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To Tess, my first writing friend

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RAVENA GURON

YOUR MURDER NEXT

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USBORNE

PART ONE

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1

The Present

I stomp through the woods, twigs crackling under my feet.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

My heart races, blood in my ears.

I thought I was in control.

I was wrong.

All the woods look the same to me, and I slow down. I'm following a dirt path away from that horrible glass house, but I have no idea where I'm heading, or where I am. Why the hell did I decide to run into the *woods* of all places? I *knew* they gave off creepy vibes.

We're miles from the nearest town, which means my grand plan of storming off and walking to freedom is quickly falling apart.

To *actually* escape, I need to take a taxi to the nearest train station. I stop, breathing heavily, my heart hammering in my ears as I try to think. Sweat sticks my T-shirt to my skin, and though I'm hidden from the sun by all the foliage of the trees, the air is still humid. It's like standing in soup. For the

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time of the year, it's horribly, unseasonably warm.

My mouth is parched. I don't think I've even gone very far – I've just followed the most obvious path. The house is probably only beyond the curve of the trees behind me. Watching. Waiting.

I can't call anyone to come get me because there's no signal out here. And even if I could contact Mum and Dad, I'm two hours from home, so it's not like they'd be able to quickly hop in the car to pick me up.

My whole plan seems ridiculous now. Why did I think it was a good idea to come away to a glass house in the woods with three people I suspect of murdering their best friend? The police dismissed what happened as an accident but not me – no, I'm so desperate to make my name as a journalist that I just couldn't let it go, determined to find the truth.

And now I'm screwed.

The trees swish in a gentle breeze that does nothing to cool me down, and a few birds chirp, and a couple of twigs crack. It would actually be quite peaceful out here, on my own – but there's something wrong. The hairs on my arms rise.

I'm not moving.

But the twigs are still cracking.

It could be an animal. A squirrel. Or a deer. Except the cracking is getting louder.

One of them has followed me.

Crap.

They wouldn't *hurt* me, would they?

But that's a stupid question, considering one of them locked their friend in a freezer and left her there to die.

"Aiden knows why I came out here with you all," I say,

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because I need them to understand that I have a safety net. That things won't be easy if they try to get rid of me. There's no reply, and I turn in the direction of the house. The path behind me is empty. But the twigs continue to snap, somewhere to my left.

"Are you busy?" someone says. A boy emerges from the trees, his hands tucked behind his back. He looks about the same age as me, and he's got curly black hair and deep blue eyes, with high cheekbones and a chiselled jaw. He must be at least six feet tall, or somewhere close to it, and he's got broad shoulders, and is wearing a plain black T-shirt and grey jeans.

I'm on edge at once. Why is this stranger emerging from trees in the middle of nowhere and acting like we're already having a conversation? Except…even though I *am* certain we're strangers, there's something vaguely familiar about him. Does he go to the same school as me? He could do. I've only been there a month. There are loads of people I wouldn't recognize.

"Who are you?" I say, trying to keep my voice from shaking. With everything else that has happened, this is just one more thing to make my skin prickle and my heart hammer. "Are you…friends with Freddie and Rupert and…" I trail off. There's an odd expression on his face, and he takes a deep breath.

"The thing is," he says. "The thing *is*…" His tongue darts out, licking his cracked lips. Now that I'm looking at him properly, I notice there are bags under his eyes. He's so pale his skin is nearly translucent, even though the weather has been scorching for months. Either he doesn't tan or he's afraid of the sun. "I've done something bad. And I need to talk about it." Slowly, he uncrosses his hands from behind his back.

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And in one of them he's holding a gun.

I stare at it, because surely that's not right. Maybe I'm hallucinating. It's hot; I need water…

"I've done something bad," he repeats. "I've just…I've just killed one of your friends."

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2

Two Days Before the Murder

"This is it," said Immy, her voice triumphant as the car came to a stop. "Take it all in. This is all for us."

I was in the back seat, and when I leaned forward to look out of the front windscreen all I could see was driveway. Freddie squirmed in the seat next to me. He'd had an argument with Immy about sitting in the back, but she'd insisted that she should be in the passenger seat next to the driver because this getaway was only happening because of her.

I had spent the whole drive wondering if any of them actually *liked* each other. All they seemed to do when they spoke was snipe and needle. Maybe it was their twisted way of expressing affection, though – because they were all *deeply* twisted people.

They had to be. One of them was a murderer.

The journey had given me a lot of time to wonder if Aiden was right and coming on this trip was actually an incredibly stupid idea. Not that Aiden had used those words, of course, because Aiden's preferred mode of communication was pointed

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silences and keeping his sentences as clipped as possible. But I got the gist. At best, he thought I would be wasting my time. At worst, it was beyond reckless to go away with Immy, Freddie and Rupert, one of whom we believed had got away with killing their closest friend.

I disagreed with him. I had wormed my way into this holiday weekend from hell through my connection with the murder. I'd been with the three of them the night it happened, in my parents' restaurant. Now, I was going to get some answers.

Okay, so there was a strong possibility Immy had invited me here because she wanted to kill me. Or at least she wanted to figure out what I knew. But I was willing to take that chance. All journalists had to take risks for a good story, and if I cracked this case it would be the break of a lifetime.

On the other side of me, Rupert opened the car door, and a cool breeze swilled in. I got out, grateful to be able to properly stretch. Rupert pulled at his brown linen shirt, tutting as he ran his hand over a tiny speck of dirt on his red trousers. His short blond hair was perfectly clipped, not a hair out of place, and his pale green eyes flicked over me as he frowned. He did not want me here; he had made that very clear. I was not part of the weekend he had imagined, and he was obviously used to things always going his way.

Immy straightened her pink hairband as she held a small mirror in front of her face, I guessed to check she looked okay after the drive. Not that she could ever look *bad*. Her skin was flawless, her eyes a beautiful deep brown, the same shade as her shiny hair. Her limbs were long and graceful, and she was wearing a skirt that skimmed the tops of her knees, and a

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sleeveless pink silk top, with a green belt and white loafers, looking all in all like she had just stepped off a catwalk.

She smiled at herself in her mirror, I assumed because she was satisfied with what she saw. Sure, it was vain, and this was one of many reasons to dislike her…but if I looked like her, I'd be the same. Worse, probably. Not that I thought I was *bad* looking. I had curly black hair and thick eyebrows I thought gave my face character… But, for many reasons, I would never be a model like Immy sort of was. I lacked the height, for one thing. And my posture was prawn-like, probably because I spent so much time hunched over my laptop.

"Great car," said Freddie to the driver, tapping the bonnet. He was shorter than Rupert, and more muscular, with brown hair and hazel eyes and a constant smirk on his face. Without the smirk he might have been good-looking, but it was a reminder of how he saw himself, as someone to be entertained, everyone else just pawns in his game. Nothing could have made someone less attractive to me. "I'm definitely going to ask my parents to get me one like this after I've passed my test."

The driver, a man I guessed was in his thirties, smiled and nodded. When Freddie looked away, though, he rolled his eyes. *Same, driver, same.*

Immy's parents had paid for a cab to bring us all the way here from Greyton – over a two-hour drive. No expense spared for their little angel. I couldn't help being impressed by the air-conditioned car and its smooth leather seats, and a speaker that connected to our phones so we could pick the music, with little bottles of water and Diet Cokes and sweets available. Freddie, Immy and Rupert had barely batted an eyelid – they

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were all incredibly clueless about how much money their families had compared to other people. That had become very apparent in the short time I had known them. My own frame of reference for cars was Mum's jerky old one that "still worked perfectly fine" even if the engine sometimes needed a hammer to get it started.

"Leave the driver alone," said Immy, shooting Freddie an irritated look. I wondered if she was more annoyed at Freddie actually *talking* to the driver – Karl – than she was about Freddie pestering him. For one thing, she somehow didn't know Karl's name, despite the fact he had introduced himself at the start of our journey and was wearing a name tag on his suit.

Rupert had stopped flicking imaginary dirt off himself and was staring at the house. I followed his gaze now that I could "take it all in". It was definitely…something.

We were in the middle of the woods. There were nothing but trees, trees and more trees surrounding us. We had passed through a small village a few miles up the road, which had a small shop for necessities. We were going to be alone – perfect for what Immy wanted. To get away from the stares, the gossip.

The reminders of their best friend – and what happened to her.

Another reason it was good we were going to be alone was that the house was made entirely of *glass*. No brick, no wood, just thick glass that you could look straight through. I could see the living room, with canary-yellow sofas. There was a bedroom on the first floor, the outline of the bed in shadow but clearly visible.

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I shivered. Being inside this place would be like living inside a fishbowl, on show to the world. I had no idea what was appealing about that. Immy's parents owned the house, and I'd looked it up, figuring it would be best if I knew as much as I could about the location, plan an escape route if I needed to. But annoyingly I couldn't find much online, and Immy hadn't been very forthcoming with information, shutting down any conversation when I asked her about it. *You're being invited on a free trip, Myra.* The additional words unspoken: *Why aren't you more grateful?* Like being in their company was a treat I should be craving.

Twats, the lot of them. And their families too, clearly, because what kind of people would buy a giant display cabinet in the middle of nowhere?

Rupert clicked his neck from side to side, and patted his hand against his hair, like he was concerned there might be a strand out of place. "I'll get our stuff," he said, shooting me another dirty look. Rupert was the kind of person the VIP area at a party was meant for – even if he was sitting in there alone. He liked the idea of exclusion, because that was what made things more *exclusive* for him. And he wanted to be the one in charge, making the decisions – not Immy. His irritation was carefully controlled though, his back straight as he headed to the boot of the car.

Immy had gone inside the house, and Freddie shoved his hands into his pockets, making it clear he wouldn't be helping. What was it like to be so used to other people doing everything for you that you even expected it of your friends? "This is your job, you know," he said to Karl. "You should be sorting our bags out."

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Karl stared back, his eyes hard. He was tall, his head shaved with the hint of a tattoo on his neck, peeking out from underneath his shirt. I reckoned he would easily deck Freddie in a fight, if it came down to it. Freddie had probably worked out the same thing too, because he clamped his mouth shut. Even he had to know his parents having a load of money wouldn't stop Karl lamping him. People like Freddie were cowards, at their core.

I settled my face into a more neutral position, not wanting to give away how lovely the idea of Freddie getting punched was to me. The three of them thought I was some sort of clinger-on, idolizing them and desperate to be near them and their money, like most other people they knew. That couldn't have been further from reality. Money had never appealed to me, especially when it was surrounded by the whiff of something rotten. Mum had raised me on the idea that, while plenty of things could be bought, *I* could not. My principles and my values were priceless. The most important currency to me was the truth – and Immy, Freddie and Rupert would not stop me getting it.

"Guys," said Immy, standing in the doorway. "You need to come and see this."

Rupert paused as he was about to lift a bright pink bag out of the boot – Immy's suitcase, which took up most of the room. Everyone else had packed for three nights – Immy would apparently be living in this house for ever.

"Let's just get these bags out of the boot, so the driver can get going," said Rupert. "He has a schedule he needs to follow, I assume." Ah, Rupert, ever the stickler for rules.

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"No," said Immy and she marched up to the driver. "Don't go yet. We still need you."

Rupert placed the suitcase down on the ground heavily, pressing his lips together. That word again – *no*. He didn't like it.

"I have another job," said the driver, but Immy shook her head.

"Speak to my parents; they'll pay you double to stay," she said. I blinked at her. What was going on? "None of our food has arrived," she said, twisting on her heel to face the rest of us. "All the cupboards are empty, the fridge… My parents have an agreement with the local shop, so the house gets stocked up before we arrive. This has never happened before. It's just the freezer that's full. With chunks of meat in plastic bags, all stacked up on each other. There's literally no space left."

I blinked at her. "Just that?" I asked. I wondered whose order ours got mixed up with, and why they needed so much meat.

Immy grimaced. "It's not even frozen – it's all bloody and raw. We must have just missed the delivery."

"No problem," said Freddie, as he turned to the driver. "You'll take us to the nearest store, yes?" It sounded more like an order than a question.

"I've got a local drop-off," said the driver. "I'll do that, and be back in an hour to take you to the shop. Double-rate, like you said."

Freddie rolled his eyes, but Immy nodded.

"Great," said the driver, as Rupert took out the other bags and shut the boot. "See you in an hour or so." His engine

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started, and I moved to give him space as he turned the car around and disappeared back along the single-track road.

I stared after him, the fumes dissipating into the breeze.

"He'd better come back," said Freddie. "I'm not living on dodgy meat for the next few days."

"He will," said Immy decisively. She seemed to be taking the delivery mix-up as a personal slight. This was definitely out of the ordinary, and I was on the lookout for anything strange – but I wasn't sure what I could take away from a freezer full of meat. I would have a look myself when I got a moment.

In the meantime, I needed to let Mum and Dad know I was here. They had been surprised when I told them I was going away with Immy, Rupert and Freddie, because nothing I had ever said suggested we were friends. I'd explained it by saying it might help me come to terms with everything that had happened if I spent a bit more time with the three of them, and that apparently had been convincing enough.

Except my phone had no signal. I moved a few paces, in case I was in a dead spot. But, nope, my phone still showed no bars. "Can anyone make a call with their phones?" I asked.

Immy shook her head. "Don't be silly," she said. "There's no signal here. Or internet."

She said it matter-of-factly, like it was something I should have known. A feeling of unease swept through me. What if Mum and Dad wanted to message me? What if something went wrong with my plan, and one of the others snapped and turned on me? We were isolated – there was no escape.

"No internet?" Freddie gaped at her, like this was the worst thing he'd ever heard. "What kind of holiday is this?"

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"This *isn't* a holiday," said Immy. "The purpose of this weekend is to reset. Recharge. Remember." She was normally addicted to her social media, so I guessed all the online talk about what had happened was wearing her down. "It's why I never invited you guys here before. But now it's a *perfect* place to come and have a digital detox."

Without another word, she turned and swept back into the glass house. I hesitated before following her.

The most important currency was the truth. I had come with a purpose. But despite *knowing* why I was here, what I wanted to achieve…I had a very bad feeling.

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