

Chapter 1



Graduation is I-want-to-lie-down-on-the-ground boring. It doesn't feel like the end of an era or the entrance into adulthood. Everyone isn't being nice and nostalgic and writing funny things in my yearbook or throwing their caps in the air simultaneously after the best valedictorian speech in the world. Granted, we haven't gotten to the cap part yet, so that may turn out to be true, but the best-speech-in-the-world part is wrong. In fact, I would go so far as to say that the speech being given right this second is the *worst* speech in the history of the world. And I am not just saying that because it's being given by the worst person—Xander Pan, my ex and, as bad luck would have it, the one with whom I'm sharing the co-valedictorian title.

“High school is like a box of chocolates,” he says, and it takes all my strength to not roll my eyes since I'm up on the stage too. “Marcus Price is the chocolate that's gone bad. Remember Donutgate, everyone? Lincoln Holmes is obviously the coconut one—”

Everyone but me bursts into laughter before Xander even finishes the analogy. I don't understand a single one of his references.

That's what happens when you've been dealt a crappy hand in life and spent all your time working two after-school jobs to help your mom keep the lights on. Or studying hard in order to get college scholarships as a possible way out—or up, I should say. Which only makes it more infuriating that this person who tied me for the valedictorian title not only doesn't need it as much as I do, having grown up with two doctors as parents, but has priorities that are, in order, (1) what others think of him, and (2) having fun. When the principal told us we had matching GPAs and I felt like I'd lost a battle, Xander deadpanned, "*What a dream come true to be co-valedictorian with my best friend!*" I sacrificed my free time, so much sleep, and my true passion, art, to chase a title that's just a joke to him.

"Even though you will eventually come to the end of a box of chocolates, the joy it brings can last you a lifetime," he continues.

I swear, someone in the audience dabs their eyes with a tissue.

How does no one else see? That not only is this metaphor terrible but it's all fake, an act, so transparent that they should be seeing through it, not laughing at the cheap jokes or crying at the forced sentimentality. This is why I call him Xander Pander—just in my head, of course—because that's what he does, to everyone.

But I'm the only one who sees him this way. Everybody else? They call him the Whole Package. Not sure if the double entendre is intentional . . . There might be a rumor floating around about it, but I wouldn't know the answer—we dated in ninth grade when we were two shy fourteen-year-olds. I called him Alex then, before he became Xander and somehow elevated himself to a plane no one else in the school could reach. Let alone me, the one they call Encyclopedia Yellow.

The only thing that gets me through the rest of the speech is catching the eye of my best (and only) friend, Valeria Gonzalez. From her place among the G surnames, she and I converse almost telepathically with only facial expressions—the human version of texting solely in emojis.

She begins by scowling at the podium while waving her hand. *Oh my god, what is wrong with Xander, can someone get him out of here?*

I widen my eyes and look at Xander, then up at the sky. *Is there anything more cliché than using the box-of-chocolates metaphor?*

Val points at me, looks through her imaginary box of chocolates, and smiles. *You're the chocolate caramel, my favorite.*

I smile and subtly return her gesture. *You're the dark chocolate, my favorite.*

She distracts me so well that I startle when I hear Xander say my name.

“And Gemma Sun, my co-valedictorian. Yi shan bu rong er hu.”

I clench my fists so hard my fingernails dig tiny crescent moons into my palms. The words sound nice, but they were designed to tear straight into my Achilles' heel.

I'm embarrassed—ashamed, even—of how I don't know Mandarin or basically anything about Chinese culture despite my blood being 100 percent Chinese. And Xander has been rubbing it in since learning my kryptonite during the China unit of World History when I turned red every time the teacher asked me to add extra insight, of which I had none.

“One mountain can't tolerate two tigers,” he translates for the audience and, of course, me. “But we proved them wrong, didn't we?”

Xander looks over to where I'm waiting in my co-valedictorian chair to give my speech after him—of course he got to go first,

curse you, alphabetical order—and he winks at me like we aren’t exes, like we haven’t been enemies throughout most of high school.

“After years of fighting, even mashed-potato fighting”—the other kids in our class laugh, no doubt thinking about that fateful day Xander stole the class-president election from me on popularity alone and Val threw the first fistful of spuds at the back of his head—“it comes down to this. A tie. I guess this particular mountain will have to settle for the two of us. Because it’s over. Today, finally . . .” His grin fills the pause. “We graduate!” he yells, and the entire class whoops and hollers with him.

That opportunistic, infuriating phony. How is he on his way to Harvard after this? That’s right, because he stuck his nose up their ass by creating a summer program with a ridiculous name—TARP, for Taiwanese American Roots Pursuit. All the acronyms in the world and he chose that one.

I’m still seething when Principal McGrail announces, “Thanks, Xander, for the entertaining speech and the perfect segue to my introducing Gemma Sun, co-valedictorian!” That *co* hits my ears like nails on a chalkboard.

I walk up to lackluster applause. The story of my life. Why was Xander’s applause so much louder?

I try to put that out of my mind and focus on the public speaking tips I memorized.

Don’t clear your throat.

Don’t think about how everyone loves Xander.

Don’t breathe too loud.

Don’t think about how Xander always breathes too loud yet somehow the microphone didn’t pick up on it.

Don’t smack your lips between words and sentences.

Don't think about how your hair is probably messy AF but Xander's looks like he's about to be photographed for a magazine.

Everyone is staring at me. *Everyone*. How does Xander thrive in a spotlight this suffocating?

I force a smile. It's creepy, definitely creepy, but I try to own it anyway.

"If high school's like a box of chocolates, then Blue Hill Regional High School is the two-for-one box left on the shelf two weeks after Valentine's Day" is what I think but don't say.

Instead, I read off the printout in front of me. "Principal McGrail, faculty, staff, colleagues, family, what an honor it is to stand before you today."

Then I pause and look up.

Eyes are glazing over; yawns are spreading through the crowd like watercolors in a puddle.

Karma for making fun of Xander's speech sure caught up to me fast. And, I suddenly realize, this is the last time I'll be in Xander's presence. I can't have it end like this, not after years of trying to prove that I'm better, that I don't miss Alex, that I don't care how much our breakup hurt me.

For the first time in my life, I decide to wing it and just be honest.

"I don't know why I'm up here when I haven't figured anything out. I just had less of a life than the rest of you." A few laughs ring out—mostly from Val, I think.

And with those words, it occurs to me that much of my existence up until now has been about getting into a good school and . . . beating Xander. After today, it'll be over. What will be left after that?

I suddenly feel empty.

With no clue of where I'm going with the improv version of my speech, I smooth the printout with one hand and robotically read the rest of what I prepared, my mind blanking as autopilot takes over. Boring is better than wild card.

I finish to—what else?—lackluster applause. As lackluster as Xander's was enthusiastic. Honestly, the amount I get feels like too much for what I delivered.

Xander wins this one. And so what? Who cares? I'm never going to see him again. The idea is both thrilling and confusingly overwhelming.

I sit down in a daze.

Val glances over at me and mouths *fantastic*, then blows a kiss. She's a keeper.

Then the fact that we're going to be headed for opposite coasts next year sinks in. I've been so happy that she got into her top choice, USC, for game development, that I haven't thought about what it would be like for us. Maybe we can sit on video chat non-stop, but that isn't the same as physically being together.

I close my eyes, willing the tears away. I conjure up an image of the pentomino puzzle Val and I are currently stuck on in our latest video game, and thinking through possible solutions calms me.

The rest of graduation is somehow even more boring than the speeches. When else would you ever want to listen to someone read out hundreds of names? The only silver lining as students are called up one by one to receive their diplomas is that a few of them try to have fun with their moment in the sun, doing silly things like throwing confetti, streamers, whatever they could find at home—

even uncooked pasta. And in the case of Noah Jenkins, the class clown, he pretends to flash the crowd, only to be wearing an inflatable He-Man suit beneath his robe.

I yell out Val's name when she's up, though she doesn't need me to. She has her own cheering section that's much louder than shy little ol' me.

Xander athletically glides across the stage with a cadence that implies he's simultaneously confident and also doesn't give a shit. And suddenly I remember why I care so much. It's because he's the worst. It's because after six months of dating (which feels like six years at age fourteen), he accused me of being no fun, then chose a cardboard dog over me. Seriously. We were teammates for the ninth-grade science project, in which we had to keep a ball bearing moving for as long as possible, and while I desperately needed a good grade, he insisted on using a toilet paper tube as a connector that was, of course, accompanied by a three-foot-tall cardboard dog using a toilet next to it. Right before our presentation, I switched it out for a funnel, but he swapped it back. And then, just like I predicted, the toilet paper tube collapsed, preventing our ball bearing from even making it to the back half of our project. My first C, and all because Xander Pander had to be funny. Who cares about grades or our future? We broke up the next period, fighting so loudly that multiple teachers got involved and I was slapped with my first detention to accompany my first broken heart. Then later that week, even though I'd been looking forward to the ninth-grade formal—and especially having Xander as my date—I didn't go, not even to hang out with Val. It hurt too much.

As I watch Xander reach for his diploma, I will him to trip or mix

up which hand grabs it and which shakes Principal McGrail's. But I can't even have that.

When it's my turn, I do not bask in my moment in the sun. I jokingly rationalize it's because I'm always in the sun, being a Sun. As I scurry across the stage, I tell myself it's fine, but it disheartens me that my soundtrack is minimal clapping. Val, Xander, and many other classmates have parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and even cousins here. But it's always been just my mom and me, my father having run when he heard she was pregnant, my grandmother having died in childbirth with my mom, and my grandfather passing away soon after I was born. I love my mother—she's my whole world—but sometimes I wish my world were just a little bit bigger.

When the ceremony finally begins winding down, an unexpected wave of nostalgia floods through me. I've done it. In a few short months, I'm going to Amherst College, an hour and change away from here. And as withered as my heart sometimes feels, today is significant. How did I get this jaded? As much as I don't want to admit it, Xander might be right—maybe I don't know how to have fun. But he doesn't get to judge me when he doesn't know what it's been like. It's impossible to have fun when your home situation forces you to grow up early. But I'm here today, having secured the next step of my future. And I will show him just how fun I can be at the appropriate times—which, mind you, Xander, is not all the time, especially not during a science project.

“Okay, everyone!” Principal McGrail is saying into the mic. “And now we've reached the part of the ceremony where students traditionally throw their caps in celebration.”

I stand, yank my cap off my head, and throw it in the air with

epic exuberance. I've always been scared of whooping—do you actually say the word *whoop* or is it more of a yell?—but I force myself to put my fear aside, and I whoop at the top of my lungs.

My cap arcs in the air beautifully, traveling vertically and horizontally because I pitched it at an angle, and it lands at Xander's feet.

It's Dead. Ass. Silent.

I'm the *only* one who has thrown their cap.

Principal McGrail forces a cough, then continues, "But this year, we won't be doing that in solidarity with Madeline Bridges, who can't take her cap off due to sun sensitivity. Madeline, we are so proud of you for being such a great advocate for alopecia awareness."

Oh no.

Maddy Bridges is trying to hide her face. She didn't ask for this.

Regardless, I look like the asshole. And everyone is glaring at me, as they should, even though it was an honest mistake.

I knew there was a reason I was wary of whooping.

"Sorry, Maddy," I squeak.

And with that, graduation has moved from the Boring category into Most Embarrassing. In my life, it always seems to be one or the other. What I wouldn't give to move this back into Boring.