

I sleep a little better than I have in the past few nights.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The letter to Joe Kelward is hard to write, but I get it done. It's not until I have it in an envelope and sealed that I realize I have no idea where to send it. There are lots of prisons across the country and he could be in any one of them as far as I know.

I text Hayley to see if she has any ideas on how to find him. Good thing, because she comes up with something and texts back: "Maybe his lawyer?" right away.

Of course! His lawyer would know where he'd been sent. And that produces another idea. The lawyer might be able to give me some advice on other things I can do to help get Kelward out of jail. Even though I can't do anything until tomorrow, it gives me the most hope I've felt in the past week.

I type a few words into a search engine and find his lawyer's name, along with three others in the law firm of Coulter, Leland, Hatton, and Stone. After jotting down the phone number and address, I crawl into bed.

Monday at lunch is the first chance I have to call the lawyer. The secretary who answers the phone is startlingly cheery. I blurt out a request to speak to Mr. Hatton.

"I'm sorry, but Mr. Hatton isn't in at the moment. Would you like to go to his voice mail?"

"Uh, can I leave him a message?" I ask. Then I realize that's exactly what she just said to me.

"Certainly," she says smoothly, as if she hadn't suggested it one second ago. "I'll put you through."

A female voice announces that I've reached the voice mail of Aaron Hatton and promises that he'll get back to me as soon as he can.

"Hi," I say. And the rest comes out in a rush. "I testified against your client, Joe Kelward, but it was a mistake and I feel terrible about it and I want to help him. I already went to the police only she got there first — Carrie, I mean, and I think they believed her instead of me even though I'm the one telling the truth. Also, I have a letter I want to send to him, but I don't know where he is or anything so if you could call me with his address — for the letter — and maybe give

me some advice or pointers or whatever on how I can help fix this, that would be great. I don't mean legal advice. Or, I guess maybe that's what I need, only I can't pay anything."

I finish up by reciting my phone number, then repeating it, and hang up. The jumble of words I've just blurted out are echoing in my ears like so much gibberish. A monkey could have left a more sensible message. I think about calling the secretary back and asking her to erase it and let me leave a new one. But I don't bother. There's no point. I'm terrible at leaving voice mails and I know I'll do as bad or worse if I get another chance.

As I power off my phone and turn to head toward my first afternoon class, I see Krysti standing just a few feet away. Her mouth is pressed pencil-line thin and there's fury in her eyes. She stares at me for a second or two before spinning around and marching away. I can't help but feel a stab of hurt when I think that a few short days ago she was my friend. That thought is quickly chased away by the realization that Krysti is almost certainly on her way to tell Carrie what she heard. I decide not to worry about that. It's not likely Carrie will try to tell any of her lies to the lawyer who defended her stepfather.

I check my phone between classes. Hatton still hasn't called me back by the end of the

afternoon. Maybe he thinks it was a prank call. Maybe he figures he has better things to do than call back some mumbling kid. I make up my mind that if he hasn't called me back by tomorrow, I'll ask my mom or dad to phone him. I know he's more likely to listen to an adult, but I can't help wanting to do this one thing on my own. In the meantime, I decide not to mention it to my folks.

The phone finally rings just past eight o'clock, but when I look at the display it's not coming from any law firm. I blink, looking at the caller's ID.

Carrie Freeman.

It's tempting to just let it ring. I have nothing to say to her, and I can't imagine that she has anything to say to me that I want to hear.

More than anything, it's curiosity that makes me press "talk" and say hello.

The first sounds I hear aren't words. It's a rasping, gasping noise that I need a few seconds to identify.

She's crying.

Then, finally, a gulp of air and, "Shana?"

"Yeah."

"Shana, I don't know what to say. I've done such terrible things and caused so much trouble, and —" Her words trail off into full sobs.

I wait, stunned into silence by what I'm

hearing. Finally, she gets herself under control and goes on.

"The worst thing of all is what I did to you," she says with a breaking voice. "To us. You were the best friend I ever had. And I don't blame you if you never forgive me, but I want you to know I'm so, so sorry. I'd do anything to prove it to you."

It's hard not to doubt her. I've seen Carrie in action too many times. But the heartbreak in her voice sounds so genuine, I can't help but hope she's telling the truth. So I ask a question that should prove whether or not she means what she's saying.

"Like go to the police and tell the truth?" There's a pause, just a slight one. Then she says, "Yes. I'll go to the police and tell them everything."

"When?" I ask.

"Tomorrow," she promises. "There's someone else I need to talk to first."

"Your mom?"

"Yes." She breaks down crying for another minute or two, and then says, "Shana? Would you do one thing for me? Would you come over and be here with me while I tell my mom?"

I only hesitate for a second before I answer.

"I'll be right there."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Mom and Dad are watching *Jeopardy* when I head toward the door. I decide not to tell them where I'm going. That would just lead to a lot of questions and slow me down. My best friend needs me.

My best friend. In spite of everything she did, I have to admit that there's a happy flutter in my chest at the thought that it's all going to be okay. And Carrie isn't the only one who did wrong. I did, too. If I expect people to forgive me, I need to be able to forgive her, as well.

I leave a note on the kitchen table that says I've gone for a walk and I slip out the side door. My steps are light as I walk the familiar route to Carrie's house. I'm so eager to get there. Oh, I know it will be awkward for the first bit, but I'm sure that won't last.

I see her as soon as her house comes into view. She's waiting in the backyard, sitting on a big wooden swing set under a huge oak tree. How many times have we sat there, sipping soft drinks and talking about everything and anything?

As I get near, her arm comes up in a long, slow wave and she smiles nervously.

"I can't believe you came," she says. "I thought you probably hated me."

"I was upset, but now it's all going to be okay. We'll do this together — remember I'm guilty, too. And then it will be over with."

She nods solemnly and steps down off the swing. "My mom will be home soon," she says. "I'm so scared to face her. I think I might be sick."

She leans forward then, clutching her stomach. "Can you get me a bottle of water?" she asks.

I dash up the back steps, into the house and down the hall to the kitchen. A moment later I hurry back to the yard. I don't see Carrie. Maybe she made a run for the bathroom. I'm about to turn to go back inside when something hard and heavy crashes into the back of my head. It sends me sprawling forward onto the ground. The last thing that registers before everything goes black is Carrie's bottle of water rolling away from me.

The pain is so intense that at first it's the only thing I can focus on. My head is throbbing *ka-
whump, ka-whump*, like it's about to explode.

My hand reaches up automatically and comes away wet and sticky.

I moan and register the fact that there's something in my mouth. A strip of cloth is tied around my head. And somehow, I still don't quite understand what's happened.

I breathe in slowly through my nose and try to get my bearings. Ignoring the pain, I look around. It only takes a second for me to realize I'm lying on the floor of the shed in Carrie's backyard. When I try to move, I find my ankles are tied together with a rope and fastened to the wall. In addition, my hands are bound behind me with what feels like a strip of cloth.

That's when the fear really hits me. Of course, I know Carrie hit me, but that's not going to be the end of it. The whack on the head was just the beginning of whatever it is she has planned. Terror grips me as I realize how completely I am at her mercy.

I fight to remain calm. Fumbling for my phone, I manage to extract it from my back pocket, but I quickly realize it's useless. Sure, I can call 911 but with a gag in my mouth I can't speak to tell them what's happening or where I am. Even if they follow up on the call, who knows how long it will take for them to figure out where the signal came from. I don't have the slightest doubt that it will be too late for me by then.

I struggle to remain calm and think.

And then, there she is. The shed door opens letting in light. It looks strangely like a halo behind Carrie's evil head. She smiles.

"Krysti told me about your little phone call to Joe's lawyer. Did you *really* think you could outsmart me? Or that I was just going to sit back and let you make trouble for me? I worked too hard to get rid of Joe — I wasn't about to let you ruin everything."

She moves forward ever so slightly. I see that her left hand is holding something. A jug — like the one my dad keeps gas in for the lawnmower. A rush of horror runs through me.

"Oh, I see you've noticed this," Carrie says, lifting her arm. She turns it so the wide side is angled toward me and I see a familiar, half-torn sticker. She sees the recognition on my face. She smiles.

"That's right, Shana. I got this from *your* place. That way, when you die tragically in the fire, it will prove *you're* the one who started it. They'll see that you came here to make good on the threat I reported. Except, something heavy fell and hit you on the back of the head, knocking you out while the fire you set blazed around you. And, of course, your gag and the ties around your wrists and ankles will be gone — burned away by the flames."

I see that she's wearing vinyl gloves as she unscrews the cap and tips the jug forward. Gas splashes out, the heavy smell of it filling the air in the shed.

"I don't know why you ever thought you could beat me," she says. Her voice is casual, as if she's talking about some everyday thing. "You never could lie very convincingly. I knew something was up for days before you went snooping in my closet. Didn't take much to catch you, either — not when I had some help from a special friend."

She pauses and smiles at me. "I can see you're wondering who that might have been," she says. "Remember that new teddy bear I got, just before Mom married Joe?"

I try not to react, but I'm curious and it probably shows on my face.

"It's a Nanny Cam!" she announces with a laugh. "It was supposed to catch Joe doing naughty things to me, but he wouldn't bite no matter what I did to tempt him. Luckily, I had you to help back up my story."

She laughs again and it sends a cold shiver up my back. "Turns out it was a good investment, anyway," she says. "I've gotten lots of great footage since I bought that thing, but your face when you found the jewellery — that was the best ever."

She lays the gas jug on its side on the floor, right by my head. Then she draws a book of matches from her pocket. Before she can strike one, I kick hard with my feet to get her attention. She rolls her eyes as she pauses to look at me. It's like she's wondering why I'm bothering her when she's busy trying to kill me. I lift my bound hands so she can see the cellphone I've been holding close to my side.

"So what?" she says. She's trying to sound confident but I hear the doubt in her voice. "You couldn't have made a call. And I'd have seen you typing if you'd tried to send a text."

She's right, of course. I couldn't do either of those things. She's sneering triumphantly when the sound of an incoming message bursts from her pocket.

I watch while she pulls out her phone and flips it open. If my head wasn't hurting so much, I might even have enjoyed seeing her eyes widen and her face twist in panic.

A film clip capturing everything she's said and done in the last few moments has just been sent to everyone on my Top Five list. And, of course, that list includes my "best friend," Carrie.

EPILOGUE

Four months have gone by since that day, but it won't stop playing in my memory.

As soon as Carrie realized there was no way to lie or scheme her way out of that one, she was gone in a flash. She left me lying in the shed — tied and gagged and bleeding on a gasoline-soaked floor. She headed west, hitchhiking, and made it as far as Kingston, Ontario, before being picked up by the OPP and sent back.

It was Jen who first saw the video and called the police. It couldn't have been more than a few minutes after Carrie took off when a squad car drove up with its siren blaring, but I can tell you it *felt* like an hour. An ambulance came, too, and took me to the hospital where they treated my head wound and kept me overnight.

Carrie is facing charges for a bunch of things, including what she did to Joe Kelward, and to me. Because what she did was so serious, they remanded her to the Nova Scotia Youth Facility until her trial comes up. Thankfully, Joe Kelward was freed quite quickly after the truth came out. I heard he's living somewhere in Dartmouth

and putting his life back together. Alone. I never did send him that letter, but I know he's heard about everything that happened. I hope he can forgive me someday for my part in all of this. When I think about the trail of hurt and betrayal I helped create, I'm not sure I'll ever be able to completely forgive myself.

Our group of friends is back together, except things are still a bit shaky. Hayley and I are closer than we used to be, but I think Krysti still resents me, even though she now knows the truth. Jen and Lori seem a little distant. Maybe they're embarrassed for not seeing what was really going on. Maybe it will take longer for the wounds left by anger and suspicion to heal.

I no longer have a best friend. And while there are things about that which I still miss, there is something good and pure in the freedom.

And yet, I am left with a kind of sadness that I can't quite explain.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many warm thanks to my editor, Shannon Whibbs, for her enthusiasm and insights. Also for her highly entertaining tweets.