

CHAPTER 1

Nothing glittered.

I'd never been to Hollywood before, but like any other person with eyeballs and a television, I'd seen it a thousand times. I expected wide, palm-tree-lined roads and mansions that overflowed with fabulous movie stars.

What I got was a normal city. Except the sky was pale brown, and the freeways went on forever in every direction. The houses crept up the sides of distant mountains like a fungus. Nobody looked particularly fabulous, especially not the roving bands of tourists taking pictures of every street sign, sidewalk, and tree.

I felt a little cheated, to be honest.

"There's Hollywood Boulevard," my new stepfather, Jonathan, said. "That's where you'll find the Walk of Fame and the Chinese Theatre. We should go there tomorrow."

Party foul. "Tomorrow's Monday," I said. "I start school."

"Oh, right." He was quiet for a second. "Well, they're nothing special. Just a bunch of old footprints and handprints. Movie stars had tiny feet."



“Even the men, right?” my mother piped up. “I think I read that somewhere.”

I didn’t reply. Not speaking when I had nothing to say had become a bit of a habit for me.

“Look, Willa! The Hollywood Sign — right through those buildings!” Mom’s nose was practically pressed up against the glass, and her voice had the chirpy cheerfulness of a preschool teacher.

I squinted to see the line of writing on a far-off hillside. “Oh . . . yeah,” I said. “Cool.”

“Are you all right?” She studied me, concealing her anxiety beneath a thin veneer of calm. “Do you have a headache?”

“Why would she have a headache?” Jonathan asked.

My mother clamped her mouth shut.

“I’m good, Mom,” I said.

As exciting as it was to ride from the airport to our new house in a stretch limo, the limitations of this mode of transportation were tragically apparent. I sat on the front bench, facing backward, with Mom and Jonathan on the forward-facing bench looking directly at me. It was like being in a fishbowl. Give me the backseat of our old Camry anytime — at least there was relative privacy.

But there was no more old Camry. No more old anything. My new stepfather was rich, which meant Mom and I were rich, too . . . unless I messed everything up.

No. I’d already destroyed our lives once. It wasn’t going to happen again.



If we had to leave, what would we go back to? Joffrey, Connecticut — a town where we no longer belonged. No house, no job, no car. No friends.

This new life in California was the end of the line for us. It was going to work out.

Because, well . . . it had to.

We followed a series of labyrinthine streets to 2121 Sunbird Lane. There was a little hiccup in my heart as our new home came into view.

Jonathan always referred to it as simply “the house,” but apparently he had a pretty warped idea of what a house was, because this was obviously a full-on mansion.

It was separated from the road by a tall privacy hedge and a metal-spiked fence. The front yard was huge and perfect, with freshly mowed grass and a fountain in the center.

I stood in the driveway looking around while Jonathan and the chauffeur got our bags out of the car. The house (there, see? I was doing it, too) was an elegant old Spanish-style with crisp white stucco walls and a red-clay-tile roof. Its beauty was simple, unadorned . . . and expensive-looking.

“Willa?” Mom called. “You coming?”

With a start, I realized that they were waiting for me on the front porch.

Jonathan unlocked the dead bolt. “The door’s original,” he said, sounding proud — as if a plank of wood lasting almost a hundred years was somehow a credit to human ingenuity and not, you know, trees.



Inside, the house was cool and open. Pale sunlight streamed in, reflecting off the cream-colored walls and gleaming hardwood floors. Overhead, a heavy iron chandelier was chained to the wall from three sides, like a wild animal. A set of stairs curved gracefully toward the second story.

My mother spun in a circle, taking in all the details. "It's gorgeous, Jonathan. When was it built?"

"Nineteen thirty-three," he said. "For an actress named Diana Del Mar."

"Really?" Mom said. "We *love* her movies! Willa, remember those old musicals we used to watch at Grandma's house?"

A vague memory bubbled to the back of my mind — kaleidoscopic arrays of dancing girls with fluffy skirts and huge headdresses, armies of bright-eyed young women cheerfully marching around in tap shoes.

"Sure," I said.

"She was big in the thirties, and then she had a string of flops. She got a reputation as box office poison and retired." Jonathan sounded a little apologetic, like he wished he could give us a better movie star.

"Amazing." Mom ran her hand over the banister. "Just think of all these walls have seen and heard."

"People have probably died here," I said.

Mom winced a little, then tried to laugh. "Oh, Willa."

But Jonathan nodded. "I'm pretty sure Diana Del Mar *did* die here. I don't know the exact story of when or how, though."

"We could look it up online," Mom said. Her frantic agreeableness made my brain itch.

“Or we could ask her ghost,” Jonathan said, winking at me like we had an inside joke.

I turned away, a chill passing up my spine.

Does he know?

He can't possibly.

My mother wandered a little farther into the foyer, and I wondered if she felt as out of place as I did — or even more so. After all, I still got to be a relatively normal teenager. For her, this house represented a whole new identity, as the glamorous wife of a famous Hollywood film director.

It was hard to reconcile that with the picture I'd always had in my head of her as a decidedly non-glamorous suburban mom. Still, she was slim and pretty — my height, five foot six, with the same dark chocolate-brown hair as me. Our eyes were the same muted blue that edged into gray. I had her high cheekbones, but softer features in general — people had always said I looked more like my dad.

I could almost picture Mom at a movie premiere, walking the red carpet. Jonathan told us he wasn't famous enough for the paparazzi to care about, but his agent had already called him about magazines wanting the inside scoop. *Rich, successful director sweeps small-town widow off her feet. Whirlwind romance leads to Valentine's Day wedding at City Hall.* Apparently there was a Cinderella element to the story that people found irresistible.

Only . . . if my mother was Cinderella, what did that make me? One of the dancing mice? Maybe a pumpkin.

Jonathan led us on a tour of the house. The gourmet kitchen that overlooked the backyard. The dining room, with its massive



oak table. The den, with a huge flat-screen TV and oversize leather couch. The formal living room, with a fireplace big enough to park a golf cart in. The powder room. The other powder room. The study, with shelves and shelves of DVDs. The master bedroom, with its soaring beamed ceiling and four-poster bed. There were even a maid's room and a butler's room and a chauffeur's quarters out near the garage — though, as Jonathan pointed out, we had neither a maid nor a butler nor a chauffeur — just a cleaning lady named Rosa who came twice a week.

And that was just the ground floor.

Upstairs were four more bedrooms, each with its own attached bathroom. And at the end of the hall, Jonathan's office, where he and his assistant worked on the days when Jonathan wasn't needed on set or at the studio. I pictured an uptight secretarial type lurking around and decided I might be spending a lot of time in my room.

Jonathan had lived alone since he bought the house a year earlier, but it was furnished for a family of eight or nine people, with enough bathrooms for all of them to go at once. Even with the three of us, it seemed echoing and empty.

The last stop on the tour was my bedroom.

"If you want one of the others, feel free to switch," Jonathan said, pushing the door open. "We put you here because it's the most private."

It was a nice room, with a big window looking down over the backyard. The furniture was heavy wood and clearly expensive — definitely not the kind that came in a box with its own little tools for assembly. The pictures on the walls were of

fruit and sailboats. I walked closer to inspect them and found they weren't just prints — each one was an actual painting, with brushstrokes and a signature and everything.

“Take those down, put up whatever you want,” Jonathan said. “You guys can go shopping over the weekend.”

Shopping — with his credit card, spending his money? No, thanks. I'd rather live with boring still lifes, even if they were as far from my style as you could get. In fact, nothing in the room reflected my style — or the style of any person under thirty.

But it was fine.

Mom cleared her throat. “Maybe Willa wants a little time to get settled. Take a shower or check her email.”

Maybe Willa's right here and you don't need to talk about her in the third person.

But I was grateful for the opportunity to be alone. I waved to Mom and Jonathan as they left, then shut and locked the door.

There was something I needed to do, and it had nothing to do with checking email.

My heart began to thud as I set my suitcase on the bed and unzipped it.

You don't have to do this. You can quit. Turn over a new leaf. Start your new life like a normal person instead of a superstitious loser.

I dug through my toiletry bag for a small black suede pouch, out of which I fished a silver ring set with an oily-looking green stone. Tucked inside one of my sneakers, wrapped in tissue paper, was a purple candle and book of matches. I lit the candle and set it on the nightstand.



Then I slipped the ring on my finger and sat cross-legged on the bed with my eyes closed, taking a deep, self-conscious breath.

I imagined every corner of the room filling up with a bright white light. (Supposedly the souls in the beyond love white light. They're drawn to it like moths to a flame. Immortal moths.)

No matter how many times I'd done this, I always felt slightly silly. . . . But here's the weird part: After a minute or so, something happens — something I can't explain. My whole body starts to sweat, especially my forehead, around my hairline. And I get a pounding insta-headache.

The book says to wait for a sign that you've made contact — a sweaty headache could be a sign of connection, right? — and then you have to concentrate on your intentions.

Dad.

It's Willa. I'm looking for you. Find me. Please.

I'd been repeating these words for more than a year. Once a day, sometimes twice.

There was no response.

There had never been a response.

I waited a few minutes in silence, then slid the ring off my finger.

Bye, Dad. Talk tomorrow . . . maybe.

I pictured the white light beginning to fade out, like it was on a dimmer switch.

Suddenly, the whole house gave a sudden bone-rattling jolt.

My first earthquake, I realized.



Then another thought dawned on me . . . one that left me with a sour taste in my mouth.

Had it really been an earthquake . . . or was it just in my head?

Stranger things had happened, unfortunately. It wasn't just headaches that struck like a thunderclap. I'd catch swiftly moving blurs of foggy light at the edges of my vision and hear random sounds without any possible source. I'd lose my footing when I walked — like that horrible feeling when you reach the bottom of the stairs and expect another step but there isn't one.

It was all those things. And even more than that, it was this sense I had — almost an instinct — that I couldn't trust myself.

It had begun shortly after my father's death. Mom, a brand-new widow, was understandably concerned that her daughter was suddenly having bizarre episodes. She was convinced I had a tumor and insisted on getting me a slew of medical tests, including an echocardiogram and an MRI. Thankfully, the doctors gave us the all clear, and for the past year or so, things had been calm. In fact, Mom was so sure my problems were in the past that she never bothered to mention any of it to Jonathan.

What she didn't know was that the problems weren't in the past.

I just wasn't telling her about them anymore. I taught myself to live this way, to make things easier for everyone.

Early on, one of the doctors suggested to Mom that the cause might be emotional, and that I should try talking to someone about my father's death. But I refused.



Believe me when I say that I could spend the rest of my life *not* talking about that morning.

There was a panicked knock at the door.

“Willa? Willa?” Mom shook the doorknob. “Are you all right? It’s locked! Can you let me in?”

I snapped back to reality and turned to blow out the candle, but the flame was already extinguished, black smoke floating lazily toward the ceiling. I shoved the ring under my pillow and opened the door.

Mom’s eyes were wide as she pulled me into a frantic hug. “Did you feel that? Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I said, wriggling free. I did feel okay — my mood was greatly improved by the knowledge that I wasn’t the only person who’d felt the jolt. “Is Jonathan okay?”

“Yeah, he’s fine.” She smiled sheepishly. “He says it hardly even qualified as a quake. Sorry to make a fuss. You know, if there’s ever an earthquake and you’re not here, you need to call me immediately to tell me you’re all right.”

“Even if I’m trapped in a pile of rubble?” I asked.

She turned a color I can only describe as “bright gray.”

“Mom, it was a joke.” *Note to self: no more jokes.* “You’re in California now. You have to loosen up a little or they’ll send you back to Connecticut.”

She gave me another hug. “Oh, look!” she said, peering over my shoulder. “You’re already settling in. How great.”

I glanced down at the candle.

Which was lit again.

“Really, Willa, I’m so pleased that you’re embracing all of this,” Mom said. “A lot of people wouldn’t.”

I smiled and tried to ignore the curious little chill that crawled up my spine.

Mom gave me a gentle pat on the cheek. “We’re ordering dinner in. Is Thai okay?”

“Sure,” I said.

“But not for a couple of hours. So unpack or read or . . . or maybe rest? Or whatever.”

I closed my door again and sat on the bed, then leaned over to blow out the candle. I took the ring out from under my pillow and tucked it back into the little suede bag. Then I opened the nightstand drawer and put the ring inside, careful to tap three times on the wood to drain any pent-up energy from the realm beyond.

Okay, yeah. I realize it all sounds a little over the top. Maybe even ridiculous. But ridiculous or not, I couldn’t stop myself. No matter how many times I vowed to quit, every night I found myself with the candle lit, the ring on my finger, trying to get through to my dad.

Because I needed to find him.

I needed to tell him I was sorry I killed him.

