

PROLOGUE

Two Weeks from Now

SIERRA FOX HURRIED DOWN THE MUDDY PATH, TYPING A
message on her phone.

Livestream ran late. Omw.

It autocorrected to **On my way!** just as she hit send. Fantastic. The cheerful tone would make Xavier even angrier.

Sierra glared down at her heels, which were caked with dirt and crushed pine needles. “Ruined,” she muttered. And for what? Why did he need to meet her so far from everyone else? Things were bad between them, but it’s not like they were actually over. Her misstep had been a small thing. A forgivable mistake. Without Xavier . . .

She wouldn’t think about that.

Sierra breathed in the fresh air made sharp by the evergreens that cast long shadows over the ground. A few birds squawked overhead, but otherwise the path was silent. Her classmates were having lunch inside, away from the mud and the damp.

A loud rustling broke through the quiet. Sierra paused to listen, but the noise didn’t come again. *Probably just a forest animal,*

she thought. It had sounded big, though, and she continued a little faster. No student had ever been attacked by a bear, but every year, Dean Whitaker reminded them not to go into the woods alone, especially during cub season.

Suddenly, a huge brown blur streaked across the path, almost hitting her.

“Ah!” Sierra shrieked, covering her mouth with a fist. She wanted to run, but she was frozen in place. The creature stopped a few yards into the woods. Trembling, Sierra forced herself to meet its eyes.

It was a baby doe.

“Stupid deer!” she yelled, sending the doe sprinting into the trees. Sierra tried to calm her racing heart. If she was freaking out over a cute little animal, she must be more nervous about meeting Xavier than she thought.

As she moved down the path, the knitting needles in her bag knocked against her arm, and she carefully shifted the tips away from her skin. Everyone else in the Stitch ‘n’ Bitch Club she’d started used metal needles, but for Sierra, it was wood or nothing. She’d even had her initials burned into the ends.

The greenhouse at the bottom of the path was as lovely as the rest of campus. Tall panes of float glass rose in a Gothic arch, like something out of a storybook. A few special stained-glass pieces were set in casement above the door, which was closed.

Sierra frowned. Xavier had told her he would leave the door propped open, but maybe he hadn’t wanted the rain to blow in. She pressed her face against the nearest glass pane, careful not to smudge her makeup. Nothing moved inside.

The heavy scent of compost and violets made her nose wrinkle as she pushed the door open. It was surprisingly chilly

in the greenhouse—nothing like its typical balminess. The last time she'd been inside was with . . . No, she wouldn't think his name. He'd shown her the tobacco plants he'd been growing to make vape juice.

"You've got to be careful extracting the nicotine," he'd said, pointing at a plant with broad green leaves. "It's strong enough to take down a horse. Dope, right?"

Sierra had not thought it was dope. The only thing she disliked more than guys who smoked were guys who had a passion for killing things.

"Xavi?" she called into the space.

The only answer was a terrified flapping of wings as several birds escaped out a missing windowpane in the peaked roof, revealing the gray sky. She didn't remember the opening being there when she was with *him*, but they'd been preoccupied with other things.

"Xavi, are you in here?" she asked again, walking between the rows of greenery, most of which had been planted by the forensic science students for their experiments.

The chill in the air entered Sierra's bones. Had Xavier stood her up? Was it possible he was serious about dumping her? Angry tears pricked her eyes like needles. She wouldn't let that happen. They belonged together.

A strange snuffling sound, like an animal crawling among the plants, made her hurry toward the table at the back of the greenhouse, where pothos vines spilled onto the ground, blocking her view of whatever was behind it.

Sierra stopped dead when she reached the table. Something white was sticking out at an odd angle, nearly touching the uprooted remains of the tobacco plants. There were plenty of

tools lying around the greenhouse, but this was something else. Something she recognized.

Xavier's shoe.

Sierra rushed around the corner, nearly twisting her ankle in her heels. When she saw what lay beyond the shoe, she screamed an endless agonized scream that traveled out of the greenhouse, up the path, and into the lunchroom.

At a table near the back door, Dulce Castillo's ears perked up. Her best friend, Emi, was still talking about how unfair it was that Xavier Torres got picked for everything.

"Shh," Dulce said. "Can you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Emi asked. "Everyone chomping on their food? Of course I can. It's disgusting."

"No, it sounds like—" Dulce paused, trying to listen over the sound of the noon church bells ringing down the road. "Never mind. It's gone."

Twenty minutes later, Sierra Fox came sprinting into the lunchroom from the hallway, her red curls in a tangle and her sheath dress covered in mud.

"Xavi's in the greenhouse!" she screamed, her voice full of anguish. "He's been murdered!"

Sierra gazed around the cafeteria in wide-eyed horror before crumpling to the ground. The entire student body fell silent.

Then everyone broke into applause.

"That was fast," Emi said over the clapping. "Usually no one finds the body until after Labor Day." She began stuffing chips into her mouth. "We should finish up so we can get to the greenhouse first. Early bird solves the murder."

Dulce smiled. Xavier Torres was dead. The game had begun.

1



WHEN MY DAD DROPS ME OFF AT SCHOOL, IT TAKES ME A minute to figure out what's different about the main building. Nothing obvious has changed. The red bricks look like they always do: old but clean, as if the gardener power washed them over the summer. The mansion still spreads like an L across the grassy lawn, the longer left side resembling a fallen redwood grown fat with ivy and steel windows. Even the brass lion knocker hangs on the door with a comforting familiarity.

My eyes move up to the black eye of the security camera that's watching my dad's car turn out the rocky front drive and onto the highway. He spent so long taking first-day pictures that the parking area near the forest is now silent except for a warm breeze shaking the stop signs on the buses that bring students in from outside Cape Cherry.

"Aha," I say, finally spotting what's new. Someone has draped wreaths of daffodils around the winged gargoyles squatting on top of the gables. They glare down at me like I personally hung the decorations around their skinny gray necks.

"It's an improvement," I call up at them before remembering that I'm already risking a tardy.

The front door is unlocked, but I give the brass lion a friendly tap anyway before hurrying down a long hallway filled with portraits of James Everett's family and the more famous criminologists who have taught at J. Everett High. A few dried flower clusters still cling to the gold tassels of the rug, remnants of the summer weddings that help fund the school's scholarships.

Right before I pass the front office, the door swings open, and I almost collide with a tall blond boy whose eyes are hidden behind tinted glasses. Even though he's wearing a ridiculous sports coat that makes him look like a leftover wedding guest, he's the kind of attractive that's impossible to miss, so I know he can't be a returning student.

Backpack slung over his shoulder. Schedule peeking out of a folder stamped with the J. Everett High crest. School map hanging loosely from his fingers.

Conclusion: He must be a freshman or a transfer.

"Sorry," he says, holding up an apologetic hand. Then his eyes meet mine, and he smiles brightly as if he recognizes me. "I was so anxious to escape all those transfer forms I wasn't watching where I was going."

A transfer, then. "It's fine," I say. "I've been talking to statues, so we're both having bad mornings."

The boy's smile doesn't falter, even though I've just admitted to conversing with inanimate objects. "Can you point me to the ballroom?" he asks. "The dean's assistant gave me this map, but—" He stops, staring down at the hastily drawn lines that are supposed to be J. Everett's hallways.

"It's confusing at first," I say, beckoning him to follow me. He walks with a slouching confidence, his long strides easily keeping up with my pace. "Dr. Everett had to keep converting rooms

in the house as he accepted more students because Cape Cherry's town council wouldn't let him build higher than two stories."

The boy glances back down at the map. "Must be weird to take chemistry in someone's old bedroom."

"Wait until you see the blood spatter photographs in the bathroom," I tell him.

The ballroom is packed with students for the first-day assembly, which thankfully hasn't started yet. Emi, usually the late one, is already seated, her tulle skirt puffed out over one of the white wedding chairs still set out in rows. Little stuffed animal bags and bright plastic toys are slung across her ripped T-shirt, which is hand-printed with the words **YOU CAN'T HANDLE THE TRUTH**. As usual, she looks like she belongs in Tokyo's fashion district, where her dad lives, instead of a seaside town in Virginia.

When she sees me hovering in the doorway, she waves at the empty seat next to her with giant arm motions, making stacks of candy bracelets shake up her forearms. "Dulce!" she calls. "Come sit with us!"

Us is apparently her and Rose Martin, a girl we had gym with last year who spent class meditating instead of jogging in the woods with everyone else. We barely know her, so I can't think of a single reason why she's sitting on our side of the room when the rest of her friends are across the aisle with Sierra.

I consider asking the new boy to join us, but before I can say anything, he ducks his head and moves to an empty corner seat in front of Emi, as if he's embarrassed to be arriving late. I follow him, confused by his sudden attack of self-consciousness.

"Who's the hottie?" Emi says when I sit down.

I glance at the boy, hoping he hasn't heard her, but with

almost two hundred other voices in the room, she probably could have shouted the words.

“Transfer student,” I say before quickly adding, “And no, I won’t introduce you. He and I exchanged ten words max, so you can introduce yourself.”

“A new record!” Emi looks at the Keroppi watch on her bony wrist.

“What are you talking about?”

“I bet Rose it would take you less than two minutes to say something grumpy, but it was only ten seconds. She owes me a root beer float.”

I ignore the fact that Emi is making bets about me with a stranger. “Wait until you hear my thoughts on how many barrettes a person can wear at one time,” I say, sticking my tongue out at her as I tap one of literally dozens of rainbow clips dotting her silky black braids.

“Happiness is in us, not in things.” Rose leans forward in her seat, smiling softly at me. Her name suits her. She’s plump, with porcelain skin, pale blue eyes, and rosy cheeks, like a hobbit from *Lord of the Rings* if hobbits had pink hair.

“Says the girl who lives in a gated neighborhood on the beach.” Emi snorts.

I expect Rose to look hurt by Emi’s criticism, but she just spins one of Emi’s candy bracelets around on her wrist and giggles. The casualness of her touch makes it seem like they’re friends, which makes no sense because Emi never talked to her in gym. A little sting of unease pricks my belly; did Emi hang out with Rose over break without telling me?

“Why does it look like Dean Whitaker spent the summer

inside an oven?” Emi asks, watching the head of our school walk to the microphone at the front of the room.

When Dean Whitaker reaches the mic, he taps it before flashing us a smile that looks very white against his tanned skin. It’s hard to tell his age because he dyes his hair, but he’s probably over forty, and richly polished, like he belongs on ski slopes or in a men’s magazine. I don’t see it, but I know plenty of students—Emi included—who have drawn hearts around his name in their notebooks.

New porcelain veneers. Shoes made of alligator skin. Picture in the school’s “Welcome Back” email standing in front of the Trevi Fountain.

Conclusion: Being engaged to Mayor Fox has some real perks.

“Good morning,” Dean Whitaker says, his deep baritone booming around the ballroom. “I’d like to take this opportunity to welcome you to the Dr. James Everett School of Criminology!” He smiles at a group of students sitting in the front row. “It’s wonderful to see so many familiar faces, and a joy to see all the new ones. Dr. Everett would have been proud that this freshman class is not only the most diverse in the school’s thirty-year history, but that they’ve also achieved the highest ever pass rate on the aptitude exam. It’s a testament to each of you and to our incredible teachers that Virginia’s best and brightest young minds continue to show interest in making the field of criminology more dynamic and equitable than ever before.”

He reaches for the iPad his assistant is holding. “I’m going to take roll call and give out your homeroom assignments,” he continues. “But before I do, I want to remind you that after the assembly, Cape Cherry’s very own Mayor Fox will be giving us the details of this year’s Grand Game, so you’ll want to stick

around for that.” He beams at his fiancée, who’s standing in the corner of the ballroom, arms crossed tightly over a pink plaid jacket.

“I think someone spiked her coffee with lemons,” Emi says, pointing at Mayor Fox’s pursed red lips. “Or cyanide.”

“Like mother, like daughter,” I whisper, glancing at Sierra. Back when we were friends, she thought her mom running for mayor was embarrassing, but now she’s sitting ramrod straight in her seat like she’s worried Mayor Fox will lose the November election if she’s spotted slouching.

Not sitting next to her boyfriend. Red curls perfect, like he hasn’t been running his hands through them in the parking lot before school. Heavy concealer under her eyes.

Conclusion: She and Xavier have been fighting.

While Dean Whitaker runs through the alphabet, Emi relaces her knee-high boots. They’re so stilted they add four inches to her height, but she’s still shorter than I am, even though I’m not tall.

Average height, average build, average brown hair and skin. Nothing about me stands out, except maybe the birthmark between my eyes, which looks like a bunny.

“Dulce Death Castillo,” Dean Whitaker calls when he reaches the Cs, drawing out the first syllable of dool-say.

“Present,” I say. The blond transfer student peeks over his shoulder with raised eyebrows, as if he isn’t sure he heard my middle name right. My mom never had the test scores to get into J. Everett, but she named me after her favorite detective (Lord Peter Death Bredon Wimsey) in the hope that I’d have better luck.

“You’re in homeroom with Ms. Moss,” Dean Whitaker says, nodding in my direction.

The boy shoots me an apologetic grin before turning back

around, like he feels bad he didn't thank me for helping him find the ballroom. I trace the echo of his smile in my mind.

Cocky. Crooked. Confident.

Conclusion: He and Emi match.

"Emi Nakamura?" Dean Whitaker says a few minutes later.

"Here against my will!" she yells, which gets a laugh from several students, including Rose, who playfully tugs on one of Emi's braids. I'm happy when the dean says Emi's in homeroom with me and not with Rose in Dr. Saka's amphitheater full of dead things.

After Dean Whitaker calls the final name, he hands the iPad back to his assistant. "Those of you who don't want to stay for Mayor Fox's presentation may head to the breakfast buffet," he says. "But you should know that this year's prize money is significantly more than last year, so it would be in your best interests to hear her out."

Despite the dollars being dangled in front of their faces, at least a hundred students get noisily to their feet, messing up the perfect rows of wedding chairs as they dash for the exit. That's the thing about private-school kids: Tons of them are rich enough to care more about fresh doughnuts than cash.

Once the others have left, Dean Whitaker smiles at those of us who are still seated. "As most of you know," he says, his voice even louder now that there are fewer bodies in the ballroom, "Dr. Everett began the tradition of hosting an elaborate murder mystery each year to give his students the chance to put their criminology learning into practice. Today, the Fox Family Trust, which generously helps fund our school"—he nods at Mayor Fox, who smiles like stretching her lips is painful—"continues this tradition. While the competition does demand a substantial time

commitment, it also comes with rewards, which I'll let Mayor Fox explain to you."

Mayor Fox's Jimmy Choos flash like puddles of blood as she clicks across the floor. Her hair, the same red as her daughter's, is cut into a severe French bob, like a model had a baby with a drill sergeant.

"Thank you, Stan—I mean Dean Whitaker—for that introduction," she says in a voice sharp enough to cut glass. "James Everett and my dad were lifelong best friends, so I spent much of my childhood inside this house. Some of my earliest memories are of him in the library, smoking a pipe while he read to me and Claire in his leather chair."

"Maybe *she* killed Claire Everett," Emi says under her breath.

"Despite the vicious crime that stole his daughter's life," Mayor Fox continues, "James Everett never lost his love of creating murder mysteries for his students. Which is why, when he died ten years ago, I decided to continue the Grand Game in his memory." She sniffs like she hates what she's about to say. "Many of your classmates left before they could hear about the prize money, so I'd like you to spread the word that this year, in order to encourage more students to play, the board has voted to give the winning team thirty thousand dollars."

Emi makes a choking sound. "That's twice what it was last year," she says, her voice rising above the disbelieving whispers spreading across the ballroom. "It'd pay for our whole trip!"

"What trip?" Rose asks, leaning in like she's part of our team, which she very much is not.

"We're going to England after graduation next year," Emi says. "We want to see Dorothy Sayers's house and stay at every place a Lord Wimsey book was set."

“Sounds fun,” Rose says, but I can tell she doesn’t actually think so. I could explain it’s the trip my mom planned and never got to go on, but it’s none of Rose’s business.

Dean Whitaker comes back to the microphone to settle everyone down. “Game packets will be available in the front office after school,” he says. “They’ll contain police interviews, witness statements, an autopsy report, and pictures of physical evidence—all the things you’ll need to solve the murder of the soon-to-be-deceased Tim Riggs.” He smiles. “Everything *except* the crime scene itself, which one of you unlucky students will stumble across very soon.”

Scattered giggles echo off the walls. The allure of a corpse, even a fake one, seems to increase every year.

Dean Whitaker grabs an envelope from Mayor Fox. “And now, the moment you’ve been waiting for. The naming of the body.”

The room holds its breath. Emi clutches at my knee like it might bring us good luck. Any previous player is eligible to be the murder victim, and everyone wants to get picked because they get extra clues to help them stage the scene. The team with the body wins over 60 percent of the time.

Dean Whitaker opens the envelope and slides out a piece of folded paper. “This year’s victim will be . . .” He unfolds the paper. “Xavier Torres!” he says like he’s announcing an Oscar winner.

Cheers erupt from Xavier’s friends as he jogs to the front of the room, but a few boos join them, Emi’s included. “The lottery is rigged!” she yells, only half joking, but no one pays attention to her except for the transfer student, who turns and peers at Emi through his tinted glasses.

Emi attracts guys like hummingbirds to nectar, so it's no surprise when his gaze lingers on her. It's not until he catches me watching him that he bites his lip and turns back to face Dean Whitaker. They're nice lips, like tulip petals. But all that matters is that Emi and I haven't been chosen.

"Why is it never us?" I say.

"We're the smallest team." Emi shrugs, her protest already forgotten. "The odds aren't in our favor."

Xavier's gelled bronze highlights and picture-perfect smile are on full display when he returns to his seat. In his navy-blue sweater and slacks, he looks like a Puerto Rican pop star about to play a round of golf. When Sierra stands up to give him a quick peck on the cheek, his chiseled jaw flinches.

"I've seen dead flies with more passion," Emi says.

Enzo Torres, Xavier's younger brother, looks just as unimpressed. He's the off-brand version of Xavier, and everything he's wearing, right down to the spike in his eyebrow, is black. The Torres brothers can't stand each other, so I have no idea why Sierra let Enzo onto their team unless it was to rub in my face that he'd quit ours. As if we'd miss his outbursts.

"I hate that Sierra thinks she's better than us," I say, grinding my teeth. "Promise me we won't lose to her again."

Emi grabs the Magic 8 Ball key chain that's always attached to her teddy bear backpack and gives it a hard shake. "Will Dulce and I make Sierra cry with our badass detective skills?"

We watch as the triangle swims lazily around in its ooze until it stops on **IT IS DECIDEDLY SO**.

"See?" She grabs my hand, her plastic rings digging into my palm. "This year is going to give us nothing but rainbows. We'll find a forensics student a hundred times better than Enzo."

At her words, the new boy spins around again. "Are you a detective?" he asks Emi.

Emi drops her elbows onto her skirt, obviously thrilled he's talking to her. "Dulce and I are the Lord Wimseys," she says, leaning closer to the back of his seat.

"The whats?"

"The teams are named after detectives from books," she explains. "The list was in the 'Welcome Back' email. You didn't see it?" When the boy shakes his head, she says, "The Miss Marples. The Sherlocks. The Lord Wimseys. It lets them give us a literature credit for the game." She bops her head in my direction. "We're the only team with two detectives, though."

"How does that work?" he asks.

"Dulce collects facts, and I read people's emotions."

The boy grins. "You know what I'm feeling?"

"Of course, new kid," Emi says. "You're nervous, but not too nervous, because you're tall and good-looking, so you know you'll be popular anywhere you go, but you're also worried your public-school classes might not have prepared you for the academics here."

The boy raises his eyebrows. "What makes you think I'm not from another private school?"

Emi points to me, and I pick up my cue.

"You're too dressed up," I say. "You picked your clothes based on the idea of a private school, not on the reality."

"Might want to lose the sports coat," Emi smirks.

Unfazed and still smiling, he takes off his coat and stuffs it into his backpack. "I wouldn't want to play against you two."

"You should join a team fast," Emi says. "Otherwise you'll end up with a bunch of freshmen. What capsule are you in?"

Before the boy can answer, the bell rings, and Dean Whitaker yells, “Happy detecting, everyone!” as the people around us grab their bags and get to their feet. The new student gives me and Emi one last grin and then heads for homeroom with . . .

I frown. Why can’t I remember what teacher he has homeroom with?

Little alarm bells ring at the back of my mind as I realize: Dean Whitaker never called his name.

WHEN MY DAD AND I SHOW UP FOR OUR WEEKLY MONDAY-

night dinner at Maldonado's Pizza, we're guided to a red leatherette booth by Beth Calhoun, the sheriff's daughter. She's technically Sierra's stepsister (Sheriff Calhoun was married to Mayor Fox when we were younger), but even though I've spent countless days at Sierra's house, I don't know Beth or her sister at all because they stayed with their mom after the divorce.

In middle school, Sierra became obsessed with the idea of having sisters, so we started a pretend detective agency called Death & Fox Investigations to solve "The Case of How Beth and Avery's Mom Kidnapped Them." It was the only reason we could think of that they would choose not to move into the Fox mansion. We discovered, through the not-very-exciting interrogation of Mayor Fox, that Beth and Avery lived with their mom because the court had awarded her custody.

I'd like to believe a tragic past is the reason Beth thrusts laminated menus at us with undisguised hostility before returning to her hostess stand, but I'm pretty sure it's because she hates J. Everett High as much as her father does.

"*Such* a pleasant girl," my dad says theatrically, bringing his

hand to his chest as he watches Beth seat another family. “We’re clearly her favorite customers. She’ll probably bring us sodas on the house.”

“Or maybe a free dessert,” I say.

“Or a puppy.” He laughs.

Bushy black beard. Round belly. Always cheerful.

Conclusion: My dad is a young Mexican Santa Claus.

“We’re finally going to beat Rocco tonight, *conejita*,” my dad says, his mustache twitching with excitement, while I cringe at being called *bunny*, the childhood nickname my mom gave me that he still won’t let go even though my birthmark has faded a lot since I was little. “I’ve been thinking about it all week, and there’s no way he has the ingredients I’ve come up with.”

A waiter’s board shorts appear at my elbow. “Welcome to Maldonado’s, home of Cape Cherry’s cheesiest pizza,” he says from somewhere above me. “What would you like to order tonight?”

“Two Sprites, please,” I say. “And we won’t be needing these.” I go to hand the waiter our menus, but they slide out of my fingers and onto the floor. We bend down for them at the same time, almost knocking heads.

“Sorry—” I groan, but I stop short when I see his face, which looks familiar even though I’m positive he’s never been our server before. He’s wearing a necklace made of tiny beads, like all the local surfers do, and there’s something nice about the lift of his lips. But it’s his eyes that capture my attention. One is blue-green, while the other is brown, giving the impression of twins that got entangled in the womb. They were hidden behind tinted glasses this morning.

“Hey,” I say. “You were at the assembly.”

"And you're the girl who talks to statues," he says, lips curving into a smile. I'm surprised he recognizes me. I thought he'd forget my existence in the whirlwind of meeting Emi. She talked about how hot he was all day, even interrupting our English teacher's lecture to show me that her Magic 8 Ball had promised he'd kiss her at the Poisoner's Festival. "I just transferred from Cape Cherry," he adds. "You know, the *public* high school."

"Must have been last minute," I say. "Otherwise you would have been on the roll-call list."

He scratches the side of his neck, leaving pink streaks. "Uh, yeah, it was."

My dad clears his throat like he doesn't see what any of this has to do with dinner, and the boy draws a notepad from his apron.

"If you don't need menus, I'm guessing you're regulars," he says, poisoning his pen at the top of the paper. "What'll you have?" He asks the question with a fake accent like he's James Bond, and my initial impression of him crystallizes: He's an extrovert, and he thinks he's charming.

"There's this game we play with the owner," my dad starts, but the boy quickly interrupts.

"Oh, *you're* the ones," he says, as if Rocco has told him all about us. "What two toppings will you challenge us with tonight?"

My dad knows Rocco from high school, and after my mom died, he suggested we all play a dinner game. Every week, we pick two toppings, and if he doesn't have them in the back, we get our pizza for free.

Rocco has three rules: Our choice must be vegetable or animal. It can't be anything extinct or endangered. And it can't be something illegal, rare, or exorbitant, which is why the rosy sea

bass and caviar pizza I tried to stop my dad from ordering last year was disqualified.

“Tell Rocco we want a Cornish game hen and fresh yuzu rind pizza,” my dad says.

“Gross,” I mutter.

“One bird and fruit pizza coming up,” the boy says, clicking his pen shut. Then he winks—winks!—at me and walks away. I’m pretty sure no guy has ever winked at me in my entire life. I’m not sure if I like it or hate it.

Beth Calhoun comes over and bangs our Sprites on the table, smirking when they slosh over and puddle on the checkered tablecloth. The smirk changes to a flirty smile when she walks over to the boy from school, who’s entering our order into a computer. I distantly register the way her fingers play with the black ties of his apron while he types.

He’s a good sport. Likes new things. Flexible.

Conclusion: He’s the opposite of me.

Emi and I play the Grand Game together because the two of us make one perfect Wimsey: She has his sparkling personality, and I weave the facts I collect into a kind of mental tapestry I can view whenever I want. Sometimes I wish I didn’t notice things—like the bright red letters on the hospital bills my dad’s been squirrelling away. I haven’t told Emi that if we don’t win the prize money, our trip to England will be as out of reach as Mars.

As the minutes pass without any pizza, my dad’s smile grows wider. I can almost see him preparing the victory speech he’ll deliver to Rocco. I look over my shoulder for the boy and notice a middle-aged man in a Stetson scowling at us. I’m glad my dad’s too wrapped up in the challenge to notice his nasty glance.

It’s been two years since Sheriff Calhoun announced that my

mom had been drunk driving when she got into a car wreck with Deputy Armstrong, but small towns don't forgive fast, even when the story they've been told is a lie. Maybe especially then.

Fifteen minutes later, the boy from school slides a bubbling pizza into the center of our table. Game hen and yuzu rind.

"Nice try, Jorge," Rocco yells from across the restaurant, where he's spinning dough high in the air.

My dad looks at the pizza with naked shock. "But the grocery store doesn't sell fresh yuzu! I checked!"

"Maybe we should give up," I say. "I don't think we're ever going to win."

"I'll never surrender." My dad's belly almost knocks over his Sprite as he slides out of the booth. "I'm going to find out how Rocco pulled this off."

Once my dad's gone, the boy stares at me with a sly smile. "Can *you* figure out how we did it?"

"Oh, um—" I stutter.

The last person to set me a puzzle at the dinner table was my mom, and since her death, I've been going all bunny in the headlights whenever someone does something that reminds me of her.

"I . . ."

The boy is starting to look like he wished he hadn't asked, but luckily, my body chooses that moment to unfreeze.

"Yes," I say. "Armchair solves are easy."

"All right, impress me."

Rocco's pizzas take twelve minutes to bake. The boy delivered the pizza to the table half an hour after we ordered. There's a bus pass sticking out of his pocket, so he didn't drive to work.

Conclusion: He purchased the yuzu somewhere he could walk to in under ten minutes.

It was me who suggested Lord Wimsey's methods to Emi freshman year, and since then I've been hammering them into her head: Ignore the motives and the psychology. Forget the gossip and the whys. Figure out *how* a thing was done, and you'll discover who did it.

The solution to the new kid's puzzle pops into my mind fully formed thanks to a book I read about foods that might be toxic to Penny, the stray cat that stays with us during bad weather: Yuzu is from Japan.

"The sushi place three blocks over," I say, crossing my fingers under the table because I really don't want to fail in front of him. "I bet they use fresh yuzu."

A slow smile blooms on the boy's lips. "Wow," he says.

"I'm right?" I ask.

"They use it in their cocktails." He slides into my dad's abandoned seat like he cares more about our conversation than earning tips.

"I'm sure you could have guessed it too," I say. "They don't let just anyone into J. Everett."

"There's your first mistake," he says, looking at me from under long blond lashes with unnecessary intensity. "I'm not in the detective capsule."

"Journalism?" I ask, then quickly regret my guess. He has the looks of a news anchor, but the superficial charm of TV-star wannabes like Xavier Torres is always covering up an acid vat of insecurity, and this boy's confidence doesn't seem fake.

"Forensic science," he says, playing with his pen. "I want to be a doctor."

My stomach clenches, though that may be from the smell of

the game hen and yuzu. A student in the forensics capsule is exactly what the Lord Wimseys need.

The problem is that the last time we invited a guy Emi liked onto the team, we got Enzo. I wish I'd brought my flip phone so I could text Emi and get her to promise not to let this boy be a giant distraction. If I wait until tomorrow, there's a high chance he'll be taken because every team is now required to play the game with someone from forensics, and it's the smallest capsule at school. I grind my teeth, annoyed that I'm going to have to make the decision myself.

I usually have a good sense for people. I can tell if they're lying or if they suck. Kind of like a golden retriever. But, weirdly, I can't with him. He's giving off two vibes—split, like his eyes. His good nature seems real, but there's something distant about him, like he's hiding part of himself behind his smiles.

Then again, we all have secrets. Pieces of ourselves we bury deep. I look into his blue-green eye and see the unpredictability of the ocean. The way the water draws you out so gently you don't know you're far from shore until it's too late. Then there's his brown eye, which looks like the center of a sunflower. Warm, with a strong stalk. Always reaching for the light.

He points to my soda glass. "Do you want more Sprite? I can put grenadine in it if you like Shirley Temples."

His kindness stirs something in my brain that makes the choice for me.

"Emi and I need a forensics student," I tell him. "The rules say teams can have up to eight players, but Emi and I have agreed to never have more than three, so if we win, you're guaranteed a third of the prize money. Ten thousand dollars."

The boy's thick eyebrows fall into a confused furrow. "You're inviting me to be on your team? Just like that?"

My brain begins to backtrack. I thought the way he smiled at Emi during the assembly meant he'd jump at the chance, but maybe I misread him.

"Aren't you going to test me?" he presses.

"Oh, right, yeah." His presence has made my sense of order slip. "What's the most likely cause of a hyoid fracture?" I ask, posing the first medical question that pops into my mind.

He answers without hesitation. "Manual strangulation."

"Good enough for me," I say. "Do you want to play the game with us?"

He bites his top lip and traces the squares of the tablecloth with a finger. He's going to say no, I suddenly realize, my heart sinking. I should have waited for Emi. She could have glammed up the offer. Talked about the fun parts of the competition. That would have appealed more to a guy like him than my facts.

Then he smiles, and my heart buoys back up to my chest. "Sure, why not?" he says.

"Really?"

He laughs at my surprise. "But only if you tell me why you picked this Duke of Whimsey guy," he says. "I've never even heard of him."

"Lord Wimsey," I correct, a pang of unease making me hesitate over my next words. Explaining why I love Wimsey is always awkward because there's no way to talk about him without bringing up my mom. Which is hard enough, but since the boy is from Cape Cherry High, he might already have heard the bullshit story about how she died.

I plunge forward, hoping he doesn't keep up with local news.

"My mom was a huge murder-mystery fan," I say, watching him process my use of the past tense. The skin around his lips tightens a little, but otherwise he doesn't react. "My dad had to convert our garage into a library because every wall in our house was piled high with paperbacks. He even built her a rolling ladder so she could pretend to be Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*." The boy smiles in an uncomplicated way that suggests he's never heard about the car crash or Sheriff Calhoun's smear campaign against my family. "She used to read me books about Wimsey at bedtime even though my dad told her they would scare me."

"Did they?"

"Oh yeah." A little stab of pain pricks my chest. "But I never told her, because I didn't want her to stop."

Why don't you read him your diary, Dulce?

"Anyway," I say, quickly backpedaling away from the personal, "she read them to me so often that the first fictional character who felt like my friend was a rich British lord whose hobby was solving crimes." I sniff. "Even if everyone else at school would rather name their teams after detectives with their own TV shows."

"C'mon, that last *Sherlock* series was good," he says.

I wrinkle my nose. "Sherlock's brilliant, but he treats people like crap. Wimsey, on the other hand, is kind." *Like you*, I add in my head, thinking of his offer to make me a Shirley Temple. "And fair, and compassionate—"

He interrupts me with a laugh. "Okay, you've convinced me," he says. "I swear my undying fealty to Duke—*Lord* Wimsey, no matter how many flashy Netflix shows my fellow students throw at me."

I giggle-snort like a dork, which makes the boy's eyebrows

arch upward. Talking to gargoyles and snorting like a pig. I'm really on a roll with the good impressions. To cover my embarrassment, I put my head down and search for a pen in my backpack, letting dark waves of hair hide my face. When I find my black Sharpie, I write my number on a napkin.

"I don't use my phone much, but if you text me tomorrow, I'll give you details about our first meeting," I say, my feelings back under control. I stop before I reach the last number. "I know I'm kind of—" I try to think of how to put it. "What I mean is I know Wimsey sounds like a simp, but Emi and I are hardcore. We're playing to win."

His face is unreadable. "I can do hardcore."

"Okay, good." My fingers shake a little as I finish writing my number and hand it over.

The boy stares at it for a few seconds like he thinks there might be a hidden code there. Then he stands up and shoves it into his pocket. "Until tomorrow," he says, giving me a little salute.

As he walks back to the kitchen, I realize I have to stop thinking of him as *the boy*, like he's the only boy in the world. "What's your name?" I call after him.

He turns around, both of his mismatched cat eyes focused on me like I'm the center of the universe. "Zane," he says softly.

My heart jackrabbits against my chest. Lord Wimsey solves cases with a woman he rescued from a murder conviction. Her name is Harriet Vane.

Vane. Zane. It's fate.