

CHAPTER ONE



Why is it that when you don't want to think about something, you can't stop thinking about it?

From the second I woke up, the scene Amanda had witnessed at my house yesterday kept playing over and over in my head like some kind of sick YouTube video on repeat. I'd thought about it while I was getting dressed, while I was riding my bike to school, and even while Kelli and I stood by her locker and she tried to recap the entire plot of the Reese Witherspoon movie she'd caught just the tail end of last night. Now I was sitting in history class, hearing not Mr. Randolph explaining the causes of World War I, but my dad's voice in my head saying the same words over and over again while I tried to figure out what, exactly, Amanda had overheard. Everything, probably. The phone rang while I was upstairs looking for my Scribble Book, and since my dad was practically screaming into the receiver by the time I got back to the kitchen, the conversation had obviously begun a while back. I mean, consider-



ing how much she and I have talked, Amanda had obviously known *something* was going on. She knew more than anyone else at school did. But up until yesterday, she hadn't known *everything*. She hadn't known the worst of it. I mean, she knew about my mom, but she didn't know about the money.

And now she did.

The crazy thing was, she hadn't seemed surprised. It was almost as if somehow she'd guessed a long time ago . . .

". . . Which is why, yes, the assassination of the Archduke is the catalyst but is not the cause *per se*." I'm usually kind of into Mr. Randolph's class even though I'm not exactly what you'd call a history buff. He's really nice and patient and he explains everything clearly, and he's one of the only teachers at Endeavor who actually prepares you for the test he's going to give. Still, there was no way I could concentrate on this morning's lesson.

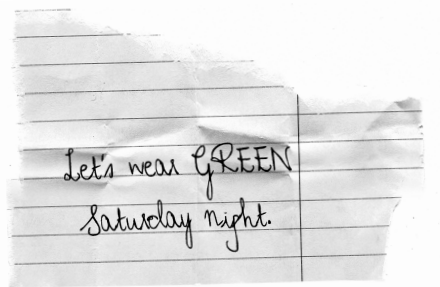
I shook my head and straightened up in my chair, clicking some lead out of my mechanical pencil. Perhaps if I resembled an attentive student, I would become one.

"Did you all write that down? *Entangling alliances*. If you remember nothing else from today, remember that."

The board was covered in notes, but Mr. Randolph had found room to write *entangling alliances* in letters almost six inches high and he'd underlined "entangling" about fifty times. I rolled my eyes at myself as I began to copy down the crucial phrase. No doubt *entangling alliances* *was* the only thing I'd be remembering from today's class. Too bad I had no idea what they were or who had them.



Just as I started writing *alliances*, Lexa Booker, who was sitting next to me, slid a crumpled piece of paper across my notebook. I palmed it expertly—Heidi and I have had enough classes together that I can pretty much make a note from her disappear in a nanosecond—and finished the word, then carefully unfolded the paper.



I looked up. The desks in Mr. Randolph's room are in a big horseshoe, and Heidi was all the way on the other side of it, but her eyes met mine and she raised her exquisitely shaped eyebrows. I nodded almost imperceptibly, grateful to have something to think about besides Amanda knowing even more about my screwed-up family than she had last week. This Saturday's party was going to be amazing, and the I-Girls—Kelli, Heidi, Traci, and yours truly (okay, I briefly spelled my name with an "i," but not anymore!)—the reigning queens of the ninth grade, were going in green. That was cool—I have a dark green fitted T-shirt, and once when we all went to the movies I wore it. Lee was there, and he'd said my eyes looked really pretty when I wore green. Thinking about Lee, I felt my face go pink, which is what happens to redheaded Irish girls

when we're embarrassed. Or scared. Or hot. Or just the slightest bit nervous or uncomfortable. Basically between twenty and a thousand times a day.

"Callista Leary?"

My head shot up at the sound of my full name. Had Mr. Randolph noticed the note going around the horseshoe? Some teachers, if they catch you passing a note make you read it out loud to the class. Not that this was such an incriminating mis-sive, but still. Then I realized it was a woman's voice that had said my name and Mr. Randolph wasn't even looking at me; he (along with everyone else in the room) had turned toward the door where one of the secretaries from the main office was standing.

"Um . . . that's me." Everyone was staring, and I could feel the heat spreading across my face and down my chest in a hard-core blush.

"You're wanted in the vice principal's office."

For a split second it was as though I'd just been addressed in a language other than English; I literally couldn't make sense of the words she'd spoken. "I'm . . . ?" I repeated stupidly.

"You can take your things," she added, bobbing her head with its tight bun. "You won't be coming back this period."

As if my befuddlement were written on my face, Mr. Randolph said, "You'll get the notes from someone tomorrow, Callie. Go with Mrs. Leong for now."

Suddenly I wasn't confused anymore, I was frightened. Could this have something to do with my mom? I stood up fast, nearly toppling my desk. Then my backpack got twisted

up in the chair and my shaking fingers couldn't work the zipper. I could practically hear everyone in the room pitying me.

As I passed her, Heidi whispered, "What happened?" Unlike Traci and Kelli, Heidi knew about my mom. She knew, but we never talked about it. Just like we never talked about anything else that happened that night. Ever.

I shook my head as a way of saying I had no idea, and as she reached out her hand to touch mine for a second, her lovely face wrinkled with concern, I had this really ugly thought. *Is she doing that because she's worried about me or because she wants it to look like she's worried about me?*

I seemed to be having those thoughts about Heidi a lot lately, but before I could turn back to check the expression on her face, I was outside the classroom with the door swinging shut behind me.

It was weird walking down the silent hallway. Normally I'm only in the corridors between classes, when there are a million other Endeavor students elbowing past each other to get to class. Now it was so silent I could actually feel the echo from the click of Mrs. Leong's chunky heels. I noticed a corner of an old homecoming banner had come loose, the heavy blue felt swaying in a breeze I couldn't feel. "The Endeavor Enders: We don't GOT spirit, we ARE spirits!" How had anyone ever thought having a ghost for a mascot was a good idea? And why did I have to be reminded of ghosts now, when for all I knew I was about to find out that my mom was . . .

Mrs. Leong pushed open the door to the main office. Here there was no hint of the silence of the hallways—a dozen

phones seemed to be ringing at once, a Xerox machine was going about a hundred miles a minute and at least two other secretaries were busily typing away at their computers. It was like I was in the headquarters of a major corporation instead of the office of the Endeavor Unified Middle and High School.

Remembering Amanda's suggestion for a new school motto ("We don't stand a ghost of a chance!") momentarily held my anxiety at bay, but my stomach sank as Mrs. Leong gestured toward Vice Principal Thornhill's office. "Go in. He's expecting you." I had a second to consider the irony that it was Mr. Thornhill who was about to witness my getting the worst possible news about my mom. For no good reason, my dad totally hates him, yet it was in this man's office that he'd have to tell me the awful truth.

Heart pounding, I pushed open the door, sure the next sight I'd see would be my father's tear-stained face.