

DISTRESS SIGNAL

MARY E. LAMBERT



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graders are on a camping trip to the Chiricahua wilderness, but the trip seems
cursed from the start, and when a flash flood splits the group up Lavender finds
herself lost, together with her former best friend Marisol, mean-girl Rachele, and a
boy John who has been behaving like a surly jerk since the start—they have only one
pack of supplies and only the most basic wilderness knowledge, but if they are to
survive they need to put their differences aside and work as a team or all that will
be left of them are their sun-bleached bones.

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It all started the night of the spring concert.

Looking around, Lavender thought everything was perfect. The stage was decorated with flower garlands of brightly colored tissue paper made by the fifth and sixth graders. In their black-and-white outfits, the choir members looked *sharp*. “No pun intended,” John Johnson said when he overheard Lavender say so. Lavender cracked up, but her best friend, Marisol, didn’t even smile.

The bake sale was a huge success. John was running the booth at the back of the auditorium with Amy Wright, and they were sold out of everything but oatmeal raisin cookies. Mrs. Henderson, the sixth-grade teacher, told Lavender that they’d

raised \$279 so far. That, plus the money from their previous fundraisers, would be enough to buy a really nice new telescope for the science campout.

As Lavender took her place on the risers, she couldn't stop smiling. She was in select choir with Marisol, and Lavender couldn't be prouder that her best friend was the soloist. Everyone agreed Marisol wasn't just the best singer in the sixth grade: She was the best singer in the entire school. Probably in the whole state of Arizona.

Mrs. Jacobson raised her baton, and everyone stood a little straighter. Lavender took a deep, deep breath, inhaling until she could practically taste the air . . . and regretted it immediately. The multipurpose room was layered with the stale smell of fish sticks and tartar sauce from that afternoon's lunch, the lingering odor of sweat and volleyballs from that day's PE classes, mixing with the strong scent of fresh coffee, which the PTO was providing for concert attendees. It was a terrible combination. Worst of all, some sixth graders hadn't started wearing deodorant yet, and they really needed it.

Lavender forced herself not to gag. To her surprise, the music teacher was less successful. When Mrs. Jacobson inhaled with the singers, the color

drained from her cheeks. As the first notes of the song played, Lavender saw the conductor's baton slip from Mrs. Jacobson's fingers. The teacher clamped both hands over her mouth and dashed for the nearest exit.

Behind her, Lavender heard Rachelle whisper, "I *told* you she's going to have a baby. She's friends with my mom. We've known about it for weeks."

Only Rachelle could be smug at a time like this. Didn't she realize that their entire concert was about to unravel like the Apollo 13 mission? Marisol's solo was supposed to be the highlight of the evening, but unless someone took action, the only thing anyone would remember was that Mrs. Jacobson barfed into a trash can.

There were only seconds left in the song intro. The choir was about to miss their cue. The song would be ruined. Marisol would never perform the solo that she'd been practicing for weeks. Last Saturday, she hadn't even been able to hang out with Lavender because she was working on her piece. This song meant the world to Marisol.

Houston, we have a problem.

Someone had to do something.

Lavender elbowed her way between the snickering

tenors until she was standing in front of the audience, facing the choir. Hundreds of eyes were on her. But there was no time to worry about that. Lavender snatched the conductor's baton from the floor, straightened her shoulders, and as the cue played, she jabbed the baton toward the singers, mouthing the word "NOW!"

A wave of relief washed over Lavender as a handful of voices sang out.

Ordering herself not to shake, Lavender ignored her nerves and concentrated on the music. She waved the baton in an imitation of Mrs. Jacobson, and the faltering voices grew stronger. The members of Wellson Elementary School Choir stopped straining to see if Mrs. Jacobson's head was still in the trash can and remembered that they were in the middle of a performance.

It was working! Marisol would get her solo after all. Lavender felt her shoulders relax. Everything was going to be okay. She held up one hand in a stop signal. The choir paused. Lavender counted a measure and pointed the baton at Marisol.

Her friend's voice, usually so rich and full, quavered and sounded uncertain. Marisol must have been caught off guard by the chaos, which was completely

understandable. And even on her worst day, Marisol still sang a hundred times better than anyone else in the choir.

With another wave of the baton, the choir rejoined Marisol, finishing the song. As the last note faded, Lavender lowered her arms. They'd done it.

Thunderous applause echoed off the multipurpose room walls. Lavender beamed at the choir, so happy and so proud of her friend that the corners of her mouth ached with her smile. She tried to make eye contact with Marisol. She wanted a thumbs-up or a wave, but before she could get Marisol's attention, Lavender felt a tap on her shoulder. Mrs. Jacobson stood there, pale but smiling. Lavender could barely hear her music teacher over the roar of the audience.

"Take a bow," Mrs. Jacobson was saying. "You deserve it. You saved the day."

Lavender turned and bowed to the cheers and whistles of the audience, most of whom had leapt to their feet and were clapping for . . . for *her*.

She was a hero.