

## BEFORE

It was the perfect day for a party. The summer afternoon was a temperate seventy-nine degrees, the sky was cloudless, and the Atlantic crashed hypnotically down the bluffs. He got ready, dressing in linen pants, a fitted white polo, and broken-in leather flip-flops. As he splashed water onto his cheeks, he saw a refined, debonair face in the bathroom mirror. He looked like the strong but silent type. Teddy Roosevelt, maybe. He smiled, delighted at the reference. Wasn't Roosevelt the one who said *Speak softly and carry a big stick*? Maybe he'd think of himself as Teddy tonight. As a little inside joke.

By 7:30 p.m., streaks of pink and orange made an ombré effect across the horizon. The beach was empty; a flock of seagulls perched on the wooden lifeguard stand. Partygoers glided toward the luxury beach club and condo complex, bottles tucked under their arms, phones in their hands. Past the gates, twinkling votive candles spanned the long seating areas by the pool, and brightly colored rafts bobbed atop the placid clear water. As the guests swarmed the space, beer bottles were popped open. Everyone began to talk and laugh. Swells of Bob Marley, the Beach Boys, and Dave Matthews drifted through the air.

Teddy sat on a chaise, beer in hand, and watched as Jeff Cohen, a staple on the beach scene, carefully made his way across a slack rope that had been set up between two trees. When Jeff reached the end without falling, he grinned at Cole, whose indie film about surfing nuns had won first prize at a couple of festivals last year. “Wanna give it a try?”

Cole chuckled. “That’s not exactly my thing.” He raised his Nikon camera and took a snap of Jeff as he jumped to the ground.

Chelsea Dawson, Jeff’s ex-girlfriend, gave Cole a flirty grin. “Cole, you’re so going to be a famous paparazzo someday.”

Cole snorted. “Uh, I have bigger career goals than loitering in a parking lot, waiting for celebs. Unless it’s *you*.”

“Nah, I’m my *own* photographer.” Chelsea pulled something from her purse. An iPhone in a sparkly pink case was attached to a motorized selfie stick; when she hit a button, the device extended, lights illuminated, and a miniature fan began to whirl. Her blond hair whipped prettily in the artificial wind. Her skin glowed under the golden bulb. The cobalt shade of her dress brought out the steel-blue flecks in her eyes. As she grinned into the lens, a hush fell over the crowd. Everyone turned and looked at the perfection that was Chelsea Dawson.

She examined the results and then tapped the screen. Moments later, Teddy’s phone buzzed, but he didn’t bother to check the alert. He knew what it said: *New post from ChelseaDFab*.

Another Bob Marley classic blared from the speakers. Someone did a perfect jackknife off the diving board. Teddy decided to check out the bonfire. Down at the beach, the

stoners were arguing about whose fudge was better – Cindy’s, a local store, or Lulu’s, from one town away. “Dude, all the fudge is made by the same company, probably in a big vat,” a glazed-eyed guy said. “It’s a *conspiracy*.”

Teddy chuckled along with them, but then he was distracted by a sharp, familiar voice. “When did you turn into such a hater?”

He whirled toward the sound. Chelsea stomped across the sand, high heels in her hand, her face a knot of pain. Jeff trailed behind her, his long hair in a messy man bun, the tails of his button-down flapping. A couple of the stoners glanced at Chelsea and Jeff, too, then went back to their fudge argument.

Jeff waved a cell phone in her face. On the screen was Chelsea’s latest Instagram post. “Look, I just don’t understand why you feel you have to post photos that show your boobs to ten thousand strangers,” he was saying, loud enough for Teddy to hear. “There are a million prettier pictures of you than this one.”

“Fifty-one thousand, eight hundred seventy-*three* strangers,” Chelsea shot back.

“Okay, so almost fifty-two thousand skeevy dudes know what your boobs look like. As a woman, I’d think you –”

Chelsea groaned. “Don’t do the feminist thing with me. Your opinion doesn’t matter so much anymore. Besides, it’s important for me to build my brand.”

Jeff laughed incredulously. “It’s not like you’re a Kardashian.”

Chelsea’s expression hardened. Spinning around, she headed for the beaten-down path that led through the dunes, behind the apartment complex, and all the way to the public parking lot. “Hey!” Jeff cried. “What did I say?”

“Forget it.”

“You’re more than a pretty face, Chel. You should have more self-respect.”

“I *do* have self-respect.” Chelsea’s eyes blazed. “It’s you who doesn’t respect *me*.”

“What are you talking about? I’m –”

Chelsea’s expression snapped closed. “Just leave me alone.”

Jeff looked like he’d been slapped. Chelsea slipped into the reeds. After a few moments, Jeff swiveled and settled down on a lawn chair at the bonfire next to one of the stoners. He stared into the flames, looking like he might burst into tears. The stoners suddenly seemed to notice him. “You okay, man?” one asked, but Jeff didn’t answer.

Taking a deep breath, Teddy grabbed his phone from his pocket and composed a message.

*You all right?*

He could picture Chelsea stopping on the overgrown beach path. Rooting through her bag, pulling out the phone he’d given her. On cue, his phone quietly pinged.

*I’m fine. Thanks.*

His fingers flew. *Wanna talk about it? I can meet.*

Up popped an emoji of a face blowing a kiss. *Nah. I’m really tired. We’ll talk tomorrow.*

He squeezed his phone hard. That had been her one last chance, and she’d blown it. Well then. Now to put the plan he’d crafted into motion.

Teddy stood as unceremoniously as he could. No one saw him as he walked away from the bonfire, though he chose to follow Chelsea by a different route than she’d taken. A quarter

mile later, a streetlamp made a gauzy golden circle across the pavement, the beach tag hut, and the concrete structure that held the men's and women's bathrooms and showers. A lithe shape streaked through the light near the beach path. Teddy breathed out, sweaty and anxious.

A car passed, its xenon headlights blinding. Teddy crouched behind the changing rooms, his thighs trembling, his heart contracting in his chest. He'd been so desperate to get close to Chelsea. For her to know him. If she'd bothered to give a shit, if she'd reciprocated the kindness he'd shown her, he would have let her in, told her who he really was, where he really came from, how he'd become this way, who was responsible for turning him into this. Instead, she had blown him off time and time again, so she only knew the basics, the lies. She knew him by the name everyone called him, a name he'd ditch when he moved to his next location – Washington, maybe, or Texas. It wasn't even as good a name as Brett Grady, which he'd used in Connecticut. He'd been quite fond of Brett Grady, actually. He sometimes still called himself that when he was alone, or bored, or right when he woke up, when he didn't yet remember who he was pretending to be.

The man formerly known as Brett Grady pulled the mask out of his pocket. The slippery piece of fabric felt energized and electrified, like a living thing. He fit it over his face and walked quietly across the pavement. Next to the path, Chelsea stood by the bike rack, her hand curled over a random bike's handlebars. It was such a pretty hand. Milky white. Long-fingered. Elegant.

It was a shame he'd probably have to break every bone.



# THE NEXT MORNING





## CHAPTER 1

On a sticky, sweltering Saturday morning in July, Seneca Frazier stood on a brick-paved side street in downtown Annapolis, Maryland, wearing the long-sleeved uniform of the Annapolis Parking Authority. The getup was 100 percent wool and didn't breathe. Unless she got into air-conditioning in the next three minutes, she was going to pass out from heat stroke.

Brian Komisky, the officer she was shadowing, inspected a parking meter next to an off-white Range Rover. His hazel eyes lit up. "Bingo! One minute left, and this baby's expired." He offered Seneca the gray handheld computer that electronically processed parking tickets. "Wanna do the honors?"

*Go, me*, Seneca thought as she held out her palm for the device. It was demoralizing that making a prehistoric iPad knockoff spit out a thirty-dollar parking ticket was the highlight of her day. It wasn't like she'd set out to score a summer internship with the APA. She'd wanted to intern with law enforcement, and her dad even begrudgingly helped her get the interview, calling upon a friend on the Annapolis PD. But somehow she'd gotten stuck on parking duty instead of actually solving crimes.

She and Brian inspected more cars on the block, but everyone was paid up on their meters, so they headed to Brian's van. Sweat dripped down Seneca's back as she walked. They passed a little boutique called Astrid, and Seneca noticed a gaggle of girls in flirty sundresses squealing over something on their phones. She felt a pang. According to her overprotective, worrywart of a dad, that frothy, bubblegummy life was the one she *should* be living.

In another universe, maybe.

Brian started the van, and Seneca cranked the AC on high and pressed her face directly against the vent. Brian peered at her before pulling out of the spot. "You okay?"

Seneca tried to tell herself that the sudden chill she felt was from the subzero air. "Right now, I'm just trying not to melt into a puddle," she said.

"C'mon, Seneca. You've been vacant all day. What's on your mind?"

Seneca sighed. Was she that transparent?

"Is it . . . a boy?" Brian asked gently, turning down the AC a touch.

Seneca felt herself blush. "*No!*" Though it was kind of true. She was thinking about a boy. Just not *that* way.

A wrinkle formed between Brian's eyes. At twenty-four, he was already married to his high school sweetheart, and Seneca understood what his wife saw in him. His penny-colored hair was thick and wavy, his hazel eyes were kind, and his impressive physical size always made Seneca feel safe. No one would mess with her with Brian around. And by no one, she meant Brett Grady.

Or whatever the hell his name really was.

It started three months ago, when she and Maddox Wright, a friend she'd made on a website dedicated to cold murder cases called Case Not Closed, looked into what happened to Helena Kelly, a murdered girl from Dexby, Connecticut. They teamed up with Aerin Kelly, Helena's younger sister; Madison, Maddox's stepsister; and another site regular, BMoney60 – Brett Grady. Together they discovered that Helena had been having an affair with Skip Ingram, a much-older man, and that Marissa Ingram, Skip's wife, had most likely killed Helena. Case Not Closed team *out*.

Or . . . not.

Only after Brett Grady skipped town did Seneca figure out that their so-called friend wasn't who he said he was. Once she put together that his name wasn't even Brett Grady, Seneca realized that Brett had fed them every clue that led them to Marissa Ingram. He'd been so subtly cunning that Seneca believed she'd come to each conclusion on her own, and she'd felt like a brilliant crime solver. Which was an improvement over feeling like the girl who'd flunked out of her freshman year at the University of Maryland – aka the truth.

But Brett knew everything because *he'd* killed Helena. And she wasn't his only victim. He'd also killed Seneca's mom, Collette, a murder Seneca had spent years trying to solve. And Seneca had discovered a slew of other cases involving blonde-haired, blue-eyed women with Brett's name written all over them.

Seneca didn't dare share her theory with anyone besides Maddox, Madison, and Aerin – and she only discussed it in clinical terms, verifiable facts. Not the emotion of it. Not the

crushing terror that they'd all been duped by someone they'd considered a friend. That they'd been working side by side with the very person who had destroyed their lives. She was desperate to tell the cops, but she didn't have any hard evidence Brett had done anything. She didn't even know his real name or age or where he was from. If only Seneca could find Brett, follow him, get something on him . . . but he'd disconnected his phone. Stayed away from CNC message boards. Shut down his social media accounts. Seneca wondered whether Brett went AWOL because he knew she was onto him, but if that were the case, wouldn't she be dead by now?

At the next stop sign, Brian swung the van to the left. "Let's take a break and get some ice cream for lunch. My treat. Sprinkles? A waffle cone?"

"Whatever." Seneca slumped, embarrassed that Brian thought she'd actually get this bent out of shape over a *boy*.

Brian pulled into the ice cream stand, a glorified shack with a small service window and a large grassy area that abutted a swampy back creek of the Chesapeake. Seneca peered nervously around the gravel parking lot, looking for Brett, as she'd done ever since he'd vanished into that crisp April evening in Dexby. She thought of the map she'd constructed on the inside wall of her closet. Each pin on the map corresponded with the locations of the cases Brett had commented on through Case Not Closed under the handle BMoney60 – crimes he *also* might have committed. His trademark was weighing in with one simple but salient clue that broke the case wide open, like he'd done with the Ingrams. There were pins in Arizona, DC, Florida, Georgia, Utah, Maryland, Connecticut, and Vermont.

Where would Brett show up next? All she knew about Brett was what he'd done in the past, not what he planned to do in the future.

A long reed jerked. Seneca tensed. A mouse shot out and disappeared into the grass. She exhaled, suddenly drained.

She and Brian ordered vanilla cones and took a seat under a filmy umbrella that provided little shelter from the punishing heat. "Well, you know what they say," Brian said, "there are plenty of fish in the sea."

Seneca licked the cone furiously to keep the ice cream from melting onto her hand, letting out a grunt.

"Maybe you need to go on a date," Brian continued. "I might know someone."

Seneca felt her cheeks blaze. "Brian, will you please drop it?" Love was the furthest thing from her mind.

Her phone beeped. As she rummaged in her messenger bag, Brian squinted at a Honda Civic in front of an antique shop across the street. "That bastard's in a loading zone." He reached for the ticket machine as though it was a semiautomatic weapon. "Not on my watch."

"I'll catch up with you in a sec." Seneca found her phone and squinted at it, but the glare was so bright she had to curl her hands around the screen. When her vision adjusted, she saw the alert she'd set up months ago. Her breath caught.

*BMoney60 has just posted on Case Not Closed!*

Hands shaking, she clicked on the link. A Case Not Closed thread appeared, something about a girl named Chelsea

Dawson disappearing from a party in Lafayette, New Jersey, last night. BMoney60's comment was four names down the list: *Easy one. It's gotta be her ex, right? I was at that party – saw them fighting. It was VICIOUS.*

*Whoa*, read the responses from the eager amateur sleuths. *Let's dig in. The cops need to question him.* But Seneca had gleaned something very different from the post. It was as though a tiny pinprick of sunlight had emerged in the sky after months of rain.

Brett Grady was back.

## CHAPTER 2

Aerin Kelly lay on a chaise on the top deck of a sixty-six-foot yacht named *That's Amore* in the middle of Newport Bay. She was pretending to sleep, but the guy she was hanging out with, Pierce, kept fiddling with the strings of her plaid bikini bottom, and it was distracting.

"Babe." Even though it wasn't yet noon, Pierce's breath smelled like beer. "Babe. I *need* you. Now."

"Mmm." Aerin opened one eye. Pierce was shirtless, showing off the rock-hard abs he'd perfected working out with his personal trainer, Jules. His hair stood up in peaks, and he wore aviator sunglasses with green-tinted lenses he'd special-ordered. Pierce was always getting things custom made. He thought buying anything off the rack was pedestrian.

"Good, you're awake." Pierce passed her a bottle of sunscreen. "Can you put more lotion on my back?"

"Can't your friends do it?" Aerin groaned.

Pierce grinned at her. "I like it better when *you* rub me down."

Aerin begrudgingly squirted SPF onto her palm and kneaded the spot between his shoulder blades. "Thanks," Pierce said. He gave her a kiss, then traipsed off to find his friends.

Aerin flopped back onto the chair and tried to find her zen again. It really was a perfect day – the Newport air was warm but not too hot, the mansions that peppered the coast gleamed like diamonds, and she was aboard the largest yacht on the harbor.

*Helena would approve.*

She flinched. It was like her sister was a commercial jingle playing on auto loop in her brain. Aerin didn't *want* to think about Helena. She certainly didn't want to imagine her *here*. She was still so angry with her. Helena had lied to her, had chosen to run away with an older man and leave her family behind without a word. Aerin still loved her sister, but sometimes she wondered if she ever knew her at all.

And did Aerin even know what actually happened to Helena? The world accepted that Marissa Ingram killed her sister, but Seneca Frazier's theory about Brett Grady gave Aerin pause. Aerin didn't want to believe it. Marissa's motive was neat, tidy, and logical, while the idea that Brett – whom she had *almost kissed* – had done it was nonsensical, irrational, and terrifying. How could her sister have even *met* Brett Grady?

Aerin jumped to her feet. A change of scenery always helped when her thoughts tumbled down this particular rabbit hole. On the lower deck, Pierce and his buddies, Weston and James, were opening beers. She walked down to them, plucked the open Anchor Steam from Pierce's hand, chugged it, and handed it back with a wink. "Sorry," she said, wiping her mouth. "I needed that."

Pierce's grin was delightfully scandalized. "Babe, you can steal my beer *anytime*." He loved that Aerin was a little crazy. He'd



told her so when they'd met at a party in Paris, where Aerin's parents had sent her on a pity trip after Marissa Ingram's arrest instead of actually talking through things. Her parents might have made a lot of promises after it all went down, including spending more time together and going to family therapy. It had taken them only a few weeks to slip back to their old ways.

Instead of working through her grief in Paris, Aerin maxed out her credit card at Chanel, buying treats for kids she barely knew. She went to seedy dance clubs, drank champagne straight from the bottle, and staggered home alone through dodgy neighborhoods in the middle of the night.

And on that trip, instead of facing the possibility that Brett Grady might *actually* be Helena's killer, Aerin agreed to travel to Nice with a guy she'd just met. On Pierce's private plane, she sloppily made out with him, then did some body shots of Patrón, then rinse and repeat. The first thing she did at Pierce's family's villa was drunkenly strip, sprint to the swimming pool, and slip on the slick stones, practically cracking her head open.

Was she acting out? Sure. Laden with baggage? She'd break an airport scale. Absolutely aware of it? Of course. But what was she supposed to do? Go to therapy? Rebound with her estranged parents? Write a college essay about how she was a survivor? Cue burst of sarcastic laughter.

The alcohol zooming through her bloodstream began to soothe her frenetic brain, but she could still hear the jackhammer inside her, thudding and splintering. *Move. Do something.* She marched to the cockpit and plopped down on the plush leather seat. "Mind if I take us for a cruise?" she called to the boys.

"Go for it," West yelled back.

Aerin pressed the lever that powered the engine. The boat jolted to life, skimming past water-skiers, a pleasure cruiser with *Newport Ferry Tours* emblazoned on its side, and a medium-sized yacht with a half-naked couple entwined on the prow. Her hair flapped in the wind, and she relished the rushing air on her face. She pushed the lever forward. The boat zoomed faster. White caps lapped against the hull. She felt so powerful. She pressed the lever forward again and let out a wild yell that matched the roar of the motor.

“Yeah!” West called out, pumping his fist.

Aerin clipped a buoy and sent it skittering across the surface of the water. The lighthouse was ahead, and she focused on it. What would it feel like to crash the boat into its rocky shoreline? Would the boat be ruined? Would they catapult overboard? Would they die?

Would she see Helena if she did?

“This is awesome!” Pierce screamed.

But something began to shift inside her. Aerin noticed how hard she was gripping the steering wheel. Her heart was pounding, and she was out of breath. The adrenaline high had vanished, and now she just felt . . . drained. Messed-up.

She steered away from the lighthouse, slowed down, and slid off the captain’s chair. “Why’d you stop?” Pierce called from his perch.

“Because we almost crashed,” Aerin said shakily. She stared at her hands, suddenly not quite recognizing them as hers. “I almost crashed.”

The boys just laughed, like she’d made a joke. She hurried down the stairs into the cabin. It was dark and cool, and she

sank into the leather booth in the elegantly appointed dining room and took a few deep breaths, trying not to cry.


“Babe?”

Pierce stood on the stairs, a concerned look on his face. Aerin felt a lump in her throat. Maybe he was more perceptive than she thought. And maybe, just maybe, she was finally ready to talk about what was going on. But as her eyes adjusted, she noticed he was holding something. It was the bottle of Banana Boat. He turned around and pointed to his lower back. “You missed a spot. I’m getting burned.”

Aerin wanted to hurl the bottle at him, but she found herself squirting lotion into her palm. What did she expect? She and Pierce didn’t have that kind of relationship. They didn’t have *any* kind of relationship, really. As she rubbed it into his muscles, she felt a pang for Thomas Grove, the cop she’d met while investigating Helena’s death. Thomas would have noticed she was slowly going crazy. Thomas would have wanted to know why she’d almost smashed a million-dollar boat to pieces.

*Wrong*, Aerin thought. She wasn’t even speaking to Thomas anymore. He’d quit the police force and gone to college in New York City shortly after Marissa Ingram’s arrest, when Aerin needed him most. He was probably having a great time right now. Aerin probably never entered his thoughts.

Something buzzed. Aerin’s gaze flicked to the granite bar, where she’d deposited the large cream-colored leather Chanel satchel Pierce had bought for her in France. Something was buzzing inside it. She dug her phone out of the smooth silk pocket. Seneca had sent her a text. *You need to look at this.*



She opened the accompanying link. The headline caught her eye. *Chelsea Dawson, 21, Disappears in Lafayette, New Jersey*. Next to the story was an image of a girl in a see-through blue dress. Aerin stared at the girl's blue eyes, her white-blond hair, the dimple next on her left cheek. Aerin's blood turned ice-cold.

She looked exactly like Helena.

## CHAPTER 3

Maddox Wright finished his treadmill run with three minutes on the 11.0 mph setting, his pounding feet echoing through the LA Fitness in Dexby, Connecticut. Normally, he preferred to run outside, but it was way too hot and humid even for an elite athlete like him.

Breathing hard, he hit the END button, wiped down the handgrips, and guzzled a water bottle he'd filled with chocolate milk. He found it disgusting to drink chocolate milk post-run, but John Quigley, his soon-to-be coach at the University of Oregon said in his bestselling self-help book, *The Path to Gold*, that chocolate milk had the optimal mix of proteins, carbs, and fats to refuel after a workout. Maddox made a point to be Coach Quigley's model athlete-in-training.

"Hey."

A tall, fit girl with green eyes and glossy, kissable lips smiled at him from the water fountain. As she moved closer to Maddox, he realized she smelled like sugar cookies.

"You were really booking it." She lowered her long eyelashes. "Are you some sort of pro?"

Maddox shrugged modestly. "I'm headed to the Olympic trials next summer, if all goes well."

The girl widened her eyes, then thrust out a hand. "I'm Laila. Wanna grab a smoothie? You can tell me more about it."

An instructor's voice boomed out from a nearby exercise room: *Pick up the pace! I want to see higher kicks!* Maddox's tongue felt coated with chocolate ooze. He cleared his throat and blurted, "Actually, I've got to get home."

Laila blinked. "Oh. Okay."

Maddox gave her a polite smile and hurried toward the front door. A scoff stopped him, and he noticed his stepsister, Madison, perched in the little nook that sold athletic gear. She was giving him such an indignant glare you would have thought Maddox had just walked across the gym floor naked.

"What?" he snapped. It made no sense that Madison was here. Whenever Maddox asked his sister if she wanted to go to the gym with him, her typical response was something like, *Well, I power-walked the Dexby Diamond Shoppes in my dream for hours last night searching for the perfect Gucci purse charm, so I'm pretty exhausted.*

Madison tucked a piece of straight, shiny black hair behind her ear. "Did you seriously just blow off Laila Gregory?"

Maddox stiffened. "Did you seriously just spy on me?"

He headed for the front door, and his sister jumped up after him. "Victoria's Secret just signed Laila as a runway model," she hissed in his ear.

He snorted. "As if a Victoria's Secret model would be hanging out in this dump."

“Her family lives in Dexby.” Madison pointed back to the row of machines. “Go back in there and apologize. Explain that you’re a reformed dork. This could be huge for you, Maddox.”

Maddox rolled his eyes. “Even if I did believe you, I need to focus on running right now. Not random girls.”

“Only you would blow off a Victoria’s Secret model for *running*.”

Maddox unlocked his Jeep, opened the door, and tossed his gym bag onto the seat. The bag tumbled into the foot well, and the contents spilled out. His phone bumped against the frame of the car, and the screen lit up, displaying the wallpaper Maddox had chosen this morning: a picture of Seneca Frazier the night of the Ritz-Carlton party in New York, her dark, curly hair in her face, her glowing, light brown skin, the corners of her mouth stretched into a lazy, tipsy smile.

Maddox lunged to hide the screen, but it was too late. Madison breathed in sharply. “Ooooooh!”

He stiffened. “There’s nothing to *ooh* about.” He cursed himself for choosing that wallpaper. Of *course* Madison was going to ask questions.

There was a knowing look on Madison’s face. “At least this explains Laila Gregory.”

“It doesn’t!” Maddox was keenly aware that his voice had shot up an octave. Why was it, though, that Madison had a particular knack for sussing out Maddox’s private, most mortifying secrets?

Because, okay, he thought a lot about Seneca. He had no chance with her, romantically, but ever since she left Dexby three months ago, no girl had measured up. He couldn’t stop

thinking about the bouncing, boyish way Seneca walked, or her raucous laugh, or the crinkle that appeared between her eyes when she was puzzling something out. He'd relived the moment they'd kissed at least two thousand times. Whenever she emailed him these days – which was becoming less frequent – he pounced on the message, stopping whatever he was doing, even running, to read it. But her emails were so chilly, so spare, just briefings about cases Brett Grady had been interested in on Case Not Closed. They weren't peppered with details of books she'd read or new music she'd listened to. There were no updates about whether she'd had dinner at her favorite greasy Asian noodle place in downtown Annapolis. It was like she was pretending what had gone down between them – how close they'd been to becoming something – had never happened.

A few times, Maddox composed an email to Seneca that cut through the bullshit, laying out how he was still crazy about her and that he worried she might be becoming a mild agoraphobic – she was spending a lot of time in her room, on Brett Watch. That he couldn't begin to imagine how devastated she was right now. The betrayal he felt was nothing compared to what she must be going through. *I'm here*, he wrote. *We're in this together*. But when he reread his words, they seemed cheesy. Seneca was the last person who wanted unsolicited help; maybe he should just leave her alone. And so he always wrote an equally toneless email in reply, burying the truth deep.

But *Madison* didn't need to know that. He glared at her now. She looked so smug, like she'd solved some major mystery.



She was wearing a heart-print dress and bootie sandals with stacked pink heels. Her hair was pulled into a high ponytail, and she smelled like she'd just smoked a pound of weed.

"What are you doing at the gym, anyway?" he asked grumpily.

"I came to find you. You got mail." She presented a slender envelope. *Maddox Wright*, it read, and then his address. In the upper-right corner, there was only a name. *Brett Grady*.

Maddox felt the blood drain from his cheeks.

The letter had a generic American-flag stamp and a postmark from Cleveland, Ohio. It had been addressed on an old-fashioned typewriter, but there was something wrong with the lateral alignment, and the letters jumped up and down across the page. It gave Maddox a spinning sense, like he was looking at an optical illusion.

He peeked at his sister. She was watching him carefully, the playful look on her face gone.

"Oh." He moved to stuff the letter into his bag, but Madison grabbed his wrist.

"Don't play dumb. Anything Brett says, I want to know, too," she said.

Maddox could feel his heart pounding through the thick canvas. When he'd first heard Seneca's theory about Brett, he'd thought she was crazy. Brett was a cool guy – they'd hit it off a year before at a CNC meetup. But the more he thought about it, a lot of Brett's behavior during the investigation *was* sketchy. *Could* Seneca be onto something? Could Brett have used a fake name and lied about who he was? Was it such a leap to think that Helena's killer had steered their

investigation all along, pointing them to the wrong suspect? That beneath Brett's seemingly harmless exterior lurked a monster? That possibility terrified him. He'd let him in. They'd partied together. He'd never once guessed that he'd been lied to.

The sun crept behind a cloud, turning the sky a purplish gray. Locusts began to screech, the sound discordant and ugly. Maddox felt a rushing sensation in his ears and peered nervously over his shoulder, half sure Brett would be lurking nearby. The gym's rusty Dumpster lid banged shut in a gust of wind. A large graffiti eye was spray-painted on its side, watching him. Goose bumps rose on his arms.

Suddenly, Madison shot forward, ripped open the envelope, and extracted two sheets of folded paper. "Hey!" Maddox tried to yank it back, but his sister had hurried across the parking lot. "We're both reading it," Madison snapped.

"Madison . . ." Maddox rushed over to her, blood sloshing in his ears. Single-spaced typewritten words marched jaggedly across the page. He caught sight of the words *Dear Maddox* on the first line and felt the same way he did when he stepped onto a boat slip: groundless, shaky, suddenly unsure of the rules of the world.

The air around him went still. As he read each sentence, his stomach began to twist with disbelief. He read the letter one more time, trying to process what Brett was saying.

*What up, Maddox –*

*Hope all is well with you. I bet you're wondering where I am, huh? I know you've been looking. I know*

*all of you still talk. So really, this is a letter for everyone. I miss you guys. But look, I might have withheld a few important details when we last hung out. I thought I'd share a few of them now, in case you want to know.*

*Seneca – I know how eager you are for information, so here's a nugget: Remember when you'd go to Target to buy books? Did you know Mama flirted with someone at the Starbucks while you were thumbing through paperbacks? Even kissed someone?*

*And, Aerin – Did you know that when a certain pretty blonde took Metro-North into the city, she always chose a seat farthest from the bathroom? And did you know her favorite bar in Grand Central was the Campbell Apartment, and that old dude she was hooking up with wasn't the only guy she met there? I bet you didn't.*

*I know you know what I did. And I know you want to find me. I'm not done with you, either. Game on, everyone. You've gotten my first clue, so come and get me. But if you think about going to the cops with this, someone's dead.*

*Stay real,  
Brett*

“What. The. Hell?” Madison whispered, stepping away from the letter as though it was seeping radiation.

When Maddox tried to fold the letter, his hands shook. “W-we have to call the police.”

“Are you insane?” Madison cried. “He told us someone will die if we do!”

From inside the car, his phone started ringing. Dazed, Maddox wrenched the Jeep door open and found it on the floor. He wondered if Brett was now *calling* . . . but it was Seneca’s name that flashed on the screen. His heart dropped.

“Maddox?” Seneca barked when Maddox answered. “Are you there? I have Aerin on the phone, too. We need to talk to you.”

Maddox couldn’t feel his legs. Spots formed in front of his eyes. His vocal cords seemed to have knotted together. “Wh-what’s going on?” he heard himself say.

“Brett just posted on Case Not Closed. Something about a girl who went missing in New Jersey. The police weren’t too concerned about it at first, but then they found blood in the parking lot near the party. It matches her blood type. BMoney60 posted that he thinks her ex-boyfriend did it. He said he was *at* the party.”

“Chelsea Dawson looks exactly like Helena,” Aerin chimed in.

Maddox’s chest tightened. “Maybe *that’s* what he’s talking about in his letter. That post is his first clue.”


“Letter?” Seneca asked sharply. “What letter?”

Maddox shut his eyes. “Brett sent me a letter. Just now.” His voice trembled. “Madison found it in the mailbox. We were just about to call *you*.”

“Hey, guys,” Madison added reluctantly.

“Brett sent you a *letter*?” Seneca sounded appalled. “Read it!”

Maddox thought of what the letter said and shut his eyes. The last thing he wanted to do was read it aloud to Seneca. “Um . . .”



Madison ripped the letter from his hand. “*I’ll* read it,” she said, as if sensing why he was so hesitant. Maddox gave her a small, grateful nod. Madison unfolded the pages again and, with a grim look, began.