

# Chapter One



THE BOY STANDING on Jolene's grandmother's front porch was drop-dead gorgeous. Handsome enough to choke Jolene's voice halfway to her lips so that she could only emit a hoarse, whispery, "Yes?" His eyes — bright and intrigued — with irises as black as the pupils themselves, regarded her curiously. "Yes," repeated Jolene, more clearly.

"I'm Stephan," said the stranger in a deep, resonant voice that reminded Jolene of the beat of a drum. "Rose invited me for supper."

Jolene stepped backwards over the colourful spirals of Grandma Rose's welcome mat, opening the door wider. "I'm Jo," she stammered, "Rose's granddaughter."

Stephan smiled a slow knowing smile. “Actually,” he told her, stepping inside, “we met five years ago. Our mothers are good friends.”

Jolene’s mind raced. Stephan. A friend of her mother’s. An invitation from Grandma Rose. “You’re Mirette’s son,” she said as her memory ordered and assembled her thoughts.

“We spent a week at a cabin together in northern Quebec. I was so envious of you.”

“Envious? How come?”

“You’re a twin. Your brother’s Michael, right?” Jolene nodded and he continued. “I’m an only child and I’ve always been virtual schooled because we’ve travelled so much. I didn’t know many kids then and you were the first twins I’d ever met.”

Jolene fidgeted with the door handle. No matter how hard she tried, she could not recall a handsome, envious boy at a cabin years ago. “I . . . I’m sorry, but I don’t remember,” she confessed closing the door behind Stephan.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I looked a lot different back then. I wore glasses and I was pretty scrawny, too.”

Jolene stole a glance at Stephan’s broad shoulders and powerful torso. His thin t-shirt did little to hide the definition of his rippling chest and stomach muscles.

“I, uh, I row now,” said Stephan gesturing towards his chest. Jolene blushed and Stephan’s cheeks blazed. “I, uh, I meant the writing,” he said quickly, “on my t-shirt, not my . . . uh, I was looking at yours — your shirt, I mean and . . .”

*River's Edge Rowing Club* read Jolene silently, focusing on Stephan's shirt before glancing down at her own navy blue top whose bold yellow lettering read, *A Perfect 10*. "Uh, it's a gymnastics shirt," she blurted out, folding her arms across her chest. "A ten's a perfect score."

Stephan jammed his hands into his jeans pockets. Jolene stared at his runners, conscious of the fact that her cheeks were a hot crimson. A strained silence enveloped them. Jolene shifted from one foot to the other and glanced up. A smile played on Stephan's lips. Jolene chewed on a grin, and suddenly they were giggling like two embarrassed teenagers.

Grandma Rose, a tall, elegant, silver-haired woman with an apron tied around her waist, appeared in the entrance way as if their laughter had summoned her. "Stephan," she said warmly. "Come in." She ushered him into the living room and gestured towards Jolene's mother and father. "Supper will be ready in a few minutes, but perhaps you remember these strangers even though it's been quite a few years since their last visit."

Jolene saw her mother wince, but quickly recover. She studied her grandmother's wrinkled face, the piercing blue eyes behind her gold-rimmed glasses, and the thin-lipped smile that her mother had not inherited. She hoped that her grandmother's remark had been more light-hearted than it had sounded. It had been six weeks since Jolene had seen her mother. Six weeks since she, Michael, her dad and grandfather had embarked on a research trip across Canada in a

recreational vehicle, leaving Mom behind in Calgary to fulfill her duties as a math professor at the University of Calgary. This afternoon, Mom had flown into the Montreal airport to spend some time with them, and the Thanksgiving holiday with her own mother at her childhood home.

“Hello Mrs. Fortini,” said Stephan to Jolene’s mother.

She rose and embraced him. “Please call me Kate. You’ve grown so much since I’ve seen you. Are you fifteen now?”

“In January.”

Jolene did some quick calculations. That made him thirteen months older than her.

“It’s nice that you could be here for Thanksgiving,” Stephan said.

“Yes, it is,” agreed Mom. “I’ve been busy with graduate students up until now and . . . well you know how it is.”

Stephan nodded and Jolene was reminded of the fact that both Stephan’s parents were professors — busy, travelling professors.

Dad greeted Stephan with a friendly handshake and then introduced Grandpa. “This is my father, Victor Fortini. Dad, this is Stephan.”

Grandpa’s dark green eyes twinkled above his moustache. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Stephan is the son of my best childhood friend,” explained Mom. “Mirette and I grew up together.”

“Ah yes, Mirette. I believe I’ve seen an old photo of the two of you having an accidental mud bath.” Grandpa

winked at Stephan. "I should have brought it along. Good blackmail material."

"That was the summer both our families went on the ranch adventure and your horses got stuck in that swamp." Grandma Rose sighed loudly. "Those were such delightful days when there was family around."

Jolene's mother dropped into a recliner chair as if she'd been punched in the stomach, and Jolene's heart sank.

"I hear that your parents are in Brazil," said Dad quickly, addressing Stephan, "and that their research is going very well."

Mom darted a glance at Grandma Rose. "Of course good research and presentations are very time-consuming," she added.

Stephan murmured his agreement. Grandma Rose removed her glasses and polished them furiously. Jolene stared at the ceiling, a deep sense of foreboding stealing over her.

"Mom and Dad will be back Wednesday afternoon," Stephan told them. "You'll still be here then, won't you?"

"We plan to be," replied Dad. He settled onto the couch beside Grandpa and carefully smoothed the crocheted coverings that blanketed the couch's upholstered arms. Everywhere Jolene looked there was evidence of her grandmother's needlework — intricately stitched petit point, embroidered runners and crocheted doilies. A half-quilted square of sapphire-coloured irises protruded from the wicker sewing basket near Dad's feet. "I've got some research to do into

the Quebec Bridge collapse of 1907 for my museum,” said Dad.

“That’s right!” exclaimed Stephan. “Rose told me that you’d opened a Museum of Disasters. I think that is such a cool idea — preserving destruction.” He pulled a straight-backed wooden chair from around the dining-room table and straddled it, resting his elbows on its wooden back. Jolene marvelled at the muscles in his biceps and forearms.

“It’s a lot of work, but the museum’s slowly taking shape,” said Dad proudly. “And this bridge disaster exhibit has the potential to be fantastic.”

Stephan’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “I thought that the bridge collapse was in Quebec City.”

“It was,” replied Dad, “but many of the men working on the bridge were from a First Nations reserve just outside of Montreal. They were the Kahnawake people, belonging to the Mohawk nation.”

“Really!” Stephan’s voice rose excitedly.

“The Mohawk people have a reputation for being some of the best steelworkers in the world,” explained Dad.

“Hey Stephan!” greeted Michael, descending the staircase and making Jolene wonder why everybody but she seemed to know the handsome stranger. Michael handed the ginger-coloured kitten in his arms to his sister. “Speaking of food,” he continued although nobody had mentioned it, “is supper almost ready? I’m starved.”

Grandma Rose bustled into the kitchen, muttering something about interruptions, with Mom on her heels. Jolene

remained where she was, stroking the kitten's white paws and stealing glances at Stephan.

"Are you finished your science project?" Dad asked Michael.

"Almost. It would help if the cat wouldn't sit on the keyboard."

Jolene rubbed Chaos' ears affectionately then set him down on the area rug. Immediately the kitten padded towards the sewing basket, batted its handle, and sniffed curiously before jumping in amidst the quilting materials. He re-emerged with fluffy batting stuck to his whiskers.

"Michael, you've got another twenty minutes or so before supper. Keep working," advised Dad

"Yeah, yeah," groaned Michael, disappearing into the kitchen.

Dad shook his head. "How can twins be so different? Jolene's project was a week early and Michael's is a week late."

Jolene shooed Chaos out of the sewing basket and the kitten ducked beneath the couch. "I wish Michael would finish up with the laptop so I can check my e-mails," she said.

"I doubt if Grandma has wireless since she doesn't have a computer," replied Dad, lowering his voice.

"You can use mine," offered Stephan. "We're renovating our house right now so we're living at my grandmother's old place, just next door."

"Why don't you go now," suggested Dad. "There's probably time before supper."

With an inexplicable anticipation building within her,