

## Chapter One

I learned early how to be invisible.

Loose fitting pants disguise my body. A hoodie covers my messy bun, sparing me from colouring my hair or wearing a wig. With a tilt of my head, my hoodie flops forward and shadows my face like a visor. I pop in two ear buds and bob my head as if to music. Like any other teen in the neighbourhood, I blend in.

I step onto the outside stoop and scan the street for anything out of the ordinary. Curious behaviours like someone peering into a window or lurking around a corner. Suspicious noises like a heated argument, breaking glass, or a scream.

A steady breeze carries the odour of stale pizza. A boy tosses a flat box and a green bag into a recycling bin. An empty beer can escapes, clattering down the road. A girl pulls into a driveway and hops off her bike, flinging it to the ground in a heap as she runs inside the house. Nothing of concern for a summer day in the city.

Behind me, Mom stands in the front room and peaks out the window. Her fingers clutching the heavy curtain, she mouths, “One hour.” And offers me a feeble smile.

Glad for any jogging privileges at all, I nod and toss her a wave. Flat grey clouds hint at rain. If it holds off until I get home, I'll be satisfied.

I square my shoulders and descend the steps. My gaze fixed about ten meters in front of me, I face straight ahead. I lengthen my stride and slip into a steady jog. My footsteps slap the sidewalk. I pace myself, following no particular route. Some routines can be risky.

Along the way, I pass the decades old two-and-three-story houses. Mainly rental properties like ours, the lawns and gardens are all but abandoned. Can't expect summer university students to do yard work while taking classes. The houses left empty will fill up in September with a new flock of students

needing rooms.

What's it like? Attending university classes instead of being homeschooled. Living with a group of like-minded kids. Free to do whatever they want, whenever they want. I close my eyes and a vague image forms. A lump fills my throat. All I have to go on is what I read online.

A vehicle emerges from around the corner. It crawls along the asphalt like a low lying fog. A black sedan, newer model. Through the windshield, a red glow flares. A cigarette, or maybe a cigar, dangles between the driver's lips. I can't make out his face.

From the passenger seat, a heavy set, bald man peers out the side window. His face isn't any clearer, but neither man turns my way. Their focus seems to be on the houses. Not typical renters. Investors maybe. Although, nothing around here's for sale.

My neck muscles tingle. Something's off.

I drop to a crouch, bluff an untied shoelace, and check out the licence plate. I lock the sequence of letters and numbers inside my head. Anyone can be a threat. I should go back and tell Mom about the men, but she'll make me stay home. Probably nothing, anyway. I rub my neck and shake it off.

Time to enjoy my freedom. I zig-zag my way through the city streets, wasting no time. At College Avenue, the residential area ends and the university grounds come into view. I jog in place, waiting for the traffic to slow. Once clear, I cross the road, enter the campus, and stride along a stone courtyard.

On one side stands Caldwell Hall. On the other side lies a grove of maple and spruce trees. Wooden benches dot the manicured lawns, resting places between the impressive buildings.

The parkour jam is in full practice. Perfect timing.

I slide onto an isolated bench behind a maple tree and get comfortable. Sunset is in less than an hour, and Mom will expect me home before dark. I won't overstay, but this time is entirely my own. I plan to make the most of it. All week, I've longed to watch the parkour again. Practiced alone in the backyard and counted the days until I could be here.

Grunts of physical exertion and squeaking sneakers carry on the wind. My skin tingles and warmth radiates throughout my body. Even if they notice me behind the leaves, it won't matter. The group is open to anyone. I could join them, if I thought Mom wouldn't find out. I don't dare break her rules. I made that mistake once. Not worth it.

If I joined in their fun, I could probably keep up. Leap across the black metal railings along the double set of stairs. Soar over the concrete pylons, flanking either side of the access ramps. Climb the flagstone walls where a giant door of solid oak marks the entrance. Maybe make some friends along the way.

Wishful thinking. I snap out of the fantasy and open my eyes. My throat thickens and my gaze drops to my hands. In one more year, I'll be eighteen. If I can hold on until then, I'll shift from my online classes and attend the university in person. Join any group I please.

Convincing Mom won't be easy, though. I've started preparing for it. No matter what she argues, I'll be ready and I won't give up.

Fleeting shadows pass overhead, the clouds darker than they were earlier. The air is thick with the threat of rain. And the parkour group has dwindled to a few enthusiastic kids. I tap my phone for the time. I'm late. Only a few minutes left to get home.

Leaping from my spot, I tuck the phone inside my hoodie. Scoot back across the campus and dash down the narrow streets. I follow the most direct route.

Two girls stroll ahead of me and I walk a few steps behind. I should pass them, but the urge to speak to them wrestles with my need to remain invisible. I know better than to give in.

At Hales Avenue, the girls run up the stairs of a triplex. One of them glances behind. Backlit by the porch light, I recognize her from the parkour practice. Her gaze slides over my rigid frame, her head tilted, as if trying to place where she's seen me before.

A sudden breeze lifts my hoodie. I gasp, tug it back over my face, and tighten the strings. The girls

giggle and enter the house. A flush creeps across my cheeks. How could I be so careless? I slip into a jog and scurry home.

The gloom of dusk swallows my block. Houses fade behind deepening shadows that creep up the tall brick walls. The air is cool. The sidewalks empty. Silence hangs like a pause between breaths. I check my phone for the time. Only a few minutes late. No big deal. I sprint for home.

Across the street and up a way, a shadowing form looms. I slow my steps. Beneath the branches of an oak tree, a dark sedan hugs the curb, its engine idling. My heartbeat quickens. I squint at the licence plate. The same car as earlier. I shudder and goose bumps pimple my skin. Why are the men still here?

When I first saw the car, I should have gone back. Warned Mom, not left her alone. A heaviness settles in my stomach.

The car's interior is too dark to make out any shapes. Red glows from behind the windshield on the driver's side. If both men are in the car, they'll see me enter the house and learn I live here. They'll follow me, and get to Mom.

If the second man isn't in the car, he could be in the house. Next to Mom's crumpled body. The street tilts and a roar of blood floods my head. My hands tremble, and I stuff them into my pockets. Mom has to be okay.

The front curtains of our house are closely drawn. No light bleeds from the living room. Maybe Mom noticed the men earlier. Locked the doors and set the motion cameras. Maybe she's huddled in her chair, fretting about me.

I suck in air. Control my breaths and relax my movements. I lope into a sprint and jog past my dark house. And the ominous sedan.

At the corner, I swivel and veer right. My sneakers rub noiselessly on the pavement. Another right, and down the darkened laneway. Back to the house. Thankful for descent night vision.

At the rear of our property, I stop. The garage blocks access to the yard. I can waste precious time,

search for the keys, unlock and lift the door. Or go over the roof.

The roof.

I speed-walk to the garage. Step up the brick wall, onto the metal handle. Spring up and stab my other foot, higher along the brick. I grab hold of the lip, hoist myself up and onto the roof, and land with a thud. I cringe at the sound. Stay low and crawl across the gritty tiles.

Streetlights spill an amber wash over everything, including me. I drop and flatten my body against the roof. Sweat pools in the hollow of my throat.

From out front, a low rumble groans. The skin on the back of my neck bristles. I still myself and peer ahead into the darkness. The street isn't visible from here. I grope my way left to the roof's edge. Scrape my palms on the tiles. And peer through the gap between the houses.

The sedan sits in the same spot. No movement. Not yet.

If I can see the car, the men might see me. My heart thumps an staccato beat in my ears. Sudden rain peppers the sedan's roof. The headlights flare, and it pulls away from the curb.

Motionless, I wait for it to turn right and sneak down the laneway toward me. My stomach contorts. The car rolls to the corner. And swings left and disappears into the night.

Heart rattling, I skitter across the roof. Jump to the grass and into a roll. I spring to my feet, race across the yard toward the back door, and climb the steps, two at a time.

Overhead the porch light automatically flickers on. My breaths come in gasps and fill my lungs with damp air. I reach for the cool doorknob, a weight on my chest and burning need to see Mom.