

Thoughtless
by Jacqueline Gardner
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Dedication: To Joe – a dedicated husband and best friend. And to my supportive critique partner, Steffi. Thanks for all the pep talks.

Chapter One

The Body

"What's your problem today, Bridget?" Emma wore an enormous grin and a wrinkle-free cheerleading uniform. "Look at me so I know you're listening. This is Brian, my date for homecoming." Brian stood next to Emma, eyeing her uniform. He glared at me. I forced a half smile but tried to avoid eye contact. Emma was obviously thrilled that Brian had picked her out of the crowd. But that was because he had already tried his luck with half the cheerleading squad. Emma was his backup plan.

A voice in my head told me that Brian was bad news – Brian's voice to be specific. The instant he came close, I could hear his thoughts. They weren't PG. Not even close. But then again, most of the boys at Mountain View High got lost in X rated daydreams. It was how they passed the time.

My fake smile towards Brian was my mask – the mask of a normal teenage girl. I put it on every morning along with my lip gloss while sitting at my vanity with the door shut. My room stayed quiet, unless my mom was digging through my laundry basket. Each day when I woke up, I prepared myself for the crowded hallways at school, wondering if I'd come home with my sanity intact. The older I got, the crazier I felt.

Sometimes the overwhelming bombardment of voices and visions made my blood boil. Emotional stress made it hard for me to distinguish between thoughts and actual talking. Talking to yourself and hearing voices aren't exactly traits of the sane. But being locked up for life was the last thing I wanted. I just wanted to graduate high school without being singled out. I wanted to graduate with my freedom.

"See ya, Emma." Brian nodded and walked off towards the football field.

"Isn't he a hottie?" Emma looked joyfully dazed. She was imagining herself and Brian twirling together all night at the homecoming dance.

"I guess." Emma wasn't pleased with my response. She wanted me to share her excitement. But how was I supposed to explain to her that Brian was already mapping out what she looked like naked? He wasn't interested in holding hands and sharing a bag of popcorn. He just wanted to see if Emma was easy like some of her cheerleading pals.

"You guess?" Emma frowned. She adjusted her cheerleading skirt and glanced around at the rest of her scattered team. "You'll have to give me a better explanation than that if you want me to come over tonight."

"Fine," I agreed. "He's ok." Emma's frown was still prominent. She shook her head with disappointment but she wasn't mad. We'd been friends since elementary school, despite the fact that we were opposites in every way but one. Emma and I looked alike. We both had dirty blond hair and petite frames. In all our years as friends, Emma had learned to put up with all my personality quirks, one of which was being blunt.

I considered Emma my only real friend. She'd never lied to me and her thoughts stayed positive, believing that everyone had a good side. I trusted Emma but I could never tell her my secret. Who would want to stay friends with someone who violated their privacy on a daily basis? I would die if I knew that someone else was snooping around my brain. That's why another part of my morning routine consisted of wishing that doomsday would never come – the day everyone knew my secret.

"Whatever." Emma erased the frown from her face. She was distracted by the constant giggling coming from the group gathered beside us. "I'm only coming over for pizza. I just want to make that clear."

More girls, and most of the cheerleading squad, were gathering in a circle. All of them had one goal, to impress. Thoughts were pushed into my head so rapidly that they all blurred together. Each thought was gushier than the next. My brain filled with so much pressure that I thought it might crack open.

"I wonder what's going on over there." Emma stood on her tip toes to see what the fuss was about.

"A guy," I muttered, trying not to claw at my forehead. I took a deep breath. I was getting better at blocking things out but it took a lot of patience. Patience was a trait I lacked. I got that from my mom.

"Oh, it must be the new guy! His name is Terrence and he's like British or something." Emma discreetly fixed her hair and imagined herself being asked out by Terrence. "Oh, I've always wanted to go to Europe." Her mind wandered to a giant English Manor with a fountain out front. The enormous house had vines growing up its dark colored bricks. The gravel paved driveway disappeared into thick fog, and pink rosebushes covered the grounds. Emma's fantasies usually involved things that were pretty. Emma stood waving at the massive front doors as a black Rolls Royce drove away. Her prince charming was leaving for work, giving her time to tend to her garden and little ones.

"Em, you are so old-fashioned," I muttered. I quietly chuckled but Emma's fantasy only added to the pressure in my head. Terrence was the source of a fantasy overload. It made me want to cover my earlobes and shout at everyone to keep their thoughts to themselves. "I need . . . to go inside. I think I left something in my locker."

My sudden comment tore Emma from her daydream involving Terrence and the English countryside. She gave me a weird look. "You put all your books in your backpack, remember? I was with you?"

More girls crowded in near the football field and I caught a glimpse of the infamous new guy. He was what I expected – blond, good looking, and fit. Why else would every girl within eyesight fawn over him? There were so many girls around him that I couldn't single out his thoughts. That was fine by me. He was probably a tool like all the other guys at school. This tool just happened to have an accent.

Terrence constantly moved his gaze from girl to girl, almost like he had trouble concentrating. When his eyes met mine, I felt a tingle in my stomach. He steadied his gaze and smiled. I looked away but soon found myself fantasizing like all the other girls. I couldn't help it.

"Oh!" Emma looked at the ground and put her hands on her hips. "I forgot my pom-poms! Shoot!" The football field lit up and the bleachers were more than halfway full. I hated huge crowds, especially ones filled with teenagers. Always something scandalous, like watching late night television.

"Huddle up ladies!" Emma's cheer coach clapped her hands. Emma glanced around for her pom-poms again, afraid that she might be yelled at in front of the entire team.

"I'll get your pom-poms!" Emma looked relieved. I was happy to volunteer. Anything to get me away from any Terrence related thoughts. "Where are they? The locker room?"

"Yeah, they're probably in my gym bag!"

"Got it." I nodded and turned towards the doors. Emma smiled and ran to the rest of her team. I needed the alone time. My head was buzzing. I stepped through the double doors into an empty hallway. The only sound around was the noise my sneakers made as they hit the floor. The girl's locker room wasn't far from the football field but I took my time digging through Emma's stuff. Her pom-poms had fallen on the floor. I grabbed them and closed my eyes, engulfed in silence. It made me feel normal. I sat on the cold locker room floor and let myself relax. Each breath washed away another foreign thought until the only person in my head was me.

A distant bang made me jump. I jerked backwards, nearly hitting my head on a locker. "What the . . . ? Hello? Is there someone in here?" My voice was quiet and shaky. There were heavy footsteps somewhere close and another crash. I concentrated, but my mind stayed blank. Whoever was making noise wasn't thinking. I couldn't hear any thoughts in their head. Strange.

My chest started pounding. My face got hotter and hotter. A bead of sweat dripped down my back. To hear noises with no accompanying thoughts never happened. Internal self talk was part of everyday living, even when meditating. I still heard nothing, not even someone counting their steps. "Hello?" My voice filled the locker room. I took a step towards the bathroom stalls. They all appeared to be empty. All I saw was tile that needed a good cleaning and rusty toilet seats. My breathing got heavier. Something wasn't right. The noises had to have come from somewhere. The sound of footsteps and crashing objects didn't just happen on their own. There had to be a source.

My own reflection in a streaked mirror made me jump again. I clutched my chest. "You're just being paranoid," I whispered reassuringly. "And you're talking to yourself." With a sigh, I slowly opened the locker room door. The hallway was dark. No one was in sight. Light from the locker room flooded into the hall.

The janitor's closet was cracked open. I studied the hall, but I was alone. The janitor's closet was usually locked and for a good reason. There were enough chemical cleaners in there to run a meth lab. Someone must've broken in and knocked over a shelf. My feet inched towards the closet, careful to stay quiet in case the culprit was still around.

I kept turning around. No one was there. The only thoughts in my head were mine. *This is stupid*, I thought to myself. I pulled the knob and the closet door swung wide open on its own. I staggered back.

Complete terror filled my chest. I rubbed my eyes. *Great! Now I'm seeing things too.* The image in front of me couldn't be real. I tried to swallow but my throat was swelling up.

"Stacy?" A raspy whisper managed to escape my lips. Stacy was lying motionless on the floor, her cheerleading uniform slightly ripped to reveal a strange bruise just under her collar bone. *Maybe she fainted? Maybe she fell asleep . . . and someone shoved her into a closet!* Her eyes were wide open and staring at the ceiling.

I knelt down a little too fast. My kneecaps banged against the floor. The pain was nothing compared to the pain in my chest. My cheeks were on fire. I touched Stacy's hand. It was cold. She didn't move. "Come on Stacy." I tugged at her cheerleading uniform but she didn't budge. Panic set in and I shook her shoulders. I shook them harder and harder making her loose curls wave through the air.

I was horrified. Stacy was dead. I didn't want to admit it but she was. And the person responsible had been in the hallway just moments before me. The killer was probably outside right now, watching the football game. What if the killer had seen me?

Without thinking I looked around and grabbed Stacy's wrists. Her body was a lot heavier than I'd thought. I had to put her back in the closet before someone saw me. There was no way I was being listed as a murder suspect. That was attention I didn't need – from the police and from Stacy's killer.

Stacy's fists were closed so tight that her nails looked like they were digging into her skin. I pushed her body upright and a silvery thing fell out of her hands. I laid Stacy's body back down and picked up the shiny chain. It was broken.

I shoved it in my pocket and lifted the body one last time. It fell back into the closet with a thud. And that's when I started to sweat even more. What was I supposed to do now? Call the police? I couldn't do that.

What are you doing, girl? What's wrong with the cheerleader? The thoughts being pushed into my head weren't mine. They belonged to a curious onlooker – a guy my same age.

My entire torso went stiff. How was I going to explain this? I'd been spotted shoving Stacy's body in the janitor's closet. This guy would rat me out for sure, especially if he was the murderer. *Don't be stupid Bridget, I thought. Why would the murderer return to the scene?*

"The cheerleader's fine! I mean, Stacy's fine." I turned around to see a confused looking guy scratching his dark brown hair. The sight of him made my heart beat even faster from anticipation. Thick glasses framed his eyes, bright green. He walked closer looking curious. I slammed my back against the closet door.

"Huh? I didn't say . . ."

"I've got this, ok. Just go back outside." *What's with the secrecy? Is the cheerleader drugged up? Plastered?*

"Yep, that's it. She's plastered! So if you could just keep this to yourself . . ."

"How?" he said looking confused again. My head was spinning and my heart was racing. I was having trouble discerning between thoughts and actual words. This wasn't happening! "Here, let me help. I promise I won't rat her out." He grinned and quickly reached for the door knob before I could object.

The door swung open and the both of us jumped back. Stacy's body crashed to the floor face first. Despite the blow to her face, her body stayed still. There was no movement. His eyes went wide with shock. I'd already seen Stacy's dead body but it was still terrifying to look at.

"Is she?" He gulped and looked around.

"Yeah. She's dead."

"We have to call the police." He pulled a cell phone out of his pocket. No! I couldn't talk to the police. I was a horrible liar, and I knew I'd screw up a one-on-one interview with a detective. A surging feeling of fear came over me as I imagined myself being questioned and locked up in an institution. I'd worked so hard to stay under the radar – to skate through high school without being put in the spotlight. All of that was in jeopardy. What if the police found out I was a mind reader? Chances are they wouldn't believe me, and I'd be force fed medication. The whole world would think I was a freak!

"Wait!" I yelped. "I mean, I had nothing to do with it. I swear. And you can't tell anyone you saw me here." I was so nervous, I felt like I might vomit all over the floor.

"Don't worry. The police will . . ."

"Think I had something to with it! Swear to me you won't say anything?" The words were rapidly slipping out of my mouth. All I could think about was getting as far away as possible. The guy shrugged and didn't know what to say. He intended to keep my secret, at least at that moment. He was imagining the police arriving after one quick phone call, but he had a lot

of questions. He wanted to know how I found her. He wanted to know more about me. But he always kept his promises. I could see proof in his head. He had since first grade when he caught his elementary school teacher throwing the class hamster in the trash. I was confident that my secret was safe, so I ran. I set my sights on a way out and my feet went to auto-pilot. Maybe one day I'd look back, wishing I'd done things differently. But I didn't care. My first instinct was to flee, and that's what I did. That's what I always did.

Thoughts buzzed all around me as a cold breeze blew across my face. I burst through the doors and ran towards the football field. The bleachers were full and buzzing with thoughts, but I jogged closer anyways. The game had already started and crowds were cheering. The cheerleading squad clapped and shouted on the sidelines. I looked down. I'd dropped Emma's pom-poms. She was going to be pissed but I wasn't going back in there. I'd rather be in a sea of floating thoughts than hang out around a dead body. It was worth the migraine.

"Just breathe normally and relax. That guy, whoever he is, will call the cops and they'll handle it." My eyes were watering as I muttered towards the ground. The pressure in my head and my chest was out of control. I had to calm myself down or I was sure I'd faint. A couple holding hands walked by and gave me a funny look. I smiled and wiped the sweat from my forehead. Yeah, I was definitely going insane.

I found a standing spot close to the football field, and away from as many onlookers as possible. I concentrated on the player's running back and forth. Whistles blew and I acted like I was completely invested in the game. And after what seemed like years of clapping and grinding my teeth, it was finally halftime. A whistle blew and the football team ran off the field to make way for the cheer squad. From a line of yelling girls, I spotted Emma. She waved her hands and did a cartwheel. She had a pair of pom-poms in her hands, probably spares.

I was beginning to calm down. I kept telling myself that what happened earlier was just a crazy nightmare. After saying it over and over, I started to believe it. Stacy wasn't dead. She was alive and jumping around somewhere in the crowd. But my hopes were shattered when I heard sirens. They got louder and louder until they settled in the school parking lot. Heads turned and curious students started moving towards the building. I couldn't bring myself to see the police cars for myself. But then I heard it, a gut-wrenching scream. Someone else had seen Stacy. I finally turned my head and witnessed a long line of policemen. They were watching a stretcher being loaded into an ambulance. A white sheet covered the body and all I could see were white cheerleading sneakers.

Chapter Two

The Phone Call

"I wonder what happened." Emma was leaning over the counter blotting her slice of cheese pizza with a napkin. She threw the greasy napkin aside and took a tiny bite.

"Can we please stop talking about it?" Images of Stacy's lifeless body were burning in my brain. I had forced myself to eat and now I felt nauseous. I couldn't wipe the image of Stacy's face from my memory. What happened to her? And why did her killer shove her in the closet? I thought about the noises I'd heard in the girl's locker room, and it gave me chills. The killer could have seen me, but all I could do now was try and act normal.

"Sorry, I'm just a little creeped out. How do you think she died?" Emma was in denial. The last time she'd seen Stacy was on instant replay in her mind. It was at cheer practice the day before. Stacy hardly paid any attention to their routine. All she did was whisper and giggle. Terrence had just asked her to the homecoming dance.

"Drugs?" I was hoping that my suggestion might give her something different to think about.

"Maybe." Emma took another tiny bite of her pizza.

"Let's talk about something else." Emma's thoughts turned immediately to the homecoming dance. She thought about Brian showing up at her door and telling her she was the most beautiful girl at school. "Are you still going with Brian?"

"You don't like him very much, do you?" Emma set her pizza down and went to the fridge for a cold water bottle. I plopped down on the couch and put a hand on my stomach.

"He's ok I guess." I tried to sound upbeat but Emma wasn't buying it.

"You just need to get to know him. I'm sure you'd like him then." I already knew I'd never feel that way. But Emma genuinely thought he was a nice guy.

"My stomach hurts."

"I hope you're not coming down with something? The dance is tomorrow! We still haven't decided on nail polish and hairstyles!" Emma was already back to her bubbly self. *Not again*, I thought. I'd chosen my outfit weeks ago but Emma was constantly changing her mind, especially when she surfed the net. I had to forbid her from clicking on paparazzi websites and watching VH1. It just made her more indecisive.

"Seriously, Em? I thought that up-do you were raving about was 'the one'."

"I never said that." Emma put her water bottle down on the kitchen table and joined me on the couch.

"But you thought it," I muttered to myself.

"Well it's easy for you, Bri. You have that long blond hair that looks good no matter what you're wearing." She smiled. I grabbed a piece of my hair and shrugged. Emma's head was bursting with ideas. She wanted to tell me her latest style dilemma but she was waiting for me to ask, knowing that I'd be annoyed.

"Ok, what do have in mind?" I asked the question she was waiting for to avoid anymore talk of Stacy. Emma's face brightened and she started blabbing about the pros and cons of curling versus crimping. I called it thought-spewing. It's when you have so much on your mind that sentences just start spewing out of your mouth. The ideas that come out are ones that sounded good in your head. But when you say them out loud, you realize they all suck.

I could hear the garage door opening and my mom came rushing through the door with a worried look. Her brunette bob bounced up and down as her heels hit the tile flooring. She was wearing her work attire – black slacks and a gray blazer.

"Oh, you girls are here! I'm so relieved. I heard about what happened at the game. Are you ok?" She caught her breath then threw her purse on the counter. Her entire way home, she'd been desperately hoping that I wasn't involved. At times my mom seemed more afraid of exposure than I was. I wasn't allowed to play sports or participate in anything that could put my name in the school paper. Her reasoning was understandable but it still made my life tough. We argued a lot, but at least I'd gotten my way when it came to going to regular school – I don't think I could've handled being home schooled.

"We're ok."

"Yeah just freaked out," Emma added.

"Well they said on the radio that the cause of death hadn't yet been determined."

"Did they say anything else?" I'd been paranoid all night that the police would show up at my doorstep.

"Um." The radio announcement, or what my mom remembered from it, played through her head again. Mountain View High School student found dead. Police interrupted the school's football game after receiving an anonymous phone call. No sign of a struggle. Cause of death has not been determined. "Not really. Just that the police received an anonymous phone call."

"Someone called?" Emma was starting to replay her last moments with Stacy again.

"Probably one of her friends." My mom grabbed our box of pizza and put it in the fridge.

"So you were saying, Em?" I interrupted. "Curls?"

"Oh yeah." Emma watched my mom take off her coat and jog upstairs. "So, I don't think I want to do an up-do anymore. That's like something you do for your wedding. Curls are so in."

"Ok, then do that. That would definitely go with the dress you picked out." Emma's thoughts wandered to her closet which was now occupied by two possible options. She was quiet for a minute.

"You bought another dress?" I asked. Emma didn't even look surprised that I knew.

"You know me too well."

"Well, out with it. What does this new dress look like?"

"It's orange. I know, I know! Orange is a weird color but trust me. It looks really good on me. That's why I bought it."

"Orange? This isn't a Halloween dance. It's homecoming."

"And it's September," Emma interrupted. "September is considered Fall and orange is a Fall color, Bri." I nodded and tried to find a comfy position on the couch. I wanted to sleep and leave this day behind but I was afraid that Stacy would consume my dreams the way she had my thoughts. Would I ever be able to bury the image I'd seen? "So what time should I come over tomorrow?"

"Huh?"

"To get ready. Duh! What time is Jason picking you up?" I bit my lip. Crap! I'd almost forgotten! I'd promised Emma that I would ask Jason from Calculus to come with our group so we would have an even number.

"Uh, about that." After hearing Jason obsess all class about Annabelle Pierce and the length of her skirt, I just couldn't go through with it. He was a perv.

"Bri, you promised! Now you have no date!"

"That's fine with me." I sighed and rubbed my eyes. It was bugging Emma that I was acting so calm. She'd been planning tomorrow night for weeks and now she was wondering why she hadn't asked someone out for me.

"But we all have dates! You'll be the only one!"

"Calm down, drama queen. Lots of girls go to homecoming without dates." Emma still looked frustrated but she accepted the fact that there was nothing she could do. The dance was tomorrow. I grabbed the remote and searched for something to watch.

"Oh QVC!" Emma sat up straighter and stared at the set of silver earrings being modeled on the screen.

"Nope. No QVC. Not after last time." I kept flipping and found the local news. Of course the hot topic tonight was Stacy. I couldn't escape her.

"Wait! Leave it here for a minute. I want to hear what they say about Stacy." Emma studied the TV but I looked down at my fingernails. My stomach was starting to hurt again. I was trying so hard not to think about it that I froze when I heard the phone ring. My heart pounded and I gulped down a bunch of air.

"I'll get it!" My mom shouted from upstairs. I heard her feet run to the upstairs phone. I was trying to breathe normally. What if it was the police calling? What if they figured out I'd found Stacy's body? I looked at my nails again and started biting. Emma sat on the couch, oblivious to everything going on around her. Her eyes were fixated on the television. "Bridget! The phone is for you honey!"

I heard footsteps coming down the stairs. My mom was holding a cordless phone and giving me an odd look. For a second, I felt like I couldn't breathe. My throat got all choked up, and I couldn't stop imagining being handcuffed and thrown in a cell.

"Who is it?" My words came out in a whispered sentence. My mom shook her head.

"I don't know." She handed me the phone and I gulped.

"Hello?" The pause that followed was terrifying. I imagined hundreds of different responses: This is so-and-so from the police department, you're under arrest, and can you tell us why you were seen with Stacy's body? But the voice on the other end surprised me.

"Hiya. Am I speaking with Bridget?" I didn't recognize the voice, nor did I know anyone who spoke with an accent. I waited desperately for a thought, a clue that would tell me who this guy was. Nothing. Maybe it was a bad connection.

"Uh, yeah. Who is this?"

"Sorry, I don't normally do this but I saw you at the football game and . . ."

"Are you like on the team or something?"

"No, actually I'm new this term. My name's Terrence." Terrence? That guy all the cheerleaders had been buzzing about before the game? I'd seen him before but we'd never spoken. My mind dug up an image of Terrence staring at me with those soft, blue eyes. If that was the Terrence I was speaking to, he must've had the wrong number.

"Terrence?" The second I said his name, Emma broke her gaze with the TV. She jumped up looking shocked. Her jaw dropped and she hovered over me trying to listen to our conversation. She got so close to the phone that I had to repeatedly push her away. "How did you get my number?"

"School directory. Look, I don't usually do this but I was hoping that maybe you'd be free tomorrow night?" Emma squealed. I cupped my hand around her mouth so she'd stop.

"Um, tomorrow night I'm going to the dance with some friends." Emma grabbed a pillow from the couch and threatened to smack me in the back of the head.

"Are you insane," she whispered. "The hottest guy in school is trying to ask you out! If you don't say yes, I'll never speak to you again!" I raised my eyebrows and sighed.

"But you can come along if you want . . ." Emma kicked my leg. "As my date?"

"That would be wicked. I mean, that would be cool."

"Yeah . . . cool." I tried to sound bubbly like Emma always did when talking to boys but that wasn't a style that suited me. It made me sound like I was mocking him.

"Sorry. That's what all the kids at school always say." He sounded a little nervous which surprised me. "Honestly, I never do things like this. I promise, I'm not some kind of weirdo." He chuckled and I made myself giggle. This might be the strangest phone call I'd ever gotten.

"Oh, it's ok. So I'll see you tomorrow? Six o'clock?"

"Sure." I said a quick good-bye and hung up. Emma started jumping up and down. She was over the moon with excitement.

"Oh my gosh, Bri! We have so much to do! Your nails need new polish, we need to make you a hair appointment, we need to sort out your dress . . ."

"What's wrong with my dress?"

"Nothing. It's just not pink enough!" My dress was dark green and I liked the way it looked.

"Hold on. Doesn't this seem kinda weird at all? I mean, Terrence and I have never met. And now he's asking me to homecoming?" Emma shook her head.

"Maybe he saw you somewhere and asked around? Bri, he likes you! You should be excited about this!" Emma's thoughts were going out of control again.

"If he likes me so much, why didn't he introduce himself at school or something?" I thought back to Emma's last cheer practice. Terrence was supposed to be Stacy's date. Would Terrence still have called me if Stacy was alive? Would my existence even show up on his radar?

"Bri, he's European!" I laughed and let her play with strands of my blond hair. It felt good to be noticed. The excitement of it all was new to me. Guys never approached me . . . ever. Emma always said it was because I was too negative. Most of my classmates thought I was a snob – too good to hang with anyone. But maybe homecoming wouldn't be so lame after all. I'd try anything that would make me forget about Stacy for a few hours.

* * *

My eyes were closed but I couldn't sleep. I'm sure Emma couldn't sleep either. She was too hyped up about homecoming. I stared at the ceiling and suppressed any thoughts relating to Stacy for as long as possible. But I had to give in. So much had happened and I'd never really gotten the chance to process everything. There was a knock on the door and my mom tiptoed in.

"Are you ok honey? You've been jumpy all night?" Her mind was very quiet. The only thoughts in her head were the questions she wanted to ask me.

"I'm fine." It was a total lie but what was I supposed to say? "How was the office party?"

"Boring, dull, you know. But it's part of the job." I smiled. "Oh, I almost forgot." She dropped a silver chain on the bed and my heart stopped. The chain I took from Stacy's hand. I should've thrown that thing away!

"Uh, thanks?"

"I thought I'd throw in a quick load of laundry, and I found it in your jeans." She hugged me and stood up.

"Oh, I must've forgotten about it." My mom sighed and rubbed her eyes.

"Well, I'll see you in the morning." The chain felt like it was burning in my hand. I was holding something that belonged to a dead girl, a dead girl that I supposedly hadn't seen since Thursday. "Who's Dru?"

"What?" I was confused until my mom thought about the charm on the piece of jewelry she'd just dropped on the bed. "Um, it's a nickname."

"Right." She knew I was lying, but her urge to sleep was stronger. She closed my door and tiptoed down the hall to her bedroom.

I sat up immediately and turned on the lamp on my nightstand. The silver chain sparkled and at the end of the broken chain was a small charm. It was engraved with three letters, D-r-u. Dru? On the back of the charm was a faded symbol. I couldn't tell what it was. I turned off my lamp and closed my eyes. And then the thought occurred to me. The chain wasn't Stacy's. It had to belong to the killer.

Chapter Three

The Warning

"Bridget! I'm using your full name because I'm serious! Why aren't you dressed? And your make-up still isn't done." I'd been sitting in my room all day, thinking about the broken chain. It was a bracelet. I couldn't stop imagining the terror in Stacy's eyes as she ripped it off her killer before falling to the floor. Emma had been texting me all morning but I was too lazy to reply. Either way, she'd come over.

"My make-up *is* done." Emma walked over and examined my eyelids.

"Well, we gotta redo it. I can't even see your eyeliner." I shrugged. "And get your dress on, Bri! What are you waiting for? Do you know how many girls will be giving you the evil-eye tonight? You gotta look hot!"

"The evil-eye?"

"Uh, hello? You're going with Terrence." Emma imagined a perfect world where the two of us double dated every weekend with our perfect boyfriends. She was jumping to conclusions. Who knew if Terrence would even like me or get used to the idea that I hated being around large crowds. I wouldn't be able to deal with the dance for more than hour. Then I'd make up an excuse to go home.

"Aren't you forgetting that Terrence and I have yet to meet face to face? And it's four o'clock. We have two hours."

"I know. We don't have much time." Emma put her bag on the floor and I caught a glance at her orange homecoming dress. Her eyelids were heavy with dark eye shadow and her lips were red. She searched through my vanity looking for a set of brushes.

"Two hours is plenty of time, Em. You want something from the fridge?" I got up, stretched, and tossed the broken bracelet under my bed. Emma shook her head disapprovingly.

"No, I'm waiting until dinner and so should you." She pointed to the chair in front of her and I gave in. As soon as I sat down, Emma started applying layers of extra eye shadow to my face.

"Don't you think it's a little much?" I looked in the mirror. My eyes were darker than before. And the shadow was a little too heavy for my taste but my hazel eyes were clearly defined and gleamed like two gems.

"See." Emma was pleased with herself. She watched me stare at the mirror and adjust to the new look. "It looks good on you." I smiled and ran my fingers through my hair. My stomach was starting to flutter as I thought about Terrence. I couldn't deny that he was attractive but hearing guys' thoughts was usually a turn-off. Almost every guy at school thought of nothing else all day, sex.

We'd arranged to meet our group at an Italian-American restaurant called The Fat Tomato. As the time passed I found myself getting nervous. I'd been preparing for the bombardment of teenage thoughts all day, but I was scared. What if Stacy's killer somehow knew what I did? I'd be next, that's what!

"Bri? You look lost again." I adjusted my homecoming dress and took one last look in the mirror. Emma gave me an approving look from the doorway. "You look amazing! And kinda mysterious too, like a mermaid."

"A mermaid? Ok, I'm changing." Emma held me back when I tried to retreat to my closet.

"I just said that cause your dress is green. We have to go." She picked up her heels and purse. I grabbed my things too and followed her down the stairs. Emma's head overflowed with excitement about tonight. *I wonder what Brian will think of my dress? Will he ask me out again? Will we finally kiss tonight?*

I had a lot on my mind too. My thoughts were torn between Terrence and the janitor's closet. If Stacy were alive, she'd be the one dancing at homecoming with Terrence, not me. Everything just felt wrong. I was starting to feel guilty about running. But I couldn't forget that people like me get locked up forever.

The sky was gray and a mini drop of water dropped on my forehead as I slid into Emma's car.

"Are you ready?" Emma started the car and backed down the driveway. In my mind were images of Stacy's dead body, the killer's bracelet, and Terrence.

"I don't think I'll ever be ready."

* * *

Terrence was smooth, smart, and knew all the right things to say. And I couldn't hear his thoughts or even interpret his emotions. For the first time, I was completely clueless on what to do. Either Terrence was a total idiot, or there was something unique about him. That was the only explanation I could think of. I found myself blushing and checking my hair like every other girl. He was the first guy I'd met that truly had mystery and I resist the urge to learn more about him – no matter the method.

On one hand, it was nice to feel normal. But on the other hand, it bugged me. I found myself desperately looking for signs that Terrence liked me. It was the burning question in my brain; what does he think of me? I ignored my gut instinct telling me to be suspicious. Blame his bulging biceps, perfect jaw line, and seductive stare.

"I'm so pleased that we finally got to meet." Terrence and I were slowly making our way through the parking lot towards the school. Emma and the group skipped ahead. I'd been so focused on Terrence that I'd almost blocked out all thoughts, including Brian's disgusting fantasies.

"Me too." I agreed and smiled. Every time my heels hit the pavement, I counted my steps. *Please don't trip. Please don't trip.*

"It's nice to have someone to talk to, especially after what happened yesterday." I was so fixed on watching my steps that I didn't process what Terrence was saying.

"Yesterday?" He sighed, and with hands in his pockets I saw a look of remorse come across his face.

"Stacy. She was supposed to be my date tonight." My eyes went wide as I saw Stacy's stiff body in my head again.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Tonight must feel weird."

"I'm ok. Honestly between you and me, I didn't know her very well." I stared at his mouth. His accent was like a spell. I was mesmerized when he spoke. No wonder every girl in school was crazy about him. Every girl has dreamt about a guy like Terrence at some point in their lives. He's the caring, sexy foreigner that sweeps you off your feet.

"What do you think happened?" My curiosity about Stacy wouldn't go away, no matter how much Terrence made my stomach leap. Terrence shrugged. *I really wish I could read his thoughts right now*, I thought.

"I have no clue. Maybe it was an accident?" I nodded but I knew better. Stacy was murdered; there was no doubt about it. And someone had tried to keep her death a secret.

"I guess." Scattered thoughts were being pushed into my head. We were standing in the doorway of the school gym. Music blasted from inside. It was loud enough to keep the voices from making me crazy, at least for an hour or two. But the overload was sure to give me a migraine.

I stood up straight in my green dress, feeling like the entire school was glaring at me. I kept my chin up and tried to act like I didn't notice. The judgmental thoughts from my classmates came into my head anyway. *Terrence came with her? What makes her so special? I bet she's not even a real blonde.*

I touched my hair and felt my cheeks getting hot. It was one thing to hear people's thoughts. But it was another to be the main act in everyone's head. I was starting to get uncomfortable and Terrence must've noticed. He grabbed my hand, sending chills through my body.

"How about I get us something cold to drink?"

"Yeah, ok." Terrence smiled and left me standing in the corner. I looked down at the floor. Students were eyeing me up and down from every direction. I now knew exactly what Emma had meant. The 'evil eye' sucked. I was getting it from girls I didn't even know.

A hand touched my shoulder and my stomach leaped again. Why couldn't I just forget about all this Stacy stuff and enjoy my night with Terrence? He was hot. And so far, he wasn't a sex-crazed animal like the rest of the school. I turned around and was greeted by a pair of green eyes, hidden by thick glasses.

"You," I whispered. My heart pounded. It felt like yesterday all over again and I wanted to throw up.

"I have to talk to you." His eyes kept shifting around the room. I brushed his hand away and tried to act like nothing had ever happened.

"Listen, um . . ."

"Rory."

"Yeah. Look, I really appreciate what you did for me yesterday but don't think that we're suddenly BFF's or something." Rory looked confused. The thought of us spending time together had crossed his mind, but that's not what he'd come for. "Is this some kind of black mail thing cuz I'll deny everything!"

"No." Rory was getting frustrated. It was clear that he didn't want to be seen talking to me. I folded my arms.

"Then what do you want?"

"Meet me by the bathrooms in ten minutes."

I looked around for Terrence. He'd be back any minute with our drinks.

"No, ok! This is a very important night for me and I won't let you spoil it." *Great. Another brainless Terrence admirer. That dude sure gets around.* Rory's thoughts hit me hard.

"Hey!" I exclaimed, slightly offended. Rory looked confused again.

"Bridget, please!" Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Terrence walking across the dance floor. He did his best to say hi to everyone that gathered around him, without making me wait too long.

"Fine," I murmured as I pushed Rory out of the way. I twirled my hair and watched Terrence move closer with two drinks in his hand.

"Here you go." Terrence handed me some punch. I took a small sip and watched Terrence stare at the dance floor.

"So, I see you've made a lot of friends." I smiled but Terrence's face remained expressionless. *Why can't I hear your thoughts? You can't stay thought-free all night. That would be impossible!*

"Everyone wants to know about the new guy, you know," he replied. "Do you, uh?" He tilted his head towards the dance floor. My heart pounded, but this time it was a good thing. I was hoping he'd ask.

"Of course." I sat my drink down and held out a hand. Terrence grabbed it again. His hands were warm and his skin was soft. He pulled me to the middle of the dance floor and the two of us swayed to the slow song that played. Terrence stared into my eyes. I looked away.

"Why do you do that?" Terrence looked intrigued.

"Do what?" I laughed. My cheeks hurt, but I still smiled.

"Try to avoid having a good time."

"I don't do that." I gave him a playful shove.

"Oh but you do!" Terrence grinned. "Whenever you start to get comfortable, you always get quiet all of a sudden, like you're purposely holding back."

"Well maybe I'm just shy." I blushed and looked down at my shoes. Terrence's hand reached for my face. He lifted my chin and studied my eyes.

"You're not shy. You're . . . mysterious. I like that." My cheeks went rosy again. Another song started and we continued to dance. *Sorry Rory, but this is more important than whatever you had to say.*

We danced and danced until my feet started to hurt. I laughed and took off my heels. My feet were covered in red marks. Terrence chuckled and I laughed again. He grabbed my hand and led me outside for some fresh air. The cool wind was a relief compared to the stuffy smell of BO in the gym.

"My feet look terrible! Really, I'm just not used to wearing heels!"

"You're right." Terrence grinned.

"Huh?"

"Your feet are hideous!" he stated. I giggled and lightly punched his arm. I took a giant breath of the chilled September air. Being with Terrence made me feel like a totally different person. I had no worries, and I had no freaky thoughts being pushed into my head. I was starting to understand what it felt like to fall for someone. I couldn't get enough of the thrilling pulses in my stomach. I'd missed out for too long.

There was a ringing that broke our conversation. Terrence reached into his pocket and pulled out a cell phone.

"Sorry, I have to take this," Terrence said looking apologetic. I smiled and nodded as Terrence answered and walked out of sight. I looked up at the stars. They were covered by gray storm clouds, but I could still spot a few stars that shone through the cloud cover.

"Pssst!" I jumped and turned around to see Rory with a disappointed look on his face.

"I thought we agreed ten minutes?" He looked upset.

"Well, I was sort of busy. And I'm still busy so . . ."

"Bridget, this isn't some stupid high school game. We've got problems." Rory was sincerely worried. I could feel his fear and his thoughts turned dark. The giddy look faded from my face. Something was seriously wrong, and it involved me.

"Ok," I said in a low voice. "Give me a sec?"

Rory nodded. I got up and walked back towards the school. Terrence had just hung up his phone. His face lit up when he saw me.

"Terrence, tonight has been . . . well, amazing. But I have to go." I hated the frown that formed on Terrence's face.

"What? Now? Is everything ok?"

"Everything's fine. I'll explain later!" I ran back to find Rory. *Crap*, I screamed at myself! *I hope I didn't just ruin everything!*

I ran with my heels in my hand. Chipped rocks dug at my feet but I sprinted towards Rory's old truck. He was waiting and watching the parking lot with a paranoid glare. I pulled open the passenger's rusty handle, and climbed in.

"Ok," I said out of breath. "Let's get this over with." But inside I knew this was easier said than done. *This'll never be over with.*

"I know the last thing you probably want to talk about is Stacy . . ."

"Good guess," I interrupted.

"But," Rory said in a louder voice. He took a piece of paper out of the glove box and dropped it in my lap. His hands were a bit shaky and the fear passing through his thoughts was making me nervous. "I think you should see this." I carefully opened the piece of paper and saw simple handwriting – writing I didn't recognize. Two sentences was all that'd been written but it was enough to make me panic. My whole Junior year was about to change for the worse. *I saw what you did, and I'll be watching. If you go to the police, you'll be sorry.* I could feel my heart dropping. The note's warning found a permanent spot among the memories in my head.

"Where did you find this?" I too couldn't help but look around the parking lot. Someone could've been watching all night, even right now. Just thinking about it made me shudder.

"It was in my locker. I was here earlier working on a science project." Rory swallowed. It was so loud I could hear it. He knew that whoever had written the note wasn't joking. Since yesterday, he'd already felt like he was being followed. This note was proof he wasn't crazy. Someone *was* following him.

"Well, this could be anything," I lied, trying not to sound alarmed. But I was. My brain searched for an answer that didn't involve Stacy. It wasn't successful. "How do you know this has to do with yesterday?" Rory looked at me like I was an idiot. He was thinking it too.

"If they saw me, they saw you." He spoke with confidence. I was quiet for a minute. The killer had seen me. How?

"But I didn't get a note," I protested. Rory shook his head.

"Have you checked your locker?" He gritted his teeth as he impatiently waited for my response. I shook my head.

"It's Saturday," I answered. "Some of us have lives." Rory rolled his eyes.

"Look, I was just trying to warn you, okay. You don't have to be a jerk about it." Rory sighed. He had a lot on his mind. He was worried, but not so much about himself. He was worried that something might happen to his mom and his little sister.

"You're right. I'm sorry. So, what do we do now?" I hoped that Rory would have a good answer, because I sure didn't. He thought for a minute.

"We find out who did this before we end up like Stacy," he replied. My thoughts turned to the bracelet.

"Do you know of anyone name Dru? Spelled D-r-u?" I studied Rory's face as he shook his head. His mind searched through a list of friends and classmates but none had the name Dru.

"No, why?" He scanned the parking lot again when a threesome of giggling girls stumbled towards a nearby car. The image of the bracelet was permanently burned into my brain. It had been lurking behind every thought since yesterday. At the moment, Rory was the only one I could mention it to. Rory paused and waited for me to speak. The words were a lot harder to form in my mouth than I'd thought.

"Yesterday, when I found . . . Stacy." I didn't know why but saying the name of a dead person out loud felt weird. "Something fell out of her hand. It was broken like she'd ripped it from her attacker."

"What was it?" Rory whispered.

"A bracelet. It has a charm on it with the letters D-r-u, and some symbol is stamped on the back." Rory's eyes went wide. But the name Dru still didn't ring a bell.

"If only we knew more about how she died." Rory had been just as stumped as I was when he saw her body. To the naked eye, Stacy's body looked normal, apart from the whole dead thing. There was no blood, no bullet wound, just a strange look in her eyes and burn mark on her uniform.

Rory started wishing he could get his hands on the police report. But the only way to do that would be to steal it. Rory wasn't willing to take things that far. He'd never stolen in his life, and he didn't want to start with a confidential police file.

"Yeah, but we don't." I tried to interrupt his thought process but his brain was spinning so fast, I couldn't keep up. I tried to stay away from his web of reasoning. It was hard not to get stuck.

"You're a science geek," I quickly began, hoping to ease his mind a little. "Can't you like take the note to your lab and dust for fingerprints or something?" Rory gave me a scolding look.

"You're being a jerk again," he muttered.

"That wasn't an insult. That was a question." A thought popped into my head, my own thought. I could read minds! If I could find a way to run into the police detective investigating Stacy's murder, I could read his or her thoughts. It was worth a try. "I got it! We go and ask."

"What?" Rory scanned the parking lot again. No one was in sight. "Are you serious?"

"You got a better idea?" It was true. My plan was stupid, but I was secretly wishing that my idiotic suggestions would encourage Rory to come up with something brilliant. He had it in him. He was smart, with a brain oozing creativity.

"Look, maybe we should give the letter to the police."

"And tell them what, Mr. Anonymous phone call? That you found Stacy dead but fled from the scene." I cleared my throat while Rory rethought that option. Technically, he'd only received a threat. Maybe this person was just trying to scare him silent.

"Good point," he agreed.

"Come Monday, we'll see if there's anything new about Stacy in the paper. In the meantime, watch your back."

"And you watch yours," Rory replied. I looked at the time. I'd managed to survive homecoming for almost two hours. But I could feel a migraine starting to surface. It was time to go home, cover my window, lock the doors, dream about Terrence, and hope that my locker was empty.

Chapter Four

Taunted

Strolling through the halls of Mountain View High School the day after homecoming was chaos. I thought I'd have a hard time listening to thoughts about Stacy, but everyone's focus was far from her. My locker was in sight and I clenched my fists together as I got closer. I didn't want to open it for fear of what might be inside, but I'd have to eventually.

"So?" Emma stepped in front of me. She wanted to know all about my night with Terrence.

"Uh, so what?"

"How did things go with you and Terrence?" she asked. I shrugged. Things were perfect. At least until Rory showed up.

"Fine, I guess."

"It had to have been better than that. You didn't catch a ride home with us." Emma would be shocked if I told her that Rory gave me a ride home. Actually, she probably didn't even know who Rory was. Up until Friday night, I myself didn't know who he was.

"Right," I muttered. "Uh, we can talk about it at lunch? I'm running late." Emma sighed, and immediately started formulating a plan to prod the details from me. She was dead set on getting the scoop no matter what.

"Ok but I'm gonna hold you to that!" Emma smiled and I chuckled. She kept walking and once again, I was left alone at my locker. My palms got sweaty as I twisted the lock. I could feel someone watching, so I paused and let myself listen to bystanders. A stranger's thoughts entered my head, and I nearly choked when I realized I was right. Someone was watching me – watching and waiting. *Come on, just open it already. What are you waiting around for?* I quickly turned around catching Rory off guard. He almost tripped backwards into a nearby garbage bin.

"I'm trying ok," I muttered between my teeth. "Just give me a second." Rory wiped the surprised look off his face and came closer. His eyes were fixed on my fingers. I turned around again, letting my hair whip him in the face. "I can't do this with you hovering like that."

"Want me to do it?" Rory was impatient. He just wanted to know if I'd received a similar note and he wanted to know now. I was so nervous that I nodded and took a step back.

"Be my guest. Just don't go snooping through my things."

"Like I would ever touch *your* stuff." He rolled his eyes and twisted the lock as I whispered the combo. Rory opened the locker but I still couldn't bring myself to look inside. He let out a huge breath.

"What? What is it?" I poked Rory in the shoulder. His thoughts weren't forming fast enough.

"Nothing," Rory replied. "You're all clear." I looked in my locker and moved my books around. No note.

"Phew! That's a relief." I felt like a burden had been lifted from my shoulders. Rory looked at the floor. He wasn't as relieved as I was. "I mean, we're going to figure this out."

"Yeah." Rory turned and walked away dragging his feet. I searched for words that might cheer him up but he was already out of sight. I was safe and he wasn't. Rory was afraid - even more so now that he had to face this psycho alone. I didn't blame him. He'd been walking

the halls all morning and looking over his shoulder. There was a ticking clock in his head. It counted down the minutes before his stalker would strike again.

The bell rang and I slammed my locker shut. My next class was around the corner; Biology. Mr. Wellborne would flip if I was late again. My bag was heavy but I managed to run to class just in time, taking my usual seat. Today I'd be forced to sit through a boring lecture about the digestive system.

"Hi Bridget." The girl sitting next to me smiled. She'd never spoken to me before now. In Biology class, I usually kept my head down and doodled in my notebook. Sometimes I had headphones on. And if Mr. Wellborne ever called on me, he was usually thinking of the answer he was looking for. That was my system and I stuck to it every class.

"Hey," I replied trying to sound polite, though I knew why she was suddenly friendly. Her thoughts entered my head, making it hard for me to keep smiling. *She's the girl that snagged Terrence.*

"I saw you at the homecoming dance. Your dress was so pretty." She flicked her long curls over her shoulder and kept on smiling. It was clear that she only wanted one thing: the scoop on Terrence - how I'd gotten him, and why he liked me.

"Thanks." I turned my head forward and broke eye contact. I could still feel her staring.

"Alright class, it's review time!" Mr. Wellborne was at the front of the classroom shouting over the giggles and whispers. "Listen up! Or fail come test time!" The room quieted down a little, but not completely. I opened my notebook to a fresh page and started drawing. The redhead sitting up front always knew the right answers. Come test time I'd just focus on her.

Bridget. The voice was low but I could still hear it over the giggles in the back. I looked up.

"Yes?" Mr. Wellborne stopped his lecture, giving me a funny look. Meanwhile, half the class turned around to look at me. Their facial expressions mimicked Mr. Wellbourne's puzzled look.

"I'm sorry Bridget. Did you have a question?" Mr. Wellborne was looking at me, awaiting an answer. I shook my head. I could've sworn he said my name. I blushed and shook my head. The class directed their attention towards the front again and my fingers resumed drawing.

Bridget. The same voice pulsed through my mind again, this time a little louder. I put my pencil down and looked at the girl next to me. She saw me looking at her and grinned. I nodded but she didn't say anything. I heard the voice a third time. The louder it got, the raspier it sounded. *Bridget.* I dropped my pencil and annoyingly stared at the students in closest proximity. They looked as if they were intently listening to Mr. Wellborne's explanation about the different sections of the small intestines.

I decided to keep my head up. Most of the class had quiet minds. The majority of the thoughts in the classroom centered around Mr. Wellborne's lecture. Though a guy in the corner was replaying the graphic night he'd had with his girlfriend. Sick. But no one had thoughts that focused on me, not at the moment.

Bridget. The voice entered my head a fourth time. No one moved their lips. No one looked in my direction. I could feel the muscles in my legs tense up. Maybe I was just being paranoid? *Bridget.* The voice was getting louder, making the hairs on my arms stand up. No one was speaking. I was sure of it. The raspy voice was a thought – a really creepy thought.

I stared around the room without blinking. My eyes got watery. This kind of thing had never happened to me before. No one, aside from my mom, had ever purposely thought

something for me to hear. The cruel voice came again, this time giving me chills. *Bridget*. I wanted to jump up and yell at the whole class. But I took a large breath and tried not to jump to any conclusions. I didn't want anyone to think I was crazy.

Mr. Wellborne continued lecturing in a monotonous tone. My whole body was tense. I desperately wanted to leave my seat, run out the door, and breathe in fresh air. A few drops of sweat lingered on my forehead as I fought my instinct to flee. I was hearing things, weird things. What if the voice followed me to my next class or even home?

"Bridget? Be my partner?" The girl sitting next to me was waving her hands, trying to get my attention.

"What did you say?" I asked in confusion.

"Be my partner?" She replied slowly, now doubting her decision to ask me.

"Did you say my name just now?" I whispered. She gave me a look similar to Rory – the look that told me I was acting like a weirdo.

"Uh, yeah. We're like supposed to talk about the essay question and stuff?"

"Yeah, of course." I smiled and laughed, pretending too hard to act casual. It just made me seem more out of it. "Sorry, it's just been one of those days."

"Late night Saturday?" She winked and flicked her hair again. "I'm Ellie, by the way. I'm on the cheer squad with your friend Emma. *And Stacy*, I thought to myself. *The girl that died Friday during the football game.*

"Yeah sure," I muttered. "So what question are we supposed to talk about?"

"Uh, essay number two on the review sheet. The roles of the – *Bridget*- stomach during –*Bridget*- the breakdown – *Bridget*- of food." The raspy voice entered my head, confusing me. I couldn't focus on anything Ellie was saying to me. *Bridget. Bridget. Bridget.*

I jumped to my feet with sweat dripping down my cheek. My chest felt heavy as I let out a few gasps. Ellie watched with raised eyebrows. Her thoughts explained the expression on her face. *What the hell is she doing?* Ellie was the only student looking at me. Everyone else had their attention directed at their assigned essay questions. I couldn't find a way to make myself understand.

"Um sorry, there was a fly." I sighed and sat down. Ellie nodded and started copying her answer from the textbook. She didn't want to waste time waiting for me to cooperate. She had a big mall trip planned, and she didn't want unfinished homework to interfere. I followed her lead and decided to keep my mouth shut the rest of the period. I wrote on my review sheet as fast as I could. When I was finished, my handwriting was barely legible.

I felt like my desk was holding me hostage. I was stuck in a never ending class. The sight of my classmates was seriously starting to freak me out. Panic was setting in, but I fought to suppress it. This was all just a misunderstanding. It had to be.

"So what's he like?" Ellie's voice went unusually high. I was a little shocked that she was trying to start another conversation. Ellie's mind had invented an explanation for my behavior – drugs. Yet she still forced herself to get a few details about the new guy at school. She eagerly waited for a response, meanwhile daydreaming about Terrence. Her brain literally started counting the ways she could steal him away. After all, I was a druggie right? I wanted to ignore her, but I resorted to playing dumb.

"What's who like?" I replied. The sour look on Ellie's face cheered me up a little.

"Terrence, of course," she responded. "Everyone knows that the two of you went to homecoming together." Ellie knew that I'd left early – most of the school did. And the latest

rumor was that Terrence had too. Ellie had put two and two together. Had I given Terrence a backstage pass? There was desperation in Ellie's stare.

"What exactly are people saying?" I asked.

"That the two of you are together."

"Well, we're not." I looked at the clock. Ellie pretended to frown but inside, she was overjoyed. I had said just the thing she wanted to hear.

"Sorry, it's just that you arrived together and then left together so I assumed that . . ."

"Left together? You mean Terrence didn't go back inside?" I smiled. Was it possible that Terrence and I still had a shot? Ellie looked confused. "I mean, never mind." Thinking about Terrence eased the knot in my stomach. It was a positive I wanted to hold on to. I'd spent all weekend wishing things had played out differently. Maybe I hadn't ruined everything, especially if he went home right after I did . . . alone.

* * *

I'd never darted out of Biology so fast. Ellie must've thought my shoes were on fire. I couldn't wait to go home and shut myself in my room. I needed peace and quiet. I needed to reset my brain. But first, I had to get through lunch with Emma. I waited in our usual spot - a quiet corner by the gym and away from usual traffic. Our corner was less crowded than the lunch room. I sat with my back against the wall, watching a few students who lingered near the drinking fountain.

"Hey, Bri!" Emma took a seat next to me and handed me a soda. "I got us diet. I hope that's ok?" I grabbed the soda can.

"As long as it has caffeine. I have a monstrous headache." I took a huge gulp.

"So," Emma said casually.

"Just skip through the small talk. You want to know about Terrence." I took another gulp of soda and cleared my throat. Emma smiled and listened intently. "We had a good time. We laughed. We danced. We even held hands. And then I went home."

"And?" Emma was disappointed by my vague description. I shrugged and took another big swallow of soda.

"And that's about it," I finished.

"Did he kiss you?" Emma asked. I almost spit soda all over my jeans. Emma's eyes went wide as she waited for an answer.

"No, Em. We didn't exactly get that far. I had a migraine and went home."

"Oh." She looked down at her lunch. I finished my soda and squeezed the metal can. It made a noise that filled the hallway. Emma continued prodding for information. "Well, has he talked to you today?" I shook my head.

"We don't have any classes together." I could tell Emma was bummed. She'd been hoping for a different story, one involving the announcement of my first official boyfriend.

"Well, I'm sure he'll call or something. I really thought he liked you." Her words were sincere. Emma would never have tried to steal Terrence from me, not that we were an item. The thought had never even crossed her mind. She wanted me to be happy.

"Yeah maybe," I said. "Or maybe he just really needed a date for the dance?"

"You weren't just a replacement, Bri. Don't go thinking that." Emma's advice was always heartfelt. At times it was like Emma could read *my* mind. I closed my eyes and took in the silence. *Finally some silence*, I thought.

A few footsteps made noise down the hall but our lunch spot was empty. I only had three more classes to go before I could go home. But I silently added up all the days I still had to spend at Mountain View - four more days until the weekend, and then like six months after that before summertime. Summer vacation was always bliss. I wasn't a slave to buzzing hallways and pornographic daydreams.

Bridget. My eyes opened. Emma was chewing on a piece of her sandwich.

"Yeah?" I said nervously, hoping the voice was Emma's. Emma frowned.

"I didn't say anything." She took another bite of her sandwich. I gulped. It was happening again. Someone was messing with my head. But that meant that . . . My eyes went wide and my throat welled up. That meant some one knew my secret. Some one knew I could read people's thoughts. "Bridget?" Emma looked me as I covered my ears. "Bridget? Are you okay?" I looked at Emma again. Her face looked gravely concerned. "Yeah, I'm talking to you. Are you ok?"

"Yeah." I spoke and exhaled at the same time.

"Are you having a panic attack?" She felt my forehead and reached in her bag for some water. "Here. Drink some water." It wasn't possible, was it? My mom was the only other person on the planet who knew my secret. My best friend didn't even know.

"Sorry. It's just all the stuff that's been going on. I guess I'm just a little overwhelmed." I grabbed a strand of hair, twirling it between my fingers. Emma didn't buy my excuse.

"You know, sometimes I think you don't tell me things on purpose." Her mind wandered back to elementary school. I'd always leave class with no explanation, and know things about people I shouldn't have known. Yet still, after all these years, Emma's suspicions were far from the actual truth. That was probably a good thing.

"Don't be silly, Em." She stood up and lent me a hand. "I'll be fine come next period. Let's hit the vending machines." I looked up and down the empty hallway. I used to have nightmares about stuff like this. They always started with one kid who had figured out my secret. And when that kid finally blabbed, the entire school would end up mobbing me at my locker. I usually woke up buried in my blankets, dripping in sweat.

I followed Emma, focusing on my steps. I counted each one. In a couple of hours, I could go home and forget this awful day. My muscles tightened. The sound of my own footsteps made me jumpy. Why couldn't I have just gotten a note in my locker? That was better than the growing bubble of paranoia in my brain. I turned around one last time to face the empty hallway, and my face cringed. I heard the voice again, and this time I was sure it wasn't imaginary. *Bye Bridget.*

Chapter Five

Sanity

I watched Rory gather his things and disappear into the science lab down the hall. My head was spinning and every sound around me made my heart pound. I was afraid. No, I was terrified that any second I'd hear the cruel, raspy voice call my name. My taunter could've been anywhere or anyone. Someone might even be watching this very moment. My feet went on auto pilot and carried me to the science lab.

I stormed into the empty lab and shut the door behind me, relishing the comforting silence. I listened for a minute to make sure no one else was in the room. Rory looked bewildered. He was alone. His thoughts were on overload as usual, and I was the last person he'd expected to see. I, Bridget Ferns, had voluntarily walked into the science lab. Rory was intrigued.

"What are you doing here? You lose something?" *Yeah my mind*, I thought to myself.

Rory knew that something wasn't right. I guess it was the look on my face. Rory thought about the note and he'd been thinking about the broken bracelet all day. He wasn't coping well, despite the brave face. But at least he seemed to be handling all this better than me. He still had his sanity. "Bridget, you don't look so good."

"Before you ask, the answer is no," I immediately responded. "I didn't get a note in my locker."

"So what *did* you get?"

"What makes you think I got anything?" I wiped my forehead and forced a smile, but Rory wasn't fooled. He was certain that something had happened but he didn't want to pry. Stacy was a scary topic of discussion at the moment. Just like me, Rory wanted to avoid the subject.

"Then quit acting like you've seen a ghost."

"You have no idea," I muttered. I dropped my backpack and sat on a stool next to Rory. He was jotting stuff down in a notebook and booting up his laptop. "Look, I know you've been thinking about the bracelet all day." Rory turned to me with a curious face. "I mean, I'm guessing you've been thinking about . . ." I tried to backtrack.

"Certain events?" Rory shut his notebook and straightened his glasses. "Well, you guessed right. You may not think this is serious, but it is. I've been trying to take my mind off it, but then the note pops back into my head." Rory was frustrated. Seeing me just reminded Rory that he was the only one in danger. He was the one who called the police, and he was the one who got a warning.

"I am taking this seriously," I replied. Rory strongly disagreed but didn't want to cause an argument.

"Fine," he replied. "Tell me what happened then? You don't need to lie you know. Just tell me what your note said. I can handle it." I hesitated. How was I supposed to explain to Rory that someone was messing with my head? I couldn't. It wouldn't make sense to him.

"What do you mean?" I had no idea what else to do, so I brushed off his question. Rory rolled his eyes, now even more annoyed.

"That's why you're here, Bridget. And don't tell me you come to the science lab for fun. That kind of lie would be obvious." Rory's thoughts said the rest. *This girl must have a lot of*

issues. That would explain the mood swings. I scowled at Rory but he ignored me and focused on his laptop. He hit a few keys and a window popped up on his computer screen. It had a picture of Stacy.

"News report," Rory mentioned. "Her cause of death has been determined. Heart failure?"

"Like a heart attack?" I gulped. That would explain her lack of wounds – no cuts, no bruises, no bullet holes. As Rory kept reading the wheels in his head turned faster.

"I guess, but heart failure is too general of a term. What they're really saying is they still don't know what killed her." Rory was disappointed. He'd been hoping for a detailed coroner's report but all he got was speculation. He shook his head, unimpressed with Stacy's diagnosis. "I want to see the bracelet."

"Keep your voice down," I whispered. "And forget it. I'm not bringing that thing to school."

"Why are you making things difficult? The murderer is after me, remember? No one's after you."

"That's not true," I protested. Rory raised his eyebrows. I looked around and forced myself to speak as quietly as possible. "Since you want to know so badly, someone *is* after me, okay."

"You got a note?" Rory whispered back. "I knew it."

"Sort of," I answered hesitantly. "It's hard to explain. I don't really want to talk it." Rory scratched his head.

"Geez, you're hard to figure out." Rory sighed. "Fine. I'll take your word for it." I nodded gratefully. My comment only created hundreds of new questions in Rory's mind. Each question burned in his head, desperate for a reply. Rory filed all his questions away. He wasn't going to ask me anything else. He didn't want to pressure me.

"Thanks." It was a relief to know I could count on him even though we didn't exactly get along. Rory shut off his computer and packed up his bag.

"Is that a sarcastic thanks or a real thanks?" He muttered while he collected his things. I laughed.

"It's a real thanks," I assured him. "But I could always take it back." Rory grinned. I'd never seen him smile before. It changed the shape of his face. "So, my house then? I mean if you want to see 'the thing', you'll have to come over. I'm not taking it out in public."

I ran my fingers through my hair, picked up my backpack, and pushed the door open. Students were scattered in the hallway. This time as I looked around, Rory right behind me, I wasn't scared. I stepped forward, running into a tall figure that was passing by. I felt Rory come to a sudden halt, almost smashing into me.

"Bridget! I thought I'd missed you." Terrence had on a baby blue shirt that matched his eyes. He looked pleased to see me, as if our short good-bye at homecoming didn't matter. Looking at his face lifted my spirits. I couldn't stop staring.

"Terrence, hi! Sorry, I didn't mean to run into you." Butterflies swarmed my stomach. I smiled, forgetting all about where I was headed.

"Can we talk?" Terrence looked at Rory who was impatiently waiting behind me.

"Yeah, of course," I agreed. I distanced myself from Rory and gave Terrence my full attention.

"Uh, Bridget?" Rory interrupted. "We have stuff to do?" Rory tapped his foot and looked at Terrence with a disapproving expression.

"Later," I replied. I'd been thinking about Terrence all weekend. This was my chance to for redemption. I nudged Rory away and heard him stamp off down the hall. The rude remarks in his head didn't faze me.

"What was that all about? Are you two?" Terrence watched Rory walk briskly out of sight.

"No," I quickly responded. "He's my . . . science tutor." Terrence nodded. His expressions didn't give much away. I couldn't tell what he was thinking. And though that was annoying and strange, it kept me guessing. It was worth the one-on-one face time. I couldn't help but remind myself of the positives. I finally knew what it felt like to be a normal teenage girl.

"So, I was wondering if you wanted to go out sometime." Terrence eyed my lips and I resisted shouting my response. Screaming out "yes!!!" would make me look a little desperate.

"That sounds cool," I replied casually. I was trying not to appear nervous, though I was. *That sounds cool*, I thought. *Lame*.

"Well, we never really got to finish our first date." Terrence leaned in a little closer. My heart started to beat out of rhythm. I could hear it loud in my ears.

"Yeah, sorry about that. I hope you didn't have too much of a terrible time after I left." I smiled, waiting for reassurance that he had in fact left the dance right after me.

"Actually I went home after you left."

"Oh really?" I lied. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to ruin your night."

"You didn't." His response made me feel tingly all over. He knew just what to say to make me feel confident. Terrence took my hand and started walking. "So when can I see you again? Tonight?"

"Tonight? Uh, sure. Although, I'm not sure how long my mom will let me stay out on a Monday night." What a stupid reply. But Terrence smiled. His hand squeezed mine. I could feel the heat from his skin transferring to my arm. It made me want to lean in even closer.

"What about your dad? He doesn't mind?"

"Not at all," I said. "He's not really around anymore. He passed away when I was little." Terrence looked slightly embarrassed. His cheeks got a little rosy.

"Sorry. I didn't know."

"Don't apologize. It was a long time ago." I smiled and changed the subject. Though Terrence's concern made me like him even more. "So, how are you liking Mountain View? I'm sure it's not as interesting as England."

"I like it just fine. Everyone's been real friendly."

"I bet." I could think of a ton of reasons why people had been so friendly. Terrence chuckled as we stepped outside. The parking lot was clearing out, and the sky was sunny with scattered gray clouds. I was supposed to get a ride home from Emma. She normally waited for me by her car. I just hoped she was already waiting for me today. She'd flip if she saw me holding hands with Terrence.

"How does seven sound?"

"It sounds like two hours from now." I was already anxious to see him, though we hadn't yet parted. I'd given another stupid reply. Terrence laughed.

"You're a real laugh, you know." He let go of my hand as I searched for Emma's car. She was sitting in the driver's seat reading a book. Probably homework.

"Emma's waiting for me."

"See you at seven then?" Terrence turned around and walked back inside. I waited until he was out of sight before I took off running towards Emma's car. I whipped open the passenger door, startling Emma. She jumped, dropping her book and losing her spot on the page.

"Looks like someone's feeling better," she commented. I looked at my face in the mirror. I was beaming.

"You'll never guess what I'm doing tonight?" I was so excited, my hands were shaky.

"Terrence? Did he talk to you?" Emma's eyes went wide. Uncontrollable giggles came bursting out of my mouth. "See, Bri! I told you he would!"

"We're going out tonight," I tried to keep my voice calm. Emma gave me a mini hug and started the car, blasting the radio. We laughed and sang along as we drove through town. Suddenly, my day didn't suck so bad. Maybe this Stacy stuff would be over soon and things would go back to normal – better than normal. I would be with Terrence.

Emma finally parked in front of my house. The driveway was empty, and the windows were dark. Most of my neighbors were still at work.

"I'll be expecting your call," Emma said firmly as I got out of the car. "And you better tell me every detail. Don't make me have to pry."

"Alright, alright." I shut the door and waved. Emma sped off and I stared at the silent, brick house in front of me. Earlier, I'd been eager to get home so I could sulk in my room. Now, all I could think about was what to wear. My current outfit didn't cut it. I needed a tighter pair of jeans and something other than a t-shirt.

A loud engine coming down the street startled me. I turned around. An old truck slowed down and came to a stop in front of my house. Rory grinned from the driver's seat. He was determined to see the bracelet. His mind thought of nothing else.

"Stalking is illegal you know!" I shouted from the front door, but Rory still got out of his truck.

"You invited me remember," Rory replied. "And I'm not stalking you. Your address is in the school directory and the phone book." I sighed and unlocked the front door. Rory jogged up the driveway. "And just so we're clear, I'm not here for you. I'm here to see the bracelet."

"Duh," I muttered. "You know, I was thinking and maybe we're blowing this whole Stacy thing out of proportion. Maybe someone's just pulling a nasty prank on us."

"Is that you talking or your new buddy, Terrence? Because I don't know about you, but you were pretty skittish not too long ago."

"Well, sometimes I over-react," I admitted.

"Sure." The front room was dark and I flipped on the light. I carried my school bag to the kitchen and dropped in on the table.

"You want something?" I opened the fridge and debated over which soda to chose.

"Whatever you're having." Rory wanted a soda. His favorite flavor was grape. I tossed him a Coke.

"Sorry, we don't have grape," I replied. Rory looked taken back.

"Did I tell you my favorite soda flavor is grape?" He scratched his head, searching through his memories. I kept a straight face. It was fun to mess with him. I shrugged and sat down. Rory quickly forgot about the subject of soda and his thoughts returned to the bracelet.

"Oh right," I said jumping up. "I'll be right back ok." Rory silently nodded, still confused by my behavior. "And then you have to leave. Terrence is coming over." Rory looked annoyed but I ran upstairs to retrieve the bracelet before his thoughts about Terrence entered my head.

When I jogged back downstairs, Rory was nervously waiting at the kitchen table. His brain couldn't move forward with homework, chores, or SAT prep until he figured out who sent him the note.

"Here," I said as I dropped the broken bracelet on the table. I avoided looking at it. Rory studied the charm's engravings – the letters D-r-u and a faded symbol resembling some sort of crest. He touched it first with his pointer finger. Then he picked it up and examined the broken, metal links.

"I have an idea," Rory commented.

"What?" I sat down as Rory kept examining both sides of the charm. He pulled out his cell phone and took a picture of it.

"I think I might be able to figure out where this bracelet came from, or at least who made it."

"Huh? How? You can't go flashing that picture around. Are you crazy?"

"Relax," Rory said calmly. "My cousin in LA is an expert jeweler. He has a huge database of manufacturers to look through." The overwhelming fear of being questioned by police started to return. I took deep breaths, trying not to freak myself out before Terrence showed up.

"Rory, are you sure you can trust this guy?" My eyes were so fixated on his face, awaiting an honest response, that my eyes were watery. Rory looked at me and I felt the strong bond he shared with his cousin. Rory's family valued loyalty. He'd been taught the importance of keeping your word since birth. "Ok." I nodded approvingly before he could speak. Rory was relieved. He planned on sending the picture whether I agreed to it or not. He thought it would be careless not to. Rory uploaded the picture to an email and pressed send.

"Well, have fun making googley eyes with Terrence." Rory stood up and walked towards the door. "And thanks for the soda."

"Do you purposely say things to make me mad?" I followed Rory to the door and caught him grinning. "I'm glad that you think dating is so funny. Maybe one day you'll actually go on a few yourself." Rory frowned and pushed open the front door. His thoughts reminisced on last year when he used to hang out with a girl named Lindsay. She was funny and her caramel hair made him excited about geometry. Lindsay dropped him when she got her braces removed.

"Funny," Rory murmured. "Absolutely hilarious." He stood up straighter and held his chin up, thinking of the one thing in his life that was consistent – his grades. I folded my arms, and tilted my head towards the door.

"Touché," I muttered.

Chapter Six

Choices

My heart raced when the door bell rang. I could see Terrence's black BMW from my bedroom window. I put on a coat of lip gloss and ran downstairs, composing myself before opening the door.

"You look lovely." Terrence reached for my hand. I was mesmerized by the bright blue color of his eyes. The warmth of his skin helped me clear my mind. I let Terrence pull me outside and decided to leave all my troubles at the door. With Terrence I was a normal girl - a girl with a gorgeous date. I didn't have to pretend at all. Not knowing his thoughts and every waking fantasy gave our relationship mystery. For once, I had to get answers on my own.

"Thanks." I looked down at my jeans and flowing red top. It had taken me forever to choose them. "So, where are we going exactly?"

"You like ice cream?" Terrence opened the passenger door, and waited for me to slide in.

"Of course," I quickly replied. "Who doesn't?" Terrence slid into the driver's seat and backed down the driveway. I looked straight ahead through the perfectly clean windshield. Through the corner of my eye, I could see him glancing at me. I decided to play it cool. I let him stare.

"Favorite flavor? Let me guess, chocolate." Terrence looked through his rearview mirror as he drove around the corner.

"Lucky guess," I laughed. "Doesn't every girl like chocolate?" Terrence sped down the street. The sky was gray again and the temperature was slowly starting to drop. Orange and yellow leaves were beginning to fill the streets. By Halloween there would be snow on the ground.

Terrence turned into the local shopping center. It was the closest place to stop for ice cream. The store wasn't crowded. Terrence raced over to open my door before I could open it myself. My stomach was still so full of butterflies that I was too nervous to think. Terrence kept on holding my hand as we entered the shop and walked up to the counter. I could barely concentrate on the flavors in front of me. Terrence watched me as I stared, struggling to make a decision.

"Want me to order?" he asked. I didn't care what flavor was in my cone. I just wanted to spend as much time as I could with Terrence before nine o'clock. My mom would go ballistic if she came home from work to an empty house.

"Chocolate fudge on a cone please," I finally said. Terrence just smiled. I glanced at the time and sat down at a small open table. Terrence paid before handing me cone and taking an open seat.

"You have somewhere to be?"

"I don't have a lot of time," I answered.

"Oh, yeah. Your mum right?" Terrence nodded, letting me know he understood. I took a small lick of my chocolate fudge ice cream. I barely noticed the sugary taste on my tongue. My mind was full of too many questions. I craved information. The information I would normally get if I could hear what Terrence was thinking.

"What's your family like?" I asked. Terrence bit into his cone and shrugged.

"Average I guess."

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"One." Terrence took another huge bite of his cone and coughed. He wiped ice cream from his lips and blushed the same way he had at school. The two of us laughed. "Sorry, I'm not usually this clumsy."

"Don't worry about it. I'm usually worse." My ice cream was starting to melt. I took another lick to prevent it from dripping down my hand but I wasn't in the mood to eat the entire thing. Besides, I was already chilly and the ice cream made it worse.

"You're just being nice," Terrence responded. I shook my head.

"Trust me, I'm not. That's why I'm no good at sports."

"Really?" Terrence took another bite of his cone, this time the bite was smaller. I smiled and licked a melting stream of chocolate from my finger. Well, it was mostly true. I played soccer when I was little, but the crowds were just too overwhelming. And games were a nightmare. Parents would shout and all my teammates had trouble concentrating on the ball. Their thoughts were all over the place. The headaches were a pain. Since then, my mom decided sports weren't for me. I liked soccer, but I preferred my sanity.

"Yeah, my friend Emma's in cheerleading but I'm just horrible at all that stuff. You play any sports?" I started criticizing my answers again. *Do you play any sports? Of course he plays sports*, I thought. *You don't get bulging biceps from sitting on the couch.*

"I played a little football back home, but that's about it."

"Our football team here isn't that good," I replied. "Hey, maybe you should try out? They could use some good players." Terrence just chuckled.

"Sorry, I meant football as in soccer." He took another small bite of his cone. I felt my cheeks get hot.

"Right," I muttered. I was trying really hard not to blush but it wasn't working. I took a few more licks of my chocolate ice cream. A loud beeping noise mad me stop and clear my throat. "Crap." I pulled my cell phone from my pocket. My mom had come home early. I handed Terrence my cone and turned down the volume before answering the phone. "Yeah?"

"Bridget, why aren't you home?" My mom sounded worried. I felt myself blushing again, awaiting a good scolding.

"I just went out for a bit but I'm on my way home now."

"With who? Emma?" she asked. I lowered my voice. Date number two was about to be ruined, just like date number one.

"I'll explain when I get home, ok." I could hear the disapproval in my mom's voice.

"Hurry home." She hung up. It made me nervous that she hadn't yelled at me the way she normally did. Maybe she was waiting until I got home. I personally preferred being punished over the phone.

"Uh, we gotta go." I wasn't sure how Terrence would take the news, but he stood up and handed me my cone. I took a few more licks and threw it in the trash.

"I hope I didn't get you into trouble?"

"No, my mom just came home earlier than expected," I replied. Terrence tossed his cone too and hurried to the car. Inside, I was dying. Who knew how Terrence felt about me now? I'd ruined another date. "I'm really, really sorry about this, Terrence."

"Believe me, I understand. I have parents too." Terrence concentrated on speeding back to my house. I twirled a piece of my hair as I stared at the road. "You're a difficult girl to take out, Bridget." I quietly giggled.

"I'll make it easier next time," I assured him. Minutes later, Terrence pulled into my driveway. The porch light was on.

"Friday," Terrence said. "We'll try again Friday." My heart pounded. My face got hotter and Terrence studied the curves of my face. He leaned in close – so close that I could feel his breath. His neck smelled of cologne.

"That's exactly what I was thinking," I whispered. Terrence touched my cheek and stared into my eyes before he kissed me. His lips were soft and they fit perfectly against mine. I closed my eyes and wanted nothing more than stay in his BMW all night. There was still so much we didn't know about each other. So much unexplored territory.

Terrence pulled away. His kiss left me speechless. All I knew was that I wouldn't be able to sleep tonight. I'd be daydreaming about Terrence, wondering if he was really into me.

"See you at school," he whispered. I loved the sound of his voice even more.

It was too hard to get out of the car. My mind was lost in a world of perfect kissing and constant hand holding. Terrence was the star of this world. Our kiss had just fueled a week's worth of daydreams.

My head was buzzing. I felt like I could take on anything, but reality smacked me in the face when my mom answered the door. She didn't look mad, but she was. She'd had a rough day at work. My disobedience just added to her stress migraine. Then a thought was pushed into my head, one that really brought me back to reality. *Stacy's funeral services are tomorrow.*

"What's happening tomorrow?" I asked.

"Is that the boy you went to homecoming with? When do I get to meet him?" Mom's worried expression lessened slightly.

"Yeah," I replied. She smiled a little and walked back to her pot of boiling water in the kitchen. She sighed and decided that now wasn't the best time for a scolding. She was too tired. Images of Stacy started to haunt me again. The look on her face came back into my head. "So, Stacy's funeral is tomorrow?"

"I read it in the paper. You want any spaghetti?" She stirred as I sat down at the table. My mom was tired and hoping for a full eight hours of rest.

"Sure." I stared at my mom, waiting for her to suddenly change her mind and yell at me. Instead, her thoughts turned to Terrence. She wanted to know where we went and what we did – the typical mom questions. Was he a good student? Did he have a habit of getting into trouble? Did he have nice parents? "Geez mom, I don't even know the answers to those questions yet."

"Any mom would want to know those things," she responded. "So how did it go? Or are you going to make me wonder all week long?"

"It went fine, apart from your phone call." I paused. Maybe that wasn't the best thing say, considering I was already on thin ice.

"Well, you could've prevented that by telling me where you were going." She picked up the pot of noodles and carried it to the sink. Steam hit her face as she strained the noodles.

"It was sort of a spur of the moment thing," I slowly answered.

"Will you get us some plates, hun?" I got up and dragged my feet to the cupboard. "So, are you going?"

"Going to what?" I asked. My mom's thoughts answered my question. *Stacy's funeral, of course.* "Oh, that. I guess I'll go if Emma goes." But honestly, I felt weird about going. Half the school would be there, wondering how she really died. That would be torture to sit through.

* * *

Walking to my locker Tuesday morning was much easier than it had been the day before. I had Terrence to occupy my mind. He was the only positive thing I had to look forward to at the moment. Stacy's funeral announcement had been broadcasted over the school's intercom. Every friend of Stacy's was invited to pay their respects. The announcement left everyone's thoughts buzzing. Stacy was everywhere – past conversations, daydreams, old boyfriends. I couldn't escape her. I tried not to let fear overwhelm me. I feared that Stacy's killer was nearby. I feared that soon I'd be exposed.

"Bridget, I'm glad I caught you." Rory looked like he might puke all over the floor. He had Stacy's dead body on his mind, the note in his locker, the bracelet, and . . .

"No," I gasped. Rory's eyes glared at every passing student. He was on the verge of a mental breakdown. I could feel my heart pounding. Why did this have to happen? Why today?

"In a way, we knew this was coming." He pulled a folded piece of paper out of his pocket. It was on the same white cardstock. Rory handed me the note. I looked around to make sure the hallway was clear before opening it. Although I already knew what it said, the writing was floating around in Rory's head, but seeing the words made me feel worse. *The weight room at midnight. Bring the bracelet. No police. No tricks.*

My eyes went wide. The bracelet hadn't left my house. How could anyone possibly know about it aside from Rory and me?

"Did you tell anyone else about the bracelet," I whispered.

"You think I'm that stupid? Of course I didn't. The only other person that knows about it lives a thousand miles away." Rory was conflicted. He didn't want to wait in the dark weight room alone. But he didn't want to know what might happen if he didn't.

"What if we left the bracelet there after school?" I spoke calmly. Rory still felt sick to his stomach. He knew that once Stacy's killer had the bracelet, the only other evidence to dispose of would be him, and then me.

"We could, but that doesn't mean I'll be left alone. It's not like the killer can erase my memory."

"What do you suggest we do?" I looked around. There were a few scattered students but none who were listening.

"My gut tells me that even if we do what we're told, things are only going to get worse. I don't want to spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder." Rory and I had finally agreed on something. I didn't want to spend the rest of my life worrying about being stalked.

"Your gut sounds right on," I agreed. Rory took a breath. He was trying to calm down but he was having little success. "And I'm not being sarcastic or anything." Rory forced a half smile. The bell rang.

"I'll think of something. See you after class?" Rory waited for a nod. He nervously turned, keeping his head down. I gulped. My forehead started to sweat and suddenly I was back where I was yesterday, paranoid about the voice. Would it call my name today? Would it whisper a new threat? I did what I could to calm myself. *Just relax, Bridget. That stuff is yesterday's news. Focus on school. Focus on Terrence.*

I pulled the strap on my backpack, scared of sitting through another biology lecture. I didn't want to face that classroom again. There was a psycho in there. And I didn't know if I could sit through another round of torture.

Chapter Seven

Plans

"The entire squad is going tonight." Emma sighed and stared at her slice of turkey on wheat toast. The two of us sat with our backs against the wall at our quiet lunch spot. I'd sat through classes with a pounding chest, wondering what my taunter had in store. Nothing happened all morning. It was a relief but at the same time it made me even more nervous. Either something crazy was about to happen or I really was just hearing voices yesterday. I wasn't sure which was worse.

"And that includes you right?" I asked.

"Yeah." Emma didn't want to go alone. This was her first funeral. Well, it was her first funeral being old enough to walk. "Would you come with me? I know that you didn't know Stacy that well, but would you?" I looked up. Footsteps were coming down the hall.

"I guess." I wanted to say a lot more. Emma nibbled at her wheat toast. "Don't worry. This Stacy stuff will be over soon." But I wasn't so sure it would be.

A group of guys paraded down the hall with paper bags full of burritos. I could smell their food long after they turned the corner. Emma coughed and whispered something in a raspy voice.

"What? Slow down, Em. You don't want to choke." I patted her on the back.

"I'm fine. I just need some water." She cleared her throat. There were a few more footsteps in the distance. I let out a huge breath. My paranoia had to stop. I'd been looking over my shoulder since the Stacy incident. Emma whispered something else in the same crackly voice, and I picked up her water bottle and handed it to her.

"Here," I said. "You're starting to freak me out with that witch voice." Emma looked puzzled.

"Bri, I didn't say anything. But I do need this." She took a swig of water. My chest went heavy. Emma's words filled my head. The voice was back.

"I'm sorry," I nervously said. "Did you say that you didn't say anything just now?" Emma swallowed another mouthful of water. And just as I heard more footsteps down the hall, a low voice entered my head. *Bridget*. I jumped up.

"Bri, what are you doing?" Emma watched me as I twirled around like a crazy person. My heart pounded even faster. My feet tiptoed down the hall. The voice entered my head again and I walked even faster. *The weight room at midnight. Don't be late.*

"Did you hear that?" I shouted. Emma gave me a strange look and shook her head. Anger welled up inside my chest.

"I'm sick of this," I muttered. This was it – I'd had enough. I knew I would regret it later, but I listened for more footsteps. As soon as I heard noise, I ran down the hall with my fists tightly clenched. I practically jumped around the corner hoping to face my attacker directly. But around the corner was a crowd of students getting ready for next period. And then I saw it, auburn hair and an orange backpack spin around and jet towards the nearest exit. That had to be him.

I bolted. The guy with the orange backpack wore jeans and a t-shirt. He was average height with an average frame, but he ran fast. I couldn't let him get away. I needed answers. I had to know why he was bothering me. This seemed like the only way.

"Hey!" I shouted and maneuvered through crowded halls trying to catch up. I kept an eye on his short auburn hair. I was eager to put a face on my anger. I could feel my lungs getting tired and I resisted the urge to cough. My leg muscles were getting tight and each step got heavier. The orange backpack turned a corner and I came to a halt when his auburn head disappeared. I let out a huge breath.

"Damn it!" I leaned over and rested my hands on my knees.

"You ok?" Terrence's voice filled my ears. I cleared my throat and wiped the disappointed look off my face.

"Yeah. I was just . . . uh, I was just trying to catch up with someone."

"If that was a race, I'd say the other guy's winning. Want me to wait or something?"

"No," I retorted. "I'll see him later."

"Him, huh. Is that Rory kid bothering you again?" Terrence chuckled. I caught a glimpse of his blue eyes and instantly thought about our kiss. The kid with the orange backpack would have to wait.

"Maybe." I smiled. My breath was catching up to me, but my heart was still pounding. I wanted to be with Terrence so bad but first, I had a lot of investigating to do. It was time for Rory and me to end this, and get back to our normal lives. There was a lot more at stake now. I had a shot at being normal, and having a normal relationship. "Look Terrence, I have something I need to take care off. But I'll see you Friday. I promise."

"Always running off somewhere," Terrence commented. "I suppose I can wait until Friday."

"Great," I replied with a smile. Terrence grabbed my arm and pulled me close. I felt my entire body blush as he pressed his lips to my cheek. "See ya." Terrence walked away with a smirk on his face.

"I have to find Rory," I muttered to myself. I ran towards the cafeteria, though it was one of places at school I truly hated. Every time I got close to that place, thoughts would bombard me, making me feel like my head might explode.

I searched through crowds, resisting the urge to cover my ears and scream at everyone. Every orangey piece of clothing that crossed my gaze, made me lunge in its direction. A guy in an orange shirt passed and I ducked out of way but still bumped his shoulder.

"Balance problem? Where were you?" Rory was standing outside the cafeteria checking his watch. He looked a little jumpy but he was anxious to tell me his plan. It was so jumbled in his head that I couldn't understand it. I'd have to wait for an explanation.

"I think we're getting close," I replied. My face was still cringing every time I saw the color orange.

"We're about to. Do you have time to talk in private?" Rory was thinking of the science lab.

"Science lab?" I suggested. Rory nodded in agreement.

"You read my mind." Rory gave me more funny looks as I laughed at his comment. I watched for anything orange as we walked.

"Rory," I whispered. He looked at me. For the first time, I wanted to confide in him. It would make things so much easier. But of course, that was out of the question. I gulped back my words, stumbling with my speech. "Have you? I mean, do you . . ."

"Do I what?" Rory said. I knew my question would sound strange but it was worth a shot.

"You know a guy? He has auburn hair, wears an orange backpack?" Rory thought but no one came to mind. "Never mind."

"New interest of yours?"

"Not in the way you're thinking," I responded. Rory's brain was moving at a million miles an hour. Trying to keep up with it was exhausting.

"And you know what I'm thinking, huh?"

"Not at the moment, no."

"Whatever," Rory muttered. When we reached the science lab, he opened the door and waited for me to step inside. "Let's just figure this out before lunch is over."

"I couldn't agree more."

* * *

Stacy's funeral services were in the place she loved most – the school's gymnasium. It was where she'd spent most of her time. It was where she'd been the happiest. And the fact that it was near where her body was found didn't seem to resonate with the crowd.

"Are you going to stand in line?" Emma was waiting for my decision before she got up. I stayed glued to my chair.

"Uh, I'm gonna pass. I'm fine right here in my chair." I looked over my shoulder. Where the heck was Rory? He should've been back by now.

"Ok," she said looking down at her black skirt.

"But you go. Don't let me stop you." I nudged her. Emma thought for a minute and got up when a group from her squad joined the line. I searched again for Rory. He'd been gone for too long. I was starting to get worried. We didn't have much time to think out our plan before Stacy's services. Neither of us intended to come back to the school at midnight.

"Please promptly proceed through the line. Our program will begin in fifteen minutes." The Principal was up at the microphone. His face remained expressionless as he sat down again next to his staff and faculty. A long line of people stood in the aisle next to me. Thoughts of Stacy flooded the entire gym – good and bad. Stacy had a lot of friends, and lot of enemies. And a lot of friends who were also enemies.

"Why her?" A girl sobbed. She wiped the runny makeup from her cheek and let the guy next to her scoot closer. Her friend looked annoyed. Crying was a great way to get attention, especially from the guy you've been crushing on since school started. At least, that's what the sobbing girl thought. Her friend only wished that she'd thought of it first.

I kept looking over my shoulder. So much in fact that the guy behind was starting to think I was checking him out. I frowned at him as he sized me up. *We're at a funeral*, I thought. *What a sicko.*

More and more thoughts about Stacy were shoved into my head. I wanted get up and get some fresh air. I stood up and that's when I heard it. A thought was crammed in with all the others, but this one was different from the rest. The subject of this thought wasn't Stacy. It was . . . Rory? I got up slowly, acting as if I was getting in line to view Stacy's body. Where was this thought coming from. I tried to clear my mind and think of one thing. Rory.

The same thought was shoved into my head again. I saw a student in the back stand up. He had auburn hair and his eyes were staring off into nowhere. He had only one thought in his head. *Rory. I must find him. I must kill him.*

"Crap," I muttered. Students were blocking my way to the exit. It was him - the same kid that'd been messing with my head. And now he was off to execute the next part of his twisted plan. Anger bubbled in my chest like before. This kid was serious. He'd made up his mind and he was going to do it. He was going to kill Rory.

I shoved people out of the way and almost tripped in my black high heels. Emma had insisted that I wear them even though I was happy with plain ballet flats. My emotions were everywhere. Thoughts floated in and out of head my mind, and I was starting to lose track of what was real and what wasn't. I was stressed, and terrified. But most of all I was determined. Rory had done nothing wrong. The only thing he'd been guilty of was trying to help me. And now he was the killer's next target. This was all my fault.

I flung the heels off my feet. They flew to opposite sides of the aisle, but I left them there. My feet hit the cold gym floor. I concentrated on one thing, despite all the people now gawking at me. *Look at that girl. What does she think she's doing? How disrespectful. I'd never do something like that.*

I ignored the judgments and continued pushing through the line until I reached the exit. I burst through the doors and came to a halt. I looked left, then right. *The weight room, my thoughts screamed. Where is the weight room!*

I sprinted towards the locker rooms. The weight room was in the same hallway where I'd found Stacy's body. I hadn't been back since. I kept running despite my tired lungs. The locker room was ahead. I stopped. Inside I could hear yelling and an enormous CRASH! The noise beat so hard through my chest that I thought my heart might stop. I opened the door to the weight room and was horrified.

Rory was crouched in a corner, and the kid with auburn hair had resorted to throwing dumbbells. I'd been so eager to get to Rory in time that I hadn't thought of what to do next. What was I supposed to do?

"Bridget! Get out!" Rory was sweating like crazy. He didn't want to die. He had people that depended on him, but knowing that he could have prevented another death was worse.

Rory's attacker swiveled around, looking at me. I caught a glimpse at his eyes – glowing red. His face looked like it might catch on fire.

"What the . . . ? Rory! What's wrong with him?" I shouted and picked up the nearest thing I could find, a five pound hand weight. The attacker's moves were sluggish but powerful. As soon as he turned towards me, Rory kicked his kneecaps. The guy buckled over but wasn't hurt enough to quit. Now he was furious. I could feel his anger and frustration almost like it was my own. He advanced towards me. I'd just made myself a target.

My nails dug into the five pound weight in my hand and I threw it with all the strength I had. The weight hit his shoulder and it knocked him to the floor. My eyes started to water. What did I just do? I backed away, heart still beating out of control.

"It's ok, Bridget!" Rory yelled from across the room. He made slow movements and kept an eye at the motionless guy on the floor. "I'm sure he isn't hurt that bad."

A quick head shake and the guy with the auburn hair and red eyes to match jumped to his feet. He rubbed his bruised shoulder and blocked Rory's way out. His mind was still set on one thing. I could hear his thoughts like he was screaming them out. He had a burning desire to kill. He had to kill. There was no other option.

I could see fear in Rory's eyes. He ducked a punch but the second punch came too fast. Rory fell to the floor, yelling out in pain. Rory bore what he could and focused on standing, but

a foot had already pinned him to the floor. I watched as if it I was in some kind of dream. *Do something, Bridget! Don't just stand there!*

I ran to Rory and his attacker. The guy with the auburn hair wasn't much taller than me. I wrapped my arms around his neck and jumped on his back. He lifted his foot from Rory's back and struggled to push me off. He tried throwing me the floor, but I latched on with all my might. I grabbed a hand full of his auburn hair and pulled. The guy screamed. I couldn't tell if the scream was in his head or out loud. Either way, he felt pain and that was all that mattered. Through the corner of my eye, I saw Rory get up.

My muscles got weak. I'd held on as long as I could but my grip was slipping. Finally with mountainous force, I was pushed to the floor. My back hit the hard ground of the weight room. It felt like a thousand knives had sliced through my back. I screamed. His red eyes got redder. He was pleased. His foot kicked my stomach and I yelled out again. This time I thought I might vomit. My stomach burned and my eyes filled up with tears.

"Stop!" I yelled. But begging for my life wasn't going to do any good. My vision was getting blurry. I saw the outline of Rory's face and it brought me hope. He had a metal bar in both hands. Rory held the bar like a baseball bat and took a swing at my attacker's face. The guy with auburn hair ducked, but Rory still managed to slam the bar into his back.

Then I heard a loud roar – a gunshot. Everything went quiet. I was still on the floor ready to puke. It took everything I had to sit up. When I did, a dark figure stood in the doorway. His right arm was raised and the gun was still in his hand.

Chapter Eight

The Test

"What's going on? Who are you?" Hearing Rory's voice, I felt relieved. He was ok. The dark figure in the door way kept his gun raised. He looked around the room and took silent steps forward. He had a pointy chin and a scruffy unshaven face. His dark hair was gelled.

"I'm the guy who just saved your ass." He took one last look around the room before lowering his gun. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and rubbed it on his shiny leather jacket.

"Is he dead?" I stared at the body on the floor – auburn hair and empty red eyes.

"No, just unconscious."

"But your gun." Rory pointed to the gun.

"Oh this!" He laughed. "Knock out darts. Pretty standard in situations like these."

"I'm sorry. Who'd you say you were?" My vision was coming back. This man's brain had a few scattered thoughts but it seemed like his mind was on lock down. I'd have to search real hard for the information I wanted. Nothing was readily available.

"I didn't," the man replied. Rory's thoughts began churning until his brain was on overload. *I was right*, was all he could think. *This wasn't the killer's first stop*.

"Are you a Fed?" Rory studied the man, still not sure if he could be trusted. "Let's see a badge." The man looked annoyed but he pulled a badge from his jacket pocket. He held it up so Rory could see it. "Toss it here. I want to see it up close."

"Are you an expert on badges, kid?" The agent tossed him his badge. Rory examined it.

"Just an expert on sorting out liars," Rory responded. "Agent Squires?" The agent smiled. He turned to me, walked over, and offered a hand. I let him help me up. Rory watched, still with a look of suspicion.

"The two of you are lucky. You could've both been killed," he stated. Rory threw the badge back to Agent Squires.

"You think?" Rory folded his arms.

"Uh, sir? Or whatever you are?" I clutched my stomach and tried standing up straight. There was still a burning that wouldn't go away. "That kid he had like . . . well, his eyes looked like . . ." At this point, I wasn't sure if I'd been imagining things. Agent Squires finished my sentence before I could find the right words to say.

"His eye looked like they were on fire? Yeah, that's because he wasn't himself. He was forced to do what he just did." Rory raised an eyebrow. He didn't know what to do with that bit of information. Me on the other hand, I was shocked. Was that even possible?

"How?" I stuttered. The agent looked down. That's why he was here. He'd been searching for that answer for a long time.

"I don't know. I'm just glad I got here in time. The others weren't so lucky." Agent Squires eyed the two of us. I gulped.

"Others?" I stuttered again. Agent Squires had been tracking killings across the United States. He'd always figured things out a little too late. But this time things were different. A crime had been committed, yet the killer was still in town. That had to mean something.

"Yes, there have been other victims."

"I knew it!" Rory exclaimed. "I knew we were dealing with a psycho. So, what now?"

"Now, we get him out of here." Agent Squires pointed to the student with auburn hair. "His name is Bryce and he might know something that could help our investigation." I tried not to look worried. Bryce had been forced to do a lot of things, including things meant to drive me insane. What if he knew my secret? He'd tell Agent Squires and then I'd be in serious trouble.

"Uh, when can *we* talk to him?" I asked. Agent Squires gave me a funny look.

"I'm going to question him. The two of you are going to wait patiently at home while the FBI figures this out." The agent's comment upset Rory. We were dealing with a serial killer, and Rory had been threatened twice. The killer somehow knew things that no one else could know. We couldn't just sit at home and wait.

"Why can't we help?" Rory followed Agent Squires as he bent over and tugged at Bryce's body.

"Look around kid." He pulled at a wire that led to a small web cam in the corner. The one Rory had been trying to set up before the funeral. "You'll just make things worse. Let the professionals handle it."

"And we're just supposed to take your word for it? There's a killer out there who can supposedly use mind control and who knows what else, and we're just supposed to wait?"

"I understand how you must feel," Agent Squires calmly replied. Rory shook his head.

"No," he interrupted. "No, you don't. You're not a target here. We are."

"Don't be so quick to point fingers." Agent Squires pulled out a cell phone and pushed a few buttons. "This killer doesn't choose targets at random. You had to have put yourselves in this position." Rory and I exchanged worried looks. Rory wanted to come clean, but he didn't want to break his promise to me. This seemed like a good time to get everything out in the open. I nodded at Rory.

"Go ahead," I whispered. Rory didn't answer.

"Whatever it is," Agent Squires responded. "I'll figure it out eventually. It's best not to wait until it's too late." Rory had almost gotten killed because of me. I'd brought him into this mess. There had to be a way to tell the truth, but not the whole truth.

"The killer wants us dead because we found Stacy's body," I blurted out, face cringing. Agent Squires hardly looked surprised.

"See that wasn't so hard." The doors opened and Rory and I both jumped. A team of medics rushed in with a stretcher. "You two come with me." Agent Squires pointed at the two of us and walked out into the hallway.

* * *

"Want to tell me why you were in the weight room in the first place?" Agent Squires rested his arms on his thighs. The three of us sat on the bleachers in front of the football field. Stacy's funeral was still going on inside, and the field was empty. I was left to listen to Rory's panic and Agent Squire's locked down brain.

"Blackmail, I guess," Rory answered. "We had something the killer wanted." Agent Squires looked intrigued.

"What? An item? What kind of item?"

"It fell out of Stacy's hand when I found her," I whispered. I waited for Agent Squire's thoughts on the matter. Nothing. His mind was well disciplined. "A bracelet."

"Do you have this bracelet with you?" He was earnest. I shook my head.

"Well, I'm going to encourage you to hand it in as soon as you can. It might help us in our search."

"Why Stacy?" I asked. "Out of all the girls in school. Why her?" Agent Squires let out a sigh.

"Based on past patterns, Stacy's death doesn't make sense. I think it was a mistake." Agent Squires continued eyeing Rory and me. I thought about the night I'd found Stacy. I was in the girl's locker room when I heard all those weird noises.

"So, the target is still out there," I said. Agent Squires nodded.

"And the killer . . . well, he or she won't rest until the deed is done."

"He or she?" Rory commented. "You mean you don't know?" Rory looked disappointed. He was pissed that his life was now in the hands of a clueless cop. "Well then, Squires. What *do* you know?"

"I'm afraid I can't disclose those details to . . ."

"Obviously your game plan isn't working out," Rory interrupted. "Maybe you should approach this one differently? Let us know what we're up against? Come on, Squires. We've both been at this school for years. We might be able to help."

Agent Squires thought about it. It's not that he didn't want to say anything. He just didn't know if we could handle the actual truth. He paused. I was finally able to hear what he was thinking, and it made me smile. *They'd never believe me if I told them*, he thought. *I didn't believe it when I first found out. Unless . . .*

He looked at me and looked at Rory. I stared at the football field. Agent Squires studied Rory for a minute. Rory didn't say anything. He just gave Agent Squires a funny look, trying not to roll his eyes.

Then Agent Squires turned to me. I continued staring at the football field, casually listening for whatever thoughts I could get. Agent Squires looked directly into my eyes and his thoughts immediately floated into my head. *Bridget*.

"Yes." I looked at him. He smiled and his thoughts entered my head again. *I didn't say that out loud. Bridget, can you hear me?* I kept my mouth shut. Agent Squires continued looking at me the same way my mom usually did when she didn't feel like talking. It was starting to freak me out. I'd never communicated with anyone else this way before. And it was different when my mom did it. I didn't know Agent Squires. He was practically a stranger.

I started to breath heavy. My own thoughts went out of control. The only thing I could think to do was deny, deny, deny. *Oh no! What happens now? This guy is a Federal Agent!* He grabbed my shoulders. My whole denial plan wasn't going so well. I was starting to hyperventilate.

"Calm down," Agent Squires said out loud. Rory stared at me looking confused. "It's best that I found you first."

"Uh, what are you doing?" Rory was worried. He didn't like the way Agent Squires was consoling me. "Is something going on here that I don't know about?"

"So he doesn't know?" Agent Squires asked glancing at Rory. I shook my head. I couldn't pretend anymore. Agent Squires knew too much, and I was a horrible actress.

"Know what?" Rory was getting impatient. I grabbed a strand of my hair and started twisting. My nightmares were slowly coming true. Someone else knew my secret. I'd foolishly given information away without even realizing it. How did Agent Squires know? The Agent's reassuring thoughts entered my head again. This time his words were soft and delicate, full of sincerity.

Relax Bridget. I understand you're scared. But you should know that you're the reason the killer is here – it's for your ability. The killer wants power. And unfortunately, there is a way he can get it – murder. I jumped up.

"WHAT?" I couldn't stay still. Everything was bombarding me at once. I felt like I was going to have a panic attack and throw up. Not necessarily in that order. "How? I mean, why would anyone want to do that?"

"Bridget, sit down."

"SIT DOWN? Someone at my school wants to kill me, and you want me to sit down?" I didn't know what else to do but to panic. My body still ached from being thrown to the floor. I could guarantee that being brutally murdered would hurt worse. "Who are these people? How did they find me?"

"Bridget, take a deep breath and sit down." Agent Squires looked as if he'd seen this reaction many times before. Rory didn't know what to think of my outburst. His brain was spinning too fast for me. My head was buzzing, my chest was heavy and my head felt like it was splitting in two.

"Rory, for heaven's sake! Stop that!" Rory's mind refused to slow down, and it was driving me nuts. I couldn't hear myself think anymore. Rory's thought bombardment on top of my panic attack was too much for me to handle.

"What did I do?"

"Try to think of nothing," Agent Squires replied. "You're overwhelming her."

Rory raised his eyebrows, confused by Agent Squire's advice. Though he needed practice, Rory did what he could to think of nothing. Agent Squires put his mind on lock down, giving me some space to think.

The killer wanted my ability, as Agent Squires put it. Ability? It's more of a curse. This meant the killer really did know about the mind reading thing. The taunting, the note, the bracelet. It was all starting to make sense – scary sense.

"Ok something weird is going on." Rory couldn't take it anymore. He needed answers. Agent Squires looked at me. His thoughts entered my head. *It's your decision whether or not to tell him.*

"You're right," I replied looking at Rory. "The killer is after me. Not you. So you can chill out now."

"Bridget, are you sure?" Rory was concerned. He couldn't quite grasp how I knew this. Concern for my safety filled his head. That was sweet. "How can you know that for sure?"

"Just trust me. It's true."

"Well, we've got to find him! We've got to stop him."

"Or her," I interrupted. Rory was willing to do anything if it meant my safety, but he didn't want to admit it. A thought crossed his mind – he knew there was still something being left out. But our relationship so far had consisted of secrets, told and untold.

"This isn't something that should be taken lightly." Agent Squires had a serious look on his face. He was about to give up classified information but his gut told him it was the right thing to do. "You're dealing with a group that has been hunting people like Bridget for decades. Most of their searches are successful."

"What do you mean people like Bridget?" Rory asked. I sighed. Rory took the hint and shut his mouth. "Fine, keep going."

"This group calls themselves The Coven. They use ancient spell books to seek out . . . certain people, and then they perform a ritual. That's when the bodies show up."

"Weird," Rory muttered. He looked at me again. "I'm going to admit something here. I have no idea what you're talking about." Rory's real opinion came into my head. *This guy believes in hocus pocus? He probably doesn't even know what he's talking about.*

"Rory, cut it out. If you don't believe in all that stuff then leave!" I couldn't help the outburst. Time was running low and I wanted all the information I get. Rory looked at me with his jaw wide open. He'd come up with some crazy ideas about how I knew what he was thinking before he said it out loud, but so far they'd been just that – crazy ideas.

"How did you? But I . . ." His brain was piecing it all together but Rory was still clueless. He'd arrived at a ludicrous conclusion. He needed more proof.

"You have a little sister named Kate," I began. "You cook dinner every night because your mom works late, and you write in a black leather journal every night before bed." My decision had been impulsive, but Rory had come closer to the truth than Emma ever had. Besides, this might've been the only way to shut him up. Rory's mouth was still open. His eyes went wide. He didn't know what to say. What *could* he say that I didn't already know?

"Bridget, you can . . ." He still sounded shocked. Even after what I'd just said, he was still in denial.

"Yes Rory," I finally said out loud. "I'm a mind reader. Have been my whole life."

Chapter Nine

Rescued

"How's your stomach?" Emma pulled into my driveway. "Want me to come in?"

"That's ok. You don't have to." Emma still looked concerned. She'd heard about my big scene at Stacy's ceremony. Everyone was talking about how I'd jumped up and stormed out. Emma actually grabbed my shoes before she left. She heard the gasps and the giggles but I had already left by the time she turned around on her tip toes.

"Are you sure? That stomach bug came on pretty sudden. I can't believe you spent an hour in the bathroom." Emma knew I was lying but she didn't challenge me. I put a hand on my stomach. I only wished I'd been in the bathroom puking. My torso felt stiff from where Bryce had punched me. I was sure that I had a nice big bruise on my abs. I just hadn't looked yet. "And what was the ambulance doing in the parking lot? Did someone faint? I didn't see anyone faint."

"Any other details you remember?" I muttered it under my breath. Emma didn't hear me. She was too busy trying to piece together the puzzle in her head. It felt strange to have someone else know my secret. I'd always assumed that if that day ever came, Emma would be the one to know first. It was surprising that she hadn't already figured it out herself. I always thought I'd done a good job of hiding it. Apparently, that didn't matter anymore.

"Well, I'm just glad the ambulance wasn't for you." She smiled and moved a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Me too," I agreed. I'd been seconds away from an ambulance ride straight to the morgue. I owed Rory a 'thanks'. That is if he ever felt like speaking to me again. He'd been so distant after hearing my news. Maybe it was a good thing that Emma didn't know my secret. Losing her wasn't an option. She was practically my only friend.

"Say hi to your mom for me." Emma watched me as I sluggishly shut the car door, slowly making my way to the front door. My stomach still burned whenever I stood up straight. Emma waited a minute and then sped off. I was relieved to finally have some time alone in my bedroom. Agent Squires brought with him a whole new truckload of problems. Someone knew my secret. Someone wanted me dead.

As I reached for my house key I noticed something unusual. The door was slightly ajar. My whole body stiffened as I poked my head in.

"Mom?" My voice bounced through the foyer. It was the only sound in the house. I heard nothing – no footsteps, no noise in the kitchen. The lights were still off. My mom wasn't home yet, unless she was quietly napping in her room.

I had strict orders to go home and stay there. It was the safest place for me, or so Agent Squires claimed. Against my better judgment I shut the door behind me and threw my stuff on the floor. I had Agent Squires' phone number in my pocket anyway. I flipped on the lights and went to the fridge for some water and an aspirin. I could feel a migraine stirring behind my eyes. The sharp pains made me long for sleep. I just wanted to leave this day behind.

"Mom?" I dragged my feet up the stairs. I got more and more tired with each step. "Mom, are you up here?" No answer. I sighed and turned the corner to my bedroom. My eyes stared down at the cream colored carpet.

I looked up and stopped. My muscles tightened and my chest went heavy. I tiptoed forward and scanned my room. It'd been torn apart. From the curtains by my bed to the clothes in my closet, everything had been destroyed. I knelt down and picked up a ripped sweater.

"Who rips apart a sweater?" I was in shock. My bedroom looked like a tornado had blown through. All my things were scattered, and out of their usual places. My eyes went wide. Had I just missed the intruder? I turned around, and with a pounding heart I listened for a sound – any sound.

My thoughts turned to one thing – a phone. I had to get to a phone. I tiptoed. The only sound upstairs was the sound of my heavy breathing. I peered around the corner, keeping my body up against the wall. Still no one in sight.

I made a break for the stairs. My feet hit each one so hard that it made the railings shake. The phone was lying on the kitchen counter. I reached for it, squeezing it tight. My fingers started hitting numbers as if they had minds of their own. The number connected and the line started ringing. The ringing filled my ears, helping me calm down. *You're okay, Bridget*, I thought. *Everything's going to be fine. Whoever broke in is gone now and . . .*

There was a creak upstairs. I carefully set the phone down, listening intently. There were footsteps upstairs, but they were so quiet I could barely hear them.

"Hello? Bridget?" The voice on the other end of the phone yelled.

"Rory?" I whispered. My voice quivered and Rory immediately asked me what was wrong. "I think . . . I think there's someone here." I could barely speak. I had to force myself. Another creak and I put the phone down. I panicked. My legs wouldn't move – they were frozen. What a great time to become the cliché girl I always criticized in horror films.

I could hear myself swallow. *Get out of here, Bridget! Don't stick around!* The thoughts in my head were really loud, and it added to my headache. There was another small creak, this time from the staircase. I covered my mouth. My breathing was out of control, the neighbors could've heard it. I backed away from the counter and listened. If someone was sneaking around upstairs, trying not to be seen, they'd have a thought eventually. A low voice was pushed into my head. *She's here. Must take her.*

I had to get out. I turned around. The back door was my one chance. I burst through it into the chilly breeze. Leaves crunched under my feet as I ran to the side gate. My palms were sweaty and my fingers slipped all over the latch. "Come on. Come on."

The gate opened and I ran. My stomach burned and I could hear the bones in my back popping. The cool air filled my lungs and I coughed as I sprinted down the street. A few houses down was a giant, leafy bush. I dove behind it and slid across the lawn. My jeans were damp from the grass stains. I clutched my chest. My entire body was shaking now. If I didn't calm down, I was sure that I'd have a heart attack.

There was no movement down the street. The intruder was still in my house. My chest sunk. What was I going to do? Where was I supposed to go? My muscles spasmed as I heard the sound of a loud engine from down the street. Rory's truck came into view. I let out a huge sigh of relief. Then I panicked. I couldn't let Rory pull into my driveway.

I leapt out of the bushes and Rory slammed on the brakes. The truck screeched and made skid marks on the street. I jumped in the passenger's seat, and practically grabbed the steering wheel.

"Turn around! Turn around!" I yelled until Rory put the car in reverse, backed into the neighbor's driveway and took off in the opposite direction. "Park around the corner. Right here!"

Right here!" When the truck finally stopped, I was out of breath. Rory was silent. He stared at tree, concentrating on each leaf. He was still confused by our last conversation.

"So," I said catching my breath. "You just going to ignore me?"

"Well, it's not like I have to say anything anyways." He suppressed his feelings the best he could and turned his thoughts back to orange and yellow leaves.

"Don't be like this," I muttered. "Why did I tell you? I shouldn't have done that."

"No," Rory disagreed. "You should've told me sooner. At least then I could've protected my privacy." I sighed again and watched the street corner.

"Trust me. You have nothing to be ashamed about. I've heard some pretty nasty things at school, believe me." I watched as Rory loosened up a little. But it wasn't because of my previous comment. He wanted to know what was going on. "I'm sorry." My apology came out almost as a whisper. The truck was silent.

"So," Rory replied. "What sort of trouble are you in now?" I nervously scanned the neighborhood again.

"Ok." My voice sounded shaky. "Emma dropped me off and when I went to open the front door, it was already open."

"And you still went in the house?" Rory interrupted. "Were you and I in the same conversation with Agent Squires earlier? You've been targeted, Bridget. I'm surprised you even went inside."

"Sorry," I retorted. "I wasn't thinking straight, alright. Can I finish my story before we're out of time?" Rory nodded. "I went up to my room and it was a disaster. I figured whoever broke in had gone, but when I went downstairs, I heard noises. That's when I called you. I didn't know what else to do." Rory took a minute to process the information.

"The bracelet," Rory replied. "They knew you had the bracelet." I gulped.

"There's more. I heard him. I mean, I heard his thoughts." The new look on Rory's face made me scared to continue talking.

"And?" Rory gasped. "What was he thinking?" I looked down, imagining what could've happened to me. I was seconds away from being dragged to my doom.

"He knew I was home, and . . . He wanted to . . . um . . . He was planning on kidnapping me." My last sentence made Rory almost choked on his spit. "And before you ask, no. I didn't recognize the voice. Except it sounded kind of robotic. You know like how Bryce sounded when he tried to kill you?"

"I wouldn't know." Rory eagerly watched the street as well. He was caught up and he knew what my plan was. "So you think this person will lead us to the real killer?"

"Maybe," I sighed. "It's worth a shot." *And you didn't call Agent Squires because,* Rory thought. He was starting to find it humorous that he didn't have to open his mouth to communicate with me. "Ha ha very funny."

"Well? You heard me didn't you?" Rory adjusted his glasses.

"Yes." My voice was firm. I rolled my eyes. "I don't know. I just called the first person I could think of. Plus, if a bunch of police cars came screaming down the street it would be obvious that we blabbed to the police."

"Uh, FBI."

"Whatever, same thing."

"Actually, no it isn't," Rory replied. I ignored him and kept my eyes glued to the street.

"Do you want to solve this thing or not?"

"Well, seeing as the both of us almost got killed . . ."

"You're impossible," I interrupted. Rory opened his mouth, but I covered his lips with my hand. "Shush!" A car was speeding down my street. I could see the headlights getting brighter against the pavement. Any minute now, we'd see the killer's new minion.

A white two door Honda came into view. Rory leaned closer to the window. The driver looked forward like he was in a trance. He yanked the wheel and sped past us without even blinking.

"That looks like Mark Freeman!" Rory was astonished. "I sit next to him in chemistry." Rory couldn't believe that his own classmate had been targeted and used as a puppet.

"Well?" I moved the truck into drive while Rory gawked out his window. "Follow him. Let's go!" Rory did what I said, even though he thought it was a bad idea.

"Maybe we should call Agent Squires?"

"By the time he gets here, we'll have lost our lead," I argued.

"It's the smart thing to do," he protested.

"Fine. You follow Mark and I'll call Agent Squires. His number is in my pocket. Deal?"

"Deal." Rory pressed his foot on the gas. We jerked forward and flew down the street.

Chapter Ten

Answers

"Just stay there! Bridget, are you listening to me? Stay in the car and don't move!" The line disconnected. I was antsy. Streetlights were glowing and leaves were drifting through the steady breeze. The school parking lot was empty except for a few cars. Rory and I had followed the intruder, Mark, back to school. Mark parked his white Honda and mechanically walked through the gym doors. His thoughts were on auto pilot. He had a burning desire to obey and complete the assignment he'd been given.

"Why would he come here?" I wondered. Rory and I sat in his truck. The lights were off and Rory's finger was twitching. He wanted to go inside just as badly as me. The only difference was, he wasn't a rule-breaker. I, on the other hand, had lots of experience breaking the rules. But Agent Squires had given us clear instructions – stay in the car.

"It's a good location I guess," Rory whispered. "We can't see inside. There are plenty of places to hide."

"You think he has the bracelet?"

"If he didn't have the bracelet, he wouldn't be here." Rory was right. I put my head in my hands. The killer had to be inside. I bit my lip, hoping the killer would finally be caught.

"You think this is it? You think the . . . killer's in there?" I stared at the school doors. Rory sighed.

"That would be nice." But Rory's thoughts said otherwise. He was worried that the FBI's involvement would make things more dangerous. The killer had made a mistake. Stacy was killed instead of me. And probably for a stupid reason too. The killer would be more aggressive this time. Maybe Rory would be next.

"Yeah, I was afraid of that," I said in response to Rory's reasoning. He grinned. A black car pulled into the parking lot. Agent Squires got out along with three other agents, all with weird looking guns - the ones with knock out darts. They jumped out of the car, weapons ready and facing the school. I opened my door but Agent Squires waved at me to stay where I was. The four of them disappeared inside. That's when Rory and I really started to sweat. We sat nervously waiting for what felt like hours, hoping that we'd made the right move.

"That night," I said in a low voice.

"You mean the night you found Stacy?" Rory said, finishing my sentence. I nodded.

"I never asked. Why were you there? In the hallway, I mean." I studied Rory as he looked at the floor. He tried not to think back to Friday but it was too late. He'd already given me a glimpse at his answer.

"Actually, I was already inside. I didn't go to the game. Well, I wasn't planning on it." His thoughts went to the science lab. It was his quiet place where he could think. He felt comfortable there, much like how I felt about my bedroom.

"You promised your mom you would go," I commented. Rory was afraid that I'd laugh, but I didn't. I spoke softly, letting the calm silence surround us whenever possible.

"She thought it might be a good way to make friends." He chuckled playfully, trying to make a joke of it. The truck got even quieter.

"And?" I asked. Rory chuckled again.

"And when I finally decided to check out the football game, you know show some school spirit, I heard weird noises near the locker rooms."

"You could've told you know. It would've saved you a lot of trouble." I sighed, thinking of all the problems I'd caused. Rory grinned again. He ran his fingers through his dark hair.

"I know," he replied. I returned his grin with a smile. But that calm silence didn't last, though I'd hoped it would. Gunshots broke it. My face cringed when I heard the piercing sound and Rory's hands covered his ears. The two of us ducked down.

"I hope those shots were a good thing," I whispered. I heard Rory gulp. The school doors burst open and I was relieved when I saw Agent Squires dragging an unconscious body across the concrete. I opened my door.

"Bridget, what are doing?" Rory grabbed my hand, but I pulled away. I had to know what was going on.

"Not now Bridget!" Agent Squires shouted while pushing buttons on his phone.

"What happened? Did you find anything?" I was desperate to know if they'd caught Stacy's killer. Agent Squires was busy dragging bodies from the building – a few more students, a couple teachers. All of them wore normal clothing and stared straight up at the night sky. I couldn't look away. These were all people that walked past me every day at school, even sat near me in class. And Mr. Wellborne? I gasped as I watched the body of my teacher being dragged, complete with a dart in the neck. Who was I supposed to trust? "Agent Squires, please."

He ran to help his team, but he turned and looked at me. Agent Squires pointed to his forehead. Immediately a lock was opened in his brain, and I saw everything that'd just happened. I jumped back in the car.

"Is that?" Watching motionless bodies being dragged out of the building was making Rory queasy.

"My biology teacher?" I replied. "Yeah." Rory rubbed his cheeks. His face was getting hot and he was starting to hyperventilate. I put a hand on his back. His shirt was damp from beads of sweat. "Rory, take deep breaths ok. They're not dead. They're all just unconscious."

"Why are they doing that? What's wrong with them?" Rory was in the middle of a nervous breakdown. Understandable. I mean, everything was happening all at once. One of us had the right to freak out. When it was my turn, I only hoped that Rory would do his best to calm me down.

"Relax," I kept repeating. "They're all going to be questioned and taken to the hospital." Just as I said those words, sirens came blazing down the street. "See."

Agent Squires dragged the last unconscious body out of the school. That made a total of ten – ten crazy, mind controlled civilians, all programmed to destroy my life.

"Holy crap," I murmured. "I can't believe things were this bad." Rory took off his glasses and ran his hands through his hair until it was messy.

"I'm ok. I'm fine." He looked away and tried to think of other things - things that would take his mind off unconscious bodies being dragged out of the killer's doomsday den. Rory's random thoughts entered my head as well. *AP Chemistry, my new Mac, fishing on Sundays, Mom's mac and cheese . . .* I laughed.

"Mac and cheese?"

"Hey it's good stuff," Rory replied, looking annoyed. He was almost back to his old self. "Stick to your own thoughts, alright." He tried holding a serious face, though I knew he wasn't offended.

"Whatever," I responded. Paramedics were strapping each victim to their own stretcher. Another ambulance showed up followed by another. It was a chaotic scene to watch each victim being strapped, waiting their turn to be evaluated. One of these people could be Stacy's murderer. I shuddered just as a chill ran through my body.

"How can you be so calm?" Rory had his breathing under control, even though inside was a jumbled, panicky mess.

"I guess the fear was scared out of me earlier," I said shrugging my shoulders. I hadn't given it much thought but it was true. Being attacked had gotten less and less scary the more it happened. I just hoped I wouldn't have more opportunities to further test that theory.

"Sure." Rory's face was a lot friendlier without glasses. I could actually see the glow in his green eyes. It reminded me that I owed him a 'thank you'. In a way, I guess you could say he came to my rescue. And I didn't ask him to. "Ok, I'm ready now." Rory cleared his throat and closed his eyes. "You can tell me what happened now."

"You mean inside?" I asked.

"Don't play dumb, Bridget. I saw what Agent Squires did when you yelled at him."

"Ok," I agreed. "But are you sure you can handle the details?"

"After what I just saw? Um, let me think. YES." All the ambulances were loaded. Each one left the parking lot following the others in single file. The loud sirens screamed down the street. I saw Agent Squires heave a huge sigh as he walked over to my window. I eagerly rolled it down

"Normally I wouldn't include you in this," he said approaching the truck.

"We want to come. This affects us, me most of all, and you know it." I stared with a worried expression, hoping he'd let us join the investigation. Agent Squires made it clear that he wasn't comfortable with how much we knew. But he also knew that his previous methods had gotten six students killed in the last year. *Wait a second*, I thought. *Six people have died on this guy's watch?* He didn't have much of a choice but to keep us updated . . . and alive for as long as possible.

"Don't you two have parents?" he answered. I held up Rory's cell phone.

"We've taken care of that." I ignored Rory's silent question. *Taken care of what*, he thought?

"Fine." Agent Squires nodded and ran back to his car.

"Cut that out," I barked when Agent Squires was out of earshot. "I get confused when people do that." Rory's thoughts entered my head. *Oh, you mean this?* Rory laughed. He was definitely back to his old self.

"You know, you can't expect me to read minds too."

"We're meeting Agent Squires at the hospital. Bryce is awake."

"And your mom is ok with this?" Rory commented.

"She will be," I said. "I'm going to call her and tell her we're out studying. . . And to stay at work as long as possible."

"But that would be a lie."

"Yeah," I said tossing him his cell phone. "And you're going to do the same."

"Uh, I'm not doing anything until you finish your story." He grinned again, meaning to annoy me.

"Right," I sighed. "Well, it's simple really. Agent Squires thinks he found the nest."

"The what?"

"You know, the killer's home base - the place where he comes up with his evil schemes?"

"And was the killer in there?" Rory's chest pounded. He was beginning to sweat again.

"They don't know," I replied disappointed. "They were all in a classroom waiting for something. Agent Squires' team shot them all with those weird dart things, and each of them will be investigated."

"That's it?"

"Oh, and they found some weird book thing," I added.

"Fantastic," Rory said sarcastically. He turned the key until his engine made a loud noise. "Hospital it is then."

* * *

Looking into the face of someone who once tried to kill you is weird. And I don't mean a cool weird like when you have déjà vu. It's a creepy weird. An uncomfortable weird. A weird that makes you want to run away and never come back. The red fire was gone from Bryce's eyes but I still had balled up fists when we stood next to his hospital bed.

"So," Rory whispered into my ear. "What's that creep thinking about now?" Agent Squires hovered over Bryce. He was still a little shocked to be lying in a hospital bed. He thought everything that had happened was just a dream.

"He's wondering what we all are doing here," I muttered. Rory folded his arms and cupped his chin in his hand. He kept nodding and intensely stared at Bryce's face. "What are you doing?"

"I'm taking mental notes," Rory replied.

"Bryce," Agent Squires began. "Just tell me what you remember, ok. Think back to this morning." Bryce's brain went fuzzy. Even I couldn't access those memories. Agent Squires looked at me. I shook my head. "Ok, what about Monday morning? Do you remember Monday morning?"

Things were getting clearer. Bryce was starting to remember things – waking up in his room, eating cereal for breakfast, being late to first period.

"Yeah, I sort of remember Monday." Bryce looked around the room. When he came to Rory he scowled.

"What's his problem?" Rory whispered.

"He remembers you hitting him with that bench press bar," I whispered back. Rory chuckled.

"Focus, son." Agent Squires had out his notepad. He scribbled down a few notes. "Who is the last person you remember seeing?" Bryce's memories were cloudy but he still had them. He concentrated real hard. He'd been late to his first class, Mr. Wellborne's class. He spoke to the teacher alone in the hallway because he'd been tardy too many times. Agent Squires looked at me again.

"Mr. Wellborne, our biology teacher," I said. Agent Squires wrote it down on his notepad.

"Anything else?" Agent Squires asked me. I stared at Bryce. He was really out of it. I doubt he'd even remember we'd paid him a visit tomorrow. Being asked to mind read for a good cause was kind of fun. It beat being laughed at or locked up like a loon. I dove into Bryce's thoughts and grabbed a hold of anything he'd give me access to. Honestly, there wasn't much

there. Bryce's mind was still in a state of major confusion. He'd done things he'd never even thought of doing before. All the while, he'd watched as his body did the work. His brain had no say in the matter.

"He's still trying to piece together what happened in the weight room," I responded. Agent Squires shut his notepad and put it in his coat pocket.

"Get some rest," he said to Bryce. "I'll be back in the morning." The two of us followed Agent Squires to the hallway.

"So," I asked curiously. "What now?"

"Now, the two of you go home."

"Just like that?" I replied disappointed. But Agent Squires was rejoicing inside. He'd cracked this case wide open. He was now confident that I wouldn't reach the same fate as my predecessors. His thought brought me the tiniest bit of relief.

"Rest easy," he continued. "I think we've nailed him. And just to be safe, I'll have a team set up surveillance at each of your houses." Rory and I looked at each other. I nodded and Rory followed my lead.

"Ok," I sighed. But I knew that it would take more than his reassurance to get a good night's sleep. It would take weeks, even months of radio silence to make me rest easy.

It was late when Rory finally dropped me off. After repeating over and over again that I'd be fine, Rory sped away leaving me at the doorstep. I didn't even have to knock. The door swung open and I was met with a worried face.

"Mom, I know I said I wouldn't do this again but . . ." My mom's face was fiery red. She wanted to yell, but she composed herself and said only two words.

"You're grounded"

Chapter Eleven

Feelings

The floor felt even more hard and uncomfortable than usual at our lunch spot. Emma was nibbling at a granola bar and shaking her head.

"My classes this morning felt empty. Weird, right?" Emma picked a mini chocolate chip out of her bar. She placed it on her tongue and waited as it dissolved in her mouth. "And I can't believe you're grounded. Did you tell your mom about Friday?"

"You mean about my date with Terrence? Yeah, she didn't care." That was a lie. I hadn't mentioned Terrence. I hadn't mentioned Agent Squires or the break in. The truth was, I didn't know what to say. My mom had enough problems of her own. And having a daughter that was 'different', that needed constant quiet, and would probably need lots of therapy in the future, was stressful enough. I didn't sleep at all. I'd paced my room all night hoping that the killer had been caught - that this stupid Stacy thing was all over.

"Have you told Terrence yet?"

"Of course not. I've already blown him off twice." I rubbed my forehead. "Man, he's really going to think I hate him now."

"Don't be stupid, Bri." She picked out another chocolate chip. "Just tell him the truth. You made a mistake, stayed out too late, and now you're grounded."

"Actually, I wasn't planning on saying anything." Emma's eyes went wide. Despite her cheerleading persona, Emma liked rules. She liked order, and she liked the relationship she had with her parents.

"You're not going to sneak out are you?" She sounded nervous. I smiled. By the time Friday rolled around, my mom would probably have forgotten all about my punishment, especially if I talked up my date.

"I don't think I'll need to."

"Oh, I get it. You're going to play the guilt trip card?"

"I'm not telling Terrence anything unless I absolutely have to." Every minute or so, a student walked by. Some had sacks full of fast food. Some were running to their lockers or lunch detention. I was nervous when each one passed. I still couldn't help looking over my shoulder.

"Aren't you going to eat anything?" I'd pulled out a brown sack, but hadn't opened it. Nothing sounded appetizing lately.

"Oh, right. It's lunch time. I'm not really hungry." My stomach growled. Emma broke her granola bar in half.

"Here," she insisted. I pushed it away. "If you don't eat something, I'll be forced to shove nutrients down your throat." I accepted it with a smile. The taste wasn't appealing but I chewed.

"You know, I already have a mom. I'm not looking for a second one." I glanced at the time as Emma bumped my shoulder. "You know what; I need to do something before next period. I'll see you after school?" Emma was surprised when I jumped to my feet.

"What are you doing, Bridget," I muttered to myself. My feet carried me through the halls. I avoided eye contact and focused on my thoughts and only those. By the time I could take another relaxing breath, I'd reached the science lab. The door was slightly open.

"Hey," I said entering slowly. Rory was in the corner typing on his Mac. As usual, his brain was on overload. It was such a crazy mess that I tried to stay away from it. He looked up briefly and looked back at his computer. Rather than speaking, he let his thoughts do the talking. *Hey, Bridget.*

"I told you not to do that," I replied hotly. Rory stopped typing.

"Sorry," he chuckled. "Couldn't help myself." I looked around. He was alone. I grabbed the nearest stool and sat down.

"You know, it really is quiet in here. I see why you like it so much."

"So did you hear from Agent Squires?" Rory asked. I shook my head.

"Then what are you doing here? Isn't it lunchtime?"

"I'm not sure," I said shaking my head. "I guess I just wanted some quiet before class. Quiet keeps me sane, usually." Rory chuckled.

"Well as much as I'd like to disagree with the 'sane' part, I've probably got too much going on up here." He pointed to his forehead. "You might not get the quiet you're looking for."

"I'll just tune you out." I dropped my bag and threw my lunch sack on the table. "Lunch?"

"I'm good," he responded. I picked up the paper sack and threw it in the trash. "Yeah," Rory said from behind his laptop. "I don't have much of an appetite either these days."

"What are you working on?" I waited for Rory to look up. His thoughts started to slow down, but then he remembered I was in the room. He found a random item to focus on. *Eraser. Think about the eraser, Rory.* "Ok, sorry I asked."

"I'm just practicing," Rory said calmly.

"Practicing? For what?"

"If you ever try to interrogate me, Bridget, I'll be ready." He chuckled. I grabbed a strand of hair and started twirling. Being alone for a while was nice. I finally had the chance I needed to clear my head before my next classes. My brain didn't feel like it was about to explode.

"I have my ways," I replied slyly. I bit my lip and smiled. My mind got lost for a minute – lost in the same calm silence from the night before. I kept smiling, but I quickly wiped that smile from my face. My mind came back to reality and I realized what I was doing. I was flirting . . . with Rory. What was I thinking? "Uh, well this was fun, but I should go." I and jumped up, embarrassed and a little freaked out. I must have been tired – real tired.

"Ok . . .bye?" Rory shouted as I opened the science lab door. It slammed shut before he could say anything else. I frantically hurried back to my locker, lost in thought. *Geez, Bridget. I think you need a nap.* I closed my eyes, letting myself relax. *You see, you're exhausted. That explains your strange behavior.*

"Bridget?" Terrence came around the corner. He always showed up the most awkward times. Luckily, I had a few minutes and nothing to do at moment. His tidy, blond hair and blue eyes had a way of making me quietly giggle. Butterflies entered my stomach.

"Hey Terrence," I replied casually. "How's it going?" Terrence smiled his usual suave smile. He leaned against the lockers, just close enough to touch my hand.

"Just thinking about Friday," Terrence replied. "I'm really looking forward to our date." I bit my lip. It was refreshing to hear Terrence's voice. His soft British accent made him even more attractive, reminding me why I let Terrence occupy half my brain.

"Me too," I agreed. Terrence rubbed my hand with his fingers, acting as if nothing had happened Monday night when I was forced to rush home. "So what did you have in mind for Friday?"

"Well that depends." Terrence kept smiling. His teeth were a perfect shade of white.

"Oh?" I tilted my head to the side and realized I wasn't wearing much lip gloss.

"It depends on whether or not you take off like last time." He laughed and kept stroking my hand. His skin was smooth, and unmistakably warm. "I hope I didn't get you in too much trouble."

"That was a one time thing," I replied. "Ok, two time thing, but that's all." I giggled. My heart jumped as the bell rang. Terrence looked disappointed that classes were soon starting. We'd hardly seen each other since homecoming. "That was the bell."

"So it was." He leaned in and kissed my cheek. "But I was thinking of ditching next period, you?" I was already in enough trouble as it was. If my mom got a call from the attendance office, that would send her over the edge. I hesitated.

"Uh," I stuttered. Terrence kissed me again. This time his lips felt softer than before.

"Come on," he insisted. "We can go for a drive. Get some food?"

"Get even more grounded than I already am," I added. Terrence raised his eyebrows.

"Are you grounded? Bridget, did you misbehave again?" He laughed and interlocked our fingers.

"I'm handling it. We'll be good to go by Friday. I promise."

"Was it me?" he asked. I shook my head immediately.

"No, you're all clear," I reassured him. Terrence's face turned to a frown.

"Was it that boy, Rory? You know, you should let me be you tutor. Then I could see you more often."

"That would be nice." A group of giggling girls walked by; I could feel them staring. Their thoughts pointed out every single one of my flaws. I tried not to let it tear apart my confidence. "I have to go to class." I leaned away but Terrence pulled me to him. His face was so close that I could smell his minty breath. He kissed me right there in the hallway. I tried not to blush.

"When can I see you again?" he whispered. I shrugged.

"Soon I hope."

* * *

Sundown came faster each day. The air was getting chillier, colored leaves were dropping at a quicker rate, and mountains in the distance were already snow capped. I sat on the floor in my room. I couldn't sleep again. Mom had come home, made chicken for dinner, and went upstairs to bed. She'd had another long day at work.

I wasn't even allowed to watch television. The radio in my room was what kept me company. With nothing to do, my thoughts were filled with images of Terrence. Things were going so well. I was starting to deal with the world around me in a new way. Stacy's killer was gone, at least for now, and for once I'd met someone who seemed to appreciate my ability – Agent Squires.

There was a low knock on my door. My mom walked in wearing flannel pajama bottoms. A steaming mug of tea was in her hand.

"I thought you'd gone to bed," I said as she entered my room.

"I couldn't sleep." She looked around my room. "I take it you can't either."

"Nope," I sighed. Her mind was empty, but I knew she'd come for a specific reason.

"I'm worried about you honey. What's been going on?" She sat down on my unmade bed. I picked myself up off the floor and joined her.

"Nothing. I've just been doing a lot of thinking." My mom gave me the look. Clearly, she knew something I didn't.

"I got call today at work," she replied. She took a sip of her tea.

"Agent Squires," I sighed, hearing what she was about to say next. She nodded.

"When were you planning on telling me all this?" she asked. I couldn't figure out what she knew exactly or what she wanted to hear. She wouldn't let me. All I knew was Agent Squires had contacted her. "Honey, you need to be careful. We can't risk anyone knowing your secret."

"I take it Agent Squires didn't tell you the whole story?" I muttered. Her eyes went wide. She was worried – frightened actually.

"No," she said firmly. "Don't tell me you told . . ."

"Agent Squires already knew," I interrupted. "He talked about my 'ability' like it was a good thing. A gift." My mom got tense. Since I was little, she'd been afraid of this day. It was the whole reason she'd moved west – to the Rockies. She just wanted us to live normal lives. I was confused. She'd never acted this way before.

"Mom, you don't need to freak out, ok. He can keep a secret." She stood up, her face stern.

"How many times do I have to tell you," she scolded. "You can't trust anyone, Bridget. You have no idea what you've done."

"But . . ."

"For once, Bridget, just listen. You're to stay here, understand? You'll come straight home from school and I don't want you talking to that Agent Squires." Her mind was on fire. She was definitely angry, but not at me. Her head was pounding. She rubbed her temples, trying to remove a flashing image from her head – my dad. "Good night." She shut my door, leaving abruptly like she did when a thought was coming - one she didn't want me to hear. How was I supposed to sleep now?

In all our years together, this was the first time my mom had thought about my dad, at least in front of me. Something was wrong. I could hardly even remember him. By the time I was old enough to remember things, he'd been permanently out of the picture. I'd never gotten much of an explanation, but I always figured mom never brought it up because it was too painful.

My thoughts were on overload, this must be how Rory's brain always felt. A whole new bank of questions opened up. I thought if anything, my mom would be relieved that the FBI had stopped a killer from destroying our lives. I guess I was wrong.

Chapter Twelve

Questions

Friday came all too quickly. I'd spent hours trying to find a convincing reason why I should be allowed to spend an evening with Terrence – he's British, he's smart, he's popular, I haven't been asked out on a date for like a year. My mom shot me down every time. For once, she was sticking to her rules. I wasn't allowed to go anywhere. My only possible weekend plans included a night in with Emma and homework.

I couldn't sulk in my room any longer. What was I supposed to tell Terrence? I'd been thinking of excuses all morning. He was looking forward to tonight, and so was I. I looked at my face in the mirror. My blond hair gleamed in the sunlight that peeked through my bedroom window. My eyes were outlined with dark mascara and eyeliner – the same way Emma had done it for homecoming. And my lips were pink, shiny, and ready for Terrence. There had to be a way. I had to think of something, some way to get out of the house without getting into trouble.

I could hear a car pull into the driveway. It was Emma. She picked me up every day for school. She'd done that all year. I had my driver's license, but no car. We only had one car and my mom took it to work. If I wanted my own, I'd have to save up the money.

"Emma's here!" My mom was shouting from the kitchen. She was probably at the kitchen table reading the newspaper. We hadn't sat together at the table in days. I went through my bag, making sure that I had all the books I needed before running downstairs.

"Bye!" I yelled before slamming the front door. The wind was rough against my hair. It blew across my face.

"So? Any luck?" Emma was just as bummed as I was about my being grounded. "Did she say yes?" I shook my head.

"She still says I'm grounded," I replied. "The only person allowed to come over is you." Emma sighed. She backed out of the driveway and headed down the street towards school.

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know yet, but I can't cancel on Terrence – not again."

"Bri, I don't think you have a choice here." Emma turned the wheel a little too quickly. I looked out the window at passing houses, most of which had yards full of dead leaves.

"I'll think of something. I'll have a plan by the end of the day." I watched Emma shake her head. She didn't agree, but she knew she couldn't do much once I'd made up my mind.

"You and your plans," she sighed. We passed a few more houses, a few busy streets, and a shopping center before we finally pulled into the school parking lot. I hopped out of the car and joined the crowd headed for the doors. It was the usual hustle and bustle that came every Friday. Everyone's mind was anywhere but at school.

"See you at lunch!" Emma ran off towards the football field. She had cheerleading practice first period. I waved and moved through the doors. Terrence would be waiting at my locker. We'd been together almost every passing period. He even came and sat with Emma and me at our lunch spot.

"There you are." Terrence was waiting by my locker. A huge smile came when he saw me. I let him wrap his arms around my waist and kiss me gently on the mouth. "Friday is finally here."

"Yeah about that," I sighed. I looked away and Terrence frowned.

"You're not allowed out?" He was disappointed. I shook my head and made a pouty face.

"I know, I know. I'm bummed too," I replied. Terrence paused for a second then smiled.

"What if I came over?"

"Nope, my mom wouldn't be up for that. Trust me, I already asked."

"Well, there's a game tonight isn't there?" he suggested. I nodded. "Why not meet me at the game?"

"Because she'll say no." I couldn't find a way around this punishment.

"Isn't your best mate a cheerleader? Tell your mum that she needs your support." Terrence winked, pleased with his solution. I hadn't thought of that, but I still knew it wouldn't work.

"We can do some more brainstorming at lunch," I said. Terrence nodded in agreement. He gave me another kiss, ran his fingers down my cheek, and turned to leave.

I watched Terrence strut through the hallway. Just thinking about tonight made my stomach do somersaults. There had to be a way around being grounded. Nothing had happened all week. Mr. Wellborne was still in police custody and Agent Squires hadn't shown up at all. Things were finally getting back to normal. For once, I didn't feel like an outsider. I had a hot boyfriend and I was learning to control my gift – block out other people and focus on my own thoughts. It got easier as days went by, especially now that I had new confidence. This whole grounded thing and my mom freaking out for no reason were just bumps in the road. Whatever had made her so upset . . . well, it was something she definitely didn't plan on sharing. So why should it be my problem, right?

The sound of the bell buzzed in my ears. I slowly walked towards my classroom, watching people walk by. A boy walked past wearing a long-sleeved shirt and baggy jeans. He adjusted his glasses when he saw me. *Rory*, I thought to myself. *I got it.*

I had an idea, and it was better than all my previous plans. If I could just get Rory to say I was studying with him, my mom would sure believe it. I could even let her drop me off at the school and pick me up later. This could work. I speed walked the rest of the way to my classroom. I couldn't wait to sit down and get the day over with. I needed to pay a visit to the science lab. I sat down at my desk with an enormous smile on my face. This weekend was going to be unforgettable.

* * *

"I had to beg my guts out but it worked!" I was in the science lab practically jumping up and down.

"Good for you," Rory muttered. "But just so you know, this is a one time thing. I don't even know why I said yes in the first place."

"Yes Rory, your thoughts about Terrence have been clearly noted, but I happen to think he's perfect." I giggled and couldn't stop moving. Terrence would be here any second. He'd grab my hand and the two of us would finally go out on a full, uninterrupted date.

"I'm just saying," Rory continued. His head was down and his brain was immersed in his AP Chemistry book. "Next time you want to fool your mom into letting you go out with Mr. Perfect, you're on your own." I rolled my eyes. The glass window on the storage closet door showed my reflection. I used it to check my hair and adjust my t-shirt one last time.

"Remember if my mom happens to stop by unannounced . . ."

"I say you're in the bathroom and send you a quick text," Rory interrupted. "Relax. You're acting like your mom doesn't trust you or something." Rory laughed to himself.

"Not that's it's any of your business, but she usually trusts me just fine. It's just lately." My voice trailed off. I had tried to dig deep into my mom's brain. I searched and searched for answers but she was an expert at keeping her secrets on lockdown – much like Agent Squires.

"Lately what?" Rory kept his head down but he was still listening. He had this weird ability to think about a few things at once. He could read his chemistry book while processing everything I said.

"Well the other night she kind of freaked out. Agent Squires called her."

"You should've expected that one Bridget. It's his job. I'd be surprised if he hadn't contacted your mom." Agent Squires had called Rory's mom as well. She was more worried than upset but Agent Squires had assured Rory's mom that things were being handled. Rory assured her too.

"Yeah but I sort of let it slip that Agent Squires knew my secret, and she flipped."

"It wasn't your fault though," Rory added. "It's not like you told him. He already knew."

"That's exactly what I told her." I retreated to a stool and sat down. It felt good to finally talk to someone about the growing tension at my house. Nobody else really understood.

"Well, did you ask her about it? There has to be a reason why your mom's so upset."

"She didn't really give me the chance to ask anything. She just said I wasn't allowed to talk to Agent Squires or anyone else really, and that was it." I remembered the night of our argument – the image of my dad and the look on my mom's face. "There is one more thing. She started thinking about my dad, which was weird. She never thinks about him – ever." I had Rory's full attention now. He raised his eyebrows and the wheels in his head started turning.

"What do you know about your dad?" Rory asked curiously.

"One box in my mom's closet. That's about it." I listened to Rory's deep thought process. He was trying to tie a few things together – my family, the FBI, my secret.

"Your dad must have done something a long time ago," Rory said, letting his thoughts run wild. "Something involving the police or the FBI or something like that, and it must've ended badly." I rubbed my forehead. Nothing like that had ever come up in my house. And it wasn't something I could just ask my mom out of the blue. She hated talking about my dad.

"Maybe," I muttered. "But the odds of that aren't very high." Rory let his thoughts wander before looking at me suddenly. His eyes were wide and his brain was basically lighting up like a siren - an epiphany. "What?"

"Bridget," Rory gasped. "You know how Agent Squires acted all normal when he found out what you could do? You know, like he'd seen it before a million times?"

"Rory, where are you going with this?" I asked. Rory stood up, hardly able to contain his excitement.

"Well, have you ever wondered if you're not the only one – the only one in your family that can . . . you know?"

"My mom definitely can't," I immediately replied. "I'd be grounded every weekend if she could."

"Bridget, I mean your dad," Rory added. I shook my head. Rory had posed a good question – one that had never crossed my mind before; mostly because up until recently, I hid whatever I could and refused to talk about it. The way my mom acted, I always felt ashamed of what I could do.

"You really think he could've been?" I said, now lost in thought. Rory shrugged. There weren't many moments in my life when I missed having a dad. My mom did a fine job on her own. But Rory's suggestion made me wonder. If my dad really did have the same abilities, there were so many questions I could have asked him. He could've helped me feel less different.

"Bridget? You ready?" Terrence was standing in the doorway and I hardly even noticed. I stood up so fast that my stool almost fell over. "Rory." Terrence looked in Rory's direction.

"Terrence," Rory nodded.

"See ya," I said real fast as I grabbed Terrence's hand.

"Two hours," Rory responded. "Remember you have two hours."

"Yes I know," I responded impatiently. Rory shook his head with disapproval.

"Don't get mad at me if your mom shows up and doesn't buy the whole 'bathroom' story."

"Two hours!" Rory yelled as I shut the door to the science lab.

"He's a real geek isn't he?" Terrence laughed and pulled me down the hallway. I just nodded in agreement. "So, I don't know how hungry you are but I thought we could stop at the café near the freeway."

"Really, and what else did you have in mind?" I asked. Terrence smiled and put his arm around my waist.

"You mean besides this?" He pulled me close. His body radiating with warmth and his lips perfectly moist, he kissed me firmly. "I don't know, maybe some food and a drive. Or maybe just the drive?" I was entranced by his eyes. I wished that we could spend all night together, but I didn't have much time.

"I only have two hours," I sighed. Terrence kept smiling.

"Right, right."

"Don't worry," I assured him. "This whole grounded thing is only temporary. Soon we'll be able to hang out together all the time."

We walked side by side to the parking lot where his black BMW was waiting. He opened my door for me and waited for me to slide in. I remembered the last kiss I'd received in this very spot – one of the highlights of my life. I checked my cell phone just to make sure Rory or my mom hadn't tried to contact me.

"Everything ok?" Terrence asked. I gave him a thumbs up. He jumped in beside me and revved his engine. I felt anxious. My stomach was in knots again. I wasn't sure I'd be able to eat. I was too excited about being with Terrence.

Chapter Thirteen

Lies

"I'll just have the turkey sandwich with fries." I handed my plastic menu to the waitress. The café was full but not too noisy. I blocked out as many thoughts as I could and resorted to staring at the pictures of American muscle cars mounted on the walls. There were rows of pictures, all leading up to the dessert counter full of pies. "So tell me more about London." Asking Terrence about himself was the first thing that came to mind. We mostly talked about school and me, on occasion.

"There's not much to tell. London is rainy and foggy."

"Did you grow up there?" I blushed – another dumb question. "I mean, of course you grew up there. The accent."

"Correct," he chuckled. This was harder than I thought. Normally, I wasn't really the question asking type. I never needed to pry to learn what I wanted.

"You ever miss your friends back home?"

"Sometimes. Believe it or not, I don't have many mates back home."

"I find that hard to believe," I smiled. The waitress came back with our sodas. I took a sip from my straw.

"Well, my parents move around a lot. They don't like being in one place for too long."

"That sounds fun. I've lived here my whole life. I've had the same best friend since I was like three. Speaking of which, we should double sometime – you, me, Emma, and whatever dude she's into that week." I laughed but Terrence was starting to look a little uncomfortable. "Or not. I mean we don't have to right away. I just thought it might be fun."

"Oh," Terrence replied. "Yeah, we can do that sometime." He stared at his soda cup, seemingly at a loss for words. I kept checking the time and looking over my shoulder. If I was in for a nasty surprise, like my mom showing up pulling Rory by the ear, I wanted to see it coming.

"I'm sorry," I sighed. "This is hardly the best way to have our first official date. I practically jump every time I hear anything close to a ringing phone."

"Well, it's hardly romantic." Terrence grabbed my hand from across the table. "But we'll make the best of it until . . . how long is your mum grounding you for?" I blushed and flipped my hair.

"Probably the rest of my life," I laughed. My entire body froze up when I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket. I frowned and closed my eyes for a second. I'd never been so scared of my phone. *Please don't be Rory. Please don't be Rory. Crap!*

"Sorry," I whispered to Terrence. I answered the phone and waited to hear Rory's panicked voice on the other end. "Rory, this better be important."

"Where are you?" he asked quietly. I looked around the restaurant.

"Eating. Is my mom there?" I braced myself for his reply. We hadn't even been gone an hour.

"No, but . . ."

"If there's nothing mom-related going on then why are you calling me?" I interrupted. Rory's voice was quiet. I could tell right away that it wasn't his intention to ruin my time with Terrence. He had the opportunity to insert a sarcastic comment but he didn't.

"Bridget, there's something I have to tell you." The tone of his voice started to scare me. He was speaking the same way he had on homecoming night. "Can you step away for a minute?"

"Just tell me real quick," I replied. Rory paused for a minute.

"Bridget, it's about the bracelet." My eyes went wide.

"Is everything alright?" Terrence asked. I stood up.

"It's fine," I quickly replied. "No mom trouble. I'm just going to visit the ladies room. I'll just be a minute." I left Terrence at our table looking confused. I covered the receiver with my hand until I could step around the corner.

"Ok Rory," I whispered. My back was pressed up against the wall, and I was suspiciously eyeing everyone in the booths near the bathrooms. "You're starting to freak me out. What is it?"

"My cousin called. He gave me some info about the bracelet."

"And?" I could here Rory breathing heavily on the other end.

"That symbol on the charm, it's a crest. It comes from a school called St. Peter's Ladies College. The bracelet is a gift given to each graduating student." All the noises around me blurred together. I couldn't stand the beating in my chest. It was pounding so fast that I was starting to sweat.

"A girl's school? I don't get it."

"There's more," Rory continued.

"Of course there is," I replied frustrated. Rory sounded a little upset.

"Bridget, be serious. I think you need to come back, now!"

"Why?" I questioned. Rory sounded hesitant but he forced the words out of his mouth.

"Because St. Peter's . . . it's in northern London." I looked at the floor, able to hear myself swallow. After a minute of silence, I was so confused that I grabbed hold of the first emotion that come over me – anger.

"What are you implying? So, you think because Terrence is from London that he's automatically a suspect?"

"I'm just saying that you should be cautious," Rory protested. "He's new. We don't know him very well." I could feel my face getting hot.

"You don't know him like I do!" I tried to keep my voice down. The people in the nearest booth were turning around and giving me strange looks. "You're just jealous. Yeah, that's it! You're jealous that I have friends and you don't." Rory was silent. I heard him sigh. A bead of sweat rolled down my forehead. As soon as I finished my rant I regretted it, but the damage had already been done.

"You know what, Bridget. Do whatever you want. I'm done trying to help you." Rory didn't yell back. His voice didn't even sound angry.

"Rory," I said in a soft voice. "I . . ." The line went dead. I hung up, realizing that I was in an even worse situation now. I fixed my hair and fanned my face before turning the corner again. Terrence was tapping his foot underneath the table. Our food had already arrived. I could see steam rising from the pile of fries on my plate.

"There you are," Terrence said. He grabbed a fry. "Everything ok?" I nodded. I quietly sat down and picked up my turkey sandwich, taking a few bites. But my food tasted bland.

"We should probably go." My voice was sad. Terrence looked confused but he kept a smile on his face.

"You seem a little down. What did Rory say?"

I shrugged. I was too emotional at the moment. Thoughts and spoken words were starting to blur together.

"Just a bunch of nonsense that doesn't matter," I muttered.

"Hmmm. Well, he is pretty strange," Terrence replied. I didn't say anything. I was still a bit dazed. I had let my frustration get to me.

"Sorry Terrence but suddenly I'm just not that hungry." I watched as the look in his eyes suddenly changed. Terrence was annoyed, but his fake smile persisted. I pushed my plate aside and folded my arms, staring out the window. Leaves were swirling outside. The sky was turning a deeper shade of gray.

"Alright," he replied looking disappointed. "I'll get the check." He waved at our waitress.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. Time just isn't on our side right now." Our waitress rushed to the table and handed Terrence the check. He threw down a wad of cash and stood up. I followed with my head down, dragging my feet all the way back to his shiny, black BMW.

"I promise," I pleaded as Terrence slid into the driver's seat. "Things aren't usually this crazy. Just give it a few weeks."

"Yeah maybe you're right." Terrence didn't look at me, and he didn't grab my hand like he always did. I desperately wanted to know what he was thinking.

As we drove, Rory's words kept replaying in my head. *How well do you really know Terrence?* Terrence stayed silent. Everything out my window was a rich orangey-yellow. I glanced at Terrence and found a strand of hair to twirl.

"I hope I didn't ruin your evening," I began. Terrence shook his head like it was no big deal. "So, your parents must wonder who's been keeping you out. Have you told them about me?" Terrence raised his eyebrows. My question had caught him by surprise.

"Uh, I guess. Sort of. I mean, they know I've been seeing someone."

"Well, maybe I could meet them sometime."

"Ok," Terrence quietly replied. "If you really want to. They're pretty boring though."

"What about your sibling? Sorry, I can't remember if you said you had a brother or a sister."

"Sibling?" Terrence cleared his throat. "I'm an only child." I thought back to our sort-of-date at the ice cream shop. I was pretty sure I'd heard him correctly. I remember laying on my bed all night thinking about every word Terrence had said to me.

"Oh, I thought you said you had a sibling." I watched as Terrence paused for a minute and looked out his window.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I must've meant my cousin, Tony. He's lived with us so long, he's practically my brother." He chuckled. I smiled but the image of the bracelet came back into my head. What if Rory was right? What if Terrence was somehow involved? I tried to react normally, but tons of questions were flashing through my head.

"Your cousin," I replied. "Yeah, of course. How old is he?" Terrence took some time to think.

"Uh, twenty three? I lose track, you know." He reached for my hand. I let him interlock our fingers but my hand was limp. We were almost back at school and I wasn't any closer to learning more about Terrence. His brain had walls – walls I couldn't break through. It was weird.

"And your parents? What do they do for a living?" Again, more silence from Terrence. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. It was making me uneasy.

"Um, this and that. They do a lot of freelance work for lots of different companies. That's why we move so much," Terrence replied. I nodded to hide my discomfort. If I could've read Terrence's thoughts right then, they would probably be the exact opposite of what he was saying.

"How exciting," I muttered. We finally pulled up to the school parking lot. And for the first time, I wanted some space. I wasn't as sad about leaving Terrence this time – or about cutting our first official date short. I was too worried that I'd ruined my friendship with Rory – the only other person on the planet aside from my mom that knew the truth about me. The car stopped. My hand reached for the door handle.

"Is something wrong?" Terrence leaned closer. He wanted a goodbye kiss. I smiled and opened the car door.

"No, I'm just tired." I moved towards Terrence and let him give me a quick kiss on the lips. The butterflies in my stomach died down. Terrence's lips were soft but not as exciting as they used to be. I just couldn't tell if he was being sincere. I shut the car door and heaved a huge sigh as I ran back into the school. The halls were silent and my footsteps made loud echoes. I jogged to the science lab, hoping that Rory hadn't left.

I pushed open the door to find Rory typing in the same spot. He didn't look up as I took a seat beside him.

"I thought you'd be gone by now," I said in a quiet voice. I waited for Rory to yell – to tell me I was a rude and inconsiderate person. He kept his thoughts on school work. He knew I was in the room, but his thoughts made it clear that he intended to ignore me for as long as possible.

"I said I'd stay, so I stayed," he muttered.

"Look Rory, about earlier."

"You don't have to apologize, Bridget. You said what you wanted to say. And now I know what you really think of me."

"I didn't mean it, Rory," I responded. Rory and I had a unique friendship. He was the only one I could really talk to. No one else knew what I'd been through, or my secret. "I was upset and completely confused, and you were right. And I'm sorry. Did I say I was sorry?"

"I guess you could say it a few more times." Rory grinned for a brief moment. "And I know."

"Know?"

"That I was right. I'm always right."

"Rory, I don't know what I'm supposed to do anymore. I mean, how can you tell if someone is lying to you?" Rory raised his eyebrows and tried not to laugh.

"You're asking me? I'm not the expert here."

"Seriously," I insisted.

"Well, you could start with your standard thought-reading routine."

"Yeah, about that," I began. "I can't read Terrence's thoughts. I've tried but every time, I get nothing." Rory almost choked. He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

"I'm sorry I don't think I heard you correctly."

"No," I muttered. "It's true." Rory looked at me like I was insane.

"And you didn't think that was at all suspicious?" He stared in awe as I shrugged.

"It was nice to do things the old-fashioned way for a change. When we're together, I can focus on what he's saying instead of spending all of my energy trying to stay out of his head."

"Ok," Rory turned to look me directly in the eye. "How many people, besides Terrence, can you not pull thoughts from?" I bit my lip and forced a half smile. "Bridget, you should've told me this days ago!"

"I didn't think it mattered until tonight."

"At least you're still alive," he sighed. "For now."

"Fine, maybe you're right. Maybe Terrence is involved, but you don't have to jump straight to killer. Terrence would never!"

"Amazing," Rory muttered under his breath. "You're still defending him." I refused to believe that Terrence was a murderer. Yes, the evidence was starting to stack up but he deserved the chance to defend himself.

"Fine, I'll ask him." I jumped out of my seat. "I'll be direct and I'll ask him about it." Rory looked at me like I was insane again.

"That's your stupidest idea yet," he replied. I scowled. Rory turned back to his computer.

"How about we stalk him first?" He pushed a few keys and grinned. "Ah huh. I did it."

"Good job genius," I sarcastically replied. "You did what?"

"I hacked into the school's database." I leaned in closer to his computer screen. It was filled with lists and lists of student information.

"And who exactly is the criminal here?" I retorted. Rory brushed off my comment and scrolled the list until he came to Terrence's name.

"There it is," he proudly stated. "Terrence's address. Unpublished info from the yet-to-be released school directory. Every girl in school would love to get her hands on this."

"What am I supposed to do with it?" I started shaking my head. Rory just smiled. "No way. I'm not going to stalk his house like some sort of creep."

"You don't have to do that Bridget. Just pay him a visit. You know, when he's not expecting you." I read his address. Terrence had never mentioned he lived just a few streets away from me.

"And what'll that prove? That he correctly completed his school contact form?"

"Trust me. If this guy is hiding something, you'll know."

"Fine," I agreed. "But if there's nothing fishy, we take him off the suspect list. Got it?" Rory kept grinning. He nodded but his thoughts were unmistakably clear. Rory thought Terrence was somehow guilty. He was too perfect, plus he was connected to Stacy. But this time, I hoped Rory would be wrong.

Chapter Fourteen

Confronted

My mom was so impressed to find me in the science lab; she decided to ease up a bit. Saturday morning wasn't nearly as boring as it could've been. She liked Rory from the moment she met him. She thought he was a nice, honest boy. In other words, she approved, which is why she was more than happy to answer the door after breakfast.

"Mrs. Ferns," Rory said with a grin. "Thanks for letting me come over."

"Thanks for helping Bridget with biology. You know, she's always hated that subject." She led Rory to the kitchen and offered him some cereal. The two of us were planning to sit around for a while, and then find an excuse to go to the grocery store. Rory was a little too happy to drive me to Terrence's house.

I was waiting at the table. I had my biology book out along with a notebook. Rory entered the kitchen. His thoughts greeted me before he said anything. *You ready for this?* I gave Rory a look. He knew I hated it when he did that, but he did it anyway. For some reason Rory thought it was amusing.

"Hello Rory," I said through my teeth. "Why don't you sit down?"

"Orange juice," my mom said as she looked in the fridge.

"He's fine Mom. Rory, sit."

"Bridget," Mom gasped. "Quit being so rude. Rory, orange juice?"

"I'd love some." Rory sat down next to me. He still had an enormous smile on his face. My mom pulled out a clear drinking glass.

"Mom, we are fine ok. You don't have to hover. I'm not going to escape out the back door." My mom frowned. But as soon as she poured the orange juice, she went upstairs.

"Your mom's nice," Rory said before chugging his juice.

"Yeah I guess," I replied. Rory and I looked at each other. We had time to kill. Rory started practicing thought blocking by focusing on his glass. "I couldn't sleep last night. Typical. You?" I immediately saw his answer. Rory paused for a minute, trying not to think about last night.

"Not really," he replied calmly. "How was that? Did you know what I was thinking?" I smirked. "Darn."

"Try keeping a clear head when someone talks. Sometimes key words or phrases trigger something in your memory."

"Right." Rory closed his eyes until his mind went blank. His only thought was – *I'm sitting in a kitchen.*

"Good. Real good. Ok, now I'm going to ask you a question. Try not to picture what I'm asking in your head. Ready?" Rory nodded. "Ok Rory. What did you have for breakfast this morning?" Rory kept his mind blank.

"How was that?" He asked keeping his eyes closed.

"Good," I answered. Rory up sat straighter. He'd always been a quick learner. "But you still need to answer the question."

"Uh, I had . . . uh." There was a quick flash of Rory running out the door with a growling stomach. "I didn't have anything." He opened an eye and I shook my head. "What?"

"It takes a lot of practice. Even my mom slips up once in a while, and she's been doing it since I was little," I said reassuringly. Rory was frustrated. He usually didn't have to try to hard to be above average.

"This is impossible," he exclaimed. "How the heck can anyone give answers without thinking of what to say first?"

"I don't know." I shrugged. "But Agent Squires, his brain is like Fort Knox. Although his thoughts are there, I can't get anything without his approval." Rory sighed.

"Fine, I'll keep practicing. In the meantime, how about a little privacy?"

"It doesn't always work that way," I giggled. "But just so you know, I usually don't try to read your thoughts. Your brain is impossible to catch up with. If I tried, I'd have nonstop headaches." Rory looked surprised. Then he felt proud again.

"Really? Hmmm." He stood up and put his empty glass in the sink. "So, how long should we wait before . . .ya know?" He tilted his head towards the staircase.

"Honestly, no clue. Maybe I should let you handle this one? It seems like you're my mom's new favorite."

"Favorite huh? Your mom's not a member of the Terrence fan club? What a surprise." Rory looked pleased.

"Actually, my mom hasn't met Terrence," I quickly responded. "In fact, you and Emma are like the only friends she's officially met."

"Oh so I'm your friend now?" Rory was trying to be sarcastic but he was glad that I thought of him that way.

"Rory, you know my secret. You're a friend by default."

"You still said friend," Rory chuckled. There were footsteps on the staircase. I grabbed a pencil and started doodling in my notebook. My mom appeared again, still in a good mood.

"I was thinking," she said searching the family room for her cell phone. "Why don't the two of you grab us all some lunch later? That would be fun, right? I'm sure you could use the study break." I looked at Rory. His eyes were as wide as mine. This was perfect.

"Sure Mom. Anything you say."

* * *

Terrence's place was a standard two-story brick house that resembled the rest of the houses on his street. The front lawn had been raked recently. The garage was open and two cars were parked inside.

"He might not be home," I whispered. Rory had parked his truck a few houses down. "I don't see his car."

"Someone could've borrowed it. Come on Bridget, we won't get many more chances." His thoughts reminded me of our agreement. I would learn more about Terrence, and we could cross him off the killer list. Sadly, Terrence was the only person on that list at the moment. He was the only lead we had found, well that Rory had found. He was all too happy to investigate Terrence. I didn't exactly share his enthusiasm.

"Whatever," I muttered. "Let's just get this over with." I opened the car door. A strong breeze pushed a pile of leaves towards my face. I fixed my hair while Rory laughed. Hair was tangled around my face. "Just wait. There's nothing wrong with Terrence, and I'm gonna prove it to you."

"I'm not stopping you," Rory commented. He already had an I-told-you-so look on his face. I slammed the car door and walked closer to Terrence's front yard. The butterflies were back. Terrence and I had ended our date on a strange note. I was determined to fix things. I wanted the excitement back. I hated feeling suspicious.

What was I supposed to say if he answered the door? I was in the neighborhood? Oh, and I got your address from the school directory even though the updated version hasn't been published yet?

My feet moved closer until his front door was in sight. I was starting to regret my agreement with Rory. I didn't want to do this. Terrence was already frustrated with me. Why would he give me a second chance? I was flaky, disorganized, and at the moment I was very, very hard to get a hold of.

The front door had a wreath with miniature pumpkins on it. I looked at the porch and squinted to make sure I was seeing correctly. The concrete porch had chalk drawings of houses, bugs, frogs, hearts – you name it. All freshly drawn in a child's hand. I firmly knocked on the door. The butterflies in my stomach went crazy when I heard noises inside. I prepared for the worst, for a disappointed look or a "Go away Bridget." The door opened. The aroma of baked apples escaped. The woman at the door looked young, in her early thirties. She had short brown hair and was wearing an apron.

"Yes," she said looking me up and down. "Do I know you?" I shook my head.

"Uh, no we've never met," I said. The woman nodded. She waited, and then gave me a strange look when I didn't speak.

"Is there something I can help you with?" Her thoughts filled my head. I had interrupted a deep concentration. Now the woman would have to review her party checklist again, just to make sure she wasn't forgetting anything.

"Sorry, I was just looking for Terrence. Is he home?" The woman kept her confused look.

"Terrence? I'm sorry. You must have the wrong house." The name Terrence floated around in her head but she couldn't make any connections. She had never met anyone named Terrence.

"Are you sure? I mean, is there a new family around here that just moved in? Maybe next door?" I desperately wanted her to answer yes. The woman looked impatient, like my lack of direction was inconveniencing her. She had a dinner to prepare. Tonight was a big night for her and her husband. She'd spent weeks planning this get together. She even got a sitter.

"Nope, I'm sorry." She shut the door before I could hound her any further. I stood at her doorstep speechless. Maybe Rory wrote down the wrong house number? But I could see the address in my head. It was the right house. Maybe Terrence's parents made a mistake? Hey, it happens.

I kept my head down as I walked back to Rory's truck. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of being right just yet. He was waiting anxiously when I opened the car door.

"So? Was he home?" Rory questioned. I shook my head. "Did you meet his parents or anything?" I shook my head again. "Well then what happened?"

"We have the wrong house," I said in a soft voice. I pointed to Rory. "And cue the laughs and rude comments."

"You know what I'm thinking so why should I say it?" He grinned. His gut had told him that something would go wrong and it had.

"Just say it," I sighed. "I know you want to."

"I'm telling you Bridget, Terrence knows something." Rory thought a lot of other things about Terrence too but he didn't want to say them out loud.

"I'm sure there's a perfectly good explanation for all this," I protested.

"Come on Bridget," Rory snapped. "Terrence is involved and you know it. He's a fake." I rolled my eyes. I still refused to believe it without solid proof.

"Call Agent Squires," I responded.

"What? Why?"

"Because he should know more about the case by now. Maybe he even has the killer in custody?"

"Uh, that kind of information would be all over the news." Rory turned the truck around and drove towards the grocery store.

"Fine then I'll call him. Hand me your phone." Rory hesitated. By calling him, I'd be breaking the rules. I'd be going against my mom's wishes. Rory's thoughts weirdly aligned with Emma's when it came to rule breaking – he wasn't a fan. He had a good relationship with his mom. It made no sense to him why I completely disregarded every rule given to me. "Yes, I know. I'm not allowed to contact him. But aren't you curious?"

"If there's anything to tell, he'll call you." He moved his cell phone to his other pocket, out of reach.

Rory's engine made a loud noise as we pulled into a parking space. It was Saturday and the local grocery store was pretty packed. I rubbed my head and cleared away my thoughts. I could tell that a headache was coming. I hated grocery stores. Everyone was always so whiny.

"I hate this place," I whispered.

"Just try to act normal."

"You don't get it. People in grocery stores are weirdoes, and they can never make up their minds."

"Try acting like you can't read minds then." Rory grinned and chuckled to himself. "Well, at least I think I'm funny." He locked the car and grabbed a basket. "What were we supposed to get again? Milk, eggs, and something for lunch?"

"Maybe I'll wait in the car," I muttered. Rory grabbed my arm and pulled me inside.

"You'll have to shop on your own someday," he whispered. "It might as well be now." We walked past a mom with three kids in her cart. Her brain was full of checklist after checklist. A single guy standing near the fruit couldn't decide what brand of apple to buy, and practically everyone close the bakery craved sugar but was afraid to act on that craving.

"This place is ridiculous," I muttered again. Rory wheeled our cart to the refrigerated aisle. He chose a gallon of milk while I looked around suspiciously. "Like half the people in this aisle hate themselves. This is depressing. Can we go yet?"

"Yeah we can go, after we buy our food." Rory checked a carton of eggs before wheeling our cart to the next aisle. "What do you want?" I gave him a dirty look. "Ok, I'll pick." He grabbed a bag of chips and some grape soda.

"Chips and Coke? Real healthy."

"Then you decide, smarty." Rory waited for me to make a decision. I didn't really care what we ate for lunch so long as it wasn't broccoli. I'd pretty much stopped eating since the night I almost got killed.

"What you pick is fine," I sighed. Rory grabbed a few more things then dragged me to the front of the store to wait in line. I kept rubbing my head. I couldn't keep an entire store's worth of thoughts out of my head. I was all right in small groups but this was painful.

A group of girls giggled. I could hear my name in their heads and I snuck a glance. I didn't recognize all of them, but I knew that were cheerleaders. I'd seen a few of them with Emma before. Rory noticed I was annoyed, and he found it interesting that for once my annoyance wasn't directed at him.

"What's their problem," he asked in a quiet voice.

"They think I'm a b-i-t-c-h." I spelled the word out instead of saying it. Rory looked upset.

"Do you even know them?" He glared at them like they were trespassers on his neatly manicured lawn.

"Nope, but they know me. I'm the girl that stole Terrence before Stacy was even buried." One of the girls looked at me. I knew she was waiting for eye contact, and a reason to walk over and tell me off. *Don't look at her*, I thought to myself. *Just forget them. They're jealous. That's all it is.* I glanced at the cheerleader who wanted to pick a fight. She was still staring, and she saw me look at her. A smile came across her face as she walked over. She had on really tight jeans and a bright pink top. Her hair was done up like she'd spent hours in front of the mirror. Her posse followed, excited to see me get yelled at.

"Is there something you want?" I said in a stern voice.

"Yeah," the girl smiled. "Stacy was a good friend of mine, and it makes me sick what you did." Rory looked shocked. He thought the girl somehow knew about the janitor's closet. But she was referring to Terrence. I squeezed Rory's arm so he wouldn't tense up. "You're a slutty whore!" She was proud of herself but a little pissed that I didn't give her the reaction she wanted.

"Is that all?" I said quietly. "I'm kinda busy." Rory laughed. The girl gave him an evil stare. Her mind filled up with images of me and Terrence kissing in the hallway.

"You should be ashamed. First you steal a dead girl's boyfriend. Then you go behind Jen's back! You're sick and I hope Terrence sees you for the backstabber you are!" I took a breath. Shoppers were staring and I was becoming the center of attention – something I didn't handle well.

"I'm sorry, Jen?" I responded, still calm. "I don't know a Jen." The cheerleader looked furious. Her eyes got wide and her chest pounded like crazy.

"Uh, hello! Jen happens to be my best friend?"

"So?"

"And Terrence's new girlfriend!" I would've thought she was making it up but her thoughts didn't lie. Terrence and Jen had a date tonight.

"Hold on," I protested. "Are we talking about the same Terrence here?" The girl stepped closer. I thought she might smack me this time.

"Back off," she said in a harsh voice. Her posse followed as she stepped past me, bumping my shoulder. I was speechless. What was going on?

"Was that a joke?" Rory pushed our cart closer to the register. He'd just witnessed his first almost-catfight ever. He had a lot to learn about girl-world.

"She was telling the truth," I muttered. Instead of gloating, Rory felt bad. Yes, he didn't like Terrence but that didn't mean he wanted me to get hurt. He just hoped that I'd figure things out before it went too far.

"Maybe this Jen girl asked Terrence out and he couldn't say no?"

"Don't try to be nice." I thought about Terrence – the feel of his lips and the fun we'd had together. "Well, I guess this explains why he was so weird yesterday."

"I wish I knew what to say," Rory replied.

"Just admit that you're a geek and that'll make me feel better." I smiled, but inside I was dying. The one person who made me feel normal, pretty, and confident was a liar. Maybe there was an explanation for all this but what if there wasn't? My stomach felt sick. I just wanted to go home and lie on the couch.

"No, I'm not doing that." Rory began unloading our cart.

"Then I'll blame you for everything that sucks in my life," I answered. Rory just ignored me and kept unloading. "Ok, I'll admit something first. It's possible that you might be right." Rory grinned.

"And that would make *you*?"

"Wrong," I admitted. The cashier rang up our groceries. I rubbed my head again but I didn't have a headache. Talking to Rory helped. It helped me concentrate. Maybe I could do this grocery store thing after all.

Chapter Fifteen

Abandoned

Monday felt like the longest day of my life. I sat through each class, my mind full of accusations. Word about Terrence and Jen got around quick. I still hadn't seen Terrence since Friday, and I was dreading that moment. As much as I craved his attention, his touch, and his ability to make me feel normal, I knew that when I saw him I'd fall victim to thought-spewing. My burning curiosity wouldn't permit me to hold my tongue. I had so many questions I didn't know which ones to pick first.

At last, the bell rang. Finally I could go find Emma and get out of here. I stared at nothing and stood up with a raised chin, pretending not to notice the glares coming from the girls next to me – cheerleaders no doubt. I also pretended not to care that half the boys in class thought I was easy. Pervs.

"Rough day?" Rory was waiting outside my classroom. An unexpected surprise but walking with him calmed my nerves. I blurred out everything around me and focused on Rory. His mind was spinning fast like always. Here and there, a thought would be released – I've got another Chem paper, my shoelace feels too loose, I should've peed before class.

"Is it possible to be hated by the entire school?" I asked. Rory grinned and adjusted his glasses. His green colored shirt matched his eyes – bright eyes that were always hidden under bulky glasses.

"You're asking the wrong guy, Bridget. No encounters with Terrence I take it?" The sound of that name put a sour look on my face. I'd heard it over and over again all day. I'd never realized how many cheerleaders I had class with.

"Terrence, Terrence, Terrence," I repeated. "Don't the girls at this school have better things to think about?" Rory followed me to my locker where I filled my backpack with the books I'd need for homework. The halls were busy. Students pushed their way through the crowds. Some even stumbled around, still hung over from the weekend.

"I'm going to take that as a no." Rory leaned against the wall. I could see him looking around. He poked my shoulder and I looked up.

"What?" I didn't mean to sound so impatient but I was starting to get a headache.

"He's coming over here," Rory whispered. "Terrence." My chest suddenly went heavy. The thoughts in my head started spinning out of control, a habit I'd picked up from Rory. I picked at my fingernails, anxious to get this over with. Rory looked down at the floor as I slammed my locker.

"Hey," I said casually. Terrence had an expressionless face. He didn't look overjoyed but he moved close like nothing was wrong, side-stepping in front of Rory.

"Bridget," Terrence replied. "There you are. I was hoping to see you at lunch."

"I had stuff to do," I replied. Rory chuckled and I saw Terrence roll his eyes.

"Do you have to be here?" Terrence turned around and gave Rory a rude look.

"He's fine Terrence," I quickly commented. Rory grinned and folded his arms, listening intently. "Is there something you wanted?" Terrence acted confused but I knew the game. Guy dates girl. Guy gets bored and dates other girl. Guy continues to date both girls like nothing's wrong. Why? Because the guy's an idiot who doesn't think girls talk. Uh, hello? Girls do nothing but talk. Word always gets around.

"Is something wrong?" Terrence asked. I let out a huge sigh. Obviously, I was going to have to spell it out.

"How was your date Saturday night? I trust Jen didn't have to leave unexpectedly?" I could hear Rory chuckle again. He was loving his front row seat. "Shush, Rory."

"Oh that," Terrence responded looking shocked. I was getting better at reading his expressions. "Bridget . . ."

"Save the speech," I interrupted. "I don't want to hear it. I'm not an idiot, Terrence. And I'm not a dumb blonde either. Your free ride ends here."

"Listen Bridget, I'll make this up to you. I promise," Terrence pleaded. Make what up to me? I raised my eyebrows. This was frustrating. My emotions were swirling out of whack. Part of me wanted to scream and the other part of me wanted to curl up in a ball in my room.

"Really?" I asked. Terrence put a hand on my shoulder. I still liked the feel of his touch, even though I despised him at the moment. "How? Are you going to take me to your house? Introduce me to your family?"

"If that's what you want," Terrence agreed. Rory tried so hard to hold in his laughs that he started coughing.

"Actually," I said putting a hand on my hip. "That's exactly what I want. Let's do that. Right now." Terrence looked shocked again. He opened his mouth but no words came out. I thought he would hesitate or make an excuse, but he actually looked pleased.

"Right now?" He smirked. "Like I said; if that's what you want." I nodded. Rory kept smiling and covering his mouth with his hand. *This is going to be good*, Rory thought to himself. *Bridget, can I come too?* I shot Rory a disappointed glare.

"Are you sure?" I asked. It seemed strange that Terrence didn't act nervous at all.

"I was saving our visit for another time, but now is better than never." Terrence grabbed my hand. Things felt like they could easily go back to normal. And the worst part was, I was still attracted to him. I was starting to see why the majority of girls at school gave their lying boyfriends second chances.

"Uh, ok." I was stunned. "Give me a minute to tell Emma I don't need a ride." Terrence looked excited - more so than he had on our date.

"You know where I'm parked. I'll wait." He left without giving Rory a second glance.

"Bridget, I don't like this," Rory muttered. "This is weird."

"I know but he deserves a chance to explain, doesn't he?" I listened to Rory's logic. His gut told him to stop me, and he wanted to.

"Then make him explain now," Rory suggested. I adjusted my shoulder strap and took off towards the parking lot, Rory trailing behind me. "Come on Bridget, don't be stupid."

"I'm not being stupid. I'm just trying to figure out his deal. Don't you want to know why he wrote the wrong address on his school form?"

"Well yes but . . ."

"Then don't worry about it," I continued. Rory was upset that I wasn't listening. He thought my feelings for Terrence were clouding my judgment.

"For once forget about your little crush and look at the facts." Rory jogged to keep up with me.

"Stop worrying." I stopped to catch my breath. I could see Emma waiting by her car. She dug through her purse for car keys. I took a step outside but Rory grabbed my arm. I'd never noticed it before but he was strong. His biceps were comparable to Terrence's but Rory hid his under long sleeved tees.

"Bridget." Rory pointed to his head. "Listen to this for just a minute. You said you could feel emotions sometimes." I nodded. "Well, focus on mine for a minute, please." I looked at Emma waiting in the parking lot.

"Fine," I agreed. "Just for a minute and then I'm leaving."

"Ok." Rory took a deep breath and concentrated. The thoughts in his mind slowed down. He let me in without hesitation.

I too closed my eyes and blurred out all other thoughts but Rory's, which wasn't that hard considering half the school had already left. Thoughts were shoved into my head – threads of facts that all connected together in multiple ways, forming patterns. I could feel an empty pit of worry in my stomach similar to my mom's worry.

The worrying quickly turned to genuine feelings of concern, and then to the fear of losing a friend. Rory's thoughts made sense. He had connected all the dots, and all arrows pointed to Terrence. Terrence was the stone left unturned. I couldn't deny the logic in Rory's head but what else was I supposed to do? I'd just been offered an explanation – a look into Terrence's home life. I needed to know why he'd lied.

"Alright get it," I said quietly. "I know this is risky. But I might not get another chance to figure out the truth."

"Fine then I'm coming with you."

"Are you insane?" I protested. "Terrence would never agree to that." Rory was already nodding. He didn't need to be a mind reader to know what Terrence thought of him.

"Not in the car, genius. I'll be in the truck." I didn't like that idea. But Rory wouldn't let me go until I agreed to something.

"Rory, that's a dumb idea," I argued. "Your truck is too loud and it sticks out like a sore thumb." Rory grinned. He loved his truck, even though most of the girls at school thought it was hideous.

"You'll just have to use your charm. Keep him distracted."

"Whatever," I muttered. "But if he stops and curses you out, I had nothing to do with this." Rory looked pleased. He stepped in front of me and jogged to the parking lot. The air was cool and I could feel moisture in the air. The ground was wet. There had been light rainfall during class. Emma saw me and waved. She finally found her car keys. I ran to catch her before she got into the driver's seat.

"Hey Em," I shouted out of breath. "I don't need a ride."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah," I replied with a smile. "Terrence is going to drop me off." Her eyes went wide.

"Terrence?" Emma responded. "Just remember not to lollygag, Bri. Your mom will fly off the handle if you keep coming home late."

"Thanks for the advice," I casually responded. Emma smiled. Then her smile faded and she gave me a hug.

"I heard about Jen," she said softly. "I wouldn't worry though. Apparently, they didn't really hit it off." I let Emma hug me. It felt good to know that she really cared. I could always count on her honesty and sincerity.

"Yeah," I replied. "That's what we're about to discuss actually." I half smiled.

"Good luck. Don't let him get away with anything just because of the accent."

"Trust me. I don't plan on it."

* * *

I was expecting a rundown house, maybe at the edge of town. Something that looked pathetic compared to the fake address on Terrence's school contact form. When Terrence turned onto a dirt road, I started nervously cracking my knuckles. A tall house with hanging shutters and chipped paint came into sight. It was the abandoned Allen House. A run down boarding house used to house miners back in the 1800's. No one ever came near it, except maybe on Halloween.

"Uh, Terrence," I said in a shaky voice. "Where are we going?"

"We're paying a visit to my family." He smirked and sped up to the abandoned house. It was dark inside. Terrence's black BMW was the only car in sight. "I realize it's not what you were expecting."

"No not really." I glanced in the rear view mirror. There was no sign of Rory's truck but I knew he was somewhere behind us. I was really glad I'd taken his advice. My stomach was beginning to tie itself in knots.

"It's just temporary," Terrence laughed like nothing was wrong. He killed the engine and unlocked the doors.

"Are you even sure anyone's home?"

"Someone's home." He walked over to open my door and grabbed my hand. "Just stay close to me. This'll only take a minute."

"Ok," I responded. "Good cuz my mom's expecting me home . . . like any minute now. She's waiting for me."

"Ok Bridget. I get it." We walked up to the front door. The windows were boarded up and the porch creaked. The wooden railings were falling apart and the yard was made up of mostly rocks and dirt.

"This is where you live?" I muttered.

"I told you. It's just temporary." He twisted the knob and the front door squeaked open. I could smell the rotting wood inside. I tried not to cringe. There was a cobweb above the doorway. It looked like no one had swept this place in decades. Terrence rushed inside, still holding my hand. Everything was dark and I could feel my heart beating fast.

"Terrence," I stammered. "I think I'd rather go home." He kept pulling me further into the house. Every floor board made noise and I felt the cobwebs on my face as I walked through them. I resisted Terrence's pull and wiped at my cheeks. Terrence's grip got tighter until I could feel his fingers pushing against my wrist bones. "Terrence, come on. Let go."

"Sorry Bridget," he responded. He sounded annoyed and not the least bit sympathetic. I tried not to panic. Rory had been right. This Terrence wasn't the Terrence I knew. I had no way of listening to his thoughts. His voice was steady. He acted like nothing was wrong. I stared at his eyes. They were still a soft blue.

"Terrence!" I shouted. It was time to get answers. I had no intention of being dragged any further into the abandoned house. The stench was way too strong. I was having trouble breathing. "What's going on? Let go of me now!" I thought his grip couldn't get any tighter but it did. I could almost feel the bruises starting to form.

"I can't let you go Bridget." His voice was calm and confident. All my muscles tightened. My throat was so tense that I had trouble swallowing. The feeling of terror – of impending doom – overcame me again. Why was Terrence doing this? What did he want?

"Terrence! Stop!" I never thought I'd resort to screaming. I lunged back and yelled as loud as I could. My voice was shrill and I struggled helplessly. Terrence looked impatient. He

ignored my cries as if he'd seen it before many times. He grabbed both my wrists with one hand and swung his other arm underneath me. In one swift movement, he picked me up like it was nothing. I kicked but he was strong. He'd done this before and he had it down to an art. There was no hesitation, not even an apology. "Let go of me, you psycho!"

Terrence carried me deeper into the house. He turned the corner and I saw what looked like a living room with dust free furniture. Terrence bumped me against the wall as he jogged down a staircase. I was exhausted from the screaming and the kicking. Nothing worked and I was out of breath. I felt a migraine coming on.

The musty smell got worse. Our surroundings got darker and darker. Terrence carried me into the basement. Every part of me was screaming. I used all my remaining energy to try and kick free again. Terrence was stronger than he appeared. He threw me into a corner. My back slammed against the concrete. But despite the burning pain all up my spine, I jumped to my feet. It was too late.

A door slammed in my face and I heard the sound of a rusty lock. I shook the door – banged on it as hard as I could. It was solid. There was no getting through without assistance from the other side. I kicked the door so violently that my big toe went numb. I was angry – angry at Terrence but most of all angry at myself. How could I have been so stupid? The fact that Terrence's thoughts were masked should've roused my suspicion a long time ago.

I could barely make out my surroundings. Only a small stream of light came from under the doorway. There were boxes everywhere. Not the type of boxes you buy new from the store, but dusty, molding boxes that added to the disgusting smell. I was locked in a closet with rotting walls. My urge to go berserk wasn't as strong as I thought it would be. I had gotten myself into this mess by being ignorant – by ignoring Rory's warnings and Agent Squires' instructions.

The floor upstairs creaked. Gentle footsteps came closer. I listened by the door. It was solid but still thin enough for eavesdropping. Terrence was still in the basement. I could smell his cologne. He greeted his guest with what sounded like a kiss on the cheek.

"As usual, I had to see for myself." The voice was soft – a female not much older than me. The British accent sounded similar to the way Terrence spoke. Her voice somehow managed to sound wistful and commanding at the same time.

"So sorry it took so long," Terrence replied. "This one was a little more distant than the others." Both sets of footsteps came nearer. I waited. My mind was going crazy trying to come up with a plan. All I came up with was making a dash for it as soon as the door opened. My heart pounded as I waited for the sound of a turning lock. Instead I saw shadows beneath the door – they blocked my light – and heard soft scratching on the doors opposite surface.

"This will all be over soon, my dear." Her voice was soothing but the words she spoke weren't friendly at all. "Your soul is in good hands." She sounded upbeat. I couldn't see her face but I imagined an angelic looking girl whose smile revealed the face of a devil.

Terror struck my entire body as I imagined my soul being ripped away. I pictured my stiff body being tossed in the dirt, and my mom crying every night for the rest of her life. I banged on the door, hoping that the monster on the other side would have a heart attack from the fright. She just laughed like this was all a game. What type of sick person found this type of stuff amusing? I guess I would soon find out.

Chapter Sixteen

Dru

I pounded my fists against the door until I felt the warm ooze of my own blood. My madness only seemed to amuse my tormentors.

"Only one thing missing," the girl sighed. "It's time we got our book back."

"What were you thinking?" Terrence responded. My eyes went wide every time I heard his voice. I still couldn't believe that I was locked in here because of him. I was so furious that I hoped I'd get a least one chance to disfigure his perfect face. If I was living in my last moments, I might as well try.

"My head is wild with ideas, dear brother. And every one is even crueller than the next."

"We mustn't waste any more time, Dru. We've already drawn too much attention to ourselves. The Council is disappointed enough by our trail." I rubbed my throat and heard myself swallow. The woman's name was Dru. The bracelet was hers. Agent Squire's raid on the school was the only reason I was still alive – that book he'd taken out of the school, it must have been hers. Without the raid, Dru would have her book. And once she had her stupid book, she'd add me to her list of helpless, innocent victims.

"Don't fret. I'll handle it." Dru's gentle footsteps left the basement. I pounded on the door again, hoping to get Terrence's attention. I heard him walk closer. His scent grew stronger.

"It's a shame things had to go this way, Bridget," Terrence whispered. "But you are number seven. I can't let my feelings for you get in the way of that." *His feelings*, I thought. He didn't sound torn up about it to me.

"Number seven?" I asked. My voice no longer trembled. A fire was building in my chest, rather than the usual sinking feeling of despair. Sulking had never worked for me in the past. It wouldn't work now either.

"Yes," he replied. "Once my sister gets her spell book, she'll be able to acquire your soul. Because you are number seven, her transformation will be complete. She will be one of few with powers that great. You see Bridget, you take your gift for granted."

"Transformation? She's already a monster! Just tell me why," I muttered. "Why did you pretend for so long? Why didn't you just grab me off the street or something?" I heard Terrence chuckle. I heard him take a breath and move for the staircase. "Terrence!" I pounded even harder. My fists stung as they hit the wooden door with greater force.

"This is much more fun." Terrence kept chuckling as he switched off the light. I heard his footsteps upstairs. Then they were gone. I was alone in the dark with only my own thoughts to keep me company. I kicked the clutter around me, making a clear spot to sit in. I was growing accustomed to the smells. The smell didn't bother me as much – Terrence's laugh did.

* * *

My eyes opened at the sound of tiptoeing and distant thoughts that feared getting caught – Rory. He'd somehow gotten inside without being locked in the basement himself. Rory's footsteps searched the main level. He called out my name in his head. *Bridget? I know you hate it when I do this but if you're here, please make some noise.* I rubbed my hands. The cuts were starting to heal, but I stood up and got ready to pound on the door one last time.

Rory heard the noise and immediately ran down the basement stairs. The sound of his voice made me smile.

"Bridget?"

"Rory? How did you get here? I wasn't sure you'd kept up!" I felt relieved. Rory opened up his mind. He'd followed from a far distance. And when Terrence turned off onto the dirt road, he knew that his destination had to be the abandoned Allen House.

"I saw them leave." Rory yanked the door but it didn't budge. I could hear him fiddling with the lock. I was overjoyed. I had to get out of here.

"So you saw . . . her?"

"You mean the super skinny blond that dresses like a barmaid? Yeah, I saw her."

"Rory that was Dru," I replied. I could feel his shock. Then his brain connected all the missing pieces. He put his concentration back on the lock. His attempt to pick it wasn't working. After a pause, I heard him run around the room.

"Back away from the door!" Rory yelled and stepped backward. There wasn't a lot of room. Before I could yell back, there was a loud noise against the door. I covered my head and ducked. The dust made me cough. After another bang, the doorway was clear. "The lock was new, but the door hinges weren't." Rory was grinning and catching his breath. I'd never been so excited to see him.

I jumped into his arms without thinking. Being locked up in the dark had forced me to make a choice: fight or give up. My choice was easy. I wasn't a quitter. I was going to fight until I was dead or soulless. Or both. Terrence and Dru were psychos. But with Rory's help, maybe I could be the target who changed the game.

"Thanks," I whispered, still squeezing him. Rory didn't know what to do. He slowly wrapped his arms around me but expected me to pull away and scold him any second.

"Let's go," he replied. The two of us quietly jogged up the basement stairs. Rory was still carrying the rusty axe he'd used to break me free. It was much brighter upstairs. The front door had been left ajar. Rory peered outside and down the street. He waved a hand and the two of us ran down the dirt road. "My truck is just over here!"

We were almost free. I felt anxious following Rory into the trees. If Rory's truck had been moved, I'd probably lose it. I couldn't handle anymore setups for the time being. We tore through a few more bushes. Rory's truck was right where he'd left it. I jumped in the car so fast that I almost smashed my fingers in the door.

"Now let's get the hell out of here!" I nodded and Rory started his engine. His truck tore through the bushes and screamed onto the dirt road. The rocks and potholes threw me up and down in my seat.

"They went after the book," I shouted over the noisy engine.

"What book?"

"The one Agent Squires found at the school. Terrence went to get it!" I yelled remembering the raid on the school. The FBI had pulled out ten of my classmates as well as Dru's precious book. She must have been at the school that night. Rory focused on getting us as far away from the abandoned house as possible.

"We have to warn him! They'll turn every police officer in this town into mindless puppets!" I heard the worry in Rory's voice. My hands itched. I studied them in the light. There were tons of bloody scratches down to my wrists, with an added splinter here and there.

"First, take me home," I insisted. Rory looked surprised.

"Your mom?" Rory asked. I nodded. Terrence knew where I lived. I would have to tell my mom the truth, eventually.

"We can call Agent Squires from there," I suggested. Rory yanked the wheel and turned onto a paved street. He sped towards my neighborhood. Our time was short. Rory knew that. I didn't have to tell him.

"I hope this means you'll let me give you boyfriend advice." Rory grinned. He was trying to keep me from having a panic attack. I smiled again.

"This was a one time thing. I'm usually a really good judge of character." My heart jumped as Rory turned a corner and I slid closer to him.

"Yeah, but that's because you cheat," Rory muttered. I pretended to be annoyed. My fists were tightly clenched. Things were happening so fast that they didn't seem real. The streets were busy. It was near rush hour. My mom was sure to be home worried out of her mind. And my school bag was still in Terrence's BMW, along with my cell phone. I couldn't call her.

"Oh crap! She's home." I could see my mom's car from down the street. The garage was still open and she'd already gone inside. I could see the kitchen light on through the front curtains. "She's gonna freak, Rory. I was supposed to be home an hour ago. You have to come with me. She likes you for some reason."

"Gee, thanks for the glowing commendation," Rory said drily.

"You know what I mean."

Rory's truck came to a halt at the front curb. The two of us ran to the front door so quickly, you'd think Rory's truck was about to explode. The key kept slipping through my fingers. My palms were sweaty. Rory put a hand on my shoulder.

"Just relax for a second," he said in a soothing voice. "Time is short but we'll never get anywhere if you keep us standing here for half an hour." I cleared my throat and pushed the key into the lock.

"Hope that didn't waste too much of your time," I replied as I stepped inside. The house was quiet. I was expecting welcoming yells from a furious mother. Instead I heard a few footsteps upstairs. I stood by the front door waiting for her to poke her head over the banister. She'd see my apologetic look and immediately jog downstairs to extend my punishment.

"Bridget," Rory whispered. "Our phone call?" I stared at the staircase. Rory started tapping my shoulder with no intention of stopping until I agreed to make the call to Agent Squires.

"You're wondering if that's annoying me? Well, it is." I muttered. I tore my focus from upstairs to the book – the book that Dru couldn't wait to get her conniving fingers on. The book that would show her how to permanently steal my abilities. "The number is in the kitchen." Rory made a dash for the phone. He was already finished dialing before I joined him by the fridge. I leaned on the kitchen counter and tried to clear my head. Rory handed me the phone. Every ring made my heart pound faster.

"Jonathon Squires." Agent Squires answered sounding out of breath. He spoke as if he were in a hurry.

"Agent Squires," I responded. "This is Bridget Ferns. I . . ."

"Bridget! So glad you called. Listen, don't move. Don't answer the door, and stay put. I'm sending someone to come get you." He tried to mask his panicked thoughts. But hearing an FBI agent's fears for my survival just made me want to freak out even more. I put a hand on my chest to try and counteract that sinking feeling. I knew what came next. Dru had the book. Once she returned to Allen House and found any empty basement, she'd be at my front door.

"She took the book didn't she?"

"I'm not going to lie to you, Bridget. Yes, the book was stolen." The worry showed on my face. Rory gasped and stamped his foot. His shoe made a huge thud on the tile. I heard more footsteps upstairs. I could see someone peering over the railings.

"I'm down here, mom!" I yelled, covering the receiver. I directed my attention back to Agent Squires. "Look, Agent Squires. My mom isn't a big fan of yours, I know that. But you've got to convince her to come to your office with me. I don't think she'll believe me if I tell her the truth, and there's no way I'm leaving her here. That would be a disaster waiting to happen." Agent Squires paused.

"Your mom's already here," he replied sounding confused. "Her name's on our security sign-in." I heard the sound of rustling papers.

"No," I protested. "Her car is parked outside. I just saw her a second ago." I could hear Agent Squires yelling in the background. A couple of his colleagues yelled back.

"Well, she was just here but Agent Williams is having trouble finding her. Hang on a second." A shadow was cast from around the corner. I watched my mom stagger towards the kitchen. Her brunette bob was messy as if she'd been in bed all day.

"She's here," I repeated into the phone. "I'm looking right at her."

"Ok, just stay there. I am coming to you." The line cut off. I was relieved to see my mom unharmed without a scowl on her face. Rory said hello but my mom kept a consistent blank stare. Something was off, and Rory saw it too. My eyes traveled down to her hand. Her fingernails were digging into a faded, red book. The book looked as if it used to be a vibrant red. It had a cracking spine and its pages looked yellow.

"Bridget," Rory said under his breath. "Is she holding what I think she's holding?" I nodded. My mom had a tight grip on the book that Dru wanted. The very book that could rip away my mind reading abilities, leaving me dead.

"Mom," I said quietly. She stood still at the base of the stairs. I tried to dig through her thoughts, maybe find out what had happened in the past hour. There was nothing there but a blank slate and an eagerness to obey orders. I took a step backward and urged Rory to do the same. "Mom, put the book down and go back upstairs." I listened as her brain processed my command, eventually rejecting my orders.

"What's going on," Rory whispered.

"That's not my mom. Dru is in her head." At that moment my mom looked at me. Her gaze wasn't the gaze of a loving mother. It was the stare of a psychopath. Orders were pushed into her brain. I could hear them loud and clear – bring the book and the girl. Her eyes lit up like torches as soon as she advanced forward. The overwhelming urge to please consumed her entire being. She was Dru's servant in my mom's body. "What do I do? What do I do? Rory, what do I do!" Each time my mom took a step forward, I took a step back.

"We'll have to do what we did when Bryce attacked."

"Rory, she's my mom! I don't want to hurt her!" My eyes went wide. Maybe if I distracted her long enough, Agent Squires would show up with his dart gun thing.

"You might not have a choice!" Rory yelled. I listened to my mom's thoughts. Her first attempt at bringing me to her master was a blow to the head. I stopped and waited for her to carry out her planned move. She walked a few steps closer and aimed a right hook at the side of my head. I was ready and I ducked just in time.

Her thoughts sped up, moving to option number two: pushing me down to the floor. The adrenaline rush raised an alarm in her head. I lunged back and missed my mom's attempt to

shove me to the tile floor. A kick to my legs was her immediate retaliation. The alarm in her head went off and I jumped, missing her well-aimed foot. After a few more jumps, ducks, and dives to the floor, it became easy. All I had to do was defend myself against each of her thoughts.

"How are you doing that?" Rory sounded amazed but I didn't have time to look at him.

"Grab the book!" I shouted. Rory snuck up behind my mom as she picked up a kitchen chair and hurled it across the room. It hit a window. The sound of cracking glass made me jump. Rory lunged for the book and grabbed it with all his strength. My mom's focus automatically switched to Rory. With one swift movement, she kicked Rory's stomach. He fell to the tile floor along with the book. I could see scattered drops of blood coming from his arms. Rory reached for the book, smearing his cuts into the kitchen floor.

"Hey!" I yelled, trying to get my mom's attention. "Over here! I'm over here!" She looked in my direction again. Rory had the book in his hand. He dragged himself back into the family room and hid it underneath a couch cushion. I waited until Rory looked at me to smile. He grinned back.

That brief interaction cost me. A hand swung at my head and knocked me over. I'd stopped paying attention for a minute and now the cold tile was bruising up my sides. A foot struck my ribs and I could feel something in my torso crack. A burning pain seared through my spine and shoulders. I tried to muffle my own painful screams but it sounded worse than if I'd actually let myself yell. I looked up to a mischievous smirk. A kick to the stomach came next.

I forced my body to stick out my arms, cupping my hands. I caught her foot before it struck my ribs. Her violent kick hit my fingers like metal weights. I yelled again and yanked her foot forward, making her other foot slide out from under her. She fell backwards, hitting her head against the kitchen floor.

I stood up and grabbed the counter for balance. My head was spinning and my muscles were aching. But the most painful injury was the sight of my mom lying on the tile floor. Her eyes stared straight up at the ceiling. Her mind was quiet. Dru had found another way to succeed. If she couldn't steal the book, she'd try to steal my mother's life. And the worst part was, she'd done it by my hand.

Tears blurred my vision. They were tears of horror, not tears of pain. I stumbled to the floor next to my mom, screaming. She had no response. I shook her shoulders, even lightly smacked her cheeks. My tears fell onto her chest, a mixture of water and black makeup. Nothing put my mind at ease. Intercepting the book didn't matter. Escaping from Terrence didn't matter.

I felt Rory's arms wrap around me. His touch was gentle. I could feel his warmth, and his desperate desire to keep me safe. I dug my face into his t-shirt. His hand stroked my hair and pulled me even closer.

"This can't be happening," I muttered in between snuffles. "No! No! No!" Rory found it difficult to look at the body in front of him. Seeing my mom's face reminded him of his own mother. He couldn't even imagine what he would do if the situation were reversed. I held onto his arms even tighter. Rory looked down at my mom's blank stare. His face cringed. Words of comfort filled his head, but he didn't know which sentence to say. He knew none of them could change what had happened.

"Wait." Rory let go of me and leaned closer to the tile floor. He smiled. I wiped the dripping makeup off my cheeks. "She's still breathing. That's a good sign."

Chapter Seventeen

Witchcraft

Rory kept a firm grip on my hand as I watched my mom being wheeled out in a stretcher. She was still unconscious. The blow to her head had fractured her skull, but her heart was still beating. My vision was blurry from tears as I followed the stretcher until it was wheeled out the front door. I could hear screeching tires outside and eventually the ambulance's siren. My hands were shaking. All the muscles in my body ached whenever I moved.

"She'll be ok," Rory said in a steady voice. I didn't want to know what he really thought about her condition. Like everyone else, he was probably only saying it to make me feel better. Rory's thoughts pushed into my head regardless. I was surprised to know that Rory really did mean what he said. He was confident that my mom would pull through. Why? Because my mom had someone who depended on her – she had me. That was reason enough for living.

"Thanks," I replied, touched. "I hope you're right." A team of agents started searching through the house, taking pictures of everything. Rory pulled me to the living room where Agent Squires was talking on his cell phone. He ended his call as soon as he saw me.

"Bridget," Agent Squires said as he sat down. "I know this is a lot to take in, but I'm just glad that you're safe. Using your mom to steal the spell book was almost genius. I should've seen that coming." He sounded disappointed in himself but seeing me alive kept his spirits up. He was haunted everyday by the victims he'd failed to save. Six teenage girls, all from different parts of the country and all with one thing in common – mind reading. After each killing, he'd swear to himself that next time things would be different. He'd be able to conquer the Coven. Leaving victims clueless had been a mistake, which was why he wanted to disclose all the details this time. He was closer than he'd ever come to catching these criminals.

"So what now?" I asked. I impatiently waited for his thoughts to play out. I was ready for answers. "I mean, we have the book. I'm safe and Rory and I figured out where their base camp is." My last comment had piqued Agent Squire's interest.

"The abandoned Allen House," Rory chimed in. Agent Squires nodded. He held up a finger and flipped open his phone.

"You're making a call? Are you kidding? How much time do you think we have here?" I continued. "Send someone to arrest them! That crazy witch nearly killed my mom!" Agent Squires muttered a few words into his cell phone and hung up.

"It's not that simple," he retorted. "You can't just walk in and handcuff these people. The minute we have an officer within range, they'll turn him into a mind controlled monster. All hell will break loose." I sighed and hung my head. How were we supposed to compete with witchcraft or whatever they called it?

I closed my eyes. For the first time, my mind took me back to the moldy closet with a rotting door. After everything Terrence and I had experienced together, he'd had no trouble locking me up. How could he possibly participate in such a sadistic ritual? He didn't seem evil, not one bit. His whispers through the closet door would be forever engrained in my head. What was worth murdering an innocent girl you had feelings for?

"He said I would be the seventh," I muttered. Agent Squires nodded and Rory just listened. "Is that supposed to mean something? He sounded way too cheerful about it." Agent Squires started twiddling his thumbs. He knew something. He wanted to tell me but he was

afraid of making things worse. "What? Just say it, Squires. Don't make me have to dig through your brain."

"They need seven souls of girls like yourself in order to . . ." He looked around the room to make sure no one else was eavesdropping. He lowered his voice. So much that Rory and I had to scoot closer. "After the seventh, the ritual will be complete. The witch will be offered a seat in the House of Doom, an upper circle of the Coven."

"And you were going to tell us about this when?" Rory asked looking frustrated.

"We only just learned this ourselves," Agent Squires continued to whisper. "It's in the book."

"Quiet Rory," I added. "Go on, Squires. There's more isn't there?"

"When the ritual is complete, each Coven member who successfully completes the challenge will have limitless powers." Agent Squires looked nervous. His forehead started to sweat. He was trying not to think of what might happen if the killer succeeded.

"What could be better than mind control?" I folded my arms. "Do I even want to know?"

"With each soul, her powers grow stronger until her strength becomes permanent. You see Bridget, members of the Coven start out as innocent kids but they all have one thing in common."

"What?" I asked. Agent Squires stared at me. *You know what*, he thought. *They all start out like you – confused and innocent.* "You mean Terrence is a . . . he's a . . ."

"Hey," Rory interrupted. He pointed a finger at Agent Squires. "Did he just think something? That's not fair." I ignored Rory and rewound back to the moment Terrence and I had first met. I'd never been able to read his thoughts, but was he able to read mine? I felt violated and most of all stupid. I was starting to understand how Rory must've felt.

"Is that why I couldn't hear his . . . you know." I didn't want to say the word 'thoughts' or 'mind-reader' out loud. It felt weird to admit those things with people around.

"It's part of being a Coven member," Agent Squires continued. "He's able to do things that takes years to learn. He can put up walls without even trying very hard." Rory was getting impatient. He reached a hand under his seat and pulled out the red spell book. Agent Squires immediately reached for it but Rory moved back. He opened the book.

"Whoa," he exclaimed as he slowly turned each page. "I feel like I'm reading a sci-fi novel. There's some freaky stuff in here."

"Skip to the soul-sucking page or whatever spell is supposed to steal away my . . . gift." I sounded a little bossy. Rory's impatience was starting to rub off. I wanted to know everything - everything and anything that might give me a chance to get back at Terrence for being a sleazebag.

"I'm looking, I'm looking." Rory pushed out his elbow to stop me from turning the pages myself. "Stop crowding me." Agent Squires stood up and watched his team.

"I'm going to see if my men have found anything," he stated. "You two, stay put. And Rory, I'll need you to give us a full description of Dru. No one's actually seen her before today." He rushed to the kitchen.

"He left out the part where he also thought the killer was a man before today," I whispered. Rory chuckled. He turned the page again, this time he stopped.

"This must be it." Rory followed the spell with his finger, reading it to himself. I was mesmerized by the drawing. It was so detailed. There was a girl with long, black hair tied to a table or, as the book called it, an altar. The girl had a bright green stone around her neck. The

book called it the Soul Stone. It absorbed each soul and relayed that person's energy to its sister stone, the Energy Stone. In the picture, both stones looked exactly the same.

"So," I gulped. "What's all the hype about?"

"According to this," Rory said looking concerned. "They can steal your soul by using this spell, and your abilities. Dru will be able to control everything around her, not just people."

"What do you mean? What could be worse than people?" I watched Rory look around the room and out the window.

"Objects, animals . . ."

"Alright, I get it. It's bad."

"But right now," Rory continued. "I think her powers are only temporary. They don't become part of her until the ritual is completed."

"So we still have a chance to stop her?" My brain tried to think of a strategy. Rory had beat me to it. He was already trying to devise a plan in his head. But not many options popped into his mind that didn't involve using me as bait.

"Possibly," Rory sighed. His brain was overwhelmed. There were so many factors to consider. My mind turned to Terrence again. Imagining him being punched in the face was giving me great satisfaction.

"I still can't believe he went along with all of this," I murmured.

"Terrence?" Rory guessed. "Well, they're family. And obviously, he has a lot to gain from this too."

"Like what?"

"He's gained powers too. This isn't all Dru's fault. And who's to say that once his older sister is in a position of power, he won't be the next Coven member trying to complete the ritual?"

"Rory that's disgusting," I immediately replied. "He'd never do that."

"Bridget, he's participated in a lot of murders including Stacy's. He's just as guilty as Dru is." Rory closed the book and looked at me. I stared down at the carpet. My stomach growled. It was past dinner time and the sun was going down. I hoped that I'd be allowed to spend the night in the hospital instead of this spooky, dark house. Being alone at night sucked.

"He fooled us all," he said calmly. "At some point, you'll have to accept that and move forward. You can't change what's already happened. But we can try and change what could happen next." I nodded, still staring at the carpet. I know I'd been stupid, but Terrence had totally reeled me in. Maybe it was that blonde hair or British accent, but after only a week Terrence had turned my world upside down. My gut told me I would see him again – this fight wasn't over. But I'd have to realize that my feelings weren't real. I'd fallen for a faker who just looked and talked like Terrence. The guy I liked wasn't real. I'd been an idiot not to figure that out sooner.

The phone rang. Every single person in the house froze. All eyes were directed towards me. Agent Squires came running from upstairs.

"Just answer it like nothing's wrong," he said out of breath. A team of agents ran to the kitchen table where stations of laptops were setup. I nervously inched towards the phone, looking back at Rory for encouragement. He nodded at me and hovered over an agent that was typing at the table. I picked up the phone.

"Hello?" My voice sounded so unusually cheery that only a fool wouldn't guess that something was wrong.

"Bridget." The sound of Terrence's voice made my blood boil. I imagined myself kicking a hole in the cabinet and screaming at the top of my lungs, but of course I only thought those things. And if Terrence could hear my thoughts through the phone, I wanted him to know how pissed off I was.

"Terrence," I replied. "I assume this isn't a personal call." Terrence chuckled on the other end.

"Still a sense of humor," he replied. "I like it." I held my tongue. Rory shook his hand, signaling to me to get a conversation rolling.

"What do you want?"

"A trade," Terrence chuckled again.

"Of what? You have nothing I want. Nothing at all."

"That's pretty cold, Bridget. But this particular trade doesn't relate to you and me."

"Get on with it," I replied impatiently. I was more and more proud of myself as the conversation progressed. I was glad that my comment was cold. I hoped that Terrence could sense the cruelty in my voice. I kept repeating - *I will destroy you, Terrence* - in my head. It seemed to work.

"Fine," Terrence agreed.

"We've got it." Rory announced from the kitchen table. Agent Squires shushed him and told him to keep quiet. "Sorry." Rory looked at me grinning.

"I want you and the book," Terrence continued.

"And in return?" I waited. What clever scheme had Terrence come up with this time? Rory was here. My mom was in the hospital. Emma was probably at home . . . oh no!

"Bingo!" Terrence sang. "In return, you get your BFF, Emma." There was a lump in my throat. My heart was pounding again. Terrence was really starting to make me sick.

"You heartless bastard!" Agent Squires put his hand on my shoulder. My hands were beginning to shake. Agent Squires started taking deep breaths in and out. He was trying to get me to mimic him.

"Hmmm," Terrence responded. "Looks like I pushed the right button." My jaw clenched together so tight that instead of talking, I grinded my teeth. "Here are the rules. You come alone, obviously. You bring the spell book. And your best mate gets to live. Did all your FBI friends get that?"

"When?" I forced myself to ask.

"If I had it my way, right now. But since I'm a reasonable bloke, you have until midnight." The line cut off before I could argue. I slammed the phone on the counter. A plastic piece fell off. I'd broken it in half.

"Relax, Bridget." Rory didn't look as stressed as I was. He raised his eyebrows, and I stared at his moist forehead. Rory had a plan.

"The signal was coming from the Allen House," Agent Squires announced to everyone in the kitchen. He turned to Rory and me. "You two were right." We weren't lying.

"So," I muttered. "You said yourself that you couldn't send your team in. I have to do this on my own. I won't be able to live with myself if Emma dies because I was a coward."

"Agent Squires," Rory grabbed the agent's shirt and pulled him towards the couch. "I have an idea to stop all this."

"If it involves feeding Bridget to the wolves, I don't want to hear it."

"It's our best shot," Rory insisted. "Just hear me out." The three of us sat down. We only had a few hours to figure this out.

"Ok," Agent Squires agreed. Rory pulled out the spell book. The sight of it made me want to burn it. If a fire had been going in the fireplace, I would have.

"They need Bridget and the spell from the book to complete the ritual. And if Bridget doesn't deliver the book, they'll hurt Emma."

"Continue," Agent Squires replied. Rory grinned.

"I can alter the spell Squires, if you give me the tools I'll need. We'll send Bridget in with the book and try to extract Emma in the process. If things get out of hand, the spell won't work anyway. I can change the words in here and no one will notice."

"You're forgetting something," Agent Squires added. "Once they discover the spell has been tampered with, what's to stop them from killing Bridget anyway?" Rory grinned again. He'd thought of that too.

"They won't," Rory responded confidently. "Because if they kill Bridget or even badly wound her, the spell won't work. Don't you see? If they fail to complete the ritual once it has been started, Dru's powers will be drained! All the souls she's stolen will have been for nothing."

"I still don't like it. It has too many flaws." Agent Squires was shaking his head. He had a plan of his own that involved his team and a bunch of dart guns.

"With all due respect," Rory rudely remarked. "The way you handle things hasn't really worked out, has it?" Agent Squires was offended, but he kept his comments to himself. In his eyes, Rory was just another arrogant teenage boy who thought he had the answers to everything. And actually, Rory did think he had all the answers. The funny thing was, he was usually right.

"I can handle this." Agent Squires lowered the tone of his voice. Rory wasn't at all intimidated.

"If two plans are in motion, there's higher chance at success. Don't you think so?"

Agent Squires was scratching his chin. He was starting to consider the plan but he didn't want to admit to Rory that he might be right. He did have a good point though. Everything the FBI had tried in the past had failed.

"I still don't know," Agent Squires muttered. He shook his head and watched his team in the kitchen. I grabbed his arm.

"Squires," I said. There was no point beating around the bush. "I think Rory's plan could work, and I'm going to do it – whether you say yes or not." He sighed and nodded his head with approval. Rory jumped up. His thoughts were already buzzing with a list of things he'd need to create a phony page. The copy had to match up exactly, minus the changed wording.

"Bridget," Agent Squires whispered. "I don't want you to underestimate these people. They'll do whatever it takes." I nodded and stared into his eyes with full confidence.

"So will I."

Chapter Eighteen

Exposed

My blood still boiled when the thought of Terrence entered my head. I let it. He'd tried to take everything from me – everything from my soul to my sanity. It's strange how feelings of love can so quickly turn to loathing. I wanted Terrence to pay for what he did to my mom. I'd never pegged myself as the sort of person who sought out revenge. That's exactly what I wanted though – revenge.

The mountain breeze brushed across my face and bare arms, giving me goose bumps. I had a flashlight in one hand and the spell book in the other. My heart was racing as my feet crunched under rocks and twigs. The abandoned house looked even spookier at night. The sky was pitch black aside from a few glowing stars. The moon hardly showed. It hid behind gray clouds. I walked closer and spotted a lit candle in the window. Terrence and his evil sister Dru were expecting me. But they weren't expecting a team of FBI agents, Rory, and a fake spell that would make tonight's ritual useless.

Rory had done all his work to the spell book far away from me. It was agreed that I had to focus on other things. I needed to practice clearing my mind in case Terrence could read my thoughts. I couldn't give anything away. Agent Squires helped with the training. After years of practice, he was able to put secrets under lock and key. He said it took practice and flawless concentration but it wasn't impossible. I knew I wouldn't be able to master his techniques in one evening but I sure as hell tried. It was unfortunate that there was no one to practice with.

I ignored the noises behind me. It was just Rory and a team of agents. It made me even more confident knowing that I had backup. I focused on a scene in my head. It was one in which Terrence got knocked down over and over again. He would look up at me wincing in pain, and I wouldn't show him mercy. The front porch was right in front of me now. The door and chipping paint still looked the same – ugly and smelly. Emma must've had a heart attack when she smelled the rotting wood and something similar to animal feces. The door was cracked open. A pale, bony finger motioned for me to come inside. I walked up the steps without looking over my shoulder.

"Happy?" I said sarcastically. Dru laughed and shut the door. We were finally face to face. She was pale, thin and wore way too much makeup. And Rory was right; she did dress like a barmaid. She had on a short lacy dress paired with a black leather corset. I couldn't help but stare.

"My book," she sighed grabbing it from my hands. When she spoke, Dru seemed delicate and even a little angelic. Her voice didn't match her choice of fashion. Dru stroked the cover of the spell book. "Oh how I've missed you, my darling." She held the book out like it was a newborn baby.

"You're insane," I muttered. Dru laughed again. This time she swayed the bottom of her dress.

"And what would you know about sanity?" She let out a childlike giggle. She opened the spell book and I watched anxiously hoping she wouldn't notice anything different.

"Where's Emma?" I looked around the dark, dusty room. Candlelight was all I had to see. I couldn't even tell if Terrence was nearby.

"I'll take you to her." Dru looked pleased by my question. She reached for my hand with a welcoming smile, like the two of us were dear friends. I leaned back. "Fine." She searched through a few pages and smiled. She grabbed my hand so quick that I didn't have time to react. Her reflexes were amazingly fast and unexpected.

Dru whispered a few words to herself. I listened carefully but I couldn't understand. A rush of wind burst through the door and surrounded us. I was completely engulfed in a harsh twister that tugged at my clothes and made my hair swirl around my face. The wind blew something into my eyes. It felt like sand. I blinked but when my eyes opened, I wasn't at the abandoned Allen House. I was at my school.

Dru laughed and skipped around the hallway. It was the same hallway where I'd found Stacy's body. I was speechless. I gulped and looked around in terror. I was alone with no backup. Rory wasn't just outside the door and neither was Agent Squires. I could feel strength draining from my chest. I'd been fooled again. Why didn't Rory factor in this possibility?

"Someone looks sad," Dru whispered. She looked me up and down and smiled. "Is Bridget sad that we left all her FBI friends behind?" I stayed quiet. Dru looked even more amused.

"Emma," I finally said. "Where is she?" Dru frowned.

"Yes, yes, come on." She skipped down the hallway and didn't look back, not even once.

"Overconfident freak," I murmured. I slowly followed her, afraid of what I might find. The entire school was empty. The halls were dark except for a light shining under one of the classroom doors. Dru stopped and pointed.

"Through there, my darling." She waited for me to turn the doorknob. It was difficult. I was scared of what I'd see inside. Dru was ecstatic. It seemed like the more I suffered, the happier she was. I tried not to stand too close to her.

The knob was cold. I pushed the door open and squinted as light filled the hall. Dru nudged me inside. My anger returned when I saw Terrence waiting. His enormous smile looked the same. He was even dressed for a normal day at school, but he didn't fool me in the least. If only I could've read his thoughts, I'd have known right away what a pig he really was.

"Bridget," Terrence said still smiling. He acted as if nothing was wrong – like this was our second date or something. I swear he would've kissed me if I had let him.

"You're sick," I replied. Terrence laughed. He walked closer like he wanted to hug me. "Back off, witch boy. Yeah, I know all about you and your little club." Terrence still didn't look offended or surprised.

"So what does that make you?" Terrence replied. "You're no different from us."

"I'm not a killer!" I protested.

"Don't kid yourself. Every mind-reader is a cheater. We can't help it. It's only a matter of time before the wants of other people drive you crazy. I chose to do something about that."

"No amount of sanity is worth six innocent girls."

"Seven," Dru added. "It's actually seven when you count the nosey cheerleader that walked in during our altar prep."

"Stacy," I muttered.

"Who said those girls were innocent," Terrence continued. "They all had vulgar, unclean thoughts just like you and me."

"Are you referring to my daydreams about kicking you in the teeth?" I asked. Terrence smiled. I was starting to see the similarities between Terrence and Dru, besides the blond hair.

Both of them were insane. Dru happened to wear her crazy on her sleeve. Terrence was a poser. He kept his crazy inside, hidden behind a wall.

"There's the real you," Terrence laughed. He kept moving closer. And though I detested him, he was still handsome. I smelled his cologne and thought about a life without mind-reading or killing sprees. Terrence and I could've been happy together, maybe even high school sweethearts. But all chances of that had been destroyed before Terrence and I ever met.

"We have the book, dear brother." Dru stepped in Terrence's way. She was excited to complete the ritual. "Quit playing with her."

"First," I interrupted. "We had a deal. You said you'd let Emma go free." Dru laughed to herself.

"She's free to leave whenever she wants," Dru replied. I looked around the room and saw nothing but empty desks and Terrence's backpack. I scanned the room again, this time catching movement in the corner. Emma was curled up and shaking. I hadn't even noticed she was there. Her eyes were wide and watery. Her face looked colorless like she wanted puke.

"What are you?" Emma whispered. She held back tears. Not knowing what to say, I froze. I looked to Terrence and his humungous smirk. He had planned this. He knew what Emma's friendship meant to me.

"Oh dear," Dru sighed. "You mean you didn't tell your best friend about your gift? Naughty, naughty Bridget." She rubbed the spell book again. I think it gave her comfort. She let it rest in her arms like a sleeping kitten.

"I . . . well, of course I didn't . . . Emma," I stammered. Emma wouldn't look me in the eyes. She was scared of what I might do. She was so confused that she didn't know what to believe.

"Yes, precious Emma." Dru dropped down to her knees and played with a strand of Emma's hair. Emma kept her face buried. She had the same thoughts about Dru as me. She didn't trust her, mostly because she acted like a mental patient. "Bridget has been keeping a secret all these years – one that you might not like."

"Emma," I gulped. I needed to clear the air now, especially if this was my last night alive. "You have to understand. I was trying to spare you the disappointment." A tear formed in my eye. I'd dreaded this day. "I knew if I told you, you might hate me." Emma was still distracted by Dru's presence. I got impatient, and my cheeks went red. A boiling feeling of anger overcame me. I walked right over to Dru and grabbed her shoulder. She looked surprised, and even more so when I pulled her to floor. She was so light that it was easy – like pushing over a piece of cardboard.

"Emma," I said ignoring Dru. "Look at me." She looked up with puffy, wet eyes. "Yes, it's true. I've been able to read minds since we were kids, but I've always done my best to respect your privacy. And I know you have questions right now, but you need to leave." Dru grabbed a piece of my hair and pulled. I was so annoyed with her games that I swung around, slapping her in the face. I grabbed Emma's arm and nudged her towards the door. She still looked shocked.

"It makes sense," Emma whispered. She was upset but I felt reassured that if I managed to live, we'd move past this. I smiled, ecstatic to know that I might at least do one good thing before I died – save my best friend.

But Terrence killed that hope when he slammed the door in Emma's face. I heard Dru clapping. Terrence grabbed Emma's arm. She was too stunned to resist.

"Now that we got that over with," Terrence said. "How about we say some spells?" Dru jumped up and down with excitement.

"Wait! I thought we had a deal?" I eyed Terrence then Dru. The both of them just smirked. "You two disgust me." The more I stared at Dru, the less frightened of her I was. She was just a psycho in a lacy dress. Dru must have read my thoughts because she stopped jumping. Her eyes flickered and her facial expression changed. My heart jumped.

"Don't think it unless you mean it, stupid girl." She walked closer to me, and this time I felt overwhelmed. She looked into my eyes, bringing to life my worst fears – my mom dying, being alone, being locked up for life in an insane asylum. I felt complete and utter doom. My breathing got heavy and I felt like curling up in the corner. Dru had turned hostile.

I fought my own thoughts. They consumed me as if they were real. Struggling with internal torment, I barely noticed when Terrence pulled me to a few desks in the middle of the room. They'd been pushed together. Ropes to bind my hands and feet were waiting. Terrence pushed me onto the table and then I saw it, the Energy Stone. Dru pulled it out from under her dress and held it in her hand. It was so dark that at first glance, the stone looked black. But when it shone through the light, I could see a tint of green.

"Beautiful isn't it," Dru said. She broke eye contact and walked over to Terrence's backpack. "I have one for you as well." I blinked and realized that Terrence had already tied together my hands and feet together. I didn't even get the chance struggle. I sat up. But Terrence was holding a long, polished blade. He was holding it to Emma's neck.

"I think not," Terrence said still smirking. I laid back down. The only thing I could hope for now was a spell that would backfire. Dru pulled another necklace out from Terrence's bag, the Soul Stone. It was prettier than the other stone. Dru smiled.

"That's because it's filled with life," Dru said in response to my thoughts. She danced over and placed it around my neck. "Hold on." Dru paused and her eyes darted to the door. "A friend of yours?" I heard it too. Rory should've kept his thoughts to himself. Dru ran to the door. She excitedly turned the knob and found Rory listening on the other side.

"Have you come to see the show as well," Dru said to Rory. She pulled him inside and shut the door. She grabbed Rory by his shirt. His face went white when he saw me. Rory's apologies entered my head. *Bridget, I'm so sorry. I should've known that they'd pull a trick like this.* I gave Rory a desperate look but there wasn't much he could do to help me. "I think I have another bundle of rope somewhere."

I stared at Rory, waiting for him to stare back. He couldn't look at me. Whenever he did, his feelings opened up too many avenues in his mind. He didn't want to give Dru or Terrence that chance. Dru pulled out more rope. She looked into Rory's eyes and immediately he was scared stiff. His face got sweaty and he looked like he was ready to faint. He must have been fighting his own fears like I had. Dru tied the rope as tight as she could before kicking Rory's knee. He hit the floor and winced.

Dru opened the spell book. She took out a bag full of red vials. Rory was getting his vision back. He watched Dru and made a disgusted face. She opened the first vial, it was one of six, and dipped her finger in the red liquid. It took a few minutes to realize that it was blood. She smeared some on her arm like it was scented lotion.

"Sick," I muttered. Dru's delighted face made me want to gag. She dipped her finger in the vial a second time and smeared the blood on me. I wanted to puke.

"From each girl," Dru smiled. She put the first vial away and proceeded to do the same with vial number two. "The last girl actually did throw up, you know. It was quite the mess." I rolled my eyes. She smeared more blood on my arm. It dried up quick leaving a weird crust on my skin. Instead of gagging, I took a new approach. I ignored Dru's comments and instead

starting telling myself that the spell wouldn't work. Dru concentrated on her task until she'd removed blood from each of the six vials.

"Where is . . . everybody?" I muttered. Rory was near my feet. He looked at me and shrugged. The second I had disappeared from the Allen House, Rory was confident that the ritual would take place where it should've taken place a week ago – the high school. But Agent Squires didn't like the idea of putting all his eggs in one basket. He made his team scout every possible location in case Rory was wrong. Rory had come on his own.

"They could be anywhere," Rory whispered.

"But they'll be too late I'm afraid," Dru replied. She was ready to repeat the spell. I had an arm full of blood that wasn't mine and the Soul Stone was around my neck, but I smiled proudly. The spell in that book was useless. Dru paused and studied the page in front of her. I waited for a cry – an accusation or another strange trip inside my own thoughts. Dru's smile didn't leave her face.

"Very clever," she said in a wistful voice. "Changing the words to the spell was a magical idea. Did you think of it?" She looked down at Rory. Then she glanced at Terrence and the two of them laughed. "Oh, it's a shame you put so much time into this Rory."

"Wait what?" I was confused now. Why weren't they angry? Their plan was about to fall to pieces.

"Silly girl," Dru replied. "The spell is right here." She pointed to her head. "After six ceremonies, I know it by heart of course." Rory and I looked at each other. My heart sank. I had failed and now I was going to die along with my friends. It was all my fault. Dru opened her mouth and started reciting the spell. I could feel myself getting weaker. My energy was slowly being drained. Pretty soon I wouldn't be able to move. The Soul Stone burned into my chest. It felt like a hot iron, and I yelled.

Rory yelled when I yelled. He was suffering just as much as me as he watched. I felt his hand grab my ankle. The pain in my chest was so great that my body crashing to the floor didn't seem like a big deal. Rory had pulled me off the table. Dru stopped mid-spell. She looked annoyed but when she bent down to smack Rory for his disobedience, Rory yanked her hair so hard that she fell on top of me. Dru looked nervous and continued reciting the spell.

That's when a thought entered my head – my own thought. I sat up screaming and grabbed Dru's neck with all my strength. She spoke even faster. Rory glared at me. *She has one sentence left*, Rory thought. Rory held Dru's shoulders as I ripped the Energy Stone from around her neck.

Chapter Nineteen

It's Complicated

I fought for my life. The Soul Stone was leached onto my chest like a ball of fire. All the strength I had was being diverted to my arms. My legs were like jelly. They couldn't move. As Dru spoke the last few words of the spell, her eyes went wide. I'd grabbed the Energy Stone and put it around my own neck. I could feel its energy instantly. It gave me the strength I needed. My fingernails dug into the Soul Stone. I tried pulling it off. Terrence dropped his knife as soon as he realized what was happening.

I ripped the Soul Stone off my neck. It felt like I was ripping flesh from my own body. I screamed again. The pain was excruciating, the most I'd ever felt. As soon as the stone parted from my skin, fresh air entered my lungs. I could move my legs, and the only pain I felt was from the tightness of my ropes. Rory looked relieved. Everything had happened so fast but to me it seemed to last forever. Terrence was shouting and ready to throw Rory against the wall. Dru was still on the ground next to me. I knew what needed to be done.

My hand thrust the Soul Stone forward. It soared through the air, landing on Dru's chest. Her eyes started watering as she wrestled with the pain. Half her body went lifeless, and the shock caused her stop speaking. Terrence looked furious. He'd pushed Emma to the floor and ran to his sister's rescue but I'd already done the damage. He knelt by Dru's side and gave me a look that sent chills through my body. He was angry, really angry.

Rory gulped. He saw me panic and clutch my chest. There was a red mark where the Soul Stone had been. He eyed the Energy Stone around my neck, knowing that even though my soul was safe that wouldn't stop Terrence and Dru from killing us all out of rage. Rory sat up straight. He opened his mouth.

"Infinite!" Rory yelled. It was the last word of the spell, the only thing left that needed to be said. I felt the Energy Stone lock into my skin. It made my chest tingle and my heart pound. A bright light filled my eyes. It engulfed me, giving me strength and opening my brain to possibilities I'd never thought of. I almost felt invincible. It was the greatest feeling in the world to finally be in control.

I could hear Dru's violent screams but I couldn't see her. She was suffering my fate and it didn't sound pleasant. I was grateful that I could see nothing but white at the moment. The terrifying scene that matched those screams was sure to be gruesome. No one would want to carry around that image with them. It would've haunted me even more than the image of Stacy's body.

The light left my eyes and the warmth surrounding my body faded. Rory was grinning, proud of his decision. He'd spent all night with the stupid spell book, staring at the words. He knew that eventually, one of us would have to fight. At first, I didn't know what say. When the light left my eyes, all of a sudden I saw everyone in a completely different way. Terrence was kneeling and breathing heavily. His sister's body was sprawled out in his arms. Dru's pale skin was now gray. She was dead, and her face looked like she'd been tortured in her last moments.

For once, I could concentrate on a single person. I could shut off access to Rory's spinning wheel of thoughts. I could dive into Terrence's mind and knock down the wall he had up. I could even concentrate on Emma, and aid her in feeling more cheerful. She was still on

the floor, not sure what to do next. I stood up and looked around the room. I could focus on people that were a mile away if I wanted. I smiled.

"Agent Squires is outside," I said quietly. Rory let out a huge breath. He was still studying my strange behavior.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Well, I can't really describe it but it feels good." I crossed the room towards Emma. She had a few bruises but she was all right. Her greatest scarring would come from what she'd just witnessed. Terrence closed the eyes of his dead sister, accepting that there was nothing he could do now to bring her back. He finally looked at me. There was a slight flicker in his eye. He no longer saw this as a game, mostly because he hadn't won.

"You," Terrence muttered. Rage was building in his chest. He wanted to pummel me to the ground. I knew the feeling. It was the same feeling I had towards him.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Things didn't go the way you had hoped?"

"You killed her!" Terrence was furious. His face turned red. "You are a killer!"

"That was an accident!" I protested. "But honestly, I'm glad it happened. It was either her or me. You know that. There's nothing wrong with fighting to survive." Terrence didn't care about my reasoning. He was just angry that he had to return to London a failure. Dru wouldn't even be there to protect him. The Coven would mock him, maybe even kick him out. Terrence took a few steps closer. I broke apart the walls in his head and finally read his thoughts. I wish I hadn't.

Terrence's brain had twisted the concept of good versus evil. He only thought about himself. He looked at me and I felt disgusted. Terrence did in fact have feelings for me but they were not loving, caring feelings. They were nothing like the way a normal boy felt for a normal girl. They were disturbing.

Terrence saw me as a toy – his favorite play thing. He liked me the most compared to all his other toys and he was a bit saddened by the fact that he would have to throw that toy away. He'd get a new toy though. He'd get over it fast because the reward was well worth it. He had tried to lead me astray every night we were together but I kept changing plans. It intrigued him.

Terrence was trying to lead me to the ritual room the first night we met. The homecoming dance would've been perfect, especially since he was never able to talk to me at the football game. I even caught him off guard when I had to rush home on our ice cream outing. I made it a chase for him. That's why he kissed me. He was thrilled by the thought of seducing his prey. What a creep.

"Terrence," I gasped. "You have some pretty messed up ideas." Terrence grabbed his forehead.

"Stay out of my head!"

"You mean the same way you stayed out of mine?" I'd triggered something in Terrence. He ran forward and knocked me to the ground with a single punch. I had no time to fight back. He'd obviously been trained. The familiar pain entered my body. Terrence meant to inflict pain. He wanted me to suffer. He wanted me to die.

"Bridget!" Rory yelled. "Are you ok?" I was on the ground coughing when Terrence kicked my stomach. Rory shouted something and jumped on Terrence's back. He was too strong. Terrence ran backwards, slamming Rory against the wall. Emma was curled up in the corner again. Terrence blocked the door looking pleased. He ran over giving Rory a kick to the gut as well.

The pain burned in my torso. All I could think about was getting out of the classroom. I never wanted to set foot in this school again. Terrence was advancing for his grand finale. I was scared. I wasn't confident enough to fight him. Rory couldn't move and Emma was horrified out her mind. Her eyes were closed because she couldn't handle any more violence.

"Bridget," Rory wheezed. He could barely talk. "You can finish him."

"I can't," I yelled. Terrence smirked.

"Yes you can," Rory insisted. "Do what you did last time." Rory thought back to my mom. I'd anticipated her moves and counteracted them so no one would get hurt. From Rory's point of view, what I'd done to defend myself had looked magnificent. I'd looked like a professionally trained fighter. But this situation was different. Terrence was taller and stronger than my mom. His moves were swift rather than sluggish.

I was on the floor in a lot of pain. I knew what Terrence wanted to do next. He wanted to kick my ribs until I coughed up blood. Then he'd grab his blade, the one he'd thrown aside, and finish me. I'd almost forgotten about his knife. I searched the room for it. It was near the exit. The blade gleamed in the light. Terrence looked at me one last time and swung his foot. I stuck my hands out, caught his boot, and pulled. It was the same move that had sent my mom to the hospital. He stumbled backwards, giving me time to stand up.

"Lucky move," Terrence muttered looking startled.

"I might have a few more," I replied. Terrence was going to throw few punches next, all aimed at my face. His fists came fast. My arms were ready. I was able to block his first, his second, his third punch . . . After the third my arms started bleeding. The dark blood oozing onto the floor distracted me. Terrence got another hit in, this time in the face.

I held on to my cheek. It was warm and sticky. My head buzzed and a sharp pain was pulsing behind my eyes. I tried to suppress my feelings of defeat. Whether I lived or died, my defense needed to happen fast before I had too much time to think about the throbbing pain I was in. I remembered Dru and crazy things she was able to do. Could I do the same? I looked into Terrence's eyes and tried to push thoughts into his head. He looked surprised but just laughed.

"Those games won't work with me, Bridget. You may have power but you're unworthy of it. You'll never learn how to use it!" He lunged at me. I ducked and stood up as soon as I felt his body across my back. He was heavy, but I shot up with all the strength in my quads. Terrence fell flat on his back behind me. I ran towards the doorway. There were tons of footsteps in the hall – Agent Squires and his men. Terrence's blade was at my feet. I hurriedly picked it up. Rory was trying to stand. He glanced over my shoulder and started waving a hand.

"Bridget! Look out!"

I turned around and in front of me was Terrence. He didn't hesitate as he smacked my face and grabbed his knife all in one movement. He shoved me against the door. I was cornered and terrified. I'd tried my very best but it wasn't enough. Terrence had a mischievous smirk. He held the knife up over his head, and then sent it soaring towards my chest. He wanted the blade to slice through my skin and pierce an organ. I imagined it would be incredibly painful, as bad as having the Soul Stone around my neck.

I saw Rory's face – the eagerness in his eyes. He was determined to end Terrence's reign. Rory reached for Terrence's wrist and pulled his arm back just in time. The blade only skimmed across my skin, leaving a small cut. Rory pulled Terrence's arm using all his body weight. Terrence struggled. The rest was perfect timing – for once. The classroom door was kicked open. Agent Squires and his men crowded the entrance. Agent Squires shot his dart gun, aiming for Terrence's neck.

The dart pierced through Terrence's skin. His hand reached for it and pulled it out, but his eyes got heavy. He looked groggy but he fought his urge to close his eyes. He fell to the floor, this time unconscious. There was no chance of him getting back up. It was over.

I took a few breaths. The pain from my injuries took over. I groaned and rubbed my face. It was bleeding and I was sure that it would be all purple by tomorrow.

"Bridget," Agent Squires said as he let his men inside. An agent checked Dru's pulse. Another dragged Terrence out the door. "Are you ok?"

"Yeah," I gasped. "I think so." Rory forced a grin while he clutched his stomach. He shot a disappointed look at Agent Squires.

"I told you they'd be here," Rory said proudly. Agent Squires ignored him. He scanned the room and eyed Dru's lifeless body. He saw the stone around her neck and started putting together the pieces. Each of the victims had what looked like a burn mark on their chest. Autopsy reports hadn't been able to explain the mark or the cause of death.

"Did you do all this?" Agent Squires looked at me, and then looked to Emma and Rory who were still breathing.

"Rory helped." I looked down at the scar on my chest. A permanent reminder of this awful night. It was the place where life was almost ripped from me.

"You and I should have a chat," Agent Squires responded. He finally put his gun down. A body bag was brought in. I had trouble watching as Dru's body was zipped up and tossed aside. Emma was in shock. She was immediately taken outside to the ambulance along with Rory. "You did a brave thing today." The room had been cleared. Agent Squires and I stood alone in the classroom.

"That doesn't change what happened," I replied.

"What happened?" I had Agent Squires' full attention. I looked down at the red marks where my ropes used to be. The ropes had been cut but the marks were still there, just like the scar on my chest. I felt different. I knew things wouldn't be the same come tomorrow. I wasn't sure if I was ready for that.

"What didn't happen?" I touched my chest and leaned against a desk. "I could feel my soul. It clung to me like it was desperate to stay attached. I could see everything – all my fears, all my doubts, all my desires. And they were being stripped from me."

"But obviously, the spell didn't work."

"Oh, it worked," I replied looking down at the floor. "It just didn't work on the right person."

"You mean . . . you took her powers?" Agent Squires was astonished. "Bridget, you have some thinking to do. Be careful not to cross the line – get greedy – like Terrence. Now is the time to watch your back more than ever. I expect it's only a matter of time before a member of the Coven contacts you."

"Contacts me? What for?" But Agent Squires didn't need to explain. It was obvious. I now possessed powers that only members of the House of Doom, the Coven's upper circle, were privileged to. I had what Dru had been working for.

"They'll be interested. Whether they'll want your allegiance or your head, I'm not sure."

"That's comforting. I guess I'm just supposed to sit around and wait, huh? I mean, how many creeps like Terrence are out there anyways?" I shuddered, hoping that this whole Coven thing was just a myth. I wasn't ready to meet anyone else as crazy as Terrence . . . ever.

"That's been the number one question for years," Agent Squires said shaking his head. "We don't know much about them - where they are or how many." His mind was racing. He had something else to say, but I wasn't yet ready.

"But someone else does, don't they?" I stared at his forehead, trying to dig farther into Agent Squires' brain. If there was someone out there who could help me, I desperately wanted to meet that person. I was on the verge of freaking out, but telling myself that I'd been through the worst already prevented that. Was that true? Probably not, but I told myself it was.

"Already trying to break through my wall?" he chuckled. "Pretty soon, you'll be no match for me."

"You're really good at resisting."

"I've had a lot of practice." He made his way to the open door. "Come on, let's get your face cleaned up. We can continue this discussion somewhere more appropriate." I followed him into the dark hallway. My muscles ached and each step I took made something hurt. My face did feel crusty, probably my own blood drying up. I was afraid to look in the mirror.

I could hear the sirens. An ambulance had already taken Emma and Rory to the hospital. The street lamps were on and I felt a chill as we stepped outside. Terrence was still unconscious. He'd been handcuffed and thrown off to the side. It made me sick to look at his face. He was a traitor - a horrible, selfish, conniving person. I couldn't believe I'd ever let myself kiss him and fantasize about the two of us. It was sick to think about.

I started to feel numb. I'd experienced more than I could handle tonight. The aftermath was sure to be messy. At least I had Rory, because I wasn't sure what Emma would think of me once she got over being kidnapped.

"Who was it?" I asked Agent Squires before he started surveying the mess he had to clean up. "Who helped you practice?"

"I knew someone like you once," Agent Squires said softly. He had great love and respect for the person he spoke of.

"Who? A girlfriend? An aunt?"

"My sister," he replied. All information about his family had been stored away. I could see a spot in his head so deeply buried that even I didn't want to attempt to search. He had put those barriers up a long time ago.

"What happened to her?"

"She was killed," he sighed. "I was young."

"Was it them - the Coven?"

"They have been around a long time Bridget," Agent Squires sighed. "You're one of the lucky ones." The question he wanted to ask me was pulsing in his head. He pushed it back on his mental checklist of things to do.

"You that I know, right? I mean about the thing you want to talk to me about." I dug deep but I still couldn't figure out what the question was. It came with complications. It involved other people and possibly leaving town for a long time.

"Soon," he responded with a smile. "I'll tell you soon, but first there's someone we need to talk to."

"The police? I suppose I'll be at the station all night giving statements."

"No." Agent Squires shook his head. "Your mother."

Chapter Twenty

A Deeper Secret

The hospital smelled like rubbing alcohol and bleach. The hallways were dull and boring, completely white. White must have been the cheapest paint color. I touched my eye. It was a little swollen. It had taken an hour for a nurse to clean up my face. I needed a few stitches and the doctor demanded that I get an x-ray. My torso was all bruised up but luckily, nothing was broken.

Although my face must have looked frightening, I still made it a point to make sure everyone was ok. My first stop was to check on Emma. The way she'd looked at me had been driving me crazy all night. What did she think of me? I had to know no matter how much it might hurt. I gulped before entering her hospital room. I pushed open the door and was relieved when I saw her smiling next to Rory. He was in the middle of a joke.

"So the other guy says . . . Bridget." Rory's face was beaming. He eyed the stitches near my mouth and made a face. "Your face has seen better days."

"And yours," I added. Rory grinned. He wanted to stay – to talk to me for hours; but he glanced at Emma and stood up.

"I'm going to go grab a soda," he announced. "Anyone want one? No. Ok." He left Emma and me alone. Emma was sitting up in her hospital bed. Her nurse had brought her some food and a few magazines.

"How are you?" I asked.

"I'm ok. Nothing serious." Her voice was quiet. She didn't know what to say or think. She was confused like Rory had been.

"Just relax," I commented. "I'm not going to go looking for your deepest darkest secrets."

"So it is true." Emma sighed and thought about the night's events. Her mind took her back to Terrence's phone call, and him asking her to come outside. He said they needed to talk. She'd been excited, thinking that he wanted to know more about her best friend Bridget – the girl he wanted to impress. She was wrong.

"Yeah, unfortunately it is," I sighed. Emma nodded.

"I guess in a way, I've always known. I mean you've always known things about me that no one else could know. I just figured it was because we were such close friends."

"I'm really hoping we can still be friends," I added anxiously.

"If Rory can do it," she replied, "I can do it." I was relieved that she didn't shout at me or call me a freak.

"Rory talked to you?" I was curious. What had he said to make things go smoother? Emma nodded.

"He told me that there were ways to keep my privacy. I just have to learn."

"He's right," I agreed. "I mean I don't go digging through people's brains on purpose. The thoughts just get shoved into my head."

"And I thought you were just a loner," Emma quietly laughed. I sat on her bed, feeling a little bit better.

"What else did he say?" I asked. Emma smiled. She liked that I was intrigued. And she liked that I had soft spot for Rory, even though I made fun of him. I rolled my eyes. "Don't even go there, Em."

"Well, he is funny," she protested.

"This isn't a conversation about Rory," I responded. "This is about you and me." Emma's smile faded a little. She had seen horrible things tonight – things she hoped she'd never see again.

"So it was Terrence," she said looking baffled. "Girls have been falling all over him since he got here, and the whole time he was a killer. It's weird. Did you know?"

"If I'd have known, I would've told someone. Honest." I was embarrassed about how far I'd let everything go. I should've been smart enough to see what he was from the beginning. I should've been suspicious about his lack of thoughts, not excited. An alarm should've gone off in my head the night we met. Instead, I developed a silly high school crush that almost killed me.

"Well, it happens," Emma said trying to reassure me. "Some boys are really good at hiding their true selves. Take Brian for example. I thought he was interested in being a couple, but he was just trying to get to next base. Jerk." I thought about the football game. I was glad that Emma figured things out herself. Brian was just like all the other brainless pigs at school.

"Yeah," I admitted. "I could've told you that sooner." Her eyes went wide and she giggled.

"No wonder you didn't like him," she muttered.

"Well, now I can share stuff like that." Sharing my secret with Emma wasn't going the way I'd thought it would. It was going really well. Emma still had questions and hesitated sometimes, but she would get used to the idea.

"Your secret's safe with me," she said quietly. She meant what she said. I wanted to cry.

"Thanks. That means a lot." I stood up. Now that things were good with Emma and I, it was time to visit someone else that needed a few answers. My mom was awake, though heavily drugged. My heart raced when her doctor told me the news.

"Tell your mom I said hi," Emma said. She was just as worried about her as I was. I nodded in agreement. "Oh and by the way, Rory said we'd all laugh about this night in a few years." I laughed quietly before leaving Emma's room.

"Well, he's always right."

* * *

My mom's eyes were barely open but they opened wider when I entered the room. Her head was bandaged and she had an IV in her arm for the pain. Her breathing and heart rate were being monitored. She breathed slowly. She reached a cold hand out and I held it as I waited for her to speak.

"I'm glad you're ok," she said.

"I'm sorry mom. I'm sorry about everything – the lies, staying out late, disobeying." She squeezed my hand.

"You're still alive and that's all that matters," she replied. "I should be apologizing to you."

"What? Is that you or the drugs talking?" I found a comfy spot on her bed. She laughed, although not very loud, and blinked. Her eyes were watery.

"I tried to fight it," she continued. "When my mind was breached I knew what they were trying to do. I tried to stop it." I was confused.

"Mom, you weren't the only one who fell victim to that mind control stuff. You shouldn't feel guilty about it."

"But I should've known better," she replied. "I should've seen it coming." Her eyes were almost fully open. A tear ran down her cheek and she kept squeezing my hand.

The door opened and I was overwhelmed by the smell in the hallway. It reminded me of needles and shots. Agent Squires stepped in. He smiled when he saw me. My mom tried to sit up but it wasn't easy for her to move.

"I'm glad you're here," he said to me.

"Jonathon," my mom muttered. She didn't look too happy to see him. What was that about?

"Sharlene," Agent Squires replied.

"Is there something going on here I don't know about?" I couldn't figure out Agent Squires' agenda, and why my mom associated his presence with bad news.

"It's not my place to say anything," he responded. "Sharlene, it's time you told her." My mom was afraid. She didn't want to lose me the same way she had lost my dad. She'd spent my whole life trying to shelter me from the world, hoping that I would feel normal one day.

"Mom?" I looked at my mom. She was frowning. "Mom, what's he talking about?"

"Sharlene," Agent Squire continued. "Professor Matthews is right outside." Her thoughts went back to many years ago – before I was born. She'd been hiding the past but she knew it would eventually catch up with her.

"Bridget," she said quietly. "You have to know that I did what I thought was best. I kept you away from all this as long as I could."

"I don't understand."

"It's your father, honey," she continued. My heart jumped when she mentioned my dad, she never did. I'd never known him. I'd seen pictures. He had the same blond hair and similar eyes as me. I'd never know anymore than that.

"What about him? I thought he was dead?"

"He is," my mom said in a sad voice. "But there's something I never told you. Your father was like you."

"Like me?" I touched my blond hair. My mom shook her head. She meant the mind reading. I laughed which wasn't the reaction she expected.

"Rory was right," I muttered. "Big surprise."

"Bridget," Agent Squires interrupted. "Your father was part of a program designed for people such as yourself." I started to worry. I immediately thought he was suggesting a trip to an institution.

"I'm not crazy Squires," I said firmly.

"No it's nothing like that. This is a training program that'll teach you everything you'll need to know for survival."

"And who's gonna teach me?" I asked. I still wasn't processing his claims. I wasn't even sure he was being serious. "You?" I laughed.

"This program goes beyond my spectrum of knowledge," he replied. "I'm just a recruiter." It felt strange to imagine myself in a room full of mind-readers. What happened when someone had a thought? Did it relay around the room, going in and out of everyone's head?

"So what's the point of it, to teach me how to control everything? I don't know."

"Accepting a spot comes with a lifelong career, Bridget. This is something that you should seriously consider." Agent Squires wasn't joking around. He thought I'd make the perfect student. "This program is privately funded and privately run. I first met its creator, Professor Matthews, when he turned up at our house to visit my sister." I was listening intently now. "His goal is to eliminate the Coven and its many chapters that spread across the globe." My eyes were wide.

"Oh." That was the only thing I could think to say.

"Coven members have been killing innocent people for hundreds of years. Professor Matthews was the first one to create a way to beat them."

"And he wants me?" I pointed at my chest and thought of all the times I'd been picked last in gym class. I'd barely survived Terrence and that was with help. And yes, I had more power than most but I sucked at using it. What had happened was a mistake. I didn't see the power inside me as an excuse to do whatever I wanted. I saw it for what it was – stolen souls and stolen talent.

"Bridget, you escaped these people once without any training. That's a huge accomplishment." It would've been nice to have some moves to use against Terrence, especially when he punched me in the face.

"I guess," I sighed. I looked to my mom. She knew that the training would mean my safety, but she was still opposed. My dad spent his whole life hunting down Coven members. He was hardly ever home and when he tried to retire the House of Doom had taken him down. My mom and I were in the next room. I gasped. I'd had no idea.

My mom opened up her memory to that night. All the screaming made her feel like nothing would ever be right again. My dad was able to wound the psycho who broke in but he was powerful. My dad didn't survive. My mom was forced to start over without any help. She left the south and moved west towards the mountains. She lost touch with all her friends and the little family she had. That was the only way.

"I had no idea," I whispered with a tear in my eye.

"I just wanted you to be safe," my mom said quietly.

"I understand." I stroked her hair reassuringly. I looked at Agent Squires. "I can't do it." He frowned but he wasn't going to argue. My mom took a deep breath.

"You have to," she sighed.

"But mom, I thought . . ."

"You already know too much," she interrupted. "They will come for you. You need to be able to protect yourself. I can't be selfish anymore. This is what's best for you."

"I can't just leave and never come back," I replied, thinking of Emma and Rory.

"You'll still be able to see your mom," Agent Squires responded.

I ran my fingers across the bed sheet. I wanted to control this force inside me but I also wanted to finish the school year with my friends – Emma and Rory. And then there was Terrence. What would happen once word of his capture got out? And when the Coven figured out that Dru was dead – what then? I wouldn't be able to sleep. Every noise in the night would haunt me and drive me insane. On the other hand, I'd never been the new kid before. The whole idea kind of scared me. I was never that good at making new friends. I mean, I only had two at the moment. What if everyone thought I was a joke?

"Take your time with this one," Agent Squires said. He opened the door and let in a short man with white hair. He had on thin glasses and a brown suit that smelled like roses. He

had a tiny smile and he walked with confidence. I waited for a thought of his to be pushed into my head. It made me nervous when nothing happened. His mind was blank like Terrence's. He had a wall up but he had worked his entire life to build it.

"Bridget," the old man said. He reached out to shake my hand.

"Hi, Professor Matthews?" I still wasn't sure what to decide. The old man nodded. "I'm not the girl you want." I looked down. I felt guilty about taking Dru's life. I knew it wasn't my fault, but I couldn't stop seeing her lifeless body or the look on Terrence's face.

"Oh but you are," Professor Matthews replied. He spoke firmly like he meant every word. And he did mean every word. "You have great potential. I have no doubt."

"Honestly, sir. I just got lucky."

"And destroyed someone worthy of the House of Doom? Not just anyone could've survived Drusilla." I cringed when I heard her full name. No wonder she went by Dru. Who would name their daughter that? "I know you have a lot to think about but I would like to show you what I can offer." I agreed. Professor Matthews opened a door in his head and I was granted a peek inside.

I saw countryside. There were miles of rich green gardens, all with blooming flowers that housed a huge number of small birds. It was beautiful, and at the base of these gardens was a huge manor made of brick. It looked like it stretched for miles. This was where I'd stay. Inside the manor with its grand staircases and antique furniture were classrooms. These weren't ordinary classes. I'd learn about weapons, hand to hand combat, and ownership of the mind. The Coven trained their members in similar areas. Professor Matthews did his best to give his students higher quality learning. Being stealthy was key.

I blinked and the manor was gone. Did a place like that really exist? If it did, I'd be stupid to turn it down.

"You didn't show me any students?"

"They are forever changing," the Professor replied. "But they are average teens, boys and girls; all are confused and eager to learn just like you."

"I'm eager to not get killed," I responded. Professor Matthews smiled. He liked my sense of humor. It reminded him of my dad. I gulped when I realized that this was the school my dad had attended. He had walked those halls, learned those same lessons. "So you knew my dad?" Professor Matthews nodded. My mom smiled at me still holding my hand. I felt like this decision was being made for me.

"Think about it," Professor Matthews said. "This would be a life-changing decision, Bridget. I understand if you need time. Leaving friends and family is always the hardest part."

"And is it worth it?"

"To some . . . yes." He nodded, turning to leave the hospital room.

"I have a lot to do as well," Agent Squires said. He followed Professor Matthews. My mom and I were alone again.

"I'm sorry you had to find out this way," my mom sighed. She didn't want there to be any feelings of resentment between us.

"I want to do it," I replied. Another tear ran down my mom's cheek.

"I know. I can see it in your eyes. And for what it's worth, your father loved his job. But when you came along, he loved you even more." My chest felt warm. My mom had never spoken this way before. I liked it.

"I want to hear more about Dad," I said quietly. Now that there were no secrets, my mom felt more comfortable talking about him.

"Ok," she agreed. "How about I start at the day you were born?"

Chapter Twenty-One

Christmas Day

My room was quiet but downstairs was the sound of chaos. I could hear my mom barking orders as people came in and out with tables and chairs. Our Christmas morning had been the best morning my mom and I had spent together in years. I think it was because we'd made a new rule about full disclosure. The lack of secrets in the room cut all tensions down and we were able to laugh and reminisce about whatever we wanted.

This would be my last Christmas before leaving for Hartfield Manor. Of all places it was in England, Terrence's old stomping grounds. A few plates crashed to the kitchen floor. Even though I was alone, I winced at the noise. Whoever had broken those plates was going to get a scolding. My mom wanted tonight's party to be absolutely perfect. Her entire office, including her boss, would be in attendance. It was a big night for her. And leaving for England was a huge step for me. It was something that would change my life forever. Once summer came, I wouldn't be Bridget Ferns the loner anymore. I'd be Bridget the Brave – fighting off Coven members in my sleep. I hoped.

I made my mom swear that she'd go after what she wanted. We'd both gotten a wakeup call this fall. Each of us was almost killed. It was time to do what made us happy, no matter what other people thought. My mom wanted the corner office. She wanted to be head Accountant. This party was the first stepping stone. I hated boring office parties with people I barely knew, but my friends were coming. I hadn't seen Rory or Emma since school got out for the holidays. Emma's family went on an early vacation to the Caribbean. She'd just gotten back yesterday. Rory won a wild card spot on some College Research Team that was conducting biomedical experiments. He had a lot of reading to do to get him up to speed. He claimed it was the perfect thing for his college applications.

I sat at my vanity, staring in the mirror. The new ball of energy inside me always beckoned me to try new things. I'd tried focusing on animals, objects, people – all the stuff Rory had talked about. Dru's powers were now my powers. But I was still lousy at using them. I could push thoughts wherever I wanted. A whole new range of possibilities had opened up to me because of that. I stared at my lip gloss.

"Come to me," I muttered. I pushed my demand into the tube of lip gloss. It slowly floated through the air on its own and eventually landed in my hand. I smiled with delight, but this was all I could manage to do so far – make my cosmetics move. I'd been doing it all month. And yes, I was starting to get lazy because of it. Walking across the room to grab nail polish felt like a hassle.

I put on the shiny lip gloss. It was sort of a plum color, very Christmassy. It went well with my dark green turtleneck and black skirt. Skirts were something I never wore, but I was craving change. That's why I cut my hair. The haircut I chose went to my shoulders, almost like a bob. It made me look different. My hair had been long my whole life and a natural shade of dirty blond. I wanted a new color. I wanted to be the blondest of the blond. I chose to go platinum. Emma went nuts when I told her.

"You're bleaching out your gorgeous hair? Are you insane?" she had argued. It was a good thing I didn't mention wanting the nose ring. One day, I'd build up the courage to get one.

Emma, of course, changed her mind when I came home from the hair salon. She got more and more used to it, and so did I. I loved it. I ran my fingers through my platinum blond strands. It was the perfect color for now. I could already feel an inkling inside me saying *Go brunette* – maybe next year.

"Bridget!" Mom shouted from downstairs. The party was starting in less than two hours. It was time for me to pitch in. I stood up, opening my drawer and grabbing my early Christmas gift from Professor Matthews. It was something to get me by until I joined him at Hartfield. I switched open the small metal blade. It smelled like spices. In his letter, the Professor said that was a bad thing. I wasn't allowed to touch it. The spicy smell was a side effect of the poison embedded inside. It was a mixture that only a Coven member would recognize.

I closed the knife. Its handle had been customized with engravings of hummingbirds and vines. It was a piece of art. I couldn't wait to learn more about it. I stuck the knife in my bra. It was the best place for it, I thought. I never liked the bulge in the pocket of my jeans. My drawer held an assortment of other things – knives, pepper spray, a few stun guns. My mom had drawn the line at a real gun. I was paranoid, and these toys brought me piece of mind, for now. I'd never used any of them and I hoped that I would never have to. But it had only been two months since Terrence was locked up. Dru was dead which meant that he was taking the fall for all the girls that were killed.

I shut my weapons drawer and adjusted my sweater. Jogging down the staircase, I felt like I was entering a new world. The front room and the family room had been cleared out. All our furniture was in the basement. Tables with crimson colored tablecloths had been setup. They matched the centerpieces – huge poinsettia plants. A buffet table was laid out. The silver trays and serving platters made it look really classy. And I especially loved the antique-looking wooden chairs my mom had rented for the tables. They made everything look rustic.

"Looks awesome!" I smiled, probably over-exaggerating to make my mom feel more confident. She'd insisted on hosting this party even though the doctor had ordered her to rest.

"Thanks honey," she replied taking a sip of water. "I'm really nervous about tonight."

"I know. We've never done anything like this before." I gave her a disappointed look. She was still wearing jeans. "Mom! You need to get changed."

"I can't," she replied. "The caterer is due here any minute and I still haven't heard from the band. They need to hurry up and set up their equipment if they're going to start playing music in time." She was starting to sweat. She wanted this night be flawless. She'd invited potential clients – a big move for her – and everything needed to be perfect.

"Don't worry," I reassured her. "Everyone will be impressed. I'll be sure to tell you so." She smiled. I took her cup of water and set in on the counter, scooting her towards the stairs. "I'll let the caterer and the music guys in. You go upstairs and shower." My mom smiled again and nodded, rubbing the scar on the back of her head.

The doorbell rang. I ran to answer it. The caterer needed to get moving and set up the buffet. My stomach was growling. I was saving my appetite for the fancy desserts and eggnog. I pulled open the door, hoping to smell something tasty coming from the driveway. Instead I saw Rory. He was dressed in a button up collared shirt. It was the same shade of green as my sweater. The color brought out his eyes. I was impressed to see his hair gelled and he was wearing his new pair of glasses, much thinner frames that didn't crowd his face.

"Nice shirt," I said. "But now I'm gonna have to ask you to go home and change. Green is my thing, not yours." Rory stepped inside anyway.

"This is your house. It makes more sense for you to change." He chuckled and held the door open. "The food people are right behind me."

"Good." I waited and saw a line of people with white boxes come rushing inside. They all wore matching black shirts paired with red vests. Their shoulders had a small dusting of snow. We'd gotten snowfall this morning. It was just enough to cover every lawn and line the streets with white. Little snowflakes were falling again. "The kitchen is just over there."

"Where's your mom?" Rory asked. "At least I know I'll get a friendly greeting from her."

"It's nice to see you," I muttered. Rory smiled.

"It's nice to see you too, Bridget."

"My how the days have been dreary since our last meeting," I continued.

"Getting ready for your senior year abroad?" Rory laughed and followed the catering staff to the kitchen. I glanced outside. There was a white van in the driveway. The doors were open and there were stacks of boxes inside. I left the front door unlocked and joined everyone in the kitchen. The smells made me even hungrier.

"So," I said leaning against a counter with my arms folded. "What are college boys like?"

"You mean the kind I hang out with, or the kind *you* want to hang out with? Because I don't think any of the guys on my research team are your type."

"Haha," I said in a monotonous tone. "See if I ever try and compliment you again."

"You haven't," he replied, ". . . ever."

"Well sometimes I think it." I had a playful smirk on my face. Rory and I never had an encounter that didn't involve teasing and sarcasm.

"Oh, if only I had the power to read your mind."

"Good one," I murmured. There was a knock on the door. "Come in!" More shoes clanked against the tile floor. It was the band. They carried in their instruments, sporting expensive looking cases. The house was now full of chatter, although not many people were talking. I blocked off what I could. I could control my mind-reading now. When something was too overwhelming, I had a solution.

"You can set up in that corner over there," I said pointing to the corner near the buffet table.

"Look at you ordering people around," Rory commented. "You're a natural." I rolled my eyes.

"You heard from Emma today? She said she'd be by soon." I checked the time. One hour until the party started. Rory shook his head. He'd been too busy with his research assignments to keep up with anyone.

There was another knock on the door. This time it was Emma. I was pleased to see her looking so happy. She was tan and she carried a bag of souvenirs from her travels.

"I brought you guys something," she said excitedly. She hurried out of the cold, wiping her shoes on the mat. "Wow, this place looks great! And it smells great."

"Well," I replied impatiently. I tried to grab her bag but she pulled away. "What did you get me, huh?"

"Hang on. And no cheating, Bri." Emma pointed a finger at my forehead. She sat on the staircase after admiring the setup in the family room. "Rory, this is for you." She pulled a thick hardback book out of her bag. It was some kind of marine life encyclopedia.

"Whoa," he said grabbing the book. "Thanks, that's really thoughtful of you." He grinned, excited to look through it during his free time.

"Boring," I commented. Rory ignored me and opened his book to the table of contents.

"And this is for you, Bri." Emma handed me a tiny cloth bag. I opened it and out fell an ankle bracelet. It was silver with a green turtle charm. I smiled. "Because you like green." Emma was pleased by my reaction. She knew it would be a great present the moment she saw it in the gift shop. "And I brought pictures." She pulled out her pink digital camera. "You guys want to look through them later?" I nodded. So did Rory while keeping his head in the encyclopedia.

"I'll put this on right now," I said as I latched the anklet around my ankle.

"And I could read this all day," Rory added. I raised my eyebrows and stared at him. He briefly looked up. "What? You don't read?"

"I have better things to do than read about whales and other fish thingies."

"Uh, whales are mammals." Rory chuckled. The three of us retreated to the kitchen table. The living room was full of people setting up the buffet. The different smells made me anxious to start dinner.

"I am so hungry," I muttered.

"It smells like pie." Emma looked around at the selection of desserts. "Can we steal some dessert before everyone gets here?"

"My mom would freak if we were short a slice of pie," I replied.

"What about that slice of pie?" Emma whispered. She giggled while staring at one of the catering staff - a buff guy that looked like he was in his early twenties. "Think he's in college?" I shrugged. Emma was interested.

"Ok, not listening," Rory muttered. He kept turning the pages of his new encyclopedia. The guy was unloading a box next to our seats.

"Bri," Emma whispered. "You think you could . . . you know?"

"What?" I was confused.

"You know," she continued. "Dive in and give me something to work with?"

"She doesn't use her powers for evil," Rory chimed in.

"I thought you weren't listening," I protested. Rory pursed his lips and restrained himself from saying anything else. "Em, how about you try going the old-fashioned route? If I help you out, you might not like what I find." Emma nodded. She grabbed my arm as she stood up.

"Hey," Emma said. The guy she was crushing on looked up. He really was cute. He had a handsome face; it was tan and acne free. He looked fit too. He smiled at the two of us.

"Ladies," he answered. He had a deep voice. Emma was startled. She didn't know what to say next.

"Uh," I said, taking over the conversation. "So, is this just a day job?" The guy laughed.

"Yeah, I'm a student."

"Really?" Emma said in her flirty voice. He smiled again.

"Say, does one of you want to help me with the boxes outside?"

"I will," Emma immediately replied. She was beaming. She followed the waiter out of the kitchen.

"And there she goes," I muttered as I sat down.

"So what's the verdict?" Rory asked. "Is he a pervert the way you claim every man is?"

"I don't know," I said casually.

"Well, what was he thinking about?" Rory insisted. "Sorbet?" I shrugged.

"I didn't catch anything." I looked around, but Rory set his book down. He stared at me and my heart pounded. Adrenaline raced through my chest and I jumped up.

"You mean he's a complete idiot or was there a wall?"

"Crap!" I ran outside, hoping that I was wrong. I'd let myself relax with Terrence locked up. I hadn't received any threats or surprise visits since. I almost slipped and fell as I ran outside. The cold air shocked my lungs and my feet went red as I ran barefoot through the snow. Emma and the waiter were laughing and gathering boxes. I concentrated and realized the quiet wasn't a coincidence. This guy had a wall that blocked his thoughts. The last time I'd felt something similar was when I dated Terrence. I pulled the knife out from my sweater.

Rory was right behind me. He saw the knife and looked shocked. I switched open the blade. That caught Emma's attention. Her eyes went wide and I motioned for her to back away.

"Get away from him, Em." The waiter's smile left his face. He took one look at me and my knife, and grabbed Emma, putting her in a headlock. She struggled but he was stronger. "Let her go!"

"Why should I?" he replied. "You didn't show Dru or Terrence any mercy."

"This again?" Emma gasped. "Really?"

"How about a friend for a friend?" He laughed the same way Terrence used to. I kept a straight face. If only I could take over his thoughts and force him to beat himself up. I took a few steps closer. He got nervous. "Back off or I'll snap her neck!" I stopped, still holding out my knife. "A BB blade." He sniffed the air.

"Yeah," I replied. I had no idea what he was talking about, but I played on his fear. If that was what my knife was called, he was scared of it. "You hurt her and I'll stab you."

He took a minute to weigh his options before throwing Emma to the snowy ground and lunged for my knife. I jumped back but not before my legs were kicked out from under me. I fell in the snow and dropped my knife. The waiter raised a fist.

"That was easy," he said. He aimed his fist at my jaw. I could hear cracking followed by a surge of sharp pain. I held my mouth. It was bleeding all over my green turtleneck. I could hear Rory yelling. I looked up and saw him throwing punches. The waiter grabbed my knife and slammed Rory against the garage door. "Ready to watch your friend die?" He raised my knife, preparing to stab it through Rory's chest.

I watched in horror. My heart was pumping and adrenaline surged through me once again. I felt angry. That was my knife! He couldn't kill Rory with my knife! My face got hot as I stood up. I switch went off in my head. I looked at my knife with intensely possessive feelings and demanded that it come to me – its owner.

The knife slipped out from the waiter's grasp. He turned around looking shocked. As I held up a hand the knife's handle fell into my fingers. *You're finished*, I thought. I imagined my blade stabbing Terrence's avenger. The knife left my hands again and flew through the air. It pierced the waiter's chest, obeying me without question. His body dropped to the ground and rolled down the driveway into a pile of snow. I demanded that the blade return to me and it did.

The waiter screamed as his body convulsed. His face turned red and his skin began to bubble. Emma, Rory and I watched. We weren't sure what was happening or whether we should turn our heads.

"Sick," Emma whispered.

"Fascinating," Rory muttered.

"What the . . . ?" I stared as the waiter's body got so hot that he burst into a flame. Seconds later, a burnt heap of black lay in the snow. Snowflakes drifted towards it, eventually covering the black with a white sheet.

"Who gave you that?" Rory asked looking at my knife.

"Professor Matthews." I was still stunned by what I'd just seen.

"I could use one of those," Rory said as he turned and walked back inside. Emma followed.

I stood alone in the snow. Deep down, I knew that this was only the first attempt of many. I didn't want to leave my friends but suddenly, I was really looking forward to my trip to Hartfield Manor. I was ready.

I'd survived this long. I guess that was my real Christmas present.

For updates and information about Thoughtless Book 2, visit www.jacquelinegardner.com

Other Works by the Author:

Mutiny, a M.E.R. novel (March 2012): Eric's life aboard a top secret stealth submarine as a member of the government's M.E.R. program has been about discipline, cunning and survival. As both a soldier and a natural born regenerator, he can heal from any wound, but to stay alive he must accept a vein-burning serum that prevents his DNA from over-mutating. In exchange Eric must follow his Chief Commander's every order. And never ask questions, no matter the assignment.

When he goes ashore on his first solo mission he runs into a complication he didn't expect; Mariella, the target's daughter. She's about to change everything.

Jade (coming April 2012): It was only a game – a contest of wits. But the night Crystal snuck out to meet her competitor was the night she didn't return.

Now her younger sister Jade has returned to Silver Hills, the place Crystal disappeared, only to find hostile townspeople and a creepy admirer. Silver Hills isn't what it seems, and Crystal's ghostly image has made reappearance. Jade's suspicions only lead to trouble as she slowly starts to realize that history is about to repeat itself.

No wonder grandma slept with a gun under her pillow.