

# Chapter One

One good thing about watching a matinee alone on a Thursday afternoon is there's no one around to see you bawl your eyes out. *The Outsiders* always got me—especially the part where Patrick Swayze's character lets down his guard and shows some love for Ponyboy—but this time I was a mess. Maybe it was because it was my eighteenth birthday (which should have been a bonus, seeing as I waited an

eternity to say goodbye to seventeen). Or maybe it was because my dad had promised to be there and wasn't. Death has a funny way of preventing you from keeping your promises. Dad used to say, *Kallie, not even death could keep me from our Swayze-fest*. I guess that's another thing death does. It makes liars of us all.

*The Outsiders* being my all-time favorite book-slash-movie, every year on my birthday my dad and I would visit the run-down Dolphin Cinema on Hastings Street for the dollar-matinee showing. Until this year, when he decided to die.

Scratch that—I shouldn't have said that. Jeremiah Echo would never have chosen to die, and certainly not before we got to see our favorite greaser gang come of age one last time. If he'd known he'd die before seeing Ponyboy bleach his hair or Two-Bit start the day with chocolate cake and beer, well, I'm sure Dad would have arranged a final viewing, no horrible death puns intended.

Pancreatic cancer is one swift downer. By the time Dad found out that the dull pain in his side was a super deadly tumor, it was too late. He was gone two weeks later, and I began spending a lot of time in dark movie houses.

Dad had been my best friend. Hanging out with him had been like being with an older, cooler version of myself. It's a little cheesy to say that about your own dad, I know, but Echo Senior was special like that. And seeing as my mom was a deadbeat or maybe not of this earth anymore, and my extended family consisted entirely of distant cousins back in Greece, well, I was on my own.

It was going to be a long walk in the blazing early-July sunlight, and as usual I was ill equipped in the fashion department. I was not meant for a hot climate—not that Vancouver was particularly tropical or anything, but it was muggy as hell in the summer, and I didn't do shorts. Or sundresses. I had some curvy thighs, and I did not want them rubbing

together and getting all sweaty or sticking to a janky old bus seat.

I stood in the sunshine and tried to will myself to enjoy the heat, to be one of those gross people who feels energized by the sun instead of cooked by it, but it wasn't happening.

I took out my dad's ancient iPod and started walking. On the playlist? The sad-sad-birthday-after-your-dad-dies-and-you-are-suddenly-homeless playlist? A downbeat mix of Radiohead, Smashing Pumpkins, Nirvana (because my dad loved them the most), Portishead and a little Chopin thrown in for the died-way-too-young factor.

I walked down the side street at a good clip, wanting to get to the main road and the bus stop as soon as possible. It wasn't the worst place in the city to be, but it definitely wasn't the best. When I spotted the old blue van trailing me, suddenly I wished I was one of those kids whose parents had

bought them a cell phone. If you don't have a cell phone, you might as well be marooned on a desert island or stranded on the moon. When you're a teen girl alone with a suspicious vehicle following you, being stuck on the moon sounds like a really good option.

The van sped up until it was right alongside me. My heart skipped a beat, and I could feel my pulse bubbling in my throat. I did not want to look, because I felt like if I did, I would be making something happen.

"Hey, hot stuff," a voice said, and I was just about to break into a run when the voice said, "Hey, Kallie, like my new ride? Kallie? Didn't you see me waiting for you?"

I stopped and turned, and relief flooded my body like a warm flush. It was Jamie, my friend, and right then absolutely my most favorite person on the planet. She stopped the van.

“Jamie, Jesus!” I said. I walked over to her.

“Well, okay then,” she said, leaning her long arm out the window and tipping her imaginary cap at me. “I’ll be your lord and savior if you like, little missy.”

I rolled my eyes. “What are you doing here? And where did you get this...thing?”

I took a look at the beast Jamie was driving. It was absolutely enormous—calling it a beast was an understatement. It was long, blue, wide, rusted and vibrating with an intense rumble that made it seem like it was going to fall apart at any second, explode or take off into the stratosphere. Maybe all three.

“This, sweet lady,” Jamie said with pride, “is your ride home. And my new tour van. So I wouldn’t go insulting it too much. Old Blue here has a sensitive disposition. And”—she lowered her voice—“I’m worried it might quit on me if it hears you.”

“Dude,” I said. “This thing is not Christine, right? It’s not going to hunt us down and kill us, is it?”

Jamie smiled—the same amazing, wide smile that had charmed me into being friends with her a few years back. The first time I met Jamie was when she came to my door looking for donations for the junior football team. I knew who she was because I had heard about this girl who went through hell just to get on the football team, and then there she was at my door, looking for cash. She had come to the wrong place. I guess the guys on the team had given her the crappy ’hood to canvass while they took Plum Hill and Tower Heights. Coming to Northside was not a good strategy.

I opened the door and there she was, giving me a world-class smile. It was a true-blue, weak-knee genuine dazzler. It wasn’t fake or put on or practiced. It was sincere, the kind of smile you can feel in your chest. The kind that makes you grin

back in a stupor. It was a wide smile too, full of teeth, and her eyes were all crinkled up. It felt like that smile was meant just for me. It felt like that smile was saying I was beautiful, that she was happy to see me, that she liked me, really liked me a lot. Jamie's smile was the warmest I had ever felt, and it came on a day when I was not feeling so good about myself. That smile was a surprise for a girl who never got surprised, and I have loved Jamie for that ever since.

And, in true Jamie style, she had shown up again just when I needed her. This time in her big blue boat of a van.

"Hey," I said. "Were you waiting for me the whole time?"

She shrugged. "Nah. I mean, I figured you'd need a ride after your yearly movie, right? Anyway, can't let you walk home alone around here. And I wanted to show off my new wheels."

"Cool. You could have come to the movie too," I said, but as soon as I had, I knew it wasn't really true.

Jamie, to her credit, just nodded. "It's all good," she said. "You going to get in or what?"

I looked at the van. "I don't know. Maybe I should take my chances on the street."

Jamie revved the engine. "Be careful what you wish for, Kallie." She smiled that infectious smile again, and I felt it lift me up inside.

"Thanks," I said and walked around the front of the van. I opened the passenger door, and the weight of it swinging open nearly knocked me over.

"Jesus," I muttered, hopping in and buckling the ancient seat belt.

"That's me," said Jamie. "Your own personal Jesus."

She pressed on the gas and we lurched forward, tires squealing, and sped off.

On the ride back to my neighborhood, Jamie kept quiet and turned on the radio. She tuned it to a classic-rock station, and the sounds of the music my dad loved so much filled the van as we drove. The windows were rolled down, and the wind stirred up my hair and cooled me off. I relaxed into the cracked leather seat and let my hand float on the breeze. Jamie didn't say a word the whole time, and she gave no indication that she saw me crying. That's just something you don't find in a person all that often. That was my Jamie. One of a kind.

## Chapter Two

Jamie waited outside in the beast while I ran into my soon-to-be-ex-home to change. I opened the door and found once again, as I had every single day since Dad died, that the house was too quiet. All I had left of him were his old records and a collection of little notes we called "echoes"—and believe me, we relished how clever we were for coming up with that.