

IT WAS SO dark in the shed. His underwear was wet, and his skin itched. It smelled awful in here—a little like the mouse that had died under his family's porch that one time. And he could hear the ocean going *whoosh-whoosh-whoosh*, but he didn't know where the sound was coming from. He hadn't actually *seen* the ocean since coming here. It wasn't like he was on a fun vacation.

He moved right and left, bumping into plastic beach buckets, rusty bikes, and a busted pool float. He'd never been allowed to play with any of it. He kept thinking about all the creatures that might be crawling over him. Centipedes. Spiders. Maybe even a mouse. His throat tightened. The smell of that dead mouse had gotten worse and worse every day—first it smelled like puke, then something even worse. When his dad finally pulled it out with a shovel, there were only bones. He'd screamed, and his dad had run over to him to give him a hug. *I know, buddy*, he said. *It isn't pretty.*

Would he ever see his dad again? Was *he* going to turn into that mouse?

His heart started to pound. He pressed his face into his knees. In times like this, times when he got really scared, the only thing that helped was to disappear into the Harry Potter books he loved. If he were at Hogwarts instead of trapped here, if he had magical powers like Harry and his friends, he'd strike down the woman who'd done this to him with a magic spell. She'd shrivel up and disappear. And then? Then he'd run. He'd run *fast*, away.

The door creaked open. He stood up, suddenly not able to breathe. The light made his eyes hurt, and he brought his bound hands to his face.

She stared at him. She wore that big flowered dress, the one that fit her once but didn't anymore. Her hair was a tangle of orangey-blond around her face. When she was just his teacher, she'd reminded him of the friendly scarecrow from *The Wizard of Oz*. Now she was more of a Halloween skeleton.

"I—I'm sorry," he stammered. "I'll never do it again, I promise."

She sniffed and gave him an ugly look. Once upon a time, he hadn't felt stranger danger with her. He'd thought she was a normal, friendly, happy person he knew well, a person who told funny jokes and gave him Junior Mints after a lesson and talked to him about the Harry Potter books—she said she loved them, too.

They never talked about Harry Potter books anymore.

"C-can I go back there?" he said, gesturing to the house across the yard. He could see it through the crack in the door. "I'm thirsty."

She wrinkled her nose. "*I'm thirsty*," she mocked. "Whose fault is that?"

His cheeks burned. How long had he been trapped in here? When she first shut him inside, he'd wanted to scream, but then he worried

she'd do something even *worse*. *You better watch it*, she was always saying. *I could really make things bad. You should be happy about how kind I'm being*. She also told him that his parents were glad he was gone, and they weren't searching to bring him home. No one was. No one cared.

She shook a finger at him. "You should have thought about what would happen before you did it. But you didn't, and you broke my heart. All I've done for you, and this is what I get. You *leave* me. You make me look like a fool."

"I—I said I was sorry."

He knew he should have never tried to escape . . . but it had felt so good. Out there on the sidewalk, he'd turned from the helpless victim into a hero in one of his books—into Harry Potter himself. The air had smelled so fresh. The hot summer sun gave him strength. When he'd knocked on that door two houses down, he'd been sure the people staying there would save him.

Now she moved closer, her face almost touching his. Her breath smelled like coffee, just as his mother's always did when she leaned over his bed to wake him up for school. It made him so homesick to smell it, and yet he always kind of *wanted* to smell it, too, just so he could remember.

When she reached for him, he flinched. But instead of hitting him, she petted the side of his cheek. "My sweet, sweet boy. I love you. You know that, right?"

"Uh-huh," he whispered. But he felt icky for saying it.

"Except you've been so very bad. And bad boys need to be punished."

The door crashed shut so hard that the whole crappy plastic shed

rattled. “Wait!” He lurched forward, tripping over his tied-up ankles.

“Wait, no, *please*! Let me out! I’ll never do it again! I *promise*!”

“I’m sorry, honey.” The metal padlock clicked into place. “But this is how it has to be.”

ONE

SENECA FRAZIER STOOD in the way-too-chilly, upscale lobby of the Reeds Hotel in Avignon, New Jersey, staring in horror at a text message she'd just received.

Don't bother looking for us. We're outta here.

"Impossible," Maddox Wright whispered. Maddox rubbed the bridge of his nose, which was peeling from sunburn, and pushed his grown-out brown hair out of his eyes. "You really think it's from Brett?"

Seneca was clenching her jaw so hard it felt like her teeth might grind to powder. "It has to be. But what the hell does it mean?"

Seneca, Maddox, and Maddox's stepsister, Madison, plus their friends Aerin Kelly and Thomas Grove had been embroiled in a game of cat and mouse with Brett Grady for the past week. Ironically, once upon a time, Brett had also been their friend, a member of their cobbled-together investigative team—they'd met on a crime-solving website, Case Not Closed, which acted as a gathering place for people who loved digging into cold cases. Their first case had been to figure out what had

happened to Helena Kelly, Aerin's sister, whose bones had turned up in a park years after her mysterious disappearance. During that investigation, they'd trusted and respected Brett. He had great insights. He'd been a good listener, and he'd stuck by them to the very end, when they believed they'd found Helena's murderer—Marissa Ingram, the wife of the man Helena was having an affair with.

Little did they know at the time that he'd steered that investigation exactly where he wanted it to go. *He* was the one who'd murdered Helena, not Marissa Ingram. But he'd disappeared before Seneca had made the connection. And that wasn't all Brett had done. . . . Through subtle hints he'd dropped, Seneca was almost positive he'd killed her mother, Collette, as well. That he'd been so close to her, right in front of her face, *taunting* her—it made her blood sizzle in her veins.

She wanted to catch Brett. She *needed* to catch Brett. It felt like her life's mission now. But Brett was like a phantom—he changed his looks as easily as he changed his name. Finding him was easier said than done. This past week, he'd resurfaced and put the group through their paces to find Chelsea Dawson, his latest victim . . . only to twist the scene to make it look like the Instagram-star Chelsea had kidnapped herself in order to gain more followers. Seneca and her friends had looked like fools when they tried to explain to the cops that Brett, who had been going by the name Gabriel Wilton around Avignon, was behind it all. It also didn't help that Brett had staged a fiery car crash that killed "Gabriel." Who knew who Gabriel actually was—not Brett, clearly, but an innocent person whose life didn't deserve to be cut short by Brett's vicious game. As far as the cops were concerned, Chelsea's case was closed—and Seneca and her friends were liars.

And now here was Brett, teasing her again with this text. *I win, you lose!* Seneca pressed her nails into her palm, wanting to scream. Every

day that passed, her desire to capture Brett turned more desperate. She needed to get this guy—for her mom, for his other victims, for herself, if only to ask him why. Why her mom? Why Helena? Why *anyone*?

She canvassed the lobby, wondering if Brett had been here, if they'd walked right past him at any point. This hotel had been their HQ, though now that Chelsea had been found, Seneca and the others planned to head back to their respective homes—Madison, Maddox, Thomas, and Aerin to Dexby, Connecticut, and Seneca to Annapolis, Maryland—and reconvene their search for Brett after a few days. The lobby had a cheerful tiki theme and was bustling with sunburned tourists. A group of raucous college-age boys drank tequila shots at the thatched-roof bar. Outside, a bunch of valets in Hawaiian-print shirts rushed to cars pulling up to the roundabout drive, and bellboys pushed carts of luggage through the automatic doors.

Seneca stared at the text again, her hands fluttering to the bare spot at her throat. She was so used to fiddling with her mother's *P*-initial pendant, but Brett had burned it beyond recognition a few days ago. She felt so naked without it, as though she'd parted with a limb.

Why had Brett sent this message? Just to tease that he'd gotten away again . . . or for some other reason? His use of pronouns—*us* and *we're*—felt like a clue. Did Brett have someone with him? His "sister," Viola, maybe? She'd just found out that Brett called someone "sis"—Amanda Iverson, Brett's boss at the real estate company when Brett was posing as "Gabriel," beach bum and realtor-in-training, had clued her in. Seneca needed to find this Viola person. She'd already begun racking her brain, trying to figure out how they might be able to track her down. Only, why would Brett brag about Viola when, as far as Seneca knew, he wasn't yet aware that she knew of Viola's existence? It didn't quite fit.

"Ready to go? Madison's here." Maddox pointed out his sister's

shiny dark hair by the elevators. She was dragging two giant, overloaded pink suitcases behind her. She'd changed into a neon floral mini-dress and cork-wedge sandals.

Seneca was about to tell Madison about Brett's cryptic text, but Madison spoke first, holding up an iPad in a Louis Vuitton case. "Aerin forgot this. She still here?"

"She left to meet Thomas." Seneca glanced at the front entrance. Thomas Grove was Aerin's brand-new boyfriend and an ex-cop; he'd helped them hunt down Chelsea and Brett. This morning, he'd received news that his grandmother was in the hospital and that he needed to return to Dexby. Aerin insisted on going with him; Thomas was picking her up in the hotel driveway.

She dialed Aerin's number, eager to talk to her for reasons beyond the left-behind iPad. She needed to clue everyone into this text, pronto—Brett's words seemed more ominous with every passing second. Maybe Aerin or Thomas, with his police experience, would have some insight.

But the call went to voice mail. Seneca dialed Thomas next; he answered on the first ring. "Thomas? Put me on speaker. Aerin needs to hear this, too."

"Oh." Thomas sounded surprised. "Actually, I'm still about five minutes away."

"Wait, what?" Seneca cocked her head, not understanding.

"I haven't picked Aerin up yet. I got stuck in traffic. I shouldn't be long, though."

"Huh." Seneca stuck her head out and peered around the hotel's driveway, searching for Aerin's silky white-blond hair, her long tanned legs, the black designer handbag looped over her elbow. She wasn't there.

Seneca's skin started to prickle. She looked at Maddox and Madison

worriedly. "Thomas isn't with Aerin," she whispered. "And she's not in the driveway, either."

Maddox frowned. Madison's eyes darted. "Maybe she's in the bathroom?"

Seneca eyed the bathroom door across the lobby. She would have seen Aerin coming or going from there. She pressed the phone to her ear again. "Thomas, can you meet us inside? We'll find Aerin. There's something I need to show you."

After she hung up, she dialed Aerin once more. Voice mail. A hot feeling was spreading across her stomach, but she tried to breathe steadily. This didn't *mean* anything. There had to be an explanation.

She looked at the driveway again. Still no Aerin. She noticed a lanky young bellman standing by the valet stand. The guy seemed bored, leaning his head against the wall with his eyes closed. A shiny name tag read *Hunter*. He snapped to attention when she approached.

"Did a girl just pass by here?" Seneca asked. "Seventeen. Pretty. Blond hair. You wouldn't have missed her."

Madison showed Hunter a picture of Aerin from her phone. The kid's lips curved into a suggestive smile. "Oh yeah. I saw her. She got into a car a couple minutes ago."

Seneca felt a jolt. "*What* car?"

The kid tried to think. "I think it was white? A sedan?"

Seneca frowned. Thomas's car was a white Ford sedan . . . but Aerin wasn't *with* Thomas. Could it have been a cab? But the cabs around here all seemed to be standard taxicab yellow. "Where did she go? Did you see?"

"Toward the bridge, I think." He nodded confidently. "Yep, definitely toward the bridge, because they cut off someone making the left. Really peeled out of here."

Then Hunter became distracted with an SUV full of people that had just pulled into the drive. Seneca turned to Maddox and Madison. Alarm bells were going off in her head. By the look on Maddox's face, she could tell that scared, paranoid thoughts were churning through his mind, too. That didn't surprise her—she and Maddox had bonded long ago over private messages on the Case Not Closed site, confessing all kinds of things, weirdly in tune with one another's thoughts.

Seneca called Thomas back. He picked up right away. "Who called you to tell you that your grandmother was in the hospital and that you needed to come home to Dexby?"

There was a pause. "My nana's doctor," Thomas said. "Why?"

"Have you ever spoken to him before? Like, do you know what his voice sounds like?"

"No . . ."

"Seneca, what are you getting at?" Madison narrowed her eyes.

Seneca held up her finger in a wait-a-second gesture. "Thomas, call her doctor back. Ask if your nana's really sick."

Madison looked confused. "You think the doctor is lying?"

Maddox swore under his breath. Seneca looked at him; by his ashen expression, she could tell he was toying with the same theory she was. Brett's text danced in her mind. *Don't bother looking for us*. Could the *us* be . . . ?

A dangerous scenario unfolded in her mind: Brett had posed as Thomas's grandmother's doctor and lied about her condition. Then he'd pulled up to the driveway in a car that looked exactly like Thomas's and taken Aerin . . . while the rest of them were inside, mere feet away, unaware.

She pressed her phone to her ear. "Call him, Thomas. Please."

“Okay,” Thomas said. “I’ll call you back. Or actually, I’ll *see* you in a couple minutes—I’ll be turning onto Sea Breeze soon.”

The call ended. Seneca shifted her weight from foot to foot. “Ten bucks says that doctor never called him,” she murmured. “Ten bucks it was Brett, disguising his voice.”

“*What?*” Madison asked, gaping. “Why?”

Wordlessly, Seneca showed her the text on her phone. Madison crowded in to look, and the color drained from her cheeks. “This is from . . . ?” She trailed off in horror.

Seneca nodded.

“And you think he’s *outta here* . . . with Aerin?”

The pieces were starting to slide into place. Throughout the search for Chelsea, Seneca had questioned Brett’s every move. Why had he taken her specifically? Could he really have a vendetta against every woman who rejected him, or was there something else at play here? And why had he given them clues on how to find Chelsea . . . and, finally, why had he let Chelsea *go*? Brett was the kind of criminal who left no witnesses—he didn’t want his victims to tell anyone about him. And he had no interest in clemency.

“Guys, maybe Chelsea wasn’t Brett’s endgame,” she said in a choked voice. “Maybe *Aerin* is.”

Madison was trembling. “We have to call the police. *Now.*”

Seneca peered into the hotel lobby. Maybe they should tell the management, too—they probably had a surveillance camera in the driveway and had caught Aerin getting into Brett’s car. But she didn’t see a single staff member anywhere. She stared at her cell phone, eagerly awaiting Thomas’s call back. Then, as she looked up, she caught sight of Thomas’s white Ford round the corner onto Sea Breeze Drive. Even

from a distance, she could see the frightened, confused look on his face. He'd made that call, she knew. His nana wasn't in the hospital. The doctor hadn't told him to come home.

Brett had.

There was something strange about Thomas's car, though. Thick black smoke poured from its tailpipe, obscuring the air behind it. Seneca knew nothing about car maintenance, but it didn't seem good. The traffic light turned green, and Thomas hit the gas. The smoke billowed. A strange *pop* sounded. And suddenly, horrifyingly, the car burst into flames.

"Oh my God!" Seneca darted toward the automatic doors.

The air outside smelled like burning fuel. Flames leapt from Thomas's hood. Most people were running away from the fire, but a few brave souls were running toward it. Seneca pressed her hand to her mouth as she reached the sidewalk. Thomas's door had opened, and he tumbled out and crumpled to the ground.

"Thomas!" Seneca screamed, but he didn't raise his head. Fear cut jaggedly through her. How had this happened? How could a car just *explode*?

Two men in volunteer fire jackets sprinted toward Thomas's body. "Get back, get back!" they screamed at Seneca, Maddox, and Madison, who'd rushed up behind her. Seneca bit down hard on her fist.

A police officer had appeared and was starting to divert all traffic to a side road. The fire department arrived and sprayed the car down. Ambulance sirens wailed. Onlookers to Seneca's left began to murmur. "Did anyone see what happened?" a woman asked.

"It just exploded!" someone else said. "Scared me half to death!"

"I've heard you can't trust that model year," a third voice murmured.

Seneca was starting to get woozy from the smoke. *Was* Thomas's

car just a lemon? But Thomas was a meticulous guy. She couldn't imagine that he'd let important car maintenance go to the point where his vehicle would explode. Paranoia nagged at her. She clutched Maddox's arm. "I don't think this was an accident."

Maddox and Madison nodded numbly. *And just like that, Brett has cut our numbers to three*, Seneca thought with dread. Of course he wiped out Thomas—as an ex-cop, he had a lot of resources to hunt Brett down. *And* he and Aerin had just started dating. Seneca couldn't forget the dreamy looks Brett had given Aerin back in Dexby. He'd liked her. Maybe liked her a *lot*.

So Brett wanted Thomas out of the way, then. He wanted Aerin all to himself. And he wanted them never to be found.

"Okay, now we're *definitely* telling the police." Madison spotted a broad, squinty-eyed cop who'd appeared to direct traffic. She took a few shaky steps toward him, but then Seneca's phone started to buzz. She looked down at the number, and her breath caught in her chest. *Impossible*. The person who had sent the *Don't look for us* text was now *calling*.

"Wait, Madison." She grasped her friend's arm. "*Don't*."

Madison gave her a startled look. Maddox started to protest, but then Seneca showed them the phone's screen. "It's the same number as before. The same number that sent that text."

Madison blinked. Maddox's lips parted slightly. The phone kept ringing.

"*Answer it*," Maddox finally urged.

With a thumping heart, Seneca pressed the green phone icon, then put the call on speaker. "Long time no talk, my friends," sang a familiar, haunting voice over the din of sirens.

Brett.

TWO

BRETT GRADY, a name he'd gotten used to calling himself, kept his hands at ten and two on the steering wheel, his cell phone wedged between his ear and his shoulder. Years ago, when he'd taught himself to drive, he didn't know how the phrase *ten and two* had leapt into his brain or how he'd known that it was the proper orientation for your hands. From his dad, maybe, when they used to ride go-karts? From a TV show? Still, he prided himself on always following the rules of the road to a T. Never speeding, never making crazy moves across lanes, always staying under the cops' radar. He'd passed three patrol cars today already, but they hadn't stopped him. Why would they? He was a model citizen. If those cops did notice Aerin's limp form in the backseat, they probably just figured she was his girlfriend and had decided to take a nap.

He was tickled by this tableau and decided to run with it for the few moments it was taking for Seneca Frazier to mentally get her shit together on the other end of the phone line. If a cop *did* stop Brett, he

would see Brett and Aerin as a couple on a long road trip. *She's my one and only*, Brett would tell the officer, smiling sweetly at her passed-out form in the back. *We finish each other's sentences. We order for each other at restaurants. We've had tons of play-fights about songs on the radio, and I guess all that wore her out.* And actually, Brett really *did* know all those things about Aerin. She wouldn't want to listen to "Call Me Maybe" because it reminded her of her murdered sister, for instance. And if they stopped for pizza, she would like it plain, with barely any cheese.

See? He wouldn't even have to fake it.

"Are you still there?" he finally asked Seneca. His phone had gone silent. Brett wasn't surprised. Seneca was probably stunned that he'd called her directly.

There was some fumbling, and then Seneca came back on the line. "Yes. Wh-where are you? Is Aerin okay? And Thomas's car *exploded*. That was you, wasn't it?"

"So many questions." Brett could picture Seneca with her curls and determined eyes. She probably thought she was going to entrap him, make him slip up, which felt insulting. They knew each other so well by now—she should understand that he *never* made mistakes.

He'd already known about Thomas's car accident. An app on his phone played the local police scanners; he'd heard the emergency call. Apparently, Thomas was still alive and had been taken to the hospital. Not the best outcome, but Brett hoped the injury was enough to scare the others. His nose wrinkled at the thought of that brawny, brainless interloper smiling at Aerin, touching Aerin, *kissing* Aerin . . . and Aerin kissing back. And also? *Brett* was the fifth person in their little sleuthing group. Thomas Grove couldn't crime-solve his way out of a paper bag.

"Aerin's great," he said brightly, glancing at her in the backseat.

She was slumped over, her head bent at an unnatural angle, a bubble of spittle at the corner of her mouth. Her skirt was hiked deliciously high on her thigh. "We're having a really nice time together."

"Let's talk to her, then," a new voice demanded.

Brett grinned. *Maddox*. He could just picture the guy standing next to Seneca, all coiled-up muscle and easy, jock-boy good looks. He was a little hurt by Maddox's harsh tone—he'd been a great friend, the type of guy he could chill with while playing the *Resident Evil 7* game. He thought with a mix of fondness and sadness about how admirably Maddox used to laugh at his jokes. "Uh, Aerin's a bit indisposed at the moment," he said. "But she's good. Scout's honor."

"Where are you taking her?" Seneca demanded.

"It's a secret." He smoothly moved into the left lane to pass, spying yet another police car lurking behind an overpass. *Just a guy out for a drive. Just a couple on a trip. Doo-dee-doo.* "Though if you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours."

"Why would we do anything for you?" came yet another voice. It was Maddox's cute, perky sister, Madison. Interesting. So they'd *all* stayed. Well, except the one he needed to get rid of.

"Because we're old friends," he singsonged. "Aren't we?"

Silence. Brett squeezed the steering wheel tightly, then let go. He'd been kind of kidding, but kind of not. He really missed his old group. It killed him that they were all together, hanging out, brainstorming as a unit . . . and he wasn't in on the fun.

"Check your CNC messages, Seneca," he said. "I've sent you a case I've been interested in. I tried to figure it out . . . but I didn't get very far. That's where *you* come in."

He thought of the link he'd sent her just a few minutes before when he'd pulled up to refuel. *Nine-year-old Catskills Boy Goes Missing*. It had

only happened two months ago, but a Case Not Closed file had already been opened on the kid. It was despicable how lazy cops could be, how quickly they could give up if things were just a teensy bit confusing. Did anyone in this world use their heads anymore? Did anyone care about justice?

His phone beeped. Brett glanced at it, then felt a leap in his chest. He pulled over—there was no way he was getting caught texting and driving!—and stared at the screen. The software he'd set up blinked a message. *User is ready to connect. Do you want to connect?*

Brett clicked yes. A map of Avignon, New Jersey, appeared. He'd downloaded this program from the darknet and loaded it onto Seneca's phone the night he'd broken into her room at the bed-and-breakfast in Avignon. Now, because his and Seneca's phones had connected for more than three minutes, the software had activated, and it was triangulating her phone's GPS coordinates and allowing him to track her every move. This was Brett's little insurance policy. He wanted to make sure his puppets were doing exactly what he wanted at all times.

"I don't get it," Seneca said, presumably after finishing the CNC article, which described how Damien Dover, a shy, musical nine-year-old boy, had disappeared from his New York hometown two months before. "Did you kidnap this kid, too?"

Brett scoffed as he pulled back into traffic. "You know I'd never kidnap a child."

"Why do you want us to look into this? It's a waste of time."

"A kid is missing, Seneca. That's a terrible thing. Don't you want to help?"

"Why didn't *you* solve it?" Seneca challenged. "You're the expert."

"You flatter me," Brett said, grinning. "Like I said, I *did* look into it. But then I had other things to do. So I'm delegating."

“How do we know this boy’s even still alive?” Maddox asked.

Brett drove past a farmers’ market sign in the shape of a dopey smiling eggplant. “I don’t know for sure, but I’m hoping he is. And you’re going to find him for me.”

“Uh, no, we’re not.” Seneca sounded irate.

“That’s the deal. You solve this, you get Aerin back. But no cops. If I find out you’ve talked to the cops, you’ll never see Aerin again. And, oh, I want updates every day. If I don’t hear from you, or if I don’t think you’re working hard enough . . .” He trailed off, letting them fill in the blanks.

“How do we know you haven’t already done something to Aerin?” Madison demanded.

“Good point,” Seneca said. “Put Aerin on the phone. Prove she’s okay.”

Brett’s skin flushed all the way to the roots of his hair. *Guys, it’s me! Your old pal! I saved you from a burning building, Seneca! Do you really think I’d hurt our precious girl?*

He knew it was insane to presume they’d think like that—he’d just rigged Thomas’s car to go *kaboom*. Still, he’d hoped that they’d at least acknowledge that they *knew* him instead of talking to him like he was some random nutjob on a Most Wanted poster.

He glanced at Aerin’s limp, sleeping form again. She looked so peaceful, the fear on her face gone. She’d been a bad girl, and she made him so angry and disappointed like so many other women he knew, but he also loved her, and the pull of love was greater than the pull of hate.

“I’m looking right at her,” he said into the phone. “She’s fine.”

“Prove it,” Seneca demanded. “Take a picture of her.”

“No way. You’re going to have to trust me. So start investigating. The clock’s ticking.”

“What do you mean?” Seneca asked. “You’re giving us a time limit?”

“Let’s see, today’s Friday.” A semitruck whooshed by him on the shoulder. “I’m going to give you three days to crack this. So until Monday.”

“Three days?” Seneca sounded horrified. “You want us to solve a cold case in *three days*?”

“Eh, you guys are experts. I believe in you. Now, chop-chop! Get going!”

Then he pressed END, tossing the phone onto the passenger seat. Aerin sighed, and he glanced at her in the rearview mirror. Still sleeping. Still unaware. He tried to run through what she might say when she woke up. Let’s face it, it probably wasn’t going to be *Oh, how lovely! A trip, just the two of us!* It was going to be *Seneca’s going to find me. Then you’ll be sorry.*

And what would Brett say to that? All his kindness would vanish. He’d see her again as the girl who’d chosen another guy over him. *Sorry, but you’re wrong*, he’d tell her. *Seneca and the others aren’t even looking for you anymore. I’ve got them busy doing something else.*

THREE

“UNBELIEVABLE.” MADDOX WRIGHT watched as Seneca said this over and over, making wide circles around a very big floral display. “Unbelievable. Un-be-*freaking*-lieveable.”

They stood in a flower shop inside the Avignon Hospital, a bright, sand-colored building that had banners of smiling, healthy people all over the walls and a man playing a classical tune on a grand piano in the lobby. Thomas had been brought here by ambulance. When they’d checked in about Thomas at the front desk, the triage nurse said that he was being evaluated and they couldn’t see him yet. Because the waiting room was too crowded, they’d retreated into the chilly, plant-filled room that smelled a little too much like a funeral home. Now they were staring at one another, still trying to process what had just happened.

Thomas’s explosion kept playing over and over in Maddox’s mind like a Boomerang video on Instagram: his car pulling forward through the light, the smoke billowing out of the tailpipe, and then . . . *fiery inferno*.

But the conversation they’d had with Brett really had its claws

in Maddox. This had gotten so personal. Well, it had *always* been personal—the Kellys had been family friends of his growing up, and it devastated him that the same monster that had murdered Aerin's sister had taken Seneca's mom away *and* manipulated all of them into being friends with him.

But now Brett had taken *Aerin*? Maddox had grown to adore her since they re-met this year. He tried to picture what she must be going through, but all he saw was scary, paralyzing emptiness. It was almost too painful to think about. He felt guilty, too—if he'd just done . . . *something* . . . maybe he could have prevented this. Why hadn't someone gone outside and stood with her to make sure all was okay? The second they dropped their guard, disaster stuck. There was no way he would take his eyes off Madison or Seneca again.

In a letter he'd written to the group just days ago, Brett said he'd had drinks with Aerin's sister, Helena, in New York, and her rejection of him might have inspired him to kill her. Was that why he'd taken Aerin, too? Any fool could see that Brett had fallen head over heels for Aerin back in Dexby. But Maddox had thought he was so harmless at the time! He'd actually felt sorry for the guy's lack of game! And now, this past week in Avignon, Brett had probably watched her in secret—and *seen* Aerin and Thomas together. The same crazy alarm bells that had rung with Helena must have gone off again. Maybe he was punishing Aerin for not choosing him.

Was he going to kill her, too?

The flower shop was so chilly, and Maddox jogged in place to get his blood pumping. It was hard to believe that just a few hours ago, he'd actually thought this whole mess was . . . well, not *over*, exactly, but at an impasse. For a few minutes, he'd figured he'd be returning home to Dexby to get ready for his freshman year at the University of Oregon,

where he'd been recruited to run track and compete at the Olympic trials. He'd begun to mentally plan for buying new off-to-college boxers at Abercrombie and doing a fartlek workout around his neighborhood tomorrow. He'd thought that *maybe* they'd return to Avignon to revisit the search . . . but with Brett tying the mystery up so neatly and cleanly, would they really find any answers about him?

What an *idiot* he'd been. As long as Brett was out there, this was never going to be over. He *had* to stay here now with Aerin gone. All of them had postponed their trip home the moment they'd gotten off the phone with Brett, actually. Seneca, in her typical balls-to-the-wall way, had called her overprotective father and blurted, "Dad, I'm nineteen years old, and I can do what I want, and I'm not coming home quite yet. I'll call soon." *Mic drop.*

"Any luck?" Seneca asked, nodding at Aerin's iPad, upon which Madison was furiously tapping and swiping.

"Still trying to log in," Madison mumbled between shaky breaths as she leaned against a refrigerated case of roses. The woman behind the counter was staring at all of them blandly, disinterestedly, as though panicked individuals who had no interest in buying flowers hung out in the shop every day.

The group had strategized about how they might gather clues as to where Brett had taken Aerin. They doubted they could just call her and ask, or even send a secret text—surely Brett had already taken Aerin's phone away. But maybe Aerin had composed an SOS in those first few moments of getting into the car. Was it possible?

Aerin had an iPhone, which meant her texts and photos might be linked to her left-behind iPad, which was in Madison's lap. When Madison finally remembered Aerin's password to unlock the screen—she'd used Aerin's phone once or twice, and Aerin had recited it to

her—she hadn't found any photos that had loaded to the cloud from the last hour. As far as Aerin's texts, she hadn't yet authorized them to show up on the iPad. But if they could figure out her iTunes password, the texts would load onto the device.

"I'm going to try that Viola person, too. You know, Brett's 'sister'?" Seneca typed on her phone. "Maybe she knows something about where Brett went." Maddox watched as she pulled up a new e-mail, using the address for Viola the realtor had given her. "I wish we had a phone number," she muttered. She searched Viola's e-mail address in Google for personal details, but the inquiry yielded nothing.

"Maybe we could question people in Avignon about what they knew about the guy they knew as Gabriel, too," Maddox suggested. "Maybe he had another beach house somewhere?"

"But everyone thinks Gabriel died in a car crash." Madison didn't look up from typing.

"Uh, well, obviously *that's* a lie." Seneca pushed her phone back into her pocket, having finished the e-mail to Viola. "Unless Brett was calling us from beyond the grave."

When she sighed, Maddox saw pain flashing across her face. What had it felt like to hear Brett's voice just now? It was her mother's *murderer*. . . . He couldn't even imagine. He opened his mouth, desperate to say something to console her, to make it better, but he had no words.

Suddenly, Madison let out a *yes*. "Got it. Aerin's password is *CapnCrunch*."

"How did you figure that out?" Seneca asked.

"She used the same password for this fashion-consignment app we downloaded a couple days ago." The iPad made a *bong*; Aerin's texts loaded.

"Well?" Seneca asked impatiently. "Anything?"

Madison filled her cheeks with air, then blew out. “Nope. No text drafts.”

“Ugh.” Maddox grabbed his foot and started to stretch his left quad, then his right. Moving felt good, so he leaned over to touch his toes, feeling the muscles in his back release.

“What are you doing?” Seneca snapped, staring at him.

“I haven’t run in a couple of days,” Maddox admitted, still upside down. “I’m starting to get stir-crazy.”

“But she did send something to her mom about forty-five minutes ago,” Madison interrupted. She had moved to the part of the store that featured a whole bunch of Get Well Soon helium balloons. “And we noticed she was missing, what, an hour ago?”

Maddox stood from his stretch, feeling overwhelmed. It was hard to believe so much had happened in sixty minutes.

Madison tapped the screen. “Her text said *Me too, see you soon*. And then her mom goes, *Have a great time in LA!*” Madison wrinkled her nose. “Wasn’t Aerin going back to Dexby?”

Seneca wrinkled her nose. “Yeah, that makes no sense.”

“Aerin doesn’t write back to her mom saying one thing or another,” Madison went on. She scrolled back through previous texts. “Nor do they talk about LA before this.” She twisted the bracelet around her wrist. “Is this some future trip we don’t know about?”

But then Seneca shook her head. “Maybe Aerin *wasn’t* going to LA. Maybe Brett’s hacked Aerin’s e-mail and wrote about the trip. He planted that idea in Aerin’s mom’s mind.”

Madison’s eyes widened. “Brett didn’t want Aerin’s mom instantly freaking out about where she was, so he made up a story that she was leaving town for a while. So her kidnapping was premeditated?”

“Definitely premeditated.” Seneca absently touched one of the balloons in the shape of Mickey Mouse and then gasped. “Could that be why Brett told us we have until Wednesday to solve that other case? Maybe that’s when Brett-as-Aerin told her mom she was coming back.”

“So if we solve it by Wednesday, he returns Aerin to us, and all is well.” Madison tried to talk this out. “But if she doesn’t, her mom starts to get worried and calls the cops. Though by then Brett and Aerin will be long gone, and we’ll have to confess that we knew Aerin was missing all along and didn’t do anything about it, and . . .”

Maddox stared miserably into the hospital atrium. Nurses wheeled a woman and a newborn to the exit. The pianist was playing the theme to *Star Wars*. Doctors in scrubs scrolled past with coffees. Life was moving on while Aerin was trapped. It was incalculably cruel.

He felt in over his head. Brett was *crazy*. And last time, when they didn’t tell the police right away, Brett twisted the story to suit his needs, *and* he got to escape. If they could just call the cops, they’d have real evidence on him this time—a surveillance photo from the hotel. And the cops had actual forensic techniques, way more than they had access to—especially with Thomas out of commission. The cops might be able to find a fingerprint or element of DNA that they missed. And they could investigate “Gabriel’s” car crash, too. It wasn’t that Maddox didn’t love sleuthing—it was a huge adrenaline high, and he was thrilled when pieces of a case came together. But this all felt so precarious—lawless, even. They were *kids*. They weren’t equipped to handle this.

There was another reason Maddox wanted to call in the police, and she was shivering among the floral arrangements, dressed in a breezy, floaty dress and beat-up Vans and wearing that cute, I’m-thinking-really-really-hard expression. Seneca Frazier was the girl

of Maddox's dreams. *Literally*: Every time he dropped into sleep, Seneca floated into his fantasies; each dream was sexier than the last. He felt she knew every version of him—the investigative side, the nerdy side, the insecure side. His friends from school only knew the jock side—everything else, he'd worked hard to cover up. He thought he knew her well, too—and he wanted to know her even better.

A little over an hour ago, he'd gotten up the guts to kiss her. It had felt beyond amazing, but it hadn't been enough. To him, a measly eleven-second kiss (yep, he'd mentally timed it) was the equivalent of downing a Gu energy packet after a long road race. And now that it had finally happened, he was reluctant to dive back into more danger. If Brett took Aerin and hurt Thomas, couldn't one of them be next? What if that was Seneca? Or his sister? Or *him*? No, he'd rather call the cops, hide away somewhere, let someone else handle it.

Except they couldn't. Here they were, *again*, handling it on their own.

"So I guess we jump on this other case, right?" Madison broke the silence. "This Damien kid?"

Seneca pinched the space between her eyes. "I feel for him, I really do, but I don't know if we have time."

Maddox felt alarmed. "But . . . don't we *have* to?"

"This is Brett's master plan. He's going to make us run around like chickens with our heads cut off while he plots something awful we don't see coming." Seneca looked hard from Maddox to Madison. "Think about it, guys. Aerin's kidnapping was premeditated—we already figured that out. So when did Brett plan for it, and how did he carry it out without tipping us off? It all happened while we were searching for Chelsea. While we were focused on her, Brett was securing the

place where he'd take Aerin, and grabbing a getaway car that looks just like Thomas's, and figuring out how to fake his death, and watching Aerin's every move. If we look into Damien, we might fall into that trap again . . . and who knows what he has planned next."

Maddox shifted from foot to foot, still thinking about Brett picking them off one by one. Maybe Seneca had a point . . . but it seemed foolish to just ignore Brett. "He said that if we don't solve the Damien case, he'll hurt Aerin. Can't we try to solve it *and* find them?"

Seneca made a face. "I don't like dividing our efforts."

"But Brett gave us a way to get Aerin back. Shouldn't we at least try to find Damien?"

Seneca scoffed. "Since when has Brett been a man of his word?"

Maddox stared at his phone. The CNC message thread about the case was on the screen. Damien Dover, a quiet, introspective nine-year-old who loved Harry Potter, hadn't come home from school on a Thursday afternoon two months before. After searching and interviewing, the townspeople noticed that Damien's piano teacher, Ms. Sadie Sage, had vanished, too. Then the police found a surveillance camera image that was dug up from a Trailways bus station of Sadie and Damien standing together the night he was taken. They were together . . . going *somewhere*.

An amber alert went out, but not a single soul called in a tip. After only a month, the police held a press conference saying they'd failed. "So weird," Maddox said out loud. Why had the cops given up so easily?

He peered through the interior double doors marked *ER* across the atrium. What were the doctors doing to Thomas in there? Would he be okay? What if one of *them* was next? Then he turned back to Seneca. "I think we have to do both things. Remember how Brett said that he

wanted updates? What if he gets pissed when we don't have any information for him? Sure, maybe he's bluffing, but do we really want to toy with Aerin's life?"

Seneca pulled her bottom lip into her mouth and stared blankly at a huge spray of pink and purple flowers. After a moment, she let out a huge sigh. "You're right. I just hate that Brett's in the driver's seat again."

"I do, too." Maddox was glad she'd come to her senses. Sometimes, with Brett, she could get irrational, laser-focused, forgetting everyone and everything around her. He understood when she got that way, he really did—he'd go crazy, too, if he were battling the maniac who'd murdered one of his parents. It was his job, he figured, to bring her down to earth, show her the big picture.

"Excuse me?"

Maddox turned. A tall, sandy-haired male doctor in blue scrubs had crossed the atrium to find them. "You're here for Thomas Grove, right?"

"Yes." Seneca stood straighter. "Is he okay?"

The doctor pressed his lips together. "He has multiple fractures, a broken arm, facial contusions. He's also suffered a few second-degree burns, some smoke inhalation, and a possible concussion. But if his MRI is clear, he'll be on his feet in a few days."

Maddox swallowed hard. A few *days*? Then again, it could have been much, much worse. "Can we see him?" he asked in a wobbly voice.

"We have him sedated. It's best if he sleeps." The doctor gave them a kind smile. "Call the hospital tomorrow morning. He'll probably be more lucid then."

"Thanks," Seneca said gratefully. Everyone shook his hand. The doctor nodded and pivoted back toward the ER doors. Maddox felt

relieved . . . but also unsettled. Where did they go from here? How would they start looking for Damien? Then he thought about Brett and Aerin together. Where were they going? What was churning in Brett's brain? If only they could talk to someone who knew the *real* Brett, not his aliases. He stared at the lettering on the hospital sign until his eyes blurred. Suddenly, an idea came to him like a bolt, and he straightened up.

"Wait a minute." He pointed at a large hotel directory that hung behind the piano guy, who was now playing, appropriately, "Piano Man." "Chelsea Dawson was brought here. We should talk to *her*. She spent hours locked up with Brett. Maybe he gave a hint about who he is, and where he might be going, or . . . something."

There was a spark in Seneca's eyes, too. "God, you're so right." She reached over and squeezed Maddox's hand. "Good thinking."

"Thanks." His stomach felt like it was swinging from one of those rope vines on *American Ninja Warrior*. He wanted to pull Seneca close. Just for a couple of minutes. Just to further define what they'd just become. And to tell her, in no uncertain terms, how protective he felt, and how much her safety meant to him.

But it was time to go back into the hospital and ask some questions. Maddox's stomach twisted at the thought of coming face-to-face with Chelsea again. Just this morning, she'd been stuck in a house with Brett, forcibly obeying his every whim, probably scared out of her mind. It was the same situation, he realized with a shudder, that Aerin was in right now.

Even more reason to find out how Chelsea was doing, coming through it alive.