

This is the Way the World Ends

Chapter 1

“We really should be studying,” I call from inside Caroline’s massive walk-in closet. It’s almost as big as my whole apartment. A tall window looks out over Central Park, the buildings on the other side silhouetted by the setting sun. Pinks fade into orange and purple in the sky; lights flicker on in apartment windows, the treetops below soaking up the last of the goldenhour rays. I turn to the floor-to-ceiling collection of shoes, running my fingers over suede heels, then velvet boots, then studded sneakers. A marble mood board covers the opposite wall, a collage of prom dresses, cute summer outfits, and models like Cara Delevingne and Bella Hadid making pouty faces, all stuck on with gold magnets. Makeup and jewelry line the built-in island in the middle of the room, lit up like Sephora.

“I saw you drooling over that dress,” Caroline calls back. “What kind of friend would I be if I didn’t let you try it on?”

I smile, not because of the More Expensive Than My Parents’ Car ball gown I’m about to try on, but because the darling of New York Webber Academy just said she was my friend. I’ve been tutoring her in science every Thursday afternoon for over a year, and of course I’d hoped it would evolve into a friendship, but this is the first time she’s actually said that word out loud. I have to tell Pari about this. I wonder if she’ll be jealous. Or intrigued. Don’t make a big deal about it, Waverly. Oh, who am I kidding? This is a Big Deal! Being in Caroline’s circle is like having a key to the city—it’ll get you in anywhere. And who knows? Maybe upgrading from her tutor to her friend will raise my social score.

But really, it’s just nice to have friends. I’ve never been great at making friends. I wish I could blame it on the kids at Webber being classist snobs, but even back in public school when I was on the same level as everyone else, I always ate lunch alone. I think it’s an autistic thing, but maybe it’s just a me thing. A Waverly thing. Every day I worry that I’ll somehow scare away the two friends I do have at Webber—Pari and Frank. So, yeah, hearing someone like Caroline call me her friend feels damn good.

I throw the heavy skirt of my school uniform onto the floor, then the itchy sweater, white shirt, and sports bra. Once I’m down to my underwear, I stare lovingly at the extravagant dress hanging on the back of the door. It’s a regal red couture ball gown designed by Christian Siriano. It’s too expensive for me to even look at, and I told Caroline as much when she first suggested I try it on. But once Caroline gets an idea in her head, it’s pointless to fight her—especially if it means getting out of studying biology for a few minutes. The material is smooth and cool on my skin, and it slides on like it was meant for me. I hold my breath as I gently lift it around my waist and chest.

Not gonna lie, I’m afraid of it. I’m afraid of ripping it or hurting it somehow. I’m afraid I’ll like wearing it so much that nothing will ever live up to this moment again. I’m afraid this is as close to Caroline’s life as I’ll ever get. The tulle skirt cascades down to the floor. The V-shaped neckline is embellished with little jewels that sparkle in the light. This is nothing like my usual OOTD. When I’m not in the awful Webber Academy uniform (all dark blue and white stripes, too-tight necktie, material that bites into me), I normally avoid too-tight or potentially scratchy clothes, prioritizing comfort over style. But this dress feels almost soothing on my skin, and there aren’t even any pointy tags I’d need to cut off. It’s tight, but in a comforting, weighted-blanket kind of way. I never in a million years thought I’d feel comfortable in a couture ball gown, but this isn’t so bad.

Caroline shrieks when I shuffle back into her room, and I worry that her dad, famous computer scientist turned billionaire entrepreneur Gregory Sinclair, is going to think I'm trying to murder her or something. "Okay," Caroline says. "I hate that you look better in it than me, but I love it for you." She turns me around to face the mirror while she zips up the back of the dress, and that's when I see my reflection. Maybe it's the built-in ring light doing me favors, but I feel like royalty. I'm standing straighter, taller, like I'm proud of what the world sees when they look at me. Is this how Caroline feels all the time? A sharp feeling of shame rushes through me, because it shouldn't take an extravagant dress to make me feel worthy. But when you spend every day being surrounded by people who have so much more than you, it's easy to feel like you're not good enough. It's easy to equate money with worth.

A lump stings my throat and I wipe at rogue tears, hopefully before Caroline notices, but she's too distracted by her phone buzzing on her desk. Her boyfriend's face flashes on the screen: Jack's trying to FaceTime her. Only his name has been changed to Jackass, which means they're fighting again. She declines it for the fifth time tonight.

"What did he do now?" I ask. Caroline lets out a dramatic sigh. "Pretty sure he's cheating on me."

"With who?" I probably should have at least pretended to be surprised, but whatever. She must know, right? She deserves so much better. She shrugs, eyes back on her phone. "No idea. But he's been doing this thing where he ghosts me for days, then suddenly calls nonstop, wasted. Like, he won't reply to my texts, but then he'll call me drunk at three a.m., rambling about how he's sorry."

"Sorry for what?"

"That's the thing," she says, running her fingers through her long, dark hair. "He won't tell me."

I honestly don't know why she's with a jerk like Jack. Caroline is the most popular girl in school, because she treats everyone like her equal—even me, the autistic, gay scholarship nerd from Queens everyone else ignores. Jack, however, is a future frat boy from a family of corrupt prescription drug peddlers who flips up the collars of his pastel polo shirts. I mean, yeah, he's good-looking in a Ken doll kinda way, but all that is ruined the moment he opens his mouth and lets his assholery spill out. I've tried to figure out why she repeatedly chooses to exchange bodily fluids with him, but it's one of life's great mysteries. Maybe this time she's truly done with him.

"I don't want to go to the boring masquerade with him," she says.

"You have to go!" I look back at my reflection, the dress spilling out around me. I'm a Disney princess. "You're going to own the night!"

"I don't want to own the night," she says. "I want a night of my own. Seriously, the ball, it's all cheek kisses, fake smiles, and backstabbing under the guise of fundraising for a school that already has more money than God." Caroline falls back onto the pillows of her rose-gold four-poster bed and sighs. "My queendom for a night off from all the high society bullshit."

I had no idea Caroline felt this way. I thought she loved being everyone's favorite. Even in biology class, where she struggles the most, there's practically a line of people wanting to partner with her on group assignments. It never occurred to me that she'd tire of all the attention—that she needs a break. Webber Academy is one of the wealthiest private schools in the country. The annual Masquerade Ball is its biggest benefit of the year, raising money for the school and celebrating new members of the Dean's Society. For people like me, a Webber Academy education opens up the whole world. It's my ticket to a good college, connections to the most powerful names in the

country, and a future of financial stability for myself and my parents. Besides, the money raised at the masquerade goes to the Webber Foundation, and from there it's given to local nonprofits and allocated to the scholarship program. It's not like the dean pockets it for himself. Dean Owen Webber always says that, at the academy, we are a family, but as much as I want to believe I'm in the family, it's hard not to feel left out when the cheapest tickets to the masquerade are still ten thousand bucks—obviously, scholarship kids need not apply.

I've always dreamed about walking into the Masquerade Ball and seeing it with my own eyes. To maybe even be invited to join the Dean's Society for who I am, instead of what I have. The night is shrouded in mystery; everyone hands in their phones and cameras at the door. The only photos are taken by approved photographers, and even then, only a select few of the images are posted online. The exclusivity is part of the allure.

"Do you know what I would give to go to that ball?" I her, a little too desperately. "You have no idea how lucky you are. I'd have to tutor every kid in school for years and probably sell an organ to afford that ticket."

Truth is, tutoring doesn't come easily to me. I have a learning disability, dyscalculia, which makes numbers and equations basically impossible for my brain to process—my calculator is my best friend. But people assume that being autistic means I'm some kind of genius, and classmates started offering me hundreds of dollars to tutor them, so I agreed. I already have to work twice as hard as everyone else to keep up anyway, may as well get paid for it. I mainly tutor in English and bio, my favorite subjects. I read ahead a little, memorize as much of the texts as I can, spend a few extra hours a week studying while the rich kids are weekendening at their summer houses, and voilà. The infinity of online study guides helps, too, and the extra time I've spent trying to beef up my tutoring skills has even boosted my own grades, as well as my Venmo account. Everybody wins.

"You worry about money too much," she says. My skin bristles. It's not the first time she's said that to me. I heard it when she invited me out to some party in East Williamsburg, when the only way to get there was three different trains that would take two hours, or a Lyft, which I couldn't afford. I heard it again when she asked why I don't just buy Starbucks on the way to school instead of bringing instant coffee in my dad's old thermos.

I try to soften my tone when I say, "That's what happens when you don't have it." Caroline presses her lips into a hard line, and I worry I've offended her. Oh, man, I hope I didn't just get demoted from friend status.

"Anyway." I pick up my bio book from her desk. "We really need to focus. We still have one more chapter in this section and it took me three reads before I fully grasped it. I'll go get changed."

Caroline looks at me with pity. "Waverly, you work harder than any of the trust-fundians at school. And you put up with their one-percenter shit on top of it. I don't know how you deal."

One day I'll be rich, and I'll have my own designer gowns in my closet, and I'll never take them for granted. But most important, I'll be a doctor, an expert in neurology, and I'll be helping people.

"It's not so bad," I lie. Actually, the kids at school can be truly awful. "But I wouldn't mind being you for a day." I put my book back down and glance at Caroline, expecting to see more pity in her warm brown eyes, but instead, they're lit up in excitement. "Be careful what you wish for."

I quirk an eyebrow at her. "Huh?" A mischievous smile squirms across her face. She stands behind me, both of us turning to face the mirror. "You're going to the ball, Cinderella."

“Again,” I say, full of suspicion. “Huh?” She laughs. “You’ll wear my dress, and my mask, and go have that wild party night you deserve. Everyone will treat you like a queen.” I laugh. “I can’t pass as you.” Sure, we’re practically the same height and both have dark hair and pale-ass skin. But where Caroline has breasts, I have . . . not much. And her legs are longer than mine, though I guess no one would see my legs under this huge, flowing gown.

“Yeah, you can! It’s a masquerade, genius. People will be in disguises. Besides, this dress has been all over my feed this week—they won’t even question whether it’s me wearing it. Our voices aren’t super different, and anyway, it’ll be loud, and dark, and people will be drinking. We can totally pull it off.”

For a glorious moment, I let myself imagine what it would feel like to walk into the ball in this incredible dress and have everyone treat me like I paid to be there. To live Caroline’s life for just one night. But I shake off the fantasy when I remember one giant ass of a problem.

“What about Jack? He’s going to be there.” She shrugs like her boyfriend is a minor detail. “He knows I’m mad at him. You could ignore him all night, he’ll just think I’m pissed. Also, his dad will be there, and when Dr. Bradley is around, Jack is always on his best behavior. He’ll be too focused on being Daddy’s special boy to pay attention to anything else. Believe me.”

My heart beats a little faster. Am I really considering this? What if I get caught? It would be humiliating. Everyone would know how desperate I am to be like them, and if there’s one thing worse than being on the outside it’s people knowing how badly you just want to be inside. My above-it-all mask is all I have; I can’t risk losing it. “No. I don’t think it’s a good idea, Caroline. I can’t do it.”

Her phone buzzes with a text, and I see on the screen that it’s from Max, Caroline’s BFF and resident gossip girl of Webber Academy. Max and I don’t talk much, but that’s mostly my fault—she’s very pretty and I get tongue-tied around her. Caroline’s eyes widen at the text.

“Huh,” Caroline says as she reads it. “Apparently Ash flew back from London for the masquerade. I bet she’s the mystery guest Webber’s been talking about, this year’s new Dean’s Society member.”

And suddenly I’m not breathing. Ash. Ashley Webber. Caroline doesn’t know it, but Ash is my ex-girlfriend. If she ever was my girlfriend. What we had, whatever it was, we kept secret—partly because Ash isn’t out, and partly because she’s the daughter of Owen Webber, the founder and dean of New York Webber Academy. Neither of us wanted the kind of attention our relationship would bring. I didn’t want people asking why the richest girl in school was dating the scholarship kid; they’d think I was doing it for a status upgrade. Not to mention how everyone was always in Ash’s business, orbiting around her for scraps of popularity or gossip to use as social currency. With our relationship, I think she wanted something sacred and private and special. For a while, that was me. I was her sacred, special thing. And she was mine. And then she was gone. All I have left to remind me of her now is the heartache. No matter what I do, no matter how much time passes, the hurt just won’t go away. Pari says I’m holding on to her tight still, waiting for her to come back to me, and I’ve always denied it. But now, Ash is back in New York. My heart is racing. Palms sweating. Maybe this is what I’ve been holding on for this whole time, one more chance. With her.

“I’ll go.”

“Where?” Caroline says, already reabsorbed in her phone. I can’t believe I’m saying these words out loud. “I’ll go to the masquerade in your place.”

Caroline lights up. “Yes, Cinderella!” I keep admiring myself in the mirror while she fetches the mask from the safe—yes, an actual safe—in her closet. It’s wrapped in bloodred tissue paper inside a metallic gold box, and I’ve been dying to see it in real life instead of just on Instagram.

“Here it is,” she says as she lifts the lid off. “The pièce de résistance.” It’s a shimmering gold mask with holes for the eyes, nostrils, and mouth. Lines have been carved into it, giving it eerie facial features, feminine and delicate. Otherworldly and somehow fae. But what really makes it stand out are the thin golden rods on top of it, forming a crown. It looks like something that would be worn by an ancient sun goddess—or a celebrity going to Coachella. “The crown has flecks of real gold in it.” Caroline gently places the mask over my face, ties the ribbon tight so it stays firm, and steps back to take in the full sight of me. “Perfection.”

“There’s no way I’ll blend in on the subway in this outfit,” I say, thinking of trying to get to the ball from Queens. “No way,” she says, shaking her head. “You’re not wearing this on the subway. In fact, you’re not even carrying it on the train tonight. It’s too bulky, and I’d die before letting it touch the grimy floor of the R train.”

“It’ll be fine,” I say. “My mom and I once rode the subway with an armchair we found on the street.” Caroline makes a face. My cheeks warm. “It was a really nice chair.”

She shrugs. “You’ll take our town car home tonight. I’ll call Bruce.” Before I can argue, she’s on the phone asking her family’s driver to be ready to take me home in thirty minutes. I retreat back to her walk-in to step out of the dress and back into my uniform, and together we place it back in its fancy garment bag.

“Now.” Caroline claps her hands together. “I’m going to give you a lesson on How to Be Moi, so pay attention.”

I chuckle while I pull my sweater over my head. “I think I’ve got that down. All I gotta do is flip my hair every now and then and slip French words into every sentence. Instant bougie bitch.”

She gasps, making a big show of being offended. “Pardonnezmoi, mademoiselle? Says you, with your closet full of flannel shirts and nails bitten down to nothing—you’re a walking lesbian stereotype.” I stumble backward and clutch my heart dramatically. “Moi?” Laughter spills out of both of us, but then Caroline turns stone cold.

“Seriously, though. Just because I want a break from this world doesn’t mean I want to be ostracized from it. I have a reputation to uphold, a vibe that people do and should expect from me. You need to make them believe in that journey.” She starts listing things off, counting on her fingers as she does. “I don’t smile. Ever. But you’ll be wearing a mask so that shouldn’t be a problem. I avoid eye contact with teachers, and pretty much all adults, because, honestly, who has the energy to deal with them? But hey, that should be easy for you with the autism stuff, right?”

On the outside, I smile and nod, but on the inside, I wince and shrink. It’s not that she’s wrong; eye contact is hard for me, but it doesn’t feel right that she gets to say it like that. There’s no way I could ever tell her that, though, because she’s Caroline, and besides, I don’t even understand why it makes me feel so prickly, so how could I make someone else understand?

“Your posture needs work,” she says, her gaze dragging down my body. “You’re all hunched up at the shoulders like you’re trying to crawl into a ball and hide.” Called out. I straighten my spine in a way that feels unnatural and vulnerable.

“Much better,” Caroline says. “If we had more time, I’d send you to the modeling class I took when I was eleven, just to get a quick download on how to walk and pose.” She sighs. “But this will do.” I’m feeling more like a monkey in a science experiment every second. But then I think about walking into the Webber Academy ball, how everyone will adore me, wish they were me, how I’ll be the star for just one night . . . and how Ash will be there to see me shine. It’s just one night. Caroline crosses her room, searches her Spotify playlists, and hits play. Shitty club music fills the room from the speakers in the ceiling. It’s too loud for me, but I don’t say anything.

“It’s time,” she says with an evil smile. “Show me what you’ve got.” I spend the next twenty minutes walking back and forth down the length of her giant bedroom.

“Less slouching,” she orders on my fifty millionth circuit of the room. “More strutting.”

Next, I practice talking and laughing like her, and even though it’s definitely a work in progress, I’m not half bad. We’ve been spending every Thursday after school together for a year now, so I’ve had a lot of study time. Besides, being autistic in an ableist world means learning how to mimic other people’s behavior as a way to fit in. It’s called masking—suppressing my natural autistic traits so that I can pass as a neurotypical person. Resisting the urge to rock back and forth during class, or tap my hands on my desk, or count how many stairs I climb out loud. Hiding my anxiety and discomfort when people get too close, or too loud, or too confusing. Pretending I’m fine when I’m completely overwhelmed and watching the clock for the lunch bell to ring so I can disappear into the bathroom, pop my earplugs in, and bury my head in my arms until I can breathe again. It’s a survival mechanism, like a chameleon changing its colors to hide from predators, only a lot less cool and way more exhausting.

When Caroline is satisfied that I sound enough like her to fool her friends in a loud, music-filled ballroom, we move on to the final step: a Caroline-style selfie—from above, angled to the right, chin slightly turned to the left, eyes sultry behind the mask. I take a dozen different shots. Then she picks her favorite and rolls it through three different photo editing apps to get the lighting and colors just right so it matches her aesthetic.

“I’ll post this before the party,” she says. “It’ll look like I’m getting ready in real time.” I grin at her. “You’re an evil genius.” She giggles, placing a hand on her cheek. “Stop! You’re making me blush.” That’s when the buzzer rings, and she hurries me out of her room. “That’s Bruce. See you at school, Cinderella!”

I creep down the stairs as quietly as possible, cradling the dress and mask box like a newborn baby, but stop cold when I hear Caroline’s dad yell in his office, “Stop!” I freeze. For a heart-stopping moment, I think he’s screaming at me. Oh, god. He thinks I’m stealing the dress. I turn to look at him in his office, but his back is to me. Then I hear a muffled voice yelling about “Cassandra!,” and I realize Gregory is on the phone. “We should have told someone,” he hisses. “Now it’s too late, and people will suffer.” His voice bounces off the walls. I’ve only spoken to Caroline’s father a handful of times, but he’s been nothing but kind and very soft-spoken, almost shy. He’s always by Dean Webber’s side at school events; I think they’ve been close friends for years. I’ve never heard him yell like this. Gregory turns around and spots me. Our eyes lock. Then he crosses the room and shuts the door in my face, drowning out the rest of the conversation.