

Chapter One



THE SOUND OF THE ALARM pulsed against the walls, and echoed back so loud it filled my head as well as the hospital corridor. I ran for the stairs, no way I was going to take the elevator. Down them, two at a time, my heart pounding in my chest, my feet pounding on the steps, my head pounding as if it were about to explode. One floor, another, another. Six, five, four. Between the third and second floors, I bumped into a woman who was inching down the steps, clutching the railing. She yelped, but I didn't turn around—kept moving as fast as I could.

When I reached the main floor, there was chaos. Nurses flew by me, charts in hand, ushering flocks of hobbling,

shuffling patients towards the doors. A few people pushed intravenous stands ahead of them, the IV bags wobbled as they threatened to come loose from their supports. Hospital gowns flapped open, backsides flashed. Not pretty. A couple of wheelchairs were pushed toward the main doors by people in street clothes, probably visitors. One nurse held a crying baby. Another held the arm of an old man, urging him to keep moving. He was also crying. I blended into the frantic crowd and left the hospital.

I walked a few blocks until my heart settled down, then called the theatre, even though I knew it was too late. Maybe, just maybe, they'd waited for me; maybe the director really wanted me for the part. This audition was for a large role in the first community theatre production of the season. It wasn't just another high school play; this was my chance to act with really good amateurs. The part was made for me, and the role was a big one. I'd be on stage almost all the time. If I got this part, I would show everyone what I could do. It could be my big chance—for a minute, in spite of everything, I had another vision of my name in lights in Times Square.

I'd made it through two earlier auditions. At first there were nearly twenty of us, then eight, and today was the final call-back—only me and a blonde girl. I was the better actress. I deserved that part. I could have had it if . . .

I got the director's voice mail, left a message. "Hi, this is Darrah Patrick. I had to go to the hospital with my brother. An emergency. I'm sorry I missed the audition, could I please come tomorrow?"

I was going to say that I'd memorized the lines in the scene he had given me to study, blah, blah, blabbity-blah. But instead I gave my phone number and hung up.

It wasn't two minutes before my phone buzzed. "Got your message, Darrah. I hope there's nothing seriously wrong with your brother, and I'm very sorry you couldn't be at the audition. When you didn't show up, we assumed you'd changed your mind. So I told the other girl the part was hers. I'm sure you understand."

"Of course," I lied.

"We'd love to have you help backstage. We could use someone to handle the props. Would you be interested?"

My voice was tight as I said I'd let him know about being props girl, goodbye and thanks. Thanks for nothing.

Props? Moving coffee mugs and vases around during scene changes and making sure the whiskey bottle was filled with tea steeped to the correct colour—no thanks. I wanted to be on stage, under the lights, acting.

But I wouldn't be because, instead of taking me to that final audition, my hysterical mother had made me come with her to the hospital. She was speeding and leaning on the horn as if this were a real emergency instead of just another one of Andrew's seizures. He'd had it in the car while they were waiting for me in the school pick-up zone. But by the time I got out of class, it was over. He'd already passed out, the way he always did after one of his "fits," and Mom was doing what she always did—rushing him to the hospital. She didn't need me to sit beside him and hold him up; his seat belt was doing

a good job of that. I should never have climbed into the car with her.

After the director's call, it took me half an hour to reach home. I had left my jacket in Mom's car, and the sunny September day had turned cold and cloudy, but I walked slowly anyway, ignoring my freezing fingers. My phone buzzed once, then twice more. Mom. I ignored it. It buzzed again. Dad. I ignored him, too.

When I got home, it was late, after five. Dad was home, early for him, and there was a policewoman in our living room.

"We've been waiting for you, young lady," said the constable. "Sit down."

"Oh, Darrah!" said Mom. "Oh, Darrah, oh, Darrah, oh . . ."



At first I denied it. "Of course I didn't pull the fire alarm. Why would I?" There had been no one in the hallway to see me. As mad as I had been, I'd still had sense enough to look around.

The constable grinned. "Ever hear of security cameras, miss? Hospitals are full of them."

"Whatever." I shrugged. "So what? It's not a crime."

"Actually, it is. You have violated Section 437 of the Criminal Code of Canada."

Mom gasped. "What's that?"

"Darrah is guilty of 'willfully, without reasonable cause, by

outcry, ringing bells, using a fire alarm, telephone or telegraph, or in any other manner making or circulating or causing to be made or circulated an alarm of fire . . .” the constable itemized, reading from her notebook. “Section 437.”

I shrugged. “Whatever. It’s no big deal.”

“It’s against the law to shout ‘fire’—or pull a fire alarm—when there isn’t any danger. Just as much as stealing or murder is against the law. It’s a very big deal.”

“But I’m not a criminal.”

“You are now.” The constable’s face was serious.

“Why did you . . . oh, Darrah . . .” Mom again, crying harder.

“I don’t know. I guess I was upset.” My voice was thin, my throat seemed to have tightened so much I could barely get words out.

“Upset? Please explain.” The constable poised a pencil over her notebook. The constable was short and had dark, curly hair. Her uniform fit perfectly, and she had a dimple on her cheek. But even though she was tiny and cute, she scared me.

“Mom promised I could audition, said she’d take me, then she wouldn’t drop me at the theatre.”

“But, Darrah, Andrew was . . .”

“Mom, the doctors told you not to take him to the hospital every time he has a seizure. They taught you how to look after him. You could have—”

“Your mother was worried about your brother.”

“Sure, Dad. Like always.”