

fingerprints

3

The deadly truth . . .

trust me

melinda metz

AUTHOR OF *ROSWELL HIGH*

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AVON BOOKS

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Trust Me

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Rae snapped her locker open. A large, deep purple envelope was jammed in front of her books.

Rae swallowed, staring at the envelope without moving. Her first impulse was to just slam the locker shut and run. She didn't want to know what was inside that thing, did she?

God, everything unexpected doesn't have to equal bad, she told herself. She took a deep breath, then grabbed the envelope and ripped it open, revealing the top of a photograph. "See, someone left you a picture. Nothing scary," she whispered, then glanced down the hall to make sure no one had caught her talking to herself. She sighed, then pulled the photo all the way out.

As soon as she saw the rest of the image, her breath caught in her throat. She stared down at the picture, unable to move her eyes away although she wanted to, wanted to more than anything. But her gaze remained locked on the woman in the photograph. She was so beautiful, standing in the surf with a big beach ball tucked under one arm, a huge grin on her face.

But on her forehead . . . on her forehead someone had used red nail polish to paint a bullet hole and drops of blood.

Don't miss any of the books in this
thrilling new series:

fingerprints

#1: Gifted Touch

#2: Haunted

#3: Trust Me

Coming soon:

#4: Secrets

For my cousin Amanda Lee Hafner

trust me

Chapter 1

Rae Voight hurried down the long hallway leading to Oakvale Institute's group therapy room on Wednesday afternoon. She tried to breathe mostly through her mouth because the smell of the industrial cleaner they used on the linoleum floor brought back memories of being in the mental hospital. Not even memories, exactly. It was more like the harsh smell transported her right back into the hospital, back into her room with her silent roommate, back to taking pills from little white accordion-pleated cups, back to feeling like she was free falling into insanity.

But now you know you're not insane, she told herself. She was a fingerprint reader—she touched a print, she got a thought from the person who left it. Weird. Spooky. Freakish. But not insane. She pulled

in another mouth breath, the chemicals sour on her tongue. *Next time I'm bringing gum*, she thought.

Footsteps pounded down the hall behind her, coming right at her. Rae whirled around, her heart rate already doubling. At any time the person who'd tried to kill her in this very building could decide to try again. She was stupid to let her guard down for even a second. She stiffened, ready to run—or just scream really loudly—but then she saw Anthony Fascinelli, and her pulse immediately slowed back down.

“Charging after a girl who's already had one assassination attempt on her isn't the smartest . . .” Rae's words trailed off as she took in Anthony's expression. His mouth was tight, and his dark eyes were practically crazed with fear. Anthony wasn't a guy who looked scared very often.

“What?” Rae demanded, wrapping her arms tightly around her waist.

“I just got a call from Anna, my little sister,” Anthony said. His voice came out husky, and he cleared his throat. Then cleared it again.

Rae wanted to grab him and shake him—shake the words out of him. Instead she pulled in a deep breath and waited.

“She said that Zack ran away,” Anthony finally continued. “He left a note. But what if he—”

“What if he got snatched, the way Jesse did?” Rae

finished for him. *Oh God, no. No.* This couldn't be happening again. She and Anthony had managed to rescue Jesse Beven—a kid in their group who was pretty much Anthony's honorary little brother. But he'd been in bad shape. If it had taken them a few more days to find out where he was being held . . . even thinking about it made Rae feel like her stomach was filled with worms. Live ones.

"Yeah. What if he did," Anthony answered. "I need you." He shoved his hands through his sandy brown hair. "I need you to do your fingerprint thing," he added quickly.

"I'm there." Rae was already heading back out of the institute, Anthony right behind her. She wanted to run, just tear down the hall, but that was the best way to get stopped and asked a bunch of questions. She forced herself to keep her pace to a fast walk. *Maybe Zack did just run away*, she thought frantically. She tried to remember how old Anthony's brother was. About fifteen. Kids that age ran away all the time. *And if he ran, we'll have him back today*, she promised herself.

But if he was snatched . . .

"Why doesn't whoever the hell is doing this just take me?" Rae exploded as she climbed into Anthony's mom's Hyundai and slammed the door. "Whoever took Jesse did it just to test me. If they still want to know more, why won't they just take me? Why go after Zack

or anybody else?" She swallowed, feeling the mixture of fear and guilt rise up inside her. "It's not like they don't know where to find me," she added, tugging her jacket tighter around her. "I mean, they bugged your car, they're taking photos of me wherever I go—"

Rae shot a glance at Anthony as he pulled out of the parking lot, noticing his lethal grip on the steering wheel. Even through his T-shirt she could see how bunched the muscles in his shoulders were. She was just making things worse. She was being antihelp.

"But we don't know anyone took him. We should just wait and see," she added lamely. Anthony gave a grunt in response. It was clear he had no interest in talking, so Rae clamped her teeth together to prevent any nervous chattering and stared out the window as he drove.

Her teeth squeaked against each other as she tightened her jaw until the muscles ached. *This is my fault. This is all my fault*, she thought. *Anytime anyone gets close to me, something bad happens to them.* Not even that close. She'd never even met Anthony's brother, and now because of her—

You don't know that, she told herself. But in her gut she didn't believe it. She knew she was dangerous. She should go live in a cave somewhere, survive on berries and nuts. Except then her new little friends, the bunnies and the bluebirds and the cute

baby deer, they'd start disappearing. Pipe bombs would show up in the trees and—

Give it up, Rae ordered herself. You can have a pity party—with balloons, cake, and a clown—later. After Zack is safe.

“This is my street,” Anthony announced as he made a left turn onto a block filled with small houses crammed together. It wasn't hard to figure out which of the houses was Anthony's. A girl and two boys stood on the small front lawn. They ran to the curb when they saw Anthony driving toward them.

The second Anthony stepped out of the car, the girl—Anna, who was nine, if Rae remembered right—rushed over to him, towing the littler boy—Carl, it had to be, since he was the youngest—behind her. She pulled a folded piece of paper out of the pocket of her denim jacket, a jacket that was almost a miniature copy of Anthony's. “I found this in his room,” Anna announced, thrusting the paper at him. “You've got to do something. Tom's going to go ballistic.”

Tom as in Anthony's stepfather. Rae knew he was Carl's natural father, and she thought Anna's, too, although she hadn't quite mastered the intricacies of Anthony's family.

“No one's going ballistic,” Anthony answered. He unfolded the letter and read it slowly, his jaw muscles tightening. Rae realized how much his reading problem

must be getting to him right now, when he needed the information fast.

He finally finished and passed the note to her, and she saw his fingers were trembling. So were hers. She ignored the questions the kids were hurling at Anthony and quickly scanned the page. It was short, with the usual words—the *expected* words. Zack couldn't deal anymore, so he was leaving. They shouldn't look for him. It sounded like a kid who was running away. *Or like someone wants us to think he ran away*, Rae couldn't help adding in her head. There was nothing personal, nothing specific. Anyone could have made up this note.

She shook her head. It was time to let her fingertips do their work.

/what if he never comes back?/

Rae's throat went dry with fear. Anna's fear. She moved her fingers a little lower.

/Nothing I need here/can all piss off/

The back of Rae's neck flushed as Zack's anger jolted through her. Followed by her own relief. Zack had run. No one else was involved.

Okay, Zack, tell me where you are, Rae thought, letting out a deep breath. She ran her fingers lightly down the page. She picked up some more fear from Anna, a mix of fear and anger from Anthony, then she got another blast of pungent Zack.

/can't stand/Tom is such a/can crash in Todd's shed/

Got you, she thought. She handed the note back to Anthony. "Why don't we drive around a little?" she asked, since she couldn't exactly blurt out in front of Anthony's brothers and sister that she knew exactly where Zack was. "I bet you know a bunch of his usual spots."

"I'm coming with you," the older of the two boys—Danny—announced. Rae's lips twitched. Danny didn't look anything like Anthony—he had longish curly blond hair and blue eyes—but his attitude was clearly something he'd picked up from his big brother. Even his tough-guy stance, feet planted apart, reminded her of Anthony.

"You are staying here," Anthony shot back. "All of you," he added before Anna or Carl could get in some begging time. "If Zack gets back before I do, you three sit on him, okay?"

He didn't wait for an answer. He climbed back in the car and slammed the door. Rae scrambled in the passenger side, shut the door, and fastened her seat belt.

"He really did run away," she told him. "He's all right." She watched as Anthony's whole face relaxed, the terror easing out of his expression.

"So where is he?" he asked.

"You know a friend of his named Todd?" she replied.

Anthony nodded, already pulling back onto the street.

“Did you get any idea why?” Anthony asked Rae after they’d gotten some distance from his house. He hadn’t trusted himself to speak for a little while there, afraid he’d go all mushy on her for letting him know his brother wasn’t in danger.

“Not much,” she answered. “A little burst of anger at Tom.”

Anthony snorted. “Big freakin’ surprise.”

“Did they have a fight recently?” Out of the corner of his eye Anthony saw Rae adjusting her glittery dragonfly hair clip. He didn’t know why she bothered to wear those things. They pretty much got lost in all that curly red-brown hair of hers.

“Recently?” Anthony repeated. “Would you call breakfast recently? Or last night? Or last weekend?”

“That bad, huh?” Rae let out a long sigh.

“Tom’s a jerk. End of story,” Anthony said. At least it was the end of the story he was telling Rae. He cut a glance over at her. How much had she noticed about his house? Had she been too caught up in the minidrama to take in much? He hoped so, because compared to where he lived, she and her dad had a friggin’ mansion.

“This is Todd’s,” he told her, pulling into the driveway of a house that didn’t look too much

different from his own. "Wait here, okay? I need to talk to Zack alone."

Rae nodded. He hoped she wouldn't touch anything in the car since she wasn't wearing the waxy stuff she sometimes used to block out her fingerprint thoughts. He knew she wouldn't go rooting through his head on purpose. But it was easy to touch something—the radio, the dashboard—without actually deciding to. *As if she'd find out something that she doesn't already know*, Anthony thought as he headed up the front walk. He punched the doorbell. After almost a full minute's wait Todd answered. One look and Anthony knew Todd was going to give him some line of crap.

"I know he's here," Anthony said before Todd could get a word out. "I want to talk to him. Now."

Todd was almost as tall as Anthony, but he was a featherweight, pretty much no muscle of any kind. It had to be clear to him that Anthony could pulp him in a second. Todd backed away from the door and pointed to the living room. Then he disappeared into the kitchen.

Anthony moved quickly to the living room, releasing a short breath when he spotted Zack in front of the television.

"What do you want?" Zack muttered, not taking his eyes off the tube as Anthony plopped down on the couch next to him.

Anthony didn't answer. He pretended he was just

as interested in watching Comedy Central as Zack was. Even though they'd both seen this Chris Rock wanna-be's act at least five times.

"So are you supposed to drag me home?" Zack finally asked, eyes still glued to the TV even though a commercial had come on.

Anthony stretched out his legs. "Nah. I was thinking of moving in here myself," he answered. There were only two ways to get Zack out of this house—an explosion or making him think it was what he wanted to do.

They watched the TV in silence. Todd poked his head into the living room for a second, then scurried away.

The Chris Rock wanna-be's act ended, and a half-hour Richard Lewis deal came on. About ten minutes into it Zack actually looked at Anthony. "Tom is such a freakin' idiot."

"You're not gonna get any argument from me," Anthony answered. "Maybe Mom will finally realize that herself and trade up. She's got to be getting itchy by now." His mother and Tom had been together for about four years, living together for over eight months—almost a record for her. She usually treated guys like Kleenex. Or maybe it was more like they treated her that way. It was hard to tell.

"So, what, I'm just supposed to be a good little boy? Be *respectful* until he gets the boot—if he ever does?" Zack demanded.