

# CHAPTER ONE

## A WAKE-UP CALL AT NIGHT

Housing compound, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia  
Just before midnight, Monday, May 12, 2003

My eyes suddenly fluttered open. Then I heard the sound that had roused me awake: the wail of sirens, lots of sirens. I slipped out of bed and padded down the carpeted stairs in search of my parents. I sighed with relief when I spied them relaxing on the living-room couch. My parents were so engrossed in the TV show they were watching that they didn't even notice me standing there in my pajamas. I cleared my throat to get their attention.

"What's up, little chick?" asked Mom, with a look of concern on her face. "Did you have a bad dream, Page?"

"The sirens woke me up. What's going on?" I asked.

"Maybe ambulances are rushing to a car accident," offered Dad. "You know how dangerous the driving is here in Riyadh."

I nodded. The sirens continued to wail.

"Maybe it's a *really* bad car accident," suggested Dad.

"Why don't you go back to bed? You've got school in the morning," reminded Mom. "Maybe there will be an article in the morning newspaper about what happened," she added.

"Okay, Mom," I said. I turned and headed upstairs to my bedroom. The sirens eventually faded away, and I drifted off to sleep.



**Early morning, around 5:30 a.m.,  
Tuesday, May 13, 2003**

My eyes suddenly fluttered open again...not to the wail of sirens, but to this disturbing sound: *deee ehh errr...deee uh deee uh*. The unmistakable sound of our dial-up internet. *Is there any sound more annoying?* I thought. My mom was probably checking our email. It was part of her early morning ritual before heading to work. I decided to get up. It was time to get ready anyway, if I wanted to catch the bus. A typical school morning for me involved eating breakfast, dressing in my school uniform, boarding a blue-and-white bus filled with identically clad children from my compound, and travelling across the city to attend a British school. Because we're Canadian, my parents would have preferred to send me to a Canadian school, but none existed in Riyadh.

As I crawled out of bed, I heard Mom making an internet phone call, which was an odd thing for her to do on a Tuesday morning. Because of the time difference, she normally called her family in Canada on our weekend, which was Thursday and Friday in Saudi Arabia.

My mother was born and raised on Prince Edward Island, Canada's smallest province. Prince Edward Island, commonly referred to by its abbreviation "PEI" or simply as "the Island," is *so* small that it is sometimes left off maps—much to the chagrin of its inhabitants, who like to be called "Islanders" with a capital letter "I." On an *accurate* map of Canada—that is, a map depicting all ten provinces and three territories—Prince Edward Island is an island

(duh) located on the east coast. Although there are lots of islands on the east coast of Canada, it's easy to spot which one is Prince Edward Island. It's the one that looks like a crooked crescent moon...or a bumpy banana...or a jagged smile. Whenever people in Saudi Arabia asked me where I was from, I told them that I was from Canada. And if they asked me *where* in Canada, I said I was from Prince Edward Island, even though I'd never actually lived there. I knew this answer would stump most people, and I secretly liked the idea of being from a place that no one had ever heard of. I thought it made me sound mysterious. I was always shocked whenever I met someone who had heard of Prince Edward Island. Most often they were aware of its existence because they'd read L. M. Montgomery's most famous book—and my favourite book of all time—*Anne of Green Gables*, which was set on the Island.

I groggily shuffled down the stairs, thinking about what I wanted to eat for breakfast. *Hmm...maybe some leftover grape leaves stuffed with rice?* A strange breakfast choice, I must admit, but that was what I was craving. I froze at the foot of the stairs when I detected distress in Mom's voice.

"I just received your cryptic email. Why did you ask if we're still alive? Why would you ask me something like that?" said Mom.

"Pollyanna, I'm so relieved to hear from you! We heard about the car bombings. Was your compound hit? We've been beside ourselves with worry!" I recognized the frantic voice. It belonged to Nanna, my maternal grandmother.

"What car bombings?" asked Mom.

"Several Western compounds in Riyadh were attacked a few hours ago. It's all over the news," said Nanna.

As soon as Nanna said the words "car bombings," Dad, who had been making breakfast in the kitchen, zoomed to

the television to switch on BBC World. I wandered into the living room and stared at the images of destroyed buildings and rubble on TV. *This explains all those ambulance sirens last night*, I thought. When the news announcer identified the compounds, I turned to Dad in panic. I recognized the name of one of them. It adjoined my school, and many of my teachers lived there. “Do you think my teachers are okay?” I asked.

Normally, Dad would have said something comforting to downplay the situation so I wouldn’t worry, but this time he just said, “I don’t know.”

After assuring my grandmother that we weren’t dead, Mom got off the internet phone and joined us in front of the TV. Over the past several months, there had been a few minor car bombings—as if a car bombing could be described as *minor*—in Riyadh, so this tragic event shouldn’t have been *that* surprising. Nevertheless, it still came as a shock to us.

A few moments later, Mom said, “Page, there won’t be any school today, but your dad and I still have to go to work. Try not to watch too much news while we’re gone, and stay inside, okay?”

They each gave me a quick hug and hurried to get ready for work. I stood rooted to the spot in front of the TV. As they gathered their things and opened the door to leave, I heard Dad remark, “In Canada, school is cancelled for snowstorms, but here it’s for car bombings.” The door clicked shut before I could hear Mom’s reply.



We lived in a villa. Dad once said that whenever he heard someone say the word “villa,” he immediately thought of

a grand house in Italy. In reality, our villa was one half of a concrete duplex, one of many on a housing compound located just behind the hospital where both my parents worked. Their commute was a two-minute walk through the compound and then past a security checkpoint to the hospital, a dazzling building made of gleaming white marble and surrounded by date palm trees and water fountains. It was quite something to behold considering that Riyadh is in a desert.

I felt better knowing my parents worked in the same hospital—my mom, Pollyanna, as a nurse educator, and my dad, Paul, as a safety officer. My parents have similar-sounding names, which they've told me is what made them take notice of each other in the first place. Dad always says that he instantly fell in love with Mom because of her radiant smile. They actually met at the hospital in Riyadh. I like hearing them describe their rather unusual courtship. Women and men who are not related are not supposed to socialize in Saudi Arabia, which, of course, makes dating basically impossible. For this reason, their first date had to be in another country. They decided to have it in Paris, which, to me, sounds *utterly romantic*, as a stopover while on their way home to Canada for vacation—Mom was travelling to her home province of Prince Edward Island, and Dad was on his way to his home province of Ontario. Obviously, their date was a success: Dad changed his travel plans so he could meet Mom's family. Near the end of their vacation on Prince Edward Island, they decided to get married. A whirlwind romance like theirs might not be expected to last, but it's obvious that they are still deeply in love.

About two years after they were married, I was born in Riyadh. For the first week of my life, I didn't have a name.

My parents simply couldn't agree on what I should be called. They settled their dispute the only way they could think of—with a game of rock-paper-scissors. Dad won (rock crushes scissors!), and he excitedly informed Mom that my name would be Harley, as in Harley-Davidson motorcycles. Even though Dad is a safety officer by profession, he likes doing things that are not so safe, or, in Mom's opinion, downright dangerous, such as riding motorcycles and bungee jumping—not at the same time, of course. Mom must have been horrified when Dad wanted to name me after a motorcycle. He defended his choice by pointing out that Harley is a real name that can be used for either a boy or a girl. However, being a nice guy, Dad then suggested that they share the naming duties. Dad chose my first name—he had won the rock-paper-scissors game, after all—and Mom chose my middle name. That was how I was named Harley Page—the latter was my mom's maiden name. For about a week, they called me Harley. Then they switched to Page, and I've been called that ever since. Whenever I ask my parents why they switched my name to Page, they always say that they just liked it better... but I have a different theory. I think they realized I could never pull off a tough-girl name like Harley.



Even though Mom had warned me not to watch too much news that day, I couldn't help myself. I sat transfixed in front of the TV. There was no other place to go; it was too hot to wander around outside. As the news trickled in, I learned four compounds had been attacked and people of all different nationalities had been killed and many more had been injured.

When my parents arrived home that evening, we had a quick supper and then walked to the compound's family pool for a swim. I wanted to sit on the deck and listen to the grownups talk about the car bombings, but Mom pointedly said that I should go "cool off" in the pool. I was about to argue that "cooling off" in the pool was practically impossible because the pool was as warm as bathwater, but I stopped myself when Dad shook his head, which meant that now was not the time to argue. Reluctantly, I plunged feet first into the not-so-cool water. As I swam about, dodging splashing kids and parents holding babies with waterlogged diapers, I managed to overhear the grownups on the deck reassuring one another that our compound wasn't really a target for terrorism since it was an international compound.



Because the roof and the windows of my school had been damaged from the car bombing at the adjoining compound, it was closed for now. The principal, however, stated that it would reopen in the fall. In the days following the car bombings, I watched several news reports showing British citizens in Riyadh packing their belongings in a rush to leave Saudi Arabia. I even recognized some of my school-mates on TV. I wondered if we would be leaving, too.