

CHAPTER 1

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At machale and ready for some drama.

#hamletauditionstomorrow!

I clicked TWEET and stared down at my avatar, looking up at me from my tiny iPhone screen. The picture was a headshot from last summer, sent in with my MacHale application even though the admissions form made it clear that a photo — let alone a professional shot complete with hair and makeup — was unnecessary. The girl in the photo had sparkly brownish eyes with a rim of gold around the edges, a wide smile, and blondish hair perfectly blown straight over her shoulders. She looked confident, assured, the type of girl who felt school-play auditions were worthy of an exclamation mark.

I hated her.

A flurry of good-luck Tweets flew in from Annie, Carolyn, Brittany, and Katy — all of my friends from Wright Memorial High School, but they did little to soften the knot of anxiety calcifying in my stomach. I appreciated their support, but their well-wishes couldn't sit next to me in the MacHale dining hall. Their "positive vibes" wouldn't choose me as a tennis partner instead of forcing me to spend forty-five minutes making awkward conversation with Coach Ruth as I missed serve after serve. Right now, all that mattered were my new classmates.

The only problem was that I didn't seem to matter to them. I swiped my phone to refresh the feed. Nothing.

"Are you studying your monologue back there, honey? We still could run some lines if you feel that would be helpful. You know I love to see you perform. Can you just do a little bit of it? For me?" My mom craned her neck back toward me, the jangling of her gold earrings breaking up the otherwise silent car trip.

"That's okay, I think I've got it. But thanks!" I added perkily. Or at least, that's what I was going for. It was a very good thing that I wasn't auditioning for a teen romantic comedy. I don't fake perky well.

Mom shot me a hurt gaze. I felt a familiar twinge of guilt at having disappointed her. It wasn't my fault I wasn't the animated, always-the-center-of-attention drama queen she'd been in high school. But she seemed to act like it was.

I glanced out the window to avoid eye contact. In the past hour, the sky had gone from shadowy twilight to inky black, and I had no sense of what direction we were headed. I wanted to enjoy the silence, not have my mom begin her inevitable barrage of questions: *Who else was auditioning? What did Dr. Spidell say before break? Have you been practicing speaking in a lower octave? You know it creeps up when you get nervous, which can make you sound shrill.*

"Can you at least tell me what play it's from?" Mom asked eagerly. "It can't be healthy for you to keep everything bottled up like that. Come on, just tell me. I won't say anything."

"Dad? Are we almost there?" A pleading note was evident in my tone. Dad was more like me: quiet, thinking, not always

saying every single thing that popped into his head. While I loved my mom, living with her was exhausting.

Had been exhausting.

“Fine.” Mom heaved an exaggerated sigh. “I guess it’s a crime to care about my only daughter’s interests. I’m sorry.”

“Give her a break,” Dad said, as though I weren’t two feet behind him. He rested his hand on Mom’s knee. “And remember, we are talking about *her* interests.”

Mom huffed derisively. I felt a tug of affection toward Dad, at the same time wishing for the hundredth time that I’d just taken a train up to MacHale from Connecticut. While deep down, I appreciated my mother’s almost obsessive interest with my high school theater career, it didn’t negate the fact her presence made me feel nervous and jumpy.

“You know, if I were auditioning for a Shakespeare play, I would choose something from *A Winter’s Tale*. It’s one of those ones directors don’t hear very often, so they’ll automatically pay more attention than if you were doing another ridiculous *Romeo and Juliet* monologue. That type of decision shows you aren’t afraid to make your own choices. Back at the theater, I’ll *always* let someone read to the end if it’s a piece I haven’t heard recently.”

“I know, I thought of that,” I said. In addition to her job as a pharmaceutical sales rep, Mom was also a volunteer at the local community theater, directing the two plays the theater put on each year. Invariably, they’d star Dr. Winters, my former orthodontist, who was also a talented tap dancer, and some rising high school theater star who’d then go on to major in drama at UConn. The theater itself was the multipurpose room of the

local rec center, and opening-night parties for the cast were held in our basement. Not like you would know from hearing my mother talk about it. She treated her small community theater as if it were just a step below Broadway.

“Also, I’m surprised that Dr. Spidell chose *Hamlet* for Winterm. It’s so long. I mean, of course it’s a classic, but I don’t know why you can’t do something like *Guys and Dolls* or *Carousel*. Something fun. Part of me would love to go to his office and tell him that, but I know you wouldn’t let me, would you?” She asked hopefully, as if she didn’t know the answer to the question. Which was *No, absolutely not* and *Are you kidding me?*

Luckily, before I had to think up some sort of *Thanks but no thanks* response, I spotted the small white hand-painted sign marking the turnoff to MacHale. Or, if you read the sign: M CH. The harsh Maine winters had caused the other letters to peel away, making it virtually impossible to find the path unless you were looking for it.

“Dad, turn!” I said.

Instantly, Dad took a sharp turn that caused me to slide against the door.

“Greg, be careful!” Mom admonished, carefully patting her shoulder-length blonde hair into place.

“Oops, sorry about that,” Dad said sheepishly as he slowed the car to a five-mile-an-hour crawl.

The gas lamps lighting the entrance were unlit, and the security guard wasn’t standing at his usual post inside the circular guardhouse that flanked the iron-gated entrance to the school.

“Is it always this dark around here? You don’t walk around alone, do you?” Dad asked nervously as he continued up the steep hill toward the castle-like complex of dorms in the center

of campus. Above us, the trees creaked from the inches of snow that had accumulated on their spindly branches.

“Greg, she’s fine!” Mom said. “This is MacHale. It’s safe.”

“I wonder if that girl’s parents said the same thing,” Dad muttered. “What was her name again?”

“Sarah Charonne. And I’d prefer we didn’t talk about her,” my mom said tightly.

Mom and Sarah had crossed paths, briefly. Mom had been a senior when Sarah, a freshman, had disappeared from campus during finals week. For a long time, everyone assumed she’d run away. After all, she’d been on the verge of failing most of her classes, and rumors had swirled that she was dating a townie her parents hated. I’d never even heard of her until this past August. That was when, five days before fall semester started, her remains had been found in the woods near the Runnymede River dam. The police had allegedly questioned a few of the people she’d associated with, including a mechanic in town who’d gone on a few dates with her, but none of the questions had led to any suspects.

But even though there weren’t any real leads didn’t mean people weren’t suspicious. The discovery had stirred up the already uneasy relationship between the town of Forsyth and the school. MacHale kids were always snobby about the working-class town that housed the school, but the discovery of Sarah’s body had made things even more icy.

“Sarah Charonne.” My mother sighed. “She shouldn’t have even been a student at MacHale. All that girl did was hang out with townies. She didn’t make herself a part of the community. Everyone at MacHale looks out for each other. She didn’t have anyone, poor girl.”