

# PROLOGUE

APRIL 5, 2005

Texts to unknown number.

Rosalyn Chamberlain has fled Westdale  
Academy

As head of the Lilith Society, she kept a journal.  
Get it before the Liliths add it to the archives

Remove & destroy entries as needed

## CHAPTER ONE

FEBRUARY 5, 2024

I'm pacing the tiny apartment I shared with my mother, as if another piece of furniture I can sell will magically appear. I started with the easy stuff. Like Mom's bed, which I sold five days after her death and then spent two days sobbing about it, torn between being glad not to see the reminder and wanting to curl up under the covers and let the fading scent of her shampoo lull me to sleep.

I just need to cover the rent until May. Four more months and then I'll be eighteen and no one can call child services. I've researched summer jobs that include boarding, and in September I'll be off to college with a full scholarship.

I'm not going to make it to May.

My mother died in November, and it's a miracle I've gotten through the past three months, working two part-time jobs while making sure my grades don't drop enough to lose the scholarship. I've scraped out the savings account Dad left when he died in a work accident four years ago. His modest life insurance payout was already long gone. Mom had kept planning to

start her own policy, but there'd seemed no rush because, really, what were the chances of her dying just as young and as unexpectedly?

I look around again, but there's nothing left to sell. I'm already sleeping, eating, and studying on an air mattress. I wander into the kitchen and eye the appliances. Then I snort under my breath. They came with the apartment, and even if I could bring myself to steal them, someone was sure to notice the buyer wheeling it off down the hall.

When a knock comes at the door, I freeze and my heart races like a rabbit smelling a fox. That's my default mode these days, where every knock could be someone who's finally realized there's a seventeen-year-old living here alone.

"Miss Green?" a woman's voice says. "Liliana Green?"

Another knock, brisk and efficient. A government-official sort of knock. My heart's in full hammer as I peer through the peephole. On the other side is an older woman with a briefcase, her hair pulled back tight, dark circles under her eyes, worry lines permanently etched around her mouth. Beside her stands the landlord.

"I saw her go in there," the landlord says. "And like I told you, I haven't seen her mother in months. I'm worried about the kid."

No. He's worried about getting caught with an underage tenant. Or he found someone willing to pay more than the reduced rent Mom charmed him into.

Another knock, harder now. "Miss Green. I really need to speak to you about your living situation."

"Do you want me to unlock the door?" the landlord asks her.

My gaze flies to the chain, which is engaged. While they can't get in, that chain will tell them I'm here.

As the landlord jangles his keys, the woman gives a weary

nod. Then her phone rings. She lifts a hand, telling the landlord to wait while she answers.

“Delores Hoffman, DCFS,” she says.

DCFS. The Illinois Department of Child and Family Services. My stomach clenches.

I keep telling myself DCFS isn’t the bogeyman. But I have plans and dreams, and they start with that college scholarship, which the upheaval of foster care would endanger.

Please, I just need a few months.

“Who gave you this number?” Ms. Hoffman says into her phone.

A pause.

“Yes, I’m trying to speak to her right now but—”

Another pause. “I don’t know who this is—”

Pause. “Fine,” Ms. Hoffman snaps. “But I will be following up with the director on that.”

A moment later, I hear another woman’s voice, distant, as if through a cellphone speaker.

“Liliana.” Her Southern accent reminds me of Mom and makes my heart ache. “My name is Cecilia Robbins. I’m your grandparents’ lawyer.”

My breath catches. She must mean my mom’s parents. My dad was raised by a single mom who died when I was little. My mother had been estranged from her family since before my birth, and I’d never even considered tracking them down after she died. If Mom cut off all contact, she had a reason.

Ms. Robbins continues, “I’m sorry I didn’t get there before Ms. Hoffman arrived. I *am* on my way. Where are you now?”

“She’s in the apartment,” Ms. Hoffman says. “Refusing to answer the door.”

A soft chuckle. “Good. You stay right there, Liliana.”

Ms. Hoffman huffs. “I’m here to help her, not kidnap her.”

“Are you familiar with Chamberlain Enterprises, Ms. Hoff-

man?” Ms. Robbins says. “You may not recognize the name, but please check your text messages and you’ll see a link to the company’s standing on the Fortune 500 list. It’s number twenty-three.”

“I don’t—”

“Liliana’s grandparents own Chamberlain Enterprises.”

My head jerks up. I’m a business major. I know Chamberlain Enterprises—one of those massive multinational consumer corporations whose name the average person doesn’t recognize . . . but they *will* recognize the brands the company owns.

“I don’t see what that has to do with anything,” Ms. Hoffman says.

A soft laugh. “Oh, yes, you do, Ms. Hoffman. You understand perfectly.”

“I—”

“Liliana is the only child of their only child. Heiress to a billion-dollar fortune.”

A *what?* My breath catches, and my brain reels, unable to process those words.

Ms. Robbins continues, “Liliana, just stay where you are. I’m entering the building now.”

“It’s controlled entry,” the landlord says. “Someone will have to admit you.”

“Someone already did. They even held the door for me. Amazing where Ben Franklin can take you.”

I swear Ms. Hoffman grinds her teeth as the landlord blusters about security. Part of me thrills at the thought of this stranger coming to wrest me from the jaws of the DCFS. And another part of me screams that maybe I should just go with Ms. Hoffman, because I have no idea what would ever compel my mother to walk away from a family that owns a Fortune 500 company.

When heels click in the hall, I look into the peephole

again as someone appears. She's a Black woman in her mid-thirties, with model-worthy cheekbones and a tapered cut with loose curls on top. Expertly applied makeup. A gold choker. And a suit that would cover six-months' rent in this place. Mom might never have worn anything that didn't come from a consignment shop, but she had an eye for fashion, and she could tell a Dior pantsuit from a knockoff in two seconds flat.

If Ms. Robbins is telling the truth, then I know exactly where my mother came by her fashion sense.

Ms. Robbins turns to the door. "Liliana?"

When I don't answer, she nods. "All right. This is a lot, and it absolutely isn't what I intended for our first meeting. You go sit down and try to relax. This is going to take a few minutes."

"A few minutes?" Ms. Hoffman says. "You cannot expect me to turn over a vulnerable child to you because you *claim* to work for her *alleged* grandparents."

"Liliana, hon?" Ms. Robbins says. "I'd like to email you a few things. I know Ms. Hoffman won't be the only one who will require significantly more proof. Do you have a phone?"

I pause. Then I say, "I sold it," and something almost like pain ripples across Ms. Robbins's composure.

Her voice softens. "All right. I'm going to pass a phone through the mail slot on your door. Just give me a minute to transfer some files."

When the phone appears, it's not some "burner phone" like I see in movies. It's a brand-new smartphone.

"It's unlocked," she says. "Just check the file folder. You can look at the documents I transferred while Ms. Hoffman and I sort this out."

"This is ridiculous," Ms. Hoffman says. "Tell the girl to come out—"

"She is a Chamberlain," Ms. Robbins replies, her voice

lilting with amusement. “I don’t tell her to do anything. And I’d suggest you don’t either.”

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I’M SITTING on the floor in my apartment, going through what Ms. Robbins sent me. It’s mostly internet links, and I appreciate that she’s letting me look it up on my own, but I also know websites can be faked. I take what I need from them and then confirm through secondary sources.

Chamberlain Enterprises is owned by the Chamberlain family. That seems obvious, but it’s not always the case, and what throws me here is the thought that I never knew Mom’s maiden name. I knew her full name was Rosalyn, but she’d always gone by Rose. Rose Green.

There’s a DNA test report that supposedly proves Mom was the daughter of the Chamberlains. That could be faked, but one look at my grandparents tells me it’s not. My grandmother has the tiny build and oversized eyes I share with Mom, and an old photo of my grandfather shows the platinum blond hair Mom and I must have inherited from him.

I also look up Ms. Robbins herself. Cecilia Robbins. Graduated from Stanford. Also from someplace called Westdale Academy, which must be a fancy private school if it’s listed right beside Stanford. Immediately upon graduating, Ms. Robbins went to work for Chamberlain Enterprises, where her father is lead counsel. There’s a photograph, and it’s definitely the woman outside my door.

She also sent me another photo, one I can’t stop looking at. A picture of two teenage girls with their arms around each other’s shoulders. One is my mother and the other looks like Ms. Robbins.

I want to tell myself this is Photoshop or AI, and be furious

at such a cheap shot, pretending she was friends with my mother, but there are other photos too, of both of them, from toddlers to teens.

Not just friends.

Good friends.

The age works. Mom and Dad had me young—teenage pregnancy—and my research shows that Ms. Robbins is thirty-six, the same age as my mother.

One of the links she sent brings me to an old Savannah newspaper's society pages. The photo is of a girl dressed in fancy riding gear, hoisting a trophy beside a gray horse.

*Rosalyn Chamberlain, 12, Takes Home Gold in Dressage*

I stare at the photo. It's my mother, her smile unmistakable, with one corner of her mouth lifting higher than the other. It's also like looking at a photo of myself at that age . . . if I could ride a horse or knew what "dressage" even was.

This is my mother.

In a world I can't even imagine my mother inhabiting.

No, actually, I can totally picture her in that world. My funny, elegant mother, who charmed everyone she met. My mother fashioned a utopia in our home, and yet she never quite fit the world outside of it—the very average one of people struggling to make ends meet.

I can wonder what made her leave *her* world, but the answer comes when I turn to a photo sitting on the floor, the table that once held it long sold. A portrait of my parents—Rose and Will—beaming at each other, renewing their vows in a cheap Vegas chapel, like they did every five years. I have all those photos, and they're all like this, portraits of two people ridiculously in love.

A teenage pregnancy.

A Southern high-society family.

Did Mom leave?



Or was she pushed out?

And do I want to connect with grandparents who'd do that to their child? Their *only* child?

I think of Ms. Hoffman at the door, and I'm not sure I have a choice. But I'm about to find out.

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BY THE TIME I let Ms. Hoffman and Ms. Robbins—"call me Cecilia"—into the apartment, my fate has been decided. Ms. Hoffman's superiors have already been contacted, all the appropriate proof given, and I'm in the custody of Cecilia Robbins. I don't think it normally happens at that speed, but it does for my grandparents.

Do I accept this at face value? Of course not. My father taught me to conduct research and check my facts and trust no one. I'd never thought that was strange. It's not like Dad was some weird conspiracist. He was laid-back and chill, always ready with a bad joke and an easy laugh. But when it came to protecting us, he was as cagey as anyone with a tinfoil hat.

And maybe now I know why.

Why Dad had been so careful. Why we'd moved around so much. Why we'd lived practically everywhere except the South.

Did the Chamberlains try to get Mom back? Had my parents decided they didn't want that—the bridge long burned—and kept two steps ahead of people who could afford to hire the best private detectives?

Well, there's a reason Cecilia Robbins showed up at my door, isn't there? It's not as if I reached out. Not as if she could have come across Mom's obituary, when I'd never written one or held a service.

I don't just trustingly toddle along after Ms. Robbins. I look up Ms. Hoffman on the DCFS website. I insist on speaking to

## A DEADLY INHERITANCE

her superior by video, and that might be very irregular, but again, it takes only a few words from my new lawyer to arrange it.

Ms. Hoffman showed up at my door at four thirty this afternoon.

By eight, I'm on a flight to Savannah, with all my worldly possessions in a backpack.

## CHAPTER TWO

We fly commercial. That's what Cecilia says, though it just means we fly on a normal plane—as opposed, apparently, to a private jet, because, as she explains, they're a bad look these days. Oh, Chamberlain Enterprises has one, of course, but they don't use it when anyone might be watching.

Flying commercial does not mean flying “coach,” which seems to be the word for the section where most people sit. We're in first class, and the luxury of that is completely lost on me, as someone who's never even flown before.

When the meal arrives, Cecilia waves hers away, whispering to me, “It's terrible. I'll feed you properly later.”

The flight attendant hovers, tray outreached toward me, and my stomach growls loud enough for Cecilia to hear it. With a look that might be a flush of embarrassment, she takes the tray with thanks and hands it to me.

“When did you last eat?” she asks softly.

“I had lunch.” I won't mention that it was an apple from the box of “healthy snacks” my cafeteria puts out for free. When you're trying to keep a roof over your head, you calculate the

exact amount of food you need to get through the day without fainting. In my case, it's two bananas, one apple, and a packet of ramen mixed with canned tuna.

"How did my grandparents find me?"

Cecilia stiffens before catching herself. "Hmm?"

"How did my grandparents find me?" I repeat.

Silence stretches so long that I glance over.

Finally, she says, "Your mother sent me a photo every year at the holidays. When I didn't get one this year, I worried. I had . . . reason to believe she was last in Chicago. I hired investigators, but it took a while to find you."

"So it was you who found me. Not my grandparents." I focus on cutting into my chicken. "Are they meeting us at the airport?"

"Your grandparents are in Europe. Your grandmother isn't well."

"Ah."

That might explain why they sent their lawyer instead of coming to Chicago themselves. It doesn't explain why there's been no mention of even speaking to them. I'm pretty sure phones work in Europe.

"So what happens now?" I say. "Am I being whisked off to some grand estate to be raised as a proper heiress?"

"No, whisked off to Westdale Academy, to receive the best possible education, for admission to the best possible college."

I take a bite of chicken. "I've already been admitted to college. With a full scholarship."

"A state college."

"There's nothing wrong with that."

"You applied to three top-tier schools. Stanford. Harvard. Yale. I believe my alma mater was your first pick. Stanford for business, yes? An MBA?"

I say nothing, but my stomach flutters.

She continues, "You received early admission offers to all of them. *All*. But the top-tier ones didn't come with full scholarships, which you needed. So why did you apply to them?"

I cut a baby carrot in half. "Just dreaming."

"Well, you don't need to dream anymore. Stanford is yours. I can accept the offer on your behalf."

I stop, carrot halfway to my mouth. I'd only applied to those schools to see if I could get in. The thought of actually going to my top pick? And not having to worry about the cost?

I can't even process that. I'm not sure I dare. Maybe being the granddaughter of billionaires should have hit harder, but it's *too* big. When I was younger, I thought a billionaire had ten million dollars. Then I realized it was a *thousand* million, and my brain couldn't even conceive of that. How does anyone have that much money? *Why* does anyone have that much money?

I don't want to think about having billionaire grandparents. But going to Stanford? That's an actual dream, one that has just come true in the most casual way possible.

*Well, you don't need to dream anymore. Stanford is yours.*

Cecilia continues, "What you'll get at Westdale is more than a top-notch education. It's about making connections. Networking."

"Not my thing," I mumble as I quickly eat another carrot.

Her voice drops, softer. "It needs to start being your thing. You also need to spend time with kids like you. Kids who are accustomed to rubbing elbows with heiresses."

Rich kids, she means. I shiver as I think of the well-off students at some of my better schools. The popular, stuck-up ones who didn't even see people like me. Imagine a school *full* of them.

"I'm fine in a regular school," I say. "I'm already accepted at Stanford, so I don't need this Westdale place."

“You do,” she says, her voice still soft. “I’m afraid that’s non-negotiable. But trust me when I say it won’t be as bad as you think.”

“You went there,” I say, remembering what I saw online.

“As did your mom. I actually went *because* of her. We grew up together—my dad is head counsel for Chamberlain Enterprises, and while I had the grades for Westdale, I didn’t have the family connections. Your mom got me in, and I loved my time there. We both did. I know it sounds like some posh boarding school full of snobby brats, but Westdale is . . . unique.”

“How?”

Her lips quirk. “Do you want the full story or just the parts that concern you?”

“Full story.”

“Okay, then.” She takes a deep breath. “Let’s go back to the late 1800s. Higher education in the South is pretty much nonexistent. You won’t even see a public high school until the 1900s. Southern families who want a good education for their kids send them north. But there’s also a push for the New South. Industrialization, education, progressive thought, moving away from the . . .” She makes a face.

“The antebellum South.”

“Yep, and the founders of Westdale saw an opportunity. Start a private boarding school at home. A prep school—preparing students for college. Headhunt top teaching talent. Focus on progressive politics. Build something to rival northern prep schools. Which they did. Initially, it was about fifty students over four years of high school, extremely exclusive, only the wealthiest Southern families. As Westdale’s reputation grew, it stopped focusing on the South and expanded to include three feeder schools—outside Atlanta, New York, and Los Angeles. Westdale itself became only for

seniors and only for select students from those feeder schools.”

I frown. “How does that work?”

“Prospective students attend one of the feeder schools, which are still *very* exclusive. The best of *those* are accepted to Westdale for their senior year, making it the most exclusive program in America. To get in, you need the money and connections to be accepted by one of those three feeder schools and *then* you need to apply to Westdale like you’d apply to college. Grades first, followed by service work and athletics. That leaves a maximum of forty kids, all seniors, all valedictorian-level students, like you.”

“That’s . . . daunting.”

Her eyes sparkle. “But maybe a little exciting, too? Westdale doesn’t have any silver-spoon kids coasting through life. No spoiled socialites who major in partying. These kids are driven. Ambitious. Top performers, every last one.”

“Is the school business oriented? Are they all from corporate families?”

She shakes her head. “That was one of the early mandates of Westdale—that it would recognize excellence in all areas. The unity of commerce, science, and art.” She catches my look and smiles. “You like that.”

“It’s interesting.”

“That is definitely one word to describe Westdale.”

I think it through, looking for more questions to ask. “So by now, being the start of second term, they’ve all applied to college.”

“A formality really. Anyone who gets into Westdale is guaranteed to get into the college of their choice.”

“Then why go to Westdale?”

“Prestige, but it’s also a reward. Once they’re in, they can

relax and enjoy their final year, while making meaningful connections for their careers.”

“Everyone just hangs out and enjoys a top-notch education they no longer need for college?”

“Why not? They’ve worked hard. Now they get to relax and do that very important networking.”

I shake my head. “Students like that don’t relax.” Students like me, I mean, though I don’t say it. “They competed to get in, which means they want something only Westdale can offer.”

A flutter of her hand. “Some of them want to be named Optima, but that’s not important—”

“What’s Optima?”

A long pause. Then, as if reluctantly, she says, “Each year, one student joins an elite group that’s made up of all former winners. It doesn’t concern you.”

“I’m disqualified because I’m enrolling late.”

“No, but you don’t need to run for Optima.”

I bristle. “Because I’m a public school student and not on their level? I couldn’t win, so I shouldn’t run?”

“No, because you don’t need it. You’re a Chamberlain. There’s nothing you’d get from making Optima that you don’t already have. You can just relax and focus on making friends and getting used to your new life.”

With that, she opens her phone. Conversation over. In other words, whatever this “Optima” thing is, she’s not talking about it.

Which means I definitely want to know more.

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AFTER THE FLIGHT, a driver conveys us to a hotel. I’m still unsettled—okay, maybe also a little grumpy—from the Optima



conversation. Being introverted means I can be mistaken for non-competitive, when nothing could be further from the truth. It doesn't even matter whether I want the prize; I just like to win. If there's a competition at this school for the best of the best, then I will want to prove that I *could* be that student, that I'm at least a serious competitor. I'll especially want to prove that I can do it without the privileges—boarding schools, tutors, job-free summers—the others have enjoyed.

My mood lifts when we reach the hotel, where I get a suite bigger than my entire apartment. The bathroom has a bidet, a toilet, a sunken tub, and a massive shower. There are four TVs—for the tub, the bed, the living room, and . . . the front hall. Under what circumstances is someone watching TV in the front hall?

After Cecilia leaves, I imagine Mom being here. I picture her rolling her eyes at the luxury but enjoying it, too. Enjoying it because it was a reminder of her old life.

She'd seemed so at home in our unending string of rented houses. She'd walk through each and say, "This is good, Will. I can make it work," and Dad would take her hand and say, "We can." Then they'd throw themselves into turning those run-down places into homes: Dad painting and fixing, Mom scouring thrift shops for curtains and artwork, and filling the house with the smell of baking.

I always figured this was how they grew up. Making do with what they had. I knew Dad did, with a single mom and zero support from his absent father. I presumed Mom's life had been the same and that when Dad brought home some little luxury for her—fancy chocolates or soaps—she loved them because they were something she'd never had. Except now I know she'd grown up in a world where people probably never ate corner-store chocolate or used drugstore soap.

Had she been faking contentment for Dad's sake? I honestly

don't think so. I look back, and I don't remember ever glimpsing anything else.

Maybe, if you've had it all, you don't mind leading a simpler life. Your idea of what's important changes. And what was important to Mom had been Dad and me. Oh, she had her own interests—reading, shopping, volunteer work—but she'd always joked that she belonged in an earlier time, one where a woman could aspire to a career as a mom and wife and no one would bat an eye.

The new story seems to be that Mom was a young woman from a wealthy family, who left Westdale and was disowned for a teenage pregnancy, but she never regretted it because she was in love with my dad. She embraced her new life and didn't look back.

That's the happy answer. The easy answer.

But is it the truth?

When things got bad after Dad died, Mom still never went to her parents for help. For billionaires, a few thousand dollars to get back on her feet would have been like tossing pennies into a fountain. I can see her refusing to give them the chance to say "I told you so." But for my sake, she'd grovel. For me, she'd swallow her pride.

So why hadn't she done that? And does the fact she hadn't mean I really shouldn't be here?

For now, I think I need to trust her best friend and remember that I don't need to deal with my grandparents. When the dust settles, though, and no one's watching, I'll start digging, because I have a lot of questions to answer.

Investigating will wait until I have a laptop, which Cecilia has assured me will arrive tomorrow. For now, I use the temporary phone Cecilia gave me to send emails to anyone who'll miss me at school. Then I do something I haven't done since Dad died, and we gave up our rented houses for tiny apart-

ments: I take a bath. I fill that tub to the brink and pour in lavender bath salts.

I stash the other two bottles—sage and lemon—in my backpack. When we took road trips, we’d sometimes stay in “nice” hotels. Mom always took whatever toiletries we didn’t use, reasoning that we’d paid for them.

I spend way too long in that steaming, lavender-scented bath. Then I hop into the shower to wash my hair, because if they’re giving me both options, I’m using them. Afterward, I pull on the thick cotton bathrobe and shuffle into my huge bedroom with its huge bed.

I’ve seen movies where fancy hotels like this put a chocolate on the pillow. I get an entire box from a local chocolatier. I pop one piece, and it’s amazing.

I wash down a second chocolate with bottled water. I have five choices. *Five*. Of *water*. The one I pick is from the south of France. Drawn, I’m sure, from a mystical well, the whereabouts of which are known only to one monk, who guards the secret with his life.

I pull back the sheets and, again, I have to pause, this time to run my fingers over them. I’ve read about things like Egyptian cotton and gazillion-thread count, and I have no idea whether that’s what this is, but I have never even *felt* sheets like this. Crisp and soft at the same time.

I shed the bathrobe, slide into those sheets, and smile like I haven’t smiled in months. And that’s before I feel an envelope on the other pillow. I pick it up to see “For expenses” written on the front. Inside are . . .

Hundred-dollar bills. A *sheaf* of hundreds, along with a few twenties for variety.

For expenses? Like what? The sudden need to buy a designer handbag? I shake my head and tuck the money under my pillow.

## A DEADLY INHERITANCE

I should say something like “I could get use to this.” But I’m not sure that’s a good idea. At least not until I’ve answered my questions. Because if there’s a reason Mom never went home again, then I’m only going to be living the life of an heiress until my eighteenth birthday, when I’m legally free. Until then, I’ll enjoy what I can, while I can.