

## CHAPTER 1

# The House

OCTOBER, 2004

“Kami, are you ready?” Mom called from the kitchen.

“Yeah, I’m packed,” I answered. I’d never be ready to leave.

A crumpled photo, still stuck to my mirror, was the only thing left to pack. The movers would arrive in a couple of days for the rest of the stuff. I pulled the picture off and flattened it between my palms. There we were, the perfect family, posed in front of an ice-cream shop in Edmonton. Mom smiled like a dainty Japanese doll, while Dad towered over her, grinning like Goofy, in his ripped, cut-off jeans and T-shirt. I was in the middle holding my dad’s hand.

Mom used to say I was the perfect blend of the two of

them. My dark almond eyes were hers, but my straight black hair had a coppery sheen that showed up in the sunlight. I got that from my dad. That and my long legs.

Almost three years ago, on my tenth birthday, Dad promised he would come for a visit and take me out to my favourite restaurant, but something came up and he bailed. That's when I squashed the picture into a ball and threw it in the trash. The next day I took it out and stuck it on my mirror. It was one of the few pictures I had of the three of us together.

"Kami!" Mom called again. "Baachan and Jiichan are here to take us to the airport." Baachan and Jiichan are what I call my Japanese grandparents.

I tucked the photo into the pocket of my carry-on bag and glanced at my cell phone. Two hours from now, Mom and I would be sitting on a plane, bound for Alberta, while my entire life stayed behind in Vancouver.



My best friend, Becca, and her parents came to the airport to see us off. "I guess that's a *No* to the party room at the condo, huh?" Becca said, trying to be funny. We had been planning the best-ever birthday bash for our birthdays, which were only a week apart. My job had been to secure the party room at our condo.

"Do *not* cancel the party," I said. "I am totally flying back for my birthday. Maybe Vanessa could have it at her ginormous house. I bet she'd be all over that idea."

Becca's sad little smile said it all. She didn't believe I'd be back. But I was serious. My mother had screwed up everything else; I wasn't going to let her mess with my thirteenth birthday party.

As my mother and I pulled our carry-on bags down the corridor to security, I felt as though I was about to walk off a cliff, followed by a harsh landing.

My mother worked on her laptop for most of the flight while I read the newest Kenneth Oppel book, *Airborn*. After a huge hassle with picking up the rental car at the airport, we finally arrived at the hotel, where Mom buried herself in paperwork again, oblivious to the fact that she had just ripped my whole life apart. I sat in front of the TV, and ate chocolates from the gift basket that arrived just after we checked in. I wasn't in the mood to talk, anyway.



We didn't go to see *the house* until the next morning. Mom thought it might be best to see it in daylight. It had been my grandparents' house and now it was ours. "We'll drive down Whyte Avenue to get a glimpse of the neighbourhood," Mom said, as we drove under a wrought-iron arch that said OLD STRATHCONA. "A lot has changed since the last time we were here," she commented. "Look at all the trendy little shops and eateries. And there's a Starbucks. You can't beat that for convenience." Mom couldn't start her day without her non-fat latte.

I stared out the window in silence. The stores weren't really my type of shopping, and everything else looked old. Really old. At least we were going to stay in the hotel until the movers came with our stuff. I was not looking forward to moving into my grandparents' old house.

Mom pulled off Whyte Avenue at 104th Street. We drove by a large brick building with the words PUBLIC LIBRARY stamped into the concrete moulding at the top. Then she turned down one of the side streets.

"This is it," she said, pulling the rental car into the long driveway of what was easily the largest house on the street. "Do you remember it?"

"It's bigger and older than I remembered."

"It's spacious," Mom agreed, parking the car in front of the fancy brick garage. Pointing to the garage, she said, "This old carriage house is something else, isn't it? Your Grandpa Anderson's pride and joy. He once told me that, back in the 1920s, the original owner converted an old carriage house into a garage with a turntable for motor cars. I don't remember the exact technology of how it worked, but it moved the car around so that the driver didn't have to back down the long driveway."

"Cool," I said, getting out of the car. I stared up at the massive brick house, shielding my eyes from the morning sun. Brown shingles popped up all over the roof, like a scared porcupine, and paint peeled in yellow curls from the window trim, making the place look kind of creepy. For a minute I

even thought I saw a face looking out at me from one of the windows.

Mom pulled a set of keys from her purse. “Let’s hope the inside is in better condition.”

“Good luck with that,” I muttered, following her up the cracked concrete stairs to the front door.

Mom turned the key in the lock and gave the door a solid shove.

“What if the inside *is* just as bad?” I said, peering past her into the dim entryway. “I mean, what if it’s horrible and we don’t want to live here?”

“That’s a possibility,” Mom said, feeling for the light switch.

I stepped into the foyer and looked around. To the left were large double doors that probably led to the living room. Mom disappeared down the long hallway, mumbling something about checking out the kitchen. I was more intrigued by the cool coat nook, tucked between the foyer and the narrow staircase that led to the second floor. I slipped off my runners and sat on the bench that outlined the u-shaped room. A sliver of a memory flitted through my brain. I was really little and hiding in the coats. Dad grabbed my legs, which were still dangling in full view. It’s funny the things you remember.

On the outside wall, a stained-glass blue jay watched me from his stained-glass tree branch. “Do you remember the blue jay?” I asked Mom, who had reappeared from the kitchen.

“I do. The stained glass in this house was always my favourite part.” She opened the double doors into the living room, then stopped. Glued to the spot.

“Oh my gosh,” I said under my breath. The entire living room was full of my grandparents’ stuff. I half-expected Grandma to appear any minute, offering milk and cookies. But Grandma died three years ago, when I had just started grade five. We didn’t make it to the funeral. My grandfather moved soon after that to live with my Aunt Linda in PEI. I guess he didn’t want to live in this big house all alone. Who could blame him?

“This is ridiculous,” Mom fumed. “When the lawyer said that there may still be some things in the house, this was not what I expected.”

“Maybe the movers can take some of this old stuff with them, when they drop ours off,” I said. But the truth was, I couldn’t picture any of our sleek leather or chrome-trimmed glass in this house. It was going to look totally weird.

“Hmm.” Mom’s forehead wrinkled under her smooth black hair. She took a small notebook out of her purse. “When your grandfather went to live with Aunt Linda, someone should have cleared out the house.” I had a feeling that *someone* she referred to was my father, but I didn’t say anything.

Everywhere it was the same. Furniture, paintings, knick-knacks. Mom groaned a lot, making notes on her trusty pad. I trailed along behind as we climbed the stairs to the second floor. What had she got us into?