

CHAPTER 26

The chapter opens with Avery, Max, and Libby in a room filled with shelves of games, reflecting the Hawthorne family's competitive nature. Avery tries to focus on finding chess sets, diverting attention to Max's romantic involvement with Xander to avoid her own complicated feelings about Grayson. Max shares her evolving perspective on relationships, shifting from preferring dramatic tropes to appreciating the unexpected connection with Xander. The lighthearted banter contrasts with Avery's internal tension, hinting at unresolved emotions and rivalries.

As they search, Avery discovers six chess sets but finds no hidden clues despite thorough inspection, deepening her frustration. The arrival of Grayson shifts the dynamic, as Max departs with a humorous warning about his "cheekbones." Grayson's presence stirs Avery's memories of his closeness with Eve, adding to her emotional turmoil. The chess sets remain a mystery, symbolizing the larger game Avery feels trapped in, while her reluctance to confide in Grayson underscores their strained relationship.

Grayson broaches the topic of Eve's struggles, suggesting she visit Toby's sealed wing in Hawthorne House—a place laden with secrets. Avery hesitates, feeling protective of Toby's memory and wary of Eve's intrusion. Grayson's empathetic approach, acknowledging Avery's feelings, reveals his growth and understanding of her perspective. Their interaction is charged with unspoken history, as Avery grapples with trust and the weight of shared memories.

The chapter closes with Avery proposing a deal to Grayson, mirroring their established dynamics—Jameson's wagers versus Grayson's deals. This moment hints at Avery's attempt to regain control amid emotional chaos. The unresolved tension between them, coupled with the ongoing mystery of the chess sets, sets the stage for future confrontations and revelations, leaving the reader anticipating the next move in their

intricate game.

