CHAPTER 1

When I was a kid, my mom constantly invented games. The Quiet Game. The Who Can Make Their Cookie Last Longer? Game. A perennial favorite, The Marshmallow Game involved eating marshmallows while wearing puffy Goodwill jackets indoors, to avoid turning on the heat. The Flashlight Game was what we played when the electricity went out. We never walked anywhere—we raced. The floor was nearly always lava. The primary purpose of pillows was building forts.

Our longest-lasting game was called I Have A Secret, because my mom said that everyone should always have at least one. Some days she guessed mine. Some days she didn't. We played every week, right up until I was fifteen and one of her secrets landed her in the hospital.

The next thing I knew, she was gone.

"Your move, princess." A gravelly voice dragged me back to the present. "I don't have all day."

"Not a princess," I retorted, sliding one of my knights into place. "Your move, *old man*."

Harry scowled at me. I didn't know how old he was, really, and

I had no idea how he'd come to be homeless and living in the park where we played chess each morning. I did know that he was a formidable opponent.

"You," he grumbled, eyeing the board, "are a horrible person."

Three moves later, I had him. "Checkmate. You know what that means, Harry."

He gave me a dirty look. "I have to let you buy me breakfast." Those were the terms of our long-standing bet. When I won, he couldn't turn down the free meal.

To my credit, I only gloated a little. "It's good to be queen."



I made it to school on time but barely. I had a habit of cutting things close. I walked the same tightrope with my grades: How little effort could I put in and still get an A? I wasn't lazy. I was practical. Picking up an extra shift was worth trading a 98 for a 92.

I was in the middle of drafting an English paper in Spanish class when I was called to the office. Girls like me were supposed to be invisible. We didn't get summoned for sit-downs with the principal. We made exactly as much trouble as we could afford to make, which in my case was none.

"Avery." Principal Altman's greeting was not what one would call warm. "Have a seat."

I sat.

He folded his hands on the desk between us. "I assume you know why you're here."

Unless this was about the weekly poker game I'd been running in the parking lot to finance Harry's breakfasts—and sometimes my own—I had no idea what I'd done to draw the administration's attention. "Sorry," I said, trying to sound sufficiently meek, "but I don't."

Principal Altman let me sit with my response for a moment,

then presented me with a stapled packet of paper. "This is the physics test you took yesterday."

"Okay," I said. That wasn't the response he was looking for, but it was all I had. For once, I'd actually studied. I couldn't imagine I'd done badly enough to merit intervention.

"Mr. Yates graded the tests, Avery. Yours was the only perfect score."

"Great," I said, in a deliberate effort to keep myself from saying *okay* again.

"Not great, young lady. Mr. Yates intentionally creates exams that challenge the abilities of his students. In twenty years, he's never given a perfect score. Do you see the problem?"

I couldn't quite bite back my instinctive reply. "A teacher who designs tests most of his students can't pass?"

Mr. Altman narrowed his eyes. "You're a good student, Avery. Quite good, given your circumstances. But you don't exactly have a history of setting the curve."

That was fair, so why did I feel like he'd gut-punched me?

"I am not without sympathy for your situation," Principal Altman continued, "but I need you to be straight with me here." He locked his eyes onto mine. "Were you aware that Mr. Yates keeps copies of all his exams on the cloud?" He thought I'd cheated. He was sitting there, staring me down, and I'd never felt less seen. "I'd like to help you, Avery. You've done extremely well, given the hand life has dealt you. I would hate to see any plans you might have for the future derailed."

"Any plans I *might* have?" I repeated. If I'd had a different last name, if I'd had a dad who was a dentist and a mom who stayed home, he wouldn't have acted like the future was something I *might* have thought about. "I'm a junior," I gritted out. "I'll graduate next year with at least two semesters' worth of college credit. My test

scores should put me in scholarship contention at UConn, which has one of the top actuarial science programs in the country."

Mr. Altman frowned. "Actuarial science?"

"Statistical risk assessment." It was the closest I could come to double-majoring in poker and math. Besides, it was one of the most employable majors on the planet.

"Are you a fan of calculated risks, Ms. Grambs?"

Like cheating? I couldn't let myself get any angrier. Instead, I pictured myself playing chess. I marked out the moves in my mind. Girls like me didn't get to explode. "I didn't cheat." I said calmly. "I studied."

I'd scraped together time—in other classes, between shifts, later at night than I should have stayed up. Knowing that Mr. Yates was infamous for giving impossible tests had made me want to redefine *possible*. For once, instead of seeing how close I could cut it, I'd wanted to see how far I could go.

And *this* was what I got for my effort, because girls like me didn't ace impossible exams.

"I'll take the test again," I said, trying not to sound furious, or worse, wounded. "I'll get the same grade again."

"And what would you say if I told you that Mr. Yates had prepared a new exam? All new questions, every bit as difficult as the first."

I didn't even hesitate. "I'll take it."

"That can be arranged tomorrow during third period, but I have to warn you that this will go significantly better for you if—"

"Now."

Mr. Altman stared at me. "Excuse me?"

Forget sounding meek. Forget being invisible. "I want to take the new exam right here, in your office, right now."

CHAPTER 2

Rough day?" Libby asked. My sister was seven years older than me and way too empathetic for her own good—or mine.

"I'm fine," I replied. Recounting my trip to Altman's office would only have worried her, and until Mr. Yates graded my second test there was nothing anyone could do. I changed the subject. "Tips were good tonight."

"How good?" Libby's sense of style resided somewhere between punk and goth, but personality-wise, she was the kind of eternal optimist who believed a hundred-dollar-tip was always just around the corner at a hole-in-the-wall diner where most entrees cost $6.99.

I pressed a wad of crumpled singles into her hand. "Good enough to help make rent."

Libby tried to hand the money back, but I moved out of reach before she could. "I will throw this cash at you," she warned sternly.

I shrugged. "I'd dodge."

"You're impossible." Libby grudgingly put the money away, produced a muffin tin out of nowhere, and fixed me with a look. "You *will* accept this muffin to make it up to me."

"Yes, ma'am." I went to take it from her outstretched hand, but then I looked past her to the counter and realized she'd baked more than muffins. There were also cupcakes. I felt my stomach plummet. "Oh no, Lib."

"It's not what you think," Libby promised. She was an apology cupcake baker. A guilty cupcake baker. A please-don't-be-mad-at-me cupcake baker.

"Not what I think?" I repeated softly. "So he's not moving back in?"

"It's going to be different this time," Libby promised. "And the cupcakes are chocolate!"

My favorite.

"It's never going to be different," I said, but if I'd been capable of making her believe that, she'd have believed it already.

Right on cue, Libby's on-again, off-again boyfriend—who had a fondness for punching walls and extolling his own virtues for not punching Libby—strolled in. He snagged a cupcake off the counter and let his gaze rake over me. "Hey, jailbait."

"Drake," Libby said.

"I'm kidding." Drake smiled. "You know I'm kidding, Libby-mine. You and your sister just need to learn how to take a joke."

One minute in, and he was already making us the problem. "This is not healthy," I told Libby. He hadn't wanted her to take me in—and he'd never stopped punishing her for it.

"This is not your apartment," Drake shot back.

"Avery's my sister," Libby insisted.

"Half sister," Drake corrected, and then he smiled again. "Joking."

He wasn't, but he also wasn't wrong. Libby and I shared an absent father, but had different moms. We'd only seen each other once or twice a year growing up. No one had expected her to take

custody of me two years earlier. She was young. She was barely scraping by. But she was *Libby*. Loving people was what she did.

"If Drake's staying here," I told her quietly, "then I'm not."

Libby picked up a cupcake and cradled it in her hands. "I'm doing the best I can, Avery."

She was a people pleaser. Drake liked putting her in the middle. He used me to hurt her.

I couldn't just wait around for the day he stopped punching *walls*.

"If you need me," I told Libby, "I'll be living in my car."

CHAPTER 3

My ancient Pontiac was a piece of junk, but at least the heater worked. Mostly. I parked at the diner, around the back, where no one would see me. Libby texted, but I couldn't bring myself to text back, so I ended up just staring at my phone instead. The screen was cracked. My data plan was practically nonexistent, so I couldn't go online, but I did have unlimited texts.

Besides Libby, there was exactly one person in my life worth texting. I kept my message to Max short and sweet: *You-know-who is back.*

There was no immediate response. Max's parents were big on "phone-free" time and confiscated hers frequently. They were also infamous for intermittently monitoring her messages, which was why I hadn't named Drake and wouldn't type a word about where I was spending the night. Neither the Liu family nor my social worker needed to know that I wasn't where I was supposed to be.

Setting my phone down, I glanced at my backpack in the passenger seat, but decided that the rest of my homework could wait for morning. I laid my seat back and closed my eyes but couldn't sleep, so I reached into the glove box and retrieved the only thing

of value that my mother had left me: a stack of postcards. Dozens of them. Dozens of places we'd planned to go together.

Hawaii. New Zealand. Machu Picchu. Staring at each of the pictures in turn, I imagined myself anywhere but here. Tokyo. Bali. Greece. I wasn't sure how long I'd been lost in thought when my phone beeped. I picked it up and was greeted by Max's response to my message about Drake.

That mother-faxer. And then, a moment later: *Are you okay?*

Max had moved away the summer after eighth grade. Most of our communication was written, and she refused to write curse words, lest her parents see them.

So she got creative.

I'm fine, I wrote back, and that was all the impetus she needed to unleash her righteous fury on my behalf.

THAT FAXING CHIPHEAD CAN GO STRAIGHT TO ELF AND EAT A BAG OF DUCKS!!!

A second later, my phone rang. "Are you really okay?" Max asked when I answered.

I looked back down at the postcards in my lap, and the muscles in my throat tightened. I would make it through high school. I'd apply for every scholarship I qualified for. I'd get a marketable degree that allowed me to work remotely and paid me well.

I'd travel the world.

I let out a long, jagged breath, and then answered Max's question. "You know me, Maxine. I always land on my feet."

CHAPTER 4

The next day, I paid a price for sleeping in my car. My whole body ached, and I had to shower after gym, because paper towels in the bathroom at the diner could only go so far. I didn't have time to dry my hair, so I arrived at my next class sopping wet. It wasn't my best look, but I'd gone to school with the same kids my whole life. I was wallpaper.

No one was looking.

"*Romeo and Juliet* is littered with proverbs—small, pithy bits of wisdom that make a statement about the way the world and human nature work." My English teacher was young and earnest, and I deeply suspected she'd had too much coffee. "Let's take a step back from Shakespeare. Who can give me an example of an everyday proverb?"

Beggars can't be choosers, I thought, my head pounding and water droplets dripping down my back. *Necessity is the mother of invention. If wishes were horses, beggars would ride.*

The door to the classroom opened. An office aide waited for the teacher to look at her, then announced loudly enough for the whole class to hear, "Avery Grambs is wanted in the office."

I took that to mean that someone had graded my test.



I knew better than to expect an apology, but I also wasn't expecting Mr. Altman to meet me at his secretary's desk, beaming like he'd just had a visit from the Pope. "Avery!"

An alarm went off in the back of my head, because no one was ever that glad to see me.

"Right this way." He opened the door to his office, and I caught sight of a familiar neon-blue ponytail inside.

"Libby?" I said. She was wearing skull-print scrubs and no makeup, both of which suggested she'd come straight from work. In the middle of a shift. Orderlies at assisted living facilities couldn't just walk out in the middle of shifts.

Not unless something was wrong.

"Is Dad . . ." I couldn't make myself finish the question.

"Your father is fine." The voice that issued that statement didn't belong to Libby or Principal Altman. My head whipped up, and I looked past my sister. The chair behind the principal's desk was occupied—by a guy not much older than me. *What is going on here?*

He was wearing a suit. He looked like the kind of person who should have had an entourage.

"As of yesterday," he continued, his low, rich voice measured and precise, "Ricky Grambs was alive, well, and safely passed out in a motel room in Michigan, an hour outside of Detroit."

I tried not to stare at him—and failed. *Light hair. Pale eyes. Features sharp enough to cut rocks.*

"How could you possibly know that?" I demanded. *I* didn't even know where my deadbeat father was. How could he?

The boy in the suit didn't answer my question. Instead, he

arched an eyebrow. "Principal Altman?" he said. "If you could give us a moment?"

The principal opened his mouth, presumably to object to being removed from his own office, but the boy's eyebrow lifted higher.

"I believe we had an agreement."

Altman cleared his throat. "Of course." And just like that, he turned and walked out the door. It closed behind him, and I resumed openly staring at the boy who'd banished him.

"You asked how I know where you father is." His eyes were the same color as his suit—gray, bordering on silver. "It would be best, for the moment, for you to just assume that I know everything."

His voice would have been pleasant to listen to if it weren't for the words. "A guy who thinks he knows everything," I muttered. "That's new."

"A girl with a razor-sharp tongue," he returned, silver eyes focused on mine, the ends of his lips ticking upward.

"Who are you?" I asked. "And what do you want?" *With me*, something inside me added. *What do you want with me?*

"All I want," he said, "is to deliver a message." For reasons I couldn't quite pinpoint, my heart started beating faster. "One that has proven rather difficult to send via traditional means."

"That might be my fault," Libby volunteered sheepishly beside me.

"What might be your fault?" I turned to look at her, grateful for an excuse to look away from Gray Eyes and fighting the urge to glance back.

"The first thing you need to know," Libby said, as earnestly as anyone wearing skull-print scrubs had ever said anything, "is that I had *no* idea the letters were real."

"What letters?" I asked. I was the only person in this room who

didn't know what was going on here, and I couldn't shake the feeling that not knowing was a liability, like standing on train tracks but not knowing which direction the train was coming from.

"The letters," the boy in the suit said, his voice wrapping around me, "that my grandfather's attorneys have been sending, certified mail, to your residence for the better part of three weeks."

"I thought they were a scam," Libby told me.

"I assure you," the boy replied silkily, "they are not."

I knew better than to put any confidence in the assurances of good-looking guys.

"Let me start again." He folded his hands on the desk between us, the thumb of his right hand lightly circling the cuff link on his left wrist. "My name is Grayson Hawthorne. I'm here on behalf of McNamara, Ortega, and Jones, a Dallas-based law firm representing my grandfather's estate." Grayson's pale eyes met mine. "My grandfather passed away earlier this month." A weighty pause. "His name was Tobias Hawthorne." Grayson studied my reaction—or, more accurately, the lack thereof. "Does that name mean anything to you?"

The sensation of standing on train tracks was back. "No," I said. "Should it?"

"My grandfather was a very wealthy man, Ms. Grambs. And it appears that, along with our family and people who worked for him for years, you have been named in his will."

I heard the words but couldn't process them. "His *what*?"

"His will," Grayson repeated, a slight smile crossing his lips. "I don't know what he left you, exactly, but your presence is required at the will's reading. We've been postponing it for weeks."

I was an intelligent person, but Grayson Hawthorne might as well have been speaking Swedish.

"Why would your grandfather leave anything to me?" I asked.

Grayson stood. "That's the question of the hour, isn't it?" He stepped out from behind the desk, and suddenly I knew *exactly* what direction the train was coming from.

His.

"I've taken the liberty of making travel arrangements on your behalf."

This wasn't an invitation. It was a *summons*. "What makes you think—" I started to say, but Libby cut me off. "Great!" she said, giving me a healthy side-eye.

Grayson smirked. "I'll give you two a moment." His eyes lingered on mine too long for comfort, and then, without another word, he strode out the door.

Libby and I were silent for a full five seconds after he was gone. "Don't take this the wrong way," she whispered finally, "but I think he might be God."

I snorted. "He certainly thinks so." It was easier to ignore the effect he'd had on me now that he was gone. What kind of person had self-assurance that absolute? It was there in every aspect of his posture and word choice, in every interaction. Power was as much a fact of life for this guy as gravity. The world bent to the will of Grayson Hawthorne. What money couldn't buy him, those eyes probably did.

"Start from the beginning," I told Libby. "And don't leave anything out."

She fidgeted with the inky-black tips of her blue ponytail. "A couple of weeks ago, we started getting these letters—addressed to you, care of me. They said that you'd inherited money, gave us a number to call. I thought they were a scam. Like one of those emails that claims to be from a foreign prince."

"Why would this Tobias Hawthorne—a man I've never met, never even heard of—put me in his will?" I asked.

"I don't know," Libby said, "but *that*"—she gestured in the direction Grayson had gone—"is not a scam. Did you *see* the way he dealt with Principal Altman? What do you think their agreement was? A bribe . . . or a threat?"

Both. Pushing down that response, I pulled out my phone and connected to the school's Wi-Fi. One internet search for Tobias Hawthorne later, the two of us were reading a news headline: *Noted Philanthropist Dies at 78.*

"Do you know what *philanthropist* means?" Libby asked me seriously. "It means *rich*."

"It means someone who gives to charity," I corrected her.

"So . . . *rich*." Libby gave me a look. "What if *you* are charity? They wouldn't send this guy's grandson to get you if he'd just left you a few hundred dollars. We must be talking thousands. You could travel, Avery, or put it toward college, or buy a better car."

I could feel my heart starting to beat faster again. "Why would a total stranger leave me anything?" I reiterated, resisting the urge to daydream, even for a second, because if I started, I wasn't sure I could stop.

"Maybe he knew your mom?" Libby suggested. "I don't know, but I do know that you need to go to the reading of that will."

"I can't just take off," I told her. "Neither can you." We'd both miss work. I'd miss class. And yet . . . if nothing else, a trip would get Libby away from Drake, at least temporarily.

And if this is real . . . It was already getting harder *not* to think about the possibilities.

"My shifts are covered for the next two days," Libby informed me. "I made some calls, and so are yours." She reached for my

hand. "Come on, Ave. Wouldn't it be nice to take a trip, just you and me?"

She squeezed my hand. After a moment, I squeezed back. "Where exactly is the reading of the will?"

"Texas!" Libby grinned. "And they didn't just book our tickets. They booked them *first class*."