

Chapter 1

A black eye. Great.

Raven Stone studied it in the mirror, lightly probing the developing bruise. Ouch. The strip light flickered over the wash basin, making her reflection blink like the end of an old newsreel. The tap squeaked a protest as she dampened a cold compress.

'You look about seven years old,' she told her mirror-double. Ten years on from the schoolyard of scraped knees and minor bumps, Raven considered the injury more a humiliation than a pain. She tugged a curl of her spiralling black hair over her face but it sprang back, refusing to hide the cloud gathering around her left eye. She wondered whether she could hide in her room until it faded . . . ?

Not possible. All the students were expected to attend the welcome-back supper and her absence would be noticed. Anyway—she threw the flannel in the sink—why give her enemies the satisfaction of knowing they had driven her out so easily? Cowardice was not part of her character résumé. She had far too much pride to allow it.

Raven stripped off her tennis kit and pulled on a towelling robe. She tossed the dirty clothes in the laundry basket by the door with a snap of the lid. It was tough keeping her promise to herself that she would be strong; easier when she had someone at her back. But the second bed in the room was empty—no heap of untidy belongings or suitcase as she had expected. What was keeping Gina? She was the only one Raven wanted

to talk to about what had just happened. Raven flopped on her bed. How had it come to this in a few hours? Until the black eye, life had been skating along fine, a smooth place after years of rough. Westron, as run by the head teacher, Mrs Bain, had been weird sometimes, putting too much emphasis on wealth and parents, celebrity pupils and privacy, but teaming up with Gina, Raven had been able to laugh off most of those absurdities. She would have said no one in the school wished her ill. In spite of owing her place to her grandfather's presence on the staff, the other students had not appeared to mind her numbering among their privileged ranks. Now she knew better.

The realization had come out of nowhere, like the tornado spiralling Dorothy's house off to Oz. When Raven opened the door to the changing rooms, everything went skipping down the yellow brick road to Bizarre City.

Hedda's question had seemed so, well, *normal*. 'Hey, where's my Chloé tote?'

The other girls in the locker room getting ready for the tennis competition had made a brief search among their belongings. Raven had not even bothered: her little sports bag, a much mocked airline freebie, was too small to hide the bulky taupe leather shoulder bag. Hedda had been flaunting it all morning like a fisherman displaying a prize catch. The flexing, polished surface had gleamed like a sea trout in her manicured fingers: *so many pockets and you won't believe how much it cost!* Hedda had thought it a bargain but it had come with a price tag more than Raven's grandfather earned in a month as the school's caretaker. Something so pointlessly expensive had to be a rip-off.

'Hey, I'm talking to you, Stone.'

Raven felt a sharp tug on her elbow. Standing on one foot to lace her tennis shoe, she toppled to one side. Why had Hedda suddenly taken to using her surname?

‘Whoa, Hedda, careful!’ Raven balanced herself against the wire mesh dividing the changing areas and tied off the bow. ‘You almost knocked me over.’

Stick thin and with an abundance of wine-red hair, Hedda reminded Raven of a red setter, sharp nose pointing to the next shopping bargain, a determined little notch in her chin that gave her face character. Hedda put her hands on her hips. ‘Where have you hidden it?’

‘What?’ Raven was too surprised to realize what it was that Hedda was accusing her of doing. ‘Me?’

‘Yes, you. I’m not stupid. I saw you looking at it. It had my phone—my make-up—my money—everything is in that bag.’

Raven tried to keep a hold on her temper and ignore the hurt of being accused with no proof. She had had enough of that in the last school she had attended before coming to the UK. She tried for reasonable. ‘I haven’t done anything with it. Where did you last see it?’

‘At the lunch table—don’t pretend you don’t know.’

The changing room fell silent as the other girls listened in on the exchange. A flush of shame crept over Raven’s cheeks even though she knew she was innocent. Memories standing before the principal in her old school rushed back. She felt queasy with the sense of *déjà vu*.

‘I’m sorry: are you saying I stole it?’

Hedda tipped her head back and looked down her long nose at Raven. ‘I’m not saying—I know you took it.’

Raven dragged her thoughts away from her past and focused on the accuser. What on earth had happened to Hedda? She had missed most of last term and had come back with what seemed like a personality transplant—from clingy, whingeing minor irritant to strident, major-league bitch. Raven told herself not to back down; she’d faced false accusations before and this time she wasn’t a traumatized little girl.

What was the worst Hedda could do? Wave a mascara wand at her?

'So you think I took it? Based on what? On that fact that I just *looked* at it? Looking doesn't mean stealing.' Raven appealed to the other girls, hoping to find someone who would join her in shrugging off the accusation as absurd, but their expressions were watchful or carefully neutral. *Gee, thanks, guys.*

Then Hedda's friend, Toni, joined in the finger pointing. 'There's no point claiming you're innocent. Things were going missing all last term.'

'I had nothing to do with that. Some of my stuff was stolen too.'

Toni ignored her. 'We all noticed small things disappearing but didn't like to . . . I mean we *guessed* it was you but we felt sorry for you, so . . .' Toni waved her hand as if to say *that was last term, this is now.*

'Sorry for me?' Raven gave a choked laugh. One thing she never wanted was anyone's pity. Even at her lowest moment after losing her parents, she hadn't asked for that.

Hedda got right up in her face. 'But taking my brand new Chloé? Now you've gone way too far. Give it back, Stone.'

Ridiculous. Raven turned her back on Hedda. 'And what am I supposed to be doing with these things I'm stealing?'

'Your grandfather has a new car—if you can call a Skoda a car.'

Toni snorted. Raven felt a surge of anger: taking a crack at her was one thing but Hedda had better keep her granddad out of it or there really would be trouble!

'So I, what? Steal from the rich to give to the poor? Now why didn't I think of that?' Raven's irony was lost on the literal-minded Hedda.

'Stop denying it. I want my bag and I want it now.'

Hoping that if she ignored the infantile rant Hedda would

back down, Raven shook her head and dipped her fingers inside her jeans pocket for a band to tie up her hair.

'Don't you ignore me!' With a grunt of fury, Hedda shoved Raven hard into the mesh, right onto a peg that caught the corner of her eye. Even though the hook was padded by clothes, Raven saw stars. Clapping a hand to her face, she swung round, temper threatening to gallop away riderless.

'Look, Hedda, I don't have your stupid tote!' She gathered herself in the defensive stance she had been taught. Raven had to be careful, knowing she could do a lot of harm with the self-defence training her father had insisted she take. It had come in useful for fending off the predators who roamed the corridors in her American public school, but she guessed it would be frowned on at refined Westron and would earn her a reputation as a thug.

'Yes. You. Do!' Hedda shoved Raven in the chest with each word so her back collided with the mesh. Someone giggled nervously while two students hurried out to fetch the PE teacher.

That was outside of enough. It was time Hedda learnt there was one girl in the school she couldn't bully.

'I've had enough of your idiotic—' (push) '—accusations!' Raven thrust Hedda back a second time, measuring out exactly the same force as Hedda had used on her.

Then Hedda went for a handful of hair. Big mistake.

'Just leave me alone!' Raven seized the girl's wrist, executing a sharp twist-and-bend defensive movement. But this was no fair fight: Toni snatched a hank of Raven's hair at the back and pulled sharply, nails raking the side of her neck. Raven shoved Hedda away and broke Toni's hold by a sharp chop to her elbow, making her arm go dead. She grabbed her tennis racket and swept it in front of her like a kendo sword, fending off both her attackers.

‘Touch me again and you’ll be sorry.’

Toni backed away, shaking her hand. ‘Leave her, Hedda: she means it.’

But Hedda had not given up on her misplaced revenge. Deterred from a direct attack, Hedda went for Raven’s belongings. ‘Think you can steal from me, do you?’ She upended Raven’s bag, scattering all her things over her head. Raven’s phone fell onto the floor and shattered, bits flying across the tiles. ‘There! Suck on that, skank.’

‘What? No!’ Throwing the racket aside, Raven dropped her knees to collect the pieces before someone trod on them. It had to be salvageable—had to.

Hedda ended the gesture by throwing the empty bag at her, cord whipping her across the cheek. ‘That’ll teach you to steal. And I still want my tote back.’

The door slammed open. ‘What is going on in here?’ Miss Peel, head of PE, had arrived and was standing, arms crossed, in the entrance.

The girls in the changing room suddenly all became very busy, like a flash mob melting back into the crowd.

‘Miss, Raven dropped her phone,’ said Toni spitefully.

‘That’s not fair! You all saw Hedda do it!’ protested Raven. No one spoke up in her defence, a slap that she’d have to absorb later when they wouldn’t see the hurt. ‘She dumped my stuff on the ground because she thinks I stole her bag.’

‘I’m not interested in bags or phones.’ Miss Peel folded her arms. ‘I was told there was a fight going on in here.’

Hedda passed Toni a tennis racket. ‘Not really. Just Raven making a fuss.’ She rolled her eyes indicating that this was a frequent occurrence.

Miss Peel glared down at Raven who was cradling the remains of her now defunct mobile. ‘You’ve been told hundreds of times that the school can take no responsibility for private

property. I swear these phones are a plague and we'd all be far better off if they were banned. Hurry up and get outside, all of you.'

The girls filed out quickly, leaving Raven seething with wordless fury.

Raven's hopes for an ally were dashed when Gina had still not arrived in time for supper. Of course, her friend might have texted to explain her delay, but with no working phone how was she to know? Raven put the pieces of the phone in her cosmetics bag and zipped it up, a police doctor sealing the victim in a body bag. What could she do to replace it? Granddad had just put down the deposit on his car and was stretched to the limit with the monthly payments; he had warned there was no spare cash for a while. He had promised to teach her to drive so she knew he had bought the new car for her benefit, thinking the old one too temperamental for a young driver. She really couldn't go to him with this problem. She tucked the dead mobile in a drawer. Her handset didn't have insurance for accidental damage. Life was almost unthinkable without a phone; she'd be out of the loop even more than she already was. Girls who got pushed to the edge of social circles at Westron soon transferred out; it wasn't a place that was kind to outsiders.

OK. So she would have to find a way of earning the money to fix it if Hedda didn't have a change of heart and own up to the vandalism. Yeah right: like that was going to happen. Raven swore and kicked the waste bin. It was so unfair. No good reporting it as the head teacher never took her scholarship pupils' side against one of the paying students.

Breathe deeply, Stone. Raven let her head hang between her two arms as she leaned on the sill of the deep window



embrasure. A bird—her namesake—cawed as it hopped and flapped untidily along the rooftop crenulations of the old castle that housed the school. The sound scraped against her hearing, a distraction from the maelstrom of hurt and anger that whirled inside her. *No biggie*. She would cope as she always did. This was peanuts compared to losing her mom to cancer and her dad to Afghanistan.

I'm sorry for your loss, that was what people said, like she had misplaced her parents. They said it, of course, because all words were inadequate and these were the ones society had settled on, but there were times she wished someone had said 'I'm sorry that your mom and dad died.' Told it like it was. Horrible. Gut-wrenching. Not a loss but a huge hole dug out of her middle. Mom had gone first. After her dad died, Raven's old life had been flushed away and an unspeakably grim transition period followed while the authorities fumbled her future. Granddad had been out of the picture—in hospital in England after a heart attack—so for a while the social worker dealing with her case had placed her with military friends of her parents, not realizing the couple was going through a stormy marriage breakdown. Emotionally there had been no room for a grief-stricken thirteen-year-old, leaving her prey to their bully of a fifteen-year-old son. Jimmy Bolton looked innocent, boy-next-door-charming, but his face hid a malicious nature. That was where she had learned to run fast, and if she couldn't run, how to fight back so she could get away. Her old self-defence lessons had become daily survival tactics. She couldn't even escape him during the day as Jimmy had been in the senior department of her high school. The exact opposite of Westron, it had been underfunded, teachers overstretched and the students low on ambition. It was a place in which you endured rather than studied. When her granddad recovered enough to apply to be her guardian, Raven had thought that



coming to Westron was a move to paradise—lawns, gardens, cool ancient building: it looked perfect. But then, even Eden had its snake, didn't it?

Enough brooding. Dumping the robe, Raven changed into a summer dress she had picked up for a fiver from the Oxfam charity shop in the local town over Easter. She smoothed it down, enjoying the sensation of the soft cotton flirting just above her knees. She doubted any of her classmates ever bargain hunted like she did. Bright orange, the colour suited her deep bronze skin tone. She accessorized it with a string of green and orange beads, also picked up from the same store but from the Fairtrade Craft section. She tugged off the label telling her about the women's cooperative in Bangladesh that made it, her mind briefly flitting round the world to a hot shed by the bank of a river that spent weeks in flood. It seemed really stupid to agonize over a smashed phone in contrast to that level of hardship. *Get a grip, Raven.*

The dinner warning bell sounded outside. Just as Raven was on the point of leaving her room, she almost stepped on an envelope that had been shoved in the gap under the door. Expecting some leaflet about term time activities, she ripped it open. Her photo fell out, features defaced by marker pen, a dagger sticking in her neck, spurting out blood. So not funny. Angrily, she scrunched it up and chucked it in the bin in the bathroom, not wanting it in her room.

The picture left a horrid taste in her mouth and a shaky feeling in her stomach. Somewhere deep down she was always the terrified girl who had lost her foundations along with her parents, and she worked hard so that side of her didn't come to the surface. Her old school had taught her not to show weakness—that was like blood in the water to the circling sharks. Only her granddad saw the true her and that was heavily edited so as not to worry him. Why had someone decided

to single her out for such spite? Even though she didn't expect a welcome downstairs, she wanted to be with other people to chase the image on the letter away.

Pushing her way through the heavy fire door in the corridor, she headed down the narrow stairs. The room she shared with Gina was up in what had once been servants' quarters. The school had four storeys in the main building, divided into boys' and girls' wings: the rambling fourth floor in the attics housed the boarders, the second and third floors were given over to classrooms; and the fancy, high-ceilinged ground floor that had started life as a medieval manor and grown to castle status under the Tudors. All in all, the school was home to three hundred live-in pupils. Westron Castle was just the English branch of the exclusive Union of International Schools. If you counted the other twenty-five schools round the world, and the alumni association, the students of the Union numbered in the tens of thousands, forming a powerful and well networked elite. Her granddad had been chuffed she'd been accepted; he thought that graduating from this school would set her up for life. And look how well *that* was going.

The gong sounded in the entrance hall. She was late. Picking up speed, Raven charged through door after door, leaving them swinging. Jumping the last few steps she reached the foyer a second before the entrance to the Dining Room was closed. The rule was if you got there after that point without a good excuse you had to forego supper. Fortunately tonight it was her grandfather on door duty. He raised a bushy eyebrow at her but held it as she slipped in.

'Thanks,' she whispered.

He patted her shoulder and disappeared off to his office by the kitchens, his little hunched frame soon swallowed up behind yet another fire barrier. The old architecture of the place had been brutally beaten to take on fire safety precautions,

swing doors and fire escapes. She wished he had elected to stay to keep her company, but as usual he avoided the rigmarole of eating with the students; the resident teachers were not so fortunate. Their attendance was obligatory.

Raven slipped into the hall and closed the door behind her, feeling exposed without Gina by her side. As anticipated, she was the last to arrive and most seats were taken. This was no baronial style dining room with heavy oak tables, as you might expect from the decor, but a restaurant setting of circular tables that could be folded away when the space was needed for other activities. The students were supposed to learn the art of dinner party conversation in their groupings of ten, teachers sprinkled strategically through the room to encourage manners and intelligent talk. At least that was what the syllabus promised parents; in reality, the tables were closely guarded spheres of influence, markers of who was in and who was out. Teachers preferred to sit together at their own table and gossip, leaving the students to fight out their social battles without referees.

Raven's eyes swept the room. Though she was standing in the shadows, her late entrance had attracted attention from the girls. A number of them glanced her way then started whispering together. She could imagine what they were saying: *there's the thief. We always knew it was her.*

Which one had left the picture, she wondered? It was horrible to think someone had spent their afternoon working out how to upset her. Her money was on Hedda and her gang but, really, now she knew what the girls thought of her—the school's trailer trash—she had begun to see enemies everywhere. No one had stood up for her: she would always remember that.

The boys, thankfully, seemed oblivious to the undercurrents in the room. When she caught the eye of Adewale, a friendly

Nigerian boy in her year, he just grinned back and returned to his conversation. Shame there was no room at his table.

Not wanting another battle, she avoided taking a seat with any of the girls. Her normal place by the serving counter was occupied so she slid into a spare chair at the same table on the far right. It was a good place to watch the room and had the advantage that she didn't recognize the two boys already there, so they at least should be ignorant of the undercurrents.

'Hi. You new to Westron?' she asked brightly, pretending she wasn't worried by the atmosphere in the dining hall. She was attuned to danger, thanks to past experience in a rough school, and somehow the situation had subtly changed. She was no longer so sure she was safe. It might not be drug-dealing seniors she had to worry about in the corridors here but something was . . . well . . . *off* about Westron post vacation. Worth thinking about later, but for now she turned to give the newcomers her attention.

The tousled-haired one on her right ignored her, apparently engrossed in a Sudoku puzzle. *Extreme level*. Great. She had put herself next to an Ultra-Geek—admittedly a handsome one. Hoping for rescue, she peered beyond him to the other stranger on Sudoku boy's far side.

'Hi, I'm Raven.'

This time her greeting did not fall on deaf ears.

'Hey, Raven. I'm Joe Masters.'

Not only did Joe have a lovely deep voice, East Coast accented like hers, but he had a smile that felt like the sun coming out to brighten her overcast day. His hair was shaved close to the scalp and his skin tone was only a couple of shades darker than hers. Total effect? Gorgeous.

'So, you . . . er . . . just joined us, Joe?'

'Yeah. We started today.'

We? Did that mean he came as a package deal with Sudoku? 'Oh. Awesome. I hope you settle in OK. I mean, it's a strange time to come, so late in the academic year.'

Joe tapped the fingers of his left hand lightly on the table, a pianist practising the bass line. 'Couldn't be helped, Raven. We got expelled from our old school.'

Raven wondered if he was joking; he seemed so cheerful about the fact. 'What?'

'The professor here blew up the labs. I was just an innocent bystander, your honour.' Joe's eyes were laughing at her expression.

'Oh, er, yeah right. Of course, you were. Totally.'

His expression told her he appreciated the irony. 'I always blame him. He never takes the trouble to defend himself. Do you, Kieran?' He nudged his friend.

'Hmm.' The boy filled in the grid with lightning speed. Raven suspected that he had to be making up the answers but when she surreptitiously checked the first box she couldn't fault it.

Waiting staff appeared with the first course, which entailed a dangerous ladling of hot soup over the shoulders of the students. As most of the servers were poorly trained locals drafted in for the meal, the older students knew to lean well back. The Sudoku boy did not take evasive action but impressed Raven by flicking up a napkin to intercept the drops with no seeming pause in his concentration.

'Is he always like this?' Raven asked.

Joe smiled indulgently. 'Hard to believe but yes.' He broke a roll into pieces. 'You think he hasn't noticed you but you're wrong.'

'Yeah right.'

'No, it's true. Hey, Key, stop that and say "hi" to the nice girl sitting on your right.'

‘Pathetically easy. I don’t know why I bother.’ The boy dropped the paper onto the floor between their chairs.

‘You bother because if your poor brain doesn’t have something to work on it starts to cannibalize its own cells out of sheer boredom.’

‘Hmm. Not very scientific but you might have a point.’ Sudoku sat up straight, revealing he was exceptionally tall. He had an enviable crop of loose chestnut curls and a face of angles and planes like some sculptor’s exaggerated version of ‘bone structure: British aristocracy’. Raven was reminded of a thoroughbred horse, all restless energy and skittishness. These two made the rest of the boys in her year look plain. She predicted that they were either going to be wildly popular with the guys who wanted to hang out with them, hoping to be at the front of the line for the girlfriend surplus, or—and this struck her as more likely—envied for being so fit.

‘So turn your gargantuan mind on your dinner companion, Key.’

As Kieran looked worth the extra effort, Raven decided to help by restarting introductions. ‘Hi, I’m Raven.’ She held out a hand.

He glanced at it, then took up his soup spoon instead. ‘I know who you are.’

Raven let her hand fall to her lap. Fine, be like that, Mr Arrogant. Clearly, he had put her in the surplus category already. That stung. A lot. ‘So, I get it: I say my name and now you know everything there is to know about me! Gee: no need to say hello back or ask me about myself. Gosh, darn it, you must be so clever!’

Joe chuckled at her sarcasm. ‘That’s Kieran Storm for you. And believe me, he does know you—height, weight, life history. He probably even has a shrewd idea of your . . . um . . . shoe size.’ He winked.

That seemed unlikely. The boy had not met her gaze yet, let alone given her feet or other parts any attention.

'I think I'm getting a fair picture of your friend, Joe. Six three, maybe six four. White British. Too intelligent for us mere mortals. Posh education at one of those English schools called public when they are private—Eton, Harrow or equivalent—until he was expelled.' She said the last with relish. She would have liked to have seen that.

Joe was highly amused. He stirred his tomato and red pepper soup in a circle, mixing in the *crème fraîche*. 'Go on.'

Raven made a guess. 'He needs you to dress him.'

'Right on target,' crowed Joe. 'That's me: his valet. How did you know?'

'You're wearing a Ralph Lauren suit . . .'

'A designer second,' Joe slipped in.

'And your friend has one too . . .'

'I know a very useful guy.'

'But his shirt is probably bummed from his dad's or younger brother's wardrobe as it doesn't fit—too short in the sleeves. I figured he threw it on this morning before coming here and since then he's been hard at work on his Sudoku until you forced him into the only decent suit he has. He couldn't be bothered to put on the matching shirt like you did and you decided the battle wasn't worth fighting. Am I close?'

'Hey, Key, you've got a rival. How many points does she get?'

Kieran raised his eyes to Raven's face for the first time. He had eyes of an uncanny pale jade green, almost alien in their intensity. Her heart did a little flip of shock as she recognized the visceral attraction she had felt from the beginning had just got ten times worse. Moth, her; flame, him: result, singed wings.

'Not bad.' His voice wasn't cold, more deep and distant,

as if it were a struggle for him to remember to relate to little Earth people like her.

'And that, Raven, is high praise from my man here. Congratulations.' Joe shook her hand across Kieran's meal then let go.

'Thanks.' Raven took a sip of her soup, attempting to regain her balance. 'So what did I get wrong?'

Kieran crumbled a piece of bread with his long fingers and scattered them on the surface of his soup. He shot another glance at her then concentrated on his bowl. 'It's my shirt. I've grown.'

Joe nodded. 'Yup, he never goes shopping for clothes. He will wear something until it falls apart or we hide it from him.'

'Who's "we"?' asked Raven.

Joe looked troubled for a moment. 'The boys at our old school. Yeah, them guys.'

'But you got him the suit?'

'It was given to me. We both share a generous . . .' Kieran searched for a word. ' . . . Godfather.'

'I wouldn't mind one of those,' said Raven, thinking of her phone. 'So I did only "OK" then. Let's see what you know about me.' She was intrigued what he would pick up as she was convinced she had not registered on his girl detector.

Kieran finished his soup before replying.

'Go on: the suspense is killing me.'

'As you wish.' Kieran pushed the bowl away and leant back in his chair to study her—to really study her. Raven had the feeling that no one had ever looked so closely at her before. It was like he was some human form of MRI scan, revealing all the layers.

'Fire away.' She crossed her arms, a little worried as to what she had invited.

'Raven Stone. Seventeen. Granddaughter of the school

caretaker, Robert Bates. You have been at the school for three years, which explains why you use both British and American English idioms. Parents deceased. One parent an American army officer—father most likely. Yes, yes, of course the father as the mother was British. Idiot.’ He hit his forehead. ‘Father was African American and proud of his heritage from the civil rights movement, but that is so obvious I apologize for mentioning it.’

‘How did you . . . ?’

Joe shook his head, warning her to let Kieran continue.

‘You are five three and would like to be taller. Size 8—or about American size 6, though the conversion equivalent is not exact. You don’t have much money, shop at Oxfam, buy Fairtrade, read real books rather than eBooks. Shall I go on?’

He was good: she had to give him that, but Raven was irritated by his calm dissection of her habits and person. ‘How do you know all this? Have you been in my room or something?’

‘No. Everything I need to know is right here.’

‘I suppose you know my shoe size too, Detective Storm?’

His eyebrow winged up at that sarcasm. ‘Size 5. I can make an educated guess at other measurements if you wish.’

Joe swallowed a laugh.

‘No thanks,’ Raven said quickly.

‘And you have had a fight with that red-haired girl over there about . . .’ Kieran brushed the bridge of his nose with a long forefinger, ‘. . . about her ridiculously large handbag.’

Raven was far from amused. ‘I think you’d better stop before you spill all my guilty secrets.’

‘Oh, you’re not the kind to have guilty secrets. You are an open book—usually honest, preferring to be direct and physical rather than subtle and devious, but under that surface show of strength, there is a hint of shyness and fragility, such as now when you prefer not to meet my eyes.’

Naturally that meant that Raven had to force her gaze to challenge his. She immediately regretted it as his eyes seemed to draw her in like some kind of Star Trek tractor beam taking her little ship in tow of his Enterprise.

Joe put a hand over Kieran's mouth. 'You'd better stop, my man, before she plants a fist in your face.'

Raven looked down at the crumbs on the table top. 'How do you know about the fight—and all the rest?'

Kieran did not appear to understand that he had embarrassed her. He was enjoying the glow of his cleverness. 'That was simple: your clothes speak for themselves—label cut out at back of dress, cotton tag end still hanging so recent second hand purchase. Bead work from Bangladesh. Fair guess that they were bought together as you matched them as an outfit, so that suggests Oxfam rather than a home-based charity. There is a branch in town. As for the fight, the girls over there have been looking in your direction continually since you came in—most comments have been directed to the redhead and she has been clutching that bag to her side all night as if expecting you to rip it away from her.'

He was right: the tote was back. All that fuss over something that wasn't even stolen! 'The jerk—she hadn't lost it at all!'

'She did misplace it,' Kieran continued. 'It had been removed by your grandfather when he found it under the table during clear up from lunch. He put it in the school secretary's office and asked her to tell the girl who owned it to collect it. I heard the secretary call the redhead over on my way in today.'

So that was why they still blamed her. They probably now thought her grandfather was in on her career as a thief, covering for her when she got caught.

Resentment fought with curiosity and curiosity won. 'How did you know we had a fight?'

Kieran paused as his bowl was taken away and the second course of lamb and new potatoes was placed in front of him.

'You have a slight scratch on the side of your neck that suggests a girl-fight,' he gestured with his trim nails, 'and a rather fine bruise over your left eye. Actually, now I think about it, were there two of them? Yes, there were. You and two girls—probably after lunch judging by the age of the bruise.'

She watched with fascination as he dissected his meat with surgical precision. 'Anything else?'

'Your phone. It got broken or stolen.' He chewed on the lamb, piece by careful piece.

Raven put down her fork. 'How on earth do you know that?'

'Because that girl over there has been wagging her iPhone at you. The gesture suggests she has something that you do not.'

'Wow, well done,' Raven said flatly. 'So you are, what? Sherlock Holmes's love child?'

'Impossible. He is a fictional character based on the real life Joseph Bell, a medical lecturer from Edinburgh who pioneered . . .'

'Enough information, Kieran. She was making a joke,' Joe said softly.

'Thanks, you can get back in your box now.' Raven gave up on her meal. If her behaviour was going to be put under a microscope, she'd prefer it to be by a friend and in private. 'It was nice meeting you, Joe.'

Joe caught her sleeve. 'Before you go, Raven, was he right about the civil rights movement?'

Kieran snorted and added another teaspoon of mint sauce to his meal.

'Yeah, actually he was.'

'Bracelet,' muttered Kieran.

Raven turned her silver wrist band so Joe could see the inscription. *I have a dream.*

‘Clearly an American piece from the 1960s referencing Martin Luther King’s speech; date suggests a family heirloom.’

It was the last present her father had given her before he deployed out of country and into the path of a roadside bomb. Raven put her hand over it protectively.

‘It’s a nice piece,’ Joe said.

Kieran swallowed his mouthful, appetite sharpened by the display of his intellect. ‘Actually, it’s only silver plate which means it’s not worth much.’

‘*Actually*, it’s worth everything—to me.’ Raven gave him her back and walked out.