

CHAPTER 1

WINNIPEG, 1990

It was the deathly scream that brought Alannah's head up, made her eyes open wide, made her stand up from the park bench before she could register a thought. She heard it again, reverberating off the bungalows in front of her, and the halfway-built concrete walls behind. A man's guttural cry. She spun around, taking in the wide, green lawn of the University.

It came again, rattling in her ears.

Alexander had just met her, was just smiling and holding out a paper cup of tea. He had the day's newspaper in the other. The wail of pain froze his wingtip shoes to the concrete sidewalk.

"Good Lord," he breathed.

Alannah swallowed hard and pointed across the grassy park to where the unfinished spires of an apartment complex rose. "Alex..."

"Yes."

Alannah set off at a jog towards it. She gave no thought to what she'd do when she got there.

Behind her, Alexander set the paper and the cup tea on the bench and ran after her.

They pulled up to the chain link fence that surrounded the gaping hole. Spires of rebar at three, six and nine foot heights. Dead center of the hole, a worker hung three feet off the ground, suspended and skewered on three metal rods of rebar. His arms were thrown over his head, and his head tilted back. His wide eyes caught and stared into Alannah's. Workers gathered around him, staring helplessly, and one ran across the construction site toward the little office trailer and the nearest phone.

"Alex!" Alannah gasped. She gripped the fence.

Alexander shoved the rolling gate open and strode through. His mouth was set in a hard and grim line.

"We've got to cut him down, we've—" One of the men pushed his hard hat back from his clammy forehead. He caught Alexander's eye. "Hey—"

The impaled man moaned. Alannah let out a little gasp. She stood just on the inside of fence, her back frozen against the chain links.

"What happened?" Alexander pushed past them to the base of the rebar. He fell to his knees and reached up to support the man's body, and prevent it from sliding further toward the ground.

Two other men followed his lead immediately, taking up the man's dangling legs, and the weight of his trunk. "He fell off the scaffolding," one said.

"Are you a doctor?" the other man asked, from his position supporting the man's head.

Alexander ignored him. "Hey." He focused on the impaled man's face. "Hey."

The man's watering brown eyes focused on him. His hands came up and reached for the rebar through his gut. "Oh God, oh... God."

"Just be still!" Alexander reached for the waving hand. "For the love of God, isn't any help coming?" He glanced back toward Alannah. Anguish burned in his blue eyes and thawed Alannah's frozen limbs. She lurched forward, across the packed ground to Alexander's side.

Alannah dropped to her knees in the blood-speckled gravel beneath the rebar. She took one of the man's dangling hands and clutched it in hers. Blood smeared from one hand to the other.

"Shhh." She reached out with her free hand, around the worker who supported his head, and touched his shoulder, then his hair. "Just be still. Let us help you. You'll be alright." But she glanced at Alexander, and he shook his head almost imperceptibly. His blond brows pulled together, face rigid in an effort to remain composed.

Alannah looked up. The rebar had pierced the man's stomach in two places, and one had shoved through his rib cage. Blood dribbled down the ridged metal.

"Should we cut the bars above him?" The worker on Alexander's left asked.

"No, don't move him. Not on your life," Alexander said, quiet and deathly calm. "How long will it take for the ambulance to get here?"

"I don't know, minutes?" The man's face was white, "The hospital is right there." He nodded his head toward the busy road.

"Then we wait for their instructions," Alexander replied.

The impaled man groaned, weaker. "Help..." His head flopped to the side and his brown eyes met Alannah's again. He had curly hair, the color of cinnamon, plastered to his head by sweat and pressed down by the hard-hat he'd been wearing.

"Shhhh." Alannah reached up and stroked his hair. "What is your name?"

"J-Jack." His lips and cheeks were flecked with blood. "You're going to be alright, Jack. Do you have a family?"

"Y-yes—oh shit!" Jack cried out.

"No, no, shhh. Shhh." She touched his cheek. She tried not to stare at the blood pooling at the base of the rebar, the very life flowing out of young Jack.

"Dear God, save him," Alexander whispered in German.

Alannah turned her head and realized that Alexander was praying, his lips in constant motion as he supported Jack. His eyes were squeezed shut; sweat beaded on his brow.

Sirens wailed, very close.

"It's going to be alright, Jack," Alannah brushed her hand over his hair again, and his cheek. "Help is close, so close. Think of your family, Jack, be strong for your family."

One of the construction workers nearby retched. Alannah pressed her lips together.

A couple moments passed and the paramedics reached around them to support Jack's body. They slid a body-board crosswise underneath his hips. A firefighter, blond and broad shouldered, squeezed in between Alannah and the construction worker holding Jack's shoulders. He was so close she could smell diesel fuel on his jacket. "I'll take him," he said.

Jack cried out. Even the small movement of the firefighter reaching to support his shoulders dug the corrugated metal deeper into his flesh.

"It's okay Jack. We're going to get you down." Alannah squeezed his hand urgently.

"Step back, please," the firefighter ordered, "Step back, ma'am."

A metallic glint—cutting tools—passed just inside Alannah's line of sight. Alannah released Jack's hand with a final squeeze and got up. She stepped back and saw the stain of blood on her hands.

Alannah swallowed hard and released Jack's hand. She dropped back a few steps, and the firefighters and paramedics closed in around Jack. She pressed her hands tight together. Sticky blood smeared between her palms.

Every cut of the tools sent shocks through the rebar. Jack's screams were fainter, feebler every moment.

"He's free." The paramedics lifted Jack onto the stretcher. The three bloody bars of rebar still protruded from his body. A trickle of blood snaked down the body board.

"Can I go with him?" Alannah jogged after them as they pushed the stretcher towards the ambulance.

"Are you family?" the medic asked without turning toward her.

"No, I—"

"Then no."

"But where are you taking him?" Alannah cried as the stretcher was lifted up through the doors of the ambulance.

"Health Sciences Center." The doors of the ambulance shut and the sirens wailed as it pulled away.

Alannah stood, staring after it. Her pulse pounded in her temples. Her hands dangled, clenched like claws at her sides. Alexander grabbed her elbow. "Alannah, you've done all you can."

She turned to look at him. His old, blue eyes stood out in his pale, young face, which sagged with exhaustion. His cheeks were wet, but his eyes were tearless now.

"Do you want to follow the ambulance?" Alexander asked.

"Yes," she said, almost inaudible. "If you will."

"Let's get the car."

"My hands," she sniffled. It wasn't just her hands. Her formerly crisp, grey slacks were speckled with Jack's blood. His life blood was spattered all over her.

"It's alright, Alannah," Alexander took one of her dirty hands in his and led her across the University grounds trudging to his car. He had a bottle of water and a box of tissue in his car. Alexander and Alannah scrubbed at their bloody hands and stuffed the crimson stained tissues into the center console.

"How will we find him?" Alannah asked softly. She was curled up in the passenger seat with her head against the window. They knew the young man's name was Jack, but they'd never asked his surname. "Do you know which building to go to?"

Alexander didn't know. They pulled alongside the massive hospital complex.

"Emergency!" she pointed. "On William Avenue. There."

Alexander pulled up at the doors and let her jump out. He took his time finding a place in the parking garage. He didn't want to go in and find out that the young man was dead. He'd outlived too many young men already, and each time he watched them go it was with deep sorrow, and yet a pang of envy. He was not going with them.

He sighed as he walked through the sliding doors, into the bustle of the waiting room. Alannah stood against the wall, near the triage desk. She had her arms wrapped tightly around herself. Every chair in the emergency room was full. Alexander slipped to her side. He shrugged out of his sport coat and wrapped it around her shoulders. She tugged it close.

"He's in surgery," she sniffled, "They told me that much. I just asked if the construction worker with the rebar was brought here." She tipped her chin toward a delicate young woman with a halo of flaxen hair, who sat between two older women. All three had their eyes squeezed shut, their hands clasped tightly. "Do you think that's his wife? She just came in."

Alexander felt a sharp burst of pain, and turned his head away. The privilege of dying carried with it a steep cost for those left behind. He knew what it was to be left behind.

Alannah leaned against his shoulder.

They waited for three hours, Alexander leaning against the wall, Alannah leaning on him, snuggled up in his jacket, until a nurse came out and called out "Mrs. Krause?"

The blond woman opened her eyes.

Alexander took in the nurse's face, and saw resignation, mixed with abject weariness. She said something to the young woman.

"Oh God!" she screamed. Then higher, disbelieving, "Oh God no!"

Alannah turned and looked at Alexander. Her face drooped, eyes dead. "Alexander."

He laid his hand on her shoulder. "Let's go home."

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"I'll cook something." Alannah dropped her leather satchel on the little kitchen table and turned to the refrigerator. She swung the door open and stared in. The grey-green light spilled out into the dark kitchen.

"It's alright, Alannah," Alexander sagged in the doorway and flicked the kitchen light on, "I'll have toast. You're exhausted. Take a bath, put on clean clothes, and go to bed."

"I won't sleep anyway." Alannah rubbed her eyes and sniffled. Her arms and legs felt leaden but she knew if she stopped moving... sat down... shut her eyes... she'd hear Jack's groans again and feel the splat of sticky blood on her hands.

She yanked a carton of eggs out of the fridge and the half-full jug of milk. "I'll make crepes. Sweet or savory?"

"Alannah," Alexander took a step into the kitchen and laid a hand on her shoulder, "It is alright to mourn over death. Death should always hurt, as something contrary to the original order of

creation.”

Her face contorted, "Well, that doesn't mean anything to me right now.”

"Alannah...”

She spun around, away from his grasp. "Sweet or savory?"

He sighed, defeated. "Savory. I... suppose you want me to make myself scarce?" Instead of waiting for an answer, he turned and left the room. A moment later his light footfalls ascended the stairs.

Alannah yanked a crockery bowl out of a cupboard and began to viciously crack eggs into it. She whisked them so hard that they began to splatter out of the bowl, onto her top. She glanced down and saw the creamy yellow egg yolks, juxtaposed with burgundy, dried blood. The whisk dropped from her hand onto the tile floor, and fell to her knees beside it. She wheezed out one, strangled sob. Then they came relentlessly. She cried so hard it hurt. At some point she realized that Alexander was sitting beside her, his back against the splattered, white cabinets.

She raised her head and pushed herself up slowly. She rubbed at her eyes and felt a smear of eggs transfer from her fingers to her eyebrows. "Ugh. Maybe you should just have toast," she said with a wobbly attempt at a smile.

Alexander leaned his head against the cabinet doors and smiled back. "I can finish the crepes, dear Alannah. Take a shower."

He was so calm, but Alannah had been Alexander's friend for more than fifty years, and lived with him for forty. She could see the strain in his face, the haunting in his eyes. Alannah settled herself beside him and touched his knee. He was in loose gym shorts and a white t-shirt. He'd probably been heading out for a run. "Are you alright, Alexander?"

"I'll live." Alexander stood and reached down to give her a hand up.

Alannah held up one shaking hand and let Alexander hoist her to her feet. "I should take something for my nerves. I'll... I'll live too." She attempted a smile again, then leaned toward him and kissed his cheek. "Call me when the crepes are ready."

She trudged up the stairs to the second floor, down the long hall to her bedroom. The light was still on in Alexander's room, the door half open, like he'd bolted down the stairs when he'd heard her crying. That would be like him. She reached in to turn off the light and saw a sheet of paper lying on the bed. It had five, small pencil portraits, one in each corner and one in the center. Alannah switched off the light and closed the door. She knew whose portraits they were. The five loves of Alexander's life, all gone.

"Oh Alexander," she sighed as she slipped into her own bedroom.

She'd just put on a clean pair of pants and a soft sweater, when a thought occurred to her: an accident like this, in a well-populated area like the University grounds, would make the news. She hadn't looked for a media presence. She'd had her eyes on Jack. What if her face had made it onto the news screen? God knew who might see it eventually.

Alannah's chest tightened. She began to pant. "Alexander!" she called out. She stumbled back toward the staircase. "Alexander?"

"Yes?" Alexander appeared at the bottom of the stairs with a spatula in his hand and wide eyes.

"What if this made the news?"

"It likely did," he said calmly. It wasn't an irrational question, not for Alexander. Immortals lived with their heads down and their eyes open. Publicity was an invitation for trouble, for people to try to delve into their secrets.

Rationality had little to do with it for Alannah. "What if... if we made the news?" Alannah could feel tears welling up again. She gasped for air. "What if my face is on the news, Alexander?"

"Sh-sh-sh." Alexander bounded up the stairs to meet her and gripped her arms. "Breath, Alannah, breath. There were no reporters, and they would never film so close to an accident such as that."

"But, but," Alannah whimpered, "are you sure?"

"I never saw one reporter, Alannah," Alexander cupped her cheek. "Come sit down in the kitchen. The news will be on at seven. I'll check. I won't let anyone hurt you, Alannah."

He held both of her shoulders and made her march in front of him, down the last few stairs, across the hardwood floor into the kitchen. He sat her down at the little table under the window and

set a plate of crepes in front of her. "Did you take any medication yet?"

She shook her head, mute, and forced herself to breathe deeply, like she was actually calm. A modicum of reason returned. Just enough to be angry with herself. Alexander set a glass of water and a pill in front of her and glanced back at the clock on the stove. "I'll take my plate to the TV. The news will be on in a bit."

Alannah tossed the pill back and swished it down with a third of the glass of water. She heard Alexander turn on the little-used television set in the living room, then the squeak of one of the easy chairs.

Alannah looked down at the crepes in front of her, filled with sautéed onions, ham and cheese—melted, but beginning to congeal. She cut off a rounded corner with her fork and placed it tentatively in her mouth. It was delicious, and she was suddenly hungry. She shoved in another bite, and then another.

"Alannah?" Alexander's voice came from the living room in a strange, strangled pitch. "Alannah can you come here?"

Her thread of calm snapped. She stood up. She was out the kitchen door before she realized that she had her fork clenched in her shaking hand. She stopped behind Alexander's chair. He stared at the screen in front of him, playing the tail end of a news clip, with a picture of the Health Sciences Center Hospital in the background, and a young, male reporter with a serious face in the foreground.

"...doctors pronounced him dead, after he went into cardiac arrest on the operating table and could not be revived. Two hours later, doctors say he woke up, seemingly unaffected by the incident."

The camera cut back to the newscaster in the studio, whose perfectly made up face and professional composure couldn't quite hide her disbelief. "Are doctors giving any more details at this time?"

The screen cut again to the reporter. "Well, Sandy, at this point they have no explanation but the family of the construction worker is calling it a miracle of God."

Sandy moistened her lips. "Well, Gord, I certainly wouldn't disagree with that."

Alannah blinked at the screen as a clip began to play, an interview with a stunned construction worker, twisting a pair of gloves in his hands.

"He's alive, Alannah," Alexander said softly, "Jack is alive."

Alannah walked over to the other wingback chair and dropped into it. Her heart throbbed in her chest. Jack, alive. The angelic wife with the halo of blond curls, not a widow. Was it really a miracle of God, as Jack's rejoicing family proclaimed? She glanced at Alexander and met his eyes. They both suspected that something very different was at play, something they both knew well.

A few minutes passed before either of them spoke.

"He's one of us, isn't he?" Alannah said finally.

Alexander didn't answer, only ran his teeth over his bottom lip. His hands lay on top of his knees, fingers drumming slowly.

"He came back to life, unaffected," said Alannah.

"I know, Alannah, I know," Alexander sighed, "I only hope... I only hope that it isn't true. I'm glad that he lives, but I do not wish this curse upon him."

Alannah sat silent.

"I am duty-bound to find him, and find out now." Alexander stood up stiffly and set his half-eaten plate of crepes on the little table beside him. "Tonight let his wife hold him and rejoice that he is alive. God knows it's what I would want if I were him."