



Chapter One

As the small plane descended, breaking through the dark thunderclouds, Avery O'Reilly finally got a good look out the window.

Below her spread a patchwork quilt of Midwestern farm fields, the green squares defined by gray roads and dotted with the occasional white house and red barn. Her eyes followed the watery squiggle that was Clear Creek as the landscape gently gave way to the familiar landmarks of her hometown. She pressed her palm to the glass. There was the shockingly turquoise rectangle of the local pool where she and Paige used to have swim meets. Nearby, its trees looking like broccoli tops, was

Center Park, where she and Jaylen had gotten stuck atop the carnival Ferris wheel. And beyond that, the L-shaped black tar roof of Lincoln Elementary, where she and Tyler had partnered on every school project from kindergarten through fourth grade.

“I’m back!” Avery whispered.

The plane banked and tilted. From beneath her came the rumbling vibration of the landing gear going down.

Ms. Choi, the middle-aged businesswoman seated next to her, smiled. “Someone will be here to meet you, right, hon?”

“Oh yes.” Avery pushed her tortoiseshell glasses up the bridge of her nose. “My best friend, Paige, and her sister.”

“Well, I hope you have a wonderful vacation. There is something special about spending time with the people you grew up with.” Ms. Choi closed her laptop and stowed it in her briefcase. “You know the saying—‘Make new friends, but keep the old. One is silver and the other gold.’”

Avery considered this. She agreed . . . sort of. Her old friends were definitely gold. But since she’d moved to Philadelphia, she hadn’t made any friends she would rate as silver . . . or even bronze. Maybe plastic? Nobody

new would ever measure up to Paige, Jaylen, and Tyler. The four of them had been inseparable since before she could remember. If only her parents hadn't ripped her away from them, uprooting the whole family for their stupid jobs. Like they hadn't had perfectly fine professorships in Illinois.

Avery took a relaxing breath. She should live in the moment, like Tyler said to do. He was chill like that. These next two weeks of summer were going to be the best *ever*, and she shouldn't wreck them by dwelling on how miserable she'd been the past year in Philadelphia.

The plane bumped slightly as it hit the runway. Static buzzed over the address system, followed by the cheerful voice of the flight attendant. Avery only half listened. She switched her cell phone off airplane mode, anticipating texts from Paige to explode across the screen.

There was only one text.

From her mom.

Hope the thunderstorms didn't delay you!
Don't forget to text me when you land!

Avery frowned. Her seven excited messages to Paige from the morning had been delivered. Paige should've

texted back as soon as her half-day gymnastics camp was over. Worry whispered in her ear. Lately Paige hadn't been as responsive as usual. What if she wasn't as thrilled as Avery about this visit?

Reason whispered back. Paige had spent a month up at her grandparents' cabin in Northern Wisconsin, where Wi-Fi and cell service were spotty. And the last few weeks she'd been way busy with gymnastics camp. Everything was fine.

Her anxiety quashed for the moment, Avery texted her mom.

Here

Immediately three dots pulsed across the bottom of her screen. Avery rolled her eyes. Clearly, Mom had been monitoring her phone, anxiously hoping to hear from her. While waiting for the text to come through, Avery pulled her bright red-and-yellow backpack from under the seat in front of her and stood. She was still small enough that she didn't have to bend to avoid cracking her head on the overhead compartment. That was probably the only good thing about being short.

Her phone buzzed.

Have a great time, sweetheart, and stay safe! Please tell everyone on the block that Dad and I say hi. And remember to give Mrs. Sernett the hostess gift I sent as soon as she's home from the wedding!

Avery's mouth twisted. There was no way she'd forget the shoebox-sized present her mom had shoved into her suitcase at the last minute. That reminded her. She unzipped her backpack and, pushing aside the latest Lark and Ivy mystery book, searched inside for a small gold gift bag until she found it. Whew. The friendship bracelet hadn't fallen out or disappeared. She'd spent hours carefully braiding it using Paige's favorite color combo: neon yellow, orange, and green. Avery rubbed the matching bracelet around her wrist. Paige would love them.

Her phone buzzed again. Another message from her mom.

Maya from down the block dropped off a birthday party invite for you! Something to look forward to when you get home!

Avery swiped out of the thread. Maya wasn't exactly part of the mean girls' clique at her new school, but it wasn't like she'd ever jumped to Avery's defense when the others mocked her Midwestern accent. Maya's parents were probably making her include Avery on the invite list just because they were neighbors.

She tucked her phone into her backpack and pictured Paige waiting in the terminal with a massive Welcome Home sign. She couldn't wait to give her a huge hug.

Ten minutes later Avery stood alone in the tiny municipal airport, a pit in her stomach. Aside from a grumpy old guy in a ballcap lecturing a ticket agent, no one was there.

She pulled out her phone and tapped out a text.

where r u

Avery waited a minute, but no answer came. She wandered to baggage claim, losing herself in a cloud of what-ifs. Paige's eighteen-year-old sister Natalie was supposed to be driving her to the airport. What if Nat had forgotten? Or the car had broken down? Or, worse, there'd been an accident? She dug her fingernails into her palm, trying to stop her mind from spinning out of control.

Her phone vibrated in her other hand. It was a text from Paige. Finally.

Sorrysorrysorry

...

Avery held her breath.

long story j and laila r picking u up

Avery exhaled.

see u at my house

Of course everything was fine.

After gathering her overstuffed suitcase from one of the two baggage carousels and waving goodbye to Ms. Choi, Avery stepped through the airport's automatic exit doors. The August rain had stopped, leaving the air damp and surprisingly cool. Her eyes swept over the half-dozen cars waiting in the passenger pick-up lane. None looked familiar.

A rusty little sedan rattled up to the end of the line,

horn blaring. The passenger door swung open. Jaylen, an energetic thirteen-year-old with dark brown skin, bounded onto the pavement.

“Aves!” he shouted, waving madly.

Avery’s heart swelled with affection. Jaylen did everything big. She jogged toward him, taking in his Chicago Bears T-shirt, his short braids, his gap-toothed smile. Good old Jaylen. He met her halfway, grabbed her bag, and patted her on the head.

“Still short, I see,” he said.

“Still rude, I see,” she fired back, elbowing him in the ribs.

He grinned and tossed her bag in the trunk. “Sit up front.”

Avery opened the passenger door. “Hey, Laila,” she said to Jaylen’s big sister.

“Hey, girl.” Laila lifted her purple sunglasses up to her forehead and gazed at Avery with her huge dark eyes. “I don’t know why you want to spend a vacation in this hick town, but welcome anyway.”

Avery giggled and climbed in.

“Boo!” The deep, unfamiliar voice came from behind her. A ghostly pale face shot up over the back seat. “Surprise!” said Tyler.

Avery slapped her palm to her chest. “You scared me!”

“Ha!” Jaylen plopped into the seat next to him.

Tyler jabbed his thumb at Jaylen. “It was his idea, not mine.”

“Of course it was,” Avery said fondly as Laila pulled the car away from the curb. Jaylen was always up to mischief, and Tyler always good-naturedly went along. But something about Tyler was different. The last time Avery had actually spoken with him instead of texted was during spring break. Back then he’d sounded the same as always—sort of nasal and high-pitched. Now Tyler’s voice made her think of a TV newscaster crossed with a bullfrog. “Um, what’s up with your voice?”

“Right?” Jaylen smirked. “Bruh, it’s sooo weird.”

“Well, sorry your voice hasn’t changed yet.” Tyler flipped his mop of dirty-blond hair.

A flicker of irritation ran across Jaylen’s face. He pushed Tyler. Tyler pushed back.

“All right, calm down,” said Laila, steering the car onto the highway.

“Not that I don’t want to see you guys,” Avery said, “but where’s Paige?”

“She’s . . . wait for it.” Tyler paused. “At the mall.”

“No, really,” Avery said. What a joke. She and Paige

had always agreed there were so many more interesting things to do than hang out at a mall.

“Really,” Jaylen said. “Something about buying fall clothes? I don’t know.”

Avery clicked her tongue in disbelief. They must have it wrong. Shopping would never be part of the “long story” Paige said had prevented her from coming to the airport.

“So, guys,” Laila said, “what are your plans tonight?”

“Plans?” Avery shrugged. The boys’ expressions remained blank. Paige was the group’s planner.

“Wait, I know!” Jaylen pounded on the seat. “We should go see that new movie *The Séance*.”

“The one that freaked out Russell?” Tyler asked.

“Yeah! You know if he was scared, it’s gotta be sick.” Jaylen’s brother, Russell, was a local hero. Not only was he the star quarterback at the nearby university, but he’d once actually saved an old lady from a burning building. Jaylen worshipped him. “Bet it won’t get to me, though.”

“Sure, *you’re* braver than Russell,” Laila said sarcastically.

“I am!” Jaylen said. “I’m braver than he was at my age, at least.”

Avery wrinkled her nose. “*The Séance?*”

“It’s only a movie,” Tyler said reassuringly.

Jaylen tousled Avery’s stick-straight brown bob, messing up her center part. “Aw, she’s still a scaredy-cat.”

“I am not,” said Avery, rearranging her hair into even curtains on either side of her face. “I’d just rather watch a comedy. I’m sure Paige would, too.”

“No, she’ll be up for it,” Jaylen said, tapping his fingertips on his knee. As a drummer, he constantly tried out new beats. “She’s way into slasher movies now.”

Avery snorted. “I don’t believe it.” She knew her best friend.

“Wait and see,” Jaylen said.

Their short stint on the four-lane highway ended, and they drove along a lonely road at the edge of town. The few buildings were scattered and dilapidated. Ahead, a clump of trash littered the weedy parkway. As the car got closer, Avery realized that the trash was actually some kind of arrangement, with a teddy bear, a bouquet of carnations, and a white poster board dingy with road dust.

WE REMEMBER was written in thick black marker on the board.

“What’s that?” Avery asked, pointing out the windshield.

“Speaking of horror . . .,” Jaylen said.

“It’s a memorial,” Laila explained. “It’s been ten years since that kid Maddie died.”

“Who?” As the car passed the sign, Avery peered beyond it at the hulking redbrick building set back from the road. A chain-link fence surrounded it. Boards covered its doors and windows.

The desolate scene nudged Avery’s memory. “Oh.” The air swooshed from her mouth. “Right.”

Everyone fell silent.

Even though it had happened when she was a toddler, Avery knew the story about the Old Winter Playhouse. It had been really popular when it was built in the late 1800s, featuring traveling vaudeville shows and musicals. But it had been closed for decades before a local theater troupe had decided to revive it ten years before, when she was a little kid. One summer night that year, when the actors had finished rehearsal for the final play of their first season, a tragic accident had occurred. The director’s nine-year-old daughter, Maddie, had climbed onto the catwalk high above the stage and fell to her

death. The show was canceled. The theater shuttered. The building had stood vacant ever since, decaying bit by bit over the years.

There were whispers that the place was haunted.

Avery barely contained a shiver. “Who made the memorial? Didn’t Maddie’s family move away?”

“My mom says nobody knows,” Tyler said, his deep voice now subdued. His mom had been there the night of the tragedy, volunteering in the box office. “It just appeared last week.”

Jaylen sighed. “There haven’t been any Maddie sightings in forever.”

“You know why?” Tyler said. “They put in a ghost light to keep her away.”

“Really?” Laila perked up.

“What is a ghost light?” Avery asked.

“It’s an old theater tradition.” Laila waved her hand airily. She was in all the plays at the high school and planned to study acting in college. “Supposedly it’s to repel ghosts. But really, it’s a safety light they leave lit onstage after everyone goes home at night. So nobody comes into a totally dark theater the next day and trips over props or equipment or falls off the stage.”

“Yeah, well, my mom says the owners are superstitious people,” Tyler said. “Plus, they’d do anything to stop the ghost rumors.”

Jaylen leaned forward and clutched the headrest behind Avery. “I heard that before they boarded up the building, people used to see Maddie’s ghost pressed against the glass doors, banging her fists and wailing like she wanted to get out,” he said in a hushed voice.

“Jaylen, don’t spook Avery,” Tyler teased.

Avery scoffed. “I’m not spooked!”

Jaylen went on. “Russell told me sometimes you can hear a little girl begging people to come in and play.”

“You can?” Now that creeped Avery out.

“Stop it,” Laila interjected. “You three were too little to remember when that Maddie girl died, but I was going into second grade. It was a huge deal. And *very* sad.”

Though the theater was in the rearview mirror now, Avery sensed its gloomy presence lurking behind them, could imagine a lonely little girl’s voice pleading for playmates. When she was six years old, a babysitter named Lizzy had told her that Maddie’s ghost attacked kids who left their beds at night. Avery had nightmares for weeks after that. It wasn’t until years later she realized

that Lizzy had wanted to frighten her enough to keep her from leaving her room after bedtime.

Avery pushed the memory aside, along with all thoughts of ghosts and abandoned theaters.

It was time to focus on making this the best summer vacation ever.