

KIM HARRINGTON

PERCEPTION

A CLARITY NOVEL





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Point

*To Mike.
My better half.*

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ONE

I STEPPED FORWARD WITH FORCED CONFIDENCE. “Let’s do this.”

I reached out and took the knife, the wooden handle heavy in my hand. For a moment, it felt like everything in me froze. As if even my blood stopped rushing through my veins.

I thought about the events of the last few days and wished I could have pieced things together sooner. Maybe then, I wouldn’t be standing here with a knife and a girl’s life in my hands. Every muscle in my body tightened in preparation for what I was about to do.

For what I *had* to do.

I raised the knife above my shoulder. She looked up at me with widened eyes and trembling lips. And with all my strength, I plunged the knife down.

TWO

SIXTEEN DAYS EARLIER

I JUMPED WHEN MY BAGEL POPPED UP FROM THE TOASTER.

“A bit on edge this morning, are we?” Mom said, buttering her toast.

“Nah. It’s quiet in here, and that toaster shoots these things out at warp speed.” I plucked the bagel out with my fingertips. “Ouch, ouch, ouch.”

“It’s hot,” Mom said.

“Wow, you *are* psychic!” I joked.

She gently patted me on the face as she brought her plate to the kitchen table. Mom wore a mauve Indian print dress that hung down to her bare feet. Her mass of red curls was tied up in a loose bun. Looking at her was kind of like looking into the future. My mom and I share the same red hair, freckles, blue eyes, and petite frame. Though I definitely won’t dress like her when I’m in my forties, unless I fall victim to some midlife personality disorder.

She glanced up from her plate. “Joining me or taking your bagel on the go?”

“I’ll join,” I said. “I’ve got some time before school.”

“Good, bring the OJ.”

I grabbed the jug from the fridge and settled into a wooden chair at the table.

“Perry still sleeping?”

Mom grunted in reply.

“Any appointments today?” I asked, quickly changing the subject.

Mom shook her head sadly. I wasn’t surprised. It was the end of September and the tourists were gone.

My brother, mother, and I live in a purple Victorian house on the main drag in Eastport, Massachusetts, on Cape Cod. Our family business is in ... well, entertainment, I guess. The sign outside our home advertises: READINGS BY THE FERN FAMILY. My mother, Starla, is a telepath. She can read minds. My brother, Periwinkle “Perry” Fern, is a medium who can contact the dead.

And me? My full name is Clarity Fern, but I go by Clare. I have a gift called retrocognitive psychometry. I can’t predict the future, but I can see the secrets in the past. When I touch an object and concentrate, I can sometimes see visions or feel emotions from when someone else touched the same thing.

Readings can be one-on-one or all three of us working together. Most of our business comes from tourists during the summer months, and we have to budget that money to last throughout the year.

Most townies love it when September comes and the tourists leave for the season. The traffic clears up. The beaches empty. Things slow down. But I’ve always found it sort of sad. Watching the seasonal businesses close down. The empty lifeguard towers on the beach. Vacancy signs on every motel. The gray skies that foretold of a long

winter to come. Knowing I had months of school and therefore torture ahead of me.

Although things were different this year.

My phone buzzed in the pocket of my jeans, and I slid it out and took a peek. A text from Gabriel Toscano.

Want a ride?

I couldn't help the smile that overtook my face. I typed back.

Sure

"Is it Gabriel?" Mom asked, and I nodded, still grinning.

"Are you dating him?" she pressed on, and I didn't answer.

Steam rose from her teacup, trailed up into the air, and disappeared. Her eyebrows went up and I knew what she was about to do. The thing that made me so angry, I imagined fireworks shooting out of my ears.

She was going to read my mind.

So I focused all my energy on a message and silently repeated it over and over.

Stop invading my privacy, you peeping Mom!

She cocked her head to the side and sighed. "No need to call me names, Clarity."

Almost all mothers are busybodies, always wanting to know every detail of their daughters' lives. I get that. And I was glad Mom wasn't one of those distant, unloving mothers who didn't care enough to bug her kids with questions. But being a telepath gave my mom an unfair advantage and I hated when she used it. If she wanted to know about my love life, she should do what other mothers do: politely ask questions that remain unanswered until the daughter decides to toss her mother a bone over a shared pint of ice cream.

I gulped the last of my OJ as another text came from Gabriel.

Outside now

I pulled back the white lace curtain and peeked out the window. Sure enough, Gabriel's red Jeep was out there idling. He'd already been almost here when he texted me. He knew I'd say yes.

I yelled a "bye" to Mom, slung my black book bag over my shoulder, and darted down the porch steps. I gave a quick wave to Milly, our neighbor, who was crossing the front yard. She often came over to share town gossip with Mom.

I slowed my walk on the driveway, not wanting to appear too excited. Though it was a bright and sunny morning, the fall air was crisp and stung my cheeks. I zipped my gray hoodie, then hitched my jeans up a bit when I realized a slice of stomach was showing.

Not fast enough, apparently. Gabriel's eyes lingered on my midsection a beat too long, then snapped up to my face.

If he were Justin Spellman, my ex-boyfriend turned friend, I'd toss out a snarky remark about staring. But Gabriel and I weren't on those comfortable terms yet. We were still feeling each other out, learning what made each other tick. And Gabriel was a hothead. I never knew when he'd take a comment the wrong way.

Plus, I didn't exactly mind that he was staring.

I climbed into the passenger seat and dropped my bag on the floor. Gabriel fiddled with the radio and I snuck a peek at him. He wore baggy jeans and a white T-shirt that contrasted well against his tanned arms. His black hair was a bit longer than the short cut he'd had over the summer, a little windblown with the hint of a curl against his

neck.

He stretched his arm over the back of my headrest and leaned toward me. For a moment, I thought he was going in for a kiss, but then I realized he'd put the car into reverse and was just angling to see out the rear window as we backed into the street.

I let out a breath I'd been holding in. Had I wanted him to kiss me again? I didn't know, so I forced the thought out of my mind.

Gabriel and I had met over the summer under intense circumstances. He had just moved to town and was the son of our new detective. When I got involved in the case of a tourist's murder, I was partnered with Gabriel. Much to his dismay.

Years ago, Gabriel's little sister was kidnapped. She'd never been found. His mother had spent all the family's money on psychics. One psychic would say her body was in such-and-such a lake. They'd dredge the lake, nothing. The other would say she was in Bangkok; they'd fly to Bangkok, nothing. But his mother kept believing whatever the psychics said, and kept wasting the family's time and money on these wild goose chases. It eventually caused Gabriel's parents' marriage to fail. His mother was constantly drunk now. He and his father moved to Eastport from New York to get some space.

So, naturally, Gabriel had a bit of an issue with psychics.

We had undeniable heat and shared a couple of swoon-worthy kisses over the course of the investigation. But we totally got off on the wrong foot, and I also had an unresolved situation with my ex-boyfriend who didn't want to remain ex.

So Gabriel and I were starting over. Trying to move past our differences and be friends.

Super-complicated friends.

"To what do I owe this honor?" I asked.

"Honor?" he repeated, turning forward and shifting the car into drive.

"Mr. Big Time hot new senior picking up little ol' me for a ride to school?"

The side of his mouth lifted in a half smile. "You think I'm hot?"

"The girls at school do. They even have a nickname for you."

"If it's those vapid blondes who follow you around everywhere, I don't even want to know what it is."

A year ago, the idea of *anyone* following me around would have made me howl with laughter. I was used to attention, but only the negative kind. Being a psychic in a family of paranormal freaks attracts that.

But when I started my junior year of high school a month ago, everything changed. Rather than tell me to get lost as I approached a cafeteria table, people actually asked me to sit next to them. When I walked by, people said, "Hi, Clare," instead of snickering and calling me names.

It was all because of what went down over the summer. My showdown with a murderer, during which I nearly got killed myself, was the talk of the town. It was like I was a celebrity. But I didn't ask for this newfound popularity and I didn't really want it. It wasn't *me* they liked. It was the story. Everyone wanted all the dirty details. How did I feel when the gun was pointed at my head? What was it like when Justin got shot? How did we get the bloodstain out of our hardwood floor?

Believe me, no question was out of bounds to those vultures.

"Okay, I won't repeat the sentiments of any vapid blondes," I replied, laughing.

The good thing about Gabriel was you never had to wonder how he felt about anything. He made his opinions painfully clear. Even when I wished he'd keep them to himself. Not because he was wrong. Sometimes I didn't want to listen to him because he was right.

"So who was that old lady going up to your house?" Gabriel asked as we drove down the street. "Is she like ... a regular customer?"

"No, that was Milly. Our neighbor," I said curtly. I wasn't in the mood for Gabriel's high horse about psychics. He'd finally agreed that, maybe, my family and I weren't frauds looking to bilk grieving people out of their savings. But I knew he still didn't completely approve. One time he'd said that our seeing regular customers was feeding an addiction, like we were drug dealers or casino owners.

I was *not* going to take the bait this time. I gazed out the window at the passing stores and houses.

"What's wrong?" he prodded.

"I don't want to fight with you," I said, crossing my arms.

"Disagreeing and having a bit of back-and-forth is not fighting."

"Bickering, then," I said.

"For it to be bickering, we have to be annoyed with each other." His eyes left the road and instead traveled the length of my body. "And I'm anything but annoyed by you right now."

That was Gabriel's MO. Get me all pissed off, then say something flattering as if that would make it all better.

It usually did.

He parked the Jeep in the school lot and we both got out, causing a few second glances and raised eyebrows as we walked toward the school.

Gabriel leaned closer to me and whispered, "People are staring."

"They shouldn't be," I said, tossing a stern look at a group of sophomore girls. "Everyone knows we're friends."

"Maybe it looks like more than that to them."

"I don't get why it's so interesting. People need to stop theorizing and gossiping about others and focus on themselves," I said with a raised voice.

We'd reached the main doors, but Gabriel stopped walking. I turned to find him staring at me. I'd seen that intense gaze before, but it still started a fire inside me, beginning at my cheeks and spreading everywhere else.

In a low voice, he said, "Everyone in school assumes you and Justin are going to get back together."

I swallowed hard. "And what do you think?"

He stepped up to me and tucked a windblown curl behind my ear. "I think people shouldn't make assumptions." Then he turned and walked into the school.

Just then, Kendra Kiger and Brooke Addison — the so-called vapid blondes — marched up to me. It was good timing since I wasn't sure my legs could move yet and I didn't want to be standing there outside all alone and frozen in place like an idiot.

"What was he saying to you?" Kendra asked breathlessly.

"He is so hot," Brooke said.

"Did he really drive you to school this morning?" Kendra asked.

I nodded. "We're friends."

“So hot,” Brooke repeated, staring off into space.

Kendra rolled her eyes at Brooke. “But *why* did he drive you to school today?”

“He offered,” I said.

They expected me to jump up and down and squee and giggle about how smokin’ Gabriel was, but that’s just not me.

I walked into the entrance hallway, which was painted a lovely shade of nursing-home gray. Kendra and Brooke followed closely at my side. I still wasn’t used to their company. Kendra, Brooke, and their other friend, Tiffany Desposito, were the most popular girls in my class. All three were blond and pretty, but only Brooke was naturally so. Kendra had to try a bit harder, to overcome the hard angles of her face. Kendra was popular because she had money. Daddy bought her a nice car, and Mommy looked the other way when she wanted to throw parties in the McMansion. Meanwhile, Tiffany rose to the top by being so mean that everyone else was afraid to slight her.

Last year, the only interaction they’d had with me was their daily attempt at verbal torture. But this year, Kendra and Brooke had gotten obsessed with my “magic powers” and desperately wanted me in their clique. I had no interest whatsoever, but I had to admit not being constantly bullied was a nice change of pace.

“Anyway, forget boy talk — we have some news,” Brooke said, snapping me out of my thoughts.

It was then that I noticed the buzz surrounding us. Clumps of kids dotted the hallway, leaning in close, whispering and reacting in shocked tones. Something was going on.

“What news?” I asked.

Kendra put on her serious face. “Sierra Waldman is missing.”

THREE

“WHO?” I ASKED.

Brooke giggled. “That was my response, too. I don’t think anyone knew her.”

Kendra added, “She’s a senior. New this year. I think she’d been homeschooled or something her whole life.” She clucked her tongue. “Only here a month and now she’s taken off. Some kids just can’t handle public school.”

I ignored Kendra’s ignorant snap judgment. “How long has she been gone?”

“Apparently a few days, but word only got around today when her mom showed up in the school parking lot, yelling at kids.” Kendra’s eyes gleamed at the drama of it.

“What was she yelling about?”

Brooke twirled a long strand of blond hair around her finger. “Just asking everyone if they’ve seen her and all that.”

“Does anyone know anything?” I asked, my interest piqued.

“There are a million rumors,” Brooke said. “I heard she met a guy online and they ran away together.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Kendra snapped. “She’d tell her mom.”

“Maybe she knew her mom wouldn’t let her go,” Brooke said. “Maybe she would have disapproved of her guy. So she left without telling her.”

I watched the conversation bounce back and forth like a Ping-Pong game until the homeroom bell rang. I followed the crowd, breaking off to file into our classrooms.

I felt sorry for the teachers who had to repeatedly try to regain control of their morning classes. Especially Mr. Rylander and Mr. Frederick — redirecting attention from juicy gossip to physics and algebra II were almost impossible feats. Sierra’s disappearance was all people talked about through the morning and well into lunch. Rumors were spreading like a virus, but no one seemed to have any facts.

I ate my lunch in relative peace, listening to Kendra, Brooke, and the rest of the junior girls around me talking about Sierra. I realized that — for the first time this fall — the spotlight was not on me. And I liked it. Then I felt guilty because it came at the expense of someone else’s problems.

I can’t win.

But I also felt something else. A stirring inside. Something I hadn’t felt since I was brought on board to help the police over the summer. I began to wonder if there was anything I could do to help find Sierra. Then I brushed the thought off. Sierra probably just had a fight with her mother, ran off, and would be back tomorrow.

When lunch ended, I dumped my tray and joined the crowd merging into the hallway, which was plastered with posters about the homecoming dance. I only had five minutes to get to my locker, grab my books, and make it to my next class. The herd was moving a little slow for me to accomplish all of that in time, so I zigged and zagged, apologizing when I accidentally hip-checked a freshman, and finally got to my

locker. I spun the dial and started knocking off the numbers.

“They really should give us more time between periods,” the girl at the locker beside mine said.

She wore a black T-shirt and a black skirt with fishnets. Her hair was also dyed black, with one bright blue streak on the side that fell in front of her face as she bent down to pick up a dropped notebook. I figured she was new in school. I would have definitely remembered her from last year. There aren’t many people at Eastport High who stand out. Standing out is bad. I know this from experience.

“Seriously,” I agreed. “It’s like they want us to be late. I’m calling it detention entrapment.”

She laughed heartily.

“Was it this bad at your old school?” I asked, figuring I’d be nice and reach out. She straightened. “What do you mean?”

“You’re new here, right?”

Her brow furrowed. “No, Clare Fern, I’m not.” And with that, she turned on her heel and sped down the hallway.

“Clare, what did you say to her?” Kendra asked, appearing beside me.

“I asked if she was new in school,” I said, still confused.

Kendra burst out laughing. “That’s Mallory Neely.”

Mallory Neely. I knew her, of course. She was the quiet girl, no friends that I knew of. She kept to herself, eyes cast down at all times, and never spoke unless spoken to. She was invisible. I’d actually felt slightly jealous of her in the past because I’d rather have been invisible like her than a big neon flashing bully target.

“I didn’t realize it was her,” I said.

“Why would you?” Kendra rolled her eyes. “No one notices Mallory. Except this year she shows up looking like a mall goth. Finally wanting some attention, I suppose.”

I shrugged. “I think she looks cool.”

Kendra bit her lip. This time last year, she’d have called me a freak, and now she wasn’t even disagreeing with me. I felt like I’d entered a parallel universe.

“Hey,” Kendra whispered, leaning in close to me. “You know the algebra quiz Mr. Frederick is planning?”

“Yeah ...” I answered warily.

“Why don’t you spend a few minutes in his classroom while he’s in the teachers’ lounge. And ... you know ...” She waggled her eyebrows. “See if you can use your powers to get us the answers.”

I sighed, not bothering to hide my irritation. “No,” I said simply. There were about ten thousand different reasons why I would do no such thing — fear of getting caught being one of them. But Kendra should have known by now I wasn’t going to “Dance, Monkey, Dance!” whenever she asked. I wasn’t some sideshow at a carnival. She had asked a couple times for me to do a reading of this or that at school. I always refused. If she truly wanted a reading, she could come to my place of business and pay like everyone else.

“What’s up, Kendra,” Tiffany said as she approached her locker, almost directly across the hall from mine. She sneered at me and said, “Hey, freak.”

Apparently, Tiffany never got the “Clare’s cool now” memo. No matter how much

her friends supposedly liked me, she never would. Tiffany had always been the one to rally the anti-Clare troops and instigate all devious plans against me. She'd ramped up the torture last year after my brother, Perry, hooked up with her and never called her again. I had to suffer for my brother's man-whore ways. As part of her revenge plot, Tiffany had set her sights on my boyfriend at a party, and Justin had been dumb enough to fall for it. Yeah, alcohol was involved, but that's no excuse. It would take a lot more than tequila to make me lose my virginity to Satan.

"Don't mind her," Kendra whispered into my ear. Then she bolted over to Tiffany, probably to relay the "hilarious" story about how lame Mallory was.

I shook my head and focused on finding my history book. The bell was going to ring any second. I pulled the textbook out and a paper fluttered to the ground. I reached down, expecting to find an old quiz of mine, but it was a note. Written in all caps were three words:

YOU AMAZE ME.

I smiled and my stomach did that little butterfly thing.

And that was when Tiffany screamed.

FOUR

TIFFANY WAS A DRAMA QUEEN, SO LOUD SQUEALS and other attention-getting techniques weren't unusual for her. But this wasn't a playful scream. This was an *open your closet door to find Freddy Krueger, Jason, and Michael Myers hiding in there* scream.

Kendra started screeching, too, while waving her hands in the air in some crazed dance of ick.

I, along with everyone else in the hall, first froze, then rushed over to see what had kicked off this performance. On the floor by Tiffany's locker was a little red box, like what you'd get with the purchase of some cheap jewelry. It was flipped over and no contents could be seen. Tiffany had one hand over her mouth and was pointing repeatedly at the fallen box with her other.

I reached down and turned it over.

Inside was a cockroach. A large one, in fact. My first thought was that it must have come from our cafeteria.

"It's dead, Tiffany," I said. "You can stop freaking out now."

"Stop freaking out?" she repeated incredulously. "Someone put that thing in my locker! Disguised as a present." She wiped her hands repeatedly on her designer jeans, though I doubt she had even touched the bug.

"It's a prank." I shrugged. "It happens. Believe me. I've found all sorts of things in my locker or scrawled across it."

Tiffany narrowed her eyes. "Is that what this is? Some sick revenge you're taking on me for treating you like the freak you are? You think because Kendra and Brooke have been struck with temporary insanity that you're going to get away with this?" She stepped closer and pointed a finger at me. "Enjoy your little time in the sun now, because soon you'll be crawling back into your loser cave."

"I didn't put the bug in your locker," I hissed. I was about to fill her in on the fact that I wasn't the only one at Eastport High who hated her guts, but before I had the chance, Mr. Frederick stepped out of his math classroom.

"Break it up, girls," he bellowed. Mr. Frederick didn't believe in going bald gracefully. He grew the sides of his hair extra long and then wrapped it around the top, like no one would realize he was just covering up a hairless dome. "Everyone better be off to their classes in three seconds or I'll start handing out detentions like after-dinner mints. Three. Two ..."

He didn't make it to one. We all scattered like rats, fear of detention pulsing in our veins. At most schools, detention was just another place to do your homework. Not much of a punishment, really, unless you were missing a sports practice or something. In Frederick's detention, however, you were not allowed to do your homework. You had to do additional math assignments. A true punishment.

The rest of my day passed uneventfully until I found myself waiting in the parking lot, watching everyone else hop on school buses or into cars. My brother, Perry, was supposed to pick me up but was clearly running late. So I sat on the curb and fished around in my backpack for the note I'd found in my locker earlier. I read it over again.

It was so sweet. I wished I knew who'd written it. My first thought was Justin. I'd seen him in physics that morning, and he'd smiled at me, but we hadn't had a chance to talk. I knew his handwriting though, and this wasn't it. He could have disguised his writing, of course. But why go through the trouble?

So if it wasn't him ... maybe it was Gabriel. We had shared some serious chemistry that morning. But he knew I wasn't ready to move forward with anything romantic.

Or maybe it was someone I hadn't even considered.

A secret admirer.

Before I could compile a list of suspects, I spied Mallory Neely trudging down the grassy hill behind the school, heading toward the woods. I stuffed the note in my pocket, swung my backpack over my shoulder, and rushed after her.

"Mallory!"

She stopped and turned around, then waited for me to catch up.

"I'm sorry I was such an idiot earlier," I said, slightly out of breath from jogging over to her. "Of course I know you. I just didn't recognize you with your new hair and all that."

She shrugged. "S'okay. I wouldn't expect you to know me anyway. I've always sort of blended in with the walls, you know?"

I looked down at the grass, not sure what to say. Lying to make her feel better would seem fake and lame. So I said, "Well, you don't blend in anymore. I like the new look."

She smiled. "Really?"

"Yeah." I peeked at the woods over her shoulder. "Where are you headed, anyway?"

"I'm walking home. There's a shortcut through the woods that leads to Fennel Street. You live on Rigsdale Road, right? Cutting through would save you some time."

I've walked home plenty, but never taken the shortcut. The woods creeped me out. But they were probably safe with the buddy system and all. Plus, it looked like my brother wasn't coming to pick me up.

"Sure," I said, casting one last glance over my shoulder before we entered the woods.

We followed a well-beaten path that snaked through the trees. It was narrow, with barely enough room for us to walk side by side. The air was thick with damp earthy smells. A pinecone crunched under my foot.

"Fennel Street, huh?" I said, making conversation. "I think someone mentioned at lunch that Sierra Waldman lives there. Do you know her?"

"Sort of."

I waited for her to continue, but she didn't. I added, "Do you think she ran away?"

Mallory shrugged, but didn't look at me. "She's a senior, but she's already eighteen. That makes her an adult. She can do what she wants, I suppose."

"People said some of her stuff is missing, like she packed up and —"

“Don’t know,” Mallory interrupted. This obviously wasn’t a topic she wanted to gab about.

We walked in silence for a minute while I tried desperately to think of something else to say. Anything we might have in common. “You know,” I said, “going unnoticed isn’t so bad. It’s better than being the school freak.”

“You’re not the freak anymore,” Mallory said.

I figured she was referring to my new celebrity status, but then she added, “Because of Justin Spellman.”

It was kind of true. When I’d started dating Justin last year, the teasing had let up a bit. But then we broke up, and I was right back where I started from — until the summer’s drama.

“He wants to get back together with you, right?” Mallory asked.

“How do you know?”

“Anyone with eyes and ears knows. The way Justin looks at you,” she said dreamily. “The way his face lights up when you enter the room. I’d kill for someone to love me that much. You should take him back.”

I almost laughed out loud because this was the same conversation I had with myself every time I saw Justin. But the argument always ended the same. “It’s not that simple.”

“I know what he did. With Tiffany. But doesn’t he deserve a second chance?”

“He slept with her,” I said. “That’s not a small thing.”

Justin and I hadn’t slept together. I wasn’t ready. I dreamed that when it happened, it would be this perfect moment we would remember forever and all that cheesy stuff. But then his first time was on Tiffany’s basement couch and he was so drunk he didn’t even remember it. That sort of killed the dream for me.

We reached a small stream, wide enough that I wouldn’t have been able to jump it. But we didn’t have to. A plank of wood served as a little bridge. We gingerly walked single file over it, then fell in step beside each other again.

“What about that new senior, Gabriel Hottie-ano?”

I nearly tripped over a tree root. Gabriel Toscano’s nickname sounded so unnatural coming from her.

“Didn’t you guys date this summer?” Mallory asked, tucking a blue strand of hair behind her ear.

I stopped and shot her a sideways glance. Maybe she was just awkwardly making conversation, but I was starting to feel weirded out. “You seem to know a lot about me.”

Mallory shrugged. “It’s a small town. Word gets around.”

A twig snapped somewhere in the trees. I turned around to see if someone else was taking the shortcut, but saw no one. Mallory either didn’t hear the noise or wasn’t fazed by forest sounds.

“We didn’t really date,” I said, and picked up the pace. “We might have gone that way but ... it’s complicated.”

The path emptied onto Fennel, a dead-end street that intersected with Rigsdale, our town’s main road and where I lived. The afternoon sun shone brightly, and I squinted as we left the shade of the woods.

Mallory pointed at a small Cape-style house with clapboard siding. “That’s me.”

“Oh, okay.” I was surprised that I’d actually enjoyed our walk. It was nice to talk about girl things. My brother was my best friend, but he didn’t want to hear too much about boy problems. And, yeah, I had girls clamoring to be friends with me for the first time in my life, but I wasn’t about to share my feelings with the likes of Kendra and Brooke. They’d probably post whatever I said online and tell everyone in school.

I didn’t feel that way with Mallory, though. And it was strange because, before today, Mallory and I had never said one word to each other our whole lives. She was probably the only girl at school who’d been lonelier than me.

Maybe this year could be a new start for the both of us.

“So you’ve got a tough decision, then,” Mallory said, stopping at the edge of her driveway.

“About what?”

“Homecoming. It’s in two weeks.”

“Yeah, I saw the posters at school. What about it?”

“It’s Ladies’ Choice this year. The girls have to ask the boys.” Mallory paused and gave a little smirk. “Everyone knows Justin and Gabriel both want to go with you. So the big question is, who are you going to choose?”

FIVE

I DEFTLY AVOIDED MALLORY'S QUESTION AND MY conflicted feelings on the topic by claiming to have to hurry home.

Of course I'd thought about the dance, but I truly didn't know what I wanted to do. Right now I was leaning toward skipping the whole mess.

I trudged up the porch steps and opened the front door. "Perry!"

"In here," he called.

I turned left and entered the kitchen, ready to bitch him out.

He stood next to the island, smiling sweetly, with a piece of chocolate in his outstretched hand.

I snatched it and took a bite. "You're not off the hook, you know."

"I know," he said. "But I figured a chocolate offering would weaken your wrath."

"Why didn't you pick me up?"

Perry rubbed his right eyebrow, which had a small scar from when he took a tumble down the staircase as a child. "I forgot?"

It sounded more like a question than an answer, like a lie he was trying on for size. I looked into his eyes, the same icy blue as mine, and knew I couldn't stay mad at him. He'd been through a lot this summer. One minute he was a carefree recent high school grad, always up for a good time or an easy girl. The next minute, one of those easy girls ended up dead and he was the top suspect. In the end, we'd cleared his name, but when something like that happens, you can't snap your fingers and be the same person you were before.

Perry just needed some time. He'd deferred his fall admission to college. Mom and I understood. College could wait a semester. I figured he'd lounge around and play video games all day, and he did some of that, but he wasn't a total lazy-ass. He was also taking an online course in Web design and working on a website for our business. It started out as a basic page but now looked quite professional.

"Where's Mom?" I asked.

"Out buying fabric for those 'dresses' she's making." He made finger quotes in the air and I chuckled.

"So what were you doing that was more important than picking up your little sister?" I popped another piece of chocolate in my mouth.

"I lost track of time." He motioned to his laptop on the kitchen table. "Working on the website."

I took a peek. "Looks cool."

Perry moseyed back to the table. "Milly told Mom that there's a local woman who says her daughter is missing. And she goes to your school. What's up with that?"

I nodded solemnly. "Her name is Sierra Waldman. She's lived here for years but was homeschooled. She's only been in our school for a month. She's a year ahead of

me. I don't know much about her at all. But I wish I could help somehow ..." My voice trailed off as Perry gave me a look.

"Don't even go there," he said, and returned his attention to his computer, effectively tuning me out.

I watched him for a moment. He hadn't inherited Mom's wild red hair and freckles like I had. He had smooth black hair, alabaster skin, and a smile that made tourist girls fall over themselves. He was tall, not a shorty like Mom and me. But he'd never looked lanky before now. I wondered if he was eating enough.

I know everyone deals with trauma their own way and it seemed that Perry's way was to keep it all inside. Mom and I let him do that, since it was what he wanted. And because it was easier than fighting with him and forcing him to talk. But now I wondered if we took the cowardly way out. And maybe Perry was worse off for it.

"What?" he snapped, catching me staring at him.

"Nothing." I wandered back into the foyer.

A loud knock on the front door made me leap back. I opened it with my hand on my heart.

Justin raised his eyebrows. "Dramatic, but I like it. I'm happy to see you, too."

I dropped my hand. "I was walking right by the door when you pounded on it. I'm merely trying not to have a heart attack."

He smiled, his blue eyes dancing. "So you're saying I got your heart racing."

"Incorrigible," I muttered. I opened the door wide, and he stepped inside.

Justin and I were trying on a new label lately: friends. It was a big step for me, considering I despised him a few months ago. For him, I could tell it was a baby step toward our inevitable reunion.

"What's up?" I asked.

"I didn't really see you in school today. You ran off at the end of physics before I could say hi. So I figured I'd stop by to see how your day was." He smiled and slipped his hands in the pockets of his cargo pants. He wore a button-down shirt, white with pink stripes. If any guy could pull off wearing pink, it was Justin.

I looked at him quizzically. "You came here to see how my day was? You could have just called."

"Face time's important. Reminds you that you love me."

"Loved. Past tense." I busied myself with the task of plucking dead leaves from a gigantic plant on the coffee table.

Justin made himself comfortable on the couch. "Anyway, we're friends now. Isn't this what friends do? Don't girlfriends stop by, chitchat about nothing, then change into lingerie, have a pillow fight, and end the day with a session of Truth or Dare?"

I threw a leaf at him, and he caught it in midair. "I wouldn't know."

"Dang," he said. "So you seemed to have your head in the clouds in physics today."

"Yeah," I said. "I was thinking about Sierra Waldman."

"The girl who ran away?" At my nod, he shrugged. "Didn't know her." He stood and began helping me pull the dead leaves. "Your mom really digs flowers, huh?"

"Yeah, it's like a funeral parlor around here sometimes."

"Want me to carry in that big arrangement from the porch?"

I paused. "What are you talking about?"