

JAYDEN JONES IS MISSING.



Everyone thinks he ran away. His best friend, Zoe Gale, knows they're wrong.

Zoe's search leads her to The 17—a secret group chat, used by anonymous teens to blackmail the powerless. To join, you have to put on a mask and record yourself completing a challenge. The challenges are always illegal. Sometimes dangerous. Maybe deadly.

Who are The 17? What have they done to Jayden?
And what will they do to silence Zoe?

*A rollercoaster of suspense and twists
from the author of the Liars series.*

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IF YOU TELL ANYONE,
YOU'RE NEXT

JACK HEATH



JACK HEATH

IF

AN EXCLUSIVE GROUP CHAT.

YOU

A DEADLY CHALLENGE.

TELL

HOW FAR WOULD YOU GO TO JOIN?

ANYONE,

YOU'RE NEXT

For Becky Watkins—JH

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JACK HEATH

IF

YOU

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ANYONE,

YOU'RE NEXT

A Scholastic Australia book

CLICK.

(Dead air, hissing.)

JAYDEN (scared)

Don't. Please.

ZOE

Sorry, kid. It's not personal.

JAYDEN

I won't tell anyone. I'll do whatever you want. Just let me go, OK?

ZOE

It's not about what I want, it's about what they want. Hold still.

JAYDEN (crying)

Who? What are you talking about? I want to go home.

ZOE

I can't let you glow home. You—

JAYDEN

'Glow home'?

ZOE

Aw, nuts. Sorry.

JAYDEN (laughing)

It's all good.

ZOE

Up for another take?

JAYDEN

Sure. I could do this all day.

ZOE

We have been doing it all day. It's 6PM.

JAYDEN (groans)

Really? Sorry, I gotta go—or 'glow', as the cool kids say. Dad reckons it's dangerous around here after dark.

RECORDING CUTS OUT.

CHAPTER I

Monday, 8:06 AM. 65 hours missing

It's the ugliest house in Burniglen. Missing roof tiles, peeling paint, foundations sinking on one side. The gate has rusted shut, blocking off a garden so overgrown that you'd need a machete to get to the front door. Some kids say it's haunted; others say it's just full of asbestos.

Zoe adjusts her backpack, pulls out her phone and takes a photo. She opens the ySup app and sends the picture to her best friend, with a message: If I die today, promise you'll finally delete that poem I wrote about Christian.

As usual, Niamh responds within seconds. Babe, I'm reading it at your funeral. There's a pause, and then another message: Wait, what house is that?

Zoe replies: The Adkison place, on the hill.

Isn't that right near Christian's house? Have you gone from cute crush to fatal attraction?

Zoe types: There's no way you've seen *Fatal Attraction*. Anyway, I'm gonna look inside.

Soon a GIF appears. It's some supervillain, looking incredulous. The image is captioned: I beg your pardon?

Zoe is about to respond when she hears a squeak from the house. Maybe a rat, or the rusted weather vane. But when she squints up at the broken windows on the second floor, she sees a shadow glide past.

Someone is inside.

'Hey!' Zoe leaps over the gate. It catches on her school trackpants and leaves a smear of grime, but doesn't tear the polyester. She pushes through the scrub towards the verandah; sticky weeds cling to her sleeves, like they're trying to stop her.

The planks of the verandah bend under her weight. Bouncing from one to the next, she soon reaches the front door. She brought her brother's lock picks, but they're not necessary. The handle is long gone, leaving an empty circle. Zoe gives the door a shove and it opens on broken hinges, grinding along the floor.

Zoe creeps in. Her smartwatch beeps, letting her know that her heart rate is elevated. The screen says: *You're stressed! Remember to breathe.*

She's in an entrance hall with a high ceiling and a cobwebbed chandelier dangling overhead, the crystals shattered. On her left is a living area with the bones of a couch and an old, hollowed-out TV that looks like someone has used it as a fireplace. To her right there's a space that might once have been a dining room—the table has been

smashed, but a couple of the chairs are intact. She spots a pair of antlers mounted on the wall, and a fridge lies on its side in the corner. In front of her, a corridor leads to the back of the house and a set of stairs goes up into the gloom. A damp, earthy smell permeates everything.

The floor is littered with muesli bar wrappers, empty spaghetti tins and bread crusts. Someone's been living here.

'Hello?' she calls.

The house sucks up the word and gives nothing back. The wind howls outside, and the walls rattle. The whole house might get carried away.

Zoe should leave. That would be the smart thing to do.

Instead, she climbs the stairs. Some are missing, leaving gaps like the black keys on a piano. At the top is a landing, softened by a worn rug. Picture hooks protrude from the walls—no pictures, though.

'I don't mean any harm,' she says. 'I just want to talk.'

The door to her right is closed. The one to the left is open just a crack. Zoe turns left, telling herself she's not really trespassing until she starts turning door handles.

'My friend is missing,' she continues. 'His name is Jayden Jones. Jay. We make a podcast together. It's true crime.' A nervous laugh. 'Ironic, I guess. Anyway, he always walks past here on his way home from school. He has grey eyes and shaggy, red hair. Freckles. I just need to know if you saw him on Friday. That's all I want. Then I'll go, OK?'

Silence.

It occurs to her, much too late, that whoever lives here might not just have *seen* Jayden. They might be the one who *took* him.

She can't see anything through the gap. Ignoring the knot in her stomach, she grips the brass door handle, the dust sticking to her sweaty palm.

'Please.' Her voice cracks. 'I just want to know he's safe.'

She waits two more seconds, then pushes the door the rest of the way open. The hinges moan.

The bedroom looks abandoned, forgotten, looted, and forgotten once again. There's a wardrobe with no doors, and a four-poster bed with no mattress. Mould creeps down the walls, like nature is trying to reclaim the building. The carpet has been ripped up, and the wood beneath is a Venn diagram of stains.

Zoe creeps in and looks around. No-one is here. She peers under the bed and pulls out some scraps of paper. They look like receipts, the ink long-gone.

The wind wails at the broken window, making the tattered curtains dance. Maybe that's what she saw from the ground level. Or maybe whoever was here escaped out the back door, desperate to avoid human contact.

Another dead end.

The disappointment crushes her and she turns to leave. The door has swung closed behind her. On the back of it, someone has scrawled a number in red paint: 17.

CHAPTER 2

Monday, 9:02 AM. 66 hours missing

Burniglen High School is surrounded by a tall, steel fence, bent inwards at the top, as though the architects thought they were designing a lion enclosure. The jumble of old and new buildings are built on a hillside, which makes the campus confusing to navigate. Sometimes you'll walk in a ground-floor entrance only to find yourself on level three. Zoe enters the nearest gate and hurries through the Escher maze of covered walkways, puffing as she climbs the concrete stairs towards the science block. The bell has rung already. There's not a soul around.

When she reaches the bottom of a gloomy stairwell, she hears a hum, like a vibrating phone. As her eyes adjust to the darkness, she sees two people hiding under the stairs: Aria Musset and Will Cork. Aria is drawing on Will's wrist with a large, black pen. Will grins as though he's posing for a photo.

Half of Zoe's classmates have already turned sixteen. Aria hasn't, but she sure acts like she has. She sashays while others

trudge, laughs while others giggle. She has the otherworldly beauty of an influencer or a movie star—sparkling white teeth, emerald eyes, gleaming honey-blonde hair with streaks of gold, long fingernails painted pastel pink.

Zoe hurries towards the corridor, bowing her head like she hasn't noticed them. Aria loves making people do things. She's choreographed a dance number for the end-of-year concert, and has been roping in anyone who makes eye contact.

'Zoooeeee!' Aria sings. 'It's so good to see you!'

Zoe pretends to notice her for the first time. 'Oh, hey, Aria. Sorry, I'm in a bit of a hurry . . .'

'I'm sure Mr Hague won't mind if you're late,' Aria says smoothly. 'Considering the circumstances.'

Will shoots an annoyed look at Zoe, but doesn't say anything. He's a gangly boy with close-cropped hair, a pointed nose, and a partially shaved eyebrow.

Aria takes in the grime on Zoe's pants and the weeds stuck to her sleeves. 'No luck in the search?' she asks sympathetically.

Zoe and dozens of other volunteers spent Saturday afternoon and all of Sunday scouring the bush around Burniglen for Jayden. Zoe would still be there, but Mum and Dad forced her to go to school. She shakes her head.

Aria sighs. 'Poor Jayden.'

If he were here, he'd be thrilled just to hear Aria say his name, Zoe thinks bitterly.

‘Isn’t there some rule about how the police stop looking after forty-eight hours?’ Aria asks.

‘Not in Australia,’ Zoe says. She knows what Aria means—on American cop shows they talk about ‘the odds dropping off’ and ‘the trail going cold’. But she doesn’t think there’s a point at which they have to stop searching.

Aria reaches out and squeezes Zoe’s arm with a manicured hand. ‘How are you coping?’

‘Fine,’ Zoe lies.

‘You can talk to me,’ Aria says. ‘We’ve been friends for a long time.’

This is news to Zoe. Aria paid no attention to her until Jay disappeared. ‘I’m OK, really.’

Aria isn’t fooled. ‘Well, don’t worry. They’ll find him soon.’

That’s what Zoe is afraid of. The police are dragging the lake, searching the swamp with cadaver dogs, and checking hospital morgues across Melbourne. She doesn’t want them to find Jayden. She wants him to stumble out of the bush with amnesia, or return from a digital detox no-one knew he was on, or land an improvised raft on the riverbank after a few days stranded on an island with a volleyball.

‘You just need to take your mind off it.’ Aria snaps her fingers. ‘Hey, how about you sign up for the end of year show?’

‘That’s still six months away—’

‘Five months, one week and two days. It *sounds* like a long time, but it’s not. We start rehearsals at 3:30 PM on Tuesday, and I could really use your expertise.’

Unless Aria needs someone to research a murder or talk into a microphone, Zoe has no expertise. 'I'll talk to Mum,' she says, intending to pretend Mum said no.

'If she needs convincing, let me know.' Aria smiles like she's on a magazine cover. 'I'm good with parents.' She blows gently on Will's wrist, drying the ink.

'Right. Well, gotta go.'

As Zoe escapes from the stairwell, she hears Will mutter something that sounds like, 'Bye, Floople'.

Aria snickers and shushes him. Zoe hurries away, wondering what a 'floople' is.

CHAPTER 3

Monday, 9:12 AM. 66 hours missing

It's overcast, so the skylights inside the science block cast scant light. The white walls look grey, the grey carpet looks black. Oil heaters line the walls, not warming the corridors at all, yet somehow too hot to touch. The smell of bleach and sweat permeates everything.

But classroom 2C is bright and clean, like a futuristic hospital. Students sit at their laminate workbenches, while Mr Hague stands in front of the smartboard, resting his knuckles on his desk.

As Zoe walks in, everyone falls silent. Her classmates stare, neither hostile nor welcoming.

She can see Christian Whitford in her peripheral vision, his mane of dark brown hair hanging almost down to his perfect cheekbones. He's wearing the standard uniform: a navy blue polo shirt with the school coat of arms on the lapel. But it looks better on him than anyone else.

Zoe had noticed Christian on her first day at Burniglen

High—or, as Niamh put it, the moment she hit puberty. Her interest escalated into a full-blown crush this year, when he came back from the holidays at least ten centimetres taller and looking like he'd spent all summer learning how a hairbrush worked. Zoe sketched pictures of him, wrote poetry about him, and drew his initials in glitter pen on the back of her hand: ZG♡CW. She always sat near him, hoping he'd notice. She even prepared a list of other people with the same initials, so she could be coy when he asked. Act like he wasn't special. But he never once glanced at her.

That turned out to be for the best. A few weeks ago Zoe had seen Christian and Will walking home from school. Their body language suggested they were discussing something private, and Zoe's aspiring journalist instincts kicked in. As she sped up, hoping to get within earshot, Christian suddenly pushed Will sideways. Will tripped and fell into an empty stormwater channel. As Will writhed on the concrete, Christian just looked down blankly, like Will was a specimen in a Petri dish.

Zoe's attraction had withered. She didn't do bad boys.

If Christian noticed her sudden coldness, he didn't show it. Why would he? Other girls were lining up around the block to date him, touching their hair whenever he walked past, squealing whenever he so much as looked at them. Not that he paid any attention to them, either.

Now, as Zoe walks into the silent classroom, his gaze flicks up to her. She turns slightly away.

'You're late,' Mr Hague says. He's a gaunt man with salt-and-pepper hair, waxy skin, and a shirt buttoned all the way up to his throat, like an undertaker or an adherent to some particularly strict religion. Zoe has never seen him smile. Despite this, she likes him. Burniglen Grammar tries to poach all the good teachers, which means the only ones left at the public school are either lazy or noble. Mr Hague seems like the latter. At least he's disappointed when his students don't learn.

'Sorry,' Zoe tells him.

Mr Hague waits for an excuse. When she doesn't offer one, his gaze softens. Like everyone else in the school, he knows Jayden is missing, and that Zoe cares about him.

'Help yourself to a dead rat, then take a seat,' he says.

For a second, Zoe thinks she's misheard. Then she remembers—they're halfway through the dissection unit. Last week it was a frog. The week before it was a cow's eyeball. Today it's a bucket of dead rats in individual resealable bags. *Great*. At the beginning of the year, Zoe had selected biology as one of her subjects—the study of living creatures. She hadn't expected to meet so many dead ones.

She pulls a pair of disposable gloves out of a box and stretches them over her hands. The latex is soft and powdery. When she scoops up a rat from the bucket, it's cold through the plastic, not yet fully defrosted. Its furry face looks both startled and forlorn.

'One-fourth of the human genome is shared by rats,'

Mr Hague begins. 'Our evolutionary paths diverged only eighty million years ago. That means the rat in your hands is quite a lot like you.'

One boy chuckles and elbows another, who mutters, 'Shut up.'

'The digestive, circulatory and nervous systems are similar,' Mr Hague goes on. 'And, crucially, you'll find the same organs in the same places. Phones down, please.'

Sara Murphy, whose protruding ears are made more obvious by her pink, half-shaved hair, flips her phone over on the workbench.

'Thank me later,' Mr Hague says. 'The average touchscreen has ten times more bacteria than a toilet seat—and that's *before* the user starts handling rat innards.' He turns to the smartboard and starts writing a list of organs.

Zoe looks around for a seat. Niamh moves her bag off the stool next to her and dumps it on the floor with a crash of badges and pins.

Niamh has frizzy, straw-coloured hair, a pierced nose, and huge, grey eyes that make her look like a lemur. Or maybe a meerkat—she's always sitting up straight, elbows bunched.

'*Nǐ hǎo, nǚ péngyǒu,*' Niamh whispers out of the corner of her mouth, as Zoe sits down. They're both in Mrs Zhuang's Mandarin class, and Zoe has been helping her practise.

'*Hāi, bǎobèi,*' Zoe replies.

'So you made it out.'

'Yep,' Zoe replies.

‘I assumed you were dead. I already converted your ySup profile to a memorial and put all your poetry on it.’

Zoe is ninety-nine percent sure Niamh is kidding, but she can’t keep the panic out of her voice. ‘You didn’t!’

Mr Hague glances over at them. ‘Less talking, more listening. Make sure you’re all holding your scalpels like this.’ He demonstrates, gripping his knife between thumb and forefinger like a pen. ‘First we’re going to try to find the rat’s heart. Make your first incision down the centre of the chest.’

Kyle Gruzas sticks up his hand. ‘I’m a vegetarian.’

‘You don’t have to *eat* the rat,’ Sara says. Giggles and guffaws echo through the classroom.

‘But I feel sick,’ Kyle complains. He’s a solid-looking boy with big hands and a round face. Zoe has heard that he plans to join the army when he graduates—his hair is very short, his spine rigid, like he’s already in boot camp.

‘You may be excused if you don’t have the stomach for this,’ Mr Hague says. ‘I don’t want anyone being sick in my classroom. However, if you want to grow up to be a surgeon, or a vet—’

‘Or a butcher,’ Sara puts in.

It’s a good point—most of Zoe’s classmates can’t afford to study medicine. They’re more likely to end up working in the abattoir.

Mr Hague silences Sara with a glare, and then continues. ‘Even if your chosen occupation doesn’t require any knowledge of anatomy, putting aside your discomfort is a

valuable skill to cultivate. Understood?’

Kyle nods reluctantly, maybe thinking that in the army he'll have to do harder things than cut up a rat.

Aria swans into the classroom. ‘So sorry I’m late,’ she gushes. ‘Mrs Jolimont asked me if I could help carry some canvases from her car, and I—’

Mr Hague smiles for the first time ever. ‘Don’t worry, you’re not late. We haven’t made the first incision yet.’

Zoe is incredulous. She watches as the girl who was casually doodling on a classmate five minutes earlier takes her rat and gloves, then perches on a stool next to Kyle.

Zoe rolls her eyes and turns back to her rat. She isn’t a vegetarian, but she still finds it hard to make the first cut. They’ve never dissected anything furry before. She touches the point of the blade to the creature’s back, but finds herself wincing, as though it’s her own flesh. She can’t apply pressure.

No-one else seems hesitant. The smell of formaldehyde fills the air as the other students dissect their rats. Next to her, Niamh is already peeling back the fuzzy skin. Up the front of the classroom, Aria is stroking her rat’s stomach with the scalpel like a painter with a fine-tipped brush, her eyes laser-focused on the corpse. Even Kyle is cutting, and not looking quite so green.

‘Find anything at the haunted house?’ Niamh asks.

‘Well, no ghosts.’

‘We’ll have to change its name, then. Why did you think Jay would be there?’

'I didn't,' Zoe says. 'But he would have walked right past it last Friday. I was hoping someone inside might have seen something.'

'Doesn't he normally walk home with you?'

'Not that day.' Not since they fought about Aria. If only Zoe had apologised.

'Does anyone even live there?'

Zoe thinks of the muesli bar wrappers. 'Someone does.'

'Babe, maybe you should leave this to the police.'

'Jayden's our friend.'

'You're *my* friend, and I don't want you to disappear like he did. Just trust the police—they are looking into it.'

Easy for her to say. Zoe has known Jay since he moved in next door, and was sent over to borrow some olive oil. She still remembers him frozen on her front porch, too shy to say what he wanted. Even after he moved a few streets away, he still came over whenever his dad was being a bit extra. Niamh, meanwhile, has only known him since he came to Burniglen High earlier this year. And she hasn't had the same experiences with the police that Zoe's family has.

'The police are "looking into" boxes of doughnuts,' Zoe says, 'while people's memories are fading and suspects are getting away.'

'Whoever's in that house might have murdered him. Did that occur to you?'

'Not till I was inside,' Zoe admits.

Niamh prises the rat's chest apart. The rib cage reminds

Zoe of a hair clip. It opens the same way, revealing the heart and two little lungs.

Poor rat, she thinks. Unexpectedly, tears sting her eyes.

Niamh hears the sniffing and glances up. 'You OK?'

Zoe nods, but she's not. She will never be OK again. Jayden has vanished. It feels like she's the one who's been ripped open, her heart exposed to the cold air.

A tortured squeak sounds from the front of the classroom. Kyle leaps off his stool and scrambles away from his workbench.

'Your rat is still alive!' he yells.

'No, no,' Aria says hurriedly. 'I just accidentally squeezed the lungs. See?'

She reaches into the rat's chest and pinches the lungs between her thumb and forefinger. Another agonised squeak.

The blood drains from Kyle's face. He sways on his feet.

Zoe jumps up and runs over. She wraps her arms around Kyle's chest from behind, like she's preparing to give him the Heimlich manoeuvre.

Just in time. He slackens, falling backwards into her. He's big and heavy, but Zoe finds she's not alone—Christian has appeared beside her, gripping Kyle's upper arms. Together, they lower him to the ground.

Mr Hague barges through the crowd of students. 'Everyone back up. Give Kyle some space.'

Zoe and Christian both step away. They end up jammed side-by-side in the crowd of students. She can feel the warmth

of his shoulder. A faint tang that might be his deodorant hangs in the air.

‘Thanks,’ she tells him. It’s the first time she’s ever dared talk to him.

Christian makes a tight little smile.

‘I didn’t mean to upset him!’ Aria goes to put her hands over her mouth, then seems to realise they’re covered in rat innards. She looks around anxiously at the others. ‘Is he OK?’

Mr Hague is talking to Kyle in a low voice. ‘Kyle? Can you hear me? Kyle?’

Kyle groans. The colour is coming back to his cheeks.

There’s a knock at the door. Zoe looks up and sees the policewoman she spoke to Saturday in the doorway. Her black hair is pulled back into a tight bun behind her police cap, and the plastic buttons on her dark blue shirt look like they’ve been polished individually. Zoe finds her gaze drawn to the gun on her belt.

The cop takes in the semiconscious boy and the huddled students. ‘What’s going on here?’ she asks.

Mr Hague glances up. ‘A fainter. He’ll be OK. Can I help you?’

‘I’m Senior Constable Shankari Wake,’ she says. ‘I need to speak with Zoe Gale.’

CHAPTER 4

Monday, 10:06 AM. 67 hours missing

Zoe takes several deep breaths, like she's about to jump off a diving board, then asks, 'Have you found Jayden?'

Constable Wake is leading her through the corridors of the science block. 'Let's talk somewhere private,' she says.

Zoe holds in a scream of frustration. 'Have you found him or not?'

Wake looks Zoe up and down, and apparently takes pity on her. 'No. This is just a follow-up.'

The wire around Zoe's lungs slackens a little. 'Have you found *anything*?'

'I'll explain in a moment.'

They exit the building and walk along another covered walkway. Soon they reach a crossroads, and Wake hesitates. 'This place is a maze,' she mutters. 'It was completely different when I was a kid.'

It's hard to picture the constable as a child. She looks like she was carved from sandstone, fully grown and already

wearing a uniform.

‘Which building are you looking for?’ Zoe asks.

‘Your principal said I could use the band room.’

The principal, Anita Klempf, is a rotund woman with beehive hair who has been at this school for approximately ten thousand years. She stopped updating school policies sometime in the nineties, and has little patience for woke suggestions such as ‘on-campus police interviews should involve a parent’.

Zoe points towards the combined arts and music block. Art and music used to have separate buildings, but after complaints about lack of parking, Klempf demolished the music block. The asphalt is still black and the paint still white on the car park that replaced it.

Wake nods, embarrassed, and they set off again.

Usually the band room is filled with out-of-tune trumpet honks and the rumbling of bass guitars, but the room is empty. The padded walls create an ominous silence. There’s sheet music on a few stands, and a flute left behind on a chair. Zoe wonders if Wake kicked out a class for this interview.

Wake sits down and holds up her phone. On the screen, Zoe can see a microphone logo and a timer ticking upwards from 00:02. ‘This is Constable Wake, interview with Zoe Gale, commencing at—’ She checks a chunky wristwatch. ‘10:20 AM on Monday, July third.’ She pockets the phone.

The first time Zoe was interviewed, there were two police. ‘Where’s the other guy?’ she asks.

'Detective Winchell has been reassigned.'

'In the middle of a case?'

Wake just nods.

Zoe tells herself this is good news. Winchell was not only grey-haired but grey-faced, and saggy, like a half-deflated jumping castle. He wheezed when he talked. Wake couldn't be more different. She has a stiff bearing, like a robot, and a prominent chin that looks like it could shatter the fist of anyone dumb enough to take a swing.

'On Saturday you told me that you and Jayden are close,' she says.

She's using present tense, at least. 'That's right.'

'Can you confirm his birthday for me?'

'He turns eighteen next month. The eleventh. Why?'

'What's his address?'

'He used to live next door to me, but now he's a few streets away, at 11 Montrose Road. Why—' Zoe breaks off. 'You're testing me. You don't think I know him.'

Wake watches her with unblinking hazel eyes.

'Why would I pretend to be friends with Jayden?'

'Teenagers—,' she says the word with barely concealed contempt, '—do absurd things to seem cool. A fake friendship with a missing boy wouldn't be the strangest thing I've seen.'

'Well, get on with it,' Zoe says, her cheeks growing hot. 'Ask me about his favourite band, his eye colour, how many pets he has. The sooner this is over with, the sooner you can get back to looking for him. Did I mention that Jayden

and I make a true crime podcast together? There are twelve episodes. You can listen to them all, and then decide whether we're friends or not.'

'Was Jayden close to your brother?'

Zoe's heart sinks. 'My brother doesn't have anything to do with this.'

'Is that a "yes", or a "no"?''

Last October there had been a break-in at a bottle shop. The police had found Axel wandering around nearby. He'd told them he was waiting for a friend, but had refused to tell them who. When they searched his bag, they'd found his set of lock picks and arrested him. Mum and Dad had been terrified that he would lose the place he'd been offered at university.

'Axel was found not guilty,' Zoe says.

'The charges were dropped,' Wake says, correcting her.

'He likes locksports. That's not illegal. None of the missing alcohol was in his bag, or at our house, *which you know* because your colleagues turned it upside down, including my room.' Zoe is still angry about that. Apparently when the cops get a warrant to search someone's residence, that means the whole house, not just the bit the suspect lives in. 'Axel was in the wrong place at the wrong time, and the police had to make an official apology. And now you're telling me you're not looking for Jayden because—'

'We *are* looking for Jayden,' Wake says calmly. 'The first step in any missing persons investigation is to find out if any

of the victim's associates have been in trouble with the law.'

Zoe is furious now. 'Jayden disappeared three days ago. I'm so glad you've reached "the first step" of your investigation.'

Wake glances down at her notepad. 'Jayden only enrolled here at the start of the year, correct?'

'Yeah. He was getting bullied at Grammar, so his parents pulled him out.'

Wake gives Zoe a thoughtful look. 'Can anyone confirm that?'

Zoe shrugs. 'His parents? The principal?'

'Were the two of you in a relationship?'

'Just friends.'

'Does he have a girlfriend? Boyfriend? Any recent exes?'

'No.'

'Could there have been someone he didn't tell you about?'

'No,' Zoe repeats firmly.

'All right.' Wake drops this line of questioning. 'When was the last time you saw him?'

Zoe doesn't have to think about it. She's been through this, several times. 'I told the police this already. Science class last Friday. Fifth period.'

'You remember what he was wearing?'

'School uniform. Plus a pair of sparkly silver sneakers. He was always wearing those.' Poor Jayden. Desperate to be noticed.

'Was that the class I just took you out of?' Wake asks. 'Same students, same teacher?'

Zoe nods.

‘The boy who fainted when he saw me—what’s his name?’

‘Kyle Gruzaz. But he didn’t faint when he saw you. He was queasy about dissecting a rat.’

Wake scribbles in her notepad. ‘What time did fifth period end?’

‘2 PM.’

‘And you didn’t see Jayden after that?’

‘No. I went to my Mandarin class, he had Ag.’

‘Ag?’

‘Agriculture.’

Wake scribbles another note. ‘You didn’t see him after school?’

‘No. Usually we walk home together, but that day we didn’t.’

‘Why not?’

Something tells Zoe it would be a bad idea to reveal that she fought with Jay right before he disappeared. ‘Some days we just don’t. Sometimes I’ll stay back at the library, sometimes he’ll take the bus because it’s raining, or his parents want him home early. There’s no system. I send him a sup when I’m ready to go, and he sups back if he’s available.’

‘A sup?’ Constable Wake repeats.

‘You know, a DM. But we use the ySup app, so they’re called sups.’

‘I see.’ Wake is visibly disgusted. ‘And this time he didn’t “sup” back?’

‘Right. I waited a while, then walked home on my own.’

Zoe has tormented herself over this. What if she'd stayed for five more minutes? Or reported him missing right then, instead of waiting for his parents to do it at 9 PM?

She found out later that most of the police were tied up with a car accident that night. They didn't even start looking for Jayden until the early hours of Saturday morning. If Zoe had paid more attention to Jayden's absence at 3 PM, she could have given them a ten-hour head start.

'How unusual was that?' Wake asks. 'Him not responding straight away?'

'Not very,' Zoe says.

'Was there anything odd about Jayden's demeanour on Friday? Did he say or do anything out of the ordinary?'

Before Zoe can answer, a boy barges in, fourteen or fifteen, hair scuffed up at the back like a recently-licked puppy.

'Did I leave my flute in here?' he wonders aloud.

'This is a police interview,' Wake says. 'Get out.'

The boy's eyes widen. He looks from Wake to Zoe and back, then scrambles out the door as though he's being chased.

'Teenagers,' Wake mutters again. She gets up, shuts the door with a meaningful thump, then sits opposite Zoe again. 'What about people in his agriculture class? "Ag." Who should I talk to?'

'Gabrielle, maybe? And Georgie.'

'I'll need last names. Have you seen them both since last Friday?'

Zoe is puzzled by this line of questioning. ‘I don’t know—I guess?’

‘Was either one dating Jayden?’

‘I told you, there’s no girlfriend.’

‘But you think Gabrielle and Georgie might have noticed any strange behaviour.’

‘There was no strange behaviour,’ Zoe insists. ‘He . . . wait.’ Her brain catches up. ‘You think he ran away from home.’

‘I didn’t say that.’

No, no, no. ‘On Saturday you wanted to know if Jayden had any enemies, or if I’d seen any strange people hanging around the school. Now you’re asking if he had a girlfriend, or was acting weird. You’ve decided he just skipped town.’

‘We’re right near the train station,’ Wake says. ‘Last Friday, several passengers paid cash for single-use tickets, right before the 3:54 to Flinders Street departed. Officers are going through the CCTV from all the stations on the line. In ninety-nine percent of cases, teenagers who go missing are—’

‘Jayden wouldn’t run away without telling me. He wouldn’t just leave me not knowing if he was even alive.’ Zoe’s voice is loud in the silence of the room.

‘We haven’t ruled anything out yet,’ Wake says calmly. ‘We’re also looking at homeless shelters in nearby towns, inexpensive motels—’

‘You’re not listening to me! You’re not going to find him in a cheap motel room out of town. Something happened to him. According to his ySup profile, he hasn’t logged in

since Friday. His neighbours didn't see him come home—'

'Miss Gale.' An undercurrent of anger ripples through Wake's voice. 'Have you been trying to conduct your own investigation?'

The way she asks makes Zoe think this might be a crime, so she doesn't answer directly. 'He's been kidnapped, or killed. Someone needs to be looking for him here, in Burniglen.'

Wake refuses to be redirected. 'Missing persons investigations are complex. If suspects involve themselves, they become a thousand times more so.'

'Suspects?' Zoe repeats.

Wake just looks at her.

'I'm a suspect?' Zoe doesn't know whether to be appalled or relieved. She's glad she didn't tell Wake about the fight. 'So you *do* think something happened to him.'

'What I think is that it would be a very, very bad idea for you to try to retrace Jayden's steps,' Wake says. 'You might muddy the trail. You might come to grief the same way he did, or in some entirely different way.'

'I... ' Zoe wishes she could look somewhere, other than at those hard eyes. 'I just want to help.'

'Great,' Wake says. 'Start by telling me where you were between 3 and 6 PM on Friday.'