

Chapter 1

“Didn’t your father die when you were ten?” I asked.

“That’s what they told me,” Mo replied.

Sister Virginia waved her finger and shushed at us.

“Then how are they burying him tomorrow?” I asked in a quieter voice.

Mo shrugged. “He came back. Now he’s dead again.”

I tried to make sense of that while glancing at our proctor to judge her level of annoyance. The good Sister sat at her desk, her whole body taut, momentarily engrossed in a romance novel she’d covered with brown paper to hide the shirtless man on the front.

As if that would fool anyone. It was difficult to guard a secret at St. Catherine’s High School. I hardly bothered trying. Whatever you thought was carefully hidden was probably common knowledge, and the rumor-mongers made up the rest. I should know. I was a favorite target.

Shirley James, self-appointed pain in my ass, gave me a superior smirk from across the rickety, study hall table. I deliberately rocked it hard enough to make all her carefully arranged pencils roll onto the floor. She yelped before diving after them.

“Shirley,” Sister Virginia scolded.

My nemesis scowled at me. I pretended to be so engrossed in my studies that I didn’t notice, but I couldn’t keep the corners of my mouth from curving up.

Last year, two girls named Megan had run around the school starting rumors and manipulating the nuns for their own amusement, including tap dancing on my reputation. Then at the beginning of this semester one of them transferred to St. Agnes and the other went silent. The

remaining Megan now spent most of her time sitting in the library reading by herself. Those two had terrorized everyone, but the attacks from Shirley seemed personal. I never saw her giving anyone else a hard time, though I had no idea what her problem was with me. I almost missed the Megans.

Outside, storm clouds were gathering. The classroom windows were all shut tight for fear it might rain since everyone in Los Angeles acted as if we'd melt like the witch in the *Wizard of Oz* if we got wet. The cramped space and closed windows were making me claustrophobic, but I was hoping it would also mask our chatter.

Most of the thirty girls in the room were studying in groups. A certain amount of noise was expected, but our sharp-eared teacher seemed to notice the difference between conferring and conspiring. Except Sister Virginia didn't react when Mary Elizabeth started carving "Class of '76" into the table with her pen. If I scratched the table, I'd be in detention the rest of the semester.

"Come to the service with me," Mo whispered as she knocked the tabletop with her knees. I don't know what that bump interrupted, but Shirley gave a loud gasp that made me smile.

"They won't let me out of school to go to some other family's funeral, will they?"

Mo pretended to write on the paper in front of her. "They have Mass at funerals. They'll let you out of school to go to Mass. Besides, the nuns are all trying to be nice because I supposedly just lost my father."

"Good point," I said. They had treated me the same way. I remembered being called into the office shortly after my transfer to the school. The principal wanted to offer sympathy for my

broken home. She gave me condolences for not having a father, and mine just lived across town. Divorce was normal to me. I think every couple in my family was a second marriage, all my aunts and uncles, all my adult cousins. But I found out it wasn't normal for Catholics. Even in my sophomore year, St. Catherine's was still foreign territory. I needed a travelogue.

“What about your family? Won't they mind if I show up?” I asked. “My family wouldn't want strangers around if we were crying and carrying on.”

“They won't care.” Mo chuckled. “Eileen refused to go. Then Peter said he doesn't have to if she doesn't. It started a big mutiny.” She paused for a moment when Sister Virginia fidgeted around in her seat, then she continued. “Mom was happy I want to go. When I told her I was inviting you, she offered to come pick you up.”

“If Eileen and Peter don't want to go, why do you?” It seemed unwise to ignore hints left by older siblings.

“No one will tell me anything. Don't you think it's weird? Where was he all those years? Why did everyone tell me he was dead?”

Sister Virginia looked up from her book to give a warning stare. Everyone else at our table was heads down, hard at work, but I pretended not to know who was being reprimanded. Instead I looked around indignantly for the troublemakers as if I were helping her police the room.

“Sandra, Imogene, get back to work.”

“Yes, Sister,” we said in unison. She frowned at us, then smiled as she returned to her fantasy lover.

Shirley glanced over triumphantly, grandma-sweater draped over her shoulders, the braids on either side of her head like dangling turds. I stared her down. Too bad she was such an idiot. She was one of the few other black students in a school of mostly Irish and Hispanic Catholic girls. It was like looking at my evil, fashion-challenged twin. We both adjusted our glasses at the same time, pushing them back up our noses. I turned back to Mo.

“I don’t think they’ll tell you all the answers at the service tomorrow,” I whispered.

Mo nodded as she pushed a piece of notebook paper between us and scribbled on it with her pencil. I thought she’d decided to pass notes instead of talking. It took me a moment to realize she was pretending to work for Sister Virginia’s sake.

“That’s why I want you to come with me,” she replied softly. “You can help me figure out what’s going on.”

“Me?” I said a little too loudly. I sensed movement at the front of the room but didn’t dare look up or say anything else. Instead, I wrote “why me?” on her paper.

“Because you solved that murder,” she wrote back, then quickly erased it.

I sat back in my chair, stunned. I still had mixed feelings about what happened last summer and hadn’t told many people about it. I glanced at Mo suspiciously. Maybe I’d told one too many. When I confided in her, I hadn’t thought she would use that story as a job qualification.

“Your father was murdered?” I asked.

“I think he got hit by a car or something. I just want to know where he was for the last six years and why everyone lied about it.”

I was uneasy about sticking my nose where it didn't belong again, but I needed every friend I could get.

“Sure,” I said. “I'll come.”

It wasn't like last time. Her father was already dead. What harm could I do?

I changed my mind by the time I got home. Sitting on the couch behind my little sister while she watched cartoons, I tried to think of a way out of the dilemma I'd created. How would Mo react if I couldn't figure out what was going on? The trouble last summer involved people I'd known since elementary school. I didn't know her family from Adam. They weren't going to line up to tell me their secrets, and Mo might dump me as a friend if I failed.

Then again, it hadn't turned out well for me last summer when I succeeded. Did I really want to get mixed up in another mysterious death? Last year's antics left me with parents that didn't trust me and a complete lack of friends. Well, an almost complete lack. Imogene was new to St. Catherine's and had befriended me before she knew any better. Now that I'd offered to help, I felt damned if I did and damned if I didn't.

My sister sat on her heels in her usual spot, close enough to touch the TV. Her braids curved around her ears like horns. I stared at the back of her favorite Minnie Mouse shirt, hoping for inspiration. Then as my mother's car drove up the driveway, I had a brainwave. I didn't need to do anything. My mother would never say yes. Mo couldn't blame me for that.

Mom bustled in carrying two grocery bags. “Hi, kids. Robbie, make a salad,” she said. “Sandy, start chopping up this broccoli. I'll be right back.”

My sister and I took up our stations in the kitchen to begin dinner preparations.

Robbie ripped up lettuce with her back to me. “Rickie’s mad at me.”

“What’d you do this time?” I shook my head and awaited the latest installment of the love / hate relationship between my sister and the little boy up the street.

“Nothing.”

I waited.

“I hit his dog with a stick.”

I tried not to laugh. “Yeah, that would piss him off, don’t you think? Why’d you do that?”

“It kept sniffing my behind. I told Rickie to call him, but he thought it was funny.”

“The dog’s okay, right?”

“Of course. I just swiped it, then Rickie called him back and went in his house.” She looked at me expectantly.

I wondered how much to tell her about my day. “I got invited to a funeral tomorrow.”

“Can I go?” Robbie asked.

“I don’t think I’m going.”

“Why not?”

Mom returned. Instead of answering Robbie’s question, I began my ploy.

“Mom, how come I’ve never been to a funeral?”

She stopped opening packages of steak and looked at me a moment before she responded.

“Actually, you have. Your father and I took you to your grandfather’s funeral when you were four. Afterwards you kept asking when you were going to die. We decided not to bring you anymore. Why?”

“I have a new friend at school.”

“That’s nice.” Mom began pounding the steaks with a mallet.

“Her father died, and she wants me to go with her to the funeral tomorrow.”

“I’m sorry to hear that about your friend. Do you want to go?”

“Yes,” I lied. That should clinch it. I’d been on unofficial restriction for months.

“Then I think you should.”

What? “It’s a day off from school.”

“Did you or your friend ask the school?”

“Yes. Mo did.” This conversation wasn’t heading in the right direction, but I couldn’t think of a way to redirect it.

“Mo?” Robbie asked. “Like Three Stooges?”

“My friend’s name is Imogene Fitzpatrick.” I frowned at Robbie. “We call her Mo.”

“What did the school say?” Mom asked.

My gaze dropped. “They said it was okay.” I’d learned the hard way not to lie about anything school related.

“Then it should be fine,” Mom replied. “I think you’re old enough to handle it now, don’t you?”

How do you tell your mother you disagree when she’s telling you you’re old enough for something? You don’t, that’s how. I nodded, acknowledging defeat. Then I brightened. Mo wouldn’t know what my mother said. I could tell her I didn’t get permission.

“I’ll call Mrs. Fitzpatrick after dinner to find out the details.”

Robbie spun around from chopping tomatoes. “Can I go?”

“No,” Mom said. “You’re going to school tomorrow.”

Robbie harrumphed. The chopping noise got louder.

Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad. Going to the funeral didn’t mean I had to get involved with what happened to Mo’s father. Hopefully, I could talk her out of that. I’d just keep her company, mind my own business, and try not to freak out if someone started crying. At least it was a day out of school.

Once the steaks were in the oven, Mom went to talk to my step-father, Bert, who was reading the newspaper in the living room. The broccoli I’d chopped was steaming in a pot and Robbie finished the salad, but we stayed in the kitchen. The TV was too close to Mom and Bert. I took a seat at the table. Robbie followed suit, peppering me with questions.

“Do you really have a friend at school?”

“Of course! You thought I made that up?” I frowned at her, but she held my gaze.

She shrugged. “You never mentioned her before. She’s never come to the house.”

“She lives far away.” Actually I had no idea where she lived, but I assumed it was far. I’d never seen any Irish people in our neighborhood. “And we’ve only been hanging out for a few weeks.”

“Why did her father die? Was he old?”

“I don’t think he was that old. I don’t know why he died.”

“Why did she ask you to the funeral?”

“Mo doesn’t know why he died either. She wants me to help her figure out what’s going on.”

Robbie snorted. “You can’t figure anything out.”

I glared at her. “Why not? I figured out what Voyce and those guys did last summer.”

“Hah. They told you what happened. That’s not solving anything, not like on Scooby Doo.”

I couldn’t think of a good answer, so I went back to the TV. My eyes teared up, but I couldn’t pin down why I was so upset by what Robbie said. Two of our favorite sitcoms were on, but I turned to a stupid-looking drama to piss her off. Now I was glad Mom said yes. I would prove my sister wrong.