

CHAPTER 2

Alec

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“You’re not serious?”

Wallaby was staring at the bicycle parked right in front of him.

“We don’t have time to wait for the bus, so this will be way faster than walking,” Stevin said only half paying attention.

His only real concern at the moment was figuring out how the pair would sneak into the hot zone. If it wasn’t for the fact that their only lead to finding Mary was hidden somewhere in her untouched room, then an honorable detective’s son would never even consider committing

such a crime. But it was *Mary*.

Wallaby climbed onto the back of his old friend's bicycle, dismissing how bad he felt that Stevin would have to carry his weight all the way to Mary's house. The duo awkwardly rode through the quiet city streets on the way to Mary's backyard. Stevin cleverly realized along the way that her backyard was their only hope for sneaking past the police currently guarding the sinkhole surrounding her house--well, her room. Wallaby had forgotten how exhilarating it was to ride through the city streets at night, though he was forced to enjoy the midnight ride precariously seated behind someone he had unresolved bitterness toward.

It wasn't long before Stevin and Wallaby finally arrived at their destination, both of them breathless. Stevin was merely breathless due to the exercise of carrying a stocky 15-year-old across four blocks, while Wallaby found himself winded from seeing the sinkhole for the second time. He still couldn't believe what he was looking at.

"I'm sure they analyzed the sinkhole and the tree with the oracle," Stevin explained without being asked.

"They really couldn't figure out what caused it?"

Wallaby said this under his breath after being quickly shushed by Stevin. Police were still in the vicinity, and one wrong move would lead the boys to getting busted.

"No, there's no trace of anything remaining from that house," Stevin whispered. "It's like everything was moved out from under the ground. Except for her room, of course."

Stevin said this much more calmly, even callously, than Wallaby expected. There was no emotion in those words. Wallaby remembered that when Stevin is thinking, the entire world around him is shut out until his mind is finished processing its scattered thoughts.

The friends, if one could call them that, circled around the outer rim of the sinkhole, searching for a way across. Stevin turned to Wallaby.

“There’s no way to make a bridge. We have to climb down the hole and then up the tree. Quietly.”

Wallaby knew his “friend” was right, so the boys didn’t discuss it further. They began to cautiously stumble down the seemingly steep crater without raising an alarm. Getting to the bottom was easy, especially once they accepted that they would be getting their clothes a bit dirty, but climbing the tree was a problem they hadn’t fully anticipated.

Before any strategies were brought up, Wallaby pointed out the obvious.

“Where are the pipes? How could *they* have vanished too?”

He said this noting how much easier it would have been to climb the branchless trunk of the tree if there were pipes sticking out of it.

“It’s not like the tree was here before,” Stevin began to say as he looked up. “Whatever was under this house, pipes and all, is clearly gone and was, er, replaced I guess. There’s no telling what really happened here, so let’s just focus on getting up this thing.”

Stevin’s leadership had a strange effect on his old friend. It was as if they were 10 years old again. Wallaby silently obeyed, though his eyebrows didn’t. Stevin leaped onto the trunk and began grabbing for any crevice he could find. He was strangely athletic, even though he never worked out or played sports. He was even able to carry his own weight and more--despite having thin arms. Wallaby had a more difficult time, so Stevin had to accommodate by not climbing too fast in an effort to boost their morale. He even pointed out the easiest spots to grab, making Wallaby’s complaints that much more unbearable. He didn’t

realize it, but Wallaby was a strong kid for his age, mostly because his father was a famed boxer who refused to accept that his son was a tad more bookish than the rest of their clan. But raw strength was about the only thing he inherited from his old man. Whining was a habit he had learned exclusively from his doting mother.

“I can’t anymore Stevin! It’s just too high!”

Wallaby’s complaints sounded more like grunts, giving Stevin little reason to acknowledge them.

“Come on Wally, it’s not that much higher.”

Stevin was telling the truth. The duo had the fortune of possessing a friend whose room was only two stories up from the original foundation of the house, a rarity for homes in the city these days---even the ones with yards. Luckily for them, the room was missing one of its walls, giving the boys plenty of space for climbing into it.

Stevin reached for what he thought was just another crevice, but it turned out to be a wide gap directly beneath Mary’s room.

“Wallaby!”

Stevin looked under him to see his “friend” showing off a face more red than his shirt.

“Yeah?”

“There’s a gap here. It’s wide enough for your legs, so you’ll be able to get into the room without having to use just your arm strength.”

Stevin knew that Wallaby was having a tough time keeping himself balanced.

“Take my hand and I’ll push you up. Then you can lift yourself up into the room first.”

“Um, okay.”

Wallaby grabbed Stevin’s hand and propelled himself forward. It was almost easy for him to catch his feet on the gap and vault into the

room. As he stumbled on the wooden floor, however, he couldn't help but notice that Stevin had lost his grip and was hanging by just one hand. Wallaby immediately reached down for his friend and tried to pull him up. Stevin struggled to lift himself up high enough to reach his hand toward Wallaby's, and the gap gave way to Stevin's weight. Stevin began to slide down the steep tree toward a bad fall, but Wallaby caught his hand just in time.

Wallaby summoned all of his strength as he began to pull Stevin back into the room.

"Hold on Parker!"

In one moment, he thrust Stevin over the ledge and into the safety of Mary's room. Wallaby fell backward onto a rug and slipped, sliding toward the ledge again, but Stevin was there to grab him just in time, returning the favor. The boys then found themselves sitting still on the ledge, overlooking the city before them. It was a few moments before Stevin finally broke the silence.

"Right. Well then, let's get to it!"

Stevin's enthusiasm had been replenished by fear, a habit shared by the Parker men. Stevin turned to examine Mary's room, recognizing the same blue covered bed and white shelves he had seen countless times before. Only this time, he had never looked upon the details of her room so deliberately. Wallaby rose to meet him, though what he really wanted at that moment was to simply rest for a few minutes. His worry for Mary, however, prompted him to begin scanning the room for anything that looked out of place. Strangely, everything there looked surprisingly normal, especially for a room surrounded by a ghost of a house.

Stevin pulled out his oracle and switched it on. Wallaby looked at him closely.

“You know, I’ve never actually seen one of those things in person before. Does it take, you know, batteries?”

“Solar power,” Stevin said as he began to look through the glass and see the world through a completely new perspective.

He could now see specks of dust, where they came from, and whom they came from. He could focus in on fingerprints, residue, and even the temperature of each object compared to the other.

“Well this is bizarre,” Stevin began to say as he lowered the oracle for the first time since he had turned it on.

“Yeah?”

“Everything here is normal.”

Wallaby didn’t respond, so Stevin went back to looking over and under everything he could to confirm the harsh truth that they might be leaving the scene empty handed.

“All of the fingerprints here belong to either Mary, her parents, or me,” Stevin said while looking at a poster of the Great Barrier Reef. “I’m not even finding anything that’s been used significantly more than anything else, except for those old toys on the shelf, obviously.”

“What does that even mean?” Wallaby asked, both hands on his head.

“It means this room has been abandoned for at least a day.”

The room was silent for several moments as the boys continued their attempts at discovering something remarkable. Stevin was stroking his chin as he opened Mary’s closet door and began to speak.

“Whatever happened here happened quickly. There’s no foreign material or even a sign of a struggle.”

Wallaby listened without watching Stevin’s movements. After a brief amount of time, Wallaby noticed a book lying on the table next to Mary’s bed. It was her diary.

The diary was small and thin, but as he picked up the red, checkerboard notebook and looked through the pages, he could tell that it had been completely filled, down to the last page. Stevin carried on without noticing what his friend was upto. While looking through the diary, Wallaby noticed that each page was marked by a date, but no year. He looked at the most recent entry, on the last page, and didn't notice anything strange. In fact, the diary was much less interesting than anyone who knew Mary would have anticipated. It almost seemed like it belonged to someone else.

"Here is her diary," Wallaby said half-heartedly as he handed the book to Stevin, who immediately raised his eyebrows.

The only thing Stevin could think of to say was, "Should we read it?"

"Already did. Nothing unusual except for the fact that there is nothing unusual."

"Yeah, that is a bit unusual."

Stevin was now looking through the entries. As he skimmed the book, Wallaby noticed something strange hiding by Mary's closet door. He walked over to it, ignoring the harsh creaks responding to every footstep. The room was now beginning to tilt.

"Stevin, come here."

Wallaby pressed his finger to a slim hair that had been reflected by the moonlight. It was too small to notice otherwise. Stevin looked over at his friend and pressed the oracle to his eyes once again.

"Let me see."

Stevin analyzed the hair, first with curiosity, then with intent.

"You're not going to believe this."

"What? Does it belong to someone we know?"

"No, it's purple. Not only that---it's not human."

“So it’s an animal?”

“No. At least not any species in the oracle’s database. This hair comes from something no one’s ever seen before.”

Wallaby winced his eyes and pushed his glasses up.

“Well, the oracle doesn’t have *every* animal species on it, does it?”

Stevin looked at Wallaby with friendly derision.

“Okay then, well what if the hair is fake? Could it be artificial? Like from a stuffed animal?”

“No. It’s biomaterial.”

Wallaby knew that biomaterial was one of the defining characteristics of hair, but he was still in disbelief.

“Well--”

The tree collapsed without warning.

Stevin was still clutching the thin hair strand in his palms while hanging from a shelf on what was left of Mary’s room. Wallaby had been caught by two pipes that had been hanging from the side of the room and was holding on for dear life, though the fall would have only bruised him badly at this height.

“Are you okay Wallaby?”

Stevin looked down and noticed that policemen had heard the crash and were running toward the scene.

“Wally, we have to go! We have to jump!”

“What?! We can’t make a jump like that!”

“We’re gonna have to! Come on!”

Stevin let go of the shelf and began to slide down the bark, waiting to reach a good enough height to make a leap for it.

He passed by Wallaby in style, loudly whispering, “Come on Wally!”

Stevin jumped for it and won the ground he aimed for, tumbling as he landed.

“It’s Wallaby!”

Stevin wasn’t sure if it was anger or pure desperation that led to Wallaby’s miraculous, daring jump from the pipes onto the ground, but it started with Wallaby swinging himself from his shaky foothold, diary still in his possession. The boys didn’t have time to congratulate each other for surviving, though. They sprung into action and deserted the now busy scene.

“Two dollars.”

Wallaby handed his money to the cashier with the face of someone who clearly didn’t sleep the night before. This was an expected sight for any coffee shop cashier working a Saturday at 9:00am. Wallaby was handed his tea, not coffee, and welcomed it by embracing the paper cup to his cheek. He had to let the tea, not coffee, steam, after all.

Stevin was already seated at the table resting comfortably next to the window. He also didn’t have a taste for coffee, just chewing gum or oatmeal--whenever he could get his hands on it. Wallaby leaned over the table as if waiting for Stevin to utter something, anything, before his companion would sit down and have an honest discussion about the previous night’s events. Stevin was too focused, however, on the diary in front of him.

Mary’s diary was filled with scant drawings and daily entries that revealed very little about the true character of Stevin’s longtime friend, a

girl of peculiarity that outshined most of the other girls her age. Stevin couldn't accept that the diary belonged to Mary Gibbs.

"It doesn't make sense, Wall."

"No, don't call me Wall."

"Seriously, I can't figure out how this could possibly come from Mary."

Stevin began to flip through the pages, looking for a crease he had made earlier.

"Here, read this entry."

Wallaby took the diary from Stevin's hands and tilted his glasses as he read.

March 23rd. Hello again. I promise to be brief, but today was just one of those days that I could go on and on about.

"March 23rd? That was last week!"

"Shush Wall! Just keep reading."

No matter how hard I try, I can't seem to get my dad to understand why it's important for me to leave this summer. I can't take it here anymore.

"It's Wallaby!"

"Shush!"

He just doesn't understand. He doesn't get why it's important for me to leave San Francisco and live somewhere nicer. Greener. Filled with brighter skies. An ocean I can get lost in. Maybe out west?

Stevin was contemplating what he had just read as Wallaby continued to have his head buried in the diary, searching desperately for clues. Mary had never told Stevin that she wanted to leave the city for the summer. Granted, she had always wanted to live on either a ranch or near the Great Barrier Reef. No one had ever understood her odd love

for both the sea and the desert, two of the world's most separate sceneries. Wallaby finished reading while Stevin was lost in thought.

"I don't get it. She's usually so deep and thoughtful. I can't believe that she wrote something so whiny and teenage."

Wallaby said all this to the proverbial choir.

"I know. Something isn't right," Stevin said as he fidgeted with a salt shaker. "It's almost like she's trying to say something else."

Stevin grabbed the diary from Wallaby's palms and began staring at it, waiting for inspiration to strike. Wallaby took a sip of his tea and laid back in his chair.

"Where's the hair?"

"I analyzed it some more last night before I went to sleep."

"You didn't sleep."

"Yeah, I know. Anyway, I couldn't figure anything else out about it, but it's in a plastic bag in my pocket now," Stevin said as he brushed his fingers against the bag to confirm that it was still where it was supposed to be. "Whoever, or whatever, it belongs to is someone or something truly bizarre."

Wallaby then said something that had been on his mind since fleeing Mary's yard on Stevin's bicycle several short hours ago.

"Why don't we talk to Mr. Azam? He's always going on about the bizarre, especially when it comes to animals."

Stevin had thought of this as well. If there was anyone equipped to deduce where their most promising lead came from, it was the peculiar professor (a nickname coined by Mary herself).

"Where is he?" Stevin finally asked.

Wallaby was already looking him up online via the school's directory.

"We can find his phone number online and call him."

Several sips of tea later, the boys were calling their teacher on a Saturday. The phone rang five times before going to voicemail.

Wallaby was on the verge of leaving a message when a hand touched his shoulder, frightening and paralyzing him at the same time. It was Mr. Azam, and he was smiling.

“Boys! What a coincidence.”

Great detectives don’t believe in coincidence.

Stevin looked up at the unexpected figure that was his teacher and quickly hid the oracle behind him.

“Mr. Azam? We were just calling you, actually.”

Stevin said this quizzically, and it came from a side of his personality he didn’t show often: *confusion*. Mr. Azam stepped by the table, hands in his pockets. He wasn’t the tallest man, but he had a commanding presence and was dressed quite formally for an early Saturday morning. He didn’t even wear a tweed jacket in class, let alone in public.

“Yes, I know. I was actually watching you two last night. Sorry if that’s weird.”

Wallaby’s eyes widened.

“Yeah, that’s extremely weird.”

“The weirdest,” Stevin added.

“Again, sorry. Look, I can help you two, but only if you promise me one thing.”

“Wait, why were you--” Stevin was interrupted.

“One thing,” Mr. Azam repeated.

“Okay,” Wallaby replied.



“Do you truly want to find your friend?”

The boys both responded, “Yes.”

“Are you willing to go to great lengths to find her? Travel to places you’ve never been?”

“Yes.”

“Put yourselves in harm’s way? Make friends with questionable characters and climb up heights much more harrowing than the one you both conquered last night?”

Stevin quickly chirped, “What does harrowing mean?”

Wallaby slammed him on the back and strongly replied, “Yes.”

“Fine, good. Come with me. I’m going to help you find where that hair came from. I promise I’ll explain everything on the way. One last thing, though: do you trust me?”

“No,” Stevin immediately replied.

“Good. Then you’re off to a great start. My name is Alec Azam. What do you think about doors?”

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