

Everyone in school knows about locker eighty-nine: the locker on the bottom right, at the end of the hall near the science labs. It's been unassigned for years now; really, it should've been allocated to one of the hundreds of students in the school to load with books and papers and forgotten, mold-infested Tupperware.

Instead, there seems to be an unspoken agreement that locker eighty-nine serves a higher purpose. How else do you explain the fact that every year, when we all get our schedules and combinations, and lockers eighty-eight and ninety meet their new leasers, locker eighty-nine stands empty?

Well, "empty" might not be the right word here. Because even though it's unassigned, locker eighty-nine ends most days housing several envelopes with almost identical contents: ten dollars, often in the form of a bill, sometimes made up of whatever loose change the sender can gather; a letter, sometimes typed, sometimes handwritten, sometimes adorned with the telltale smudge of a tearstain; and at the bottom of the letter, an email address.

It's a mystery how the envelopes get in there, when it's rare to spot someone slipping one through the vents. It's a bigger mystery, still, how the envelopes are collected, when no one has ever been spotted opening the locker.

No one can agree on who operates it. Is it a teacher with no hobbies? An ex-student who can't let go of the past? A big-hearted janitor who could use some cash on the side?

The only thing that's universally agreed on is this: if you're having relationship issues and you slide a letter through the vents of locker eighty-nine, you will receive an email from an anonymous sender within the week, giving you advice. And if you're wise enough to follow that advice, your relationship problems will be solved, guaranteed, or your money back.

And I rarely have to give people their money back.

In my defense, in the few cases that didn't work out, the letter left out important information. Like last month, when Penny Moore wrote in about Rick Smith dumping her in an Instagram comment, and conveniently left out that he did it after finding out she'd coordinated her absent days with his older brother so they could sneak off together. If I'd known that, I never would've advised Penny to confront Rick about the comment during lunch the next day. That one was on her. Admittedly, it was kind of satisfying to watch Rick perform a dramatic reading of her texts to his brother in front of the whole cafeteria, but I would've preferred a happy ending. Because I did this to help people, and to know I made a positive difference in the world; but also (and maybe even mostly, in this case), because it pained me to drop ten dollars into Penny's locker all because she was too proud to admit she was the one in the wrong. Problem is, I couldn't defend myself and my relationship expertise if Penny were to tell everyone she didn't get a refund.

Because no one knows who I am.

Okay, I don't mean literally. Lots of people know who I am. Darcy Phillips. Junior. That girl with the shoulder-length blond hair and the gap between her front teeth. The one who's best friends with Brooke Nguyen, and is part of the school's queer club. Ms. Morgan-from-science-class's daughter.

But what they don't know is that I'm also the girl who hangs back after school while her mom finishes up in the science labs, long after everyone else has left. The girl who steals down the hall to locker eighty-

nine, enters the combination she's known by heart for years—ever since the combination list was left briefly unattended on the admin officer's desk one evening—and collects letters and bills like tax. The girl who spends her nights filtering strangers' stories through unbiased eyes, before sending carefully composed instructions via the burner email account she made in ninth grade.

They don't know, because nobody in school knows. I'm the only one who knows my secret.

Or, I was, anyway. Up until this very moment.

I had the sinking inkling that was about to change, though. Because even though I'd checked the halls for stragglers or staff members like I always did barely twenty seconds ago, I was thirteen-thousand percent sure I'd heard someone clear their throat somewhere in the vicinity of directly the fuck behind me.

While I was elbow deep inside a very much unlocked locker eighty-nine.

Crap.

Even as I turned around, I was optimistic enough to hope for the best. Part of the reason why I'd gotten by without detection for so long was the locker's convenient location, right at the foot of a dead-end, L-shaped hallway. There'd been close calls in the past, but the sound of the heavy entry-doors swinging closed had always given me plenty of notice to hide the evidence. The only way someone would be able to sneak up on me was if they'd come out of the fire escape door leading from the pool—and no one used the pool this late in the day.

From the looks of the very-wet guy standing behind me, though, I'd made a fatal miscalculation. Apparently, someone did use the pool this late in the day.

Well, fuck.

I knew him. Or, at least, I knew of him. His name was Alexander Brougham, although I was pretty sure he usually went by Brougham. He was a senior, and good friends with Finn Park, and, by all accounts, one of the hottest seniors at St. Deodetus's.

Up close, it was clear to me said accounts were categorically false.

Brougham's nose looked like it'd been badly broken once, and his navy-blue eyes were opened almost as wide as his mouth, which was an interesting look, because his eyes were kind of bulgy to begin with. Not goldfish-level, but more like a "my eyelids are doing their best to swallow my eyeballs whole" type of bulgy. And, as aforementioned, he was wet enough that his already dark hair looked black, and his T-shirt stuck to his chest in damp, see-through patches.

"Why are you soaking?" I asked, folding my arms behind my back to hide the letters and leaning against locker eighty-nine so it closed behind me. "You look like you fell in the pool."

This was probably one of the few situations where a sopping wet, fully clothed teenager standing in the school hallway an hour after dismissal wasn't the elephant in the room.

He looked at me like I'd said the stupidest thing in the world. Which seemed unfair, given I wasn't the one who was wandering around the school halls literally dripping.

“I didn’t ‘fall in the pool.’ I was swimming laps.”

“With your clothes on?” I tried to shove the letters down the back of my skirt without moving my hands, but that was a more complex task than I’d anticipated.

Brougham surveyed his jeans. I used the brief distraction to ram the letters inside the band of my tights. In hindsight, this was probably never going to go far in convincing him he hadn’t just seen me digging through locker eighty-nine, but until I had a better excuse, denial was all I had.

“I’m not that wet,” he said.

Today was apparently the first time I’d heard Alexander Brougham speak, because until just now I’d had no idea he had a British accent. I understood his wide appeal now: Oriella, my favorite relationship YouTuber, once dedicated a whole video to the topic. People with perfectly good taste in partners historically had their senses addled in the presence of an accent. Setting aside the messiness of which accents were considered sexy in which cultures and why, accents in general were nature’s way of saying, “procreate with that one, their gene code must be varied as fuck.” Few things, it seemed, could turn a person on as quickly as the subconscious realization they almost certainly weren’t flirting with a blood relative.

Thankfully, Brougham broke the silence when I didn’t reply. “I didn’t get time to dry off properly. I’d just finished up when I heard you out here. I thought I might catch the person who runs locker eighty-nine if I snuck through the fire escape. And I did.”

He looked triumphant. Like he’d won a contest I was only now realizing I’d been participating in.

That was, incidentally, my least-favorite facial expression. As of right this moment.

I forced a nervous laugh. “I didn’t open it. I was putting a letter in.”

“I just saw you close it.”

“I didn’t close it. I just banged it a little when I was sliding the, uh . . . the letter inside.”

Cool, Darcy, way to gaslight the poor British student.

“Yeah, you did. Also, you took a pile of letters out of it.”

Well, I’d committed to this enough to shove them down my tights so I might as well follow this through to the end, right? I held my empty hands out, palms up. “I don’t have any letters.”

He actually looked a little thrown. “Where did you . . . I saw them, though.”

I shrugged and pulled an innocent face.

“You . . . did you put them down your stockings?” His tone wasn’t accusing, per se. More “mild, patronizing bafflement,” like someone gently questioning their child on why, exactly, they thought dog food would make a great snack. It only made me want to dig my heels in further.

I shook my head and laughed a little too loudly. “No.” The heat in my cheeks told me my face was betraying me.

“Turn around.”

I leaned against the lockers with a rustle of paper and folded my arms across my chest. The corner of one of the envelopes dug uncomfortably into the back of my hip. “I don’t want to.”

He looked at me.

I looked at him.

Yeah. He wasn’t buying this for a second.

If my brain were functioning properly I would’ve said something to throw him off track, but unfortunately it chose that precise moment to go on strike.

“You are the person who runs this thing,” Brougham said, confidently enough I knew there was no point protesting further. “And I really need your help.”

I hadn’t settled on what I believed would happen if I ever got caught. Mostly because I’d preferred not to worry about it too much. But if you’d forced me to guess what the person catching me would do, I would’ve probably gone for “turning me in to the principal,” or “telling everyone in school,” or “accusing me of ruining their life with bad advice.”

But this? This wasn’t so threatening. Maybe it was going to be okay. I swallowed hard in an attempt to shove the lump in my throat down closer to my thudding heart. “Help with what?”

“With getting my ex-girlfriend back.” He paused, thoughtful. “Oh, my name’s Brougham, by the way.”