

# One

Boys were disappearing. Sometimes weeks passed before they turned up, dazed and confused, wandering in the park, down the street, on the rooftops of tall buildings. When asked about it, they had no clue how they got there, where they had been, and what happened while they were gone. Sometimes, if they thought hard enough, they'd have vague memories of a girl. But I know what happened. I know the girl.

I turn up the volume on the media screen in the taxi's back seat as a reporter sticks his mic in the face of the latest victim – an eighteen-year-old boy found sitting under the bleachers in Times Square a few hours ago. He'd been missing for two weeks.

'I . . . I don't know,' he says. 'I was biking to the store and then I woke up here.'

The reporter pats his shoulder then turns back to the camera. 'Three boys are still unaccounted for in the latest string of disappearances. Police are asking anyone with information of their whereabouts to call in to the hotline.'

A phone number appears in a thick, flashing font, followed by headshots of each of the missing boys, with their names, dates, and what they were last seen wearing. I turn off the screen and stare out the rain-streaked window, preferring a soggy New York to their faces. Besides, there's nothing I can do about it and right now I have more pressing matters to deal with, like coming up with an excuse for being late.

The taxi drives through a large puddle as it turns into the parking lot. I sink deeper into the seat, delaying the moment I'll be spotted by the tall blonde pacing the corner. I know that walk – shoulders back, arms crossed, quick determined steps.

She punches something into her phone and immediately my pocket buzzes. I pull out my cell to find our text thread filled with angry emojis. Marissa Bale, the pacing blonde, is the closest thing to a friend I have. Where I come from, we don't pick our friends – we're assigned accountability partners instead.

'Miss?' The driver clears his throat. 'Miss, we're here.'

I sigh, and sit up, flashing a strained smile to the man watching me curiously through his rear-view mirror.

Marissa spots me and stomps to my door, yanking it open before I'm fully upright. 'What time do you call this?'

'It was raining,' I say, rushing to hand over the fare and leave the cab. 'Finding a ride was—' My foot shoots

out as it hits the wet pavement, sending me tumbling, rear first, to the ground.

‘Classy, Rach, real classy.’ Her deep blue eyes study my feeble attempt at righting myself.

I glare up at her. ‘A little help?’

Instead she glances at her watch and adjusts a gold-blinded purse to sit higher on her shoulder.

‘Seriously? I’ll remember this next time you ask for something.’

Chunks of my black waves flop wildly about. I brush an escaped curl from my face, shoving it back in my ponytail. As I do, my skirt rises to expose the cut-off jean shorts smuggled underneath.

Marissa’s eyes lock on the shorts; her lips curl into a sneer. *If it isn’t Vogue, it isn’t Marissa.* ‘Really, Rach?’

She shakes her head and turns away, giving me the opportunity to take her in. At half a foot taller than me, though a lot of that is the navy heels, her height only adds to the fact that she looks like a model in our school uniform. The white dress shirt clings to her willowy form. It’s covered by a meticulously pressed blue blazer with gold buttons, and the matching skirt stops just above her legs – whereas on me, it hangs down my calves.

I sigh and use the door for balance while I wipe myself off and straighten my skirt. The driver taps impatiently on the steering wheel, the taxi jerking forward. Before I

can gather my things, Marissa whirls around, her eyes bulging.

‘He’s rushing you? And you paid him?’

‘It’s fine,’ I say, loading my arms at record speed.

Still, she starts in a determined march to the door, making me drop my bag to grab her arm. All I can picture is the cab driver’s face, flashing on the screen beside the three other boys.

‘Just let this go,’ I say, giving her a gentle tug back.

‘Let it go?’ Marissa’s eyes widen even further. ‘He got you here late, which makes *me* late.’ She yanks her arm away. ‘Besides, nobody gets away with treating you like that.’

‘Oh really?’ I purse my lips, half smiling, trying to lighten her mood.

‘Really.’ Marissa taps the passenger window, turning back to add, ‘Nobody but me.’

I shake my head as her back arches like a cat readying for attack.

The cab driver glances past her, his eyes locking on me.

‘Let me just get my things,’ I say, rushing to the back seat and scooping up the bag. As soon as I shut the door he revs off, splashing water on to Marissa’s shoes.

‘Eww. Jerk.’ Marissa grabs an envelope from my pile, balls it, and throws it after the taxi. It lands in a puddle a few feet away.

‘That was my application for the social work program.’

Her arms cross, and she takes in my frustrated look. ‘So?’

‘So, it took me hours to fill out.’

‘Time wasted.’ She sighs at my glare, bending to wipe her shoes, and scowling at the dirty water left on her fingers.

‘Wasted? There are so many kids in need of help. You of all people should know what it’s like to be without a guardian.’

‘Should I?’ She glares and holds my arm for balance, her touch lingering extra-long, no doubt to dry her hand. The glare trails to my bird’s-nest ponytail. ‘You look pathetic.’

‘How kind.’ I bat her hand away, roll my eyes and adjust my armful of stuff, not sure if I should start walking to school or wait for Marissa, who looks to be rearing up for another lecture.

‘We’re late, remember,’ she says, taking quick steps ahead into the park.

I shrug and jog to catch up.

‘Why do you even pay the cabby?’ she asks. ‘Turn one into your personal driver. It saves a ton.’

‘I don’t think it’s right.’

‘Oh please. It’s wrong to *not* use your gift. Even in good weather, it’s impossible to get a cab in New York. At least you could do something about that.’

‘Anyway.’ I’m not in the mood for my lecture on tardiness to become a lecture on my lack of respect for our *ability*. ‘How was your night?’ I ask instead.

Marissa lifts her well-groomed eyebrows. ‘My mom sent this bag from London. My reward for straight As last semester.’

‘London?’

She pauses, thinking over her reply. ‘Her and her new lover are on vacation there.’

*Lover* is a gentle way of putting it.

‘Well?’ she says slowly. ‘Do you like it?’

I’m sure it’s a nice bag, just a bit too flashy for my taste. But there’s a certain spark in Marissa’s eyes that I haven’t seen for a while and I don’t want to be the one to dowse it. ‘It does make you stand out.’

Her smile becomes blinding. ‘And it matches the buttons on our uniform. Mom thinks of everything.’ Her face softens, and for a quick second she almost looks fragile. Then she hooks her arm through mine, nearly dislodging my armful of books, and uses my elbow as leverage to pull me through the park towards school, her gold bag whacking my side with each step.

Central Park is unusually empty for a weekday, a result of the morning rain. Still, a few people walk their dogs and a dark-haired boy sits by the Bethesda Fountain across the path. There’s something about the way he holds his headphones to his ear with one hand, singing

quietly to himself as he reads a magazine. He doesn't seem to care if someone notices, and I envy him for that feeling.

As we pass by, he looks up. I glance away, but out the corner of my eye it's easy to tell his gaze is following us. He's probably checking out Marissa. They all do. Still, his awareness makes my cheeks flush.

'When's your mom coming home?' I ask, distracting myself from the guy.

Marissa's pace quickens and, her focus fixes on the ground. 'I don't know.' She clears her throat. 'No rush, though, I get the whole apartment to myself.' She raises her chin and squares her shoulders. 'Parent-free life is awesome.'

I force a smile. 'Say hi to her from me. Next time you talk.'

Marissa misses a step.

'Careful.' I twist to hold her, dropping my books in the process.

'I'm fine.' She yanks her arm free and kicks a binder out of her way, scattering lined paper everywhere.

I sigh and bend down to gather them.

'Great, we'll be even more late now.' Marissa crosses her arms.

'You could help.' It's not like I can leave the mess. Losing my college application to the puddle is one thing – schoolwork, however, must be protected at all costs. I

grab most of them before looking up to see what Marissa's doing. She twirls a lock of hair, managing a playful grin while biting her bottom lip. I follow her gaze to the guy by the fountain. *Of course.*

He stands, smiles, takes a step our way.

'He's coming over,' she says, her voice higher than normal. Marissa smooths down her hair, then a sober look floods her face. 'You should probably stop him.'

'If you mean what I think you mean, the answer is no. Always no.'

'We can't very well let him see this.' Marissa taps her heel against the spine of a leather-bound book with a gold block font that reads: *Eros's Arrows: Indifference and Infatuation*. 'We have to do something.'

'I *am* doing something,' I say, picking up another loose sheet.

She lifts her chin, making her seem even more smug. 'I've got all the bonus credits possible for turnings and you're still at zero for the year. You really should do it. It's not that big a deal.'

'He's probably just coming to help.' I wave to the mess but she doesn't take the hint. 'He's not a threat, and as long as we keep our cool, there's no reason for him to become one.'

'You're the worst A.P. ever,' she says, the muscles on her jaw bulging – it happens every time she's mad. Marissa thinks being an accountability partner means me

doing what she says. I do have to do everything with her, but I don't have to like it.

The guy approaches. He passes Marissa, giving her a polite smile, and continues towards me. She mouths, '*Do it.*' I shake my head a firm *no*, returning my attention to the papers. As I reach for one, the guy bends down and grabs it, our hands nearly touching.

'Here,' he says. 'Let me help with this.'

I smile up, noticing how bright blue his eyes are. He hands me the leather-bound book and smiles. I flip it over, hoping he didn't catch the title. Marissa's a few paces away, waving at me to get on with it.

I ignore her and jump after a rogue sheet, trapping it underfoot. It flaps wildly over the toe of my Converse. Marissa huffs and beelines for the guy.

'Hi, I'm Marissa.' She extends her hand to him.

'No! Don't—'

It's too late. She yanks him close, grazing his lips with her kiss. He jolts back – eyes blinking fast as he struggles against the power separating his consciousness and dragging him deep into a trance. Marissa screams from the pain of using her gift. One hand pressing her stomach, the other her head. But I focus on her victim. On the way his blue eyes now stare, his body twitches, and on the mixture of fear and release that pours over him the second his legs start to wobble under the pressure of it all.

Then I run to him. But before I reach the boy with the striking blue eyes, his legs give out. He falls hard to the brick walkway, convulsing at our feet. All I can think of is how there's now four.

Four missing boys.