

# CHAPTER ONE

My father's plot in Elmwood Cemetery gapes like a fresh wound. Beside it, the scraggy old scab of my mother's grave confronts me with its neglect – a sunken rectangle covered by tangles of Creeping Jenny, with its small headstone, tilted slightly toward the freshly dug hole beside it. April rain has turned to May drizzle, making the sod squishy underfoot. My feet sink into the ground as they lower the coffin to be covered forever.

Since the burial, I've been shuffling around the house, trying to find my place, but nowhere seems like home. I can't come to grips with Dad's unexpected death. Just last week, we were sitting together here in the kitchen, the cheerful sound of nesting birds and fresh spring air wafting through the open window.

"I'm going to a library conference in Montreal," Dad said. "I'll be back on Wednesday." He was in a good mood, and I was glad to have the house to myself for a few days.

But he didn't come back.

He liked to drive the meandering side roads along the Magog River and lost control of the car around a sharp curve on the slippery road.

He's never coming back.

Now, I must steel myself to attend his memorial service. I stare in disbelief at the announcement on the kitchen table:

*In loving memory of*

*Gregory Mouland*

*June 20, 1946 – May 11, 2005*

*Lennoxville United Church,*

*6 Rue Church, Sherbrooke,*

*Friday, May 13, 11:00 a.m.*

Most of the population of Lennoxville is here, tracking their muddy feet through the funeral home. Many are left standing on the periphery of the chapel, and even more spill over into the entrance hall. They've all come to pay respects to their town librarian. I resent them for being here; this was *my* father. *I'm* the one who will miss him forever.

When I enter the chapel, I avert my eyes from the congregation, looking down at the hideous floral pattern of the carpet. One insistent stare draws me, and I look up to see Mary Allidon squeezed between her husband and Stacey Bell, who replaced me as her best friend. Mary must have flown in from Arizona just to pay respects to my Dad. She's wearing a pastel blue summer dress, which I'm sure Stacey admires. To me, she just looks cold.

I feel uncomfortable in this room in this cheap polyester dress from Le Château. My gangly arms and legs feel wooden, as if they have been tacked on to my torso like an artist's jointed mannequin. My careful attempt at smoothing my hair has already failed. Dark chestnut tendrils have escaped the restraints of the scrunchy, so I remove it, and my whole head of hair springs back to its natural frizzy mass. The mascara I applied, for no good reason, is already smudged.

There is no way I can bring myself to speak in front of this crowd, so Sage Hume, Dad's long-time colleague at the library, delivers the eulogy.

"Gregory Mouland was a giant of a man, his enormous heart consistent with his six-foot frame. He devoted himself to his daughter Manon and to this community that he served ..."

She waxes eloquent about Dad's many accomplishments, but often, overcome with emotion, she falters and wipes her eyes. As she speaks, she looks out over the congregation with her pale oval face, pointy nose, and chin. She talks about what a devoted father he was, of his love for me. I sense the furtive, even hostile glances directed at me by those who knew of our difficult relationship. Many of them had witnessed our vehement arguments at the library.

They saw how Dad tried to constrain his rage whenever I misbehaved – almost always. When I was younger, I drew pictures with markers in library books, and when I was older, I carved flowers into the library table. They loved my dad, so when they saw his red face and heard his whispered shout, "*To my office!*" they felt sorry for him for having such an unruly child. They saw how defiant I was. What they couldn't see was that all I wanted was for him to hug me.

*Really, Sage? Did he really love me?*

Mary is seated in the fourth row behind me. She had been my only friend growing up. The other kids thought I was too weird to hang out with, and they were right. I had no qualms about speaking my mind, even if it meant alienating those I actually wished to be liked by. They treated me with caution and avoided me where possible. I scorned their idea of fashion: cartoon-stenciled hoodies, T-shirts printed with bands' logos, tight trousers, and Converse runners. I preferred quirky mismatched garments from the Salvation Army store. When they swooned over sentimental 'screamers' like Whitney Houston and Celine Dion, I mocked them with screeching parodies. I preferred the soulful vocals of Amy Winehouse and Etta James. In school, I strove to

be ignored by my peers. I rejected the efforts of teachers, who thought I was smart and just needed direction to 'befriend' me. I didn't need anyone's approval, only Mary's. She understood my passions and thought I was special.

After she ghosted me, I never had another close girlfriend. I had boy 'pals', but I didn't really belong among them, and that sense of apartness led to bouts of self-loathing. Once, I cut myself accidentally with an exacto knife and watched in fascination as the blood oozed out of me. This was so satisfying that I began using a razor blade to make hair-thin incisions on my inner thighs just to see that first drop of red trickle out. The pain was soothing, and nobody was the wiser, not even Mary. That's around the time I started experimenting with cubist portraits in shades of blue, painting limbs with slits leaking rivulets of blue blood.

Now, I secretly touch the scars through my dress and am somehow comforted. Mary and I only exchange a brief glance before I look away without saying hello. I fear that if I greet her, I might lose my reserve and devolve into a public display of tears. We have never forgiven each other for that infamous weekend that ended in her feeling abandoned and my feeling betrayed.

As the pastor drones on with his meaningless parables, my mind wanders. We were just seventeen when I convinced her that we should hitch a ride to Montreal for the day. We sat people-watching on the steps of the Edward VII monument in Phillips Square.

"Manon, look at that girl!"

"What about her?"

"She's wearing those new cargo pants with all the pockets."

"Yah, they're okay."

"I want to get my hair cut in that layered, messy style."

I had noticed her, too, but I was more interested in the crop top revealing her midriff, where a metallic glint caught my eye.

"Look Mary, she's got a belly button piercing. How cool is that?"

A boy sat down beside me, ignoring me at first, but then he silently offered me a cigarette, which I took but didn't light up. He was about our age, tall, disheveled, and totally cool.

"Wanna come to my place and smoke a joint?"

I wanted to go badly, my hedonistic tendencies overruling my common sense. Mary didn't, so I suggested we meet by the statue in an hour and go off with him. His name is Tom. Tom from Baie D'Urfé. That's all I know because we didn't speak more than ten words to each other. He took me by the hand, and we walked for about five minutes to his room in a basement somewhere near Chinatown. It was a bare, dingy place with an unmade bed that exuded body odor. With my first toke of the joint, I had a coughing fit, and when I calmed down, he kissed me. I blissed out,

oblivious to everything but Tom's hands. They were rough, and his fingernails were filthy, but when he touched me, my body responded with delicious tremors in my belly.

I lost my virginity, but with my first cigarette, I gained a new vice. I couldn't wait to tell Mary what happened, but when I got back to Phillips Square, I couldn't find her anywhere. I waited and waited, watching the after-work crowd bustle by me. Were they looking at me differently? I felt like I was glowing.

I wandered along Ste. Catherine Street as far as St. Denis, eventually accepting that Mary must have left. Finally, I got the 8:45 bus to Lennoxville, agonizing the whole way about what Dad would say and still feeling the thrill of my first sexual experience. When I got back at 11:00, Dad was fuming mad. He had that red-faced anger that made him look fearsome. His fingers fisted by his side, he shouted, "We had the Sherbrooke police out looking for you, Manon! Mary's parents even organized a search party to scour the river banks. When she got home, she told us everything about hitchhiking to Montreal and how you left her and went off with some boy."

"Dad..."

"Don't say a word. Do you know how much anxiety you caused? Not just for me but for all the neighbors who nervously waited to see if they would dredge your bodies from the river. You're an inconsiderate, selfish girl. Consider yourself grounded. From now on, you are to come straight to the library after school and then straight home with me. And no more allowance."

Really? Was he kidding? I've been saving my allowance since I was twelve, when he took me to the bank to open my own savings account. A couple of weeks without it won't hurt me at all.

He stomped off to bed without even giving me a chance to offer excuses. As usual, when I upset him, I'm the one that feels miserable. Dad was the last person I wanted to hurt, yet I couldn't stop aggravating him. I stayed up that whole night drawing, designing piercings I would never get, replaying my experience with Tom, and vowing never to forgive Mary.

Dad smoothed things over with the police, but our neighbors were not as easily appeased. They saw me as an ungrateful troublemaker and were sad for him.

At the memorial, several people step up to recount stories of Dad's generosity and his decency. A widowed woman tells how he helped her find government agencies that provided social services she didn't even know she was entitled to.

"He improved the quality of my life," she said, "he always made time for me, and he was so patient."

Really? He was patient? Not with me, he wasn't.

Others speak about his knowledge of books and how his tenacity in championing municipal causes led to improvements in the neighborhood. A young woman came in from Montreal to say

a few words. Her familiar voice, smooth as caramel, resonates in the small chamber. Dad had helped her find books on writing the perfect resumé and urged her to pursue her desired career.

“With his encouragement and his letter of recommendation, I landed my dream job at CHOM-FM.”

Formerly a fan, I am now bristling with resentment for this woman who benefited from Dad’s encouragement. I didn’t merit his support. He never acknowledged that I had any talent for art. When it was time to choose a college, I begged him to let me go to the École des Beaux-Arts in Montreal, but he wouldn’t budge.

“Art school will squelch whatever flair you may have,” he said.

“If I have real talent, it can never be squelched.” I asserted with less conviction than I felt. Do I really have any talent?

“A liberal arts education will be the key to finding your true muse. Better yet, explore your love of plants and nature. You could go for a science degree, in biology maybe. Even studying Humanities would be better than becoming a flâneur and squandering your academic potential.”

Maybe he really believed I had no talent and wanted to save me from my own disappointment. Maybe he regretted sacrificing his own musical talent to establish a more secure existence. Is that what he wanted me to do?

“Besides,” he went on, “artists tend to be anarchists. You need to settle down. You’re lucky, you have the brains to study and contribute something worthwhile to society. I don’t want you to embitter your life by continually creating chaos around you.”

“But Dad, what if I can make masterpieces that will live on after we’re gone, wouldn’t that be contributing?”

“After we’re gone, it won’t matter, it’s this life we need to live as best we can. Great artists’ lives often end tragically. Look at Caravaggio, what did his talent accomplish but a wretched life and an early death? I could cite any number of talented artists who lived unhappy lives and died before reaching their full potential.”

At his insistence, I ended up at Champlain College, a ten-minute bike ride from home, in the science program – a far cry from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, let alone from my secret, unattainable dream of attending the Pratt Institute in Manhattan. As much as I wanted to break away, to leave Lennoxville, I could not imagine abandoning him. Dad was my only family, and he only had me.

I reluctantly attended classes with a bunch of science nerds I couldn’t compete with, and while botany interested me greatly, the rest was just tedious. I lacked the inherent exactitude and discipline required for scientific study. Learning formulas by rote, memorizing Latin names, and conducting lab experiments were anathema to me, so I dropped out after the second semester. When I told Dad, he replied in his just-about-to-explode voice.

“Quitting is not an option. You’re far too smart for that.”

“I’m smart enough to know that I don’t want to do this for another day.” I was fiercely defiant. I wasn’t going back.

“What are you going to do? You can’t just waste your life dabbling in paint.”

“I got a job. I’m starting on Monday as a Junior Associate at Michael’s, the art supply store on Wellington St. I’ll be working with art in the framing department.”

I thought I was so clever, managing to get a job even before I told him I was quitting. And I was thrilled because I would get discounts on art supplies.

“This junior retail position has nothing to do with *art*, Manon. It’s just another minimum wage, dead-end job for losers.”

Despite his lack of support, I devoted myself to painting. I painted endlessly, never satisfied with the results. My work seemed inconsequential compared with the visions I imagined. Now, listening to these testimonials about how supportive Dad could be, I feel a pang of jealousy for every favor, every hour of attention he had devoted to these people. Why couldn’t he have given me this kind of unconditional support for my passion? Why had he insisted on pushing me away from what I love?

My sense of loss grows with each anecdote, and I hunch over, wincing with that familiar sinking feeling in my stomach that I’m no good, the word ‘loser’ reverberating in my brain.

The room is stifling with the crush of bodies sweating in their raincoats, yet I feel shivery sitting in the front row, aware of all the eyes on the back of my head. I’m bristling and have a strong urge to tell them all where to go and then make a dramatic exit myself.