

PROLOGUE

Every object has a ghost.

There is a small yellow backpack – half unzipped, mouth yawning to the pavement, contents strewn around it (a banana, an exercise book, a pair of scissors) – abandoned on a suburban footpath.

Ten feet away the rubber stamps of tyres, resisting clamped brakes, mount the kerb and cut across the path. The tracks come to an end at a crippled stop sign.

The street, a tree-lined suburban road dappled in late-afternoon sunlight, is calm. But anyone walking past can feel the ghosts: the prickle on the back of their necks that tells them *something happened here*. The story of a vehicle careening to a halt. Of a child's backpack left in a hurry.

That intuition comes before they take a closer look and see there is dark dry red on the scissor's blade. The ghosts are screaming now; the scene's memory turns violent. And as the passer-by raises their phone to answer the question *what is your emergency?* they see more red. Between the tyre tracks and the blood. Two words, hastily scrawled on the footpath. Written in blood.

FIND US.

DAY ONE

CHAPTER 1

Claudette

Claudette Holloway decides that today she will be Raphael Lopez.

She's found the perfect photo for him, a teenager with one foot propped on a soccer ball, elbow on his thigh. He's sporty, but not in a jock way. That would be too intimidating. Soccer is the right choice to show he's not a total loser but not one of the cool kids. Raphael's Instagram page, which Claudette has laboured over – she has to spend several months adding posts before she introduces Raph to anyone, in constant fear of the curious scroll – shares football highlights and video gaming memes in equal measure. His sense of humour is juvenile but friendly. He misspells his captions. His deep tan, short curly hair and Spanish name fit his backstory that he's relocated. That's important to Claudette for two reasons. It means it's believable that he's looking for friends online. It also means people don't ask why they've never seen him at school. He's *new here* wherever he goes.

It was a choice between Raphael and Aaron Chamberlain. Aaron's profile picture is a washed-out close-up of Aaron peering into a webcam. He has a black fringe that hangs over one eye. Aaron doesn't play sports; he's a misfit through and through.

His feed has a series of photos of him posing with swords in his bedroom. His captions use alternating caps lock and are rebellious but ambiguous.

WHEN it haPPens YOU'LL all See!

He's for what Claudette calls 'immediate responses'. For the ones who have started making plans, who are looking and ready to spill their guts to anyone. Because really that's why they're doing it: they want to be heard. Aaron doesn't have the subtlety to ease it out of someone who's on the brink. He's there to reel in the like-minded, a short-term solution. Raphael is for the long game. Friendly and loyal, he's there to build trust.

Claudette has TikTok accounts for both Aaron and Raphael, but these exist solely for verisimilitude. In any case, for Instagram, she needs to pluck from at least the twentieth page on Google Images, otherwise she is too easily caught. Aaron's persona is built from a treasure trove of a long-dormant Myspace page. She thinks he's Romanian originally.

She started running out of Raphael's content a while ago so has shied away from selfies for him lately. When she felt a mark was losing interest a few months prior and that Raph's façade was slipping, she had no choice but to put up a photo of a similar-looking Spanish kid in a soccer jersey. She shouldn't have, but she didn't want to burn the profile. The Raphaels take longer to build than the Aarons. Aaron doesn't need friends, but for Raph she has to pick around the school and add a range of the target's mutual friends so he seems popular enough but without committing him to one particular level of the school's hierarchy. She knew it was a risk to post, but she figured he was burned if she did, burned if she didn't. The mark hadn't noticed it was a different kid. They just thought he'd got a tan.

The profiles have to be believable because the biggest challenge is switching the kids over to WhatsApp. Once she picks them up on message boards such as Reddit (for Raph), DeathStream (for Aaron) or 4chan (for both), she needs an incognito form of private messaging. She discovered quickly that if she invited them to Snapchat, or asked for their phone number, they thought she was trying to seduce them.

Claudette doesn't make any of her aliases girls for that very reason. If the profile picture is even close to attractive enough for the boys to want to interact with her, they always assume she's an old man trying to bait them. One thing she's learned: nothing unmasks a fake profile faster than sex. Teens on the internet are very aware of who's trying to seduce them. That's all they worry about.

If they'd known who Claudette Holloway really was, they would have worried about her too.