

**RAINS,
AT TIMES
HEAVY**

DEBI GOODWIN

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*For Jane
May you weather all storms*

CHAPTER 1

Toronto – August 25, 2014

Her mother named her Linden. Paulette probably sat in a library, eight months pregnant, dressed in a faded Goodwill maternity dress, pissed at the husband who left her, flipping through picture books of flowers and trees for inspiration, wanting something different from the Karens, Susans and Jills born in the seventies, searching for a name that might make everything all right. She says she chose Linden because pagans claimed the so-named sacred tree brought luck. She couldn't have got it more wrong.

In the park by the Humber River below her grandmother's house, Linden has never seen a linden tree. Only maples, willows and oaks, many so tall her father could have sat in their shade as a child. Grandma Abby tells her that when her father was little, he loved everything about this park: the trees, the small stones imprinted with fossils of ancient plants and bugs that he set on his window ledge in order of size, and the river waters inexorably pulled into Lake Ontario. That changed, of course, after that day, decades ago. The day that still haunts them all—the first indicator that they, as a family, were cursed by weather.

“Come quickly,” Grandma Abby said on the phone earlier that morning. “I have something to show you. Before I change my mind. Or forget.”

But Linden lingers in the park. Delays the climb up to Dundas Street and the walk to her grandmother's house. Unwilling to return to her father's past. Especially now, when the winds have finally dropped, the barometric pressure lowered, the fog cleared in her storm of grief over Matt's death. She prolongs this walk on a Monday because she can. It is only the second Monday of a three-month leave from her job as a climatologist who records the extreme rainfalls of climate change, a job no one cares to hear about. She wants to be in this sunny park with the arm-in-arm retired couples, the packs of mothers with their Bugaboo strollers, the solitary dog walkers who seem in no hurry to get to their jobs. In the days ahead she will have to find a way to make a good life for Katie and for herself. Figure a way to stay happily single and solvent. But not today, on this day of sunshine with no rain in the forecast.

Her curiosity gets the better of her, as all things related to her father do. By the time she stands in front of the old house, she is out

of breath. Grandma Abby's real estate agent has finally pounded a For Sale sign into the lawn below the towering spruce, but the sign is slightly off kilter, as if his expectations are low. The Toronto market is hot, but the shabby brick house perched on a hill could be a hard sell; it's one of a dozen houses on a dead-end street, cut off from the rest of the residential neighbourhood by a grocery store, a car wash and a noisy auto repair shop on busy Dundas Street.

Inside the house, the rooms, once so connected to Linden's every childhood emotion, have been stripped of their ghosts: wall-paper torn down, walls patched and painted in a shivering white. She stands in a near-empty living room as though in the centre of a snowstorm. Grandma Abby has gone along with all the agent's suggestions on how to get ready for an open house; she wants enough money from the old place to keep her in her new suite in a retirement home.

"Up here, dear." Linden follows the trail of Grandma Abby's voice, up stairs that squeak beneath the thick red Persian runner. She stops in the doorway of her grandmother's bedroom, blinking at the frigid walls, and chucks up another loss in the ledger. Gone are the pink and yellow roses that used to run down the walls along green, thorny branches; the black and white photos of a young couple with two smiling twin daughters and a still-faced boy; the purple chenille bedspread with its nubs Linden liked to run her hands over. Gone is the safety she always knew in that room, her haven from the chaos of her mother's apartment and life.

"Terrible, isn't it? Apparently, it will appeal to buyers. I guess because it looks like everyone else's house and not mine."

Linden sits on the bed beside her grandmother, the only place left to sit in the room. The rocker, which has always nestled in a corner by the window that looks down toward the river, is gone too.

"The rocker's in the garage. I'll let Cheryl and Carol fight over it." Grandma Abby takes Linden's hand into her age-roughed one. Her hand is surprisingly cold for such a hot day. "Your mother told me about your leave."

"Sorry. I was going to tell you..."

Grandma Abby waves away the apology.

"My mother's not too happy with me for taking time off work."

"Paulette is rarely happy about anything. I suspect she told me in the hopes I'd talk you out of it because I worked most of my life. 'Good for Linden,' I said. That stopped her."

"I just need a break to figure out... to figure out..."

"I understand, dear. You'll manage a good life for you and

Katie. You'll think it through. You're more like me than like your mother."

Linden's eyes travel to a yellow rectangle on the white duvet cover. Grandma Abby picks up two weathered envelopes at her side and sets them in her lap. Linden stares at the envelopes, confused, as though time is bending backwards to her sixteenth birthday when her grandmother gave her a packet of envelopes tied with a blue ribbon. Linden's father had sent the letters from Varanasi, a city in India, where he'd gone as a hippie to find enlightenment, or some Eastern thing. He wrote them from the time before Linden was born until she was a toddler, and told his mother to give them to his daughter as a record of his years in India whenever the time was right. Linden doesn't know why her grandmother thought sixteen was the right age to learn your father knew about you but didn't come home even when he could have. Months after the date of the last letter in the packet, an American woman wrote Grandma Abby to say her son had died from the pneumonia he'd developed during the monsoon rains. So Linden never got to ask him why he didn't make his way back to her.

"More letters?" Linden tries hard to keep her voice from trembling.

Grandma Abby's hands massage the envelopes, the arthritic joints like eagle talons. "I came across them when I was sorting a drawer. I've always known they were there, of course, waiting... It's time I pass them on."

Linden sees the bland writing of a bland name, Tammy Smith, in one corner of the first envelope her grandmother hands her.

"It's the letter with the news I shared with Paulette. From the American woman. She included a smaller envelope with some of Michael's ashes inside, but don't worry, they're not in there anymore. And there's this one." The second envelope is addressed to Grandma Abby in the perfect cursive hand Linden recognizes as her father's.

Linden stares into her grandmother's watery eyes for a clue. And then at the skin around them, as red and thin as Christmas tissue paper. Grandma Abby is old now, almost ninety. Linden is going to lose her soon, too.

"Oh, don't look at me like that. Old age is a privilege our men never got to know. Just read the letter. And share it with your mother if you want. It's not for me to keep secrets anymore. Did you ever show her the other letters?"

"You told me not to."

“I was vengeful back then. I believed Michael wouldn’t have gone to India, wouldn’t have died there if she’d been a better wife. She always pushed him too hard to change. He couldn’t change. He needed his routines.”

Grandma Abby rubs the deep crease at the top of her nose. “I was trying to save myself from the blame. I see that now.”

“What do you mean?”

“For another day, dear. Read the letter.”

The crinkle of paper is loud in the emptied room.

September 13, 1976

Dear Mom,

I don’t believe it will be long before I am gone. I trust that you will pass my letters on to my daughter when you think the time is right. I think it best she doesn’t know about me when she is little so she can get on with life with her mother.

There is one more thing I need you to know. A woman I’ve come to love here, Tammy, is pregnant. I am repeating my sin of leaving behind a fatherless child. I don’t want to hurt Linden or Paulette with this knowledge. It may have been best to keep it from you. But there could be a day you decide that Linden should know.

Mom, I hoped I could come to understand why I left Paulette, and you, and why I couldn’t live the life everyone wanted for me. I hoped to make sense of what happened that drew me to this city on a holy river. I may not have learned enough from the Buddhists here but I know that every being is in pain, every being suffers on this plane. My pain is that I have failed everyone. My suffering is that I cannot change that or my destiny. My mercy is that I know where I’ll be going.

Your loving son, Michael

Linden slides the letter back into the envelope. She tries to press the envelope closed but the glue is too old. Her tongue sticks to her dry palate. She searches for the right words to calm the fresh turbulence stirred up by a long-dead father. “Did you ever find out what happened to Tammy and her child?”

“No. I wrote to her at their rooming house in Varanasi, but I never heard back. She probably returned to the States.”

“Haven’t you been curious all these years?”

“Yes. But what could I do? Michael didn’t want you to know and I had no idea how to find them.” Grandma Abby studies the blank wall across from her bed. “You’re a smart girl, though. Maybe, during your leave, you might make some enquiries.”

“You know Smith is the number one surname in the United States?”

“No. I didn’t. But you did.” Grandma Abby smooths Linden’s hair. “Maybe you could fit a little travel into your break. You might have some fun.”