

## chapterone

I stood on the side of Dufferin Street with my thumb out again. I hardly ever had to hitchhike. But when I did, it was always truckers who picked me up, and never those scared suburbanite rabbits in their armoured van SUVs.

And really, I was as far from scary looking as a sixteen-year-old in 2004 could get. No piercings. No tattoos. No black eyeliner and purple lipstick. Not a whiff of the goth about me. Well, on the outside, anyway. No exposed midriff. No exposed anything, other than my face, neck and calves. I was wearing a long-sleeved yellow t-shirt. I always wore long sleeves; but I had a reason for that. In the bulging pockets of my cropped cargo pants were a bottle of water, my wallet, sunglasses, a hat and a half-eaten granola bar.

I wiped the sweat off from under my bangs. If some trucker didn't pick me up soon, I'd be too ripe to get into any vehicle with anyone with a working nose.

It was so ugly here outside the city limits of Toronto. There were patches of new housing developments containing cookie-cutter townhouses, a few strip malls, gas stations and donut shops, and that was it. Not enough people living in the spotty subdivisions to justify a bus route. The rest was empty land, stretches of parched

yellow grass and trees that had given up the fight and remained leafless, even in the summer.

After breathing in the visibly thick and smelly fumes of the speeding cars for another ten minutes, finally a trucker delivering bottled water pulled over.

“Want a lift, huh? I’m going as far as Newmarket,” he shouted.

He swiped at the sweat running down the sides of his face with the back of his left hand. As far as I could tell, this balding, beefy, middle-aged trucker seemed like a guy just doing his job, and me a favour. And not like a serial rapist/killer trolling for fresh prey. So when he opened the passenger door, I climbed in, dragging up my duffel bag, trusting he was what he appeared to be, and not a prospective client for my criminal lawyer father.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve seen a hitchhiker,” he said, glancing over at me as he drove off the shoulder of the road and back into traffic.

Probably a really long time. I had yet to see anyone else when I’d had to hitchhike.

“What’s in the bag, and where you headed?” he asked.

“A couple flowerpots, some bulbs and seeds, a spade, a blanket, a prayer book and stones,” I mumbled. “I’m going to Pardes Shalom Cemetery to visit my mother.”

“Oh yeah, that Jewish cemetery out in the middle of nowhere,” he said.

“The Jewish cemeteries in the city are almost all filled up. So all the synagogues and Jewish organizations banded together to buy a plot of land huge enough to bury another century’s worth of Toronto Jews,” I explained, speeding through the explanation, recalling how hideously my father and I had fought when he’d informed me just how far away my mother was going to be buried.

He had the pull to get tables in restaurants reserved for weeks, tickets to sold-out plays at the Royal Alexandra Theatre, seats on overbooked flights, but hadn't put much effort into getting my mother a burial plot in the downtown cemetery where her parents lay. I still believed that, despite the onslaught of what he called explanations, and what I considered feeble excuses.

"It's a hike, huh, to see your mother?"

I shrugged. I didn't want to say more.

"I'm Joe, by the way," he said, sticking out his right hand.

I shook his hand. "I'm Alice."

"Don't you have anyone to drive you?" he asked.

"Usually my cousin Chloe drives me, but she's taking a summer course." I could almost hear the question he was too polite to ask. How come there was no one else?

"It's so isolated on this stretch of Dufferin. Aren't you afraid?" he asked, giving me another assessing look.

"Some."

"You should be," he said. "For your own good."

I knew that. Assault. Rape. Kidnapping. Murder.

After all, the only programs I watched on TV were crime series, and I was more familiar than I cared to be with my father's caseload and clientele.

And you didn't have to look and dress like the latest hot celebrity star or model, which I certainly did not. More like Hamlet actually, if you viewed my cropped pants as pantaloons and my dark blond, short, shaggy hair as a Prince Valiant type hairdo.

Was I leaving something off the crime blotter? Robbery. Not much to steal off me unless you were into gardening. Okay, I was being flip.

The truth was I wasn't afraid enough, not if that's what it took to get to the cemetery every week.

After some hemming and hawing, he spit out, “Are you sure you can’t find someone to drive you? It’s a no man’s land here.”

I stared down at my picked-raw cuticles. Then I made myself look up. On one side, there were grassy knolls and sand traps, part of a golf course in mid-construction, and on the other side, four cows grazing on waist-high grass near a barn.

“Your father?” Joe said, clearing his throat.

Right. In the six months since my mother had died, my father had gone to the cemetery only after running out of reasons why he couldn’t make it “today.” Have to meet a client. Have a summation to prepare. It’s snowing too hard. It’s raining too hard.

When he did take me, I’d sit down, as I always did, next to the gravestone, while my father would pace behind me. I swear I could feel him calculating how long he had to be out there before he could announce, “I’ll meet you in the car,” and walk off. His behaviour disgusted me. Instead of being able to think about my mother, all I could think about was how repulsive my father was. So I’d stopped asking him to drive me.

I could have asked my aunt Leslea, the provider of the potter’s field style flower bed display before my mother’s gravestone. Right. As a showy gesture of her “caring,” she’d offered to pay for the gardening. And she’d chosen the bargain basement selection consisting of a few geraniums dead from the get-go, surrounded by wizened, sickly brown shrubbery on its deathbed. It was the most wretched of all the flower bed arrangements I’d come across in the cemetery.

I’d complained about it to my father, who’d done zilch. Next I’d offered to pay for the gardening, but he wouldn’t allow it. He said it would shame his dear sister. Shame her? How? She was shameless.

She was rolling in alimony payments from Chloe’s father, who’d hit the road when Chloe was two. She got “pocket money,” as she

dubbed it, in a cutesy voice, from her “prestige” jobs working as a real estate agent for an agency that dealt only in luxury residences and as a prop decorator for American movies filming in Toronto.

When Chloe had gotten her driver’s licence two months ago, it had solved the lift problem and the flower problem. Chloe said we should do the gardening ourselves.

“I didn’t mean to pry,” Joe said, with a loud gulp, signalling as clear as an ambulance siren just how uncomfortable he was. “Sorry. It’s none of my business.”

“There’s no one except my cousin,” I said, sounding abrupt although I didn’t mean to. Not that I was embarrassed on my behalf. I was, though, on my mother’s. It made it seem as if she didn’t have many people who loved her.

“You know what,” he said, breathing so hard I could count each breath. “Passing by that cemetery always brings back the memory of my best friend in high school. He was killed instantly crossing the road when this asshole speeding driver ploughed into him. And ever since then, I can’t step foot into a cemetery without getting the shakes,” he said, flushing.

Feeling totally guilty about being the Grim Reaper in the guise of a teen hitchhiker, I tried to lighten the mood with a choice story about Leslea. Last week she had been showing a couple a pricy condo at the too appropriately named Granite Place. When the couple had gone out onto the balcony, they’d noticed it overlooked a small cemetery. My aunt told them, not to worry, it wasn’t a particularly “active” cemetery.

“Therefore, only the occasional gravedigger and open grave when you sit out on the balcony drinking your morning java,” Joe said, groaning.

Determined to make the sale, Leslea hadn’t given up. Restful, she’d tried, peaceful, I continued, mimicking my aunt. I knew the

whole story, thanks to Chloe, who loved passing on tales about her mother that further fed our conviction that she and my father just didn't get it. Chloe had gone along because she and Leslea had one of their gazillion beauty appointments afterwards.

Joe hooted at that. "Peaceful? For whom? And you can't know that unless you're some damn psychic claiming you can communicate with those who 'have passed over,'" he added.

That was the problem exactly. Maybe if I knew my mother was truly at peace, maybe then I wouldn't feel so haunted.

Joe stopped in the entrance of Pardes Shalom. I turned to him and thanked him, then hopped out.

Lugging my bag, I headed up the hill along the curved roadway to my mother's gravesite.