

CHAPTER ONE

Echoes of the Past

The embalming room was dimly lit, with a single bulb swaying gently from a wire overhead. Shadows danced on the walls, animated by its wavering light and the chilly drafts from the ceiling vents. A white curtain sectioned off the room, hiding the bodies waiting to be prepared from the one on the table.

Nestled against the curtain's edge, a stainless-steel surface supported the weight of the room's current centrepiece. A slender woman with golden, chaotic hair bent over the table, focusing on the lifeless form beneath her.

The woman leaned closer toward the skeletal corpse. As her hair parted, it revealed the college sweater she wore. It was faded and worn down from frequent use. She sighed, the sound echoing in the room as her fingers grazed the icy, waxen arm of the deceased. The cold touch awakened a memory, taking her back to a hot summer afternoon of her childhood.

The warm air hummed with the symphony of lawnmowers as seasonal enthusiasts took to their yard work. From the vantage point of a bird in flight, the neighbourhood presented a sea of newly constructed townhomes, each nestled on impeccably manicured lawns.

One lawn stood out amid all the rest: wild thistles and towering grasses that reached almost to the knees of a young girl. She wrestled with a stubborn push mower, simmering with quiet resentment toward her father, who insisted she help their irritable neighbour—a woman who rarely left her home except to threaten neighbourhood children.

The large bay windows of the home overlooked the front yard. Their heavy curtains briefly parted to reveal a shadowed figure lurking within. The curtains draped shut again, and moments later, the front door swung open. A woman emerged onto the front steps, the sunlight catching her silver-streaked hair. She waved her arms wildly, managing to catch the attention of the labouring child.

As the young girl released the handle, the lawnmower's roar subsided to a gentle purr before stopping. She regarded the older woman with a glimmer of hope. Silently, she prayed that a cool bottle of water might magically manifest from within the folds of the woman's wrinkled skirt.

"Everything okay, Ms. Penny?" Sweat trickled down her forehead, seeping into the creases of her eyes and blurring her vision. She ran her tongue over her parched lips, wincing slightly at the salty taste.

"Isabelle Adams! You have gone and destroyed my garden beds!" Ms. Penny's thick finger jabbed down toward a patch of dirt alongside the front of the house. It was overrun with weeds and wilted flowers.

Isabelle's gaze followed the pointed finger, landing on the drooping petunias swaying gently in the breeze. She blinked, glancing between the flowers and Ms. Penny with a puzzled expression. After a long, drawn-out moment, she said, "I don't see what

I've done wrong."

Ms. Penny's eyes widened, her arm swinging again in a wild arc, pointing toward the flowerbed. "The mulch girl! You've scattered grass all over it!"

Isabelle shrugged, her face indifferent. "Well, that's not my fault! I can't control where the lawnmower shoots out the grass, can I?"

Ms. Penny clutched the metal railing. "Not your fault? You're cutting the grass from the wrong direction, girl. Of course it's your fault! Where on earth is your father? What would he think about this?" She raised a gnarled hand, shielding her eyes from the sun as she squinted past Isabelle, scanning the area for any sign of her father.

Isabelle turned her head as if to examine the mulch again. She then rolled her eyes before responding with a practised calm. "He would say that I tried my best, and my kindness will earn me another step toward heaven, ma'am." Her voice held an edge of polite sarcasm, and she bit her lower lip to keep from grinning. "And I prefer to be called Izzy," she added, straightening her back as she met the older woman's gaze head-on.

This, of course, sent Ms. Penny into an overexcited rant. Izzy shifted away from her neighbour as she continued her tirade of yelling. Scowling at the mulch, Izzy muttered, "Maybe if you'd spent less time yelling at kids and more time watering your flowers, they wouldn't look so dead." She inhaled deeply, finding comfort in the scent of the freshly mown grass.

"The lack of respect given to seniors!" Ms. Penny continued, her voice rising in octaves. She placed her hand dramatically on her chest and said, "At my age, I shouldn't be expected to bend down and remove bits of grass from my mulch!" Her eyes then swivelled back to Izzy, a cunning glint flickering within them.

An awkward moment of silence hung in the air. Finally, almost reluctantly, Izzy said, "I'm sorry, Ms. Penny. I'll pick out the grass when I'm done mowing." She reached up and snatched at a piece of her hair and yanked on it, twisting it between her fingers. Her eyes glistened, and she bit the inside of her cheek, trying not to let the tears fall.

Ms. Penny nodded at her triumphally. "Apology accepted, dear. It's quite understandable that you wouldn't know the ins and outs of such a mature task." She gestured dismissively toward the blue-shuttered townhouse standing adjacent to hers. "Your poor father, always immersed in his undertaker affairs, scarcely has time to teach you much of anything, does he?"

She turned as if to re-enter her house, only to pause and look at Izzy again. "Oh, and *Isabelle*, while you're at it, be a dear and do some weeding. I expect that much shouldn't be too difficult for you to figure out." With a dismissive wave, she pivoted and disappeared back into her house. Izzy stood alone, pulling furiously at her hair, glaring at the retreating figure of her neighbour.

Slowly, the warm haze of her memory faded away. The comforting touch of the sun gave way to the cool feel of the arm under her fingertips. The faint, sterile smell of formaldehyde hung in the air, mingling with the metallic tang of the embalming room. Izzy opened her eyes and peered at Ms. Penny's corpse as if trying to pierce through the shroud of death.

“You were always such a miserable old bat,” she said, her eyes hardening. “Not a single ‘thank you’ passed your lips in all those years. And yet, even in death, I still have to run errands for you.”

Izzy held a pair of red socks in the air, her words steeped in exasperation. The mystery of why Ms. Penny would choose Adams Funeral Home as her final resting place was something she couldn’t fathom. After all, the old woman had seldom shown anything but disdain for Izzy’s family.

She took in Ms. Penny’s emaciated frame and hollowed-out face, studying every detail. A wave of heaviness settled on her chest as her eyebrows knitted together. “I am sorry that you went the way you did, though. Cancer is a nasty way to die.” She gently patted the corpse’s shoulder, a silent apology hanging in the air. “You had your good moments too. I’m sure someone will miss you.”

As she pulled her hand away, a bristly black spider scurried from underneath the body. Recoiling in alarm, she stumbled backward into a tray behind her, sending cotton swabs and blush palettes tumbling to the floor.

Panic surged through her, twisting her gut into a knot. The spider shot across Ms. Penny’s chest, then back onto the embalming table, vanishing once more beneath the body.

Seeing it cross the table triggered unwanted thoughts in Izzy’s mind. She was reminded of her childhood fear of spiders and the countless nights she’d crawled into her older sister’s bed, having awoken from a nightmare about one.

“Deep breaths, Iz. It’s only a spider. Just a tiny, eight-legged embodiment of every horror movie ever made,” she muttered.

The curtain shook as if laughing at her, which Izzy attributed to the sudden blast of freezing air from the vent overhead. Shivering, she bent down to pick up the fallen items, placing them back onto the tray.

Izzy tossed the socks near Ms. Penny’s feet, carefully avoiding touching the table. “Kate can manage the rest,” she said, backing up to the door.

A soft click sounded behind the room divider. An eerie stillness enveloped the room as Izzy moved toward the exit. The slow drip of the sink vanished, replaced by the sound of heavy breathing.

She hesitated, fingers trembling near the doorknob. Slowly, she turned to look toward Ms. Penny’s body, desperately searching for the rise and fall that would betray any flicker of life. Finding the chest unmoving, Izzy sighed and reached again for the doorknob.

The room was once again wrapped in silence. And then, a raspy breath cut through the stillness, sounding louder than before. Each echo was a cool whisper against her skin, filling her with dread. Her mind replayed all the old ghost stories she’d heard as a child huddled around the campfire.

“This isn’t happening,” she said, her voice wavering and sounding small. “I’m just tired. It was a long drive.” She shook her head as if to cast off the lingering terror that

clung to her soul. “Still, I should just make sure . . .” She took a deep breath and then strode toward the lifeless figure on the table. She leaned down again and touched the arm.

The skin felt reassuringly frigid and marble-like beneath her fingers. “Definitely dead. Sorry, Ms. Penny,” she said, laughing nervously. “There’s a tiny, rather inappropriate part of me—the part that’s watched too many zombie movies—that’s a bit relieved you’re not planning a surprise comeback tour.”

Without warning, the body beneath her hand recoiled from her touch. Izzy’s face paled, and she was once again frozen in place. With another twitch, the arm jolted forcefully. It struck the edge of the table, knocking Izzy’s hand away.

A scream grew in her throat. It emerged as a feeble croak, drowned out by the adrenaline coursing through her body. Pivoting fast, she collided with the tray of cosmetics once more, sending it crashing to the ground along with her.

She scrambled backward in blind terror, a flurry of cotton swabs scattered in her wake like tiny ghosts. Her back crashed against the door. She frantically tried to rise to her feet, but her legs—reduced to a quivering mass of nerves—refused to respond.

In desperation, she grabbed at her hair. Yanking hard on a blond lock, she tried to focus on the sharp pain to drown out the overwhelming fear that surged through her. A deep laugh rolled through the room. It bore no resemblance to Ms. Penny’s yet was strikingly familiar nonetheless.

“Eddie!” Izzy said, her mouth twisting into a snarl. Her eyes were icy blue and ablaze with fury. They fixated on the black dress shoes poking out from beneath the white curtain near the table.

CHAPTER TWO

Ghosts in the Dark

Adrenaline pumping through her veins, Izzy leaped to her feet. The spider that had set her heart racing was forgotten as she strode toward the table. Leaning over the body, she gripped the fabric of the curtain. With an unceremonious yank, she drew it aside. A man, not much older than herself, stood there, bathed in the harsh glow of the light.

His charcoal grey suit, sharply tailored and impeccably pressed, appeared out of place in the morgue. Taken by surprise, he stumbled back into the empty table behind him. "Ow!" He gingerly rubbed at his side, wincing. An amused grin played across his face as he looked up at Izzy.

She crossed her arms and pressed her lips into a thin line. "Eddie! The dark humour isn't appreciated."

"Aw, come on, Iz, it was pretty funny," Eddie said, smoothing out his dress shirt.

"No, it wasn't. It was morbid!" Izzy's hands moved instinctively to her hair, bunching it up into a messy ponytail, only to let it fall back down. The scent of roses filled the air around them. "Did Lyssa know about your prank?"

Crimson bloomed across Eddie's cheeks, a stark contrast to his strawberry-blond hair. He started to fiddle with his bolo tie. "Yeah, she knew." The words tumbled out as he tugged harshly on one string. "She called my joke 'poor taste.' She didn't seem so happy when I left the house."

Izzy's gaze fell on the tie, concern etching lines on her forehead. "You're going to break that," she warned. "It was Dad's, wasn't it?"

Eddie nodded, the string bouncing back into place as he let it go. "Yeah, it was with some other stuff that Mom wanted to donate. Lyssa recognized it when she was dropping the box off."

Izzy's eyes welled up at the news, and she bit down on her lip. "She gave away Dad's things?" A muffled sob slipped past her lips.

Eddie's eyes widened, and he quickly circled the table to comfort his sister. "No, Iz. Crap, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you!"

He opened his arms like a protective cocoon, and she stepped into the warmth, immersing herself in the familiar, spicy scent of their father's cologne. It now clung to her brother like a nostalgic ghost.

"It was caught in the sleeve of one of Dad's old shirts. I didn't want it. The shirt was too big." He patted Izzy gently on the back, continuing, "Mom kept the important stuff. When we're ready, we'll all go through it together, okay?"

Izzy sniffed, her face nestling into the fabric of her brother's shoulder. "I don't think I'll ever be ready." Hot tears rolled down her cheeks, soaking into the material of his suit. "I miss him."

Eddie tightened his embrace, tears welling up in his coffee-coloured eyes. “Me too,” he confessed, his voice breaking. Time halted momentarily as they stood there in their shared grief.

Izzy pulled back from her brother, her gaze falling on the bolo tie. She traced the engraved maple leaf, a tentative smile beginning to tug at her lips.

“Do you remember the charity gala Mom organized, the one where Dad’s belt broke?” Her smile widened at the memory. “Dad just fastened this bolo tie around his waist and strutted around the rest of the evening like he’d invented a new fashion trend.”

Eddie chuckled, “Yeah, and he wore it all the time after that. He called it his ‘Backup Belt Buddy.’”

“Dad was so funny.” Izzy sighed, her hand releasing the tie. “And his laugh . . . Remember his laugh?”

“Mortifyingly loud but contagious,” Eddie said as he carefully adjusted the tie.

“I miss that laugh,” Izzy said, her gaze dropping to the socks near Ms. Penny’s feet. She picked them up, her mind shifting gears to the task. Carefully, she unravelled the fabric before pulling the first sock onto the deceased woman’s foot.

“Yeah, me too,” he said, sidling closer to the table. “What’s with the socks?”

“Kate called me on my way into the city. She said she forgot to put them on. Ms. Penny specified it in her funeral plan—had some concern about her feet becoming cold.” Izzy picked up the matching sock and slipped it onto the other foot.

“Or she was more concerned about people seeing her ugly feet,” Eddie said, his gaze wandering off to a desk nearby. “Ugly feet to go with an ugly personality. What a horrible person that woman was. I never liked her!”

He walked over to the desk and leaned against it. The radio perched on the corner crackled to life. A screeching sound filled the room, making Eddie wince and cover his ears. As the noise gradually tuned into a song of questionable tempo, the lyrics floated out:

*Young lad, best mind your words,
Time’s a river. Fast it surges.
In its wake, we all turn old.
And beauty fades in its bold hold.*

Izzy looked at Eddie, a perplexed expression crossing her face as the haunting melody continued, its volume increasing with each line.

*In your prime, you jest and jeer,
But remember, your twilight’s near.*

Izzy’s hands flew to her ears. “Shut it off!” The song continued. Its volume now cranked to the highest the radio could go:

When your time comes, as it will,

*You won't be smirking when you're
laying so still.*

Izzy watched as Eddie fumbled with the buttons. At last, the room fell silent except for the dripping from the nearby faucet. Recovering, she lowered her hands, shooting her brother a surprised look. "I think you upset Ms. Penny," she said, glancing at the body on the table.

Eddie frowned at the radio and stepped away from it. "Yeah, that was . . . weird." He approached the embalming table and fiddled with Ms. Penny's arms.

"I wasn't kidding. It sounded just like Ms.—Hey, what are you doing?" Izzy squinted, peering over his shoulder. She caught sight of the fishing wire he extracted from the deceased woman's sleeve and gasped. Eddie wound it up and stowed it in his pocket.

With a sheepish grin, he said, "Can't let Kate find this. She would lose her mind if she knew I used it to move Ms. Penny's arm." His voice trailed off as the air conditioner hummed back to life.

"I think it's gotten colder," Izzy muttered, pulling the strings of her hooded sweater tighter around herself. "Kate must have tinkered with the thermostat again." She jammed her hands into the pockets of her jeans, trying to warm them.

Eddie shot her a knowing glance before striding over to the sink to silence the dripping tap. "A frosty room to match her frosty attitude."

Izzy chuckled, watching Eddie return to the table. He stretched his back with a crack, jostling Ms. Penny's body. The radio blared back to life, this time with a more sombre melody:

*Don't you know that I'm hurting over here
Have a little respect for me, my dear.*

"Jeepers!" Izzy quickly covered her ears again, her heartbeat hammering against her ribs as an eerie sensation tingled up her spine.

*Would it harm you to shed just one sincere tear?
Invisible I may be, yet I'm standing right here!*

As the radio screeched out its last note, Eddie rushed to it again, his fingers slipping over the dials as he tried to shut it off. Izzy bolted to the wall and yanked the power cord from the outlet. The radio fell silent.

She looked at Eddie, her pale face making her small scattering of freckles jump out. "Do you think . . . Could she be here, listening to us?" Izzy's voice came out in a whisper as if afraid Ms. Penny might hear.

Eddie's gaze softened, and he shook his head. "You've been reading too many of your spiritualism books, Iz," he said, chuckling lightly. "The radio's just old. There's nothing supernatural going on here."

“Don’t make fun of my books,” Izzy snapped. After a moment’s pause, she said, “They make me feel closer to Dad. It gives me a better understanding of where he might be now.”

“Sorry, Iz,” Eddie said, his voice quivering. “If those books make you happy, that’s all that matters. Just . . . don’t bring them up around Mom. You know how she feels about the whole spiritualism thing.”

He strode to the embalming table, reaching over Ms. Penny to close the curtain. “We should get going. We’ll never hear the end of it if we’re late for dinner.”

A sigh tumbled from Izzy, and her face grew shadowy with weariness. “These Saturday dinners are turning into an ordeal. The drive from Belleville to Toronto is exhausting.”

Eddie walked over to the overturned tray, righted it, and gathered the broken blush palettes and cotton swaps Izzy had knocked over. As he gestured for her to toss him a towel, he said, “It’s her way of grieving. It gives her control to have us all safe under one roof. Saturdays are hard for her now . . . You know that.”

Izzy turned away, her vision blurring as tears swelled up once again. “I’m just tired,” she said, focusing on a small crack in the wall. “I suppose if I leave early, the drive won’t be so crappy . . . A couple hours tops? I can manage that . . . at least for now.”

Eddie nodded and rose to his feet with the grime-smeared cloth in his hand. “It won’t be forever. It’s almost been a year, you know. I’m sure things will go back to normal soon.”

Things will never be normal, Izzy thought, her gaze drifting to her brother as he attempted to lob the dirty towel into a hamper across the room. It sailed through the air, missed the mark entirely, and slapped Ms. Penny’s face.

A strange tension hung in the air, sending a trail of goosebumps marching up her spine. Suddenly, the overhead bulb burst with an ear-splitting crack. Glass shattered down like rain, plunging the room into darkness.