

CHAPTER TWELVE

In the end, Hayley and I come up with a general kind of plan. First of all, we agree that alerting Carrie to my suspicions would be the dumbest thing I could do. Besides, if it turns out this is all just a crazy theory that turns out to be wrong, then I won't have ruined my friendship with her for nothing.

I will act like everything is perfectly normal. I'll hang out with Carrie and the others as usual and I won't have anything to do with Hayley when there's anyone else around. I need to get into Carrie's house and look for chances to find the missing jewellery. If I find it, I'll tell the others and confront her with the evidence.

That still doesn't answer the questions running through my head about Joe Kelward. I know I'm going to need to face that soon, but it's not exactly something I'm looking forward to.

I feel awkward the next day at school, but no one seems to notice anything is wrong. I relax after a couple of minutes and manage to pay attention to the conversation.

Jen is talking about a tattoo. Nothing new there. About once a month she announces that she's found The One, the tattoo she's going to get as soon as she turns eighteen. Her folks won't give her permission to get one before then. That's probably a good thing, considering how often she changes her mind.

Today's choice is a tiny pink dragon. Jen is undecided if she's going to get it on her ankle or her shoulder. None of us comment on that. We all know she has three years to change her mind. We also know the dragon will probably be forgotten before she turns sixteen, never mind eighteen.

The talk shifts to last night's TV shows, then moves through a string of topics that slip by before I've fully focused on them. It's all so normal. I begin to relax.

Carrie is seated across from me, paying less attention to the talk than to the chicken Caesar salad she's having for lunch. When she happens to glance up and sees me watching her, she just smiles — an everyday smile you'd give a friend — and goes back to her lunch.

And the day passes.

I see Hayley a couple of times as we pass each other in the halls on the way to our different classes. We ignore each other completely, as we've agreed to do. It's essential that Carrie

believes she's been successful in cutting off all contact between Hayley and the rest of us.

It's a relief to hear the final bell ring. I'd never realized just how hard it is to put on an act all day, or to walk around carrying a secret this heavy. It would be nice to go home and relax for the evening, but the sooner I can look for the missing jewellery at Carrie's place, the better. So, I catch her on the way out of the school and suggest we hang out this evening.

"Yeah, sure," she says. "Perfect, in fact. Mom just texted me that she's working late again."

"You want to come to my place to eat first?" I ask.

"Maybe. What's your mom making?"

I make a quick call home, ask Mom, and then report that it's tuna casserole.

Carrie wrinkles her nose and says "No, thanks."

"Then, I'll see you later," I tell her. I'm relieved that she's not coming. My parents like all of my friends, but since the whole business with Carrie's stepfather they've been extra nice to her. The thought of them being all sympathetic and caring toward her after what I've just learned makes me sick.

It's just after seven when I get to her place. The side door is unlocked and when I knock I hear a yell. I take it as permission to go in. Noise

from the front room draws me there, where I find Carrie sprawled across the couch watching television. Some reality show.

"Hey, Shana," she says with a half wave. She's clearly less interested in my arrival than in what she's watching.

I sink into an armchair and wonder how much longer the show is. A strange lump grows in my throat as I sit there, in a chair I've occupied so many times. An urge comes over me to ask Carrie about everything that's been happening. I want her to offer an explanation even though I know very well that there is none. I want everything to be okay, and for Carrie to still be the friend I've believed she was for the past three years. But in my heart, I know that's not going to happen.

A commercial comes on and Carrie stretches, turns to face me, and grins. "Sorry," she says. "You know how addicted I am to reality TV."

I force a smile. "Sure, no problem," I tell her. Then inspiration hits me. This is the perfect time to start looking around — while Carrie's engrossed in the show she's watching. I wait until the commercials end and then casually ask if I can borrow a sweater.

"Sure," she says without looking away from the TV. "Get whatever you want."

I go to her room, feeling guilty. It gets worse as I open her dresser drawers and run my hands

along the bottom of each one, trying not to mess up the contents in the process. At the same time, I'm trying to listen for any sound of metal clinking, in case there's anything hidden in among her clothes. And, of course, I'm listening for any sound in the hallway, just in case Carrie tears herself away from the show and comes along.

I find nothing in the dresser or her desk. The closet is next and by now I'm so nervous that my skin feels a bit prickly. Even before I open the door I know it's going to be hopeless. You never saw a closet stuffed so full! Besides being jammed with clothes hanging from the rod, there are more bags and boxes than you'd think a person could squeeze into a space this size. I poke at a few things half-heartedly but I know there's no way I can go through even a tenth of what's in there. Instead, I stand there staring, like there might be clues that will jump out and tell me where to start. If there's anything that might give away a secret hiding place, it sure isn't obvious to me. And I've been in her room long enough that Carrie is bound to start wondering what's up. There's no choice but to give up for now.

I sigh and start to close the door, but then I remember that I'm supposed to be getting a sweater, so I yank it back open. And that's when I hear it.

On the inside of her closet door, Carrie has a hanging shoe holder. It's red vinyl, kind of ugly, with sixteen compartments. There are a few pair of slippers stuffed into the compartments, but most of them hold other things. There are scarves, hand fans, ornaments that have fallen out of favour and an assortment of other odds and ends.

And something that made a metallic tinkling sound when I jerked the door.

I run my hands along the bottoms of each row of shoe pockets, feeling the contents as quickly as I can. I find what I'm looking for in a pocket holding Carrie's old Brownie sash and badges. Tucked in the bottom is a small collection of jewellery. It takes only a quick glance through it before I recognize Lori's ring.

I have my proof.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

If I were in a movie right now, this would be the moment where Carrie would appear in the doorway. She'd demand to know what I thought I was doing and I'd stand there like a mannequin with its mouth stuck open, trying to think of something to say.

Fortunately, this isn't a movie and no one comes along. I hesitate for a second and then shove the jewellery back where it was, grab a sweater, and hurry back to the front room. Another batch of commercials is on and Carrie is sitting up, looking around.

"I can't find the remote," she says. "I had it just a minute ago and now it's gone."

"You're probably sitting on it," I suggest.

She stands up and turns to inspect the couch. The remote is half hidden between cushions and she digs it out.

"Good thinking," she says, waving it. She flops back down and then thinks to ask, "What took you so long to get a sweater?"

"Sorry. I was texting."

"Oh, yeah? Who was it? Was it Krysti? I've

been trying to get ahold of her since I got home.”
 “No, not Krysti,” I say. I feel my face getting warm. “It was, uh, my cousin. You don’t know her.”

“You’re the absolute worst liar of anyone I know,” she says, laughing. “It’s like you’re wearing a big sign that says you’re lying. So, really, who was it? Was it Jake? It *was*, wasn’t it? I told you he was going to make a move.”

I’m trying to think of what to say when the commercial break ends and her attention shifts back to the television.

I wish I could leave. The idea of spending the evening with her after what I’ve just discovered makes me feel a little ill. I even toy with the idea of telling her I’m sick, but I don’t want to do anything that might make her suspicious. So I stay, and when her show ends we hang out until my school-night curfew.

When I hit the sidewalk to head home, my knees are almost rubbery with relief to be out of there. I gulp fresh air like I’ve been breathing something toxic, which is exactly how I feel.

The question is: what do I do next? The temptation to confront Carrie with the stolen jewellery had been almost overpowering, but I know it would have been a bad mistake. She’d have denied knowing anything about it.

She’d likely have tried to claim that Hayley was setting her up.

And, honestly, I’m afraid she’d have worn me down. Carrie can be so persuasive and once she starts she goes on and on until she’s won. I’ve been there before, although never over anything this serious.

If I’m going to confront her, I need the others present. It’s almost certain that she won’t be able to persuade everyone.

When I get home I give Hayley a quick call. When she hears that I’ve found the stolen items, her voice begins to quaver.

“I thought it was hopeless, and I’d lost my friends for good,” she says. “You have no idea how grateful I am that you believed me, Shana.”

We talk a few more minutes before she brings up the big question.

“So, does this mean you’re going to go to the police and tell them the truth about Joe Kelward?”

“I guess I have no choice,” I say. “I just wish there was some way I could find out one hundred percent that Carrie made that up. I mean, isn’t it possible that she’s telling the truth?”

“Then why set me up the way she did?”

“Maybe she was just worried you’d *think* she made it up — because of what she said to you about the boarder.”

"I hope you know how lame that sounds," Hayley says. "Who would come up with such a complicated plan if they weren't guilty?"

"You're right. I guess I'm just scared."

"I don't imagine Carrie's stepfather is feeling all that great, either," she says dryly.

Shame fills me at the thought of Joe Kelward. If he's truly innocent — and I'm pretty well convinced he is — it must be horrible for him. Imagine being locked up in prison for something you didn't do. Especially when that something is a crime as disgusting as molesting your own stepdaughter. How horrible and helpless and angry he must feel.

"Anyway, Shana," Hayley continues, "you don't need to be sure about whether or not Carrie made it all up before you do something."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"I mean that there's at least one thing you *do* know. You know that *your* testimony was a lie. And *that's* what you need to tell the police."

There's dead air on the phone for the next minute. I know Hayley's waiting for me to speak. I find my voice at last, and it's a cowardly one.

"What do you think will happen when I tell them?" I ask.

"I have no idea. I just know you have to do the right thing. It's terrible, what's happened to that man — and honestly, I never thought he

did what she said. You've got to do whatever you can to make it right."

"I know I do," I say.

"You should start by talking to your parents," Hayley adds. "They're going to have to know, and they can probably give you some advice."

That suggestion fills me with hope and dread all at the same time. I don't know how I can face my mom and dad and admit what I've done. On the other hand, if anyone will know what's likely to happen, it's my true-crime-expert mother.

I'm off the phone and almost ready to take a deep breath and go confess everything to my parents when I realize something else that makes me call Hayley back.

"What about the jewellery?" I ask as soon as she answers. "If I go to the police now, they'll talk to Carrie. She'll know I'm not on her side anymore. That will mean I won't have a chance to expose her as the real thief."

"Oh! Right," she says. "You need to take care of that first, don't you?"

"Definitely."

"Well, then, you have to do something about that as soon as you can," she says.

"I will. Promise. It shouldn't be a problem, anyway. We're all supposed to get together at Carrie's place on the weekend. I'll figure out what to do by then."

“Look, Shana, I know I’m being pushy about this.”

“It’s okay,” I tell her. “I understand why.”

“I don’t want you to be mad at me,” she adds. “You’re the only friend I have left.”

“I swear, I’m not mad, Hayley. I get it.”

After I hang up I feel so totally exhausted that all I can do is crawl into bed and fall asleep. The last thought on my mind is that I wish I could go back in time and undo my part in this whole mess.