DJ’s room.”

Noah turns his head to the wall behind him to indicate he hears the screaming now.

“He probably found out that he would have to fly coach on his next trip to the Bahamas,” Noah snarks.

The screaming gets quieter and quieter until they only hear silence, outside of a mild shuffling of legs, behind the wall.

“What do you think is happening?” Phineas asks.

Noah shrugs.

“We should go in there, just to make sure everyone is alright,” Phineas suggests.

“If you want to, feel free to,” Noah says.

Phineas gets a notification on his phone and checks it.

“Hey Noah, it’s that guy who covers popular songs by making fart noises in his elbows,” Phineas says. “He has a new TikTok.”

Noah abandons the sluggishness he moved with before now as he hurries to his roommate’s bed.

“Start the video! Start the video!” Noah says.

Phineas opens TikTok and plays the video, which has the owner of the account, a man in his late teens or early 20s, running down a dark street with his phone camera pointed at his face.

“It’s awful out here! Awful!” the man says, clearly terrified. “Please...if you can...stay indoors.”

The camera starts shaking, and a wrinkly hand grabs the front of the man’s face.

“No! Stop!” he shouts before the video cuts off.

“What a bummer,” Noah says after several moments of staring at the now-blank video. “There wasn’t a single fart noise.”

Phineas uses the light coming from his phone to guide himself to the light switch on the wall, but when he flips it, nothing happens.

“The power’s off,” Phineas observes.

“Hopefully it’s on in the morning,” Noah says, getting back into his bed.

“I’m going to DJ’s room now,” Phineas says. “I have a bad feeling about all of this. You should come with me, too, in case somebody needs our help.”

“If we needed help from DJ and Brian, do you think they’d give it to us?” Noah says.

Phineas knows that they wouldn’t help if the roles were reversed, but he also knows that if he ignores whatever is happening behind that wall, he might regret it later.

“Either you come to DJ’s room with me, or you stay in here by yourself with no light and no protection from whatever’s out there,” Phineas says.

“Do you really think there’s something out there?” Noah asks.

“I don’t know,” Phineas replies. “But if there is, I’m taking it out.”

Phineas, a star slugger for Hanover Academy’s baseball team, pulls a composite bat out from under his bed and leaves the room with it. He turns on his cell phone’s flashlight and waits outside his door until Noah comes out, just as Phineas predicted, less than a minute later.

“Alright,” Phineas whispers, getting closer to the door to their right. “One...two...”

Phineas kicks the door open, and he coughs as his nose is assaulted by a putrid smell. As he opens his eyes, the first thing he sees in the light shining from his cell phone is Brian’s unmoving, bloodied face. He hears Noah gag behind him, and then he hears movement from another part of the room. He shines his cell phone’s flashlight at the source of the movement, and he gasps as he realizes who it is.

“Mr. Rodney?” Phineas whispers.

Mr. Rodney is sitting over an unconscious DJ with a steak knife raised. Though he didn’t seem to notice or care about Phineas breaking in, Phineas pointing the flashlight at him visibly irritates him, and he stands up, points the knife at Phineas, and runs.

“He’s gone *crazy*!” Noah exclaims.

Phineas drops his cell phone and pushes Noah out of the knife’s path before dodging the knife himself as Mr. Rodney catches up to them. Phineas swings his bat at Mr. Rodney’s back, and Mr. Rodney crumples onto the floor face-first like a ragdoll. Phineas picks his cell phone back up and points its flashlight at Mr. Rodney, noticing that the back of his shirt is stained red with blood already. He then points it at Noah.

“You okay?” Phineas asks.

“Yeah, no thanks to you,” Noah says, brushing his long, blond hair out of his face as he stands up.

“Would you rather I let you get stabbed?”

“Just warn a guy next time.”

Noah and Phineas jump as they hear Mr. Rodney prepare to get back up.

“Do the thing! Quick!” Noah says.

Phineas hesitates as Mr. Rodney gets on his knees, still holding tight onto the steak knife. Phineas puts down his phone again and grips his baseball bat with both hands.

“Please, Mr. Rodney,” Phineas says. “Snap out of it.”

Mr. Rodney is on his feet again. He grabs Phineas’ neck with his free hand and squeezes as hard as he can. Phineas feels his grip on the bat loosen, and his vision gets blurry, making Mr. Rodney’s stoic face even harder for Phineas to see in the darkness. He hears the bat hit the floor without even realizing that he had dropped it, and just as he’s about to pass out, Mr. Rodney lets him go. Phineas falls to his hands, the bat lying right beside him but his muscles too stiff to pick it up again. He hears Noah let out a scream, and he turns his head to find Noah kicking Mr. Rodney repeatedly until Mr. Rodney falls back to the ground.

Noah runs to the bat beside Phineas and grabs it before running back to Mr. Rodney, who’s on his knees again. Noah raises the bat, and Phineas notices that Noah’s arms are trembling due to fear or due to the bat being heavier than expected, or perhaps both. Noah lets the bat fall on Mr. Rodney’s head as Phineas, still recovering from being choked, coughs with more ferocity than he did when he entered the room. When Phineas finishes coughing, the first thing he sees as he opens his eyes is Mr. Rodney lying on the floor, staring at him with eyes so white he can see them clearly even in the darkness, eyes more still than the eyes he stared at Phineas with as he choked the life out of him. The next thing Phineas sees is his bat, and the person holding it, Noah. Though Noah is turned away from Phineas, it’s obvious by the way his body shakes that he’s crying.

Phineas hears movement behind him, and he uses what’s left of his strength to grab his cell phone and point its flashlight at this movement’s source. DJ, who has just regained consciousness, covers his eyes as the light shines on him.

“What are you doing here?” DJ asks.

“We heard a girl screaming in here and wanted to see what we were missing out on,” Phineas quips.

“Where’s Brian?”

“You...don’t want to see him.”

“What are you talking about?”

DJ’s expression changes from one of annoyance to one of mortification as he seems to remember what had happened to him and Brian before he was knocked out.

“Just be happy you’re alive,” Phineas says. “That’s not the case for everyone in this room.”

“Mr. Rodney?” DJ manages to get out with a voice that begins to crack.

“He had an unfortunate incident with my baseball bat.”

“You bashed the dude’s head in?”

“Not me.”

Phineas points his flashlight at Noah, who is no longer crying but is still holding the bat.

“Noah?” DJ says. “That’s even more surprising! Didn’t know you had it in you, man!”

“Shut up,” Noah mutters.

“Hey, it was a compliment,” DJ explains. “And not a backhanded one, either. I’m impressed!”

“I don’t care,” Noah says. “I didn’t want to kill the guy. I...”

“You had to do it. He killed my friend, and he would have killed us all. I’m just mad I didn’t get to do the honors.”

Phineas points his flashlight at DJ again.

“What is this, an interrogation?” DJ says, shielding his eyes.

“Noah clearly doesn’t want to talk about it, so let’s just drop it,” Phineas says.

“Whatever,” DJ says. “There’s plenty more to talk about, anyway, like...”

Phineas and Noah hear the thud as DJ jumps off the table he was lying on.

“Why would our house counselor go berserk like that?” he continues.

“It wasn’t just him,” Phineas says. “At least, I don’t think it was just him. I saw a TikTok. There’s crazy stuff going on in the streets. Like something out of a horror movie. I... I thought it was a hoax at first, but now... I’m not so sure.”

Phineas shines his flashlight on the light switch and sees that it’s already flipped on.

“So, the power’s out everywhere,” Phineas observes.

“Can we get out of here?” Noah asks. “It smelled bad enough with one dead person.”

“Brian...” DJ says, remembering Mr. Rodney’s hands around his friend’s neck.

“The less you think about it, the better,” Phineas says.

“I have to know for sure,” DJ says.

Phineas shines his flashlight at Brian’s body next, showing the blood not just on his face but everywhere else, like Brian had just come back from a swim in fruit punch. His eyes and mouth are still open, showing the fear and pain he died with. DJ vomits at the sight, and Noah follows soon after. Phineas, feeling his own dinner about to return, quickly turns the phone’s flashlight off.

“Let’s go now,” Phineas says after taking a moment to collect himself.

“Finally,” Noah says, shivering and wiping his mouth.

“If there’s anybody else like Mr. Rodney in this dorm, we need to find them and take them out before anybody else gets hurt,” Phineas says as he heads towards the door.

Phineas and Noah stop at the door, waiting for DJ shake off his own nerves before joining them. Phineas grips his bat tightly, prepared for whatever awaits them as they leave the room together.

Chapter Four

Five days before The Event

“So, have you asked a girl to prom yet?” Phineas said the moment he stepped into his and Noah’s dorm room, holding his composite bat,

“Nope,” Noah replied as he played a game on his modded Switch.

“Well, are you going to?”

“I’ve already told you that I won’t!”

Phineas playfully put Noah in a headlock, causing him to drop his handheld console.

“I told you not to do that!” Noah wheezed. “Are you trying to break my neck?”

“I might if you don’t actually put yourself out there for once!” Phineas said. “We only have two more years at Hanover left, and if you don’t take advantage of this time, have experiences, dance with a pretty girl or two, you’ll regret it!”

“I’m willing to take that risk,” Noah said as Phineas finally released him.

“Come on! I don’t want to go to prom alone!”

“You won’t be alone. You practically have girls fighting each other for a chance to go with you.”

“But I don’t just want to go with a girl,” Phineas said. “I want my boys with me, too, you know?”

“What about the other guys on your baseball team?”

“That’s different. You’re my roommate. I won’t be having as much fun out there knowing you’ll be in here bored out of your mind.”

“I promise, Phin, that isn’t something you’ll need to worry about.”

Phineas sighed.

“Even if you don’t end up going,” he said. “Could you just ask one girl to the prom? Just for me?”

Noah rolled his eyes.

“I’ll be your best frieeend,” Phineas sang, dropping his backpack and twirling around Noah as he started to play his Switch again.

“Fine,” Noah said. “I’ll think about it.”

Phineas pumped a fist at this small win. Noah always refused to go to the parties and other events Phineas invited him to, as he hated large groups of people, especially large groups of the sorts of people Phineas hung out with. The only friends Noah really had outside of Phineas were the ones he made through robotics club, friends who weren't as likely to bore him with conversations about which sports team won last night and how great (or, increasingly, how disastrous) a company's recent stock performance has been.

"Did practice go well?" Noah asked, not looking up from his game.

"As well as it could go. Our coach sucks, but it's me and the rest of the team who will get blamed for every loss since the coach comes from the Red Sox minor league affiliate, so there's no way he could do any wrong," Phineas snarked as he hopped onto his bed.

Noah, who was smaller than everybody else due to having skipped two grades before being accepted into Hanover and being small for his age already, didn't bother signing up for any sports. Though he knew it would make getting into his preferred college harder, he hoped his work with the robotics club, personal projects, test scores, and GPA would more than make up for it. His goal had always been to get into MIT, with Harvard as his safety school. He was born in Massachusetts, had rarely left the state, and wanted to earn his degrees in the state if he could help it.

Phineas wasn't as academically gifted as Noah but was smart enough to get into Hanover which, along with his athletic gifts, would allow him to go to pretty much any college he wanted. Though his team didn't win a lot of games last season, he still put up great numbers, ensuring he would be one of the top ranked baseball prospects in the country as a senior. Phineas never saw it that way, though, blaming himself for the team's poor performance and thinking colleges will hold it against him despite Noah reminding him several times that colleges aren't nearly as concerned with team records as the players themselves are.

Perhaps, Noah thought, *A prerequisite to greatness is hating yourself enough to not even think you're good.*

Though Noah didn't generally care about sports, he went to all the baseball games to support Phineas. Every hit, every stolen base, every home run had Noah on his feet cheering his roommate on, something he hoped Phineas appreciated with his parents too "busy" to attend any of the games, including the weekend games. Though they went to a few of his games when he was a Lower, the team being as bad as it was likely made his parents feel it wasn't worth the two hour flight, something Noah was sure Phineas took personally even if he never talked about it.

Noah and Phineas didn't get along at all when they were first assigned to the same dorm room, and Noah considered requesting a transfer to a different room multiple times, but it was an unlikely thing that led to the blossoming of an unlikely friendship: a shared love of TikTok brainrot. Whenever Noah was frustrated by the pressures of being a straight-A+ student or Phineas was frustrated by the pressures of being a sports star, they let their algorithms, which turned out to be quite similar despite their very different personalities, take them all over the world, to places where their troubles at home no longer mattered and whatever funny, gross, or bizarre thing they were looking at now did.

They heard banging on the wall, causing Noah to sigh and turn his Switch off.

“What do they want now?” he asked.

Phineas and Noah left their room and entered the room next to theirs, where DJ and Brian were waiting for them.

“Yo, Phin! You got a date for prom yet?” DJ asked.

“No, not yet,” Phineas replied. “Worst comes to worst, I’ll just go by myself.”

“Yeah, right!” Brian snorted. “Half the girls in our class are leaving the guys who asked them in limbo waiting for your decision.”

“Which is why we would prefer you make it sooner rather than later,” DJ said.

“I’m sure you would,” Phineas said. “I’ll make my decision by tomorrow, don’t worry. It’ll be the girl I have my longest Snapchat streak with right now.”

“And who’s that?” Brian asked.

“I guess you both will know soon,” Phineas said.

“Do you know?” DJ asked Noah.

“Why would I tell *you*?” Noah asked.

“I can help you get a date,” DJ said. “It won’t be your first choice, unfortunately...”

Brian shot a glance at DJ indicating he knew exactly who DJ was referring to and he wasn’t happy about it.

Noah had a crush on Maeve since his first year as a junior student as Hanover, and it didn’t take long for Maeve to figure it out. The feelings weren’t reciprocated, of course, and Noah was sure the rest of the choom gang knew about his crush by now, though it was one of the few things they hadn’t made fun of him for yet. Noah kept his distance from Maeve after she and Brian started dating, but since he and Brian only had a wall separating them, it was much harder to do the same with him. He doubted that Brian saw Noah as a threat, but he was sure Noah liking Maeve made Brian uncomfortable nevertheless.

“...but I know after Phin makes his decision, there will be a lot of heartbroken, desperate girls without prom dates, and I’m sure I can convince one of them to let you take her,” DJ continued.

“Noah can find his own prom date!” Brian asserted.

“I can?” Noah said. “Oh! Uh, yeah, I can!”

“Then you’re coming to prom?” DJ asked.

“And you’re bringing a baddie?” Brian asked.

“Yes and yes!” Noah said, doing his best to look as confident as he didn’t feel.

“Great! I guess we’ll see the both of you, then,” DJ said. “And I better know who you’re taking by tomorrow, Phin.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Phineas said, following Noah out the room.

“Why do you get me into these situations?” Noah whispered once the door was closed behind them.

“You’ll do fine!” Phineas said. “It’s like DJ said. Tons of girls will be on the market after I make my decision, and prom is this weekend! It couldn’t have worked out better for you!”

“Yeah, thanks your indecisiveness,” Noah said.

“You’re welcome, by the way.”

“Are you really taking Hannah, though?”

“No, of course not!”

“But she’s who you have your longest Snapchat streak with!”

“And I would hate to jeopardize it by actually entering a relationship with her.”

“But you would just be going to prom together.”

“You know how girls are. First you’re going to prom together, then you’re going to the movies, then you’re naming your kids.”

“No, I don’t know, and I don’t think you do, either.”

“I’ll just pray on it.”

“Since when do you pray?”

“I pray before every game!” Phineas said as he and Noah re-entered their room.

“I don’t think your prayers have been getting answered, then.”

“I haven’t torn anything yet, have I?”

“Guess not,” Noah said as he picked his Switch back up.

“What game is that you’re playing, anyway?” Phineas wondered. “I haven’t seen any streamers play anything like that.”

“That’s because it isn’t in any stores,” Noah said. “I made it.”

“You *made* a video game?” Phineas said with astonishment. “When did you find time to do that?”

“While you were out partying, I was in here being productive.”

Noah had been working on his game since before he was at Hanover, joining the Switch’s homebrew scene when he was in middle school. He made the standard games, a Pong clone, a simple platformer,

before jumping into his current project, a Soulslike. He generally didn't work on it when Phineas was around, but since it was finally something resembling complete, he didn't mind Phineas seeing it.

"Can I play it?" Phineas asked.

Noah hesitated at first. Though it was close to a finished state, he still wasn't happy with his game. The movement wasn't as smooth as he would like. The enemies weren't as hard as he would like. He knew the game would eventually have to be played by other people to reach it's full potential, though, and he trusted Phineas more than anybody else to give him truly honest feedback.

"Fine," Noah said, returning to his game's main menu and starting it from the beginning before handing his Switch over.

Phineas played with a curious look on his face, a look that gradually transformed into excitement. Seconds became minutes and minutes became hours as Phineas played the game, and Noah didn't look away from his roommate once, not even to glance at TikTok. Though he couldn't see the game as Phineas played it, he knew every twist and turn, every enemy and surprise boss, judging only on how Phineas reacted to each moment. By midnight, Phineas finally put the game down.

"That was incredible," he said. "It's the best thing I've played since Elden Ring."

At this moment, Noah realized something that hadn't crossed his mind once during the hundreds of hours of development that went into the game: he might actually be good at this. Since he never believed he was good at it, he could even be great at it, but he wasn't willing to go that far yet. He took his Switch back and plugged it into its charger. As the Switch wasn't developed with a battery that let it go from 1% charge to 100% charge in an instant like newer handheld devices, he would have to let it charge through the night.

Phineas climbed into bed and was asleep immediately. Noah took a bit longer, as usual, with the anxiety over whether Phineas would like his game replaced with anxiety over whether he would be able to find a prom date and prove DJ, Brian, and himself wrong.

Chapter Five

Jared is the first to wake up to the knocks on his door, loud bangs that come every three to five seconds. He rolls his eyes when he sees his roommate Kevin is still asleep.

“Kev would sleep through a tornado,” Jared mutters as he climbs out of bed.

Jared turns on his phone, which is connected to the charger plugged into his wall. While the phone is fully charged already, it usually indicated that it was connected to the charger even at 100%, and it’s giving no such indication now.

“Weird,” Jared says before turning the phone back off.

The banging on the door continues.

“Who is it?” Jared shouts.

There is no response, only more knocks.

“It’s almost two in the morning! Who are you, and what do you want?” Jared asks the mystery knocker.

After another minute of nothing but knocks, Jared climbs back into bed.

“Screw this,” he whispers.

Jared tries to fall back asleep, but the banging on the door won’t stop. Already irritated from being kicked out of the choom gang the night before, he’s tempted to greet whoever’s knocking with a swift punch in the gut. Even if it’s an adult, he would be willing to be suspended again, even expelled, as he never wanted to go to this school in the first place. His parents made him go to Hanover, saying it’s the best prep school in the country, an incredible opportunity most kids could only dream of, but all Jared wanted was to be around the friends he grew up with in the Philadelphia suburbs. His parents were willing to budge on most things, but not on Hanover.

He swiftly became friends with DJ, knowing his experience at the school would be a lot less miserable with a friend as powerful as him. It was a happy coincidence that he and Kevin were assigned a room so close to as DJ’s, which made getting close to DJ even easier. This allowed him to become a founding member of the choom gang, though it wasn’t always smooth sailing from there. Maeve, one of the chooms, hated Jared because she couldn’t control him like the others, and Brian hated him because Maeve hated him. DJ always sided with Jared, though, until prom night. Though even Jared would admit that he wasn’t completely in the right, it still came as a surprise to him.

Jared gets out of bed again and marches to the door. He opens it to find Mr. Carter, the baseball coach, standing there, and Phineas standing behind him holding a baseball bat.

“Jared, look out!” Phineas exclaims as he swings the bat.

Jared turns on his heel just as the bat makes contact with Mr. Carter’s head, sending Mr. Carter falling face-down in front of him.

“Oh, my God,” Jared says, looking at Mr. Carter’s caved-in head. “I knew you hated your coach, but I didn’t know you hated him *that* much.”

“That wasn’t my coach anymore,” Phineas says. “He and all of the other adults have...changed.”

“What, are they possessed by aliens now?” Jared speculates. “Is this like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*?”

“Maybe,” a familiar voice says.

Jared turns back around and realizes the voice is coming from Noah, who is now behind Phineas with DJ.

“Mr. Rodney...he killed Brian,” DJ says with a look that makes it clear he barely believes it himself.

“After he killed Brian, he started...started eating him,” DJ continues.

“Oh, so they’re zombies,” Jared says.

Jared walks to Kevin’s bed and shakes him awake.

“What do you want?” Kevin asks with his eyes still closed.

“All of the adults are zombies now, so we’re going to kill them,” Jared says.

“Can’t this wait until the morning?” Kevin whines.

“If you think you can last that long without being eaten, sure, but you’ll be on your own until then.”

Kevin groans before climbing out of bed and grabbing a container of pills on his desk.

“Is this really the time for that?” DJ asks.

“If you want me to go with you, it is,” Kevin growls.

Kevin opens the container, places two pills in his left hand, and quickly swallows them.

“Alright, let’s go,” he says.

Kevin, not noticing Mr. Carter’s body in the dark, trips over it on his way to the door. He regains his balance and then stares at the body in horror.

“M-Mr. Carter?” Kevin whispers.

“That wasn’t Mr. Carter anymore,” Phineas says.

Hearing Phineas say that again, Jared realizes that Phineas is saying it to himself as much as he’s saying it to anyone else, his hand holding onto his bloody baseball bat so tightly that Jared’s sure the hand itself will bleed soon. Noah and DJ both avoid the sight of Mr. Carter’s body, but Jared looks at it as intently as Kevin does.

“Did you kill Mr. Rodney with that, too?” Jared asks.

“Yeah,” Phineas says quickly.

DJ gives Phineas a confused glance but says nothing.

“Let’s get going,” Phineas suggests as he turns around and starts walking down the hallway.

“You heard him,” Jared says, walking out the room.

Kevin joins the others outside his room moments later.

“Is this the only other room on this floor you’ve checked?” Kevin asks.

“It’s the only room other than mine that’s had an adult try to get into it,” DJ says.

“Mr. Carter has always been on this floor, but the house counselors rotate through them,” Phineas says. “I guess it was Mr. Rodney’s lucky...or unlucky day.”

“Lucky because unlike Mr. Carter he at least got a meal in before you gashed his skull,” Jared says.

“Come on, Jared,” DJ says with a pleading voice.

“Hey, I didn’t like Brian, and I know Phin and Noah didn’t like him, either,” Jared says.

“Still, he didn’t deserve to have that happen to him,” Phineas says.

“Maeve is going to be devasted,” Noah adds.

“At least she’ll have you to comfort her, won’t she?” Jared teases.

Noah turns away, his face red. Phineas seems ready to tell Jared off, but as they reach the stairway, he changes his focus to that.

“We’re on the second floor, so we should clear the first before going back up,” he says before entering the stairway.

Jared and the others follow Phineas, who walks down the steps carefully before opening the door to the first floor with just as much caution.

“Nobody’s in the hallway,” Phineas whispers.

Jared begins to feel the weight of the moment as he reaches the door, and he’s unable to go further. He jumps as a hand grabs his shoulder, but he turns and sees that it’s only DJ.

“It’s okay,” DJ whispers.

Jared wants to believe that it’s okay, that all of them will escape the building alive, but the image of Mr. Carter’s bloodied head returns to his mind as clearly as if he were looking at it on his phone. He was ready to invite Mr. Carter in after several minutes of his knocking, and if Phineas and the others weren’t there, it likely would have been Jared on the floor looking just as messy as Mr. Carter did. Jared had

watched enough zombie movies to know that what they lacked in speed and strength they generally made up for in numbers, and even if he and the rest of the students made it out of the dorms alive, the adults would have the numbers advantage everywhere else they went. Brian didn't stand a chance against Mr. Rodney one-on-one, so what chance would the five of them stand against dozens, if not hundreds of adults?

He starts walking again, catching up with Phineas in front of a room with an open door. Phineas shushes Jared and the others before storming into the room with his bat raised. The next sounds are of a bat crushing a skull and of a body hitting the floor. Jared enters the room with everybody else as Phineas turns the flashlight of his phone on, revealing their chemistry teacher, Mr. Anderson, on the ground with the same caved-in head Mr. Carter had.

"Why did you bring your bat down on him so fast?" Noah asks.

"Because he was snacking on that kid," Phineas responds before turning the flashlight to Mr. Anderson's victim, who has so many cuts and bites taken out of him that he's now unrecognizable.

"Okay, we get it!" Noah says, turning away. "Do you want us to hurl again?"

Phineas shines his flashlight around the room and gasps as he finds the victim's roommate hanging from the ceiling fan, a bed sheet tied around his neck, wearing nothing but his underwear, no skin on his body, with blood slowly dripping from what's left of him. Despite his best efforts to ignore his curiosity, Noah peeks at the other victim, and horrified, he vomits again, falls to his knees, and sobs.

"We need to keep moving," Phineas says as gently as he can.

"Then go!" Noah says. "I'm done! If they want to eat me, they can eat me."

Jared pulls Noah up by his shirt and looks directly at his face, which is covered in tears and mucus now. Though he never liked Noah, he never felt as much hatred at the sight of him as he does in this moment, and the way Noah's bottom lip begins to tremble shows that he can see this in Jared's face. Phineas can see it, too.

"Just calm down, Jared," Phineas says, still trying to be gentle.

"If Noah wants to die, why don't I just grant him his wish instead of letting him slow us down?" Jared says without a hint of irony.

"Please, Jared," DJ says. "You know there's more of them out there. We can't afford to start turning on each other."

"Then tell Noah to be less of a punk!" Jared says, letting go of Noah's shirt.

Everybody is quiet as Noah wipes his face with his shirt and takes a deep breath.

"We're going to kill them all, right?" he says after what feels like an hour of silence.

"Yes," DJ says. "Every last one."

"Every last one," Noah echoes.

Phineas leaves the room, and the rest follow.

“This floor’s house counselor should be in one of the rooms up ahead,” Phineas says.

“Why don’t we wake up some of the other kids so we have some backup?” Jared suggests.

“We need to clear out these zombies as quickly as we can,” Phineas says. “And be as quiet as possible, so it isn’t worth the risk.”

Jared says nothing else despite not believing those are the real reasons Phineas doesn’t want help from anybody on this floor. This is the floor the seniors live on, and Phineas would likely prefer to be able to brag to them about how they were saved by a bunch of Uppers than have any of them as recruits. As they near the back of hallway, they discover two open doors.

“Should we split up?” Kevin asks.

“What is this, Scooby-Doo?” Jared snarks. “There’s only one baseball bat, so whatever team Phineas isn’t on could very well be somebody’s lunch.”

“Jared’s right,” Phineas says. “We stay together.”

Phineas walks through the first door with the others, shining his flashlight around the room and finding both of the boys in the room dead and bloodied already.

“Looks like he’s done here,” Phineas says. “Let’s head to the next ro-”

A hand reaches out of a nearby closet and grabs Phineas’ arm before he can notice it, startling Phineas so much that he drops the bat. Phineas curses and tries to pick up the bat again while also trying to pull his other arm from the grip of the man Jared recognizes as this floor’s house counselor, Mr. Garrett. As Phineas grabs the bat again, Mr. Garrett bites into his wrist, seeming to hit a vein as blood spurts everywhere. Phineas releases the bat again and cries out as Mr. Garrett pulls him into the closet. Kevin runs to the bat, picks it up, and turns to the closet just as another spurt of blood hits him in the face.

“Get him, Kevin! Now!” Phineas shouts as Mr. Garrett bites into the growing wound on his arm.

Mr. Garrett hides behind Phineas just as Kevin brings the bat down.

“Kevin, wait!” DJ exclaims.

But it’s an exclamation that comes just a couple of seconds too late.