

CHAPTER 1

THE SECRET COMPARTMENT

AIDAN COOPER SPRINTED UP THE STAIRS. From behind he heard a voice, choking with fury, shout, “I’m going to *kill* you!”

Aidan reached the second-floor hallway, crowded with antique end tables and chairs, its walls covered in dark oil paintings. He heard footsteps creaking up the stairs. He hurried down the hall and ducked into his father’s study, closing the door as quietly as he could.

The footsteps reached the top of the stairs.

“You’re dead, you hear me!” called the voice. “*Dead!*”

The voice belonged to Aidan’s sister, Sarah. She was very unhappy because Aidan had just swiped her iPhone, which he now clutched in his hand.

He heard a door open and shut, then another. Sarah was checking the upstairs rooms one at a time. Sarah was methodical. Her room was always neat, her weekend homework done before Friday dinner. What worried Aidan more

was that she was also quite a good puncher, having taken six years of karate.

“I’m going to find you, you little snot!” she said.

Aidan looked around frantically for a place to hide, his eyes lighting on a massive oak desk. It was a new addition to the household; Aidan and Sarah’s dad, a serious collector of Victorian furniture, had bought it recently at an auction. Aidan dropped to his hands and knees and crawled into the space where the chair was supposed to fit, between two walls of drawers.

Sitting cross-legged under the desk, he activated the iPhone screen and opened the text messages. He scrolled quickly through them, looking for the name of the girl he was deeply in love with, at least this week (Aidan fell deeply in love a lot). She was a friend of Sarah’s, Amanda Flores. Like Sarah, she was seventeen, and in eleventh grade. Aidan was only fifteen, a lowly ninth-grader. He wasn’t dating Amanda; the truth was, he had never actually spoken to her. But he had hopes.

These hopes had soared a few moments earlier when, reading over his sister’s shoulder, Aidan had spotted a text from Amanda saying—at least this was what Aidan *thought* it had said—that Amanda considered him cute. He had tried to see more, but Sarah, annoyed at his spying, made the phone’s screen go dark and told him to mind his own business.

So Aidan had snatched the phone and run upstairs. At the time it seemed like a good idea, but now Aidan sensed that it might have been a mistake. First, his sister was really mad. Second, as he scanned the iPhone texts, he realized that Amanda had not been texting about him at all, but about a boy named Aaron. Aidan didn't know Aaron, but he was pretty sure he hated him.

The study door burst open. Three seconds later, Sarah was crouched in front of the desk, red-faced with anger.

"Give me my phone back right now," she said, the palm of her hand extended.

"Okay," said Aidan. "Don't get—"

"I said *give* it to me!" yelled Sarah, lunging toward him.

Startled by his sister's lunge, Aidan jerked back and banged his shoulder and head, hard. Then three things happened.

Aidan said, "Ow!"

Sarah grabbed her phone back.

And a hidden door appeared in the desk.

It was a wooden trapdoor about the size of a DVD case. It hung down between Aidan and Sarah from the underside of the desk, revealing a dark opening.

"Huh," said Sarah, suddenly more interested in the door than in killing her brother.

"Weird," said Aidan, relieved that his sister was at least temporarily distracted. Trying to prolong her interest, he said, "What is that, anyway?"

“Duh,” explained Sarah. “It’s a secret compartment.”

“Cool,” said Aidan. He reached up and pushed the door shut. There was a soft click as it latched. The grain on the door matched the surrounding wood exactly; the fit was so tight that the seam was invisible.

“Wow,” said Aidan. “When it’s closed, you can’t even see it.”

“Right, nimrod,” said Sarah, “but you also can’t see inside. Open it back up.”

Aidan tried to pry it open, but his fingernails couldn’t fit into the seam. He banged on it, but nothing happened. He ran his hands over the surrounding wood, but found nothing that would open the door.

“I don’t know how,” he said.

“You are such an idiot,” said Sarah. “Let me see.” She crawled under and felt around the door as her brother had just done, also finding nothing.

“You must have done *something* to open it,” she said.

“I hit my head.”

Sarah pushed the panels above them. Nothing happened.

“I also hit my shoulder,” said Aidan.

“Where?”

He pointed to the sore spot on his shoulder. She punched it, hard.

“Ow!”

“Not your shoulder, idiot! Where did you hit the desk?”

“Oh . . . the side, I think.”

Sarah made a fist and pounded it. Nothing.

“I hit it really hard,” said Aidan.

Sarah frowned and gave the panel a karate chop.

The trapdoor popped open.

“Excellent!” said Aidan, reaching his hand up into the hole.

“If there’s money in there,” said Sarah, “we split it.”

Aidan groped inside the opening. “I don’t feel any—wait! There’s something in here!”

He withdrew his hand, which now held an envelope. It was letter-size and yellow with age. Aidan turned it over; it had no writing on either side.

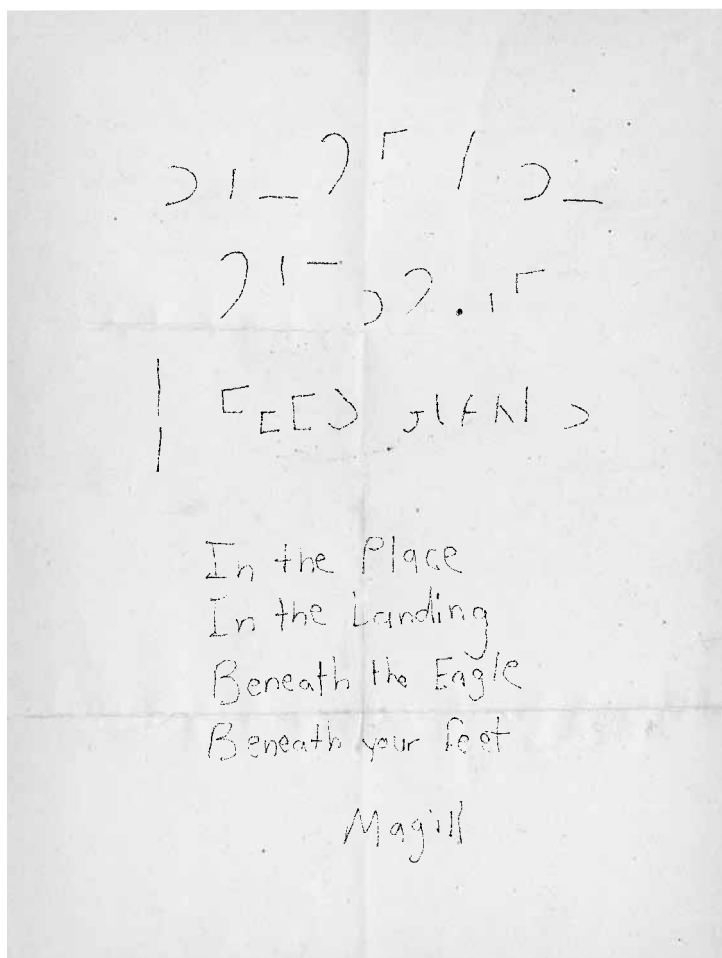
“Open it!” said Sarah.

Aidan frowned. “Maybe we should tell Dad,” he said.

“Absolutely,” said Sarah, snatching the envelope. “After we open it.”

Before Aidan could protest, she slid her finger under the flap and opened the envelope. She pulled out a piece of flimsy paper, folded into thirds. She unfolded it carefully, and Aidan leaned in to look.

The paper was so thin that it was almost transparent. On it, drawn in black ink, were random-looking lines, some straight, some curved, not forming any obvious pattern. Below the lines, handwritten in the same ink, were the words:



"What the heck does that mean?" said Aidan. Sarah was staring at the document.

"Magill," she said.

"What about it?"

"I think I know that name."

"You know somebody named Magill?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure I actually *know* him, but I've heard that name somewhere." She continued staring at the document. Fifteen seconds passed.

"Can I ask you something?" said Aidan.

"What?"

"This guy Aaron? Who Amanda likes?"

Sarah looked up. "What about him?"

"How old is he?"

"He's a senior."

Aidan's shoulders slumped.

Sarah smirked, enjoying her moment of revenge for the iPhone theft.

"He's also very cute," she added.

Without a word, Aidan slouched out of the room, heartbroken. Sarah turned back to the document.

"Magill," she whispered softly.



At 11:40 P.M. that night, she remembered. She had turned off the light and was almost asleep when it suddenly popped into her brain.

"Magill," she whispered, sitting upright in bed. Fumbling in the dark, she found the switch to her reading light and turned it on. She got out of bed and crossed her bedroom to

a shelf jammed to overflowing with books. She searched the titles, stopping finally on a fat hardcover book. She pulled it out and began impatiently turning pages; she flipped most of the way through before she found what she was looking for. She read a passage, then read it again.

"I knew it," she said. She sat on her bed for a few moments, thinking. Then she returned to the bookshelf and pulled out another fat book. After flipping through it as well, she found a particular passage and began reading.

"Yes," she said. She bookmarked the page and moved ahead to another chapter, reading with growing excitement. She opened the small drawer on her bedside table and withdrew the fragile document they had discovered in the desk. She reread it, standing as she did, too excited now to sit.

She paced her room for a minute, the book in one hand, the letter in the other. Then she collected both books and, holding tightly to the document, quietly left her room and crept down the hallway to Aidan's room. She eased open the door without knocking and closed it softly behind herself. She switched on the light.

"Psst! Aidan, wake up!" she whispered.

"What?" he said, squinting and blinking at the unwanted light. "Why are you . . . ?"

"Shh," she hissed. "Not so loud. You'll wake Mom and Dad."

“What are you doing in here?” he said. “It’s . . . midnight.”

She handed him the first book. He reluctantly accepted it from her, rubbed his eyes open, and read the title.

“*Peter and the Shadow Thieves*,” he said. “I already read this. As in like five years ago.”

“I know that,” she said. “But read this part.” She was pointing to a paragraph on the bottom of page 475.

Aidan read it aloud quietly.

“First thing tomorrow,” said Aster, “I will arrange to send you all back to London. But for tonight you must remain here. I’m going out for several hours with Mister Magill—the man who, ah, greeted you at the gate.”

Aidan looked up at Sarah. “So?” he said.

“Magill!” she said, holding up the document from the desk. “I *knew* I knew that name. He helped the Starcatchers!”

“Are you insane? You woke me up for this?”

“Magill!” she repeated.

“So it’s the same name. Big deal. There’s probably a million Magills. I can’t believe you woke me up—”

“Do you know any Magills?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean—”

“I’m not done,” she said, holding up the second book. He read the title: *Peter and the Sword of Mercy*.

“Magill’s mentioned in here, too,” she said. “A lot.”

“I still don’t see why—”

“Just wait, okay?” she said, opening the book to a folded page. “Here. Leonard Aster is telling Peter and Wendy to go to a safe place. Look where he sends them.” She presented the book to Aidan, this time pointing to the middle of page 312. He read:

“When you get out of here,” he said, “go straight to a hotel in Sloane Square called the Scotland Landing.”

Aidan looked up. Sarah showed him the document again. “‘In the Landing,’” she said. “It says ‘In the Landing.’ In the book, Magill lives there. In the Scotland Landing Hotel.”

“That’s just a coincidence,” said Aidan. But he sounded less confident than before.

“Wait,” said Sarah, now leafing furiously through the book. “Here!” She was pointing to the bottom of page 325. Again, Aidan read:

The taxicab rumbled through the dark streets for fifteen minutes, then stopped in front of a narrow three-story building on a quiet street near Sloane Square called Draycott Place.

“Draycott Place,” said Sarah. “In this book, Magill was in Scotland Landing, in Draycott Place.” She waved the document. “Magill. In the Landing. In the Place.”

Aidan looked at the book, then the paper, then back to the book again. “So are you, like, saying you think this Starcatchers stuff is for real? That’s crazy.”

“Then who wrote *this*?” she said, holding up the document.

Aidan thought about that.

“It could be a practical joke,” he said. “Somebody read these books, and then they wrote that stuff on the paper, and then they hid it in the desk so somebody like you would fall for it.”

“Really?” said Sarah. “You’re saying somebody read the books, then found this ridiculously old-looking piece of paper and wrote this stuff on it, then hid the paper in the secret compartment of this really old desk, and it was all some kind of joke?”

“Well . . . yeah.”

“But how would they expect anybody to ever find it? If you hadn’t hidden under the desk and bumped your shoulder, we’d never have found it. Nobody would have ever found it. Ever, as in ever.”

Aidan thought about that. “Okay,” he said, pointing to the paper. “So what do you think it is?”

“What I think,” said Sarah, “is that it’s . . . a mystery.”

“Wow. A mystery. Nice work, Sherlock Holmes.”

“I’m not saying I have the answer to the mystery. I’m just saying it is one.” She hesitated, then said, “And I’m going to solve it.”

“You?”

“Yes.”

“How, exactly?”

“I’m going to start at Draycott Place.”

“Which is in London. We’re in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.”

“Right. And where are we going in two weeks?”

“Oh yeah,” said Aidan, remembering that the Cooper family was taking their summer-vacation trip to England this year.

“So when we’re in London, we’ll go find this Draycott Place,” said Sarah. “Meanwhile, we can do some research on the Internet. And I’m going to ask Dad what he knows about who used to own that desk.”

“Are we going to tell Dad about this?” asked Aidan, pointing at the document.

“Not yet.”

“Why not?”

“Because we found it, and I think we should have the first chance to figure out what it means. We’ll tell him about it later, okay?”

“No,” said Aidan. “It’s Dad’s desk, so he owns the documents in it. We have to tell him.”

"No, we most certainly do not. That desk is in our house. That makes it just as much ours."

"Absolutely not," said Aidan. "We have to tell Dad. You are not going to change my mind about this."

"I'll introduce you to Amanda Flores," said Sarah.

"Deal," said Aidan immediately. He yawned. "Now please, can I go back to sleep?"

"Okay," said Sarah. "Just don't forget our deal."

"I won't. Don't you forget your part."

"I won't." Sarah turned off the light and opened the door.

"For the record," Aidan whispered in the darkness, "you are completely insane."

"Pleasant dreams." Sarah quietly shut the door. Holding the books and the document, she tiptoed back to her bedroom. It was well past midnight now, but she was too excited to sleep. She sat on her bed and looked at the covers of the books, which were illustrated with scenes of a flying boy and a heroic girl menaced by cruel pirates and hideous, evil creatures. Sarah knew these stories well; she had read and reread them over the years. But to her they had always been make-believe; there was no flying boy, she knew, and no magical island.

She set the books on her bed, then went to her window and looked out. The backyard, bathed in moonlight, was dominated by a massive oak. A gust of wind shifted its twisting branches; their shadows writhed on the ground. Sarah

looked at them for a moment, then back at the books. A persistent thought kept bubbling up in her mind; she knew it was ridiculous, but somehow she could not completely dismiss it.

What if it's not make-believe?