

The  
**Rival**



*Emma Lord*



WEDNESDAY BOOKS  
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## Chapter One

“Why do you sound like you’re being chased by a zombie horde?” Christina asks in mild alarm.

“McLaren Hall,” I gasp into my phone. “Where is it?”

“Uh—I’m assuming not where you are?”

I can count the number of times I have been late on one finger. The day I was born—end of list. Ever since I came into the world a week overdue, I have been so reliably on time that I wouldn’t be surprised if clocks started resetting themselves around me.

Turns out I’m making up for it now, because I’m not just late, but *late*.

Thankfully, Christina’s gorgeously manicured nails are clacking on her keyboard on the other end of the line, where she is no doubt still starfished on her bed in our dorm where I left her ten minutes ago. “So there’s a McLaren Hall and a McLaren Hall II across the street from it. Do you know which one you’re looking for?”

No, because it did not occur to me that somewhere in the universe there exists a college campus architect nefarious or lazy enough to do such a thing. “Shit shit,” I squeak.

“According to my good friend the internet, the zine meeting is in the OG McLaren, which is the one next to the fountain,” Christina informs me.

I do an absurd pivot like I’m auditioning for a musical, finally spotting the fountain across the street from me. “Angel human,” I wheeze gratefully. “Goddess among mortals.”

“Okay but like. Sadie. Take a beat, okay?”

“I’m out of beats,” I say, looking both ways for cars and booking it across the street. “I’m so late I have negative beats to take.”

“It’s an interest meeting, those always start late. And this is like—your big dream zine, right? You can’t go in there looking frazzled.”

“I’m not—” I glance down at myself and see that not only is one of my sneakers untied but my carefully chosen floral blue first-day-of-college dress has pit stains deeper than most emotions. The first building I was trying to get into was locked at every entrance, but that sure didn’t stop me from sprinting multiple laps around it to make sure. “*That* frazzled looking,” I concede.

“One beat,” Christina insists.

I take a breath and stare at the wide brick building, a small thrill working its way up my spine—not fear, but anticipation. I earned this opportunity. Every test I pulled all-nighters studying for, every school newspaper deadline I raced the clock to meet, all so I could get into Maple Ride University and have a chance to try my hand at getting a staff position on *Newsbag*, arguably the most famous college zine in the country.

Maybe I should be scared. It’s taken me years to get this close to the thing I want most, but now I have to prove myself all over again.

“You’re at your dream school. You’re finally away from your family drama. You’re hot as hell and have the best roommate in the world.” I roll my eyes at Christina’s pep talk but bite down a

grin. “And you—how did you phrase it? ‘Vanquished your nemesis at long last.’”

By “nemesis” she means Sebastian Adams, whose favorite and only hobby growing up was one-upping me at every turn. It only got worse in high school when we both clearly took an interest in journalism. I’d get the editor position on the school paper, but he’d become the school’s most beloved writer. Seb would get a coveted recommendation from our recluse of an English teacher, and I would win the year-end student departmental award. The competition was so absurd that we started competing in every other way we could, forcing the school to declare the first-ever tie for salutatorian—our GPAs and mutual accomplishments were such a dead tie that nobody could decide who won.

But I broke the cycle. I got into Maple Ride. Seb didn’t.

I breathe back out, decidedly grounded again. “You’re right,” I say, nodding into the phone. “Thanks. You’re right.”

And she is. At least until five seconds later, when a boy rounds the corner at top speed, lets out a surprised, “Shit, sorry, shit!” before colliding right into me, depositing half his smoothie on my human form.

Naturally, I open my mouth to say “sorry” right back, a reflexive smile already poised on my lips. Avoiding conflict is quite literally in my DNA. Or at least I assume it is, since my sisters seem to have absorbed all the conflict-creating genes, leaving me to play family peacekeeper more often than not.

But then I glance up into the wide, apologetic brown eyes directly in front of mine and realize this is not just any boy. This is the aforementioned archnemesis, looking distinctly unvanquished in the late August sun.

“Sadie!”

A grin cracks across Seb’s face—that trademark wide-open-sky one that somehow only got more dazzling in the last few days.

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There's a dusting of new freckles on his newly tanned skin, and his dark-brown hair is even more tousled than usual, like it's still salty from the beach trip I know he took this past weekend. He looks like he should be recruited for a billboard for an all-inclusive, family-friendly resort.

Unfortunately for Seb, I'm immune to every inch of it.

"What, no hello hug?" he asks, extending his arms out in a gesture made more absurd by the fact that he is also now covered in smoothie.

In lieu of answering him I stare briefly up at the sky as if it's going to explain to me why Seb Adams is two feet in front of me instead of clear across Virginia at Blue Ridge State University. Unsurprisingly, it does not answer. Worse still, when I lower my head, Seb is still standing there.

"I really am sorry," he says, reaching out as if he's going to help with the disaster zone that is my dress and clearly thinking the better of it. "Shit. I got you good."

I sigh. At least the smoothie will distract from the pit stains. "What on earth are you doing here?" I demand.

"Enriching my young mind. Widening my cultural horizons. Trying to figure out where I'm going to drink tonight." He looks me up and down again, slower this time—apology mingled with mischief. "You should wear green more often. It suits you."

"You should shut your mouth more often. It suits *you*," I say, plucking what remains of the smoothie from his hand.

I take an experimental sip. Something with banana. It's not half-bad.

"This is mine now," I inform him, knocking the remaining inch of green goop back.

Seb's grin is back in its usual insufferably effortless way, but his eyes linger, widening with surprise. "You got a haircut."

More like a hair eviction. Two days ago when my parents

dropped me off I had strawberry-blond locks that fell to my waist. Now they're ten inches shorter and curling up so aggressively in the humidity that I'm pretty sure this lob thinks it's a bob. Not that it really matters—the cut was less about vanity and more of a “lean into a full main-character cliché” of shaking off my old hair and my past right along with it.

But now the past is upsettingly present, in the form of Seb saying “It's very you.”

I have no idea what the hell *that's* supposed to mean, but that doesn't stop my face from flushing. I use it as motivation to move faster.

“So where are you headed?” Seb asks.

Maybe if I just keep walking he'll disappear. He's just a panic mirage, is all. The ghost of academic rivals past.

“Apparently hell, if you're here.”

“Satan does make a killer smoothie.” Seb gestures at the backpack slung over his shoulder. “I've got a sweater in here you can borrow.”

I'm too fixated on Seb following me into the building to consider the offer. “I've got a one-way ticket out of my sight you can keep.”

“I hope you can get a decent refund, then,” says Seb, taking a few quick paces ahead of me to open the door. “I just moved all my stuff into my dorm.”

He's holding open the door for me, but I've suddenly forgotten how to pass through it, like a vampire that needs to be invited in.

“I am begging you to unsay every single one of those words.”

Seb leans in close, his hand braced on the door. He smells the way he always does—a salty honey sweetness. Equal parts nostalgia, irritation, and something loud and warm in me that doesn't deserve any kind of name.

“No can do,” he tells me, with enough glee that I know he imagined this moment long before now. “I got off the waitlist. You’re looking at a fellow Maple Ride Sweetie,” he says, referring to our school mascot.

I close my eyes. The thing is I am largely a good person. I dutifully babysit Christina’s pet rat Blorbo every summer she goes on her annual family trip, despite clear evidence of him needing an exorcism. I eat all of my mom’s alarmingly crunchy mashed potatoes on Thanksgiving with a smile on my face. I even managed to remain cordial with our next-door neighbor Pat when she said she “wasn’t that big of a fan of Harry Styles.”

All of which is to say, I cannot think of one thing I have done in the eighteen years of my Seb-addled existence to deserve this fate.

Seb’s voice is close to my ear and wry as ever. “Please, Sadie. Try to contain your joy. I’m embarrassed.”

My eyes pop open, right into his smug, tanned face. “When did this even happen?”

His eyes brighten. “Two days ago. Plot twist, right?”

I’m too dumbstruck to move, but Seb makes himself useful for once by settling his hand on the small of my back and nudging me forward. I surge ahead out of his reach, and just like that I’m snapping back into a familiar pattern: I best Seb and he bests me right back. It’s second nature, like riding a bike or periodically asking Blorbo to please not curse my family line.

But there was never a moment I entertained this particular scenario in the ongoing saga of “Sadie versus Seb.” Maple Ride has historically only ever let in one student from our high school each year. As in, one of us had a shot at *Newsbag*, and the other was old news.

“Since this is a waking nightmare that’s only getting worse

by the minute, I assume you're *also* here for the interest meeting," I say.

Seb is a half pace behind me now, the two of us following a neon-pink sign taped to the wall that says NEWSBAG NEWSBAG THIS WAY!! with a badly drawn arrow. "Still sharp as ever."

"Aren't you majoring in engineering?" I demand.

Seb's head tilts to meet my eye. "Yes, but surprisingly, I'm still allowed to have hobbies."

"Is your hobby ruining my otherwise perfectly decent life?"

"Aw. I've missed this," says Seb, gesturing at the air between us.

My nostrils flare. "It's been seventy-two hours."

Seb's pace slows, and I can't help stopping, too. It's an annoying magic trick of his, how you can't help naturally wanting to do whatever Seb is doing. He's got the kind of magnetism that makes parents say things like "If all your friends jumped off a bridge, would you?" It's my theory as to why his Instagram account Adams' Apples is so popular—sure, the ridiculous memes and TikToks he rounds up for it are funny, but don't get half as many likes as when he posts a photo of himself being goofy and hot. Seb turned himself into a damn billboard for wholesome internet nonsense.

Which is to say, I respect that Seb uses this power of his for good, not evil, but right now he is using it to make us perilously late.

"No, I mean *this*." His eyes may be smug but his smile has gone soft at the edges. "The real Sadie."

I point at my banana-clad self. "This is the angry Sadie."

His smile quirks back up like it's on a fishing line, and as usual I can't help feeling caught in it. "Whatever you say."

He reaches up unexpectedly then, his hand just under my



chin, his thumb warm just under my lip. Despite our lateness I go entirely still, like he's accidentally pressed a small nerve that's radiating all over my body.

"You've got a little something," he says, swiping his thumb across what must be a splatter of smoothie still on my chin.

The brown of his eyes flecks the barest of gold where the late-summer light is streaming in through the window. I blink but don't pull my face away.

"No," I say. "I've got a big something. A five-foot-ten something I can't seem to shake off. And if you think you've got a shot of getting a staff position over me, I will make it a personal mission to shave a few of those inches off."

Seb pulls his hand off my face, slowly and deliberately. Every now and then we get into each other's space like we're playing a game of chicken. Like we have to prove how little of an effect we have on each other.

I know we don't. My heart is only hammering because I'm stunned to see him. My skin is only tingling because yet again I've let him get under it. But still, these are the only times in our lifelong competition that I'm never sure who wins.

"Or maybe we could both get staff positions, bury the hatchet, and work together in peace and harmony at last."

His eyes are glinting again, the way they always do right before we're about to try and mercilessly decimate each other. The way they did before he won the school spelling bee after I fumbled the word "coccyx" in fifth grade. The way they did before I laid his mock-debate strategy to ruin in AP Lang junior year. The way they did the day we were supposed to get our admission decisions back from Maple Ride, and my email ended up a whole lot longer than his.

I straighten up my spine and smooth out my dress. "That's a

cute little self-insert fan fiction you've written for us. Maybe you can submit it for your first piece."

He's laughing softly as he opens the door to the classroom, which is mercifully full of chattering students who don't even look up at our lateness. I do a quick scan, unsurprised not to recognize anybody save for the two people at the front of the room. One is an upperclassman half draped on a desk and looking effortlessly cool in a pair of drawstring sweatpants, a bright-pink crop top, and a row of fruit-shaped earrings popping from the dark skin of her ear. The other pale lanky upperclassman is sitting upright on a stool typing into a laptop, clad in a white T-shirt tucked into a pair of jeans so crisp they look ironed, rocking black combat boots and matte black-painted fingernails. They can only be Amara and Rowan, the coeditors of *Newsbag*, whose articles I've been diligently reading since they became staff writers when they were freshmen themselves.

"Oh, shit," I murmur to myself, because this just got *real*.

"Hmm?"

I nearly jolt. For two blissful seconds I had forgotten about the Seb of it all. Naturally, he's already slipping into the chaos of the room with the same ease he's had pretty much since the day he was born. I would know—I met Seb at the ripe age of three days old, when my mom plopped me into his bassinet. See, the frosting on the "I can't stand Seb Adams" cake is that our dads were best friends growing up, then married two women who became *best* best friends, and somehow this culminated in them moving into identical houses next door to each other in our small town and having weddings and kids within days of each other.

As a result I have more early pictures and videos of myself with Seb in the frame than not. Baby Seb and Sadie getting pushed around the block in identical strollers for our dads'

Sunday-morning eighties pop-themed jogs. Toddler Seb and Sadie trying to yank the beard off an unsuspecting mall Santa's face. Kindergarten Seb and Sadie running around the town's Fourth of July parade scooping up candy thrown from the floats, the two of us wordlessly swapping his Twix for my Skittles, his Reese's for my Sour Patch Kids.

Safe to say that none of those versions of us would recognize the two mortal enemies side-eyeing each other in this room today.

"Oh yikes," says Rowan, taking in the sight of our smoothie carnage. "I'm scared to ask."

Amara evidently isn't, her dark eyes widening as she glances between us. "Did we miss a rave at Jamba Juice?"

I'm not expecting it to hit me sideways, the strangeness of seeing the two of them in real life after reading their work for three years. Amara especially, because I've read every single word she's published in *Newsbag*. She writes the gut-bustingly hilarious "Maple Mishaps" column from the perspective of Sweetie, a made-up student at Maple Ride who keeps accidentally stumbling into the most absurd gossip the school has to offer, like an undergraduate Amelia Bedelia. Amara is the kind of quick, understated, biting funny that's headed for sitcom writing rooms or the *SNL* stage.

Then there's Rowan, who made a name for themselves before they even got to Maple Ride by writing for *Newsbag* as a high school correspondent, chronicling the absurd lengths students were going to in the overly competitive admissions process. (I wish I could say I didn't buy into it, but the mountain of SAT study guides under my bed say otherwise.) They wrote about the school's policies with a lens so critical that everyone reading was holding their breath to see if they'd get in, and when they did they were offered a coveted staff position at *Newsbag* on the spot. They've been writing the more hard-hitting topical pieces about the school and larger community ever since, and manage to do a

ton of freelancing for major websites on the side to boot. At the rate they're going, it's only a matter of graduating before they're hosting an NPR podcast or launching an edgy site of their own.

Seb shifts his weight between his feet, clearly giving me the space to answer first. I'd appreciate it, except then something utterly ridiculous happens: I freeze. It's like I've imagined being in this room in front of these writers I've idolized for so long that there's no room in my brain to process it in reality.

"Well," I start, certain that if I get that far, the other words will follow.

The other words that follow are, unfortunately, *shit. Shit shit shit*. Because the thing is, I'm not like Seb, who's so charming he could walk into a bank heist and make friends with everyone in the room. I am only a medium amount of charming, which is doing precisely nothing for me right now.

Then Seb's head tilts beside me, a silent but familiar signal. Not to rescue me, but to decide between our well-established modes of being. There's Parental Mode, which is when we're mildly polite to each other, even downright thoughtful, in front of our families. There's School Mode, where we're absolute parodies of Best Friends Ever, nearly sickening half the student body with how well we get along.

This situation feels like it's outside of both those universes, but in my panic, School Mode prevails.

"Seb and I are from the same high school, so we wanted to match in solidarity," I say, easing into our old rhythm but shooting Seb a wide smile that he knows to interpret as *The instant we're out of here I'm going to figure out a way to launch you into the sun*.

Seb beams back at me with *Not if I get you on the first ship to Mars* eyes and says, "I don't pull it off half as well as Sadie does, though."

Amara's brows twitch in amusement as she catches my eye.

That's when I realize we may have slipped too close to our third and rarest mode: Lawless Mode, when we're safe to drop the friendship facade and let the claws out.

But if Amara happened to see those claws, we're interrupted by some sympathetic laughter before she can say anything.

Most of the nerves are rattled out of me as we all start to take our seats. At least they are until Rowan slouches against the desk at the front of the room, pauses for effect, and says ominously, "Welcome to what may very well be the last *Newsbag* meeting in history."

Amara bats them lightly on the back of the head. "Don't scare the baby starfishes."

"They're in a polluted, underfunded ocean now," says Rowan. "They were going to learn soon enough."

Amara seamlessly reaches for the front pocket of Rowan's jeans to liberate the pack of bright-pink gum poking out. "What my favorite cynic here is trying to say is that the school has been less than generous with funding as of late."

"Funding we need for the web domain, for printing, for the faculty member who"—Rowan makes a big show of peering around the distinctly faculty-free classroom—"oversees' us and approves our drafts before they go to print."

Amara pops a piece of gum into her mouth. "Anyway, scratch all that and pretend we started this meeting like normal humans. Hi. I'm Amara. I use she/her pronouns and I'm coeditor of *Newsbag* with this nerd, who I am incidentally dating, despite their inability to start a single conversation without griping about capitalism."

Rowan raises their eyebrows at her gamely. "That would make me Rowan, they/them pronouns, fellow coeditor. And to be fair, I occasionally start conversations by talking about cats."

They both launch into the legacy of *Newsbag* then, which I tune

out only because I know it all and then some. It started back in the seventies as what I can only describe as prehistoric *Gossip Girl*, essentially rounding up funny and scandalous news on campus and getting everyone's bell-bottoms in a twist. It evolved over the decades to include other sections and become the larger, somewhat chaotically organized zine it is today, but what really put *Newsbag* on the map—enough that they're well known far beyond the reach of campus—was the writing talent. They've been selective from the start, only taking on the funniest, edgiest, and most innovative writers the campus has to offer.

In other words: bad news for a very large chunk of the “baby starfishes” in this room.

“We have one spot open this year for a new staff writer,” Rowan tells us. “We're always willing to consider outside pieces, but those would be on a case-by-case basis—only staff members get guaranteed stories in each edition and get their names printed on the masthead.”

What they're not saying: only staff members get to put this on their college résumé and use the name recognition of *Newsbag* to open all kinds of doors after graduation. Doors to internships at quippy websites like Hub Seed and Fizzle, or assistant positions in newsrooms and publishing houses, or chances with podcast producers willing to work with newbies, because *that's* how well known *Newsbag* is in the outside world. This zine may be small and campus-oriented, but its alums are notorious.

And if I play my cards right, I could be one of them. I could get my own start in comedy, and open a door to a world that sometimes feels so impossible for me to fit into that I haven't told a single person other than Christina about it.

A world that just got a Seb-shaped obstacle planted right in front of it.

“An email will go around with more details, but basically

we'll have three themed assignments for you over the course of the next few weeks," Rowan explains. "We'll have a point system for ranking, and the winner of each challenge will get their piece published in the next edition of the zine."

It's not just me leaning forward like an animal at a very dry watering hole, but every single freshman in the room.

"That said, all our meetings are open," Amara adds. "You'll find that to be the case with all the student-run orgs here. We are all extremely wacky and deeply underfunded and have to stick together to survive. So everyone is welcome, all the time always, even if you're not on staff. Even if you're not competing for a spot."

"Even if you're just here for vibes," says Rowan.

They give a brief overview of the challenges then: one that focuses on student organizations on campus, another on student relationships, and a third that Amara describes as "a giant question mark! Go ham! Or the vegetarian alternative of your choice!" and Rowan clarifies as "an original idea of your own, something we haven't already done in *Newsbag*."

"Sign-up sheets are in the back, but you have until the end of the week to decide if you want to join the fray," adds Amara. "And on that note, we made you all some 'sorry we're about to put you through it' cookies back there, too. We've got the room until the end of the hour, so feel free to hang out. Mingle with the competition. Start a local *Hunger Games* chapter."

"Could you maybe wait until *after* I get into law school to incriminate yourself?" asks Rowan wryly.

Seb lingers, casting his eyes toward me as people start milling out of their seats, but I pointedly ignore him. I've had eighteen years of my fill of Seb, and I came here to make new, well, frenemies, for the time being. I stand and do a quick scan of the room to assess the rest of the competition, but that's a difficult thing to do when an entire person is suddenly cutting right through

your line of sight to say loudly, “Wait, shit. You’re that kid from Adams’ Apples, aren’t you?”

Ah, yes. The one scene in the movie of my life that keeps accidentally skipping back like a glitch. I already know the script. An Instagram follower makes a big deal out of seeing Seb out in the wild. Seb is his usual embarrassed self about it, reminding everyone he doesn’t actually *make* the memes, just curates them after getting permission from the creators, but nobody’s listening by then because Seb has a chronic case of “everyone wants to be my best friend” that has no cure in sight.

Except this time the script changes. Because this time, Rowan and Amara overhear the commotion, and their interest is clearly piqued.

Within the next minute Seb has beaten out Amara’s cookies as the most interesting thing in the room. Amara has her phone out looking up the account; Rowan is wondering out loud about *Newsbag*’s failed attempt at an Instagram years back and curious if they should give it another go; and Seb is holding court with a crew of freshmen so fascinated they don’t even have the common sense to realize that if we really are in a polluted ocean, he’s the friendly dolphin about to eat them all alive.

It hits me then, the full magnitude of it: Seb isn’t just here, but *here*. Another four years of competing neck and neck, exhaustingly matched in everything except for this one contest I always lose: the popularity one. I may have plenty of friends, but you could put Tom Hanks and Seb in a room of strangers and Seb would still win out every time.

And judging from the belly laughs Seb’s already gotten from half a dozen strangers, I won’t even be in this race long enough to lose.

“Dark-chocolate cherry with sea salt. Damn. They really outdid themselves this time.”



I blink. I've migrated toward the cookies and the sign-up sheet, and now there's a cookie in my hand, courtesy of the stranger who just spoke to me. *Introduce yourself*, says the rational part of my brain. *Get the fuck out of here and scream so loudly into a pillow that the cheap stuffing explodes*, says the much louder part of it.

The only sound way to neutralize them is to take a giant bite of cookie. It is, in fact, delicious, and snaps me out of my thought spiral long enough to acknowledge the boy who gave it to me with a quick thanks.

"Do you think you're going to try out?"

If he says something else, I don't hear it past another kid wandering to the sign-up sheet. "Well, damn. If Seb Adams is in the running, we're all screwed."

"Yeah, no shit," says someone back.

I blink again and I'm back in the spiral—back to countless student-newspaper meetings, where everyone hung on Seb's every word and resented me for editing their pieces. Back to junior high, when classmates started to not-so-casually ask me to ask Seb if he might want to go out with them sometime. Back to the year we turned four, and my own *infant sister* would cry for Seb over me.

The boy shifts his weight between his feet, waiting for an answer. I should give one. I'm the master not just of smoothing over awkward situations but avoiding them at all costs. Apparently I hit my limit on that approximately ten seconds ago, because all I manage to do is blurt, "I've gotta go."

And that's precisely what I do. I take my fancy cookie and bolt for the door.

"Sadie?"

I don't stop at the sound of Seb's voice or the unmistakable

concern in it. I was wrong to say there were three modes between me and Seb, because there's a fourth persistent one that's louder than all of them combined: the one where Seb perpetually wrecks my damn life.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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