

Chapter one



The highway, like the tail of a fat grey lizard, stretches before Jolene. Waves of heat dance above the hot asphalt. Gingerly, she places one foot in front of the other, following the solid, white centre line. Far ahead, on the horizon, the line and road merge. Jolene slows. She glances over her shoulder, searching for her twin brother Michael, her father, mother and grandfather, but they are absent. The road belongs to her alone and yet she wishes it didn't. Its silent greyness disturbs her. Jolene resumes walking, aware of the odd sensation within her body. It is as if she is made of glass, as if she might shatter. She peers at the horizon. Is that her destination? Does she have the strength to reach it? Does she want to? The questions nag

at her in chants and whispers, filling the space she occupies — the space between dreaming and waking.

Jolene's eyes blinked open, her dream highway transforming itself into the ceiling panels of the recreational vehicle that she had called home for the past five days. Beside her, Chaos, her ginger-coloured kitten, snuggled closer, his white paws illuminated by a sliver of morning that pierced the RV's skydome. Jolene was grateful for his presence. The dream, which had come three times since they'd left Calgary, always left her feeling edgy.

Michael murmured in his sleep and Jolene looked down from her loft bed into the living area where her brother and grandfather slept. At the far end of the RV, she could hear movements behind her parents' bedroom door. It must be her father. Her mother had stayed behind in Calgary to work with a graduate student at the university. She would join them in a few weeks.

Jolene wondered where they would be then. A month ago that question would not have entered her mind. But that was before Dad had decided to take a family trip across Canada to conduct research for his Museum of Disasters. That was before she and Michael had agreed to relinquish their sports to travel. That was before arrangements had been made with their school to start their grade seven courses on the road. That was before they had followed the Trans-Canada highway, winding its way from the snow-blanketed mountains, across the ironed prairies, over the Canadian Shield to the shores of Lake Huron.

The highway in Jolene's dream was different from the Trans-Canada. No barbed wire fences, gravelled ditches or muddy sloughs edged its shoulders. No semi-trailers, motorcycles, or vehicles rolled over it. She walked it — alone, towards an unknown destination. She wondered why none of her family was in her dream.

Grandpa was awake. His dark green eyes, so like Michael's and her own, were open. He was, she knew, silently composing and rehearsing the stories he would share as the museum's official storyteller. The bedroom door opened with a hushed click and Jolene's father emerged. Grandpa sat up, Chaos yawned, Michael shielded his eyes against the light and Jolene propped herself up on one elbow.

"Well, it looks like everyone's up," said Dad, pulling the blinds open.

"It's already nine o'clock Ontario time," Grandpa informed them.

"Goderich, Ontario, here I come." Dad's voice held the excitement of a child's on Christmas morning. The town of Goderich on Lake Huron's east side would serve as the base for his investigation of the Great Storm of 1913, the worst storm ever to hit the Great Lakes.

"What are your plans, Doug?" asked Grandpa, rising.

"I've got a meeting at the Huron County Museum at ten o'clock. How about you?" The coffee pot gurgled and sputtered.

"I'd like to go to the . . ."

"Library," finished Michael knowingly. Jolene could have

done the same. Libraries, rich in historical collections, were one of Grandpa's favourite places.

"I want to go to the pool," said Michael, throwing back his covers. "Hopefully Goderich has a speed-swimming team I can train with while we're here."

"Good idea," said Dad. "Any plans, Jolene?"

It was a simple, innocent question, but it made her want to shrink beneath her covers and disappear. "No, none." The tone of her words betrayed her agitation. "I have to finish up my science project," she added feebly.

"Okay, but how about coming uptown with the rest of us first and then working on it later this afternoon?" suggested Dad, turning his attention to breakfast.

"No thanks." Jolene pulled her feet upwards, smoothing her sheets and quilt with an unsteady hand. The feeling of fragility that had been present in her dream had returned. She felt as breakable as the eggshells that Dad cracked against the side of his bowl. Yet she wasn't sure why. She and her family were safe in the picturesque town of Goderich. She recalled their drive among the beautiful old stone and brick buildings last night. Dad had found a secluded campsite in a quiet RV resort near the harbour and the Maitland River. Jolene climbed down from the loft bed into a stream of sunshine and set Chaos on the couch. There was no reason to feel out of sorts and yet she did. Michael eyed her curiously, as if her feelings were transparent.

"You can come to the pool with me," he offered.

Jolene did not respond. She brushed past her brother, pulled the cupboard door open with more force than necessary and sorted through the fabrics of her clothes.

“Or you can come to the library,” said Grandpa, twirling the ends of his moustache.

“No thanks.” She wished they would stop. With each invitation, she felt the cracks within her deepen and widen.

“Do you want to see if there’s a gymnastics club in town?” asked Dad.

“That’s okay.” Jolene chose a shirt from the cupboard and shorts from the neat piles of colours in her drawers and escaped into the tiny bathroom to change. She had already decided not to re-enroll in gymnastics this year, a sport she had been devoted to for the past five years. She’d been spared having to tell her parents when Dad had announced their road trip. Dressed, Jolene stepped back into the living room. “I’m going to take Chaos out,” she announced, anxious to be away from her family’s good intentions.

A whimsical breeze blew off the water causing a canopy of green leaves above her to tremble, and buoys to clang in the distance. Chaos skittered left, then right, chasing a shimmering blue moth and making Jolene wish she were a cat.

“What a perfect day,” said Grandpa, joining her outside with his coffee cup in hand. Chaos somersaulted across the grass, landing face first in a mauve petunia. “Are you sure there isn’t anything special you’d like to do today, Jo?”

“There’s nothing, Gramps.” Didn’t he realize that was the

terrible truth? Didn't he understand that was the problem itself? There was nothing special that appealed to her. Nothing that made her leap out of bed or grin like a small child. Nothing that inspired her to feel passionate and alive. Grandpa put an arm around her shoulders and Jolene felt as if she would shatter beneath his touch. Michael had his swimming, Dad had his museum, Grandpa had his stories and history and she . . . she had nothing. She pulled away from her grandfather. "I really want to finish my science project."

Grandpa gave her an unconvinced smile. "All right then. Breakfast is almost ready."

"Thanks, but I'm not hungry."

After her grandfather had gone inside, Jolene watched Chaos torment a ladybug before being distracted by the rapid drumming of a woodpecker. The kitten's antics lightened her spirits and by the time the others stood straddling their bicycles, Jolene was able to manage a reassuring smile. But as she watched them pedal toward the steep incline of North Harbour Road, which would lead them to the town's centre, she scooped up Chaos and hugged him tightly.

Despite what she had told her grandfather, she was in no mood to do her science project. Restless, she deposited the kitten inside the RV and headed for the dirt trail that she and Michael had discovered yesterday evening. Three small cabins, surrounded by the smiling faces of pansies, squatted opposite the small resort pool. Behind them, the Maitland River trickled towards the harbour.

A man with a dirty baseball cap and a belly that protruded over his carpenter's apron pushed a wheelbarrow towards her. He greeted her with a lopsided smile. "You must be Jolene. I met your father and brother last night." He wiped his forehead with his shirtsleeve. "I'm Dave. Me and my wife Alice own this place." Pride resonated in his voice.

"It's beautiful," murmured Jolene, looking to make a quick escape.

"We love it here," Dave replied, taking in the vast sky with a sweep of his eyes. "We'd always dreamed of owning this place, and two years ago our dream came true."

"That must have been wonderful."

"You can't even imagine." Dave continued on and Jolene slipped past the cottages, following the gurgling of water. Sadly, he was right. She couldn't imagine.

She ran from that thought, her feet pounding across the wooden bridge that traversed the Maitland River. On the other side, she veered left and raced down the trail until she reached a dead end at a small marina. Silver sailboat masts formed a web of lines and poles in the sky. The clang of metal came from within the maze of bright blue wheelhouses, and orange and white lifebuoys. Beyond the marina stretched Lake Huron, seemingly endless and blue. Jolene plunked down on the smooth wooden pier. Dipping the toe of her sandal into the lake, she watched the ripples radiate in a circle. Why did everyone else in her life know what they wanted except her? Why did she feel so lost and fragile?

Jolene hugged her knees to her chest. Hot tears rolled down her cheeks. One by one the tiny teardrops splashed into the deep blue waters of Lake Huron.