

*The Last  
Place  
on  
Earth*



HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY | NEW YORK

*The Last  
Place  
on  
Earth*

CAROL SNOW

Henry Holt and Company, LLC  
*Publishers since 1866*  
175 Fifth Avenue  
New York, New York 10010  
macteenbooks.com

Henry Holt® is a registered trademark of Henry Holt and Company, LLC.  
Copyright © 2016 by Carol Snow  
All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Snow, Carol, 1965–

The last place on Earth / Carol Snow.—First edition.  
pages cm

Summary: “Daisy’s best friend Henry has mysteriously disappeared, leaving behind only a cryptic note”—Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-1-62779-039-0 (hardback)—ISBN 978-1-62779-040-6 (e-book)

[1. Best friends—Fiction. 2. Friendship—Fiction. 3. Love—Fiction.  
4. Survival—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.S6807Las 2016 [Fic]—dc23 2015003266

Henry Holt books may be purchased for business or promotional use. For information on bulk purchases please contact the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at (800) 221-7945 x5442 or by e-mail at [specialmarkets@macmillan.com](mailto:specialmarkets@macmillan.com).

Book design by Liz Dresner

First Edition—2016

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America by R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company,  
Harrisonburg, Virginia

*For Andrew,  
who took me camping once*



# One

ONE DAY HENRY was there, and the next he wasn't.

I assumed he was home sick. Well, playing sick, more likely. When it came to faking an illness, Henry was a master. True, he'd had his slipups, like the time he gargled hot tap water before taking a thermometer from his mother, only to have his temperature come in at 109 degrees. But that was an exception. (To Henry's credit, his argument about the thermometer's "defective engineering" was so convincing that his mother wrote a letter to the manufacturer.)

Most of the time, Henry managed to convince his parents that his cough, headache, nausea, and/or fever were reason enough for him to stay out of school ("I'd feel really bad if I gave it to the other students"), but not serious enough for him to see the doctor. His parents would phone the excuse into the attendance office and head off to their Very Important Jobs in pet insurance and contracts law,

while Henry would pass the day downloading music onto his MP3 player and teaching himself the guitar.

Had it been a normal day, I would have sent Henry a text—Hope it isn't fatal—and Henry would have replied right away with something like, Pray for me. And bring me my homework. (Please.)

But there was nothing normal about this day, because there had been nothing normal about the night before. I was all set to act like nothing had happened, if that was how he wanted it, but I wasn't prepared to find an empty desk in our first-period class (Spanish II) or in any of our shared classes that followed (AP European history, honors chemistry, dance, advanced geometry, honors sophomore English). Henry might be lazy, but I had never taken him for a coward.

"Where's Henry?" the girls in dance class asked, as they always did.

"The usual," I said.

Henry was the only boy in dance class, which was exactly why he'd signed up. Anyone who didn't play a sport was required to do two years of physical education or dance.

"I'll take the one where the girls wear spandex shorts and tank tops," he had said.

As for his own clothes, he'd talked the teacher into letting him wear basketball shorts and a T-shirt. Of course he had.

"You want to take one of these for Henry?" our chemistry teacher asked, giving me an extra packet. Only a month into sophomore year, and our teachers had figured it out: Henry would be absent a lot. I'd take his work. Henry would catch up without any problem.

It made me crazy, how easily Henry pulled As without even trying. Sick or healthy, I never missed a day of school. I never forgot a



homework assignment. I never left a paper till the last minute. And yet my GPA was lower than Henry's. Not by a lot, but still.

Henry, Henry, Henry.

"I think you're secretly in love with him," my mother said back in ninth grade, when we first started partnering up for school projects, sharing inside jokes, and exchanging endless texts.

"We're just *friends*," I told her.

But we weren't *just* friends. We were *best* friends. And best friends don't disappear without saying anything. Which must mean that our best-friendship was in jeopardy.

By the end of the day, after checking my phone during every passing period and lunch, I still hadn't heard from him. *I won't be the first to text*, I swore.

And then, of course, I thumbed a message before I had a chance to talk myself out of it: I have your chemistry packet.

Text sent, I had nothing to do but wait for a reply. Because there was *no way* I was going to text him again.

Well, unless a whole hour went by without a word.

Will you just answer already?

Still no word.

You promised things wouldn't be weird.

Nothing.

Things are weird. Let's call a do-over. Last night didn't happen. OK?

Nothing.

Finally, at five o'clock, with my mounds of homework not yet begun, I called him and got a recording: "I'm sorry. But the number you are trying to reach is not in service."

I felt cold all over. And then I laughed. No wonder Henry hadn't

returned my texts—his phone wasn't working! I should have known there was a good explanation. Henry wasn't a coward. Our friendship hadn't turned weird.

In my room, I found my laptop buried under last night's pajamas and booted it up, positive I'd find a message waiting. I didn't.

"I'm taking some homework over to Henry," I told my older brother, who was sticking three frozen burritos into our vintage microwave. Our kitchen, also vintage (which sounds so much better than *old*) was red-and-white tile. It looked like an In-N-Out Burger.

"Mm," he grunted, pressing in too many minutes. Peter was the king of the exploding burrito.

"Yeah, so tell Mom when she gets home."

"Mm."

Chemistry packet in hand, I let myself out the rickety gate that led to the horse and jogging trail behind our house. The trail wound around a murky pond and then led to a street that led to another street that led to Henry's house. By the time I reached what Henry called the Fortress (picture light sensors and triple locks and a security system with video cameras), I was sweaty and dusty and out of breath.

Though it was big, Henry's house was not what I would call pretty. In fact, it was what I would call ugly. All hard angles and sharp lines, the Fortress was painted an icy white and roofed in blue metal. The gray-blue trim helped, but not much. The one soft touch that Henry's parents had added, red roses under the windows and salmon bougainvillea along the sides, had been planted for security purposes only. An intruder would think twice before braving those thorns. The bees were a bonus.

I climbed the familiar steps to a front door so big that it never

failed to intimidate me. Or maybe it was the discreet video camera mounted above the door that made me squirm. I ran a hand over my sweaty forehead and pushed the doorbell. Chimes echoed: *Ding-DONG. Ding-dong-DING*. Averting my eyes from the video camera, I looked instead at the weatherproof sign planted among the red roses: A-1 SECURITY. ARMED RESPONSE.

It did not make me feel better.

I waited for footsteps. *Don't let it be his mother*. I was still wearing what I'd worn to school: a rock band T-shirt, denim miniskirt, and artfully torn black tights. Mrs. Hawking would not approve.

No one came. But maybe Henry had his headphones on. Maybe he was watching TV.

I pushed the doorbell again, listened to the *dings* and the *dongs*. Still no answer.

The late-afternoon sun reflected off the windows. Not that I could have seen inside anyway; Henry's parents kept the blinds drawn at all times. A flash of color caught my eye: A stained glass sun-catcher, shaped like a shooting star and attached with a suction cup, hung between the blinds and a living room window. That was new. Or maybe I'd just never noticed it before. How like Henry's parents to put something pretty (well, pretty-ish; actually, it was kind of tacky) behind the window blinds, where they wouldn't even see it.

Finally, I pulled my phone out of my pocket. In all the time we'd been friends, I'd never called Henry's home number. There had never been any reason to. Besides, I wouldn't have wanted to risk talking to Henry's parents. ("May I ask who is calling? . . . Oh. *Daisy*." Here his mother or father would insert a disapproving silence. "Henry is rather busy right now.")

But Henry's parents were clearly out of the house. The phone rang four times, and just when I expected a machine to pick up, it

rang a fifth time. And a sixth. After eight rings I gave up and slipped the phone back into my pocket. Despite the heat, I shivered.

I shuffled down the steps, paused, and turned back one last time in the hopes that Henry would appear. But the door remained shut. The house appeared deserted, but then it always looked like that: mean and lonely.

As I made my way down the front walkway, I glanced over at the driveway. Not that I expected to see a car there—Henry’s parents would never leave their vehicles potentially exposed to thieves and vandals and *goodness knows what*—but . . .

I froze. A newspaper, wrapped in orange plastic, sat in the middle of the gray pavers. I crept toward it as if it were something alive. Something that might bite. A lizard, maybe. Or a rabid possum.

I tried to quiet my mind. Maybe it wasn’t the daily paper. Maybe it was some kind of free circular tossed there during the day.

But no. Hands shaking, I picked up the bundle, reached inside, and pulled out the *Orange County Register*. I checked the date: today.

That was when I knew: Henry was gone.

# Two

A DAILY PAPER in the driveway. So what? It doesn't seem like much, I know. But Henry's parents believed that a newspaper left out was an advertisement that no one was home. In other words, an invitation to thieves.

The Hawking family left town at least once a month to go camping or fishing or something else nature-related. Whenever they were gone, they paid a neighbor kid to take the paper away by seven in the morning. One time a kid didn't get it until eight thirty, and they fired him. How did they know he was late? Video footage, of course.

You'd think they'd just put their mail or newspaper on vacation hold. But no: Someone who worked at the post office or newspaper might have ties to a crime ring. Before you knew it, intruders would be crawling through their windows. (Assuming they could get past the thorns and bees.)

Henry thought it was funny that his parents were “bat-crap-crazy paranoid.” Up till now, I had done my best to laugh along, but it was hard. Henry was the best friend I had ever had. I wanted to like his parents. I wanted them to like me. So far, it wasn’t happening.

Now I had to wonder: Were they as crazy as we’d thought? Or had they known something all along?

“I’m worried about Henry,” I told my mother, back in our red-and-white kitchen. She had just come in from her day job and was scarfing down a cup of soup before she headed off to teach a jewelry-making class.

“I’m sure he’s fine,” she said when I told her about the newspaper. “The universe will look after him.”

That was one of my mother’s favorite sayings, right up there with “Everything happens for a reason” and “Things have a way of working themselves out.”

Peter wandered into the kitchen. “We’re out of toilet paper again.”

“Did you put it on the shopping list?” my mother asked.

“Yeah.”

She shrugged. “Last time I went to the store, I forgot the list.”

---

The next morning, my mother agreed to swing by Henry’s house on the way to school. There were now two newspapers in orange plastic sitting in the driveway.

“I’m sure there’s an explanation,” my mother said.

I was, too. But I was terrified the explanation would be something awful.

By second period, AP European history, I was in such a frenzy

that I broke down and spoke to Gwendolyn Waxweiler. “Have you heard from Henry?” I tried to sound casual, but my voice cracked.

Gwendolyn, sitting on the other side of Henry’s empty chair, dropped her gaze to the ends of my hair. Bored one day last summer, I decided to see whether cherry Kool-Aid really works as a hair dye. It really does, especially if you have previously lightened your hair with Sun-In. And the color doesn’t come out. So now I know.

She said, “I haven’t tried to make contact with Henry.” That was the way Gwendolyn talked, as if she were from outer space and hadn’t quite figured out normal human speech. She had known Henry for longer than I had—they had gone to the same small, private elementary school. Their parents were friends, and the families did stuff together. Like barbecues! And campouts! And . . . killing defenseless animals!

No matter what I said, Henry would defend man’s right to hunt: “At least these animals had a good life until they were shot. Unlike the cow that died for your hamburger.” (Perhaps it was growing up in that In-N-Out kitchen, but as much as I wished I had the inner strength to go vegan, I loved nothing more than a Double-Double and fries.)

Still, whatever Henry’s arguments about man-versus-animal, he seemed to fall suddenly ill every time his parents scheduled a hunting trip.

“He’s just got a cold or something, correct?” Gwendolyn said, as our teacher, Mr. Vasquez, began his daily PowerPoint presentation.

I shrugged and turned my attention to the first slide:

## THE BLACK DEATH

### “The Plague”

1347–1351 first struck Europe

**Death estimates: 1/3–2/3 of European population**

**Bacterial infection: now curable by antibiotics**

Henry found history fascinating, but even though Mr. Vasquez was cool, I always left his class feeling slightly depressed, and not just because it involved a good two hours of homework a night. If our lesson wasn't about disease, it was about war. The kings and queens may have had a good time (as long as they kept their heads), but for the rest of the population in medieval Europe, life was miserable, and death came early, often, and in a whole bunch of disgusting ways.

Two seats away, Gwendolyn took notes with one hand. With the other, she fiddled with her thick braid. Gwendolyn's hair was strawberry blond. It would take Kool-Aid really well.

Usually, Gwendolyn ignored my existence entirely, but she kept glancing over at me. Finally, a few slides later (“**Forms of the Plague**”), when Mr. Vasquez paused to let us copy down some more depressing facts, she leaned over Henry's desk. “Does he not respond to your phone calls?”

“Phone's disconnected.”

I copied the first line from the slide:

- 1. Bubonic Plague: Most common variant. Carried by rats; spread by fleas. Swellings (buboes) on neck, armpit, and groin. Mortality rate 30–75%. Typical life expectancy: one week.**

“Have you been to his house?” Gwendolyn whispered.

I paused. Should I tell her about the newspapers? No. I wanted someone besides my mother to tell me that I was overreacting.



That everything was going to be fine. Gwendolyn's family was just as bat-crap-crazy paranoid as Henry's. She'd tell me that the abandoned OC *Registers* were a sure sign of calamity.

"Yesterday afternoon," I said. "No one answered the door. But it was kind of early—his parents wouldn't even be home from work yet. And Henry could have been sleeping or listening to music or something."

She nodded, looking less than convinced.

I copied down the next line from the slide.

**2. Pneumonic Plague: Attacked respiratory system.  
Spread by breathing infected air. Mortality rate:  
90–95%. Typical life expectancy: 1–2 days.**

"When did you last talk to him?" she asked.

"Night before last."

"And everything was normal?"

That was a weird question. Especially since Henry was so *not* normal the last time I had seen him. But how could Gwendolyn know that? Oh no. Now I was getting bat-crap-crazy paranoid. Maybe it was spreading, like the plague. Were there any flea-bitten rats around?

"Sure," I said. "Everything was normal. I guess." I copied down the third plague variant.

**3. Septicemic Plague: Attacked the blood system.  
Mortality rate: near 100%.**

"I'm sure everything is fine," I told Gwendolyn, willing my words to be true.

She didn't say anything, just twisted her strawberry-blond braid with renewed vigor.

"The universe will look after him," I added.

At that, she dropped her braid. “Are you kidding me? The universe looks after no one. We’re all on our own.”

---

Peter’s beat-up little car, pale yellow with gray doors, was waiting in front of the school when I got out. Most of the time I walked home—it was just over a mile—but if it was hot outside, my mother would tell my brother to get me.

I grabbed the handle and pulled hard. The door creaked open. I slid into the bucket seat, which was black vinyl laced with pink leopard-print duct tape. The duct tape had come with the car, as had the Jesus stickers on the rear fender. Henry and I had spent a lot of time trying to visualize the previous owners.

“Need to stop for coffee,” Peter mumbled, pulling away from the curb. His eyes were puffy. He needed a shave.

“Did you just get up?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Not *just* just, but—whatever.”

Another one of my mother’s mottoes (there were hundreds) was “I trust my children to make the right choices.” That worked okay for me. I chose hard work and responsibility. Which sounds incredibly boring, but there you go. Then there was my brother. After finishing high school in the spring, Peter had mostly chosen to binge on Netflix and sleep through lunch.

I stayed in the car while Peter ran into the grocery store, emerging with a large cardboard cup and a four-pack of toilet paper.

“That TP is not going to last long,” I said.

He smirked. “Mom’ll buy more. It’s on the list.”

As we approached the turn to the Fortress, I said, “Can we drive by Henry’s house?”

Peter gave a single-shoulder shrug (when it comes to conserving energy, Peter is a master) and flicked on the blinker. We turned off

the main road and wound around to Henry's mean-looking house. Peter stopped the car.

I was prepared for the two orange bundles still sitting in the driveway. Still, when I saw them, a fresh stab of disappointment hit me in the stomach.

"You getting out?" Peter asked.

I shook my head. "Let's go home."

In my bedroom, I unloaded my books and notebooks. I booted up my laptop, an old model that my mother had bought for next to nothing when her office updated the equipment. I meant to research some stuff for English but wound up checking my messages instead (nothing from Henry). I stared at the wall. I stared at my laptop screen. Finally, I gave up. I had to go back to the Fortress. Maybe I'd missed something. Maybe there were clues to Henry's whereabouts.

I let myself out the back gate and hurried down the dusty horse and jogging path until I reached the pond. It was usually busy here during the day. Today, a mother walked near the edge, a toddler clutching her skirt. A bicyclist zipped past several old men in camp chairs, fishing rods in their hands, tackle boxes by their feet. Coots and mallards paddled across the green-black surface, while dragonflies hovered among the reeds like tiny helicopters.

I would never again pass this pond without remembering that last night with Henry. He'd known something was up, I was sure of it. He'd known he was going away.

But where? And why?

# Three

IT WASN'T UNUSUAL for Henry to show up at my house on a school night, but he usually texted first, and he almost never came this late, just past ten thirty. He had been in school that day. In fact, he hadn't staged an illness for over a week, which I might have found strange if I hadn't been so glad to have him around to challenge me to "power pirouette" contests during dance class or to doodle stupid cartoons in my history notebook when I was supposed to be copying down disgusting facts about medieval Europe. (One word: leeches.)

"You up for a walk?" he asked, hands in his jeans pockets, narrow shoulders angled forward.

I almost said, *No, let's just hang in my living room*. I was in my pajamas already (flowered boxers and a tank top; it was a warm night), and I still had a good half hour of math homework left. But there was something about Henry's expression. His eyes, so dark brown

they were almost black, were always sharp, but tonight they looked strained. His jaw muscles twitched.

So I said, “Yeah, sure. Let me just tell my mom and put some clothes on.”

Five minutes later, we were out the back gate and onto the trail. Something rustled in the bushes. My arm tickled; I swiped away a spiderweb that might have been imaginary but probably wasn't. The path, so familiar during the day, was kind of creepy at night.

“We going to your house?” I asked.

“*No.*” (Had his voice really been that forceful? I couldn't remember. Mostly, I was just relieved that I wouldn't have to deal with his parents.)

We said almost nothing until we reached the pond, which wasn't as weird as you might think. Henry and I were not only close enough to tell each other everything (at least in my mind), we trusted each other with our silences.

At the pond, Henry stopped as if entranced by the glassy surface. The night was clear. The moon cast a ribbon of light across the water. The air smelled of eucalyptus and wild sage.

I studied his profile: the straight nose, the strong jaw. Henry was better looking from the side than he was full-on. His face was a touch too narrow, and his eyes, dark and deep-set, were a little too close together. But I liked his face from any angle—not in *that way*, not really, but because it was Henry's face. It was so familiar, I knew just how to read it. At least, I had until this night.

“If you knew you only had one day left on earth, what would you do?” Henry asked, his gaze still on the water.

Coming from someone else, this question might have seemed odd, but all the time we launched conversations with things like, “Would you rather be a free-range chicken or a farmed salmon?”

Or, “If you could only bring one book to a desert island, what would it be?” (My answers, in case you’re wondering, were farmed salmon and an e-reader. And I don’t care if that’s cheating.)

“Depends what you mean by last day on earth,” I said. “Are we talking solar flare or alien abduction?”

Henry chewed his lower lip. “More like aliens.”

“I’d hide,” I said.

He shook his head. “No, no, no. One day left and there’s no escape. They’ve got you, I don’t know, microchipped or something. And they’ve got a Daisy-finding task force. And if the aliens don’t get you, they’ll take out your entire family.”

“They could have Peter.”

“You can’t sacrifice your brother! Peter is my role model.” Henry laughed but in a sad way, which I hadn’t even known was possible. And then he did this weird whimper-hiccup thing. I let it pass.

“Fine,” I said. “If I knew it was my last day on earth, I’d shut myself in my room with a box of cookies. And I’d cry.”

“Would you come see me to say good-bye?”

“Sure. Maybe. I don’t know. I wouldn’t want to make you sad. And besides, I hate good-byes.”

There was a long pause. Finally, he spoke. “What kind of cookies?”

“Girl Scout. Thin mints. And those coconut thingies that are like a thousand calories each, but if I’m going to die tomorrow, who cares?”

“That’s two boxes. And I didn’t say you were going to die tomorrow, I just said . . .” He sighed.

“Is something wrong?” I asked. “You seem weird.”

“I’m always weird. It’s my natural state.”

He held my eyes for a moment. *Henry’s taller than I am*, I thought

with surprise. When did that happen? We'd been more or less the same height since I'd known him. And then, before I could ask how he'd snuck a growth spurt past me, he did something that was undeniably weird, even for him. He yanked off his sneakers and ran into the pond.

"Henry! Are you crazy? It's gross in there!"

But he didn't answer, just waded through the muck until the water got to waist level and dove under. He remained submerged just long enough to make me worry that he'd gotten caught on something or that his waterlogged jeans had dragged him down, and then he burst through the slimy surface.

"Join me for a swim?" he called.

I stared at him in horror. "That water is disgusting. There is duck crap and fish crap and algae and probably a million kinds of bacteria."

"So that's a no?"

"I think you're going to need antibiotics. I'm serious, Henry."

"Fine," he said. But instead of slogging back through the muck, he turned and dove under the scum again. With choppy strokes, he splashed his way to the center of the pond, where he floated on his back and gazed up at the moon.

If it were anyone else, I would have walked away. But I stayed, of course. I would never desert Henry.

Finally, he backstroked to the shallows, where he stood up and made his way to shore, his feet making sucking sounds in the muck.

"I've always wanted to do that," he said when he got to me. His breathing was heavy. Henry was not one for physical exertion.

"How was it?" My voice was flat.

"Not as fun as I expected. Plus I think I stepped on a turtle." A cloud drifted in front of the moon.

I hugged myself, even though it wasn't cold. "I should get home. Do my math homework."

"I'll walk you."

"No, I'm fine. You should go shower."

"Do I smell that bad?" He tried to smile.

I tried to smile back. And then I gave up and let my gaze fall to the ground. "I'll see you at school. Don't forget that chemistry thing is due tomorrow."

"There's something else I always wanted to do," he said.

I looked up just in time to see his face closing in on mine. "Henry, no!" I took a step backward and stumbled on a tree root, just managing to steady myself before falling.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I never should have—"

"It's okay," I said, though of course it was anything but. "I'm just tired. And you're wet. And a little . . ." I caught myself before I said *stinky*.

His eyes glistened. "You mean so much to me. I didn't mean to make things weird."

"You didn't," I lied. "Everything's the same as it always was. Let's just blame tonight on the full moon." (The moon wasn't full.)

"Deal," Henry said. "Things will never be weird between us. I promise." He held my gaze for about two seconds more than was comfortable under the circumstances. "You sure you don't want me to walk you home?"

"Positive." I forced a smile and gave him a quick wave. Then I made my way around the pond, to the trail, past the spiderwebs, through the gate, and into the safety of my house.

I never looked back. Not once.



# Four

I KNEW THE house was empty, but I rang the doorbell just in case. At this point, I'd even be happy to see Henry's parents. Well, relieved, anyway.

*Ding-DONG. Ding-dong-DING.* Nothing.

I raised my eyes to the video camera painted the same ice white as the house. It stared back at me, unblinking. I stuck out my tongue. It did not react.

I rang the bell again because I didn't know what else to do. Finally I gave up and trudged back down the front walkway. Peeking through the narrow slot of the locked metal mailbox, I spied a pile of envelopes and circulars.

*Justin Kim.* Just like that, I remembered the name of the boy who took in the mail and paper. Henry and I had run into him once

while walking around the pond. Later, Henry had pointed out his house, three doors down.

As I hurried away from the Fortress, I prayed that Justin Kim had messed up. That the Hawkings had called him. That he just hadn't showed.

The Kim house also had a sign from A-1 Security planted in the front yard. Perhaps there was some kind of neighborhood discount. No video camera, though—at least that I could see—and unlike Henry's mother, who refused to open the door to strangers (UPS drivers were forced to show credentials beyond their big brown trucks), a petite Asian woman with perfect makeup answered my knocks. She wore a silk tunic, gray leggings, and terry-cloth flip-flops.

"I'm Daisy Cruz," I said. "A friend of Henry's?"

"Henry. Yes. Nice boy." She smiled. Piano notes drifted from farther back in the house.

I tried to keep my tone casual. "Henry and his parents have been gone a couple of days, but their newspapers and mail are still out there." Saying it like that, it didn't seem so ominous. "Do you know if Justin was supposed to get them?"

In a flash, Mrs. Kim's smile transformed into a scowl. "Justin!" The piano music stopped. "*Justin!*"

Justin Kim, a lanky eleven-year-old with a sharp gaze and black hair that stood up like feathers, padded into the front hall.

His mother glared at him. "You forgot to do your job for the Hawkings!"

"No, I didn't."

"You go over this morning?"

"No, but—"

"Then you forgot!"

“They may not have called him,” I said.

“They didn’t call me!” Justin’s voice cracked. He turned from his mother to look at me with something stronger than dislike.

Disappointment clenched my stomach. “Sorry, I was just checking. Mr. and Mrs. Hawking must have forgotten to tell Justin they were going away.” My words sounded less than convincing, and not just to me.

Mrs. Kim raised her eyebrows. “Mr. and Mrs. Hawking forget nothing.”

I left the Kims’ house feeling even more panicked than before, and not just because Justin looked like he might hunt me down and strangle me in my sleep. Even if the Hawkings had neglected to call Justin before they left town—something they would never do—they could have called him from their car on their way to . . . wherever they were.

Unless they didn’t drive away at all? Maybe they’d been kidnapped. Or murdered in their sleep (though probably not by Justin Kim; he was saving his strength for me). There was one way to find out.

On the right side of the Hawkings’ garage, a keypad glowed like a telephone handset that had lost its way.

“My parents made me promise I’d never tell anyone our security codes,” Henry had said one day after school, when we were standing right here, about to go inside. “Yeah? So what are they?” I’d asked.

“What do you want to know—the garage code or the alarm system?”

“Both,” I’d said. “I want you to tell me both.”

My hands shook as I punched in the numbers. A green light flashed twice. The door lurched and lifted. The family had two cars:

a Mini Cooper for Mr. Hawking, who, since he worked on the far side of Los Angeles, needed something with good gas mileage, and a giant black SUV with tinted windows for Mrs. Hawking. The SUV was roomy enough for camping gear. Also intimidating enough for doing drug deals, though Henry's mom didn't seem the type.

I didn't even realize I'd been holding my breath until I saw the Mini, alone in the vast garage, and let out a huge sigh of relief. They had taken Henry's mom's car, that big, bad wilderness machine. Up in the mountains or down in a valley, cell phone reception would be so sketchy, they wouldn't even know that Henry's phone wasn't working. And they couldn't call to check on whoever they had hired to take in their mail and paper. Justin Kim had obviously been fired without notice.

*Nothing to worry about.*

I was still worried. The Hawking family did not take off in the middle of the week on a whim. The Hawking family did not do anything on a whim.

The garage was huge, with enough space for three large vehicles if not for the deep floor-to-ceiling cabinets that lined the walls. Around here, pretty much everyone used the garage for storage. My mother's and brother's cars hadn't seen the inside of our garage since . . . ever. But these cabinets were enormous. How could they need to store that much stuff, especially when their house was already too big for three people?

My eyes flicked around the space: no video cameras. Behind me, the garage door remained open like a giant, screaming mouth. I peered around the corner; the street was empty. I pushed the garage door button, and the door lurched back down, sealing me in with the car.

It was hot in here. Blood rushed in my ears. I grabbed the nearest

cabinet handle, took a deep breath, and pulled, half expecting to find a weapons arsenal or a body stashed inside.

*Toilet paper.* I couldn't believe it. The rolls were jammed into the cabinets four deep and six across, stacked all the way to the top. The next cabinet was the same. The Hawkings, family of three, had several hundred rolls of toilet paper sitting in their garage, while in my house we couldn't even keep a spare in the bathroom. I broke into laughter, the sounds echoing around me.

"My parents are gearing up for the Big One," Henry had said whenever the topic of earthquakes came up. I'd assumed he meant stocking jugs of water and some granola bars—enough to get through a few days without power. But this! This was bizarre.

I pulled open the next cabinet, expecting to find yet more toilet paper, but no. This space was jammed with cleaning supplies: dish soap, sponges, window cleaner. The next cabinet was filled with bleach. Just bleach.

I worked my way around the walls, uncovering sacks of rice, bags of beans, canned vegetables, canned meat, canned fish, bouillon cubes, salt, pepper, sugar, more salt. There were flashlights and flares, no-drip candles, and an entire cabinet of batteries, in every imaginable size.

Clearly, the Hawkings expected the Big One to be very big indeed. Of course, if an earthquake was severe enough to merit all these emergency supplies, the odds of the family surviving it were pretty slim.

Unless the universe looked after them. That could happen.

I'd seen enough. I opened the garage and slipped back out into the dazzling sunshine. Hands trembling, I keyed in the code, and the door slid back into place. I took a deep breath and exhaled with a sigh of something approaching relief.

I had just reached the street when a huge white pickup truck pulled up to the curb. The back door opened, and Gwendolyn climbed out. “Did you see Henry? Is he here?”

A minute earlier, and they would have caught me coming out of the garage. Yikes.

I shook my head and tried not to look freaked out. “I just stopped by to give him his homework, but no one answered the door.”

Gwendolyn’s gaze flicked down to my hands, which were not holding homework. Before she could interrogate me further, her parents got out of the car. Both of them were fair skinned and light eyed, like Gwendolyn, but Mrs. Waxweiler was short and plump, while her husband was a great big bear of a man. And not a cute bear, like a panda. More like a big scary one that comes out during the spring thaw to maul hikers nibbling sunflower seeds. He had brown hair and bushy red eyebrows that looked so much like caterpillars, I half expected them to crawl across his face.

Mrs. Waxweiler, on the other hand, was a blond bubble: one of those moms who look so stereotypically mom-ish that she could be on a commercial for laundry detergent. She wore a pink T-shirt and flowered capris and a superfake smile.

“You are Daisy Cruz,” Mr. Waxweiler said, which would have been helpful had I forgotten my name. His voice was surprisingly high for such a large man.

“Yes,” I said.

“And you are unaware of Henry’s whereabouts.”

“Yes.”

He appraised the cherry-red ends of my hair, the four earrings, the T-shirt I’d hand-decorated with Sharpies. Though we’d only been acquainted for thirty seconds, I instinctively knew that

Mr. Waxweiler was not the kind of man to appreciate a custom T-shirt.

And then, suddenly, it was like I wasn't even there.

"We'll try the front door," he told his womenfolk. They headed for the walkway.

"They're not there," I said. "I rang the bell twice. And—" I caught myself before I said, *their SUV is missing*.

Mr. and Mrs. Waxweiler didn't even pause, but Gwendolyn spun around and shot me a look as if to say . . . something. But what? *Be quiet? Go away? Watch out?*

Something bad. Her look definitely conveyed something bad.

She spun back around (I'm not just saying that; as a member of the school drill team, Gwendolyn can spin with the best of them) and followed her parents to the front door. Mr. Waxweiler pushed the doorbell and waited, hands on hips.

As if she sensed my eyes on her family, Mrs. Waxweiler turned around and stared at me, her fake smile gone.

Face hot, I gave her a limp wave and hurried away. But after a few paces, something made me glance back. The three of them were still standing side by side on the front stoop, but now Gwendolyn was pointing off to the right. There was something in the landscaping or . . . no. She was pointing at the window.

Her parents stepped up to the very edge of the rosebushes and peered at whatever it was that Gwendolyn had spotted. There was no way they could look into the house. The blinds were shut. There was nothing to see except . . .

The shooting star sun-catcher. That was it. They were staring at that little bit of stained glass, dangling from a suction cup, as if its blue and yellow rays could reveal the secret of life.

# Five

“HENRY’S STILL OUT?” Mr. Vasquez, our history teacher, asked.

“Yeah.”

It was Friday: test day. Mr. Vasquez put a sheet facedown on my desk.

“Whatever Henry has, it must be catching.” He nodded at the empty desk on the far side of Henry’s. Gwendolyn was absent, too.

“Must be.” I shivered.

Friday was the worst day to miss school because so many teachers gave tests. Besides, there was a football game tonight, which meant that Gwendolyn would have to forgo a halftime performance. Almost as bad, she didn’t get to walk around all day wearing tiny blue shorts and a bright yellow T-shirt that said DRILL.

“‘Drill,’” Henry had said, the previous Friday, when a girl



wearing the shirt had passed us in the hall. “You think that’s meant to be a noun or a verb?”

I considered. “Verb. So if a girl is all, ‘Wait, what was I supposed to be doing?’ she can just look at her shirt and be like, ‘Oh yeah—drill routine.’”

“Sensible.” He nodded. “It’s a trend that should catch on, kind of like casual Fridays, only this would be verb Fridays. The dancers could wear T-shirts that say ‘Dance,’ and the math geeks would go with ‘Calculate.’ The teachers, of course, would wear shirts that said ‘Teach.’ Yours could say ‘Paint’ or ‘Draw,’ depending on your mood.”

“How about you?” I said. “What would your shirt say?”

He looked off to one side for a moment, thinking. And then he smiled. “‘Sleep.’”

Had that conversation really happened only a week ago? I still couldn’t believe how much had changed.

History tests distributed, Mr. Vasquez returned to his desk. “You may begin.”

I flipped over my paper and read the first question: **How did the Black Death get its name?**

I wrote: *The Black Death got its name from the black swellings, or buboes, that characterized the disease, along with the black spots that followed. The buboes appeared on the armpits, neck, and/or groin. If the buboes were lanced, the blood that came out was black, thick, and foul-smelling.*

Around the room, students shifted in their seats and cleared their throats. It was hard to write this stuff without squirming.

Next question: **How did the bubonic plague epidemic (the Black Death) affect communities in Europe?**

*The epidemic destroyed communities. Families broke apart when the well rejected the sick. Essential services collapsed. In some areas, there was little law*

*and order because the enforcers had died. People panicked as they struggled for their own survival. Properties stood empty. Corpses were dumped in the street or buried in mass graves. Crops withered in the field, and untended cattle wandered in the streets.*

This test was not doing wonders for my mood. I'd be happy when we finished the chapter on the Middle Ages and moved to the Renaissance and beyond. I was ready to hear about great art and guillotines. Let me eat cake.

Before I had a chance to answer the third question (**How did the pneumonic plague spread?**) Mr. Vasquez let out an enormous, wet sneeze. Thirty-two heads shot up at once.

"Bless you," someone murmured from the back.

*The pneumonic plague spread through droplets in the air, primarily from coughs and sneezes,* I wrote, suppressing a giggle.

---

I'd never paid enough attention to Gwendolyn to notice who her friends were, so the DRILL shirts were a big help. During nutrition, I walked up to a girl I recognized from my chemistry class.

"Do you know Gwendolyn Waxweiler?"

"Yeah."

"Do you have her cell number?"

She thought for a moment. "No."

"Do you know anyone who would?"

She thought for another, slightly longer, moment. "No."

I had no more luck with the next two girls I asked, but before the bell rang in math class, I hit pay dirt.

"Are you friends with Gwendolyn Waxweiler?" I asked a pinch-faced drill team girl I'd previously managed to avoid.

She narrowed her eyes. If she didn't watch out, the line between her eyebrows would become permanent. "Why do you want to know?"

“I need her phone number.”

“What for?”

I stifled several sarcastic responses. “She’s out today, and I need to give her the history homework.”

She straightened the notebook on her desk. “Most teachers post assignments on the school website.”

“This one doesn’t.” (Actually, he did.)

The bell rang, and she still hadn’t turned over the number. Defeated, I trudged to my seat across the classroom. At the end of class, however, the pinch-faced girl surprised me by slipping a scrap of paper on my desk.

“Just don’t tell her where you got it,” she said.

*Gwendolyn won’t answer*, I thought, punching in her number after school. She’d see my unfamiliar number in her display, and let it go to voice mail. Fine. I’d leave her a message.

Cars crowded the pickup line in front of the school. I stood just outside the main door, in the shade of the overhang. It was another hot afternoon. Surely Peter would come get me.

When Gwendolyn’s phone picked up on the first ring, it suddenly hit me that I had no idea what I was going to say. *Henry’s been out, and then today you were out, and that just seemed weird since you seemed fine yesterday, so I thought I’d call and—*

“The number you are trying to reach has been disconnected.”

I didn’t even realize I’d made a sound till a guy from my Spanish class appeared at my side and touched my arm. “Are you okay?”

Everyone was looking at me.

“Not really,” I said. “No.”

Peter didn’t show up at the school, and he didn’t answer his phone (which, being typical behavior, didn’t worry me). After waiting fifteen minutes, I gave up and walked home.

By the time I staggered into the house, I was out of breath and drenched in sweat. After dropping my bag in the kitchen, I went through the living room and down the hallway. The worn blue carpet needed a good vacuuming, but right now that was pretty low on my list of priorities.

In my room, I booted up my laptop. A few clicks later, I had the information I needed.

I pushed open the door to Peter's gloomy bedroom, where he sat slumped in his armchair, playing a game on his phone.

"Why didn't you answer your phone?" I asked.

The room looked better in the dark, which may have been why Peter hadn't bothered to change the overhead light since it burned out almost a year ago. As usual, the shades were drawn.

"Huh?" The phone cast a ghostly glow over his face.

"I called your phone like five times, and you didn't pick up."

"What? Oh. Yeah."

"It was really hot, and—oh, never mind. I need you to drive me somewhere."

He shifted his weight in the chair and thumbed his phone. "I'm kind of busy."

"It's an emergency."

"I very much doubt that." With an index finger, he scratched his stubbly chin. Peter had been cute enough in high school, when he played on the basketball team and exposed his skin to sunlight on a regular basis. But too many microwave burritos and not enough activity was making him soft and pale and scruffy. At least he wasn't dirty. A combo aroma of body wash, deodorant, and plug-in room freshener wafted into the hallway.

From past experience, I knew that begging didn't work on Peter.

Nor did threatening to complain to our mother, who wouldn't do anything, anyway. That left bribery.

"I'll buy you hot Cheetos," I said.

At last he perked up. "Deal."

---

Gwendolyn lived in a unguarded gated community, which meant that we had to wait maybe fifty seconds before someone who lived there punched in the magic code, after which we followed them into the development. So much for security. If Peter's crappy car could get through, anyone could.

"Tax records," I told Peter, when he asked how I'd gotten the address. "It's all online."

If I had expected him to be impressed by my cleverness, I would have been disappointed.

Gwendolyn's house, beige stucco with a red tile roof and wood trim, was just as pretty as three identical houses on her street. I don't mean that in a bad way. Unless decay and neglect come into style, no one will ever want to live in a house that looks like ours.

No one answered the door at the Waxweilers' house. I tried the bell twice and then went back to the car.

"No one's there."

"Which proves what, exactly?" asked Peter.

"Nothing." With a sigh, I fastened my seat belt. "I wanted to come because I don't know what else to do."

"I don't get why you're freaking out," Peter said, starting the car. "So Henry went on vacation without telling you. So what?"

"Henry never does anything without telling me." I took one last look at the closed-up house. "Peter—wait."

Something colorful flashed in a front window. I hurried over

the tidy lawn and got as close to the window as I could. (Like the Hawkings, the Waxweilers favored thorny plants.) It was close enough. Dangling on the other side of the windowpane was a shooting star sun-catcher, just like the one at Henry's house.

Breathlessly, I told Peter the news.

"And this is significant because . . . ?"

"I don't know! But it has to mean something. And if we can figure out what that something is, then maybe we'll find Henry."

Peter pulled away from the curb. "You said Henry and Gwen have been friends a long time, right?"

"Gwendolyn. No one calls her Gwen. Their *families* have been friends a long time. Henry and Gwendolyn went to that private school together. It's not like Henry would hang out with her if he didn't have to."

"Whatever. If their families have been doing stuff together since Henry and what's-her-face were kids, isn't it possible that they did crafts together? Or that they made the sun-catchers in school?"

"It's possible. But why hang them now?"

He shrugged. "Gwendolyn's could have been up all along. Maybe Henry's mom saw this one hanging and got craft envy and decided to hang hers, too."

"Henry's mother would never get craft envy."

We'd reached the edge of the development. We didn't need a code to get out; a sensor triggered the gate.

"Know what's even better than elementary school craft projects?" Peter asked.

"What?"

"Hot Cheetos."

Soon afterward, we pulled into the chain drugstore that doubled

as our neighborhood convenience store. Inside, it was refrigerator-cold. In the chip aisle, Peter didn't hesitate before choosing a jumbo-sized bag.

"Where's Henry's dad's office?" he asked, cradling the orange bag like a baby.

"Far. Like Burbank."

"So maybe that's where they are. Since his hours are long. Maybe they're staying someplace nearby."

"Maybe . . ." It still didn't explain the disconnected phone and abandoned newspapers, but it was an angle I hadn't considered.

"Have you tried calling his dad's office?"

"No," I said. "That's a good idea."

"I have my moments." Peter strolled off for the refrigerator section, where he plucked a big bottle of Dr Pepper from the case. I paid for it without complaint.