

THE EXECUTIONERS THREE

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THE EXECUTIONERS THREE



*When northern wind gusts
Through trees bare of leaves,
Take heed and take watch,
For Executioners Three.*

Their blood oath is summoning.

*First comes the fog,
Rising from the shore.
Once rings the bell:
Cold death is in store.*

The Hangsman is rising.

*Next are the crows
To block out the sun.
Then twice rings the bell,
To warn everyone.*

The Headsman is coming.

*Third comes the ice
Wreckt upon the stones.
Thrice rings the bell.
No chance to atone.*

The Disembowler is hunting.

*Last is the heat,
A sign it's too late.
No bells are rung
When the Three leave the gate.*

The Oathmaster is waiting.



SUMMONING

Theo Porter had just rounded the curve by City-on-the-Berme Park—that sharp turn with all the woods and the steep slope down to the lakeshore—when *bam!* Two baby raccoons came scuttling through the fog and into his headlights.

Theo hit the brakes and yanked the steering wheel left. The two raccoons had frozen, their eyes latched onto his low beams.

A sharp squeal across the pavement. Then a thump as he left the road, crunched onto grass and underbrush, and finally crashed sharply into a witch hazel. (He recognized those red and yellow leaves from botany class—a deeply unuseful fact right about now.)

“No, no, no,” he breathed to himself, heart hammering. In the dim red glow of his brake lights, he couldn’t see if the raccoons had made it to the other side of the road. In the much brighter glow of his headlights, he could definitely see his Honda Civic had not.

Three summers of working had bought him this Silver Sweetheart. Now she was scratched and dented, but he prayed she was at least able to get back onto the road.

He wanted to rewind time by ten seconds. He wanted to shout at the raccoons for trying to cross the street right then—he hadn’t seen them in all this fog. And he wanted to shout at himself for caring so much that he’d driven off the road to avoid them.

He could not afford a mechanic's bill right now.

"Come on," he murmured, shifting into reverse. "You can do it, Sweetheart." He eased his foot on the gas.

The Civic rolled back. Back some more. Then spun out.

Theo released the pedal. Digging the wheels in was only going to make this worse, and he absolutely could not afford a tow truck on top of everything else. He flicked on his emergency lights. There were no streetlights around, and the sun had long since dropped behind the lake. Each flash of orange revealed white fog and more white fog.

With a groan, Theo kicked open the car door. His Nokia buzzed in his jeans pocket, but he ignored it. It was probably just Davis wondering where the beer was.

Ever since the fall semester had begun, Theo had become official booze runner for the Allard Fortin Preparatory School. He'd set up a sweet deal with the dude at RaceTrac. In exchange for twenty bucks, that dude would pretend Theo's license didn't say 1982 and that the math didn't make Theo only seventeen in this year of 1999. Six cases of Natty Lite later, Theo would drive the beer to campus, sell them to his fellow Fortin Prep students at an upcharge of a dollar a can, and then pocket the difference in the envelope under his mattress. So far, he'd made almost a thousand bucks.

A thousand bucks he was now going to have to eat into if he wanted to get his car fixed.

Theo stepped around to the front of the Honda. The hood was dented, although not as badly as he'd feared. The bumper and grille were only moderately busted. So . . . yay?

He scowled at the witch hazel, which was barely scratched at all. Then he scowled in the general direction of the raccoons too, although they were long gone.

And honestly, he was glad he hadn't hit them.

Theo's breath plumed, tendrils of steam that glowed in his headlights. He was going to have to get some branches to wedge under the tires.

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Fortunately, there were plenty of branches to be found. Evergreens and autumn hardwoods spanned for miles in the county park here.

As Theo scanned what little forest he could see through all that fog and shadow, he regretted not keeping a flashlight in his car. Or a jacket.

He set off into the forest. His sneakers crunched over the first downfall of autumn leaves. In seconds, the fog and trees swallowed him. The last of his Silver Sweetheart's light faded, while a rotten smell gathered around him. As if maybe some other raccoons hadn't been so lucky when they'd crossed the road.

After thirty steps or so of wading through the fog, Theo finally tripped over maple branches hefty enough to withstand his tires. He crooked down to retrieve two when something glittered at the edge of his vision.

Theo paused.

Theo turned.

A long, coiling thing lay on the ground nearby. It was reddish, speckled with dirt, and every faint flash of distant emergency lights through mist made it glisten.

It looked, Theo thought, like the pig's intestine he'd had to dissect during AP Bio last spring. Or like a rope that had been left to soak in blood.

Theo followed the length of it, his blue eyes squinting in the fog and his hand still outstretched for a branch. He had never been a paranoid guy, but this felt . . . off.

The stink was getting worse too. Licking over him on the night's cold breeze.

His phone vibrated. He flinched. And suddenly the rope thing moved, slithering backward several inches.

Nope. Theo did not like that. He swooped up two sticks and twisted toward the road in a single movement.

The branches were cold and damp in his grip with a few leaves still hanging on. They rattled with each of his steps—

faster, faster as he jogged, then practically ran toward the street. Headlights swamped over him. The trees and fog fell away.

And Theo's breath whooshed out with relief. He felt immediately safer here.

Which was silly. Really silly.

Again, his phone buzzed.

"Piss off," he muttered. "The beer will get there when it gets there."

After snapping the branch in two—a feat that required several grunts and several snarls—Theo crouched behind his left front tire to wedge the branch under rubber. It smeared dirt all over his jeans.

It also seeped cold right into his bones.

Once the second branch was also firmly in place, Theo hurried for his driver's door, dusting dirt off his hands as he moved.

That was when a bell rang.

It pealed out, echoing over bare tree branches. Riding the lakeshore wind. A sharp, clear sound, much too close to be from any of the churches in Berm's downtown.

The hair on Theo's arms pricked up. On the back of his neck too, and without thinking, his eyes snapped to the forest. Toward the general spot where he'd seen that weird, glistening intestinal thing.

Click, click went his emergency lights. Noisy, bright. *Click, click.*

The smell was stronger, and the fog—had it gotten thicker?

Theo swallowed, eyes still latched on the enshrouded trees. He almost thought he saw a person in there. A hazy, grayish figure walking this way.

"Hello?" he shouted at it. "Is someone there?"

The figure halted, and Theo was hit with an overwhelming sense that he was being scrutinized. Judged. As if every misdeed he'd ever committed was being siphoned up to the surface and weighed on some unseen scale made of dead things.

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And, god, it really reeked of rotting corpses now. Theo couldn't stop imagining intestines and blood and ropes cutting into his neck . . .

In fact, every paranoid nightmare he'd ever conjured as a kid was searing through his mind. Murderers at the window. Demons in the closet. Ghosts under the bed.

Theo lifted his hands. They were shaking. "If you're, uh, not okay, let me know because I'm . . . I'm leaving now." He pivoted and bolted for the car.

"Please work," he muttered once inside. "Please work, please work." He was overreacting—he knew he was being a wuss about absolutely nothing. But that wasn't changing the fact that he could hardly breathe. That his neck felt like it was being squeezed by someone's dead fingers.

Ropes. Axes. Knives.

He revved the engine and shoved into reverse. His foot hit the gas, harder than was wise. *Spin, spin, spin.* The tires took to the branches. They crunched over maple wood. The Civic veered back onto pavement.

And Theo got the hell out of there.

The last thing he saw before he cranked into drive, his emergency lights still flashing, was a figure in the fog. Tall, broad-shouldered, and blurry around the edges, it hovered only feet from the witch hazel.

Flash. The figure stood there. *Flash.* The figure was still there. *Flash.* The figure was gone.



Freddie Gellar hadn't meant to get half the student body of Fortin Prep boarding school arrested. It wasn't like she'd woken up that morning and thought, *You know what? I feel like ruining lives at the rival high school today.*

Not at all. She'd simply heard shrieks coming from the woods near her house, so she'd called the cops. Like any *normal* human with a *normal* conscience would do.

Freddie stabbed her broom halfheartedly at a swarm of daddy longlegs who'd taken roost on the ladder inside the old schoolhouse. She was supposed to go into the cupola, with its broken bell, and string up fairy lights.

But so far, all she'd managed was to open the schoolhouse door, sweep around the benches that would soon get moved outside for the Lumberjack Pageant . . . and then cough dramatically at the gathered dust and cobwebs on the ladder.

The Fête du Bûcheron was in a little over two weeks, and that meant every inch of City-on-the-Berme Village Historique had to be ready for a shindig the locals took Very Seriously Indeed. Every year, the Village was open from Memorial Day to Labor Day. Then, the Village reopened its gates one extra day for the locals to celebrate Halloween.

Not only was it a big fundraiser for the Village, but it was also *the* event of the year for a town that was as insular as it was festive.

Which meant it was Freddie's mom's most important event of the year.

Freddie and a handful of volunteers had already spent the last two weeks helping Mom deck everything in jack-o'-lanterns, scarecrows, and an unseemly number of hay bales. La Maison Authentique du Bûcheron (the Authentic Lumberjack Homestead, which was neither authentic nor a homestead) was now a haunted house, complete with skeletons, mirrors, and hiding places for her stepdad, Steve, in ghost makeup.

La Taverne now housed all the necessary accoutrements to sell heaps of hot apple cider and Mrs. Ferris's famous jams, while La Marché d'Été (the summer market) was all ready for the jack-o'-lantern contest (whoever won that got to put a banner on their house for the entire year).

Lastly, two portable toilets had been tucked behind the tavern that didn't actually sell alcohol. No French placards for those. (*Port-A-Potty*, it would seem, was not worth translating.)

Freddie sighed toward her best friend, Divya, who leaned at the school's red clapboard entrance with all the cool poise of a runway model. The fall wind had picked up outside, lifting leaves and adding a lovely autumn glow to Divya's amber skin. It also made Divya shiver while she frantically played Snake on her Nokia.

"It just seems," Divya said now without looking up, "like a really hard mistake to make, Fred. I mean, surely you know what a bunch of rich kids drinking sounds like."

"Not really," Freddie admitted. "It's not like *I've* ever been to a party. Have you?"

Divya flashed a laser glare—and a sound like digital snake death beeped out. "You know I haven't. Unless you count our book club meet-ups with Abby and Tom. Those can get pretty rowdy sometimes."

Freddie didn't count those at all. A drunken teenage party was not the same thing as a spirited discussion of whatever novel Divya had insisted they read. (This month's selection had been *The Notebook*, which Freddie had found a little too light on murder for her tastes.)

Freddie stabbed more forcefully at this nest of longlegs (or was it a *swarm*?) blocking her from the schoolhouse bell twelve feet above. She really couldn't go up there until these were gone. With hair as wild and dark as hers, all those arachnids would get lost in a heartbeat.

Divya, meanwhile, slunk into the shadows of the school and notably *didn't* offer to help Freddie as she eased onto a bench. After all, it wasn't *her* mom who was head of the City-on-the-Berme Historical Society. And no matter how many times Freddie pointed out to Mom that it was illegal to force her daughter to prepare for the fête every year, Mom just laughed and said, "Great. In that case, you can find somewhere else to live."

Although, for all Freddie's vocal complaints (she was very, *very* vocal), she secretly loved volunteering here. City-on-the-Berme was her favorite place in the whole world. Part tourist attraction, with its only moderately accurate French logging settlement, and part outdoor center, with the county park trails winding through the forest next door—you couldn't get more autumn creeptastic than this place.

Which was likely why the fête was always the biggest event of the year for locals.

And also why Mom always put so much pressure on Freddie to help.

Last night, however, things had gone awry. After Freddie had finished helping Mom with the hay bales, she'd left her scarf behind. And seeing as it was her favorite scarf (and therefore crucial for the completion of any fall outfit), she'd set out for the City-on-the-Berme Village Historique on Steve's rickety bike after dinner.

Freddie never made it to the Village—or found her scarf, for that matter. The trail had been dangerously foggy, her headlamp bouncing beams everywhere, and there'd been an awful stench like dead animals in the air. So strong, so overwhelming, that Freddie had actually thought she might gag.

It had forced her to stop her bike just so she could cover her mouth and try to breathe. The fog definitely hadn't helped. Freddie'd had the horrifying sense it was alive and trying to climb inside her.

Then a bell had tolled from somewhere in the trees, even though there was only the one bell in City-on-the-Berme (currently over Freddie's head) and it had no clapper so it *couldn't* ring.

Freddie had not liked that sound. Nor the way she'd suddenly felt the fog tighten as if solid around her throat.

So the instant she had heard frantic shrieking from the woods nearby, she'd needed no urging whatsoever to turn around and pedal straight home again.

She had seen enough *X-Files* and read enough *Goosebumps*, thank you very much, to know how this sort of story would end.

Once home, she'd called the cops. Unfortunately, instead of finding a Person in Distress Being Slowly Dismembered in the old logging forests of City-on-the-Berme, Sheriff Bowman had found an unauthorized bonfire and a lot of underage drinking.

Divya kicked her legs onto the bench in front of her. "Look, Fred, I'll *grudgingly* accept that neither of us knows much about parties or partying or anything associated with the verb 'to party,' but surely you can tell the difference between someone screaming bloody murder and someone screaming for more beer."

"Can I, though?" Freddie asked. "Because it sounded like bloody murder to me. I mean, glass containers aren't even allowed in City-on-the-Berme, Div."

"Pretty sure the Fortin kids don't care about that part. They're also under twenty-one." Divya gave a low whistle. "Oh boy, I hope they don't know that it was you who called the cops on them."

Freddie's stomach flipped. She hadn't thought of that. "How could they possibly know?"

Divya shrugged. "Dunno. But it's a small town. People talk."

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Freddie winced. That phrase—*It's a small town, people talk*—might as well have been the town motto for Berm, population 1,321. There were more deer here than people, and if the deer could talk, they probably would too.

Freddie's only possible saving grace was that almost all of the students at Fortin Prep were from out of town, and the one thing Bermians hated more than a disruption to their beloved fête was out-of-towners. They even said it that way—*out-of-towners*—like it was a dirty word, and tourists were only accepted as long as they didn't stay for more than a long weekend during the summer.

When at last the daddy longlegs were vanquished from the ladder, Freddie retrieved the necessary fairy lights from a box by Divya's bench. "Thanks for the help," Freddie said with as much sarcasm as she could muster.

"Any time," Divya murmured, once more playing Snake. "Can we go to the archives now?"

"No." Freddie sniffed. "The agreement was that you'd help me clean up the old schoolhouse, and *then* I would take you to the archives."

"But my paper is due Monday, Fred." Divya finally shoved her phone into her pocket. "I can't wait any longer."

"Well, maybe you should have thought of that before you spent the last ten minutes playing Snake." Freddie notched her chin high and sashayed away from Divya, a trail of lights dragging over the wooden planks behind her.

"I'll help now." Divya chased after.

"Too late." Freddie reached the ladder, and with one handful of lights, she lumbered up.

"Please, Fred." Divya hugged at the ladder below and shot dramatic puppy eyes upward. "Just tell me what to do. Pwetty pwease?" She fluttered her lashes. "I can plug in the lights . . . or . . . sweep?"

"I already swept." Really, had her bestie been paying any attention? "You're going to have to get more creative, Madame

Srivastava. Think *firstborn child* or *family inheritance*. Then I might reconsider.”

Freddie reached the top of the ladder. Cold air billowed against her—and the Village Historique spanned beyond. Beautiful, vibe-y, and always right on the edge of falling apart because there never seemed to be enough funding.

Straight ahead was the Village Square, soon to be filled with the Lumberjack Pageant stage but currently only filled with hay bales and scarecrows, one of which appeared to be waving, thanks to the wind.

“New idea,” Divya called from below. “What if I lend you Lance?”

Oh, now we’re talking. “Two weeks,” Freddie replied as she unknotted fairy lights. “I want him two weeks.”

“One.”

“Two or I climb down and leave you stranded.”

“Ugh, *fine*. You can have him for two weeks.”

Huzzah. Freddie grinned at the bronze bell before her, with its green outer patina. *I am so getting the better end of this bargain.*

Creak, creak, the bell agreed, since it had no clapper—meaning when a wind tumbled through the cupola or Freddie wrapped lights around it, the poor thing could only give a sad squeal upon its hinge.

Still, that didn’t mean it couldn’t be the bell she’d heard last night . . . And there was only one way to find out. Freddie grabbed the bell now and shook it.

Creak, creak, creak, it said in reply.

She gave it one more heave, just to be sure . . .

Creak, creak, creak.

Yep, okay. Freddie could now say with absolute certainty that this was *not* the bell she’d heard, and if this thing had ever tolled with any dignity, those days were long past.

Which was fine. It didn’t need to ring. It was just a replica of the bronze bell over at the Allard Fortin mausoleum anyway.

Although, to be honest, the replica was looking pretty rough this year—like maybe the guy Mom had hired to make it hadn't done a very good job. Once she'd covered the bell in lights like a sad Christmas tree, Freddie scuttled down. She was absolutely freezing now, and truly mourning the loss of her scarf. "I'll take Lance, please." She thrust her hand at Divya.

Who scowled. Then also obeyed and withdrew the sacred keychain from her pocket. A heartbeat later, the face of Lance Bass gleamed up at Freddie.

And Freddie sighed a melty sigh as she accepted Lance's flawless face. He fit so perfectly in her palm, a tiny slice of boy band magic. Whenever Divya (or Freddie) had it with her, good things happened. *Magical* things, like finding fifty-dollar bills in the road or repeated Good Hair Days.

Freddie blew Lance a kiss, then slipped him into her puffer vest. "Alright," she declared, chin rising in triumph, "follow me, Madame Srivastava. I shall lead you to the archives!"

She marched them out of the schoolhouse. If she twisted slightly, she could see Le Moulin à Eau (the water mill) through a copse of coppery maples. Currently, no paddles spun.

South of that was Le Forgeron (the blacksmith), which technically had a working forge . . . but also *technically* lacked a working blacksmith to use it. It had been modeled on a smithy that had been in the original City-on-the-Berme in the 1600s—and it was thanks to the blacksmith at the time keeping meticulous journals that Mom had been able to make the replica bell that now lived in the schoolhouse without its clapper.

It was toward this storied blacksmith's hut that Freddie and Divya now aimed. They reached the stream that fed its forge, glittering, burbly, and dark with cold. The sign in front that read *Le Forgeron* had a fresh streak of bird poop on it. So now it just read *Le Forger(splat)*.

Freddie scowled at the poop. She should probably clean it before the fête.

She and Divya were just rounding the building so they could embark into the woods when footsteps stomped out. A figure barreled into view. "Hey," he said.

And Freddie's heart lurched into her throat. Luis Mendez, star athlete and fellow senior at Berm High, had just spoken to her. Even more bizarre, he wasn't done speaking *and* he was smiling. "Gellar," he panted. "Nice to see you."

Then he was past Freddie in a gust of sweaty air.

"Um . . ." Divya wiggled a pinkie in her ear. "Did Luis Mendez just say your name?"

"I think so." Freddie was as fully stunned as Divya. Every day, the Berm High cross-country team ran the park's paths. Sometimes they nodded her way, but 99.9999 percent of the time, they ignored her existence.

"Gellar!" cried a new voice. Then another and another, and suddenly an entire swarm (or was it a *nest*?) of boys was charging past. Zach Gilroy and Darius Baker even slung out their hands for high fives.

Freddie complied, although she wasn't entirely sure how. Her brain had basically disconnected from her body, and she could feel her jaw dangling low. In seconds, the entirety of the boys' team had jogged past. Which meant that any second now, the girls would—

"Freddie!" shrieked Carly Zhang as she bounded by. "Nice job!"

"Nice job on what?" Freddie tried to ask, but Carly was already gone, and now cheers were rising up as a second stampede of bodies rushed closer.

"We have officially entered *The X-Files*," Divya said as feet and ponytails thundered past, and Freddie could only nod in agreement. Even the blacksmith's hut seemed faintly astonished, its wooden exterior creaking on the wind.

Then, as fast as the Berm High cross-country teams had appeared, they vanished again. Which wasn't terribly surprising, given there were only seventeen runners across both teams.

Last, because he was always last (except in the jack-o'-lantern contest of '95), came poor Todd Raskin, ever determined to dominate his asthma through sheer perserverance.

"Do you need your inhaler?" Freddie asked as he heaved past.

"Nah," he wheezed. "Thanks, Gellar. And good job!"

"I think," Divya said, slipping her arm back through Freddie's as they watched Todd tromp away, "that you're *popular* now, Freddie. This is . . . well, monumental, certainly."

"Or just weird." Despite Freddie's greatest belief in her own fortitude, her knees were quaking inside her jeans. "Why would everyone like me all of a sudden? I don't think Carly has talked to me since seventh grade."

"Erm." Divya's face scrunched into something almost pained. "I think this means they all know you got the Fortin kids arrested. Which means . . ." She paused to bite her lip. "Well, the Fortin Prep kids probably know too. After all, Fred, it's a small town."

Freddie sighed. "And people talk."

Leaves rattled beneath Freddie's boots as she trekked down one of the many sloping hills in the park that spread beyond the Village. Beneath the leaf litter, mud squicked, and every few steps, water had the audacity to splatter. Good thing Freddie always wore her duck boots in the fall.

Divya was not as well prepared. "Are you sure this path is a shortcut?" she asked, ten paces behind Freddie and lagging farther each second. Her feet, clad only in formerly-beige-but-now-mucky-brown Birkenstock clogs, were not faring well—and Divya had made sure to point this out almost every step of the way.

"Of course it's a shortcut." Freddie laughed as if to say Divya was ridiculous for suspecting otherwise. She did not mention that *this path* was really just an ephemeral stream that tended to fill with mosquitos in the summer.

"We've been out here five minutes—"

"Oh my god, *five minutes*." Freddie made a *Home Alone* face. "Div, you're the toughest gal I know. You can handle this trek—I promise. And if your shoes get too muddy, I'll carry you."

"Oh yeah?" Divya snorted a laugh. Her face was now as rosy as the cross-country team's. "You mean like that time you carried me to my room after I twisted my ankle? I remember how that ended."

Freddie flipped her hair. "I *meant* to fall down the stairs, Divya. It's called *comedy*."

"And this place is called *horror*." Divya shivered. "I mean, we could die out here and no one would know! I don't have cell service, which is always how slasher movies start—"

She broke off as wind burst through the trees. It carried leaves and dust. Freddie's hair sprayed into her face.

Then the wind settled. One breath, two, before a loud creaking split the trees.

It was like groaning wood, but subtler. Higher pitched.

And cold trickled down Freddie's neck. She gulped. "Did you hear that, Div?"

"The wind?" Divya shivered. "How could I miss it? I should've worn my winter coat."

"That's not it." Freddie turned toward the sound. It had come from farther down the hill.

The creak repeated, shuddering deep into her ear. She knew that sound, and yet she couldn't pinpoint how.

Divya scampered in close, worry pinching her forehead. "What do you hear, Fred?"

"Something isn't right." As soon as Freddie said that, she knew it was true. Deeply, terrifyingly true.

Divya tensed beside her. "Is it your gut?" Like everyone else, she knew that Freddie's gut was foolproof. Freddie had sensed three tornadoes *and* a kitchen fire before they'd happened. Plus, she'd known Divya's cat was dying before anyone else had even sensed Rasputin was acting sluggish.

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She threw a hard look at Divya. Her best friend's flush was gone; her lips were pale. "Div," she said softly, "I think you should go back to the Village, okay? And call the sheriff. She needs to be here."

Somehow, Divya's face went even whiter. "What about you?"

"I've got experience with this kind of stuff."

"What kind of stuff? Creepy forests? I'm pretty sure a few weeks riding last summer with Sheriff Bowman does not mean you can waltz through here looking for trouble."

Freddie wasn't just waltzing. She'd done two summer internships with her hero, Sheriff Rita Bowman, and even though they'd never encountered anything truly horrific, she *had* learned what to do at a crime scene. "Please, Div. Just go."

"Absolutely not." Divya took Freddie's hand in hers.

And Freddie swallowed. She did feel safer having Divya there, and she supposed every sheriff needed a deputy. "Come on, then."

They resumed their march, hands held and eyes watering against the wind. The trees blurred. Freddie's boots kicked up mud and decomposing leaves. She barely noticed. The creaking sound was getting louder. It grated against her skin.

Then the forest opened up, and the girls skittered to a stop.

Freddie released Divya's hand. She knew what the sound was now: the groaning of a rope. The gritting of fibers against each other as if a body was being towed downward and swung on the wind.

She spun and spun, but there was nothing there. Nothing but raging wind and spraying leaves—

A crow cawed. High and just beyond the clearing.

Freddie's gaze lurched up, to a sycamore. To a branch so high, no human could have possibly reached it.

Yet someone had.

"Divya." Freddie clutched her stomach. "Cover your eyes. We're leaving."



Freddie's mom had never been one to fuss. Now, though, it was all she seemed able to do. Ever since Sheriff Bowman had called and told her to pick up Freddie from the Village Historique the evening before, Mom had been nonstop fuss-fuss-*fuss*.

Freddie wanted to throttle her.

Especially because Freddie hadn't even seen the body (which apparently belonged to a middle-aged man). All she'd seen were a pair of dangling Nikes, blue with orange accents. Mud on the tread.

And *yes*, it was true that those shoes were imprinted on Freddie's brain for all of time now, but cups of tea and Snickers bars weren't exactly helping. Nor was tucking Freddie into bed, stroking her hair every ten seconds, or surprising her with a "real breakfast" of bacon and eggs.

By the time Freddie was supposed to meet Divya to walk to school the next morning, she was desperate to get away. She didn't care that it was raining. She didn't care that her usual Friday outfit of cute tights and a festive fall skirt was missing an accent scarf and now getting wet. Nor did she care that, in her race to leave the house, she'd forgotten to trade her glasses for contacts.

Why, Freddie didn't even care that she couldn't roll her bike by the handlebars *and* fit under Divya's umbrella either. She was free, and it tasted so good. Drizzle-frizzed hair or eighth-grade glasses couldn't ruin it.

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Divya, it would seem, felt the same. She and Freddie had just stepped off Freddie's leaf-strewn lawn onto the street when Divya tipped back her umbrella and said, "My mom wants me to see a counselor."

"Mine too." Freddie's nostrils flared, and she pushed the bike faster. "Parents don't know anything."

"Old people don't know anything." Divya stomped her feet. "I mean, I didn't even see the body!"

"And I only saw his shoes!"

"So we definitely aren't traumatized." Divya flipped her braid over her shoulder.

"Definitely not." Freddie mimicked the movement with her rapidly expanding curls. "It takes more than a little murder to scare the likes of us."

"Exactly. No, wait." Divya skidded to a halt. "*Murder?* What are you talking about? It was a suicide."

Freddie squeezed her bike brakes. "That was not a suicide, Div."

"Uh, Sheriff Bowman herself said it was a suicide."

"The body was hanging twenty feet off the ground." Freddie rolled the bike backward, then ducked under Divya's umbrella. At least far enough to protect her hair.

"So? Maybe the man wanted a climb before he died."

"A climb on what ladder? And on what branches? There wasn't a single thing he could've used to get up there."

"So what are you trying to say?" Divya launched back into a march. Rain sprayed Freddie once more. "Are you saying you know better than Sheriff Bowman?"

"Maybe?" Freddie pushed her bike after Divya. "You didn't hear the screams on Wednesday night."

"You mean the screams of drunk prep schoolers?"

"But what if that wasn't what I heard, Div? What if I *did* hear screams for help?"

"Sheriff Bowman was in those woods arresting people. Surely if there'd been a murder underway, she would've heard those screams too."

"Okay, but how do you account for the dead guy's clothes? He was wearing jogging shoes. Who dresses up like that to go kill themselves?"

"I don't know." Divya shook the umbrella. Rain splattered. "But I do know you're not a detective. Just because you solved one shoplifting case when you were riding with Bowman does not qualify you as a pie."

"A pie?" Freddie cocked her head. "You mean a . . . PI?"

"It can be pronounced both ways."

"It definitely cannot."

"That's not the point!" Divya shook the umbrella again, and this time, rain splattered Freddie's face. "The point is that you aren't a *Pee Eye*, and while I get that your gut is doing its spidey-sense tingling, maybe you should leave it to the actual professionals."

Freddie's fingers instinctively tightened on the brakes. The bike gave a skittering skip. She knew Divya was thinking about Sheriff Bowman right now, since Bowman was the current "professional" in charge of such things.

But Freddie couldn't help but think of her dad instead. He had been local sheriff before Bowman—meaning he *would* have been the "professional" that Freddie would leave this murder to . . . if he hadn't died when Freddie was five.

Sometimes she wondered if it was mere coincidence she wanted to follow him on the same career path. Her mom had divorced Frank when Freddie had been only two, so she'd barely known the man, and she'd learned young to never ask about him.

The consequences just weren't worth the curiosity. Mom always clammed up and got stony—sometimes for days at a time—while Freddie's stepdad, Steve, just looked heartbreakingly sad.

Freddie hated it. And she hated how even thinking of Dad made her own insides get stony. Made her feel guilty, like she'd broken some rule that no one had ever actually told her was in effect.

She squeezed again at the brakes. They squeaked a sympathetic reply.

"I know I'm not a professional," Freddie finally admitted, pushing past the sudden rocks in her abdomen. "Not yet anyway. But you know I'm the Answer Finder, Divya. Everyone at school asks me to find them sources in the archives. Like all the time."

This earned one of Divya's *you sweet, innocent child* faces. "Oh my Honey Bunches of Oats. You're just being used."

"You mean *you're* using me."

"Never." Scowl. "Second of all, having access to the archives via your *mom* doesn't qualify you to investigate murders."

"Ha!" Freddie cried. "So you *do* think it was a murder!"

"Silence." Divya's eyes narrowed in a way that spoke of bodily harm in Freddie's future.

Fortunately Freddie was saved the indignity of not getting in the last word by an explosion of flapping wings. Then a shadow stretched over Freddie and Divya. They lurched their faces upward, to where . . .

Freddie gasped.

Birds. Hundreds of them, maybe even thousands, covered the sky like a thundercloud. Freddie huddled toward Divya, who huddled toward her, and they both took shelter beneath the umbrella.

At least until muddy water sprayed upward in a geyser, drenching Freddie's entire body. She shrieked, Divya yelped. Then the crows were past and a black Jeep Cherokee was skidding to a stop on the road.

"*Jerk!*" Divya bellowed, launching herself at the Jeep. "*Giant jerkity jerk!*"

A door slammed and a voice called out, "Are you okay?" A boy scrambled around the back of the Jeep. "Crap, I am so sorry! My bad, my bad, are you okay?"

"No," Divya snarled. "You almost killed us."

Freddie grabbed for her best friend. "That's Kyle Friedman," she hissed.

"I'm aware." Divya lifted her voice again. "You should watch the freaking road. My friend here is soaked—" She broke off with a yelp as Freddie stabbed Divya's wrist with her nails.

Kyle Friedman was the coolest guy in school, and he had been ever since sixth grade when he'd shown up at school with the words *Surf's Up* monogrammed onto his L.L. Bean backpack. He progressed to the *hottest* guy at school two years later, when he hit puberty and his jawline came in.

"I'm so sorry," Kyle said again, and Freddie couldn't help but notice how well the slightly panicked and disheveled look worked for him. His white button-up was turning dark with the rain, and his brown curls looked shower fresh, while pink flagged on his summer-tanned cheeks. "I didn't mean to splash you like that."

"It's fine," Freddie said, surprised by the strange syrup layer on her voice.

"No, it isn't." Divya gaped at Freddie. "These jeans are new, and your sweater is drenched."

Kyle flinched. "I really am sorry." Then his eyebrows drew together. "Wait . . . you're Freddie Gellar."

Freddie nodded mutely. Kyle Friedman had said her name. She didn't think he had ever said her name despite three plus years in the same homeroom.

It was glorious.

Then it became even more glorious when he added, "Awesome! I was looking for you."

I was looking for you too, she thought. *All my life*. She sent a silent thank-you to Lance Bass in her pocket.

"Laina told me you lived on this street, but I didn't know which house."

"Laina?" Divya repeated, anger giving way to shock. "As in Laina Steward?"

Kyle beamed. "Exactly. I'm supposed to pick you up."

"Pick who up?" This was Divya again because Freddie had lost all ability to speak. Kyle was just so pretty with his green

eyes, golden tan, and floppy dark hair. Part surfer, part prep, part athlete, and *all* perfection.

"I'm supposed to pick up Freddie," he said. "And take her to the Quick-Bis." He paused and wet his lips, as if realizing this sounded very strange. "I mean, you don't have to come . . . Or you both could come, if you wanted." He glanced between them.

"We will definitely come," Freddie breathed at the same instant Divya barked, "*Divya*. My name is Divya."

"And his name is Kyle." Freddie grabbed Divya's bicep in a death grip. "Can we please get in the car now?"

Divya glared. "What about your bike?"

"We can fit it in the trunk," Kyle offered, and Freddie only nodded. Then her heart ramped up to light speed because suddenly Kyle was touching her. He was resting one of his perfect hands on her muddy shoulder and guiding her toward his car.

She could die a self-actualized person now.

While he shoved the bike into the back, Freddie hunkered into the passenger seat and started cleaning mud splatter off her glasses. Her shoulder felt seared by his fingertips.

In a good way. *Swoon*.

Divya, meanwhile, climbed into the back and pushed through the front seats. "Um, where are your survival instincts, Miss PI? The most popular guy in school shows up to find you—at the command of the most popular *girl* in school—and you don't think that's weird?"

"Yes," Freddie whispered, glancing at Kyle back by the trunk. "I do think it's weird, but he's just so handsome."

"If you're drunk."

"As if you know anything about being drunk. Besides, you *know* I've had a crush on him since sixth grade."

"A crush that ended in seventh grade!"

"But has now resumed with heart-stopping force."

Divya emitted a half groan and flopped backward right as Kyle hopped into the driver's seat. "Are you sure you're not hurt?"

He shot Freddie a nervous glance while he cranked the car into gear.

"I'm . . . fine?" She was struggling to summon coherent words. It would seem her entire brain had been invaded by white noise. "I . . . I was just surprised," she finally squeezed out. "It was a lot of water."

Divya snorted from the back seat.

And Kyle cringed. It made his forehead pucker in the most adorable way. "Did you guys see all the crows? There must've been thousands of 'em. They'd totally blocked out the sky." He motioned vaguely to where the sun was just beginning to peek over the red and gold hills of Berm. No birds flew there now.

"We saw them," Divya said.

"I thought it was an eclipse at first." Kyle flicked the turn signal at the only stoplight in Berm. To their left, the Fortin Park lawn was covered in a fresh smattering of fiery maple leaves. "But then the darkness kept on moving, and I realized it was birds. And then . . ." He glanced at Freddie. "I splashed you. And I'm really sorry about that."

Freddie felt her cheeks erupt with pink. "It's okay."

"No, it isn't." Divya inhaled, clearly about to launch into a tirade that would likely hurt poor Kyle's sensitive feelings.

So Freddie jumped in first: "How did you know they were crows? Did you see them up close or something?"

Kyle's cheeks bunched upward—and Freddie thought her heart would melt. He just oozed with an I-don't-ever-know-what's-going-on sort of handsome. "Naw. I just assumed it was like in that poem, you know?"

Freddie and Divya exchanged a glance. "Er," Freddie said. "Poem?"

"Yeah. Something about bells tolling and crows blocking the sun."

Freddie's brows pinched together. There *was* something vaguely familiar about that, although nothing obvious was churning up in her memory banks.

And beautiful Kyle was still talking: “I don’t really know. I just remember it was in an old book my mom had in the garage, and it gave me nightmares. So she threw it away.”

“Understandable.” Freddie nodded solemnly. “That sounds deeply traumatizing, Kyle.”

Divya rolled her eyes. “Not as traumatizing as Kyle’s driving.”

Freddie and Kyle both ignored this comment as they rolled into the tiny downtown—even more festive than the Village Historique with its twinkling fairy lights strung around tree trunks, with its jack-o’-lanterns and autumnal wreaths, with its fallen leaves that brightened the sidewalks like new pennies.

At a four-way stop, Kyle flashed Freddie a shy smile.

And Freddie wilted. Like, literally *wilted*.

Sure, she had almost been run over, her sweater was possibly ruined, and her best friend clearly thought her selection in boys was lacking, but as far as Freddie was concerned, none of that really mattered. She was a self-actualized human now, and really: What more could a gal ask for in life?

Thank you, Lance Bass. Oh, thank you, indeed.

The Quick-Bis was the closest thing to fast food in Berm. As such, it was always crowded. No matter that it only served a handful of items, nor that it was perpetually greasy and imparted all entrants with a scent like *eau de biscuit*. The cuisine was cheap, and as the name implied: it was quick.

It was also 100 percent *verboten*. Freddie’s mom never let her eat there—not even when the book club sometimes met there instead of the library.

More like Heart-Attack-Bis, Mom would say coldly whenever they drove by—and as much as Freddie always wanted to point out that one biscuit wouldn’t kill her, Freddie’s dad *had* died of a heart attack. So a general fury toward all things high-cholesterol seemed to be one of Mom’s coping mechanisms.

Which meant in the end, it was just easier to never ask for biscuits than to risk triggering some onslaught of Dad-shaped feelings that Freddie didn't want her or her mom to have to deal with.

Originally, the Quick-Bis had been called the *BisQuick*. Until the actual Bisquick company had quickly swooped in for trademark violation. So Mr. Bromwell, the owner, had simply rearranged the sign outside, and voilà. Problem solved. Quick-Bis it was. He even plopped a cement pilgrim out front with a sign that read *Even First Settler Allard Fortin Gets His Biscuits Here*.

Freddie's mom hated that pilgrim even more than she hated the cholesterol. *Allard Fortin wasn't a pilgrim*, Mom would always rant, *and he wasn't the first settler in the region—those were the Native Americans who lived fifty miles to the north*. When the Fake Fortin (Mom's name for him) became a frequent target for drive-by tippings by out-of-towners, she cheered. When Mr. Bromwell then chained Fake Fortin in place and changed the sign to *Even the Ghost of Allard Fortin Gets His Biscuits Here*, her scowls and rants resumed.

Freddie liked Fake (Ghost) Fortin. He was kind of cute, even if one nostril had broken in the last tipping.

As the Jeep pulled past him into the crowded parking lot, the rain was really dumping down. It forced Freddie, Divya, and Kyle to bolt at top speed into the buttery building of blue and yellow decor. Not that Freddie noticed the downpour. She was floating too high on Kyle's smile.

Murder in the woods? Pshaw. Sweater that smelled like a barnyard? Eh. Kyle's hair looked *so good* all wet from the rain.

It wasn't until she reached a booth by the window that Freddie's euphoria finally cracked. Because sitting before her were the most popular kids from Berm High.

And every one of them was smiling at her.

Luis Mendez, his red letterman jacket almost as bright and gleaming as his smile, sat against the window. He had one arm

slung casually around his girlfriend, Cat Nguyen, whose warmer brown skin contrasted with his paler skin. Cat's mustard turtleneck, umber sweater vest, and perfectly matching plaid skirt looked exactly how Freddie wanted to dress (yet could never actually manage).

Across from Cat and Luis sat the crowning queen of them all: Laina Steward, a Black girl with dark, cool-toned skin and long braids. She wore fishnets and combat boots no matter the weather, carried nunchucks in her backpack (and knew how to use them), was a competition cheerleader *and* class president, and *also* listened to punk rock and regularly debated Mr. Grant on the merits of socialism in a democratic state.

Laina was not only the coolest girl at Berm High School, but the coolest girl who had *ever lived*. This was a widely known fact, and no one who had ever met her could argue otherwise.

"I found them!" Kyle beamed at his fellow nobility and snagged two free chairs from a nearby table.

"Them?" Cat's smile faltered at the sight of Divya tucked behind Freddie. "It was supposed to be just Gellar."

"Who else did you bring?" Laina asked. Then her eyes slid past Freddie and her grin widened. "Divya, right?"

Divya choked softly, and Freddie turned, alarmed—only to find her best friend flushing furiously and looking as lost as Freddie had felt with Kyle.

"Yes, Madame Class President," Freddie inserted. "This is Divya Srivastava."

"Eep," Divya agreed.

"That means hello, Madame Class President."

Laina's smile widened. "You don't have to call me that—though I do think it's funny."

"President Steward, then." Freddie smiled back. "Someone with your title deserves at least a little recognition."

This earned her a full bark of laughter. Laina motioned to the empty booth seat beside her. "Sit, you guys."

Freddie moved to obey; Divya, however, did not. Which left Freddie with no choice but to grab her best friend's forearm and shove her into the booth. Then Freddie chose a newly added chair at the end.

Instead of sitting beside her, though, Kyle looked down and asked, "Want a biscuit? I'm gonna grab one."

Now it was Freddie's turn to *eep* and Divya's turn to take action. "She does. And I do too, thanks."

With a nod, Kyle ambled off—and Freddie thanked Lance in her pocket. He was really on a roll today.

"Welcome," Laina said, bracing her elbows on the table. "I'm sure you can guess why you're here. After all, your record speaks for itself."

My record? Freddie almost asked—but then it hit her. Of course. *It's a small town, people talk.* "You mean the arrests?"

"Hear, hear!" Laina drumrolled the table.

"A stroke of genius," Luis declared.

And even Cat thawed enough to say, "You knocked out two-thirds of their football team."

"About that." Freddie pushed her glasses up her nose. "There seems to have been a misunderstanding—*oof*." Freddie's shin erupted with pain, and when she glanced Divya's way, the laser-beam stare was at maximum power.

"A misunderstanding?" Laina's drumrolling paused.

Another kick. A harder glare, and Freddie was left with no choice but to say, "Erm, yes. You see . . . it wasn't my idea alone, but Divya's too."

"Heyyyyy." Luis grinned Divya's way, and Cat finally thawed completely—even offering Divya an approving once-over.

Laina just nodded like she'd known this all along. Divya blushed prettily.

"Should we wait for Kyle?" Cat tugged her purse over and unbuckled the clasp.

"Naw." Luis waved her on. "Kyle can catch up."

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So Cat withdrew a worn, blue-bound book. In faded script on the spine, it read *Official Log*.

And in perfect synchrony, everyone dipped in low across the table. Even Freddie and Divya. There was a reverence in the way Cat held the book—and in the way she, Luis, and Laina gazed at its canvas cover.

“This,” Cat said dramatically, “is a log of every prank ever pulled by the Berm High seniors.”

Freddie and Divya both gasped in unison. Everyone in Berm knew about the prank war with Fortin Prep—because of course they did. There was no missing the spray-painted lawns or disrupted football games or dyed marching band uniforms or *insert any other obvious prank here* that happened each fall.

Yet for all that locals saw the effects of the prank war, no one ever knew who was behind them. It was like the secretest of secret societies.

“It all started when the bell went missing from the Allard Fortin mausoleum in 1975.” Cat creaked back the cover on the log. “The Fortin students blamed us—even though we obviously didn’t do it, since the bell was found years later.”

Freddie nodded emphatically at this. She might not have known about the school prank war origins, but she *did* know heaps about the missing bell. After all, it had been her mom who’d first worked to get a replica made for the mausoleum. And then it had been *her* mom who’d found the original bell hiding in plain sight in the schoolhouse years later.

“Fortin Prep retaliated against Berm,” Cat continued, “by putting underwear on the school’s flagpoles.” She tapped the logbook, where sure enough the first line read, *October 27, 1975: Fortin Prep stole BHS flags and put up lingerie.*

“We of course had to respond.” This came from Laina, whose voice was suitably grave for discussions of such weight. “So we stole their mascot. A woodchuck named Bubba. Then they painted our football field, so we covered theirs in cat litter.”

"It has gone back and forth like that ever since." Cat flipped pages. "And this journal contains twenty-four years' worth of those pranks. Now we"—she stopped two-thirds of the way in—"are right here." She tapped at the bottom of the page, where it now read, *October 13, 1999: Freddie Gellar got half of Fortin Prep arrested.*

"Oh," Freddie exhaled, heart pattering ever so slightly. Her act of terrified conscience had landed her in the Official Log. She felt Very Exalted Indeed. In fact, for the first time since Wednesday night, she felt like she might have done a *good* thing.

"And when we graduate," Luis inserted, "we'll pass this log on to a few chosen juniors, just as the class of '98 passed it on to us. So you see? This book right here is sacred, and now you have to swear to never tell a soul about it."

Again, Freddie and Divya reacted in unison, each nodding. Each offering a rapturous "We swear."

Yet before Freddie could ask if the Prank Squad was sure they wanted to include a lowlife like *her* in their ranks, a figure moved into Freddie's periphery.

Kyle, she assumed, and instantly her body flooded with heady flames.

Until she realized no one was smiling. In fact, Cat was suddenly closing the Official Log, Laina's teeth were baring, and Luis was puffing his shoulders to twice their size. Divya blinked Freddie's way, so Freddie blinked her neighbor's way.

To find that he was not, in fact, Kyle Friedman. This boy was a head taller than Kyle. Lankier too, and where Kyle's hair was a dark chocolate shade, this boy's was a dishwater blond combed into side-swept perfection. He also lacked Kyle's tan, his skin instead a perfect match for Tom Cruise's in *Interview with the Vampire*.

And the biggest difference of all: this guy wore a Fortin Prep uniform. A navy blazer with the school's initials, a scarlet tie,

and fitted khakis—all of it impeccably tailored and ironed.

He looked like he'd stepped right out of the TV. Not in a hot way, like Kyle, but in the *I am a stereotypical bully* way.

Freddie instantly disliked him. Especially because he was looking at her with recognition when she had no idea who he was. "Gellar, I presume?" He plunked into the seat beside Freddie and offered a hand. "Theo Porter."

She didn't shake his hand. She didn't move at all except to mold her face into a glare. Clearly he was the enemy.

"Nice to meet you too." He grinned a devastating grin, hand lowering as his other hand whipped up a soda cup. He took a long drag; it rattled. "No need to stop what you were doing on my account, friends. Continue, continue!"

Laina was the first to speak. "Why are you here, Porter?"

He batted his eyelashes—thick, pale, and framing blue eyes. "I just wanted to see the new prankster. *She*"—he motioned toward Freddie with his cup—"got a lot of us into trouble on Wednesday night. Myself included."

He smiled again, and this time, there was a layer of respect to mingle with the mocking. "But listen." He bent conspiratorially toward them. "If you're going to escalate things over at Berm High, then we will gladly escalate things on our end. Just be warned: we don't pull our punches."

"Bring it," Luis snarled while Laina intoned, "We. Will. Crush you."

"You sure about that?" Theo's eyebrows bounced high. "There's still time to say you're sorry . . ." His eyes flicked to Freddie's.

And this time, she was smart enough *not* to blurt out *It was all a misunderstanding!*

Divya clawed a warning on her thigh anyway. Or maybe that was a claw of solidarity. Either way, Freddie didn't need it. Theo Porter made her lungs expand with heat, and there was an odd rumbling happening in her gut. Part fury, part . . . part something she didn't recognize.

Something that prompted her to declare in her primmest, most unfazed voice: "I hope you know, Mr. Porter, that soda is not a balanced breakfast. You might consider orange juice. I'm told they sell it here."

To her surprise—and seemingly to his—he laughed. Just a punch of air, but a laugh all the same. He pushed to his feet. "Great." He knocked the table. "So glad we had this talk."

Then without another word, Theo Porter shoved into the crowd and disappeared.

For several long seconds, no one at the table spoke. Then everyone erupted at once. *Did he see the log? How does he know we're the Prank Squad? Well, now we know he is on the Fortin squad. What a jerk. I hate his guts. I hate his face.*

"Sorry it took so long." Kyle popped out beside the table, a full tray of biscuits in hand. "There were a ton of Fortin Prep kids in front of me . . ." Kyle's precious face bunched up. "Why is everyone so pissed?"

As Cat explained what had happened, the crew slid out from the booth. It was time to get to school; Divya and Freddie would have to eat their biscuits in the car.

Unfortunately, Quick-Bis was *really* crowded now, and Freddie lost Divya on her way to the exit. She arrived there with Cat instead, and while Freddie held open the door, she gazed covetously down at Cat's shoes (knee-high riding boots that would never fit over Freddie's calves). Freddie was fighting so hard to keep the envy off her face that she didn't notice the giggles coming from above as she let the door swing shut. It wasn't until someone barked, "*NOW!*" that she finally looked up.

And straight into a bucket of water.

She screamed. Cat screamed. The water connected. Both girls were silenced by cold, cold, *cold*, and wet, wet, *wet*. It was a veritable dunking booth and made the drizzle from grumpy clouds seem a mere annoyance.

As if that wasn't already bad—and wet—enough, Fortin Prep students erupted from cars with water guns.

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Luis launched from the Quick-Bis, bellowing like a bull. He was completely unconcerned by the water—and Laina, who followed a split second behind, also didn't care. Even better: she had her nunchucks.

That sent the Fortin students dispersing.

Except now Divya was shouting a warning, and when Freddie spun around, it was just in time to see Theo darting away from Cat. He had a blue book gripped in his hands.

"I got it!" he crowed, and before anyone could chase him, the Fortin Prep kids doubled down on their attack.

This time, it was water guns *and* water balloons. And this time, two trucks squealed out of the parking lot before anyone could fight back. Soon enough, all of Fortin Prep was gone, leaving Freddie and the Prank Squad shivering from the cold.

And also from an unquenchable, bone-deep rage.

Laina was right, Freddie decided while she crawled miserably into Kyle's front seat. *We will crush those Fortin Prep kids.*