The Final Gambit (The Inheritance Games)

To inherit billions, all Avery Kylie Grambs has to do is survive a few more weeks living in Hawthorne House.

The paparazzi are stalking her. The fortune-hungry relatives want her gone. And the only thing more dangerous than inheriting the Hawthorne fortune may be falling for one of the Hawthorne brothers.

As the clock ticks down to the day Avery will become the richest teenager on the planet, danger arrives in the form of a visitor who needs her help — and whose presence in Hawthorne House could change everything. Secrets upon secrets. Riddles upon riddles. In this game, someone is always watching — and the stakes are higher than ever.

In this **explosive conclusion** to the *Inheritance Games* trilogy, Avery must solve one last puzzle — and risk everything to finally discover her place in the Hawthorne legacy.

CHAPTER 1

The chapter opens with Avery, the protagonist, in the grand library of Hawthorne House, surrounded by reminders of the Hawthorne dynasty. Her lawyer, Alisa Ortega, insists on discussing her upcoming eighteenth birthday and the implications for her massive inheritance. Avery, however, is more focused on a bet with Jameson Hawthorne to uncover hidden passages in the mansion. Her dismissive attitude toward Alisa’s concerns highlights her determination to prioritize the game over her

impending wealth and legal matters.

Amid the tension with Alisa, Avery’s interactions with the Hawthorne brothers add depth to the scene. Xander, her self-proclaimed BHFF (Best Hawthorne Friend Forever), interrupts with his trademark humor, offering a distraction that Avery declines. Nash, the eldest Hawthorne brother, lingers protectively, hinting that Alisa’s agenda involves establishing a trust for Avery’s inheritance. His presence underscores the family’s protective dynamic, even as Avery asserts her independence by dismissing him.

Alisa persists in discussing Avery’s birthday, proposing an extravagant party to manage public perception. Avery firmly rejects the idea, unwilling to turn her personal milestone into a media spectacle. Her refusal reflects her resistance to the spotlight and her desire to maintain control over her life, despite Alisa’s insistence on the importance of optics. The exchange reveals Avery’s growing frustration with the expectations tied to her newfound status as the Hawthorne heir.

The chapter culminates with Avery’s triumph in discovering another hidden passage, marking her twelfth victory in the bet against Jameson. Her playful taunt and disappearance into the wall symbolize her defiance and focus on the game, even as Alisa’s unresolved concerns loom in the background. The scene captures Avery’s balancing act between her personal ambitions and the pressures of her inheritance, setting the stage for future conflicts and revelations.

CHAPTER 2

The chapter opens with the protagonist lying in bed, reminiscing about receiving a symbolic bronze key pin from Jameson and the Hawthorne brothers—a token marking her acceptance into their group. As she resists dwelling on a memory involving Grayson, she distracts herself by anonymously donating to charitable causes using her unlimited credit card, a privilege granted ahead of inheriting the Hawthorne fortune. The scene establishes her emotional ties to the family and her restless anticipation for Jameson's call, hinting at unresolved tensions and her transitional status.

Their phone conversation quickly shifts to playful banter, with Jameson describing the beauty of Tuscany in vivid detail before revealing he found a triangular mirror in the villa’s fireplace—a potential clue tied to the Hawthorne family’s love of puzzles. The discovery electrifies the protagonist, as they speculate about its significance while acknowledging their broader quest: uncovering the mystery behind a valuable coinlike disk linked to Tobias Hawthorne’s son, Toby. The disk’s connection to her late mother and its sudden disappearance add emotional weight to their search.

The discussion turns to the protagonist’s own findings—a hidden passageway in the Hawthorne House’s circular library, which Jameson didn’t know about. This revelation sparks a competitive yet flirtatious exchange, underscoring their dynamic. Her impending freedom after the year’s end looms in the background, filled with possibilities but also uncertainty. Jameson’s impending trip to Santorini hints at their shared determination to pursue answers, even as their unspoken attraction simmers beneath the surface.

The chapter closes with a return to their playful rapport, as the protagonist solves Jameson’s requested anagram ("knead" from "naked"), blending wit with underlying tension. Their dialogue balances lightheartedness with deeper stakes, reflecting their dual roles as partners in mystery-solving and potential romantic interests. The

unresolved quest for the disk and the protagonist’s emotional ties to the Hawthornes leave the reader anticipating the next steps in their journey.



CHAPTER 3

The chapter opens with the protagonist reflecting on the chaotic weeks spent juggling charity events, school exams, and unanswered calls from Grayson. Amidst this turmoil, they find solace in honing their shooting skills at the Hawthorne estate's private range. Though uncomfortable with firearms, the protagonist recognizes the necessity of self-defense after surviving multiple life-threatening situations since inheriting Tobias Hawthorne's fortune. Nash, their mentor, praises their progress, highlighting the shift from vulnerability to empowerment through combat training.

The narrative delves into the psychological toll of the protagonist's newfound wealth and danger. Despite the estate's security, past experiences of being shot at, nearly blown up, and kidnapped have left lasting trauma. Practical skills like shooting and carrying a knife offer more reassurance than theoretical safety. This pragmatism is reinforced by Nash's philosophy: survival justifies any means. The protagonist's internal conflict between fear and resilience underscores their complex adaptation to a perilous new reality.

A significant subplot emerges as Nash inquires about legal paperwork regarding the inheritance. The protagonist recalls their lawyer, Alisa Ortega (Nash's ex), suggesting a revocable trust to manage the fortune until they're ready. Alisa's firm offers to act as trustees, framing it as a protective measure rather than a restriction. This conversation reveals the underlying tensions between autonomy and guidance, as well as Nash's lingering connection to Alisa, which he masks with casual interrogation about the trust.

The chapter concludes with Nash reinforcing his survival ethos, asking the protagonist to reiterate their "no rules in winning" mantra. This exchange cements their mentor-student dynamic while subtly addressing Nash's personal stake in Alisa's advice. The protagonist's compliance signals their growing alignment with Nash's ruthless practicality, setting the stage for future confrontations—both physical and strategic—in

their high-stakes world.



CHAPTER 4

The chapter opens on the protagonist's eighteenth birthday, where she wakes to find an extravagant midnight green ball gown hanging in her doorway, adorned with black jewels and accompanied by a cryptic note: "WEAR ME IF YOU DARE." Recognizing the handwriting as Jameson Hawthorne's, she confronts him at the edge of the Black Wood, where he awaits in a white tuxedo beside a hot-air balloon. Their reunion is charged with tension and passion, culminating in a fiery kiss, though their moment is observed by her discreet bodyguard, Oren. Jameson's daring nature is immediately evident as he whisks her away on the balloon, setting the tone for an unforgettable day.

The adventure continues as Jameson orchestrates a series of extravagant surprises, including a hidden picnic, a helicopter ride to the Gulf, and a barefoot dance on the beach. Each moment is meticulously planned to overwhelm the protagonist, who reflects on the sensory richness of the day—the weight of the gown, the wind in her face, the taste of chocolate-covered strawberries. Despite her initial resistance, she finds herself swept up in the magic, acknowledging that Jameson excels at creating unforgettable experiences. The chapter captures her internal conflict between skepticism and awe, as well as her growing attachment to him.

As the day winds down, the helicopter returns to the Hawthorne estate, revealing an astonishing sight: a lavishly decorated party with a Ferris wheel, rose petals, and a string quartet—but no guests. The protagonist is initially horrified, assuming Jameson has planned a grand social event, but her sister Libby explains it's an "introvert's ball," attended only by close friends and family. The intimate gathering includes Nash grilling, Thea and Rebecca stealing a private moment, and Xander overseeing a surprise. The scene underscores the theme of personalized luxury, where grandeur is tailored to the protagonist's preferences rather than public spectacle.

The chapter closes with the arrival of Jameson's great-grandmother and aunt, adding a layer of familial tension to the otherwise joyous celebration. The protagonist's emotions oscillate between delight and disbelief, as she grapples with the surreal reality of her new life. Jameson's flair for drama and his ability to anticipate her desires leave her both exasperated and enchanted. The chapter masterfully blends romance, adventure, and humor, setting the stage for deeper character development and future conflicts within the Hawthorne family dynamic.



CHAPTER 5

The chapter opens with the protagonist waking up beside Jameson, her ball gown draped over the bed. She reflects on his mysterious scar, which he has never explained truthfully, and resists the urge to touch him before leaving the room. After picking up her Hawthorne pin and dressing, she heads downstairs, where she finds Grayson alone in the dining room. Their conversation is tense, as Grayson reminds her that the estate will soon be hers, signaling an inevitable change in their dynamics. Despite her reluctance to accept this shift, Grayson insists she must adapt to her new role.

Grayson reveals his knowledge of the Hawthorne family traditions, recounting how Tobias Hawthorne would task his sons with investing, cultivating a skill, and completing a creative challenge each year. He advises the protagonist to follow this framework, emphasizing the importance of planning for her future. He hands her a blank leather-bound journal, instructing her to draft and refine her financial and personal goals repeatedly. The protagonist senses Grayson’s unspoken turmoil beneath his composed exterior, but she avoids addressing it directly, focusing instead on her own uncertainties about her ability to fulfill her new responsibilities.

Their conversation grows more personal as the protagonist reminds Grayson of his broken promise to guide her. She immediately regrets bringing it up, acknowledging the emotional burden he already carries. Grayson reacts sharply, refusing to be seen as "broken," and the protagonist shifts the topic to her legal advisor’s suggestion of placing her inheritance in a trust. Grayson’s subtle smile hints at his approval of her independent decision-making, but their exchange is interrupted by Oren, who announces an unexpected visitor at the gates.

The chapter ends on a suspenseful note as Oren reveals the visitor’s name: Eve. The protagonist’s mind races with potential threats, recalling past dangers from Grayson’s

mother and her own father. Grayson’s sharp reaction underscores the tension, leaving the reader curious about Eve’s identity and her connection to the Hawthorne family. The encounter sets the stage for further conflict and intrigue, hinting at unresolved mysteries and challenges ahead.



CHAPTER 6

The chapter opens with the protagonist, Avery, grappling with the secret of Toby's daughter, Eve, which she has kept hidden at Toby's request. When Eve unexpectedly appears at the gates of Hawthorne House, Avery is overwhelmed by emotion but quickly shifts into protective mode, aware of the potential harm Eve's presence could cause Grayson, who is emotionally fragile. Eve's striking resemblance to Emily Laughlin—a figure tied to the Hawthorne family's painful past—heightens Avery's urgency to shield Grayson from further trauma. Despite her internal turmoil, Avery focuses on the immediate need to handle the situation discreetly, ensuring Eve's presence remains hidden from the public eye.

Avery's initial confrontation with Eve reveals the gravity of the situation: Toby, a father figure to Avery, has been taken by unknown assailants. Eve, desperate and alone, explains that Toby had been hiding with her until he was forced to flee after encountering someone he feared. Her account is fraught with tension, as she insists Toby would never abandon her willingly. Avery's skepticism clashes with Eve's desperation, but the physical evidence of Eve's injuries and her emotional distress lend credibility to her story. The chapter underscores Avery's loyalty to Toby and her growing, albeit reluctant, responsibility toward Eve.

The dynamics between Avery and Eve are charged with mistrust and urgency. Eve reveals she blackmailed Toby into taking her with him, a move Avery initially judges harshly but begrudgingly understands. Eve's recounting of their time on the run and Toby's disappearance paints a picture of a dangerous, unseen threat. Avery's internal conflict is palpable as she balances her distrust of Eve with the need to uncover the truth about Toby's fate. The chapter builds suspense around the identity of Toby's captors and their motives, leaving Avery—and the reader—with more questions than answers.

By the chapter’s end, Avery is forced to confront the reality that Toby’s disappearance is no coincidence. Eve’s insistence that she can prove Toby was taken adds a layer of intrigue, hinting at deeper mysteries to come. Avery’s protective instincts kick in as she realizes the stakes extend beyond Toby’s safety to the stability of the Hawthorne family. The chapter closes with Avery poised to take action, setting the stage for a high-stakes investigation into Toby’s abduction and the secrets Eve might hold. The emotional and narrative tension leaves readers eager for the next development.



CHAPTER 7

The chapter opens with a tense encounter between Grayson Hawthorne and Avery, where Grayson's controlled demeanor cracks upon seeing Eve, a girl who strikingly resembles his late love, Emily. Grayson initially believes he's hallucinating, revealing his fragile mental state and past struggles. Avery physically grounds him, insisting Eve is real and explaining her connection to Toby, Grayson's adopted uncle. The revelation that Eve is Toby's biological daughter—and thus shares Emily's bloodline—adds layers to Grayson's visible distress, as he grapples with both grief and the shock of her sudden appearance.

A confrontation unfolds as Grayson realizes Avery and Jameson knew about Eve's existence but kept it secret, per Toby's wishes. His accusatory tone underscores the Hawthorne family's tendency toward control and secrecy. The emotional weight intensifies as Grayson, typically composed, allows himself to openly confront his pain, stepping toward Eve like "a shirtless man stepping out into freezing rain." Eve, meanwhile, remains pragmatic, demanding action over emotional drama and redirecting focus to Toby's disappearance—a pressing crisis overshadowed by the personal revelations.

Eve's bluntness contrasts with the charged atmosphere; she dismisses Grayson's intensity, prioritizing practical needs like safety and answers. Her frustration mirrors Avery's growing urgency, as both recognize their delay could jeopardize Toby's rescue. Grayson's observation of Eve's injuries shifts the dynamic slightly, revealing his lingering protectiveness despite the turmoil. The chapter's tension peaks as the group prepares to return to Hawthorne House, with Avery drawing a parallel to Pandora's box—hinting at irreversible consequences unleashed by Eve's arrival.

The closing scene in the SUV underscores the chapter's themes of unresolved trauma and impending chaos. Grayson's vulnerability, Eve's defiance, and Avery's mediating

role set the stage for deeper conflicts. The chapter masterfully intertwines personal histories with immediate danger, leaving readers questioning Toby's fate and the ripple effects of long-buried secrets. The Hawthorne family's legacy of control is challenged, foreshadowing further upheaval as alliances and truths unravel.



CHAPTER 8

The chapter opens with the protagonist allowing Eve, a mysterious newcomer, to use their shower, a decision driven by the desire to keep her under surveillance. Tensions rise as Jameson, shirtless and in the protagonist's bed, notices Eve, while Grayson struggles to look away from the bathroom door. The protagonist observes the brothers' reactions—Jameson's guarded poker face and Grayson's obvious discomfort—hinting at unresolved emotions tied to Eve's resemblance to Emily, a figure from their past. The protagonist hesitates to reveal that Eve's presence is linked to Toby's abduction, setting the stage for a fraught conversation.

Jameson presses the protagonist for details about Eve, while Grayson reacts with uncharacteristic friction, revealing underlying tensions between the brothers. Jameson expresses skepticism about Eve's story, suggesting her sudden appearance is too convenient, while Grayson insists they owe her protection as Toby's daughter. The protagonist notes Grayson's protective stance mirrors how he once treated them, stirring mixed emotions. The brothers' argument escalates when Grayson accuses Jameson of keeping secrets about Toby's daughter, further complicating their dynamic.

The protagonist redirects the conversation to Toby's abduction, urging Jameson to focus on solving the mystery. Jameson suggests analyzing the kidnappers' motive, leading the protagonist to consider three possibilities: ransom, leverage, or harm. The discussion shifts to what the abductors might have sought, with Jameson highlighting the significance of Eve's pockets being searched. The protagonist suddenly realizes the kidnappers may be after the elusive "disk," a key mystery they've been investigating for months, connecting Toby's abduction to a larger puzzle.

The chapter concludes with Eve emerging from the shower in a towel, her presence reigniting tension. Grayson avoids looking at her, while Jameson focuses on the protagonist. Eve requests a bandage, her demeanor unselfconscious despite the

charged atmosphere. Her appearance—darkened wet hair and striking features—further emphasizes her resemblance to Emily, leaving the protagonist and the Hawthorne brothers grappling with unresolved questions about her true intentions and Toby's fate.



CHAPTER 9

The chapter opens with the protagonist withholding information about a mysterious disk from Eve, rationalizing that it might be insignificant. The emotional weight of Eve's arrival at Hawthorne House is palpable as Mrs. Laughlin, her great-grandmother, reacts tearfully to seeing her. The protagonist grapples with guilt and the unspoken truth that Eve belongs there, while also giving Jameson and Grayson space to process their trauma. The scene sets the tone for the chapter's exploration of secrets and unresolved family dynamics.

The protagonist retreats to Tobias Hawthorne's study, focusing on the enigmatic disk Toby once took from them. The disk, engraved with concentric circles, holds unknown value, hinted at by Toby's cryptic message to the protagonist's mother. Despite extensive research into art, ancient civilizations, and secret societies, no records of the disk exist. Jameson's global search of Hawthorne properties has also yielded nothing, leaving the protagonist frustrated and isolated in their quest for answers.

The narrative shifts to a tense interaction with Xander and Max, who confront the protagonist about keeping Eve's existence a secret. Xander's humorous yet pointed remarks highlight the protagonist's dilemma—balancing trust and secrecy. The conversation reveals Xander's loyalty and the complexities of their relationships. The mood lightens momentarily with pie and banter, but the underlying tension remains as the protagonist acknowledges their deliberate omission to protect sensitive information.

The chapter concludes with a phone call from Oren, who reports a 911 call about "shots fired" at the location where Eve was supposed to meet Toby. Though no evidence of an altercation was found, the incident raises alarms. Oren assigns a security detail to shadow Eve, emphasizing caution. The protagonist's instinctive touch of their Hawthorne pin underscores their growing unease, leaving the reader with a

cliffhanger about Toby's fate and Eve's true intentions.



CHAPTER 10

The chapter opens with the protagonist being introduced to the Hawthorne family's unique version of Chutes and Ladders by Xander, which involves physical challenges and strategic elements rather than a traditional board game. As the protagonist heads to the Versailles wing to convince Eve to participate, they encounter Grayson, whose presence triggers a flashback to a past event where he heroically saved a toddler from drowning. The tension between Grayson and Eve is palpable, with the protagonist noting their unspoken dynamics and Eve's insistence that security should focus on Toby rather than her.

The game's rules are explained by Xander, revealing an elaborate setup involving pillow fights, hidden chutes within Hawthorne House, and a race to climb to the roof using unconventional tools like grappling hooks and rope ladders. The competitive nature of the game is underscored by Xander's playful yet menacing demeanor, while Max's sarcastic commentary adds levity. The stakes are raised when Grayson reveals that choosing climbing supplies requires each participant to share a secret, a twist that forces vulnerability and strategic disclosure among the players.

Secrets begin to unfold as Grayson admits to kissing a girl at Harvard, Max confesses to a hidden nerdy tattoo, and the protagonist shares their fear that Tobias Hawthorne may have chosen the wrong heir. Xander drops a bombshell by revealing he has discovered the identity of his father, shocking Grayson and the others. The emotional weight of these revelations contrasts with the game's playful exterior, highlighting the complex relationships and personal struggles within the Hawthorne family.

The chapter ends with Eve picking up a grappling hook, her reaction to the secrets still unclear, leaving the reader intrigued about her next move. The interplay of competition, trust, and hidden truths sets the stage for further tension and character development, as the game becomes a metaphor for the larger dynamics at play in the

Hawthorne household. The blend of action, emotion, and mystery keeps the narrative engaging and propels the story forward.



CHAPTER 11

The chapter opens with the narrator observing Eve's competitive nature and her seamless integration into Hawthorne House during a game of Chutes and Ladders. Eve's presence notably affects Grayson, hinting at underlying tensions. Jameson, ever the provocateur, teases the narrator about their placement in the game while subtly masking his concern for Grayson. The rooftop setting becomes a backdrop for deeper conversations, with the narrator expressing worry over Grayson's emotional state, suggesting his struggles have been long-standing. Jameson's response reveals the Hawthorne family's unspoken rule against vulnerability, setting the tone for the chapter's exploration of hidden pain.

A pivotal moment occurs when the narrator uses the code word "Tahiti" to prompt Jameson to confront his emotions. Jameson confesses his guilt over Emily's death, revealing his internal turmoil. The narrator reassures him, but Jameson redirects the conversation to the narrator's jealousy of Eve's connection to Grayson and the Hawthorne family. This leads to a raw admission from the narrator, who acknowledges feeling displaced by Eve's newfound ties to Toby and the estate. Despite these emotions, the narrator resolves to trust Eve with information about a mysterious disk Toby left behind, signaling a tentative alliance.

The tension escalates as Max and Xander join the group on the roof, lightening the mood momentarily. Eve, sensing the underlying scrutiny, directly asks if she's passed some unspoken test. The narrator responds by revealing the drawing of the disk, explaining its significance and Toby's connection to it. Eve's reaction is a mix of curiosity and concern, questioning how the narrator knows about the disk's value. The narrator shares limited details, focusing instead on Toby's letter to their mother, and presses Eve for any clues Toby might have shared about the disk's whereabouts.

The chapter concludes with a chilling realization: if Toby was taken for the disk, his captors might harm him further once they obtain it. This thought leaves the narrator and Eve grappling with fear and urgency. The shared concern for Toby's safety momentarily bridges their personal tensions, hinting at a fragile unity in the face of danger. The chapter masterfully blends emotional vulnerability with suspense, setting the stage for the next steps in their search for Toby and the disk.



CHAPTER 12

The chapter opens with Avery finding solace in Jameson's presence after a night of unsettling dreams about her mother, Toby, and fire. Her morning is interrupted by her sister Libby's outrage over another provocative cowboy hat gifted by Nash, sparking a heated denial of their romantic connection. Libby insists she is "deficient in love," refusing to acknowledge any feelings for Nash, despite Avery's teasing. The lighthearted moment shifts when Oren arrives with a mysterious, heavily screened envelope addressed to Avery, hinting at a darker turn in the ongoing mystery surrounding Toby's disappearance.

Avery's anxiety spikes as she opens the envelope, discovering a golden disk—a significant artifact—alongside a cryptic message. The disk's presence suggests Toby's abductor either doesn't understand its value or has a more sinister motive. Jameson joins her, theorizing the message could be "proof of life," but Avery corrects him, noting it only confirms Toby's captivity. The tension escalates as they examine the blood-red script on expensive linen paper, its fragmented letters forming an eerie, incomplete puzzle. The disk feels like a taunt, intensifying Avery's fear for Toby's safety.

Jameson deciphers the message as a coded puzzle, a tactic favored by his grandfather. By inserting the same five-letter sequence into each blank, the fragments reveal chilling words: "Avenge," "Revenge," and "Vengeance." The final line, once decoded, reads "Avenger," implying the sender's identity or motive. Avery's realization that the abductor seeks retribution rather than ransom deepens the mystery, leaving her and Jameson to grapple with the implications. The chapter ends on a foreboding note, with the word "Avenger" hanging ominously between them.

The chapter masterfully blends personal dynamics with escalating suspense. Libby and Nash's banter provides brief levity, while the arrival of the disk and coded message

thrusts Avery back into the central conflict. The discovery that Toby's abduction may be driven by vengeance—not greed—adds layers to the mystery, raising stakes for Avery and Jameson. The cryptic message's resolution leaves readers questioning the "Avenger's" identity and motives, setting the stage for further unraveling in the story's central conspiracy.



CHAPTER 13

The chapter opens with the protagonist gathering Grayson, Xander, and Eve in the library to reveal a mysterious disk and a cryptic message. Eve reacts with hesitation, sensing the disk's significant value, while Grayson notes the absence of a ransom demand. The protagonist reflects on three possible motives for Toby's kidnapping, with revenge emerging as the most likely. The group decodes the message, linking it to the tragic Hawthorne Island fire decades earlier, which claimed three lives—an event tied to both the protagonist's and Grayson's families.

The discussion shifts to the fire's aftermath, revealing Toby's reckless role and the victims' identities: David Golding, Colin Anders Wright, and Kaylie Rooney. Xander summarizes the incident as a mix of arson and tragedy, while the protagonist realizes the Rooney family—her maternal relatives—may seek vengeance against the Hawthornes. Grayson confirms the familial connections, highlighting the Rooneys' criminal background and their hatred for the Hawthornes. The tension escalates as the protagonist steps out to confront her grandmother, a volatile figure with a history of violence.

In a tense phone call, the protagonist confronts her grandmother, who responds with threats and hostility. The grandmother implies she has kidnapped a Hawthorne grandson, but the protagonist deduces she is bluffing, as Toby's survival remains unknown to the Rooneys. The call ends with vicious barking dogs and a chilling warning, leaving the protagonist shaken but certain the Rooneys are not behind Toby's disappearance. Nash Hawthorne arrives, offering comfort as the protagonist steels herself, revealing her preparedness for conflict.

The chapter concludes with Nash comforting the protagonist, who asserts her physical and tactical skills despite her emotional turmoil. The exchange underscores her resilience and determination to protect her family. The unresolved tension with the

Rooneys and the looming threat of revenge create a cliffhanger, setting the stage for further investigation into Toby's kidnapping. The protagonist's internal conflict and external threats highlight the chapter's themes of family legacy, vengeance, and survival.



CHAPTER 14

The chapter opens with the group reconvening in the library to analyze the mysterious envelope, message, and disk. Avery confidently dismisses the Rooney family as suspects in Toby's disappearance, citing their violent tendencies but lack of concrete knowledge about his survival. Grayson similarly clears his estranged Grayson relatives, though his claim about Sheffield Grayson's whereabouts is a carefully constructed lie to conceal his father's death. The conversation shifts to the remaining suspect—the family of David Golding, the third victim—as Oren volunteers to investigate, maintaining his shadowy presence.

The group begins questioning the motive behind Toby's abduction, with Jameson pointing out that the message was addressed to Avery, suggesting she might be the true target. This sparks a debate about Avery's potential enemies, given her high-profile position. Meanwhile, Xander proposes an alternative angle: focusing on the coded message itself rather than revenge. The brothers recognize the style of their grandfather Tobias Hawthorne's intricate puzzles, implying the perpetrator is someone familiar with his games—a revelation that narrows their suspect pool significantly.

The discussion turns to Skye Hawthorne, the brothers' manipulative mother, as the most likely culprit. Jameson and Grayson insist on confronting her directly, despite Nash's objections and Avery's skepticism about Skye's willingness to cooperate. Eve suggests using the disk as leverage, but Avery doubts Skye would part with anything valuable, given her disinherited status. Grayson theorizes that Skye's reaction to the disk could reveal her involvement, while Avery firmly insists on joining any confrontation, despite Oren's strong warnings about the dangers of engaging with Skye.

Tensions rise as the brothers clash over their next steps, with Jameson and Grayson advocating for direct action while Nash resists. The chapter highlights the group's

dynamic—banter, sibling rivalry, and shared trauma—as they grapple with the puzzle's layers. The unresolved confrontation with Skye looms large, setting the stage for a high-stakes encounter that could expose the truth behind Toby's disappearance or plunge them deeper into danger. The chapter ends on a note of suspense, emphasizing the personal risks involved in pursuing the truth.



CHAPTER 15

The chapter opens with the protagonists traveling in an SUV, accompanied by bodyguards, as tensions rise between brothers Jameson and Grayson. Jameson questions Grayson's decision to delay his return to Harvard, implying his stay is motivated by concern for Eve, a vulnerable newcomer to their circle. Grayson defends his choice, citing a threat against their family, but Jameson remains skeptical, warning him not to confuse Eve with Emily, a figure from their past. The exchange reveals Grayson's internal struggle with his protective instincts and the emotional weight he carries as the family's de facto leader.

The conflict deepens as Grayson recounts a late-night encounter with Eve, where she shared her fears of being perceived as weak. This moment humanizes Eve, showing her resilience despite her traumatic past, and resonates with Grayson, who recognizes their shared burden of perfectionism. Jameson mocks Grayson's emotional vulnerability, but Nash intervenes, diffusing the tension as the group arrives at their destination—a suburban neighborhood where Skye Hawthorne, their estranged mother, now lives. The contrast between her modest surroundings and the opulent Hawthorne House underscores the family's fractured dynamics.

Upon meeting Skye, the brothers are met with her trademark manipulative charm. She deflects their accusations of abandonment, painting herself as the wronged party and dismissing their grievances as childish. Grayson confronts her about her past actions, but Skye twists the narrative, portraying herself as a victim of circumstance. Her revelation of a recent marriage to her defense attorney adds another layer to her enigmatic persona, leaving the brothers wary of her motives. The interaction highlights Skye's ability to unsettle her sons, even as they attempt to maintain control of the conversation.

The chapter concludes with Skye's smug disclosure of her new marital status, further complicating the family's already strained relationships. Her marriage to her attorney suggests a calculated move, reinforcing her reputation for self-serving behavior. The brothers' reactions range from disbelief to resignation, underscoring the emotional toll of their mother's unpredictability. The encounter leaves the group—and the reader—questioning Skye's true intentions and how her presence will impact their ongoing investigation into the threat against the Hawthorne family.



CHAPTER 16

The chapter opens with a tense walk down a driveway as the characters grapple with the emotional fallout of a confrontation with Skye, their mother. Jameson masks his pain with sarcasm, joking about being conceived for the Hawthorne fortune, while Grayson internalizes his hurt, insisting he can handle himself. The siblings' dynamic is fraught with unspoken tension, highlighted by a silent staring contest between Grayson and Jameson, revealing their shared but unacknowledged anguish. The narrator, observing their pain, reflects on Skye's inability to love her children unconditionally.

During the drive back to Hawthorne House, Nash shares a poignant memory of Skye's fleeting moments of maternal warmth during her pregnancies, only to abandon her children soon after. He reveals how she willingly gave them to their grandfather, prioritizing her father's approval and the family fortune over her own children. This revelation deepens the narrator's understanding of Nash's detachment and his resolve to be different if he ever has a child. Nash's heartfelt declaration that his future daughter will be his "whole world" contrasts sharply with Skye's neglect.

The mood shifts abruptly when Oren receives a call about a security breach in the tunnels beneath Hawthorne House. The narrator's initial panic subsides as they realize the intruder is likely Rebecca, a familiar figure. This moment underscores the constant undercurrent of danger and secrecy that pervades their lives, even as they process deep emotional wounds. The chapter ends on a note of suspense, leaving the reader eager to discover Rebecca's motives and the implications of her intrusion.

Throughout the chapter, the characters' complex relationships and unresolved traumas are laid bare, particularly their fraught connections to Skye. The interplay of humor, pain, and vulnerability reveals the depth of their bonds and the scars left by their mother's abandonment. The sudden shift to a security threat serves as a

reminder that their personal struggles are set against a backdrop of larger, looming dangers, adding layers of tension and intrigue to the narrative.



CHAPTER 17

The chapter opens with Avery finding Rebecca in the hidden tunnels beneath the Hawthorne estate, a place Tobias Hawthorne had once shown her as a child. Rebecca stands stiffly before a concrete wall, her red hair wild and her emotions raw. When Avery approaches, Rebecca initially mistakes her for Xander and then tries to push her away, but Avery refuses to leave. The tension between them is palpable, with Rebecca using silence as both a weapon and a shield, a habit she developed after her sister Emily's death. The scene sets the stage for a deeply emotional confrontation.

Rebecca reveals that she and others have told Eve the truth about Toby's adoption, and Eve now wants to meet Rebecca's mother, Mallory. This news unsettles Rebecca, as Mallory is Eve's grandmother and has endured immense grief—losing Toby to adoption and later Emily to illness. Rebecca struggles with the idea of introducing Eve to her mother, fearing it will reopen old wounds. Her voice trembles with a mix of anger and sorrow as she confesses how much Eve resembles Emily, both in appearance and voice, which only deepens her pain.

The conversation shifts to Rebecca's guilt and unresolved feelings about Emily. She recalls their last fight, which occurred just before Emily's death, and how Emily would have made her work for forgiveness. Rebecca also mentions cutting her hair short, something Emily would have disapproved of, symbolizing her struggle to break free from her sister's shadow. Avery tries to reassure Rebecca that she is her own person, but Rebecca's self-doubt lingers. She questions whether she deserves to move on or if the universe is punishing her for wanting to.

In the final moments, Rebecca grapples with the impending task of telling her mother about Eve, fearing Mallory will see Eve as a replacement for Emily. Avery offers to accompany her, but Rebecca declines, asserting that she must face this alone. The chapter ends with Rebecca steeling herself, embodying a newfound resilience despite

her pain. The emotional weight of the scene underscores the themes of grief, identity, and the complexities of family bonds, leaving readers with a poignant sense of Rebecca’s inner turmoil and strength.



CHAPTER 18

After Rebecca leaves, the protagonist remains in the tunnels, contemplating their next move before returning to Hawthorne House through a hidden staircase. Upon regaining cell reception, they make a decisive phone call to Thea Calligaris, a character with whom they share a complex, evolving relationship. Thea responds with her signature sarcasm, hinting at their unlikely friendship. The protagonist hesitates before revealing their purpose for calling, setting the stage for a significant conversation about a mysterious girl named Eve.

Thea, now a successful influencer, initially deflects the seriousness of the call with her trademark wit. However, the tone shifts as the protagonist discloses that Eve bears an uncanny resemblance to someone from their past—likely Emily, Thea's late best friend. The revelation that Eve wants to meet Rebecca's mother adds another layer of tension. Thea's uncharacteristic silence underscores the gravity of the situation, and she acknowledges the bizarre nature of the circumstances, even by Hawthorne standards.

Despite her hardened exterior, Thea's concern for Rebecca becomes apparent. The protagonist probes Thea's emotional state, but she deflects with humor, maintaining her "bitch aesthetic." Thea deduces that Rebecca didn’t want her involved, yet she seems determined to intervene. Their banter reveals Thea's conflicted feelings toward the Hawthornes, blending schadenfreude with underlying care. The protagonist gently steers the conversation back to Rebecca, questioning Thea's next steps.

Thea resolves to call Rebecca, refusing to let her avoid the conversation. Her determination hints at a deeper commitment to their relationship, contrasting her earlier aloofness. The chapter closes with the protagonist entrusting Rebecca's well-being to Thea, who assures them with uncharacteristic sincerity. The exchange highlights the growth in their dynamic, from rivals to reluctant allies, united by their

concern for Rebecca and the unfolding mystery surrounding Eve.



CHAPTER 19

The chapter opens with Avery anxiously awaiting updates from Oren about Toby's disappearance. Oren reports that the courier service used to deliver messages remains untraceable, but his team has located a warehouse owner who received another mysterious envelope. The envelope contains a recent photo of Toby, bruised and holding a dated newspaper, serving as proof of life but no ransom demand. Avery struggles to maintain composure as she processes the grim reality of Toby's captivity and the lack of clear motives or demands from his abductors.

Avery shifts focus to potential suspects, questioning the whereabouts of Eve's half-siblings, her father, and other connected individuals. Oren confirms that none were near the location of Toby's abduction, ruling them out as immediate suspects. He then shares background on Eve, revealing her troubled past, including a contentious incident with a teacher and her subsequent distrust of authority. This information aligns with Eve's earlier skepticism about being believed, adding depth to her character and her relationship with Toby.

Oren reveals a concerning pattern: members of Avery's security team have been approached with job offers from various private firms, suggesting a coordinated effort to weaken her protection. While the attempts were unsuccessful, Oren warns that this could indicate a broader threat targeting Avery or those close to her. The chapter underscores the growing tension as Avery realizes the abduction might be part of a larger, more sinister plan against her.

The chapter concludes with Oren expressing concern for Max's safety, urging Avery to assign her a security detail as she returns to college. Oren emphasizes the need to treat the situation as a serious, multipronged threat, given the uncertainty surrounding Toby's abduction and the potential risks to Avery's inner circle. Avery is left grappling with the escalating danger and the realization that anyone close to her could be at

risk.



CHAPTER 20

The chapter opens with the protagonist grappling with two difficult tasks: convincing Max to accept a bodyguard and showing Eve a distressing photo of Toby. The scene shifts to a bowling alley where Xander lightens the mood with his antics, despite the tension. Eve presses for updates about the mysterious disk, but the protagonist redirects the conversation to the photo of Toby. Eve reacts viscerally, demanding its removal, while Xander shifts gears to analyze the photo for hidden clues, suggesting the use of black lights and heat sources to uncover potential messages.

As the group examines the photo more closely, the protagonist notices blacked-out letters in a newspaper Toby is holding. By piecing these letters together, they decode a chilling message: "I ALWAYS WIN IN THE END." This revelation confirms that Toby's abductor is not only manipulating them but also directly challenging the protagonist. Xander returns with investigative tools, but the group is momentarily sidetracked by the need to secure Max's safety, leading to a humorous negotiation about her bodyguard's qualifications.

The protagonist's concern shifts to Jameson and Grayson, who are still absent. Oren reassures them that the brothers are safe, though likely embroiled in a heated Hawthorne-family conflict. The chapter's tension lingers as the protagonist dissects the abductor's message, analyzing its implications—suggesting a lone individual with a history of setbacks. Despite their efforts, no further clues emerge, leaving the group frustrated and emotionally drained.

Eve's anguish over the situation is palpable as she expresses her hatred for feeling helpless. The protagonist, meanwhile, remains fixated on the message, searching for deeper meaning or hidden patterns. The chapter ends on a note of unresolved tension, with the group no closer to rescuing Toby and the abductor's taunt looming large. The emotional and psychological toll of the investigation is evident, setting the stage for

further conflict and discovery in the story.



CHAPTER 21

The chapter opens with an extravagant fondue setup at Hawthorne House, where Xander enthusiastically describes the array of cheeses, chocolates, and dippers available. Max and Xander engage in playful banter, culminating in a chaotic food fight that leaves Eve covered in chocolate. The scene serves as a lighthearted distraction, though the narrator, Avery, remains aware of the need to "break the loop" of tension. Eve’s discomfort with the opulence becomes apparent as she hesitates to participate, hinting at deeper unease about the Hawthorne lifestyle.

Avery takes Eve to her massive closet to replace her chocolate-stained shirt, where Eve is stunned by the sheer luxury. As Eve reluctantly selects a green silk shirt, she reveals Toby’s disdain for the Hawthorne family, calling them secretive and potentially dangerous. This moment underscores Eve’s internal conflict—she is drawn to the wealth but wary of the family’s dark underbelly. Avery reflects on the Hawthorne secrets she’s uncovered, including murder, infidelity, and cover-ups, reinforcing the theme of hidden corruption beneath the family’s glamorous facade.

Returning to her room, Avery contemplates the photo of Toby, questioning his motives and the extent of the family’s secrets. Her introspection is interrupted by Mr. Laughlin, who delivers a cart of blueprints—Tobias Hawthorne’s annual expansion plans for the house. The blueprints symbolize the family’s relentless growth and ambition, while also hinting at unfinished business. Eve’s reaction to the blueprints mirrors her earlier fascination with the closet, suggesting she is both intrigued and unsettled by the Hawthornes’ legacy.

The chapter closes with an air of mystery as an unnamed figure appears in the doorway, leaving the reader to wonder about their identity and purpose. This cliffhanger, combined with the revelations about the family’s secrets, sets the stage for further intrigue. The juxtaposition of lavish indulgence and hidden danger

reinforces the novel’s central tension: the allure of power and wealth versus the moral compromises they entail. Avery’s growing awareness of the family’s complexities positions her as both an insider and an observer, navigating a world where nothing is as it seems.



CHAPTER 22

The chapter opens with a tense and intimate interaction between the narrator and Jameson, who is visibly injured and covered in mud. Despite his disheveled appearance, Jameson remains composed, assuring the narrator that both he and Grayson are unharmed. The conversation hints at a recent confrontation with Skye, though Jameson dismisses her involvement in the ongoing kidnapping case. The narrator, however, reveals new information about Toby’s disappearance, including a hidden message in a picture and attempts to undermine their security team, deepening the mystery.

As the narrator shares these details, the physical proximity between them and Jameson intensifies, reflecting their emotional connection. Jameson analyzes the situation, suggesting the kidnapper’s clues are not sequential like traditional Hawthorne games but may form a single, fragmented riddle. He posits two possibilities: the captor either aims to instill fear without a grand design or is weaving a complex puzzle requiring multiple clues to solve. This realization shifts their perspective, highlighting the captor’s unpredictability and the need for patience.

The discussion turns to the nature of the riddle, with Jameson emphasizing its incompleteness and the captor’s control over the narrative. The narrator expresses frustration at their inability to progress, but Jameson’s calm demeanor offers reassurance. Their banter, laced with tension and flirtation, momentarily lightens the mood, though the underlying urgency remains. Jameson’s playful challenge to turn their predicament into a game underscores their dynamic, blending seriousness with levity.

The chapter closes with a charged moment as Jameson teases the narrator, leaving his intentions ambiguous. Their interaction, marked by mud, blood, and unresolved tension, encapsulates the chapter’s blend of mystery, emotional depth, and budding

romance. The unresolved riddle of Toby’s kidnapping lingers, setting the stage for further developments while reinforcing the characters’ resilience and connection amidst adversity.



CHAPTER 23

Avery awakens from a vivid nightmare in which she plays chess with Toby, whose bruised face hints at violence. The dream shifts abruptly as Tobias Hawthorne replaces Toby, ominously declaring his strategic prowess before strangling her. The terror lingers as she jolts awake, disoriented and struggling to breathe. Unable to find Jameson, who often wanders during sleepless nights, Avery seeks solace in Hawthorne's study, where the wall of trophies underscores the grandsons' extraordinary achievements—and their grandfather's manipulative legacy. The dream leaves her unsettled, sensing an unseen adversary plotting moves ahead.

Haunted by the dream's warning, Avery steps onto the balcony and spots Grayson swimming in the moonlit pool. Memories of a past conversation about his heroism resurface, but her focus shifts when Eve appears in one of Avery's nightgowns. The intimate scene between Grayson and Eve stirs unease, though Avery masks her discomfort by citing concern for Grayson's well-being. Jameson's sudden arrival interrupts her thoughts, and his probing question—how long she would have watched them—hints at underlying tension between them.

Jameson's jealousy surfaces as he pins Avery against the wall, kissing her fiercely to reaffirm their connection. Though Avery reassures him of her commitment, the unspoken question lingers: why does she care about Grayson's attention to Eve? Jameson cryptically references Emily, Grayson's former love, suggesting history might repeat itself. Avery vehemently denies the comparison, insisting Emily's manipulative nature has no parallel in their relationship. Yet, the exchange leaves a palpable strain, underscoring unresolved emotions and rivalries.

The chapter closes with Avery grappling with the Hawthorne family's complexities—their strategic minds, tangled loyalties, and the shadows of past betrayals. The dream, the encounter with Eve and Grayson, and Jameson's

possessiveness all converge to heighten her awareness of the psychological games at play. As she clings to Jameson, the narrative hints at deeper conflicts ahead, with Avery caught between love, suspicion, and the ever-present legacy of Tobias Hawthorne’s machinations.



CHAPTER 24

The chapter opens with Avery waking up to Alisa, her lawyer, knocking on her door. Oren, her security head, initially blocks Alisa's entry, but Avery lets her in. Alisa brings a mysterious leather satchel and immediately chastises Avery for not informing her about Eve, the woman claiming to be Toby Hawthorne's daughter. Alisa emphasizes her role in protecting Avery's legal interests, referencing her past decision to move Avery back to Hawthorne House during her coma, which secured her inheritance and security team. The tension between Alisa and Oren is palpable as they debate whether the situation is a legal or security matter.

Alisa reveals she learned about the threats against Avery from Nash, surprising Avery given Nash's strained relationship with Alisa. The lawyer asserts her competence and urges Avery to involve her in future crises. The conversation shifts to a smear campaign targeting Avery, with gossip websites offering high prices for compromising photos. Alisa also mentions instability in companies tied to Tobias Hawthorne, hinting at a larger conspiracy. Oren and Alisa agree to collaborate, with Alisa vowing to investigate the business disruptions while Oren handles security.

The discussion turns to Toby's potential kidnapping, with Alisa suggesting they keep Eve under surveillance and prepare for possible ransom demands. Avery reflects on the incomplete riddle and the uncertainty of Toby's fate, wondering if the captor is waiting to make demands. Alisa assures her the law firm can handle any financial arrangements, but Avery remains uneasy about the unfolding situation. The chapter highlights the growing complexity of the threats against Avery and the Hawthorne legacy.

Finally, Alisa directs Avery's attention to the leather satchel, revealing it was left by Tobias Hawthorne with instructions to deliver it under specific conditions. Avery is intrigued but wary, as the satchel represents one of the few direct communications

from the late billionaire, whose only previous message to her was an apology. The chapter ends on a suspenseful note, leaving the contents of the satchel and its implications for Avery's future unresolved.



CHAPTER 25

Avery is left alone with a mysterious leather satchel, instinctively recognizing it as another game from the late Tobias Hawthorne. Despite her eagerness to explore its contents, she hesitates, haunted by unresolved tensions with Jameson. Her sister Libby interrupts her thoughts, offering playful distractions like "cupcake pancakes" and lighthearted banter about tattoos. Libby’s encouragement eventually pushes Avery to confront the bag, symbolizing her transition from a passive participant to an active player in Hawthorne’s intricate puzzles.

Upon opening the satchel, Avery discovers a seemingly random assortment of items: a handheld steamer, a flashlight, a beach towel, magnetic letters, a USB drive, and a blue-green glass disc. Recognizing Hawthorne’s signature sequential gameplay, she methodically examines each object for clues. The glass disc reminds her of past decoding tools, while the USB drive contains an audio file labeled with her name—hinting at a cryptic message. Despite her efforts, the distorted audio remains indecipherable, fueling her determination to uncover the game’s starting point.

Avery and Libby work together, experimenting with the audio file by adjusting volume, speed, and even playing it backward, but to no avail. Undeterred, Avery theorizes that the other objects hold the key to unlocking the audio’s meaning. Her analytical approach mirrors the Hawthorne brothers’ problem-solving methods, impressing Libby, who notes how deeply Avery has absorbed their mindset. The chapter highlights Avery’s growing confidence and her willingness to embrace the challenge independently, even as she acknowledges the emotional weight of stepping into Hawthorne’s world without Jameson.

The chapter ends with Avery meticulously inspecting each item again, starting with the steamer, hoping to uncover hidden clues. Her persistence reflects her determination to honor Hawthorne’s legacy while asserting her own agency in the game. The

unresolved mystery of the audio file and the enigmatic objects leave readers anticipating the next steps in Avery’s journey, underscoring the themes of curiosity, resilience, and the bonds between siblings.



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.



CHAPTER 27

The chapter begins with the narrator, Avery, reluctantly agreeing to show Eve Toby’s wing after Grayson insists it was part of their deal. As they approach the wing, Eve slows her pace, visibly affected by the remnants of the brick wall Tobias Hawthorne had built decades ago. Avery explains that the wing was sealed off after Toby’s disappearance and later searched for clues when they discovered Toby was alive. Eve’s curiosity is piqued, and she eagerly asks what they found, setting the stage for the revelations to come.

Avery reveals a hidden compartment beneath a marble tile in Toby’s wing, containing an engraved poem by William Blake titled "A Poison Tree." The poem reflects Toby’s teenage identification with suppressed wrath, a sentiment Eve deeply relates to, momentarily losing herself in the words. Avery further explains how the poem led them to a legal text in Toby’s library, which contained a coded message—a self-written poem by Toby. The poem hints at stolen evidence and a dark secret, leaving Eve desperate to understand its meaning.

Eve’s emotional connection to Toby’s story intensifies as she requests to explore the wing alone, revealing her personal struggles with identity. She shares how her adoptive family treated her as an outsider due to her dissimilar appearance and how a DNA test failed to connect her to any biological relatives. Avery empathizes, acknowledging Toby’s role in finding her, but Eve’s focus remains on Toby’s poem, which resonates with her own experiences of isolation and hidden anger.

The chapter concludes with Avery reflecting on her own mother and the traits they share, contrasting Eve’s search for belonging. As Avery leaves Eve to explore Toby’s wing in private, the moment underscores the themes of identity, family, and the weight of hidden truths. The emotional depth of the chapter highlights the characters’ intertwined journeys and the lingering mysteries surrounding Toby’s past.

CHAPTER 28

The chapter opens with the protagonist finding Jameson at the top of a climbing wall, where he dramatically drops down upon hearing about a game left by their grandfather. Despite the dangerous height, Jameson lands effortlessly, showcasing his reckless yet skilled nature. Their banter reveals his troubled childhood and his tendency to seek attention through risky behavior. The protagonist then reveals the existence of a game designed by their grandfather, which was meant to be delivered if she ever met Eve, hinting at deeper family secrets and foreshadowing future revelations.

Jameson and the protagonist discuss the game’s first clue, which leads them to search for a chess set. Jameson mentions the six chess sets in the game room but suggests checking a binder detailing the protagonist’s inheritance for more information. The binder reveals a seventh, extraordinarily valuable chess set made of white gold and diamonds, valued at nearly half a million dollars. Realizing this set must be in the Hawthorne vault, the protagonist calls Oren to escort them there, setting the stage for the next phase of their quest.

Inside the vault, the duo meticulously searches through the treasures, including a stunning gold scepter that catches the protagonist’s eye. The discovery of the diamond-encrusted chess set is described in vivid detail, emphasizing its craftsmanship and opulence. The protagonist carefully examines each piece, eventually noticing a subtle seam on the black queen. With Jameson’s help, she uses a jeweler’s loupe and tweezers to extract a hidden strip of black paper, showcasing her determination and attention to detail.

The chapter concludes with the protagonist successfully retrieving the hidden message, written in Tobias Hawthorne’s distinctive handwriting. This moment underscores the grandfather’s penchant for elaborate puzzles and the emotional

weight of his legacy. The discovery not only advances the game but also deepens the mystery, leaving readers eager to learn the contents of the message and its implications for the protagonist and Jameson. The chapter masterfully blends suspense, character dynamics, and intricate plotting, maintaining the series’ signature tension and intrigue.



CHAPTER 29

The chapter opens with a tense atmosphere as the protagonists, Jameson and the narrator, search Hawthorne House for clues, reflecting on their shared history. Their conversation reveals Jameson's nostalgic fondness for the competitive games orchestrated by their grandfather, Tobias Hawthorne, which bonded him with his brothers despite their rivalries. The narrator questions whether Tobias left the current game to prove her worth, hinting at deeper insecurities about her selection as his heir. This introspection underscores the psychological complexity of Tobias's legacy and its impact on those entangled in his games.

The narrative shifts to the next day, where the narrator attends school despite personal turmoil, determined to project strength in the face of adversity. Her resolve to provoke her unseen adversary into making the next move highlights her strategic mindset. Meanwhile, a subplot unfolds in the school library, where Rebecca and Thea confront emotional tensions, showcasing the interpersonal dynamics that parallel the main mystery. The narrator's discreet exit from this scene emphasizes her growing awareness of others' struggles amid her own challenges.

A pivotal moment occurs when the narrator is summoned to the headmaster's office, initially fearing repercussions but instead receiving a mysterious package. The elegant handwriting on the box suggests another clue or twist in Tobias's game, reigniting the central mystery. This delivery serves as a narrative hook, leaving readers curious about its contents and implications for the ongoing plot. The chapter masterfully balances character development with plot progression, maintaining suspense throughout.

The chapter concludes with a sense of impending revelation, as the narrator stands on the brink of uncovering another layer of Tobias's intricate game. Her interactions with Jameson, Rebecca, and Thea reveal the emotional stakes tied to the Hawthorne

legacy, while the mysterious package promises new challenges. The blend of personal introspection, interpersonal drama, and cryptic clues creates a compelling narrative that drives the story forward, leaving readers eager for the next development.



CHAPTER 30

The chapter opens with Avery receiving a mysterious package at Hawthorne House, which Oren initially confiscates for security checks. The package contains an antique-looking jewelry box with a six-dial combination lock, suggesting an escalation from previous communications from Toby's abductor. The Hawthorne brothers, Eve, and Libby gather in the library as Avery examines the box, noting the absence of a note this time. The group speculates about the sender's ability to bypass school security, interpreting it as a threatening message of accessibility. Tensions rise as Oren and Nash advise Avery to avoid school for safety, but she defiantly refuses to be intimidated.

The group debates how to proceed, with Jameson and Grayson unusually advocating caution while Eve insists on immediate action. Xander raises concerns about potential explosives, but Oren reassures them the box is safe. X-rays reveal a phone inside, offering temporary relief until they discover a countdown timer set for 12 hours and 45 minutes. The Hawthorne brothers collaborate to crack the lock's combination (15-11-32), revealing the phone nestled in red velvet. Avery accesses the phone using the same combination, finding no data except the ominous timer and a calendar entry labeled "Niv" set for when the timer expires.

The discovery of the timer heightens the group's anxiety, with Eve voicing the unspoken question about what will happen when it reaches zero. Jameson redirects focus to analyzing the phone's contents, leading them to the cryptic "Niv" clue. Xander suggests "Niv" could be a name or contain Roman numerals, while Grayson's research yields unrelated results like a federal form and an appetite suppressant drug. The chapter ends on a cliffhanger as the group grapples with the ambiguity of "Niv" and the impending deadline, leaving Avery and the others in suspense about the abductor's next move.

Throughout the chapter, the dynamics between characters reveal their personalities under pressure: Avery's defiance, Jameson's uncharacteristic caution, and Grayson's analytical approach. The locked box and timer serve as metaphors for the escalating stakes, forcing the group to balance urgency with careful deliberation. The unresolved mystery of "Niv" and the ticking clock create a sense of impending confrontation, setting the stage for the next chapter's developments.



CHAPTER 31

The chapter opens with the protagonist analyzing clues about Toby's captor, noting he is elderly, uses their full name, and enjoys riddles and games. This description eerily matches the late billionaire Tobias Hawthorne, though he has been dead for a year. The group, including Grayson, Jameson, and Eve, discusses the captor's pattern of leaving decipherable clues in earlier deliveries, suggesting the current situation is part of a larger, more complex riddle. They focus on finding hidden details in the box, phone call, or combination, determined to uncover the next piece of the puzzle.

Xander reveals he recorded the captor's phone call, hoping to extract additional clues. The group listens repeatedly but finds nothing obvious. Oren, the security expert, explains the challenges of tracing the call due to its likely routing through untraceable internet channels. The protagonist considers involving the police, but Eve fears this could endanger Toby. Oren notes that trusted police contacts have been recently transferred, hinting at the captor's extensive influence and deliberate efforts to isolate them. The tension rises as they realize the adversary is methodically dismantling their resources and connections.

Jameson and Grayson analyze the captor's wording, noting he allowed the protagonist to call him "Luke" rather than stating it was his real name. This subtle distinction suggests a potential alias or deeper meaning. Their discussion is interrupted when the protagonist receives a call from Thea, who delivers alarming news: a photo of Eve outside Hawthorne House has gone viral, alongside an exposé linking Grayson and Jameson to Emily Laughlin's death. This media storm adds another layer of pressure, as the captor's machinations extend beyond the immediate kidnapping.

The chapter culminates in a sense of escalating crisis, with the group grappling with both the immediate threat to Toby and the spreading public scandal. The captor's strategic moves—combining psychological manipulation, media manipulation, and

systematic isolation—paint him as a formidable adversary. The protagonists must decode his riddles quickly while managing the fallout from the damaging rumors, highlighting the high-stakes race against time and the captor's calculated game of control and deception.



CHAPTER 32

The chapter opens with the protagonist informing Alisa and the group about a scandal, likening the emotional toll to a physical injury. The brothers—Nash, Grayson, and Jameson—react with varying degrees of defiance and stoicism, while Eve is visibly shaken by the revelation. The scandal, which involves accusations of murder and personal attacks, is attributed to Luke, an antagonist manipulating the situation. The group’s tension is palpable as they grapple with the fallout, with Eve particularly distressed by the public exposure of her past.

The conversation shifts to strategies for countering Luke’s moves, with Nash invoking their unspoken rule about fighting dirty. The protagonist echoes this sentiment, emphasizing the need to win at all costs to rescue Toby and defeat Luke. Eve’s frustration grows as she realizes the extent of the damage, while Xander interjects with a metaphorical "glitter cannon" analogy, illustrating how Luke’s actions are designed to create chaos and delay their efforts. Grayson and Libby add depth to the discussion, highlighting the lingering consequences of such tactics.

The group’s dynamic reveals their shared determination despite the emotional weight of the situation. Nash and Xander’s banter about literal glitter in Grayson’s bathroom lightens the mood momentarily, but the urgency of their mission remains clear. The protagonist reiterates that Luke’s goal is to distract them and run down the clock, heightening the stakes. Eve’s resolve hardens as she rejects the metaphor, focusing instead on the dire consequences of inaction for Toby.

In the final moments, the group rallies to action, replaying Luke’s conversation for clues. The chapter underscores their unity and resilience in the face of adversity, as well as the relentless pressure of time. The emotional and strategic layers of their conflict with Luke are intertwined, leaving readers with a sense of impending confrontation and the group’s unwavering commitment to their goal.

CHAPTER 33

The chapter opens with the protagonist acutely aware of the dwindling time—6 hours, 17 minutes, and 9 seconds remaining—as they grapple with mounting pressure and frustration. Despite attempts to clear their mind through fresh air and anonymous charity, no solutions emerge. The tension escalates when Xander receives a call from Max, the protagonist's best friend, who lightens the mood with humor about her bodyguard situation. However, the protagonist feels guilt over endangering those close to them, especially after Eve's exposure and the targeting by an enigmatic figure named Luke.

Max’s call shifts the narrative as the protagonist unloads their struggles, including a mysterious package, a phone call with Luke, and an ultimatum. The discussion turns to deciphering clues, particularly the term "Niv" and a set of numbers—15, 11, 32—previously dismissed as a combination. Max’s quick thinking identifies "Niv" as the New International Version of the Bible, sparking a breakthrough. The protagonist connects this to "Luke," realizing the numbers likely reference a biblical passage, heightening the sense of urgency and possibility.

The revelation leads to a pivotal moment as Max deciphers the numbers as Luke 15:11-32, identifying the parable of the prodigal son. This discovery shifts the protagonist’s perspective, offering a potential key to unraveling the mystery. The chapter highlights the dynamic between the protagonist and Max, whose wit and insight provide both emotional support and critical problem-solving assistance, contrasting with the protagonist’s growing desperation.

The chapter concludes with the protagonist’s mind racing, piecing together fragments of memory and clues. The parable of the prodigal son emerges as a central theme, suggesting deeper layers to Luke’s motives or the Hawthorne family’s secrets. The interplay of tension, camaraderie, and intellectual puzzle-solving drives the narrative

forward, leaving readers eager to see how this biblical clue will influence the protagonist’s next steps in the race against time.



CHAPTER 34

The chapter opens with Avery and her companions in a tense, sleep-deprived state, having spent the night analyzing various interpretations of Luke 15:11–32, the parable of the prodigal son. As a timer counts down, the group prepares for an anticipated phone call, with Avery answering and putting it on speaker. The caller, who addresses her by her full name, demands an explanation of the biblical passage, revealing his control over Toby and forcing Avery to engage in his psychological game. The atmosphere is charged with urgency and suppressed emotion as Avery tries to maintain composure while negotiating for Toby's safety.

Avery succinctly summarizes the parable, focusing on the prodigal son's wasteful actions and his father's unconditional forgiveness. The caller, however, pushes further, pointing out the overlooked third character—the loyal brother who stayed behind. Eve intervenes to mention this brother, but the caller dismisses her, insisting on speaking only to Avery, the chosen heiress. This rejection visibly wounds Eve, highlighting the emotional stakes and the caller's manipulative tactics. The tension escalates as the caller's silence leaves Avery panicked, fearing he may have hung up, and she desperately reaffirms her presence.

The caller resumes the conversation, pressing Avery to acknowledge all three characters in the parable: the prodigal son, the loyal brother, and the father. His insistence on this triad suggests a deeper symbolic meaning tied to the Hawthorne family dynamics. Avery, though rattled, responds calmly, recognizing the three figures. The caller's cryptic instruction to "ruminate on that" implies the parable holds a key to understanding his motives or the broader conflict. The chapter ends on a cliffhanger as he abruptly ends the call, leaving Avery and the others to decipher his intentions and await further contact.

This chapter masterfully blends suspense with psychological manipulation, using the parable as a metaphor for familial loyalty, inheritance, and chosenness. The caller's calculated cruelty and Avery's forced composure underscore the power imbalance, while Eve's marginalization adds emotional complexity. The unresolved tension and symbolic undertones set the stage for deeper revelations about the Hawthorne legacy and Avery's role within it. The narrative leaves readers questioning the parallels between the biblical story and the characters' real-life struggles.



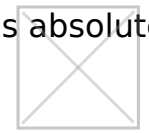
CHAPTER 35

The chapter opens with the group reacting to a tense situation, each character displaying their coping mechanisms: Libby makes coffee, Grayson composes himself, Jameson paces, Nash broods, Xander leaves abruptly, and Eve expresses regret for speaking up. The narrator reassures Eve that her intervention didn't alter their predicament, as their adversary had already set the stage for their torment. The group grapples with the cryptic reference to the narrator as "the heiress" and the allusion to the biblical prodigal son, recognizing it as another layer of their opponent's manipulative game. Frustration mounts as they acknowledge being trapped in a cycle of overanalysis, with the narrator's rage simmering at their powerlessness.

Xander returns with chess pieces—a king, knight, and bishop—symbolizing the prodigal son parable's key figures: the father, the prodigal son (Toby), and the faithful son. The group dissects Toby's past as a reckless youth and Tobias Hawthorne's unwavering desire to forgive him, drawing parallels to their current dilemma. Grayson, though stoic, hints at personal resonance with the overlooked faithful son, while the narrator reluctantly considers Toby's siblings as potential adversaries. Jameson dismisses Zara as the mastermind, insisting the caller's identity points to a third player—someone embodying vengeance.

The discussion shifts to the possibility of a hidden family member, with Xander humorously suggesting a "secret uncle" fits the Hawthorne family's chaotic legacy. Nash counters this, asserting Tobias Hawthorne's loyalty and possessiveness, making an unknown heir unlikely. Instead, he implies the culprit lies within their known circle. The narrator and Jameson simultaneously realize the implication: the vengeful "faithful son" could be someone already connected to the family, like Constantine, though Jameson hesitates to confirm this. The chapter ends on a cliffhanger, leaving the group—and reader—poised to uncover the abductor's true identity.

Throughout the chapter, the characters’ dynamics and emotional states are vividly portrayed, from the narrator’s fury to Eve’s quiet desperation. The chess pieces serve as a tangible metaphor for their theorizing, grounding the abstract parable in their reality. Themes of revenge, inheritance, and familial betrayal dominate, as the group wrestles with their grandfather’s legacy and their own roles in the unfolding drama. The tension builds as they inch closer to the truth, yet the adversary’s control over the narrative remains absolute, reinforcing the cat-and-mouse dynamic that defines their struggle.



CHAPTER 36

Grayson and the protagonist locate Zara in the greenhouse, where she is pruning roses with sharp shears. Zara immediately recognizes their visit as purposeful, demanding to know their intentions. Grayson reveals that Toby has been abducted, and while there's been no ransom demand, the kidnapper has sent cryptic messages. Zara's composed demeanor falters momentarily upon hearing about her brother's disappearance, especially when Oren confirms Toby is alive but unfound. The tension rises as Zara realizes the gravity of the situation, given Oren's expertise, and she challenges them to state their suspicions directly.

The duo explains that the kidnapper's clues point to a familial connection, specifically referencing the biblical prodigal son. Grayson presses Zara for information about her first husband, Christopher, suggesting he might fit the profile of someone who viewed Tobias Hawthorne as a father figure and felt wronged. Zara dismissively recounts Christopher's privileged background and their divorce, hinting at his subsequent downfall. She reveals Christopher died in a boating accident, seemingly closing that lead. The protagonist, however, refuses to accept this dead end and probes further about Christopher's family, only to learn they are also deceased.

Frustrated, the protagonist questions whether Tobias Hawthorne might have had another secret son, but Zara scoffs at the idea, given the fortune at stake. Grayson and the protagonist then reassess their assumptions, guided by Zara's reminder of the Hawthorne ability to see beyond obvious choices. Grayson cites a family mantra about challenging implicit assumptions, prompting the protagonist to reconsider the prodigal son analogy. They speculate that Tobias Hawthorne might not be the father in the parable but one of the sons, shifting the focus to his own mysterious family history.

Zara recalls her father's claims of having no family, but Grayson hints there might be more to the story. The chapter ends with the protagonist visualizing the three chess

pieces from earlier clues, symbolizing the unresolved mystery: if Tobias Hawthorne is the bishop or knight, who is the king? This realization opens a new line of inquiry, leaving the reader with a sense of intrigue and the promise of deeper secrets yet to be uncovered.



CHAPTER 37

The chapter opens with Jameson insisting they must locate Nan, the only person who might know if the late Tobias Hawthorne had undisclosed family beyond Zara's knowledge. The group discusses Nan's habits, noting her fondness for specific rooms in the Hawthorne estate, and Jameson deduces she's likely in the chapel. The chapel is described as a stunning, artisan-crafted space where Nan is found resting. Her sharp, no-nonsense demeanor is immediately apparent as she chastises Jameson and the protagonist for interrupting her, though it's revealed she's less praying than venting her frustrations to God.

Jameson and the protagonist join Nan in the pew, where she reminisces about Tobias Hawthorne. Nan reveals Tobias was a late-in-life child with no siblings and parents who died young, leaving him alone by the time he married her daughter, Alice. Despite his ruthless business persona, Nan emphasizes Tobias's devotion to family, never letting his morally ambiguous dealings affect his home life. Jameson probes further, asking about mentors or father figures, but Nan dismisses the idea, stating Tobias was too single-minded for close relationships outside his family.

The conversation takes a darker turn as Nan acknowledges Tobias's "unclean hands," hinting at his morally questionable past. This triggers the protagonist's realization that the ongoing kidnapping crisis might not be about Toby or herself but a vendetta against Tobias. The possibility that the kidnapper's true target is the late Hawthorne patriarch takes root, raising stakes and shifting the narrative's focus. Jameson gently presses Nan about potential enemies, but she deflects with a grim joke about revenge-seekers lining up, underscoring Tobias's controversial legacy.

The chapter closes with lingering tension as Nan's cryptic remarks and the protagonist's suspicions deepen. The unanswered question of Tobias's past misdeeds hangs heavily, suggesting a broader conspiracy tied to his empire. Nan's affection for

Tobias contrasts with her acknowledgment of his flaws, painting a complex portrait of the Hawthorne patriarch. The scene sets the stage for further exploration of his history and its consequences, leaving readers anticipating the next revelation in the unfolding mystery.



CHAPTER 38

The chapter opens with the protagonist experiencing a breakthrough in their investigation, realizing they must challenge their assumptions about Toby's disappearance. They consider the possibility that Toby was taken as revenge for his father Tobias Hawthorne's past actions, reflecting on hints about the family's dark secrets and the questionable means Tobias may have used to build his empire. This leads them to question Oren, Tobias's former head of security, about a "List" of potential threats—people Tobias may have wronged—which could hold clues to Toby's captor.

Oren confirms the existence of Tobias Hawthorne's List, though it differs from the protagonist's own list of threats. While the protagonist's List focuses on strangers and stalkers, Tobias's appears to catalog individuals he may have exploited or betrayed. Jameson and the protagonist recognize this List as a critical starting point, given the captor's narrative of envy and revenge. The group gathers in the solarium to review the extensive files, which reveal hundreds of potential threats Tobias meticulously documented.

The team narrows their focus to an older man with a personal vendetta against Tobias, possibly tied to a trio of men in a parable-like story. Eve emphasizes the gendered aspect of the captor's motives, noting Toby was targeted as the "son," suggesting a patriarchal grudge. Grayson's silent exchange with Eve hints at their prior discussions about the captor's psychology. Despite the daunting volume of files, the group remains determined, though the sheer scale of Tobias's enemies underscores the complexity of their task.

By the chapter's end, the protagonist concludes that Toby's captor is now wealthy, powerful, and well-connected—someone who has risen from past defeat to pose a formidable threat. The stacks of files symbolize Tobias's morally ambiguous legacy,

leaving the group to sift through his sins to uncover the truth. The chapter underscores themes of revenge, inherited consequences, and the shadows cast by unchecked power, setting the stage for a high-stakes pursuit of justice.



CHAPTER 39

The chapter reveals the darker side of Tobias Hawthorne's rise to wealth, as the characters sift through confidential files that expose his ruthless business tactics. Despite the sunlight filling the room, a grim atmosphere settles as they uncover how Hawthorne built his empire through hostile takeovers, lawsuits designed to bankrupt competitors, and merciless layoffs. The files paint a picture of a billionaire who prioritized profit over people, leveraging his employees' talents only to discard them when they were no longer useful. This stark contrast to his public image leaves the group unsettled, realizing the myth of Hawthorne glossed over the human cost of his success.

One particularly harrowing file details the story of Tyler Seaton, a biomedical engineer whose life unraveled after being laid off by Hawthorne. Despite a generous severance, a noncompete clause left Seaton unable to find new work, coinciding with his daughter Mariah's cancer diagnosis. The file includes photos of Mariah, who died at age twelve, and a subsequent donation Hawthorne made to a children's hospital—a hollow attempt to balance his moral ledger. This revelation sickens the protagonist, highlighting Hawthorne's transactional view of human suffering and his inability to truly atone for the consequences of his actions.

Tensions rise among the Hawthorne heirs as they confront the extent of their grandfather's exploitation. Grayson, Jameson, and Xander exchange horrified reactions, citing examples of Hawthorne's unethical practices, such as undervaluing patents from grieving widows and manipulating contracts to control employees' intellectual property. Nash, the eldest brother, admits he always knew Hawthorne's true nature, hinting at his own struggles living under his grandfather's shadow. Libby's quiet observation about Nash's compulsion to save people adds emotional depth, suggesting his actions were a response to Hawthorne's legacy of harm.

The chapter culminates in a poignant moment as the brothers recall a childhood puzzle involving a shattered glass ballerina, which Hawthorne used as a metaphor for his business philosophy. He taught them that sacrifices—broken things—were inevitable in pursuit of success, and failing to "clean up the shards" would lead to others getting hurt. This memory crystallizes the chapter's theme: Hawthorne's wealth was built on broken lives, and his heirs are now grappling with the moral weight of that inheritance. The dialogue underscores their shared trauma and the lingering impact of his ruthless worldview.



CHAPTER 40

The chapter opens with tension mounting as thirty-six hours pass without contact from Toby’s captor, leaving the Hawthorne household on edge. Avery and the Hawthorne brothers, along with Libby and Eve, exhaustively scour files on Tobias Hawthorne’s enemies, hoping for a breakthrough. Despite their efforts, nothing aligns with their search, leaving them frustrated and emotionally drained. Each character copes differently: Jameson retreats into the walls, Grayson pushes himself in the pool, Nash escapes to a bar, and Xander immerses himself in his lab, while Eve and Avery obsessively reread files, driven by desperation.

A pivotal moment occurs when Avery discovers an empty file labeled "Isaiah Alexander," which previously contained a single page about a disgruntled former Hawthorne employee. Eve dismisses its significance, but Avery’s curiosity is piqued when she notices the name’s connection to Xander. The missing page gnaws at her, hinting at a potential clue or personal significance. The revelation that Isaiah might be Xander’s father adds a layer of emotional complexity, as Avery realizes Xander’s reluctance to confront this possibility reflects his deeper fears of rejection.

Avery seeks out Xander in his lab, where he deflects her questions with his trademark humor, booping her nose to avoid the topic. Despite his playful antics, Avery persists, appealing to their bond as "Best Honorary Hawthorne Friends Forever." Xander eventually admits he didn’t take the missing page but confesses he’s researched Isaiah independently, revealing his fear that his father might resent him for costing him his career. Avery’s heart aches for Xander, whose cheerful exterior masks profound vulnerability.

The chapter closes with a poignant moment as Xander shares his lifelong struggle with being misunderstood and disliked, despite his kindness. Avery reassures him fiercely, but his smile hints at unresolved pain. The interaction underscores the emotional

stakes of their search for Toby, as personal and familial tensions intertwine with the larger mystery. The chapter leaves readers with a sense of urgency and empathy, setting the stage for deeper revelations about the Hawthorne family’s secrets and Xander’s unresolved past.



CHAPTER 41

The protagonist returns to the solarium after another fruitless search, haunted by a cryptic message: "I'll be in touch." Inside, they find Eve photographing confidential files, exhausted yet unable to stop. Eve's emotional breakdown reveals her desperation to uncover the truth, despite her physical and mental fatigue. The protagonist empathizes, acknowledging their shared need for rest, but the urgency of their mission leaves little room for respite.

The protagonist reflects on Jameson's absence, drawing parallels to their own past grief over their mother's hidden identity. They grapple with how to console Jameson and Xander about Tobias Hawthorne's complicated legacy—his brilliance, strategic mind, and ambiguous morality. Hawthorne's final words to Xander, hinting at self-discovery through his games, linger in the protagonist's thoughts, deepening the mystery of his intentions.

Frustration mounts as the protagonist realizes their efforts to solve Toby's captor's riddle have led nowhere, suspecting the clues were designed to mislead. Determined for a breakthrough, they turn to Hawthorne's satchel, methodically examining its remaining items: a steamer, flashlight, beach towel, and glass circle. The clue "Don't breathe" sparks a sudden realization, connecting the objects to a potential solution.

The protagonist's epiphany ties the beach towel and blue-green glass circle to the idea of being underwater, where one naturally holds their breath. This visceral understanding suggests a new direction in deciphering the riddle, offering a glimmer of hope amid the emotional and mental toll of their investigation. The chapter ends with a sense of impending action, as the protagonist prepares to act on their insight.

CHAPTER 42

Avery arrives at the Hawthorne family pool at night, carrying a piece of glass and a beach towel, signaling an impending confrontation. The pool, usually vibrant by day, now feels shadowy and tense. Grayson, swimming in the darkness, immediately senses her presence and warns her she shouldn’t be there. Their interaction is charged with unspoken history, particularly Grayson’s rigid adherence to family expectations and his internal struggle with vulnerability.

Avery turns on the pool lights, accidentally activating a fountain, creating a momentary illusion of magic. However, she quickly shuts it off, emphasizing her purposeful visit. When she reveals that Grayson’s grandfather knew about Eve—Toby’s daughter—Grayson reacts with shock and anger. He pulls himself out of the water, his body tense, as he processes the betrayal. The revelation shatters his belief in his grandfather’s honor and the justification for his own strict upbringing.

Grayson’s rage erupts as he confronts the hypocrisy of his grandfather’s actions. He recalls a lifetime of being held to impossible standards, believing it was to mold him into a worthy heir. Now, learning that his grandfather knowingly abandoned Eve, he feels deceived and disillusioned. Avery tries to soften the blow, suggesting the grandfather may have acted out of pain, but Grayson dismisses this, convinced he was deemed too weak to handle the truth.

The chapter culminates in Grayson’s raw admission of his perceived failure. He believed he was destined to lead the family, sacrificing emotion and vulnerability to meet his grandfather’s expectations. Avery’s presence and the revelations about Eve force him to confront the futility of his sacrifices. The chapter ends with Grayson grappling with his identity, caught between the man he was raised to be and the emotions he can no longer suppress.

CHAPTER 43

The protagonist dives into the pool, examining the intricate blue-green mosaic tiles at the bottom. Using a glass circle to filter the light, she discovers a hidden chessboard pattern beneath the tiles, a revelation that underscores Tobias Hawthorne's penchant for layered puzzles. The discovery triggers her recollection of earlier clues, including the Queen’s Gambit and the phrase "Don’t breathe," which guide her next steps. Determined to solve the mystery, she mentally maps the chess moves and prepares to interact with the tiles, sensing the depth of Hawthorne’s cunning design.

After memorizing the chessboard’s key squares, she repeatedly dives to manipulate the tiles, facing physical strain and the urgency of her dwindling breath. On her third attempt, she successfully triggers a chain reaction by pressing the correct tile, revealing a hidden compartment. Despite her body’s desperate need for air, she retrieves a flat package just before the compartment closes. The tension peaks as she surfaces, gasping for breath, only to find Jameson waiting for her, his presence adding emotional weight to the moment.

Jameson helps her out of the pool, and their reunion is charged with unspoken understanding and shared purpose. The protagonist focuses on the retrieved package, which contains a vacuum-sealed fireproof pouch. Inside, they find a faded photograph of three women standing before a stone church, with Tobias Hawthorne’s handwriting on the back indicating the location and date: Margaux, France, December 19, 1973. The date and place name immediately spark her curiosity, hinting at another layer of the puzzle.

The chapter ends with the protagonist and Jameson contemplating the significance of the photograph. The name "Margaux" could refer to a person or hold a deeper meaning within Hawthorne’s intricate games. Their dynamic shifts back to collaboration, emphasizing their synergy in solving puzzles. The discovery sets the

stage for the next phase of their journey, leaving readers intrigued about the connection between the photograph and the larger mystery surrounding Hawthorne’s legacy.



CHAPTER 44

The chapter opens with the protagonist in a shower, their mind racing as they attempt to decode a complex clue involving a photograph, the name "Margaux," a location in France, and a cryptic date. Jameson suggests a reverse image search to identify the church in the background, but the protagonist points out its limitations unless an exact copy exists online. They consider consulting Zara and Nan to recognize the women in the photo, while steam thickens the air, adding to the tension. The scene underscores their collaborative yet strained dynamic as they grapple with the puzzle’s layers.

Jameson and the protagonist shift their focus to other objects in the bag: a steamer, a flashlight, and a USB drive, debating how to use them to uncover hidden clues. Jameson reflects on his grandfather’s strategic mindset, suggesting they revisit the beginning to reassess their approach. The absence of clear instructions complicates their task, but Jameson theorizes that the game’s trigger—meeting Eve—might hold the key. His eyes gleam with possibilities, hinting at a deeper connection between the game and their current crisis.

The narrative delves into Jameson’s growing suspicion that the game might conceal vital information about Toby’s abduction. He portrays his grandfather as a master strategist who anticipated multiple outcomes, implying the game could be a deliberate clue. The protagonist’s hope surges, but Jameson tempers it, acknowledging his own bias in seeing patterns. Their emotional exchange reveals Jameson’s internal conflict, torn between admiration for his grandfather’s ruthlessness and his own moral reckoning.

The chapter closes with a raw confession from Jameson, admitting he shares his grandfather’s relentless hunger for victory. The protagonist tries to dissuade him, insisting he’s different, but Jameson’s intensity suggests otherwise. The tension between them mirrors the larger themes of legacy, strategy, and morality, leaving the

reader questioning whether Jameson will follow his grandfather’s path or forge his own. The scene is charged with emotional and intellectual stakes, setting the stage for further revelations.



CHAPTER 45

The chapter opens with the protagonists working late into the night to solve a mystery involving a church location, only to hit a dead end by morning. Their focus shifts when Xander sends a cryptic "911" text to Jameson, signaling an urgent summons. The pair prepare to respond but are interrupted by Nash, who emerges from Libby’s room with a rescued puppy. The tender moment reveals Nash’s protective nature and Libby’s appreciation for his kindness, hinting at their deepening bond. The scene underscores the theme of found family and the characters’ shared history of rescuing each other in different ways.

Xander’s urgent message takes center stage as the group gathers to decipher its meaning. Nash explains the unspoken rule among the Hawthornes: a "911" text demands immediate action, no questions asked. The tension builds as Xander follows up with a series of bizarre drawings—a heart labeled "CARE," a monkey on a bicycle, a tree, and an elephant on a pogo stick, all accompanied by the sound "EEEEE." The group’s playful banter about the drawings lightens the mood, but the underlying urgency remains. The dynamic between the characters shines through as they collaborate to interpret Xander’s clues.

The protagonist attempts to decode the puzzling images, piecing together the words "Care," "Eee," "Oak," and another "Eee." Nash offers a hint by identifying the tree as an oak, which finally leads the protagonist to the realization: the drawings spell out "karaoke." The absurdity of the revelation contrasts with the gravity of the "911" summons, highlighting the Hawthornes’ unique blend of seriousness and whimsy. Jameson’s smirk and quip about never joking about karaoke reinforce the family’s eccentric traditions and the importance of camaraderie in their lives.

The chapter concludes with the group preparing to heed Xander’s call, blending urgency with humor. The juxtaposition of a high-stakes summons and a lighthearted

karaoke outing reflects the story’s balance between tension and levity. Through the interactions, the chapter emphasizes loyalty, teamwork, and the unbreakable bonds between the characters. The rescued puppy serves as a metaphor for their collective journey—saving each other and finding joy amidst chaos. The stage is set for the next adventure, leaving readers curious about the significance of Xander’s karaoke emergency.



CHAPTER 46

The chapter opens with the group gathering in the Hawthorne theater, where Xander has organized an impromptu karaoke session. His energetic antics and playful teasing of his brothers—particularly Grayson’s absence—set a lighthearted tone. However, the mood shifts when a crashing sound interrupts the scene, prompting Jameson and Avery to investigate. Nash’s insistence that they handle the situation hints at an underlying tension, foreshadowing Grayson’s emotional turmoil.

Jameson and Avery find Grayson in the music room, surrounded by the shattered remains of a violin. Despite his poised performance, Grayson’s destructive actions reveal his inner conflict. His cold dismissal of beauty as a "lie" and his apology to Avery for damaging her property underscore his struggle with perfectionism and self-worth. Jameson’s intervention—both physically restraining Grayson and mocking his melodrama—highlights their complex sibling dynamic.

The confrontation escalates into a physical fight, with Jameson deliberately provoking Grayson to release his pent-up emotions. Their struggle becomes a metaphor for Grayson’s internal battle, as he grapples with feelings of inadequacy and the ruthless legacy of their grandfather, Tobias Hawthorne. Jameson’s challenge—"What do you want, Gray?"—forces Grayson to confront his suppressed desires, breaking through his stoic facade.

The chapter closes with Grayson admitting his desire to rescue Toby for Eve’s sake, revealing a rare moment of vulnerability. This declaration hints at unresolved family loyalties and sets the stage for future conflicts. The interplay of humor, tension, and raw emotion captures the Hawthorne brothers’ fraught relationships, while Avery’s silent empathy adds depth to the narrative. The scene masterfully balances action with introspection, leaving readers eager for the next development.

CHAPTER 47

The chapter opens with the protagonist entering the wine cellar, triggering vivid memories of a past cocktail party where Grayson Hawthorne saved a little girl from drowning. Despite his composed exterior, the protagonist recalls noticing Grayson's troubled expression before he retreated downstairs. As they descend the stone steps with Jameson, the protagonist tries to focus on the present, but the sight of the antique tasting room transports them back to a pivotal moment with Grayson. The setting is rich with symbolism, from the lion-carved chairs to the dark cherry wood table, underscoring the tension and emotional weight of the scene.

Grayson is revealed in a vulnerable state, drinking alone and visibly distressed. The protagonist confronts him, and Grayson confesses his anguish over a comment from the girl's grandfather, who claimed Tobias Hawthorne would have been proud of him. This praise triggers Grayson's self-doubt, as he believes true worthiness comes from accomplishing "impossible things." His pain stems from a deeper sense of inadequacy, particularly his failure to save Emily and his perceived inaction during a bomb explosion. The dialogue highlights Grayson's internal struggle with perfection and the Hawthorne family's unrelenting expectations.

The protagonist attempts to reassure Grayson, insisting he is not broken, but Grayson's guilt runs deep. He reveals haunting hallucinations of Emily's voice, a confession that lays bare his psychological torment. Grayson's admission—"I failed her, and she will haunt me until the day I die"—captures his profound grief and self-reproach. The protagonist's physical gesture of holding his head symbolizes their emotional connection, yet Grayson remains trapped in his belief that he must be "stronger" for others, especially the protagonist.

In the final moments, the protagonist offers unconditional acceptance, telling Grayson, "You. It’s enough." This simple yet powerful statement contrasts with Grayson's rigid

self-judgment, leaving the chapter on a poignant note. The scene encapsulates themes of trauma, familial pressure, and the struggle for self-forgiveness, while deepening the emotional complexity of Grayson's character and his relationship with the protagonist.



CHAPTER 48

The chapter opens with the discovery of a cryptic pencil sketch on the label of a rare 1973 Chateau Margaux bottle from Tobias Hawthorne’s collection. The drawing depicts a teardrop-shaped crystal, sparking curiosity about its significance. While Grayson initially guesses it might relate to jewelry, the protagonist recalls seeing similar crystals elsewhere and deduces they are part of a chandelier. This realization narrows their search to one of the eighteen crystal chandeliers in Hawthorne House, setting the stage for the next phase of their investigation.

Their search leads them to the Tea Room, where they locate the chandelier in question. The sheer size and complexity of the fixture—with its thousands of delicate crystals—daunts the group. Jameson demonstrates how the chandelier can be lowered for maintenance, allowing them to examine it closely. The tension rises as they contemplate the painstaking task of inspecting each crystal, aware that a single misstep could shatter the fragile pieces and potentially destroy hidden clues.

Working methodically, the trio examines the crystals one by one, their physical proximity underscoring the collaborative yet tense dynamic between them. Grayson spots irregularities in a particular crystal, prompting Jameson to speculate about possible etchings. Grayson, however, hands the crystal to the protagonist, who struggles to decipher any hidden message without tools. This moment highlights the group’s reliance on each other’s strengths and the need for ingenuity to uncover the truth.

The protagonist’s quick thinking leads them to use a flashlight to illuminate the crystal’s irregularities. When the light refracts through the crystal, it projects a chilling warning onto the floor: “DON’T TRUST ANYONE.” This ominous message casts doubt on the alliances within the group and sets a foreboding tone for the chapters to come, leaving readers questioning the motives of every character involved in the mystery.

CHAPTER 49

The chapter opens with a tense moment as the protagonist, Avery, discovers a chilling message—"DON’T TRUST ANYONE"—projected from a crystal. The warning fills her with dread, and she immediately seeks clarification from Jameson and Grayson, wondering if it’s a cryptic clue. Jameson examines the crystal further and finds the faint letters "Fin," suggesting the game is over. Avery struggles to accept this, questioning whether the USB drive they found earlier might still hold significance, but Jameson dismisses it as potential misdirection. The message leaves Avery unsettled, forcing her to reconsider her trust in everyone around her.

Avery reflects on the game’s origins, realizing it began when she met Eve, a newcomer who resembles Emily, a figure from the Hawthorne family’s past. She recalls Eve’s suspicious behavior, including taking photos of confidential files, and wonders if the warning specifically targets her. Grayson vehemently defends Eve, insisting the message is general, but Avery remains skeptical. She argues that "anyone" inherently includes Eve, hinting at deeper suspicions about her motives. The tension escalates as Avery questions why Tobias Hawthorne never brought Eve into the family fold, suggesting he may have known something they don’t.

The confrontation reaches a climax when Eve unexpectedly enters the room, having overheard the discussion. She appears devastated by the implication that Tobias knew of her existence but never acknowledged her. Eve defiantly offers her phone to Avery, daring her to search for evidence of wrongdoing. Avery, skilled at reading bluffs, senses genuine emotion in Eve’s reaction but remains wary, the warning echoing in her mind. The scene is charged with tension as Oren, Avery’s bodyguard, positions himself protectively between them, underscoring the growing mistrust.

The chapter ends on a note of unresolved conflict, with Avery torn between her instincts and the possibility that Eve is being unfairly targeted. Eve’s emotional

outburst and willingness to submit her phone for inspection add layers to her character, leaving readers questioning her true intentions. The message "DON’T TRUST ANYONE" lingers, casting doubt on every interaction and setting the stage for further intrigue. Avery’s internal struggle—balancing suspicion with the need for evidence—highlights the psychological complexity of the narrative, as the Hawthorne family’s secrets continue to unravel.



CHAPTER 50

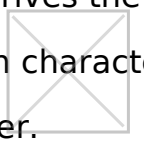
The chapter opens with the protagonist preparing to leave Hawthorne House under tight security measures. Oren, displeased with the decision, arranges for three identical SUVs to deter paparazzi from identifying which vehicle contains the protagonist and Eve. Xander Hawthorne accompanies them, primarily for Rebecca’s sake, while Grayson and Jameson remain behind. During the ride, Eve inquires about her grandmother, Rebecca’s mother, and Xander describes her as intense, detailing how she abandoned her surgical career to care for her daughter Emily, whose heart condition ultimately led to her death. Eve’s apprehension about meeting her grandmother is palpable as she sarcastically remarks on the likely success of the encounter.

The protagonist checks Thea’s social media, discovering a series of dramatic self-portraits and a contentious post featuring Thea and Emily Laughlin. The caption suggests Thea is defending Emily’s memory against rumors, hinting at underlying tensions. Eve expresses admiration for Thea’s boldness, which unsettles the protagonist due to Eve’s seemingly genuine demeanor. Thea’s fourth photo, showing her and Emily laughing together, is accompanied by a defiant caption, further emphasizing the emotional stakes. The protagonist notes the overwhelming public response to the post, signaling the gravity of the rumors circulating about the Hawthorne brothers and Emily.

Xander reveals Thea has also posted a video addressing the rumors directly. In it, Thea dismisses the gossip as false, claiming she started them herself to control the narrative. Her performance is both theatrical and calculated, blending vulnerability with defiance. Xander admires her audacity, calling her "magnificent and terrifying," while Eve questions his history of fake dating. The protagonist remains wary of Eve’s apparent normalcy, despite finding no incriminating evidence on her phone, leaving

their trust in her uncertain.

The chapter concludes with the protagonist grappling with doubt, questioning whether to maintain their guard around Eve. Thea’s manipulative yet effective damage control contrasts with Eve’s enigmatic authenticity, creating a tension that underscores the protagonist’s internal conflict. The interplay of public perception, personal loyalty, and hidden motives drives the narrative forward, leaving readers to ponder the true intentions of each character as the group heads toward an uncertain reunion with Eve’s grandmother.



CHAPTER 51

Eve, accompanied by Avery and Xander, arrives at Rebecca’s home to meet Mallory, Rebecca’s mother and Eve’s grandmother. The tension is palpable as Rebecca’s red, chapped hands hint at the stress and emotional turmoil within the household. The living room is immaculately clean, suggesting either Rebecca’s efforts to cope or Mallory’s obsessive control. Mallory’s fixation on Eve is immediate, as she dismisses Avery’s presence and lavishes attention on Eve, comparing her to her late daughter, Emily. The scene underscores Mallory’s unresolved grief and her unsettling possessiveness.

Mallory’s behavior grows increasingly unsettling as she insists Eve call her "Mom" and reminisces about Emily, whom she saw as an extension of herself. Eve, seeking answers about her origins, gently probes Mallory about Toby’s father, Liam. Mallory’s reaction to Liam’s name is fraught with tension, revealing a painful past. Rebecca, caught between her mother’s instability and her own distress, remains silent but visibly shaken. The dynamic highlights the family’s fractured relationships and the weight of unspoken truths.

Eve persists in her questioning, asking why Liam left, but Mallory’s response is evasive and emotionally charged. The arrival of an unexpected visitor interrupts the tense conversation, prompting Oren to take defensive measures. Avery deduces that the security team anticipates another threatening package, linking the visit to the ongoing danger surrounding Eve. The abrupt shift in focus heightens the sense of impending crisis, leaving the unresolved family drama simmering in the background.

The chapter culminates in a blend of emotional confrontation and external threat. Mallory’s unresolved trauma and Rebecca’s silent suffering paint a poignant picture of a family haunted by loss and secrecy. Meanwhile, the looming danger outside the house adds a layer of urgency, suggesting that Eve’s quest for answers may be

overshadowed by more immediate perils. The interplay of personal and external conflicts sets the stage for further tension and revelation.



CHAPTER 52

The chapter opens with tension as Eve chooses to stay at the cottage with Mallory rather than return to the Hawthorne estate, leaving Avery grappling with guilt and suspicion. Despite Oren's reassurances about extensive security measures—including guards for Eve and Mallory—Avery's internal mantra, "don't trust anyone," underscores her growing paranoia. The arrival of Alisa, the family's lawyer, further heightens the stakes as she presents Avery with a damning news article questioning her ability to manage the Hawthorne fortune. This confrontation sets the tone for a chapter rife with distrust and external pressures.

Amidst the tension, a moment of levity arises with the introduction of a playful puppy named Tiramisu by Xander, offering brief respite. However, Alisa's cryptic warning about Nash Hawthorne's tendency to abandon what he loves hints at deeper familial fractures. The mood shifts again as Alisa reveals a gossip article painting Avery as romantically entangled with multiple Hawthorne brothers, amplifying the media scrutiny surrounding her. Jameson's protective intervention highlights the family's divided loyalties, while Avery's frustration with the distractions from her larger mission—uncovering the truth behind the threats—becomes palpable.

The chapter delves into the complexities of power and perception as Alisa pushes Avery to establish a trust to stabilize the Hawthorne empire. Jameson counters, advocating for financial advisors instead, revealing a power struggle over Avery's autonomy. Grayson's sudden appearance and pointed question about Eve's whereabouts further strain Avery's emotions, hinting at unresolved tensions between them. The exchange underscores the chapter's central theme: Avery's isolation as she navigates a web of distrust, media manipulation, and familial expectations.

The chapter closes with Avery's urgent demand for answers about the unseen adversary targeting the Hawthornes. Alisa's vague response about the sheer number

of potential wealthy suspects frustrates Avery, while Grayson's cold demeanor adds to her emotional turmoil. Rebecca's interjection about Eve's location serves as a reminder of the fractured relationships Avery must navigate. The chapter leaves readers with a sense of impending confrontation, as Avery's resolve to uncover the truth clashes with the mounting obstacles around her.



CHAPTER 53

The chapter opens with the protagonist and their team divided into tasks to decipher two key clues: a seal and a number. Grayson focuses on financial records, while Xander, Thea, and Rebecca explore the significance of the date December 29, 1982. Jameson and the protagonist tackle the phone number, speculating that adding an area code could reveal a location or a lead to Toby's whereabouts. Despite their efforts, initial attempts to call the number yield no results, and an internet search provides only tangential information, leaving them frustrated but determined.

Their investigation takes a dramatic turn when Thea receives a call from a blocked number. The mysterious caller, who has been tracking them through a program installed on Thea's phone, engages the protagonist in a tense conversation. He taunts them with cryptic questions, demanding they "know" rather than guess the meaning of the clues. The call reveals his intimate knowledge of their location—Tobias Hawthorne's study—and his manipulative intent. The protagonist remains composed, but the encounter leaves them unsettled, especially when the caller abruptly ends the call with the ominous instruction, "Look up."

Following the call, the team realizes the extent of the caller's surveillance. Oren destroys Thea's phone to prevent further spying, but the protagonist is consumed by the caller's final words. They analyze the study's layout, considering where Tobias Hawthorne would have directed his gaze. The wall of trophies and achievements belonging to the Hawthorne grandsons catches their attention, showcasing their diverse talents and accomplishments. Among these, patent certificates stand out, each bearing a seven-digit number—a detail that suddenly feels significant.

The chapter culminates in a moment of clarity as the protagonist connects the patents' seven-digit numbers to their ongoing search. This realization sharpens their focus, suggesting that the answers they seek may be hidden in plain sight. The tension

escalates as the protagonist pieces together the caller's hints, underscoring the high-stakes nature of their mission. The chapter ends on a note of anticipation, leaving readers eager to see how this newfound insight will propel the story forward.



CHAPTER 54

The chapter begins with the discovery of a 1972 US patent co-held by Tobias Hawthorne and Vincent Blake, a name previously unknown to the protagonists. The patent describes an oil drilling mechanism, but Xander quickly identifies a fatal flaw, rendering it worthless. This revelation sparks curiosity about Blake's identity, especially after recalling a mysterious phone call where the man hinted at his name. The group realizes Blake is connected to Toby's disappearance and seeks revenge, though his motives remain unclear. The patent's failure contrasts sharply with Hawthorne's later success, hinting at a deeper conflict.

Further investigation reveals a second patent filed the same year, solely under Hawthorne's name, which improves upon the flawed design. This patent becomes the foundation of Hawthorne's fortune, suggesting he deliberately undermined Blake's claim. The group deduces that Hawthorne's betrayal—filing a worthless patent with Blake before securing a profitable one alone—lies at the heart of Blake's vendetta. The emotional weight of this discovery is palpable, especially for Grayson, who shifts from despair to determination, recognizing the gravity of their adversary.

The narrative delves into Blake's background, revealing him as a wealthy Texas oil heir whose family wealth dates back to the 1930s. Despite his fortune, Blake's resentment toward Hawthorne stems from their shared history: Hawthorne, once a lowly oil rig worker, allegedly double-crossed Blake to claim the valuable patent. The group speculates about the dynamics of their relationship, questioning why Blake never sued Hawthorne. The tension escalates as they grapple with the implications of facing an octogenarian foe with a grudge and the resources to act on it.

The chapter concludes with the group piecing together the puzzle, linking Hawthorne's rise to his betrayal of Blake. The emotional stakes are heightened by Eve's arrival and her disbelief that a patent dispute could fuel such vengeance. The protagonists

recognize the need to understand Blake’s true intentions, fearing his revenge extends beyond financial loss. The chapter leaves readers with a sense of urgency as the group prepares to confront a powerful enemy whose motives are as shrouded in mystery as Hawthorne’s past.



CHAPTER 55

The protagonist confronts Nan about Vincent Blake, presenting a metallic disk as evidence of Tobias Hawthorne's past dealings with him. Nan reveals that Tobias worked for Blake in the 1970s, during his courtship with Alice, and was brought into Blake's inner circle. Blake, a wealthy and powerful figure, enjoyed pitting his protégés against each other, including his nephews, who resented Tobias's rise. The tension escalates as Nan hints at the nephews' harassment of Alice, which Tobias ultimately used as motivation to surpass Blake.

The narrative delves into Tobias's betrayal of Blake, filing a superior patent that eclipsed their joint work. Despite the underhanded move, Blake respected Tobias's cunning, allowing him to leave and build his own empire. This history suggests Blake's dangerous nature, yet Tobias seemingly neutralized the threat, as he never included Blake on his list of enemies. The protagonist questions why Blake would resurface now, targeting Toby, and Nan implies it's because Tobias is no longer alive to protect the family.

Nan's cryptic warnings paint Blake as a ruthless figure who thrives on power games, much like Tobias. She draws a parallel between the protagonist's current predicament and her own past, where she suffered abuse for her talents. The chapter underscores the cyclical nature of power struggles and the dangers of underestimating old enemies. Nan's final words serve as a stark reminder that Blake will exploit any weakness, urging the protagonist to stay vigilant.

The chapter concludes with a sense of foreboding, as the protagonist realizes the gravity of the situation. Blake's reappearance threatens to unravel the Hawthorne legacy, and the protagonist must navigate this perilous game without Tobias's guidance. Nan's advice to protect herself from Blake's brutality underscores the high stakes, leaving the reader anticipating the next move in this dangerous confrontation.

CHAPTER 56

The chapter opens with the protagonist reflecting on Vincent Blake's insistence on communicating exclusively with her, reinforcing her central role in the unfolding conflict. As she rejoins the group, she overhears a tense exchange between Thea and Rebecca, urging the latter to channel her emotions into anger rather than retreating inward. This moment highlights the emotional stakes and interpersonal dynamics among the characters, setting a charged atmosphere for the scene. Meanwhile, Jameson's immediate approach to the protagonist underscores his protective and strategic nature, hinting at deeper alliances and tensions within the group.

The plot escalates when Grayson announces Eve's sudden disappearance, revealing she has left to confront Vincent Blake alone. The group's reaction—ranging from concern to frustration—illustrates their shared vulnerability and the dangers posed by Blake. The protagonist's internal monologue, recalling Nan's warnings about Blake's unpredictability, adds a layer of foreboding. Grayson's determination to pursue Eve, despite the risks, underscores his guilt over past failures and his fierce loyalty, further complicating the group's already precarious situation.

A pivotal moment occurs when Jameson invokes the Hawthorne rite "On Spake," forcing Grayson to listen silently as Jameson delivers a private message. This ritualistic interaction showcases the brothers' complex relationship and the unspoken codes governing their actions. Grayson's eventual decision to waive his right to respond suggests Jameson's words have struck a chord, though the specifics remain hidden from the protagonist and readers alike. The tension between the characters is palpable, leaving their next steps uncertain.

The chapter concludes with Jameson requesting a private conversation with the protagonist, signaling a potential shift in strategy or revelation. Thea's dismissive remark about the Hawthornes adds a note of external skepticism, emphasizing the

family's insular and enigmatic nature. This ending leaves readers anticipating the secrets Jameson might reveal and how the group will navigate the escalating threat posed by Blake, while also hinting at deeper emotional undercurrents yet to be explored.



CHAPTER 57

Jameson leads the protagonist to a hidden gemstone room concealed behind a model train setup on the third floor. The room, lined with obsidian and agate crystal slabs, serves as a dramatic setting for a pivotal confrontation. When the protagonist steps inside, Jameson traps them there, revealing his plan to leave without them. Through a phone call, Jameson explains his intentions, hinting at a dangerous mission involving Grayson and Eve, while the protagonist demands to be released, frustrated and concerned for his safety.

The conversation shifts as Jameson reveals the origin of his scar, a deeply personal story about revisiting the cliff where Emily died. He describes his reckless jumps and the near-fatal injury caused by a submerged tree branch, framing it as a metaphor for Grayson’s current emotional turmoil. Jameson emphasizes that Grayson, usually the steadfast one, is now unmoored, and he feels compelled to step up as the strong one. This confession underscores Jameson’s protective instincts and his determination to shield both Grayson and the protagonist from further harm.

The protagonist pleads to join Jameson, arguing they don’t need protection and insisting on being part of the mission. Jameson, however, remains resolute, stating that the Hawthorne family’s mess is their responsibility to clean up. He admits he doesn’t trust Eve, aligning with their grandfather’s warning, but reassures the protagonist that they are the only person he truly trusts. This moment highlights the tension between Jameson’s loyalty to his family and his deep connection to the protagonist.

The chapter ends abruptly as Jameson hangs up, leaving the protagonist trapped in the gemstone room. The unresolved tension and Jameson’s cryptic final words—"the only person I trust with all that I am and all that could be, Heiress, is you"—leave the protagonist and readers questioning what dangers lie ahead. The chapter masterfully

blends emotional vulnerability with suspense, setting the stage for the next phase of the story.



CHAPTER 58

The chapter opens with the protagonist furious at Jameson for locking her in an extravagant, gemstone-lined room under the guise of protection. Unable to reach her usual allies—Oren, Libby, Xander, or Rebecca—she vents to Max, who shares her frustration with colorful insults. As she examines her surroundings, she realizes the room is not a dungeon but an elaborate escape puzzle, with walls made of rotating obsidian and white agate bricks. Despite hours of attempts, she struggles to find the correct pattern, all while worrying about Jameson and Grayson's pursuit of Eve.

Frustration mounts as the protagonist experiments with various designs, including diamonds, chessboards, and keys. After wiping away a diamond pattern, she hears a click, revealing a hidden trapdoor. Without hesitation, she descends into a dark passageway, eventually emerging in Nash's bedroom. Nash, blocking the door, challenges her impulsiveness, urging her to think before acting. Though initially defiant, she concedes to his wisdom, calming down as Nash steps aside and offers duct tape for future retribution against Jameson and Grayson.

Relieved but still annoyed, the protagonist confronts Oren, who confirms that Jameson, Grayson, and Eve are safe. Eve had been denied entry to the Blake compound, and the boys intervened to de-escalate the situation. The protagonist's irritation resurfaces as she chastises Oren for allowing Jameson to lock her up, but her anger is interrupted by the arrival of Xander, Thea, and Rebecca. Xander, wielding a medieval shield, announces their dramatic rescue, while Thea rolls her eyes at his antics.

The chapter ends with the protagonist questioning why Xander and Rebecca didn't answer her calls earlier. Rebecca apologizes, explaining her phone was on silent as they were "blowing off steam." The scene balances tension with humor, highlighting the protagonist's resilience and the dynamic relationships within the group. The escape room serves as both a physical challenge and a metaphor for her struggle to

break free from others’ overprotectiveness and take control of her own fate.



CHAPTER 59

The chapter opens with the protagonists arriving at a small-town mechanic shop, having evaded paparazzi with their security team. Inside, they meet Isaiah Alexander, a mechanic working under a car, who initially seems unfazed by their arrival. Xander Hawthorne, visibly nervous, attempts to connect with Isaiah through humor and shared mechanical interests. The tension builds as Isaiah reveals he recognizes Xander, hinting at a deeper connection between them, though his calm demeanor contrasts with Xander's emotional turmoil.

Xander, struggling to process the encounter, reveals his identity to Isaiah, who responds with unexpected familiarity. The dialogue highlights Xander's anxiety through his rambling speech, while Isaiah remains composed, even joking about Xander's tendency to overthink. Thea and Rebecca, supporting Xander, add moments of levity, but the emotional weight of the scene intensifies as Xander confronts Isaiah about their relationship, asking if he knew about him all along.

Isaiah confirms he has known about Xander since before his birth, revealing a painful history tied to Tobias Hawthorne, Xander's grandfather. He explains how Tobias fired him and blacklisted him from the industry, leaving him financially ruined and unable to fight for custody of Xander. The revelation shocks Xander, who realizes Tobias orchestrated his separation from Isaiah to keep Xander for himself. Rebecca, protective of Xander, challenges Isaiah's past decisions, while Isaiah defends his actions, blaming Tobias's manipulation.

The chapter concludes with Isaiah disclosing that Skye, Xander's mother, named him Alexander as a nod to his father and that Tobias falsified a DNA test to sever their legal ties. Xander, grappling with the truth, is left speechless as Isaiah acknowledges the injustice but admits he couldn't prove it. The emotional confrontation underscores themes of family, betrayal, and the lingering consequences of power struggles, leaving

Xander to reconcile his identity with the newly revealed past.



CHAPTER 60

The chapter opens with Avery meeting Xander at a doughnut shop, where he distracts himself by humorously stacking doughnuts. Despite his playful demeanor, it’s clear Xander is grappling with the recent revelation that the Hawthorne family manipulated a paternity test to keep his father away. Avery tries to comfort him, but Xander deflects with humor, refusing to discuss his emotions. Their quiet moment is interrupted when Oren signals they’ve been spotted, hinting at the constant scrutiny surrounding the Hawthorne family.

The scene shifts to Isaiah’s garage, where Xander asks Isaiah about a mysterious metal disk. Isaiah identifies it as Vincent Blake’s “family seal,” a token granting its holder significant power within Blake’s empire. Only Blake’s blood relatives could possess these seals, and owning one promised a stake in his fortune upon his death. The disk’s connection to Toby Hawthorne raises questions, as it seems unlikely Blake would willingly share his wealth with a rival. Avery realizes the disk’s immense value, linking it to Toby’s cryptic message to her mother.

Isaiah reveals that Blake’s son disappeared years ago, leaving no direct heir and intensifying the competition for the seals. Avery’s adrenaline spikes as she connects the dots, suspecting Toby may have stolen the seal from Blake. The mystery deepens as she wonders why Tobias Hawthorne would have such an item, given his fraught history with Blake. Isaiah’s reluctance to engage further suggests unresolved tensions, but Xander tentatively agrees to talk with him, hinting at a potential emotional breakthrough.

The chapter ends with Rebecca asking about the name of Blake’s son, introducing a new layer of intrigue. Isaiah’s hesitation implies there’s more to the story, leaving readers curious about the son’s identity and his possible connection to the Hawthorne family. The scene underscores the ongoing tension between past secrets and present

revelations, setting the stage for further unraveling of the complex relationships at play.



CHAPTER 61

The chapter opens with the protagonist questioning whether Toby’s choice of a poem by William Blake holds deeper significance beyond its emotional resonance. The discovery of the Blake family seal in Tobias Hawthorne’s possession sparks a flurry of speculation, linking it to Vincent Blake’s vendetta. As the group waits in the SUV, the protagonist’s mind races through themes of revenge and vengeance, suggesting that Blake’s actions may not stem from a decades-old patent dispute but rather from a personal grudge involving his son, Will Blake. This sets the stage for a deeper exploration of familial betrayal and hidden motives.

The narrative shifts to a discussion of the parable of the prodigal son, with the protagonist theorizing that Tobias Hawthorne might be the "prodigal" who betrayed Vincent Blake’s trust. Xander and the protagonist piece together clues, noting that Will Blake, as a teenager, could have witnessed this betrayal and harbored resentment. The protagonist’s realization that Will might have been the "good son" who felt overshadowed by Hawthorne’s actions adds layers to the mystery. The tension builds as they consider the possibility that the seal belonged to Will, hinting at a darker connection between the families.

Rebecca’s sudden interjection about the nickname "Liam" for William introduces a shocking twist, implying a potential link between Will Blake and another character. The protagonist’s frantic online search confirms Will’s disappearance around 40 years ago, aligning with the timeline of Hawthorne’s rise. Rebecca’s revelation drains the air from the car, leaving the group—and the reader—to grapple with the implications. The chapter ends on a cliffhanger, with the characters barreling toward an uncertain and potentially explosive conclusion.

Throughout the chapter, the interplay of historical clues, familial drama, and psychological tension creates a gripping narrative. The protagonist’s deductive

reasoning and the group’s collaborative efforts highlight the complexity of the mystery. The recurring motifs of revenge and hidden identities underscore the chapter’s themes, leaving readers eager to uncover the truth behind the Blake-Hawthorne feud. The final lines, with their breathless intensity, ensure the story’s momentum carries into the next chapter.



CHAPTER 62

Avery grapples with the shocking possibility that Will Blake, Vincent Blake's long-missing son, might be Toby's biological father. Mallory Laughlin's vague revelations about a charming older man named Liam, coupled with the timeline of Will's disappearance, fuel Avery's suspicions. Questions swirl about Toby's knowledge of his parentage, Vincent Blake's motives for taking him, and how Tobias Hawthorne came to possess a seal belonging to Will. The weight of these unanswered questions leaves Avery feeling as though she's in free fall, hurtling toward an uncertain truth.

Upon returning to Hawthorne House, Avery confronts Jameson about locking her in a secure room, sparking a heated argument. Jameson defends his actions, insisting he's trying to protect her from Vincent Blake's dangerous pursuit. Their clash escalates as Avery rejects his overprotectiveness, while Jameson passionately declares his love and willingness to sacrifice for her safety. The tension between them underscores their struggle to reconcile love with autonomy, leaving Avery frustrated and Jameson emotionally raw.

Amid the turmoil, Avery has a sudden realization about Eve's potential connection to Vincent Blake. If Will is Toby's father, Eve would be Vincent's great-granddaughter—a revelation that casts her arrival at Hawthorne House in a new light. Avery recalls Eve's reaction to William Blake's poem and her DNA test, questioning whether Eve's loyalty might lie elsewhere. The possibility that Eve was sought out by Vincent Blake first adds another layer of complexity to the unfolding mystery.

As Avery shares her suspicions with Jameson, he reveals that Eve is currently with Grayson at Wayback Cottage. This development heightens the urgency, as Avery must now navigate the tangled web of family ties, hidden motives, and the looming threat of Vincent Blake. The chapter ends with a sense of impending confrontation, as Avery prepares to uncover the truth behind Toby's disappearance and Eve's true allegiance.

CHAPTER 63

Avery, accompanied by Jameson and security personnel, arrives at Wayback Cottage to confront Eve and Grayson. The tension is palpable as Avery questions Mrs. Laughlin about Grayson and Eve's whereabouts, leading her to the kitchen where Eve sits with Mallory while Grayson stands protectively nearby. Avery's urgency is evident as she demands to speak with Grayson privately, but Eve insists on joining the conversation. The scene sets the stage for a confrontation, with Avery's suspicions about Eve's true motives beginning to surface.

Avery reveals her discovery about Vincent Blake's son, Will, and his connection to Toby, implying that Eve might be hiding something. She confronts Eve directly, demanding to see the contents of her locket, which she suspects holds a family seal linking Eve to Blake. Grayson intervenes, but Avery persists, accusing Eve of being related to Blake and questioning her loyalty. The atmosphere grows increasingly hostile as Mallory and Mrs. Laughlin react defensively, adding to the escalating tension.

The confrontation intensifies as Avery exposes the Laughlins' secret: Mallory had a relationship with Will Blake, resulting in Toby's birth, and the Hawthornes adopted him to protect him from Vincent Blake. Mrs. Laughlin pleads for Avery to stop, but Avery continues, revealing the painful truth about Toby's origins. Eve, meanwhile, seizes the opportunity to manipulate Mallory into confessing more, further fueling Avery's suspicion that Eve is working for Blake.

The chapter culminates in a clash of loyalties and revelations. Grayson is torn between protecting Eve and heeding Avery's warnings, while Jameson stands firmly by Avery's side. Eve's emotional appeal to Grayson contrasts sharply with Avery's insistence that she cannot be trusted. The chapter ends on a cliffhanger, with Avery echoing Tobias Hawthorne's final message: "Don't trust anyone," hinting at the looming threat of

Vincent Blake's involvement and setting the stage for the next dramatic confrontation.



CHAPTER 64

The chapter opens with a heated confrontation between Avery and Grayson outside, where Avery expresses her devastation over Eve's rejection of the Hawthorne family. Grayson, cold and dismissive, declares he was wrong about Avery before walking away, leaving her emotionally shattered. Avery reflects on their past interactions, from Grayson's subtle gestures of care to their shared moments, contrasting them with his current harshness. Meanwhile, Jameson attempts to comfort Avery, offering practical solutions to contain Eve while acknowledging her pain without directly addressing it.

Jameson and Avery engage in a vulnerable conversation about love, loyalty, and self-worth. Jameson admits his insecurities, comparing himself to Grayson and revealing his fear of never being truly chosen. Avery reassures him of her unwavering commitment, emphasizing how he inspires her courage and refuses to be confined by protective measures. Their exchange highlights their deep emotional connection, with Jameson ultimately accepting her love despite his self-doubt. However, he leaves shortly after, mirroring Grayson's departure and leaving Avery alone with her thoughts.

Determined to take control of the escalating conflict with Vincent Blake, Avery shifts her focus from personal turmoil to strategic action. She recalls Blake's relentless psychological warfare—tabloid scandals, financial attacks, and cryptic clues about his missing son, Toby. Fueled by anger and resolve, she leverages her social connections to obtain Blake's phone number, refusing to play his games any longer. Her actions mark a turning point as she transitions from reactive to proactive, signaling her readiness to confront Blake directly.

The chapter culminates in Avery's bold phone call to Blake, where she confronts him about Eve and his son, demanding clarity instead of riddles. Blake's taunting response—"Guess."—underscores his manipulative nature, but Avery's refusal to engage further demonstrates her growth. The unresolved tension leaves readers

anticipating her next move, as the power dynamic between them begins to shift. Avery's emotional resilience and strategic defiance set the stage for an impending showdown, blending personal stakes with high-stakes rivalry.



CHAPTER 65

The chapter delves into Vincent Blake's conviction that his son, Will, is dead and that his body is hidden on Tobias Hawthorne's property. The narrator reflects on Toby Blake's theft of the family seal and his cryptic message to the narrator's mother, hinting at a deeper truth. Toby's hidden poem, "A Poison Tree," suggests his awareness of his father's secrets, including the concealed adoption and Will Blake's fate. The narrator pieces together that Toby knew about Will's predatory behavior toward Mallory, a minor under Hawthorne's protection, and Tobias's likely retaliation.

The narrative explores Tobias Hawthorne's moral stance, contrasting his intolerance for Will's actions with Vincent Blake's dismissive "boys will be boys" attitude. Mallory's vague account of Liam's disappearance further fuels suspicions about Will's fate. The narrator revisits Toby's invisible ink diary and poem, decoding its references to stolen evidence and a "darkest hole," possibly alluding to hidden remains. This evidence suggests Toby knew the truth about Will's disappearance and Tobias's role in it.

The narrator speculates about the location of Will's body, considering Hawthorne House's many hidden compartments and additions over the years. The blueprints of the estate's expansions, from garages to tunnels, hint at potential hiding places. The narrator methodically plans to analyze the blueprints chronologically, recognizing Tobias's penchant for layered meanings in his constructions. The chapter builds tension as the narrator nears a breakthrough, driven by the urgency to uncover the truth for Vincent Blake.

The chapter culminates in the narrator's determination to systematically search Hawthorne House, guided by the blueprints and Toby's clues. The realization that Tobias likely hid Will's body during an early construction phase narrows the search. The narrator's logical approach underscores the gravity of the discovery—unearthing not just a body but the dark legacy of the Hawthorne and Blake feud. The chapter ends

on a note of impending revelation, leaving the reader eager for the next steps in the investigation.



CHAPTER 66

The protagonist enters a chapel early in the morning, bathed in colorful light from stained-glass windows, searching for a hidden clue. After meticulously examining the pews and finding nothing, they turn their attention to the marble altar, which holds a candelabra, a golden Bible, and a silver cross. An inscribed biblical quote—2 Corinthians 4:18—catches their eye, hinting at a deeper mystery. The verse’s emphasis on the "unseen" sparks their curiosity, leading them to suspect the altar may conceal more than meets the eye.

Kneeling to inspect the altar, the protagonist discovers a series of raised circles hidden beneath it, arranged in three rows of six. Connecting the dots between the biblical reference and the 18 circles, they theorize the numbers 4, 1, and 8 might hold the key. Realizing the circles correspond to Braille numerals, they press the correct sequence, triggering a mechanism that unlocks a hidden compartment in the altar. The discovery confirms their suspicion that the altar is hollow, possibly designed to conceal a body.

With the help of Oren, the protagonist slides open the heavy marble slab, revealing an empty space inside the altar. Instead of remains, they find a shroud and defaced marble with Toby’s handwriting—a chilling message accusing Tobias Hawthorne of wrongdoing. The words "I KNOW WHAT YOU DID, FATHER" suggest a dark secret tied to the Hawthorne family’s past. The protagonist speculates about Toby’s motivations and what else he might have uncovered in this hidden tomb.

The chapter culminates with the protagonist finding a USB drive inside the altar, hinting at further revelations about the Hawthorne family’s secrets. The discovery raises questions about Tobias Hawthorne’s true intentions and the role of the chapel as more than a religious space. The protagonist’s methodical investigation and the cryptic clues left behind by Toby set the stage for uncovering long-buried truths, leaving the reader eager to learn what the USB drive might reveal.

CHAPTER 67

Avery discovers a suspiciously new USB drive in what was supposed to be an ancient tomb, raising immediate questions about its origin. As she examines it, Eve suddenly appears in the chapel doorway, feigning vulnerability before revealing her true, calculating nature. The tension escalates when Eve pulls a gun on Avery, demanding the USB, while Oren, Avery's bodyguard, intervenes with his own weapon. The confrontation highlights Eve's sudden shift from a seemingly fragile ally to a ruthless adversary, leaving Avery to grapple with the betrayal and the realization that Eve's motives are far darker than she initially appeared.

Eve's cold demeanor and unwavering focus on the USB suggest she has been manipulating events from the start. She reveals her collaboration with Vincent Blake, admitting she helped abduct Toby after he refused to bring her to the estate. Her mention of Mallory's confession about Liam's bloody disappearance adds another layer of mystery to the tomb's secrets. Eve's taunts about Grayson's potential reaction to her being shot further demonstrate her psychological manipulation, forcing Avery to order Oren to lower his weapon. The standoff underscores Eve's willingness to exploit emotional weaknesses to achieve her goals.

The chapter delves into Eve's twisted philosophy, where she openly admits to using pain and vulnerability as tools for control. She boasts about her ability to make others trust her by appearing wounded, revealing the bruises she arrived with may have been self-inflicted. Avery realizes Eve's entire persona was a facade, and her true allegiance lies with Blake, whom she aims to impress by securing one of the elusive seals. The USB becomes a bargaining chip, with Eve offering Toby's safe return in exchange for it, though Avery suspects her promises are empty.

The confrontation culminates in a chilling exchange where Eve positions herself as a rival rather than a victim. Her declaration that "invisible is the one thing I will never

be” underscores her relentless ambition, contrasting sharply with Toby’s desire for her to remain hidden. Avery is left with a sinking realization that Eve’s betrayal runs deeper than she imagined, and the USB may hold the key to unraveling Blake’s plans. The chapter ends on a tense note, with Avery weighing her options as Eve’s threats and manipulations hang heavily in the air.



CHAPTER 68

In this emotionally charged chapter, Grayson and Avery share a poignant conversation in the chapel, revealing layers of unresolved tension and vulnerability. Grayson begins by apologizing, acknowledging his self-punishment for past failures and the relentless pressure he faced from his late grandfather. Avery, initially resistant, listens as Grayson confesses his struggle with perfectionism and the fear that he loved the idealized memory of his late fiancée, Emily, more than he could love a real person. The dialogue exposes Grayson’s inner turmoil and the weight of his emotional baggage, setting the stage for a raw and honest exchange.

The conversation shifts to Avery’s relationship with Jameson, Grayson’s brother. Grayson confronts Avery about her feelings, and she admits she loves Jameson, though the admission is bittersweet. Grayson’s acceptance of this reality is tinged with regret, as he reveals he had hoped Avery might be different—someone he could love instead. Avery’s emotional conflict is palpable as she grapples with her loyalty to Jameson and her unresolved connection to Grayson, highlighting the complexity of their intertwined relationships and the inevitability of their choices.

A pivotal moment occurs when Avery implores Grayson not to isolate himself again, symbolically pinning her Hawthorne family pin on him as a gesture of belonging. The Latin phrase *Est unus ex nobis* (“She is one of us”) is reciprocated, emphasizing their bond despite the romantic complications. Grayson’s raw vulnerability is laid bare as he stands in the stained-glass light, stripped of his usual armor. This scene underscores the theme of family and acceptance, as both characters confront their fears of abandonment and rejection.

The chapter concludes with a practical turn as Avery and Grayson discuss the USB drive, hinting at unresolved plot threads. Grayson’s question about whether to call his brothers signals a shift from emotional confrontation to collective action, leaving the

reader anticipating the next steps in their journey. The blend of personal revelation and looming intrigue ensures the chapter resonates emotionally while advancing the broader narrative.



CHAPTER 69

The chapter opens with Xander retrieving and playing two seemingly garbled audio files from separate USBs. When combined, the files reveal a clear message from the late Tobias Hawthorne, addressing Avery and the Hawthorne brothers. His voice, eerily present, immediately shifts the atmosphere in the room. The recording begins with Hawthorne reflecting on his life, acknowledging his luck and cunning in achieving greatness, while also hinting at the mystery surrounding Avery's connection to him and the Hawthorne family.

Hawthorne's message takes a darker turn as he reveals his calculated plans, implying that Avery was chosen as his heir not out of benevolence but as a strategic move to protect his legacy. He warns of Vincent Blake, a dangerous adversary who, now that Hawthorne is dead, poses a significant threat to Avery and the family. The recording suggests that Blake's motivations are tied to long-held secrets and a desire to claim Hawthorne's fortune, painting Avery as a deliberate target in this high-stakes game.

The emotional weight of the message is palpable, particularly as Hawthorne addresses the Hawthorne brothers directly. He expresses hope that Avery has bridged gaps he couldn't, subtly acknowledging his own failures as a patriarch. The brothers' reactions—especially Nash's conflicted demand to turn off the recording—highlight the complexity of their relationship with their late grandfather. Hawthorne's cold pragmatism is further underscored as he admits to using Avery as a disposable shield, a revelation that leaves her reeling.

The chapter closes with Hawthorne referencing Avery's mother, Hannah Rooney, and his failed attempts to manipulate her. This cryptic mention hints at deeper family secrets and connections yet to be uncovered. The recording leaves Avery and the brothers with a sense of unease, as they grapple with the realization that Hawthorne's machinations extend far beyond his death, binding them to a dangerous and

unpredictable fate.



CHAPTER 70

The chapter opens with a tense silence among the Hawthorne brothers as they grapple with the revelations about their grandfather, Tobias Hawthorne. The protagonist reflects on how Hawthorne’s manipulative schemes have shaped their lives, comparing his tactics to "killing twelve birds with one stone." The brothers realize they’ve been pawns in his grand design, with each warning the protagonist about the family’s destructive nature. Tobias’s apology and cryptic messages hint at a larger, dangerous game involving an enemy, Vincent Blake, who is now targeting the protagonist as the heir to Hawthorne’s fortune.

The brothers dissect their grandfather’s strategy, recognizing that he intentionally removed them from the conflict to protect them. Grayson notes Blake’s formidable influence, while Jameson curses their grandfather’s calculated moves. The protagonist recalls Hawthorne’s letter, which hinted at his guilt and the burdens he didn’t want his family to bear. It becomes clear that Hawthorne left his fortune to the protagonist as a decoy, drawing Blake’s attention away from his grandsons. The protagonist steels themselves for the coming confrontation, recalling Hawthorne’s words about surviving the flames.

Determined to gain leverage, the protagonist calls Vincent Blake directly. Blake taunts them, suggesting he still has spies within Hawthorne House. The protagonist, however, remains composed and offers to negotiate for the truth about Blake’s missing son in exchange for Toby’s safety. Blake’s ominous response hints at darker intentions, leaving the protagonist unsettled. The call ends abruptly, and a courier’s arrival at the gate signals Blake’s next move, heightening the tension.

The chapter underscores the protagonist’s growing resolve as they step into the role Hawthorne designed for them. Facing Blake’s threats and the brothers’ shock, they begin to strategize, recognizing the need for leverage in this high-stakes game. The

courier’s arrival foreshadows further escalation, leaving the protagonist and the Hawthorne brothers bracing for the next phase of the conflict. The chapter masterfully blends tension, revelation, and character dynamics, setting the stage for a dramatic confrontation.



CHAPTER 71

The chapter opens with the protagonist receiving a mysterious package, immediately recognizing it as a threat from Vincent Blake. The contents consist of thirteen plastic sheets with abstract designs, which, when stacked correctly, reveal a black-and-white photograph of Alisa Ortega unconscious on a dirt floor. The Hawthorne brothers and Libby gather around as the protagonist pieces together the image, confirming Blake's sinister intentions. The discovery sparks tension and urgency, with Jameson noting Alisa is alive but clearly in danger, reinforcing Blake's manipulative tactics.

The group debates Alisa's potential involvement, with Nash vehemently defending her loyalty despite the protagonist's doubts. The conversation reveals Nash's deep care for those in his life, even past relationships, as Libby observes his unwavering compassion. The protagonist reflects on Tobias Hawthorne's warning not to trust anyone, realizing Blake has targeted Alisa to exploit her connection to the Hawthorne fortune. The emotional stakes rise as the group grapples with the reality of Alisa's abduction and Blake's calculated moves.

Efforts to contact Alisa fail, heightening the urgency. The protagonist considers involving the police or FBI but learns that Blake's influence has compromised local authorities, leaving them with few options. Oren confirms the loss of their usual allies, leaving the group isolated. The protagonist visualizes Blake's strategic maneuvering, feeling trapped as the situation grows increasingly dire. Nash insists against involving authorities, citing Alisa's preference for discretion, while Libby demands action to secure her safe return.

The chapter concludes with the protagonist realizing the only way to save Alisa is to find Toby's long-lost remains, a task fraught with uncertainty. Nash's skepticism underscores the gravity of the situation, hinting at a complex and dangerous path ahead. The group's resolve is tested as they confront Blake's ruthless game, setting

the stage for a high-stakes confrontation. The tension between urgency and strategy drives the narrative forward, leaving readers eager for the next move in this deadly chess match.



CHAPTER 72

The chapter opens with the protagonist concluding an explanation, prompting Nash and Libby to depart ominously. As the group strategizes their next move, Xander reveals that Rebecca and Thea are at the cottage, dealing with family tensions after Eve uncovered a truth from Mallory. The protagonist then leads the boys to her room, where she presents blueprints of Hawthorne House, pinpointing the chapel as a key location. She explains that the hollow altar once concealed a USB and a cryptic message from Toby, hinting at his discovery of dark family secrets involving his adoption and the mysterious figure Liam.

The narrative delves into Toby’s past, revealing how he uncovered his adoptive father’s crimes, including the hidden remains of Liam. Toby left a series of hidden messages for his father before spiraling into self-destruction, culminating in the fire on Hawthorne Island. The protagonist reflects on Toby’s tragic legacy and his attempts to protect loved ones from the Hawthorne family’s poisonous secrets. This introspection underscores the emotional weight of their current mission: to locate the evidence Toby hid, possibly in the tunnels or another construction project from his time at Hawthorne House.

Jameson and the protagonist focus on the hedge maze as a potential hiding place, analyzing blueprints to narrow their search. The maze, a sprawling and intricate structure, symbolizes the complexity of the Hawthorne family’s secrets. As they prepare to search, Jameson subtly probes the protagonist about Grayson’s absence, hinting at unresolved tensions between them. The protagonist deflects, emphasizing Grayson’s emotional growth and his confrontation with Eve, which allowed him to move past his guilt over Emily.

In the maze’s center, Jameson presses the protagonist about her feelings for Grayson, forcing her to confront a truth she’s avoided. The chapter ends on a cliffhanger, with

the protagonist refusing to answer Jameson’s unfinished question, leaving their dynamic—and the mystery of Toby’s hidden evidence—unresolved. The emotional and physical search for the truth mirrors the tangled paths of the maze, setting the stage for further revelations.



CHAPTER 73

The chapter opens with the protagonist and Jameson discovering a hidden chamber beneath the ground, part of an unfamiliar tunnel system. Despite their efforts, they find no body, only cryptic messages written by Toby on the walls, revealing his inner conflict about his identity and complicity in past events. The duo ignites a torch, which illuminates the messages, including the chilling phrase, "Try again, Father," suggesting a deeper mystery. Their exploration is interrupted by Mr. Laughlin, the groundskeeper, whose unreadable expression hints at his knowledge of the secrets buried within the maze.

Mr. Laughlin's demeanor shifts as he confronts the protagonist, expressing sorrow over Alisa's kidnapping and revealing Nash's plea for help. The protagonist deduces that Mr. Laughlin knows the location of Will Blake's remains, a secret he insists should stay buried. Tensions escalate as the protagonist vows to destroy the maze and use any means necessary to rescue Alisa and Toby, highlighting her desperation and determination. Mr. Laughlin's resistance and loyalty to the Hawthorne family create a stark conflict, emphasizing the weight of long-held secrets.

The arrival of Rebecca, Thea, and Xander shifts the dynamic. Rebecca confronts her grandfather with quiet steel, recalling their bond and hinting at her knowledge of the maze's secrets. Mr. Laughlin's emotional breakdown reveals his pain over his daughter's past and the sacrifices made to protect the family. Rebecca's insistence on uncovering the truth contrasts with her grandfather's plea to forget, underscoring the generational divide and the toxic legacy of the Hawthorne and Blake feud.

The chapter culminates in a poignant standoff, with the protagonist piecing together the tragic history: Mr. Laughlin's daughter, then a teenager, was involved in Will Blake's death. The protagonist's resolve to unearth the truth clashes with Mr. Laughlin's desperation to keep the past buried. The emotional confrontation highlights

the far-reaching consequences of the families' intertwined fates, setting the stage for a reckoning that could finally bring the dark secrets to light.



CHAPTER 74

The chapter opens with the protagonist discovering the remains and preparing to contact Blake, only to receive a shocking call from Alisa. She reveals her intent to kill Grayson Hawthorne, explaining that Blake released her in exchange for him. The protagonist experiences a wave of relief at hearing Alisa's voice but is immediately gripped by fear for Grayson's safety. The situation underscores Grayson's tendency for self-sacrifice, leaving the protagonist torn between frustration and a tender emotional response.

As the group processes the news, tensions rise. Jameson points out that Blake still holds the upper hand, having captured Grayson as a twisted mirror of Tobias Hawthorne's past actions. The protagonist realizes the grim symmetry: Blake now holds both Toby and Grayson, while she possesses the remains of Blake's son. Despite the apparent leverage, she suspects Blake's motives run deeper than just uncovering the truth, hinting at a larger, more dangerous agenda targeting the Hawthorne legacy and herself.

Reflecting on Tobias Hawthorne's warnings, the protagonist recognizes Blake's likely underestimation of her. Hawthorne's cryptic message suggests Blake will come for the fortune, the legacy, and her personally. However, Hawthorne also believed in her ability to outmaneuver Blake, trusting her strategic mind. This realization fuels her determination to think ahead, contrasting with Blake's expectation that she will react impulsively. The chapter highlights the psychological chess game at play, with the protagonist beginning to formulate a counterstrategy.

Amidst the chaos of the group's heated debates, the protagonist tunes out the noise to focus on her plan. Drawing inspiration from the Queen's Gambit, she embraces the idea of strategic sacrifice, allowing her opponent to mistake her moves for weakness. The chapter concludes with her resolve hardening as she makes a decisive call, setting

the stage for a high-stakes confrontation. Her calm amid the storm underscores her growth and readiness to face Blake's challenge head-on.



CHAPTER 75

The chapter opens with Jameson questioning the protagonist's unexpected decision to report the discovery of human remains at Hawthorne House to the authorities. Thea and others express confusion, as the original plan was to use the remains as leverage in a trade. The protagonist, however, reveals a strategic mindset, comparing the situation to a chess game where she must anticipate her opponent Blake's moves. By reporting the remains legally, she avoids giving Blake any leverage over her, demonstrating her calculated approach to the conflict.

Tensions rise as Thea confronts Rebecca about her lingering attachment to her family, despite their complicated history. Rebecca reflects on her strained relationship with her mother, realizing that her feelings of inadequacy were rooted in her mother's unresolved trauma. Thea's emotional support helps Rebecca find clarity, and she encourages the protagonist to "bring on the light" and reveal the truth. This moment highlights the intertwined personal and familial struggles that shape the characters' motivations and alliances.

The protagonist then contacts Landon, a former publicist, to craft a narrative that shifts blame onto the deceased Tobias Hawthorne, accusing him of murder and a cover-up. This bold move is part of her strategy to control the story and outmaneuver Blake. Jameson, intrigued by her plan, catches up to her as she heads to the vault to retrieve an undisclosed item. Their exchange is charged with tension and mutual understanding, as Jameson recognizes the risk she's taking but trusts in her ability to succeed.

The chapter concludes with Jameson's unwavering confidence in the protagonist's ability to defeat Blake. Their interaction is intense and intimate, with Jameson challenging her to find an anagram for "everything," symbolizing their shared determination to overcome the odds. The chapter sets the stage for a high-stakes

confrontation, blending strategic maneuvering with emotional depth and character dynamics.



CHAPTER 76

The chapter opens with the protagonist facing Alisa Ortega's furious reaction after an undisclosed action involving a vault. Alisa accuses them of recklessly involving the police without consulting her, but the protagonist defends their decision, clarifying they didn't target Blake directly. Oren, the head of security, warns that local police and DPS agents are arriving, escalating the tension. The protagonist asserts their authority, hinting at their impending control over Tobias Hawthorne's fortune and challenging Alisa to either support them or risk losing her position. This confrontation highlights the protagonist's growing assertiveness and willingness to make tough decisions.

Alisa pushes back, warning the protagonist would fail without her guidance, but the protagonist counters by urging her to stay on their side. The dynamic shifts as Oren intervenes, and the protagonist acknowledges his loyalty transcends mere duty, recognizing his personal commitment to protecting them. This moment underscores the deep bonds formed between the protagonist and their allies, even as they navigate power struggles. Oren's brief smile and return to professionalism signal his unwavering support, setting the stage for the next phase of their plan.

The protagonist reveals their bold strategy: using the Blake family seal to infiltrate Vincent Blake's ranch alone. Oren objects on safety grounds, but the protagonist mitigates his concerns by announcing a public press conference outside the ranch to ensure their safety. Nash, another ally, vehemently opposes the plan, but the protagonist remains resolute. Jameson and Xander intervene with a playful yet effective tactic to restrain Nash, demonstrating the Hawthorne siblings' unity and creativity in overcoming obstacles. This scene balances tension with humor, showcasing the group's dynamic.

As chaos ensues with Nash's protests and Xander's limerick, the protagonist and Oren prepare to leave. Oren's refusal to intervene in the siblings' scuffle reinforces his

loyalty to the protagonist's authority. The chapter ends on a note of determination and camaraderie, with the protagonist poised to confront Blake while their allies handle the fallout. This sets up a high-stakes confrontation in the next chapter, emphasizing themes of trust, leadership, and the cost of power.



CHAPTER 77

The chapter opens with the protagonist traveling to Vincent Blake's expansive ranch near the Texas/Oklahoma border. By helicopter, the journey is significantly shortened, allowing the protagonist to arrive just as the press, tipped off by Landon, begins to gather. The protagonist delivers a rehearsed statement revealing the discovery of William Blake's remains on the Hawthorne estate, framing Tobias Hawthorne as the killer who intervened to protect an underage girl from Blake's assault. This sensational narrative is carefully crafted to shape public perception, though the protagonist acknowledges the story might not be entirely truthful.

Upon arriving at Legacy Ranch, the protagonist approaches a massive brick archway marking the property's boundary. The ranch's sheer scale is emphasized—spanning hundreds of thousands of acres with farmland, oil wells, and livestock. A black truck approaches, and armed ranch hands, resembling soldiers, confront the protagonist for trespassing. However, the protagonist reveals a mysterious seal, which immediately grants passage. The seal's significance is underscored when the driver refuses to question its origin, hinting at its powerful and undisclosed authority.

Inside the ranch, the protagonist is driven toward Vincent Blake's fortress-like home, a stark contrast to the Hawthorne estate's castle-like appearance. The dark stone structure, with its imposing turrets and wrought-iron balcony, exudes an air of intimidation. Eve, a key figure with amber hair, awaits on the porch. Her deliberate movement forces the protagonist to follow her, setting the stage for a tense confrontation. The chapter builds suspense as the protagonist's calculated gamble—relying on the seal's power—appears to have succeeded, at least for now.

The chapter concludes with Eve's cryptic remark, suggesting that the protagonist's current ordeal could have been avoided if they had simply acquiesced to her earlier demands. This exchange hints at deeper conflicts and unresolved tensions between

the characters. The chapter masterfully blends suspense, strategic maneuvering, and the looming threat of unseen consequences, leaving readers eager to discover the seal's true significance and the outcome of the protagonist's risky confrontation with Eve.



CHAPTER 78

The chapter opens with Avery being led by Eve to meet Vincent Blake, an imposing octogenarian who appears decades younger. Blake demonstrates his dominance by shooting a bird from the sky and sending his bloodhound to retrieve it, then casually remarks, "we cook what we shoot." Avery immediately demands to know the whereabouts of Grayson and Toby, refusing to be intimidated. She presents Blake with the royal chess set as a symbolic offering, but he dismisses it as mere showmanship, preferring a hand-carved set instead—a subtle power play underscoring his disdain for extravagance.

Avery returns Blake's seal and reiterates her intention to deliver his son's remains once the investigation concludes, offering condolences Blake coldly rejects. The tension escalates as Avery confronts Blake about his son's crimes—impregnating an underage girl and assaulting her—to which Blake responds with detached indifference. He deflects responsibility, framing his son's actions as a personal failure rather than a moral transgression. The exchange reveals Blake's ruthless worldview: consequences are inevitable, but accountability is negotiable.

The power struggle intensifies as Blake tests Avery's resolve, hinting at potential blackmail while toying with his bowie knife. Avery counters by threatening to expose more details publicly if Grayson and Toby aren't released, leveraging media scrutiny as her shield. Eve briefly challenges Avery's narrative, but Blake silences her, revealing his condescension toward both women. Avery internally notes Blake's tendency to underestimate her—a vulnerability she plans to exploit. The chess metaphor extends beyond the literal set, as each verbal thrust and parry mirrors strategic moves in their high-stakes confrontation.

Blake's final question—whether Avery will expose Sheffield Grayson—hangs ominously, suggesting deeper layers of manipulation yet to unfold. The chapter masterfully builds

tension through sparse dialogue and visceral imagery (the shotgun, the knife, the firepit), painting Blake as a predator assessing his prey. Avery's calculated bravery and Blake's chilling pragmatism collide, setting the stage for a battle where morality and power are the ultimate stakes. The unresolved threat lingers, leaving readers anticipating the next move in this psychological duel.



CHAPTER 79

The chapter opens with the protagonist observing Toby's physical state—his healing bruises and unshaven face—while grappling with overwhelming emotions tied to their last encounter. Toby warns the protagonist against being present, but she asserts her awareness of the dangers posed by Vincent Blake. The tension escalates as Blake unveils a high-stakes tournament involving Toby, Eve, and the protagonist, structured as three matches with severe consequences for failure. The protagonist realizes the gravity of the situation, knowing she must navigate Blake's manipulative game carefully to protect herself and her loved ones.

Blake outlines the tournament's rules, each match carrying life-altering stakes. Toby's freedom hinges on his performance: winning both matches grants him anonymity, losing one forces him to reveal his survival, and losing both binds him to Blake permanently. Eve's matches offer control over the Blake family seals, with the ultimate prize being all five seals—and thus Blake's entire fortune—if she defeats both Toby and the protagonist. The protagonist's terms involve a dangerous favor owed to Blake if she loses, while winning secures Grayson Hawthorne's release and safety for her loved ones.

The chapter intensifies as Blake reveals an additional leverage point: secrecy about Sheffield Grayson's truth, which visibly shocks Toby. The protagonist internally acknowledges Blake's untrustworthiness but recognizes the limited options available. Despite the risks, all three participants reluctantly agree to Blake's terms, understanding the dire consequences of refusal. The protagonist's resolve hardens as she accepts the challenge, aware that even victory won't fully shield her from Blake's future schemes.

The chapter concludes with Blake directing attention to an expensive chess set, symbolizing the strategic and deadly nature of the impending games. The

protagonist's internal monologue underscores the precarious balance between calculated risk and inevitable danger. The stage is set for a high-stakes confrontation, with each character's fate hanging in the balance, and Blake's manipulative dominance casting a shadow over their every move.



CHAPTER 80

The chapter opens with a tense chess match between Toby and Eve, where Toby deliberately lets Eve win. However, Vincent Blake, observing the game, threatens Toby with violence against Eve if he throws the next match against Avery. This sets a high-stakes atmosphere as Avery prepares to play Toby, knowing the consequences of losing—either exposing a cover-up or becoming indebted to Blake. The psychological pressure is palpable, with Eve remaining stoic despite the threat to her safety.

As Avery and Toby begin their match, their familiarity with each other's playing styles becomes evident. Toby warns Avery not to get overconfident, hinting at unseen dangers on the board. Blake escalates the tension by pressing the knife against Eve's arm, demanding Toby play seriously without aiding Avery. The game intensifies as Toby gains the upper hand, forcing Avery into a precarious position where she must carefully strategize to avoid checkmate.

Avery meticulously analyzes the board, envisioning multiple move sequences to counter Toby's advances. The stakes weigh heavily on her, as losing would mean surrendering to Blake's control or revealing a dark secret. Despite the pressure, she finds a way to turn the tide, setting a trap that Toby eventually falls into. His muttered words, "Horrible girl," carry a mix of frustration and admiration, revealing their complex relationship.

The chapter culminates in Avery's hard-fought victory, declaring checkmate and securing her freedom from Blake's demands. However, the win comes at a cost: Toby loses both matches, binding him to Blake's will. The emotional weight of the outcome is underscored by Avery's internal turmoil, leaving readers with a sense of unresolved tension and anticipation for the consequences of Toby's defeat.

CHAPTER 81

The chapter opens with Vincent Blake chastising Toby for losing to a "little girl," reinforcing the high expectations placed on the Blake family. The protagonist, Avery, apologizes to Toby, who responds by seeing her mother's traits in her, hinting at a bittersweet farewell. The tension escalates as Blake shifts his attention to Eve, who basks in his approval, revealing her deep desire for acceptance. Meanwhile, Avery's internal conflict grows as she grapples with the emotional stakes of the situation and the looming chess match that will determine their fates.

Avery's reunion with Grayson provides a brief respite, as she reassures him of their familial bond despite his reckless tendencies. The chessboard is set for a final showdown between Avery and Eve, with immense wealth and power hanging in the balance. Eve's surprising skill forces Avery to recalibrate her strategy, realizing Eve is playing not just to win but to claim her place in Blake's world. The intensity of the game mirrors the broader power struggle, with Avery recognizing the need to think beyond immediate victory.

As the match progresses, Avery sees a path to victory but hesitates, understanding that defeating Eve would only prompt Blake to escalate his attacks. Reflecting on Tobias Hawthorne's advice, she decides to play the long game, allowing Blake to underestimate her. She deliberately loses the match, sacrificing short-term success to maintain her strategic advantage. Eve's triumph is met with glowing pride, while Toby's suspicious glance suggests he may have guessed Avery's ploy.

The chapter concludes with Blake dismissing Avery and Grayson, his cold demeanor underscoring the ruthlessness of their world. Avery's desperate plea for another chance is ignored, leaving her to confront the consequences of her calculated risk. The scene sets the stage for future confrontations, as Avery's decision to lose the game becomes a pivotal moment in her larger battle against Blake's relentless ambition. The

emotional and strategic layers of the chapter highlight the complex dynamics of power, family, and survival.



CHAPTER 82

The chapter opens with a tense exchange between the protagonist and Alisa, who questions their risky actions. The protagonist cryptically responds that they are doing what is necessary, implying an undisclosed plan. Alisa remains skeptical, insisting there is no obligation to proceed, but the protagonist stands firm, silently conveying trust and determination through their tone. The interaction sets the stage for a high-stakes confrontation, with the protagonist hinting at a deeper strategy they cannot openly discuss.

Alisa shifts the conversation to reveal personal history, explaining why her engagement with Nash ended. She stayed loyal to the Hawthorne legacy despite Nash's rejection of his grandfather's influence, a decision that cost her dearly. Mr. Hawthorne later entrusted her with guiding the protagonist, a responsibility she now feels she has failed due to recent events. Her frustration and self-doubt highlight the weight of her role and the pressure to live up to the Hawthorne family's expectations.

The protagonist counters Alisa's doubts by suggesting she has fulfilled her purpose exactly as intended. Emphasizing that both of them were chosen by Mr. Hawthorne for a reason, they imply their current risky actions align with his grand design. Alisa's demeanor shifts as she begins to grasp the deeper meaning behind the protagonist's words, recognizing their shared mission. The dialogue underscores themes of destiny and trust, as the protagonist reassures her that their gamble is part of a larger plan.

The chapter concludes with Alisa questioning the extreme risks involved, to which the protagonist responds that danger has been inherent since Mr. Hawthorne altered his will. This final exchange frames their actions as the culmination of a high-stakes game set in motion by the late patriarch. The protagonist embraces their role in this gamble, solidifying the chapter's tension and foreshadowing the consequences of their bold strategy.

CHAPTER 83

The chapter depicts a high-stakes chess match between the protagonist and Vincent Blake, a formidable and wealthy adversary. The protagonist, playing white, opens with the Queen’s Gambit, a classic maneuver, but soon reveals her strategic depth by luring Blake into a trap that costs him his queen. As the game progresses, Blake realizes they are more evenly matched than he anticipated, and the tension escalates with each move. The protagonist’s calculated playstyle and psychological edge become apparent, leaving Blake to acknowledge her skill too late to recover.

Blake’s underestimation of the protagonist proves to be his downfall. Despite his reputation as a dangerous and strategic opponent, he fails to recognize her growth since her earlier loss to Eve. The protagonist’s confidence is palpable as she internally notes her impending victory, her heartbeat underscoring the intensity of the moment. In a decisive turn, Blake concedes after realizing he is trapped, tipping his king in a symbolic surrender. The opulent chess set, adorned with jewels, becomes a backdrop for his defeat, highlighting the stakes of their confrontation.

The aftermath of the game reveals the unspoken terms of their agreement. The protagonist’s victory is not just about chess but also about securing Blake’s compliance without legal enforcement. She relies on the honor code implied by Tobias Hawthorne’s assurance that Blake would respect the outcome if bested. This moment underscores the protagonist’s strategic thinking beyond the board, as she navigates the precarious balance of power and trust with a man known for his ruthlessness.

The chapter concludes with Eve’s bewildered demand for an explanation, to which Blake succinctly replies, “She won.” This terse acknowledgment seals the protagonist’s triumph, both in the game and in asserting her dominance over a formidable foe. The exchange underscores the protagonist’s transformation and the respect she commands, leaving Blake to grapple with the consequences of his underestimation.

The chapter ends on a note of quiet victory, emphasizing themes of strategy, growth, and the shifting dynamics of power.



CHAPTER 84

The chapter opens with Vincent Blake honoring his wager with Avery but banishing her from his property, ordering his men to escort her, Grayson, and Alisa Ortega away. Toby intervenes when a guard roughly grabs Avery, asserting his authority as Tobias Blake to take charge of their departure. This moment underscores Toby's conflicted position—while Avery has won her gamble, Toby is now bound to the Blake legacy against his will. The tension escalates as Eve confronts them, furious at being used as a pawn in Avery's scheme to outmaneuver Blake, feeling robbed of her chance to prove her worth.

Eve's emotional outburst reveals her deep-seated need for validation, particularly from Grayson and Blake, now overshadowed by Avery's victory. Grayson's cold acknowledgment that Eve "could have been one of us" highlights the fractured trust between them. Eve's defiant mask slips momentarily, revealing vulnerability before she hardens again, dismissing Toby and Avery with a venomous promise that Toby will return. This exchange underscores the chapter's themes of betrayal, identity, and the inescapable pull of family ties, even when they are fraught with manipulation and resentment.

As they leave, Toby warns Avery about the risks she took, but she deflects with humor, referencing the meaning behind her name—a "risky gamble." Their conversation turns somber as Toby accepts his fate as Tobias Blake, despite his earlier rejection of the identity. Avery pleads with him to flee, but Alisa and Toby emphasize the consequences of breaking the wager's terms. Toby's decision to stay for Eve, despite her actions, mirrors his own redemption arc and his loyalty to Avery, whom he considers a second daughter. This moment poignantly reflects the chapter's exploration of sacrifice and forgiveness.

The chapter closes with Avery grappling with Toby's choices and her own journey. Toby's admission of past mistakes and his belief in redemption, inspired by Avery's mother, Hannah, adds emotional depth. Avery reflects on her growth through Tobias Hawthorne's game, realizing it revealed her inherent strength rather than creating it. The bittersweet parting between Avery and Toby underscores the cost of their victories, leaving readers with a sense of unresolved tension and the enduring impact of their choices. 

CHAPTER 85

The chapter opens with Jameson’s playful declaration, “The knight returns with the damsel in distress,” as he greets the protagonist and Grayson. The protagonist, exhilarated by her recent victory, feels an intense connection with Jameson, who alone understands the thrill of her triumph. The moment is described with vivid metaphors—comparing the rush of success to standing at the edge of a waterfall or discovering the ability to fly. Jameson offers her a ride home in a helicopter, defying rules with his characteristic daring, and challenges her to learn to fly, symbolizing their shared appetite for adventure and risk.

Later, the protagonist reflects on a puzzle cube given to her by Toby, which she disassembles to reveal carved words: “I see so much of your mother in you.” This emotional revelation becomes a pivotal moment, deepening her self-awareness and resolve. The message from Toby serves as a catalyst, reinforcing her connection to her past and strengthening her determination to embrace her future. This introspection contrasts with the earlier adrenaline-fueled scenes, highlighting her growth and the weight of her decisions.

The next morning, the protagonist visits the Great Room, where the Hawthorne family’s will was originally read, and burns the trust paperwork that would have temporarily absolved her of responsibility. With Libby’s encouragement, she chooses to fully accept the power and challenges of her inheritance. The act of burning the papers symbolizes her rejection of hesitation and her readiness to take control. The imagery of flames and blooming tulips underscores her transformation and newfound confidence.

In the final section, the protagonist commits to her vision, carrying Grayson’s leather notebook as she prepares to implement her plans swiftly. She acknowledges the potential backlash from lawyers and financial advisors but remains resolute in her

unconventional path. The chapter closes with a sense of urgency and determination, as she embraces her role as a decisive leader, unafraid to challenge the status quo and make bold moves. Her journey from triumph to self-assured action marks a defining moment in her story.



CHAPTER 86

The chapter opens with the protagonist preparing for a pivotal evening, dressed in an exquisite deep red ball gown adorned with golden vines and jewels, symbolizing the grandeur of the occasion. As she admires her reflection, the anticipation of the night’s significance weighs heavily on her—her year at Hawthorne House is nearing its end, and everything is about to change. Jameson arrives in a matching white tuxedo with a red vest, their playful banter hinting at the close bond they share. The "Countdown Party," conceived by Xander, promises a night of celebration and transition, with the protagonist embracing the festivities despite the underlying tension of what lies ahead.

The party unfolds in a series of lively and unconventional activities, starting with a water gun battle in the sculpture garden. Dubbed "Hide and Go Soak," the game brings out the competitive and playful sides of the characters, including Libby and Nash, who join in the chaos. The protagonist’s excitement is palpable as she navigates the games, her interactions with the Hawthorne siblings revealing their camaraderie and shared history. The playful yet strategic nature of the water fight underscores the blend of lightheartedness and intensity that defines their relationships, with Libby’s advice—"there’s no such thing as fighting dirty if you win"—capturing the spirit of the night.

As the party progresses, the group moves through various locations in Hawthorne House, each hour marked by a new activity. From climbing walls to bowling alleys and pottery rooms, their formal attire becomes increasingly disheveled, mirroring the unraveling of their carefully constructed facades. The protagonist’s exhilaration grows, culminating in a sense of inevitability as the clock ticks toward midnight. The arcade scene, featuring gourmet dishes presented by private chefs, adds a touch of luxury and indulgence, contrasting with the earlier chaos. Oren’s rare moment of relaxation

and Grayson’s unexpected approval hint at the deeper emotional undercurrents of the evening.

The chapter closes with a poignant moment between the protagonist and Grayson, whose guarded demeanor briefly softens as he acknowledges her plans for the future. His words—"I’m glad that it was you"—carry a weight of acceptance and respect, leaving the protagonist both moved and uncertain. Jameson’s return to her side signals the continuation of their journey together, as the night’s events build toward a climactic resolution. The chapter masterfully balances humor, tension, and emotional depth, setting the stage for the transformative moments to come.

ONE YEAR LATER...

The chapter opens with Avery Grambs, a 19-year-old heiress and philanthropist, being interviewed about her extraordinary life. She reflects on her unique position with humility, acknowledging her luck while emphasizing that her wealth still feels surreal. The interview takes place in the Nook, a personalized space in Hawthorne House that symbolizes her journey. Avery shares how her global adventures with Jameson Hawthorne have shaped her worldview, and her tone remains candid as she discusses the balance between gratitude and responsibility.

A significant portion of the interview focuses on Avery's decision to donate the majority of her inherited fortune. She explains how the Hawthorne brothers initially reacted with shock but eventually embraced her philanthropic mission as a collective challenge. Avery highlights the foundation she established, which prioritizes rapid, impactful giving over slow disbursement. The foundation's board includes diverse experts and activists, reflecting her commitment to inclusive, innovative solutions for global issues. The interviewer probes Avery's motivations, leading to a deeper discussion about wealth and power.

Avery dismisses the notion of sainthood, humorously pointing out that she retained two billion dollars for herself—a sum she admits is impossible to spend fully. She argues that excessive wealth inherently concentrates power, which she finds ethically problematic. Her pragmatic yet principled stance challenges conventional views on fortune and legacy. The foundation's name, "Hannah the Same Backward as Forward," hints at personal mysteries tied to her family, though Avery leaves this thread unresolved, adding intrigue.

The chapter concludes with Avery's unflinching critique of wealth inequality. She questions why society doesn't demand more from billionaires, framing her actions as a logical response to systemic imbalance. Her dialogue with the interviewer blends wit

and gravity, revealing her maturity and strategic thinking. The exchange underscores Avery's transformation from an unexpected heir to a purposeful changemaker, while her relationship with Jameson and the Hawthorne brothers adds emotional depth to her public persona.

