Rock Bottom Girl

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Bloom Books

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To everyone who faced an Amie Jo in high school.

Also, to anyone I ever Amie Jo-ed, I am so very, very sorry.

Chapter One
Marley

August

This was what rock bottom looked like.

My childhood room—unchanged except for a new duvet—with the same dark green carpet, the same dull yellow walls. The same New Kids on the Block poster I'd defaced with my fourth-grade best friend and a bottle of sparkly purple nail polish.

We'd been too cool to like what everyone else in our class liked.

Yep. That same too-cool elementary school rebel was now thirty-eight, downsized, broken up with, and newly homeless.

I, Marley Cicero, was not winning at life.

My fingers worried at a pill on the peach bedspread while I tried not to think about the fact that everything I owned fit into two suitcases and three cardboard boxes, all tossed in front of the closet where I'd once hidden warm Diet Mountain Dews and pilfered vanilla cigarettes.

I'd given my parents enough of a heads up that they had time to move their winter wardrobe out of the closet and into my sister's old room, which Dad now used as a calligraphy studio. When Zinnia got married, they'd repurposed her bedroom and left mine alone. I had a feeling it was because they knew Zinnia would never return home with a suitcase and a sob story.

My phone signaled a text, and I held the screen up to my face.

Zinnia: Welcome home, sis! Hope Mom and Dad's retirement sex doesn't keep you awake at night.

I sighed, hating the fact that my perfect, brilliant, beautiful sister knew what a gigantic loser I was. I'd text her back later when I was feeling less like roadkill. Rolling my head to the side took the maximum amount of effort I was capable of. The hot pink alarm clock informed me that it was 7:05 p.m. Too early for bed. Too late for me to suddenly become a less ambivalent girlfriend or a better director of social media management at my ex-job.

That left only one thing. Smothering by Harry Potter pillow. Mustering the necessary energy, I rolled and pressed my face to Daniel Radcliffe's.

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There was a quiet knock on my door. I knew that knock. It was the "tread carefully—my teenage daughter is unstable" knock.

"You aren't in there smothering yourself, are you?" Dad asked through the door.

"Mmmph."

Retirement must have made my father braver than he'd been before because I heard the jiggling of the handle no one had bothered to tighten since I moved out sixteen years ago. Sixteen stupid, wasted, crappy, pathetic years.

Okay. Now I was being a little too melodramatic. It was like the room still gave off the fumes of teenage hormones of despair. It was possible they'd seeped into the drywall and carpet, poisoning anyone who entered…like asbestos. Or lead paint.

The mattress shifted under my father's weight as he settled on the edge of the bed.

"The way I see it, you've got two choices, snack cake." I'd earned the nickname due to my insatiable appetite for the delectable little plastic-wrapped desserts. My pre-teens were spent embracing the addiction, and then my teen years and early twenties were mostly focused on battling the hold that processed sugar had on me. Now, just the thought of golden cake and butterscotch icing had my mouth watering all over Harry Potter's face.

"You can either wallow in disappointment—which is a legitimate choice—or you can embrace this change as a reboot of sorts." My father, Ned Cicero, had the voice of a Muppet and was a retired computer engineer. A stereotypical one with plaid, short-sleeved button-downs, and thick glasses. He'd been with the local IBM headquarters for thirty years before retiring last year. You could take the geek out of the cubicle, but you sure as hell couldn't take the cubicle out of the geek.

I lethargically rolled to one side. "Dad, I promise that I'm not going to be one of those adult children that move back home temporarily and then never move back out," I said fervently.

"You can stay as long as you like. Did I mention we're opening my calligraphy studio as an Airbnb?" he asked, shoving his glasses up his nose.

I sat up. That was news. My parents were golfing and calligraphy-ing and now starting an Airbnb. And what was I doing? Nothing. Zip. Zilch. Squat. I'd stay here a month tops. Regroup. Refresh the ol' resume. Try to make the new-job-every-two-years thing look like a benefit. Maybe I'd reconnect with some old friends while I was in town. Okay, maybe not.

I'd land on my feet, dammit. Or at least my hands and knees.

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"I don't know what I'm going to do, Dad. But I'm going to do something," I promised.

He patted my knee in that absent, fatherly kind of way. "Sure you are." It was the kind of parental enthusiasm applied to preschooler statements about becoming astronauts and rock stars.

The door burst open, and my mother exploded into the room. Where Ned was calm and contemplative, Jessica Cicero was an effusive ball of energy. She was excited over everything from the first snowfall of the year to front-load washers with windows. This unusual zest for life had served her well in her former career as a first-grade teacher.

"You are *not* going to believe this, Marley! Fate has intervened," she announced grandly. The plastic bangles on her left wrist clanked against tan skin. She was pretty. And not just for her age. She had lovely blonde hair that she touched up every four weeks and kept cut short in a face-framing bob long enough to pull back into a stub of a ponytail. She had bright blue eyes that crinkled nicely in the corners because she was always laughing or smiling about something.

I'd spent my entire life wishing I could be either the easygoing girl next door like Mom or the beautiful genius like my adopted older sister. Zinnia was born in India and had grown into a woman who could have easily enjoyed a modeling career had she not been so busy winning grants for worthy causes and changing lives.

"Tell us more, my beautiful angel," Ned said, rolling onto his belly and resting his chin in his hands.

I half wished I'd succeeded in the suffocation. Usually my parents' undying affection for each other was like an anchor in the storm. It was something to depend on, something I could always hold up my relationships to like a measuring stick. None of my relationships ever actually measured up to the great love of Ned and Jessica Cicero. And today, that love just reminded me that I was single, jobless, and hopeless.

"Well, I just got off the phone with Lindsay Eccles. You remember her, don't you, Marley? She worked in the front office of the elementary school when you were in sixth grade. Remember how she went back to school and got her principal's certificate? I still say that surprise party was a mistake. We almost gave the poor woman a heart attack…"

This was typical of Mom's stories. They took the scenic route with nary a shortcut and rarely a punchline.

Dad listened, enthralled. I tuned out.

Culpepper, Pennsylvania, took "small town" and made it microscopic. As much as I

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would have liked to pretend that I had no idea who Lindsay Eccles was, I was inundated with the unfairly high-definition memory of Mrs. Eccles holding back my hair while I enthusiastically vomited in the trash can behind the front desk in the school's office during the flu outbreak of 1992.

"Anyway," Mom said, taking a deep breath. It was the signal that she was coming to her point. "She told me that Miss Otterbach just turned in her resignation this morning! She and her girlfriend are getting married and moving to New Hampshire to be closer to their family."

My mother paused and looked expectantly.

"Uh. Good for them?" South Central Pennsylvania had come a long way since I'd grown up here. It was no longer the talk of the town to be a lesbian school teacher. But I still didn't know what Miss Otterbach becoming Mrs. Otterbach had to do with me.

"More like good for *you*! It turns out the high school is in desperate need for a phys. ed. teacher *and* girls soccer coach!"

My dad's feet quit swinging behind him.

"I didn't know Miss Otterbach was the soccer coach."

"She wasn't," Mom said, glossing over whatever she was hiding with a bright smile. Dad cleared his throat. He was picking up what my mother was putting down while I was still miles behind them both.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"She offered you the job, silly!"

"Me?"

Mom nodded, her eyes bright. "Preseason starts in two days. School in two weeks. Aren't you over-the-moon thrilled?"

My mom doled out equal enthusiasm for all things. For instance, Zinnia's straight A+ report cards and my solid Bs—with the occasional C—both received top billing on the refrigerator and a standing ovation from my mother. It made me feel like a bit of a cheerleading charity case.

"I don't have a teaching certificate," I argued. "And I haven't touched a soccer ball in over a decade." High school had been the bane of my existence. I had not thrived in the captivity of Culpepper Junior/Senior High. I had rebelled and complained and limped my way through the minefields of popularity, academic achievements, and athletic accomplishment. None of those

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had I any actual personal experience with. At least, not until senior year when I briefly dated Mr. Popularity and temporarily rose out of the middle of the pack only to be brutally slapped back down.

"It's just for the semester until they can find a permanent replacement. You'd basically be a long-term substitute. The state has emergency contingencies in the case of open teaching positions since they started slashing pay and closing programs. There's a shortage, you know."

Before she could launch into her "sorry state of affairs in education" speech, I held up a hand. "I don't understand. How did Principal Eccles even know I was home?"

"Oh, I have a weekly lunch date with some of my school friends."

"And you told them I was moving home?"

Mom nodded cheerfully. *Great. So all of Culpepper was now aware that the girl permanently banned from Culpepper Homecoming festivities was back, single, and broke.*

"I really don't know anything about gym class or coaching," I reminded her.

"You can learn anything you put your mind to," my mother insisted.

"Let's go out and kick the ball around," Dad chimed in. "You can talk it through with me and wake up some muscle memory." He bounced off the bed and clapped his hands in anticipation.

With great reluctance, I dragged myself away from the safety of my mattress. I could always say no. I could just hunker down, lick my wounds, and start applying for jobs anywhere but here. I could do that.

"I hope you don't mind, but I told them you'd take the job," Mom said brightly.

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Chapter Two
Marley

While Dad be-bopped into the backyard shed—a dusty, spider-filled museum to my childhood—looking for a soccer ball, I sat on the porch steps and dragged on my sneakers.

It was hot. Pennsylvania mid-August humidity hot. The air was thick enough that it felt like sitting in a bland, nostalgic stew. The fence needed a new coat of paint, but the same trees that I'd climbed and fallen out of as a kid were still there. The same garden beds were still as neglected as they had been since Mom's 1988 homegrown everything experiment. The red brick patio that I'd scraped my knees open on more times than I could count still cut a jagged swath through the green sod.

Stepping into the backyard was like traveling back in time to when I was eight. Except I was thirty years older. My dreams were dead. And I didn't even own cleats or shin guards anymore. Did coaches need those? Or did they just stand on the sideline yelling as mine had? Were the rules the same? Or had the game evolved into something different with the viral popularity of Abby Wambach and David Beckham?

There was no way I could do this.

"Heads up!" The ball landed with a definitive thud in front of me. It didn't bounce. "Guess it needs a little air," Dad noted, jogging toward me with a bicycle pump in one hand.

He was wearing cycling shorts, leftovers from his three-month spin class obsession. He'd had trouble settling on a new hobby since retirement.

"What?" he asked as he pumped.

"I can't get used to your mustache."

He patted the furry caterpillar above his lip with pride. It was another post-retirement hobby: facial hair growing. "Think I'm going to try a goatee next."

"Can't wait."

He gave the ball a poke. "Nice and firm."

I tried not to watch him handle the ball while he said that. Dad had an uncanny knack for saying inappropriate things without ever trying.

"I seem to recall you were quite adept at juggling balls in high school, snack cake," he

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said cheekily. “Let’s see if you still remember how.”

“Jesus, Dad. Listen to yourself.” But he was already scampering to the back of the yard.

We kicked the ball and the idea of me being a temporary teacher and coach around.

“What if my team loses every game?” I asked.

“They won one game last season, and that was because the other team’s bus got stuck in the traffic when the cattle escaped the auction. It was a forfeit. I don’t think the district is looking for a winning season.”

“But where do I even begin? Practice starts in two days.”

Dad shrugged and kicked at the ball like he was a puppet with wooden joints. His athletic experience had been deferred in favor of the AV Club during his high school career. “What did your coaches have you do during preseason?”

“I don’t know. Run until I hated running?”

“There you go. We can start there,” he said, winding up for a kick and missing the ball completely.

I laughed. I couldn’t help myself. He didn’t have an athletic bone in his body, but that didn’t stop him from wanting to support me. I didn’t deserve him, but I wasn’t willing to let that get in my way of appreciating him.

“We can look on the internet after dinner,” he suggested. “You can learn anything online.”

“Mmm. What about teaching? I don’t even know what a gym teacher does besides stand around creepily while students change and then make everyone play volleyball from November to May.”

I was by no means in the best shape of my life. Adulthood had taken its toll in the form of happy hours and sodium-laden convenience foods and no time for the gym. I was dehydrated and low on sleep. My shape was soft, round. And I lost my air with a flight of stairs.

“Dad, I don’t think I can do this. It doesn’t make any sense. I’ve been working in health care and data mining. Not sports and fitness.” I kicked the ball back to him.

He tripped over it and face-planted on the grass. I jogged to his side and pulled him up. “Maybe we should continue this discussion over beers. While sitting,” I suggested, picking his glasses off the ground.

“Sounds like a safer plan,” he agreed.

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There was a loud, strangled honk from the neighbor's fence. I yelped. "What the hell was that?" I was already out of breath just from kicking the ball around. Surprises could explode my already over-taxed heart.

"Dang swan," Dad said without any heat.

"Swan? Did you say 'swan'?"

The honk sounded again.

"Amie Jo thought their yard needed an exotic touch," he said, limping toward the back porch.

Oh, no. No no no no no. Not her. Not the monster from my past.

"Amie Jo Armburger?" I asked as nonchalantly as the lump of dread in my throat would allow.

"Hostetter now," Dad corrected me. "She and her husband, Travis, bought the house next door a few years ago. Tore it down and rebuilt it from the ground up."

My entire senior year came rushing back to me so quickly I got vertigo. Travis Hostetter. Amie Jo Armburger. And I couldn't think of either one of them without remembering Jake Freaking Weston.

This was why I moved away. Why I rarely came home. And when I did, I didn't make it a big thing. I wore a baseball cap out in public. I refused to go to any local bars or Walmart. I pretended to be a stranger.

"Amie Jo and Travis live next door?" I clarified weakly.

Dad, oblivious to my instantaneous panic, jogged up the back steps. "Yep! I'll grab us a couple of brewskis and check on dinner."

The back door closed, and suddenly I wanted nothing more than to peer over the fence and see what kind of castle the Prom King and Queen had built. It was stupidity and curiosity that had me running at the seven-foot-tall, peeling-paint barrier. My sneakers scrambled for grip as my biceps screamed. I was able to haul my eyeballs above the fence just long enough to catch a glimpse of a huge kidney-shaped in-ground pool surrounded by what looked like white marble. There was a raised hot tub spewing a waterfall of color-changing water back into the pool. The porch had Roman columns holding up the two-story roof.

"A fucking outdoor kitchen and a tiki bar? Are you kidding me?" I groaned.

"Mom! Some lady is spying on us!" The shout came from the direction of the pool, and I

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realized there were people in the water. Two of them. Towheaded teens with surfer dude haircuts lounging on rafts the size of small islands.

"Shit. Shit. Shit."

I dropped to the ground, ducked—for unknown reasons as I was currently blocked from view by the fence—and ran to the gate. I slipped through into my parents' front yard and stared up at the modern monstrosity McMansion that I'd missed when I'd pulled in the driveway on the other side of the house.

Stately red brick, more white columns, and what looked like a cobblestone driveway. All behind a wrought iron fence that clearly stated that only a certain kind of visitor was welcome. There was a freaking fountain in the front yard. Not just one of those understated cement jobs you could get at Lowe's or Home Depot.

No. This had statues in it. Naked ones spitting water at each other.

Honk!

"Oh my fucking God!" I clutched my hands to my heart and jumped a foot off the ground.

A swan waddled past on the other side of the fence, casting a derisive look in my direction. Was it an attack swan? Had it been trained in the art of home defense? Would it swoop over the fence and start pecking at me? Could swans fly?

I had many questions.

The front door of the mega mansion opened, and a man stepped out onto the porch. Even twenty years later and from one hundred feet away, I still recognized him. Travis Hostetter. His blond hair was cut shorter than it had been in high school, but the easy gait, the set of those shoulders was the same. His head swiveled in my direction, and I did the only thing that made sense.

I bolted.

I turned and ran for my parents' front door, diving over the hedgerow of azaleas. Catching my foot on one, I landed hard on mulch and concrete. The wind left my lungs, and all I could do was stare up at the sky and listen to the rumble of the Cadillac Escalade next door as it backed down the driveway.

I'd made a huge mistake coming back here.

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