

I
KNOW
YOUR
SECRET

BY DAPHNE BENEDIS-GRAB

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CHAPTER 1

SUNDAY: 5:30 P.M.

OWEN

It was random that Owen even checked his email before dinner that Sunday. Usually he went straight from pickup basketball with the guys to the backyard. His stepdad, Big Rob, was still insisting it was warm enough for Sunday night barbecues. Which was fine with Owen—give him a pile of ribs soaked in Big Rob’s secret Lexington sauce and he would be happy eating outside in January. But Mom said barbecue season in upstate New York ended with the first frost—which had been that morning.

So when Owen got home, Big Rob was standing next to the cold grill, saying, “It was more a light dusting of rain, not an actual frost,” while Mom countered that rain did not leave a white icy residue.

Owen figured it would be a while before the family ate anything, so he went into Mom’s office to use the computer. His older sister, Jade (who was technically

his stepsister), normally hogged it, but Jade was on a college tour with her mom and away for the week. So the computer was free for Owen and the project he had started during the Covid-19 shutdown.

It wasn't something he had told anyone—right now it was just his. But Owen was creating a graphic novel. None of his friends were into comics, drawing, or writing, and while Big Rob was enthused about most of Owen's interests, Mom and Dad were more invested in Owen's grades, which were somewhat less than great. They didn't nag him much, but Owen knew they might butt in if they realized that half the time they thought Owen was doing homework, he was actually working on his story.

Owen had reached a point in the book where he needed to know a little more about the armor worn by samurai for when his character went back in time. He did a quick search, found some great images, and then, while they were printing, logged into his account.

And that was how he ended up being the first of the four to see the email.

6:15 P.M.
GEMMA

“Can I please be excused?” Gemma asked, doing her best to appear casual. This was hard because she was pretty much crawling out of her skin. But it was essential that Mom not see how desperate Gemma was to get on her phone after Mom’s new “screen-free Sundays.” Mom was still scarred by all the screen time Gemma, Kate, and Avi had had during the Covid-19 shutdown. Although it’d been necessary for school and to socialize online, now that things were open again and people could go out, Gemma’s mom was determined to keep them off screens as much as possible.

“Isn’t it your night to load the dishwasher?” Gemma’s evil younger sister, Kate, asked.

“No, it’s Avi’s,” Gemma said between gritted teeth. Her older brother, who was as sweet as Kate was evil, nodded cheerfully.

“Okay, then,” Mom said, sounding reluctant.

“I did all my homework,” Gemma said, smiling like she wasn’t aching to snatch her phone out of the charging cabinet and fly up to her room.

“Great, off you go,” Dad said, waving Gemma toward the living room.

It took everything in her but she managed to walk calmly to the cabinet, take out the phone without checking it (Mom was watching), and meander to the stairs. She didn’t start running until she was half-way up and Kate had started moaning about how she hated her math teacher.

And after all that? *He* hadn’t even texted.

Gemma threw herself down on her pink comforter-covered bed (so immature, but Mom wouldn’t get her a new one until high school, which was years away) and scrolled through her notifications, then went to her inbox. She noticed the email right away and not because the subject line was all caps. Gemma noticed it right away because of what it said.

I KNOW YOUR SECRET

7:17 P.M.
TODD

Todd wanted to punch the computer screen.

He could imagine how it would feel to put his fist through the screen, blasting that email apart—but obviously he didn't. Mom was so proud of the old desktop her boss had given her that it sat in a place of honor on the kitchen table where they ate. Todd knew Mom's boss just wanted to get rid of the computer without hassle since it was ancient, but the important thing was that Mom didn't know that. And it did still work. Even though it took up half the small table in their very small trailer.

"I forgot my milk," Mom said, coming out of her bedroom. She was getting ready to watch her Sunday shows.

Todd quickly closed the email before she could see what was on the screen.

"You know how it helps me relax." She was wearing what she called her "cozy robe," her feet in the bunny slippers Todd had gotten her for her birthday. Mom loved bunnies and wore the slippers every night.

"Want me to get it for you?" Todd asked. He started

to stand up and found he felt shaky, almost dizzy, from what he'd just read.

“No, you keep doing your work on the computer,” Mom said, grabbing a teacup and saucer for her milk. It was the “little touches,” as she called them, that made Mom happy. That and anything involving bunnies, Todd, or chocolate.

As soon as Mom was safely back in her room, Todd clicked back to the email. As he read it a second time, his fists clenched up.

But punching wasn't going to help him get out of this:

I know your secret. Do what I say, when I say it, and I won't tell a soul. Skip even one step and I will tell everyone. Text me at this number as soon as you read this email. And then get ready for tomorrow. It's going to be a very big day.

8:12 P.M.

ALLY

Ally's hands were shaking, her breath coming in short, sharp bursts as she shoved things around on her desk,

trying to find her phone so she could send the text. Thank goodness she had checked her email tonight! It had been a long day helping Grandpa and Gram—Sundays were always long days, not that Ally minded. Nothing mattered more to her than the animals at the sanctuary she helped her grandparents run. And nothing made her, or her grandparents, happier.

But still, the work was tiring. Often after evening animal feeding and cuddles, Ally took a long, hot shower, fell into bed with a book, and passed out by nine. And what if she had done that tonight and missed this email?

It was too awful to even contemplate.

She finally found her phone, wedged into a far corner of the desk under a pile of *Cat Care* magazines. It took two tries to open up a new message and type in the phone number from the email. Then she hesitated. What was the proper response when someone was blackmailing you? She settled on *It's Ally* and pressed send. Then she waited, cold sweat slithering down her sides, staring at her phone.

Ally had no idea who could be threatening her like this. And how had they found out her secret? It was most certainly the one thing Ally never, ever wanted

anyone to know. Because if anyone found out what she had done—

Her stomach tumbled ominously as a bubble appeared on the screen, three dots flashing. Ally closed her eyes and said a quick prayer. This person—whoever they were—had the power to ruin everything Ally had ever truly loved.