

My Life
and Death
by
Alexandra
Canarsie



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Prologue

None of this would have happened, I suppose, if I had a normal hobby like skateboarding or hanging out at malls. But I don't do things like that. I go to the funerals of strangers.

Weird, huh?

Maybe I began going so I'd have something to put into the diary I'd always planned to start. I imagined that other people used diaries to keep track of their fabulously interesting lives. *I* needed to keep a diary because it would be the one place I could talk about things the way they *really* happened.

No matter how I explain something, Mom or Aunt Darleen or one of my teachers sighs and rolls his or her eyes and murmurs, "Well, you're the only person who saw it like that, Allie."

What does that mean? That it didn't really happen that way? That I didn't tell the truth, maybe didn't even *see* the truth in the first place? That makes me halfway think I should shut up and try not to attract attention, at least for a while. But sooner or later my wicked side twists and turns

and breaks loose. In other words, I have to air out my tonsils and tell *my* side of things.

Aunt Darleen or Mom would say that going to the cemetery that first morning was just an accident or maybe bad luck. I say it was definitely fate...

Chapter 1

It was June, and Mom and I had just moved again, the tenth time in six years. We were renting an old run-down trailer in Lost & Found Acres, in the town of Nickel Park. Lost & Found was pretty much rock-bottom living, the kind of place people on the “wrong” side of the tracks looked down on. Mom had grown up in Nickel Park, though not in the trailer park, so coming home had been really hard on her.

I guess she just had to spread all that good cheer around, because our first Saturday in the trailer, she stuck her head into my so-called room, which was about a sneeze bigger than a gym locker, and asked me a surefire, let’s-start-to-fight question:

“You know, Allie, come September you’ll be a freshman,” she said. “High schools have so much more going on than junior high. Will you join something this year?” *This* year, as opposed to last year, and the year before that, was what she was really saying. She wore the painful smile of an optimist who never hears the word “yes” yet refuses to give up hope.

“Golly gee, Mom. There’s so much that I just can’t choose,” I said brightly. “Maybe the school paper, drama

club, chorus, and girls' softball team. It's all so exciting. Maybe I'll even try out for team captain!"

Her face pulled into itself, a contrast to the poster of Einstein I'd just hung up (the one where he's sticking out his tongue).

"Look, if you can't handle a crowd scene," she said tightly, "at least do something with math. Why don't you volunteer to tutor?"

Kill my one good subject wasting time on a moron? I mean, math was my easiest class. It was basic. $1 + 1 = 2$. $A \times B = AB$. It was totally predictable, all memorization and logic, not like analyzing a poem. A math problem was always the same. A poem was slippery: it changed each time you read it. I got enough slippery stuff in life.

"I don't see any effort on your part to adjust," Mom nagged.

With so much effort I deserved a medal, I kept my mouth shut and rummaged through one of the moving boxes for a pair of shorts. As soon as I pulled them out, Mom switched gears without so much as taking a breath: "You're *not* wearing *those* today, are you?"

"Sure," I said. "It's a picnic, isn't it?"

The third annual Nickel Park Welcome Stranger Picnic, to be precise. Aunt Darleen, Mom's only sister, had lived in Nickel Park all her life. She'd told us the "tradition" started three years ago when the Tastee Treet Cookie Factory opened and Nickel Park's population exploded. The factory was where Aunt Darleen, and now Mom, and probably most of Nickel Park worked, at least the people who weren't milking or shucking or whatever it was hicks did. The town council decided it would be neighborly for all the newcomers who'd moved in during the past year to get together with the old-timers and meet and mingle.

In a town as small as Nickel Park, “population explosion” probably meant ten new people, being “neighborly” meant a chance to sell life insurance to the newcomers, and “meet and mingle” meant gossiping over the three-bean salad. I knew the last part made Mom nervous. People would talk if she went, but talk more if she didn’t. And what was she anyway—a newcomer? An old-timer?

She’d left Nickel Park to go to the state university instead of just commuting three towns over to Deedy County’s junior college. Her first semester, she declared herself a psych major; her second semester, she got pregnant. “One day,” I once overheard her say, “I woke up and found I’d somehow become a college drop-out married to another college drop-out,” as if how it actually happened baffled her. In the six years since the divorce, she’d gone through a string of jobs too embarrassingly long to fit on a résumé. What was the classification for a local girl who *didn’t* make good?

Maybe all this had been going through her mind and that was why she was a bit touchy about my outfit.

“I really want to make a good impression,” she said.

“Some impression,” I countered. “If I wear a dress to a picnic, I’ll look like a jerk.”

“Wear shorts at our first public appearance, and *I’ll* look like a bad mother.”

“First public appearance? What are we, royalty?” I swung around to look at her. “Ow!”

I’d banged my arm against the sharp edge of the dresser. Everywhere I turned I bumped into what the rental agent called “conveniently placed furnishings.” *Can you die from black-and-blue marks?* I wondered. Worse, none of the stuff tripping me was ours. It came with the unit. Another convenience, said the rental agent. More crap was what *I* said. Rips in the carpet had been smoothed with duct tape. The

kitchen counter that doubled as the table was scarred with cigarette burns and worn down past the pattern. Everything looked gray and faded except for the flowery blue curtains Mom had bought new. They were such a lie they made me mad every time I saw them.

Still, I should have been grateful. Some of the trailers were subdivided into twos and threes. Aunt Darleen lived in one of those. I guess that made ours the deluxe model.

I'd end up killing my aunt if I had to live with her in such a tiny space. I'd had a taste of life with Aunt Darleen the week before. Mom had put me on the bus to Nickel Park a few days ahead of her while she put our things in storage. At least that's what she said she was doing. I think she really stayed behind to have a garage sale. She'd sold my life from under me. Now whenever I passed the blue curtains, I unraveled a bit of the hem. Three more days and they'd match everything else.

As I stood rubbing my sore arm, Mom snatched the shorts out of my other hand.

"Don't take all morning to get dressed," she said. "We don't want to miss the group introduction." This was the part of the picnic when all the new people marched up onto a ribbon-decked stage and let themselves be gawked at. "If we're not on time, we'll be introduced later all by ourselves, which I do *not* want. Just make yourself presentable."

Presentable. As if anything could be done with my tall gawky body and blah face. I have sandy hair, neither blond nor brown, and gray eyes, neither blue nor green. I felt like the kitchen counter, worn down past the pattern.

I took the shorts from her, flung them back into the box, and fished out a sleeveless denim jumper. This was as far as I'd go: jumper and sandals, no slip, no pantyhose. If I couldn't be presentable, I could at least be comfortable.

As I pulled off my jeans and top and pulled the jumper over my head, Mom launched back into her original let's-start-to-fight subject.

"You know, Allie, you're getting a brand new start here," she said. "It's a new town, at least for you, a new home, a new school. And Nickel Park has some wonderful teachers. Or they did back when I went. Maybe some will even still be there."

How could she talk like that, as if this was a great adventure for me? This dump was *not* my home. I'd never really gone to a school I liked, but my *home* was six years, ten moves, and several hundred miles back.

"It's high time you learn how to get along, young lady," she went on. "No more loner stuff. You've got to meet people halfway."

She crossed her arms and gave me a stern look. She was tall, slim, and sandy-haired, too, gray-eyed and gray-faced; she looked so much like me, it was like fighting with myself. Or like fighting with my future. Maybe that's why I did it so often.

"Meet people halfway?" I echoed. "Halfway to the mall? Halfway to Mars? I don't see *you* with crowds of friends, Mom. Maybe you should try going halfway yourself."

As soon as the words flew from my mouth, I felt small and ugly. Mom was always working so hard she didn't have time for friends. Up till now she'd been a waitress, which always left her too tired to do more than come home and soak her sore, swollen feet in ice water. But if you try to unsay what's been said, that's like twisting the truth to suit you, so I kept my mouth shut.

The phone rang.

As soon as Mom answered, I knew it was Aunt Lolly. She's

my dad's great aunt and my great-great aunt. Though my dad disappeared after the divorce and was a forbidden topic, we always stayed in touch with Aunt Lolly. That was so she'd leave me something in her will. Mom would never admit that. She said we did it to be nice. *I* figured that *she* figured that Aunt Lolly was the only way I'd get to college, as I sure wasn't going on a scholarship. *I* was surprised I'd made it through junior high.

"Of course I have time to chat!" Mom said with fake delight. That annoyed me to the point of craziness. If she couldn't talk now, she should just say so and call back. Instead, she forced her mouth into a smile, drummed her fingers, and probably thought, *here's a good hour shot*.

I refused to put up with an hour's worth of silent commands to change into something dressier, so I stomped outside and slammed the door behind me. Out on the corrugated metal stoop, I looked around at my wonderful new home.

With a name like Lost & Found Acres, you'd expect old sagging trailers, skinny smudge-faced kids, pit bulls, and death-trap refrigerators abandoned out back. Well, our trailer *did* sag, there *were* lots of skinny kids, and the two German shepherds chained up about five trailers down set my heart thumping with their vicious bark. But one section was full of nice trailers with satellite dishes on top so big they threatened to tip the whole thing over. And a steady parade of shiny new RVs pulled in to dump their crap, fill up on gas, then take off to who knew where, throwing a cloud of dust behind them.

A veil of dust hung in the air even now. The rest of the world had all sorts of weather. I had quickly learned that the trailer park had just two—dust and mud—and it hadn't rained in three days. By the time I reached the road, my nose

had started to itch and my skin had picked up a thin coating of grime.

I knew Mom wanted to leave for the picnic as soon as she got off the phone. I meant to stay close, I really did, but when I saw a splotch of green beyond the far end of the trailer park, I began to walk toward it. I ignored the curtains that twitched aside as I passed and the kids who begged for a dollar for candy. The green lured me, an oasis in a desert. Maybe it would end up a mirage and be just the corner of a hideously painted trailer. But I had to see.

The end of the trailer park bordered on a sparse patch of grass where the dust finally gave way to better soil. Some distance away, under the shade of a row of trees, stood an old crumbling stone wall and an iron gate. One of the doors hung tilted from a single hinge; the other had fallen off completely. Weeds had grown up between the bars. Rusty letters across the still-standing archway said "Evergreen Cemetery."

The back of my neck prickled as I stepped over the fallen gate.

Evergreen was everything Lost & Found was not: lush, dark, almost cool. The place was overgrown with grass, weeds, ferns, and wildflowers. I found a path of sorts between old twisted oaks draped with hanging vines and things equally creepy. Bushes that should have been pruned into front-lawn tameness spread up and out, pressing in on me as I walked by. The hot sunlight that made the trailer park a dust bowl barely penetrated the thick branches and leaves, creating a sort of perpetual twilight.

The cemetery seemed to have sprung up in the middle of the woods. Gravestones had pushed their way up beneath straggly rosebushes and sprouted like stone mushrooms on the hillside. Angels and skulls and strange-looking clawed creatures elbowed past trees and bushes and watched with

cold marble eyes as I trespassed on their silent, secret world.

In the movie-set town of Springfield, the last place we lived, I don't remember any cemetery at all. It must have been hidden away, or else Springfield shipped off its dead, the way they shipped off the rest of their problems, like me. All Springfield cared about was that everything looked good on the outside. A cemetery would have been a wart on the ass of a beauty queen—okay as long as the judges never saw it. *This* cemetery looked as if it might take over the whole town.

I wandered through Evergreen till I came to its new section, where all the tree-filled hollows and hills leveled off to stretches of lawn. Grave markers, set in neatly measured rows, were upright slabs or small stone rectangles flat against the ground—not a carved skull in sight. A narrow paved lane cut through this newer part and led off to the west, where it probably came out onto one of the town's main roads.

In the new section, a funeral was taking place.

Most of the time I stay clear of any and all social activities, but that day I didn't. I walked closer to get a better look, then a little closer, until soon I was almost part of the group. I leaned against a headstone, closed my eyes, and listened to the minister.

"Did you know Mr. Franklin well?" asked a nearby voice.

An elderly woman in black stood next to me. Usually I can guess someone's story in about five seconds max. What I can't guess is easy enough to fill in—interesting details about things people have done, things they wished they'd done. On any other day I could have written this woman's life and handed it to her in a leather-bound book, from her Persian cat named Elroy to her bingo addiction. But being caught so close up, I suffered major brain freeze. I looked down at my sandals and shrugged. She took that as a yes.

“Well, thank you. It was so kind of you to come.”

As I walked away, my mind raced with all the incredibly cool answers I might have given and how the old lady would have reacted.

And it didn't have to stop with today's visit.

TV Guide listing for *The Girl in Black*: “Each week a mysterious young woman goes to the funeral of a stranger, setting off a chain reaction of dramatic, sometimes dangerous events.”

The idea of having my own show—written by, directed by, and starring me—was irresistible, even though normally I didn't watch much TV. Nothing sucked more than counting on watching your favorite show, only to discover that the set had been pawned yet again. About the third time it happened, I decided TV was stupid anyway.

The main gate to the cemetery came out on Turkey Hill Road. It took me a few moments to get my bearings. By the time I got back to the trailer park, I'd been gone over an hour.

“What do you mean storming out like that?” Mom demanded. “And where have you been? You know I wanted to leave.”

“I went to a funeral at Evergreen,” I said.

“A funeral? Whose? Who died?”

“I don't know. Just someone.”

Red splotches popped out all over my mother's cheeks.

“You went to a funeral and you don't know who died?”

“I do now. It was a Mr. Franklin.” Studying the floor, I heaved my biggest sigh and said, “It was a very sad service.”

“Alexandra Canarsie, sometimes I just don’t understand you!” she fumed. “I was worried sick. And look at you! What in the world were you doing?”

My mother’s hands fluttered about my jumper, picked off a couple of loose leaves, then brushed something from my hair. Suddenly she tore open the bow at the neck of her own blouse, and I knew we were skipping Nickel Park’s third annual Welcome Stranger Picnic. I guess she decided not showing at all was better than standing on stage alone.

“Let ’em talk,” she said. She kicked off the heels I knew must have pinched her feet. “I’m sure they’ve been yapping about me nonstop since I moved back anyway.”

She leaned back in the trailer’s one comfortable chair, sighed, and closed her eyes. She looked tired; she always looked tired. I figured she’d be asleep within seconds. I figured wrong.

“That was a horrible, morbid, intrusive thing you did, Allie,” Mom said. She opened her eyes, sat up straight, and nailed me with a killer look. “Don’t you *ever* do that again.”

The very next day I began going through the obituaries in the *Daily Sentinel*; we read Aunt Darleen’s copy when she was finished checking it for sales and engagement announcements for “the ones that got away.” I was clearly justified in checking the obituaries, even provoked. Mom asked me three more times about joining an activity and keeping busy. Since it was only June, she began to push the summer rec program. I decided I wouldn’t argue any more. It just wore us out, and she didn’t need help from me in that department. Each morning she left for her new job, working alongside Aunt Darleen at the cookie factory. Each night she came home exhausted, smelling of vanilla and butter and sugar. I wanted to hug her, to bury my face in her white lab coat, and

sniff my way back to some wonderful childhood place I imagined I knew. But too tired for even a hug, she would strip off the coat and collapse into the chair.

The middle of her second week on the job she seemed particularly beat.

“How Darleen can go from work to drinks and dancing is beyond me,” she murmured, her hand over her eyes. “When did I get so old?”

“When you had me?” I offered.

“Must have been.” She lowered her hand and gave me a “Mom” look. “So, did you spend the day reading again or did you find something more constructive to do? What about volunteering at the library?”

Volunteering? I’d stick with an activity that suited me: going to funerals.

The next morning I found several scheduled for Saturday burial at Evergreen. I studied them, then chose a name: “Ethel Claridge, 87, president of the garden club for ten years.” The obituary was brief, there was no next of kin, and the funeral was likely to be small. I was doing poor Ethel a favor by showing up. That was my idea of service.

Ethel, Ethel...a good name for tragedy, I thought. Her first and only love died in the war and her later marriage to Mr. Claridge was just for show on both their parts. Then somewhere in all their years together, Mr. Claridge fell for her, truly and deeply, while Ethel still pined for her dead love. They both died of a broken heart.

Mrs. Claridge was being buried at ten o’clock Saturday morning. At nine Mom left for the community-center aerobics class, coaxed to join by Aunt Darleen. I circled Mrs. Claridge’s obituary in black marker, put the opened paper on the counter, then walked to the cemetery. I was right: only

three other mourners were there. No kin, the paper had said. Were these her friends, or just fellow members of the garden club?

When I got back, Mom and Aunt Darleen were sitting at the kitchen counter, their heads close together. They were both still dressed in their exercise clothes: Mom in an oversized navy T-shirt and tights, Aunt Darleen in glittery pink spandex and black bicycle shorts. Aunt Darleen was younger by five years. Maybe she'd seen her future in Mom, too, and decided she didn't like it. She dyed her hair whitish blond, wore teen fashions a year after they'd become stupid, and had long fake nails with smiley faces on each tip. I wanted to scream every time I saw them.

"Oh," said my mother stiffly when I came in. "How are you, Alexandra?"

Alexandra? I was in real trouble.

"Okay. Hi, Aunt Darleen."

"Hi, Allie. How was the funeral?"

I noticed Mom kicked her under the table.

"Why don't you change your clothes, Alexandra? Then you and I and Aunt Darleen can do something silly this afternoon. Maybe miniature golf."

I said sure, went into my sardine-can room, and stopped just inside the door to listen.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" Aunt Darleen asked.

"Shh, she'll hear you. I've been doing a lot of thinking. There's only one reason why she'd go off to the cemetery again this morning. I think she's mourning her father."

Hearing my father mentioned made my breath catch.

"Mourn him? But he's not dead!" Aunt Darleen said.

"He might as well be dead. Sometimes I think it would be easier for her if he *were*."

“Well, talk to her about it.”

As desperate as I was to find out about my father, I didn't want Aunt Darleen to take my side. She was supposed to be the trailer-trash butt of my jokes, not my defender.

“I couldn't,” Mom answered. “Talking would be much too painful.”

“For her or for you?”

“For her! She's just a kid, she still needs protecting.”

“Winnie, she's a teenager! Why, when I was her age—”

“I know what you were doing at her age,” Mom said hurriedly. “But you're not Allie. I've got to do things my own way.”

“Yeah, look how good *that's* working,” Darleen answered. “I mean, if she was just at Evergreen visiting Mom and Pop's grave, that would be one thing. But she's going to strange funerals. That's plain weird.”

Mom and Pop's grave? The grandparents I had never met were at Evergreen? My mother had said they'd been killed in a car accident years ago. A strange sensation crept over me. Mom really *had* come home.

“And if Allie *is* mourning her father,” she asked, “how else can she act it out?”

“Give her his picture and a dart gun. At least she can do that in her room. You know how small this town is, Win. Burp and your neighbor says, ‘Excuse me.’ You've been back less than two weeks and people are already talking. It'll be Springfield all over again! It'll be worse than Springfield because they know you here in Nickel Park.”

Worse than Springfield? Not likely. For once I'd almost been happy to move.

“You don't know anything about Springfield!” my mother snapped. “Springfield was a horrible town with a horrible school.”

“Oh, unlike all the other towns and all the other schools the two of you have left.”

“This time it’s going to be different. It has to be.”

My hands stung. I looked down and saw I was clenching them. The nails had dug into my palms. Tight stomach, tight fists. I slammed the door to my room and began to change my clothes. I gave Nickel Park three months, tops.