

Prologue

Summoning every scrap of defiance I had left, I pulled my knees up to my chin and met her eyes. I repeated the line from *Labyrinth*, my favourite film, in my head. *You have no power over me.*

She might be my therapist, but she couldn't make me talk. Not if I refused.

'I don't want to talk about it.'

'I know you don't. But if we're really going to work through this, we're going to have to talk about it. There's no other way.'

'But I'm fine now! I haven't had a panic attack in weeks. My grades are back to where they were before . . .the *thing* happened. I've done what I came here to do. I'm cured!'

'You are functioning much better than when you first came here, that's true. But functioning is not the same as cured, Llewella. You know that, don't you?'

'I'm . . . not ready. I don't want to go there. I'm scared the panic will come back. I can't go through that again. I'd rather just carry on as I am.'

'OK. It's your call. I can't force you to do anything you don't want to do. But remember this – our traumas are like bags of poison we carry around inside of us. In this room, you can lance them safely and it'll be painful for a bit, but I'll be here to help you deal with it. If you leave here today with that bag of poison intact, something else will burst it, one day. Probably when you least expect it . . .'

Two years later . . .

Autumn Term

'All that glitters is not gold;
Often have you heard that told'

The Merchant of Venice

Act 2, Scene 7

Chapter 1

It was one of those days when the clouds hung low and the air felt dense and heavy as I sweated my way up the long hill towards St Edith's High School for Girls. I hated it when the weather was like this.

It wasn't just the atmosphere which felt oppressive. Despite having spent the summer avoiding this part of town in a futile attempt to get into the 'holiday spirit', everything remained spookily unchanged. The square, grey facade of the bus station still blighted even the sunniest of skies. The green paint was still peeling from the front gate of the first house on the left at the bottom of the hill. An untamed tree still spilled on to the pavement halfway up, requiring even the tiniest of pupils to dart into the road to go around it. In about twenty minutes, the street would fill with SUVs as mums with huge sunglasses, designer handbags and faces frozen with Botox – or else their identical-but-younger au pairs – dropped off pupils who didn't live within walking distance. After attending St Edith's for six of my seventeen years on this planet, everything I saw, heard and felt was depressingly predictable.

Chiddingwell, the suburban Surrey town where I'd lived since I was five, was one of those places where everyone knew everyone's business. You could obtain a reputation in Chiddy merely by existing. Some residents chose to stay here after their education, getting jobs as office assistants in one of

the solicitors or estate agents we seemed to have in abundance, but I couldn't think of anything worse. There was only one acceptable way to be a young human woman in Chiddy – white, slender, glamorous and conforming. I was none of those things. I'd spent my life here feeling alien, dreaming of being unleashed into the vibrant, diverse world I'd read about in books and seen in films; to finally find my tribe.

I took in an impatient, raggedy breath, reminding myself that right now, everything was fine. I tried to 'consciously count my blessings', like my therapist had taught me. I was safe. I was healthy. I was on target for all As in my exams. I practised the technique I'd learned to calm my mind – breathe in for a slow count of five, out for a slow count of seven. To make sure I didn't rush, I counted three of my rapid footsteps for each 'beat'. It helped, but I still felt irritable.

I heard someone running behind me and turned to see it was Olivia. A fellow oddball, Olivia and I had bonded in Year 7 over a mutual love of acting. Whenever I got overwhelmed by the sense of being a fish out of water, it was Olivia I sought out. She could usually help me make sense of life at St Edith's, or at least laugh at it with me.

'Hey!' she gasped, putting her hand on my shoulder, forcing me to stand still. I wondered if she could feel that I was damp with perspiration and resisted the strong urge to shrug her off. 'I was calling you but I don't think you heard. You walk so fast!' She put her hands on her thighs for a few seconds, breathing heavily.

I studied her for a moment, thinking how unfair it was that she was this unfit, apparently survived on a diet of Haribo and

cheesy Wotsits and yet remained enviably thin. I immediately felt self-conscious, my hands travelling to my stomach which I could feel straining against the waistband of my trousers.

About three years ago I'd promised myself I'd lose weight by the time I left sixth form. But then I'd think that going on a diet made me a traitor to the body-positivity movement and I would tear into tubes of Pringles with new-found zeal. As a result, I was thought of as the 'pudgy' girl at school and I wasn't sure I wanted to spend three years at university wearing the same label.

I'd once overheard one of the Botox Mums saying, as she swiped a Twix out of her daughter's grasp, 'a fat girl will only ever be seen as a fat girl, no matter what else she achieves.' I was appalled by what she said, but somehow it also stuck with me. I found myself wondering how I looked, through that woman's eyes. It's weird how you can despise everything a person stands for, but still want them to like you at the same time.

Together, Olivia and I started back up the hill, me making a conscious effort to slow my footsteps.

'So, who do you think got in?' Olivia asked without preamble, as soon as she'd got her breath back.

There was no need to ask her what she meant. Just before summer break, we had auditioned for our school's annual Shakespeare production. This year, it was going to be *The Merchant of Venice*. The plays were a big deal at St Edith's. They were directed by Professor Coleman – a huge, booming, eccentric man with a penchant for flamboyant waistcoats, who swore within the context of beautifully constructed sentences and fashioned his bushy eyebrows into elaborate peaks.

He was in equal parts terrifying and inspiring and let it be known to anyone involved in his plays that he wouldn't let the trifling fact that we were teenage amateurs deter him from directing a masterpiece worthy of the Globe.

Anyone remotely interested in drama knew that to score a part in one of Professor Coleman's productions meant you had 'made it' and usually the main roles were given to Year 13s. Seeing as I was just over six feet tall and at an all-girls' school, I'd auditioned for two of the main male parts – Shylock and Antonio. Casting was supposedly a 'blind' process, but the taller pupils always somehow ended up cast in the male roles because, well – stereotypes and patriarchy, I supposed, and I wanted to maximise my chances.

Shylock, as the villain of the piece, would be fun, but it was Antonio I really wanted. The way I read it, Antonio was an outcast – outwardly confident but a misfit trapped in his own head and prone to bouts of low mood. All of which I could relate to.

Traditionally, auditions took place during the last week of the summer term and the cast was pinned up on the sixth-form notice board by the time school began again in September. Hence why Olivia and I were half an hour earlier than usual, along with a smattering of people doing theatre studies or from drama club, all huffing our way up the hill while trying (and failing) not to appear too eager. I had some ideas about who had been given which role, but I didn't want to say them out loud in answer to Olivia's question and jinx anything.

'I couldn't possibly speculate,' I told her.

'OK, so, one – you're not in a Shakespeare play now, so why are you using words like "speculate"?' Olivia retorted, but there

was a smile on her face. She loved to tease me about my habit of using words she considered archaic, but I knew it came from a place of affection. ‘And two – you know the list is already pinned up. There’s nothing we can do to change it. So you don’t have to worry about, like, tempting fate, or whatever.’

‘Well, I think Charlotte’s probably a shoo-in for Portia,’ I replied, carefully. I didn’t like Charlotte, but I couldn’t decide whether it was because of her (lack of) personality or because I was jealous of her. Until I had worked that out, I had to try hard not to let my dislike show. After all, everyone knows fourth-wave feminists do not display envy; women should support other women unconditionally.

Charlotte was a quintessential PST (Perfect Surrey Teenager). She had blemish-free, porcelain skin; long silky blonde hair which naturally fell as though it had been carefully styled and a physique which was somehow both slender and curvy at the same time. She was a decent actor and had an OK singing voice, but seemed to be given opportunities over and above what her talent merited. Last year, she had played Rosalind in *As You Like It* and I didn’t think she had done the Bard’s brave, strong-willed heroine any justice with her two-dimensional performance. But that could have just been my bitterness talking. I would literally sever a limb for that part.

‘Yeah,’ Olivia replied, with what I thought might have been the subtlest of eye-rolls. ‘I really hope I get Bassanio.’

I hoped so too. Olivia had been trying for a lead role for years and had always been given a chorus part. But last year she’d really dedicated herself to ‘EMBODYING THE ESSENCE OF THE FUCKING CHARACTER’ (as Professor Coleman

was fond of saying) in drama club and I reckoned she stood a decent chance.

‘Well. Here goes!’ I said with a thin-lipped smile as the red-brick entrance to St Edith’s loomed, ancient and imposing, ahead of us.

Kara, Head Girl and known as the school swot on account of her nothing-but-A*s record for absolutely everything, was sitting behind a desk in reception. I noticed she was wearing an immaculate black trouser suit and white shirt without a crease in sight, and wondered how she found the time to be so put-together.

‘Ah, the drama crew!’ Kara exclaimed as Olivia and I pushed through the heavy glass doors. ‘I thought you’d be here early. You’re ticked off,’ she assured us, indicating a tablet in front of her on which, presumably, was a register. Kara loved doing this kind of extra-curricular school admin – it won her brownie points with teachers and, I was fairly certain, gave her a mildly thrilling power trip.

‘Off you go.’ She gestured in the direction of the notice board, just beyond her in our vast oak-and-brass-lined entrance hall, in a way that was borderline infuriating. She always acted like she was a teacher, giving us ‘permission’ to go about our day whenever the opportunity arose.

‘Thanks. See you later,’ I replied. I didn’t bother to ask her about her summer. Other girls at school seemed to have a knack for pretending to like people. They had lengthy, small-talk-packed conversations with others, then bitched about them the moment their back was turned. I really didn’t know how they found the requisite skill or energy.

Olivia and I practically sprinted to the board. I was surprised to notice we had gripped each other's hands at some point as we approached, although I didn't remember doing it. There, laminated as traditional and pinned at a precise angle, was the cast list. It might have been my imagination, but as the shiny surface caught the light from the chandelier overhead (donated to the school by an earl or a duke of somewhere in fifteen hundred and something-or-other) it looked as though it was actually glittering.

I could feel my heartbeat thundering in my ears as I scanned the list. Charlotte had, of course, got Portia. Shylock had gone to a girl in the year below called Rebecca who I didn't know that well but had absolutely smashed the minor role of Jaques the year before. Bassanio would be played by Olivia.

I caught her in a fierce embrace and jumped up and down, both of us squealing with delight. I was so happy for her.

'I'm so happy for you!' Olivia shrieked at a gazillion decibels and in a register probably more suited to dogs than humans.

'Wait, what?' I asked.

We broke apart, I ran my finger down the first few names and there I was.

Antonio: Llewella Williams.