

# Chapter One

I heave my bulging backpack onto the kitchen table and grin at my mother. "I'm ready if you are."

I expect her to laugh and ask if I've packed my entire closet. But she doesn't. Instead she glances uneasily at my grandmother, who isn't smiling either, so now neither am I.

“Um, about that, Kat,” Mom begins but leaves her sentence hanging. Suddenly I have a horrible feeling she is about to drop a bomb on me. The happy butterflies that have been fluttering inside my stomach all morning do a nosedive.

“About *what?*” I ask, although I’m pretty sure I don’t want to know.

She takes a deep breath. “There’s been a change of plans.”

“What change?” The question is out before I can bite it back, and I mentally kick myself. Why do I keep asking stuff I don’t want to know?

She reaches for me, but I put out my hand like a stop sign. Her arm falls to her side.

“We’re not going, are we?” I say point-blank.

She reaches for me again, but I shake my head and push her hand away.

“Just tell me,” I blurt, already angry, though I don’t have any reason to be—yet. “Has the shipment been canceled? Has it been given to

another trucker? Are you sick? Has your rig broken down?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “It’s none of those things. The run is still on.”

“*But?*” I wait for her to smile and tell me there is no *but*. That everything is fine. She’s still taking me on this run. I’m just going to have to pack lighter. *Ha-ha. Good joke, Mom.*

So how come she’s not laughing? Or smiling? Or even looking at me? She starts fidgeting with the buckles on my backpack.

“Mom!”

That makes her look up.

She sighs. “The run is still on, but there’s a glitch. I was just talking to the dispatcher. He’s offered me a follow-up job.” She shrugs. “The payout is huge. But it means getting back to Winnipeg sooner than I planned. I can do it, but there won’t be much wiggle room. I know you were looking forward to coming on this trip, honey, and I know I said we’d

turn it into a holiday, but if I take this second run, we won't be able to do that. There won't be time for anything but driving. You wouldn't have any fun, Kat. There'd be nothing for you to do but look out the window. You'd be bored silly."

"You said *if*." I block out everything else my mother has said and cling to that single tiny word as if it were a life preserver keeping me afloat in a stormy sea. "*If* you take the run. That's what you said. That means you haven't accepted yet. Right?" She opens her mouth to answer, but I don't let her. "So tell the dispatcher to give the shipment to someone else. Tell him you can't do it. Because you *can't*."

"Kat. Please." Her eyes are pleading even more than her words.

I cross my arms and shake my head stubbornly.

She bites her lip. "I'm sorry, Kat. I already told him I'd take it."

For a second, I'm so stunned I can't speak. And then I explode. "Are you serious? You took it? Really? How could you? You promised me, Mom. You *promised!* Call him back and tell him you've changed your mind."

"Katarina, stop." It's my grandmother. "Your mama, she had no choice. She—"

"Don't stick up for her, Gran," I snarl. "Of course she had a choice. She just didn't choose me." I turn away and mutter, "So what else is new?"

"Kat, I'll make it up to you. I promise."

I spin around to face her again. "Give it up, Mom. You promised I'd be going on this trip with you. Your promise is worth about as much as Monopoly money. So tell me, if you're on the road and Gran is off to Mexico, what exactly am *I* doing?"

She hangs her head and mumbles, "I've arranged for you to stay with Tina."

I throw up my hands. “Tina? Great! I get to spend my spring break with your friend, her egghead husband and their three moronic kids. Gee, thanks, Mom. You’re the best. But if it’s all the same to you, I’ll take a pass.”

I grab my backpack and jacket and run from the kitchen. I have no idea where I’m going. I’m just going. If I stay in the house, my mom and grandmother will hunt me down, so I bolt for the front door and slam it behind me.

And then I come to a screeching halt. Now what? I look around at the dirty March snow covering the ground. It looks like I feel, and though I’m still angry, the tears start streaming down my cheeks. I swipe at them and reset my survival compass. Since Dad died eight months ago, it feels like I do that on a daily basis.

He was a trucker, which meant he was on the road a lot, so half the time it was just Mom and me holding the fort. Back then we were more

than mother and daughter. We were friends. We did girl stuff—shopping, baking and painting our nails. When Dad was home, we did family things—tobogganing and skating or swimming and cycling, depending on the season.

Then my dad had a massive heart attack, and everything changed.

Now it’s Mom who’s on the road. She was a trucker before I was born, so the transition from stay-at-home mom to breadwinner was no big deal—for her. It was a big deal for me though. Almost faster than I could blink, my whole world got turned upside down. We moved in with Gran, so I lost the only home I’d ever known. I had to change schools, so I lost my friends. But worst of all, I lost my family. As often as I see my mother these days, she might as well have died too.

This road trip was supposed to be our chance to find our way back to each other. I’m on spring break, so I have no school for the next ten days. But

my grandmother is going on vacation in Mexico—she flies there tomorrow—which would leave me home alone. That’s why Mom suggested I ride with her on her next run.

Yeah, well, so much for that. Her dispatcher snaps his fingers, and she drops me like a hot potato.

New tears spring to my eyes, and I angrily wipe them away. Do I really mean so little to my mother that she can toss me aside without a second’s thought?

I choke back a sob and run down the driveway. I don’t know where I’m going, but it’s sure not to Tina’s house.

My mom’s semi—minus the trailer—is parked on the road, so I put it between me and the house, making sure to stand behind a tire so Mom and Gran won’t see my feet. If they come looking for me, I want them to think I took off down the street or hid behind the house or in some shrubbery.

Sure enough, a moment later I can hear them out in the yard.

“Kat!”

“Katarina!”

As they head around the side of the house, I think about making a run for it, but then I have another idea. Last night Mom gave me a spare key to the semi for our trip—in case of an emergency, she said. Well, I’d say this situation more than qualifies. I fish the key out of my pocket and let myself into the cab of the truck as quietly as I can. Then I scrunch down in the back under all Mom’s gear.

I can still hear them calling me, so I sneak a peek out the window, which is slightly open.

Mom glances at her watch. “I’m so sorry about this, Mama,” she tells Gran. “I hate leaving without setting things right with Kat.” She takes another look up and down the street and then checks her watch again. “But I have to get going.”

Gran pats Mom's arm. "Is okay," she says and shoos Mom toward the truck. "Everything will be fine. Katarina will calm down and come home. I no leave until tomorrow. I drive her to Tina's. Don't worry. Now go."

Mom looks unsure but nods. Then she gives Gran a hug and a kiss and heads for the truck.

As I shrink back into my hiding place, excitement shoots through me like an electric current. This is not what I planned, but whether Mom likes it or not, I'm coming with her on this run.

## Chapter Two

As Mom climbs into the cab, I stay perfectly still. She sticks the key into the ignition, and the motor rumbles to life, making the whole truck shake. I shake with it. It's like being on one of those vibrating motel beds, except not so comfortable. Every bolt and bump in the floor digs into me. To make matters worse, the stuff I'm hiding under