

CHAPTER ONE

A cold north wind was blowing snow into my face as I trudged toward my PI office in Hintonburg. Six days before Christmas and the city was a sparkly snow globe of icy white. Red and green lights flashed *Merry Christmas* in Gino Roma's pizza shop, to the left of the stairs that led to Storm Investigations. I wanted to be in the holiday mood, but so far I was feeling like the Grinch—green, grumpy, and sick of listening to never-ending Christmas carols in malls and restaurants.

Five shopping days left to the big day and I hadn't bought one gift. I was seriously considering booking a flight south and disappearing Christmas Eve.

Bah humbug.

The door at street level and our office door at the top of the stairs were both unlocked. I found my partner, Jada Price, working at her desk with a glass of what looked like egg nog within arm's reach. Nutmeg and a cherry floated on top of the creamy white liquid.

She was humming “Santa Claus is coming to town . . .” but stopped when she saw me in the doorway.

“Gino sent up some rum nog,” she said, pointing to the fridge. “Help yourself.”

“A bit early in the day, isn’t it?”

“Never too early for some cheer.” She studied my face as she lifted her glass and toasted me. “Did Nick make his flight okay?”

“He did. I expect he’s landing in New York City as we speak.”

“And he’s gone until New Year’s?”

“Work before pleasure.”

Jada shook her black dreadlocks. “I don’t understand the movie industry.”

“They’re filming Christmas scenes and want to use the New York backdrop while it’s decked out for the holidays.”

“Still.” She took a long swallow of egg nog. After a twenty-second pause, she said, “A man named Albert Romaine is arriving shortly and I’m hoping you can meet with him. I have an apartment viewing in an hour.”

“Any information about Romaine?”

“Not really. He said it was about a cold case when he called. Nick took the message and started a computer file before he left yesterday.”

I was quiet for a moment. Nick still liked working in our office when he wasn't on a film shoot. But his acting reputation was growing and he was in demand. He likely wouldn't be working for us much longer. I shrugged out of my coat, sat down at my desk, and opened the Romaine file.

Albert Romaine hadn't given Nick more than an address and phone number. He lived in Orleans, an Ottawa suburb that was sixteen miles east of the downtown. Nick's note said that Romaine wanted to meet us before giving any more details.

The secretive type, I thought. I leaned back in my chair and watched the snow swirling outside the window.

"What kind of movie?" Jada asked.

I turned my head. "Movie?"

"Nick. You know—in New York."

"Oh. Romantic comedy."

"I thought Nick hated those."

"Carolina Mambella is his co-star. She begged him to take the part. Their last movie together was a big hit. The movie critics say their on-screen chemistry is remarkable." I tried to sound happy about that.

“I’m sure Nick could co-star next to a turnip and they’d say the same thing. He’s one gorgeous hunk of man.” Jada stood up quickly and grabbed her parka from the coat rack on her way to the door. “I hope this apartment in the Glebe is decent. Henry and I have to move by the end of January.”

“Will your brother be able to stay in the same high school if you leave your neighbourhood?”

“I don’t see why not.” She bent down to put on her boots. “Especially if I don’t tell anybody. Let me know how it goes with the Romaine guy. The case is all yours if you decide to take it. I plan to take next week off for Christmas and to start packing for the move.”

“An old cold case might be just the distraction to get me through the Christmas holidays,” I said.

I decided to put off booking a ticket south, until after I found out what Romaine wanted.

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Albert Romaine arrived twenty minutes after Jada clumped down the stairs. He was a large, out-of-shape man with sandy hair cut short in the back with a long swoop of bangs that fell across one eye. I placed him in his mid- to late twenties. He had a

square jaw and piercing blue eyes that took in the office, and me, before he crossed the room to sit in the visitor chair. We shook hands before he sat down.

“Can I get you a coffee, tea?” I asked to kick things off.

“No, thanks.” He took a deep breath. “How good are you at finding people?”

“We’ve found a number of missing people. Who are you searching for?”

“My fiancée, Shelley Vincent. She disappeared over a year ago and the police have stopped looking.” He looked down at his hands folded in his lap. His right knee was jumping up and down, the only sign that he was upset.

I tried to recall if I’d heard about his missing girlfriend but nothing came to me. “Do you think she’s come to any harm?” I asked.

His head shot up. “God, I hope not. The cops have no idea what happened to her.” His eyes met mine. “I was out of town when she went missing and they ruled me out as a suspect.”

“Were you getting along before she left? Were there any signs she was unhappy?”

A flash of anger crossed his face before his mouth relaxed into a smile. “We were very happy together.

And no, I didn't see any signs of anything wrong before I went to Toronto that week on business. She called her mother and sister after she took me to the airport, then went to work later that day and the next morning. Nobody noticed anything off."

"Why were you angry just now?" I asked.

He raised both hands, palms skyward. "I've been grilled by the police about our relationship, as if I must have done something to her. I'm frustrated that I'm the only suspect they looked at, when I'm innocent. In my opinion, they didn't try hard enough to find her. Before or after they ruled me out."

"I can start today if you'd like to hire us. I have a standard contract ready to sign. It states our hourly rates."

"Yeah, I'm fine with paying whatever it takes. It would be good to have her home for Christmas ... or at least to know what happened to her. I haven't been able to move on."

"Christmas is only a few days away, but I'll do the best I can. I'll need a list of people in your lives, where you both work, and other information. We can start with this questionnaire."

"Whatever you want. She means the world to me and it's killing me not knowing if she's okay."

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An hour and a half later, Albert had told me all he could about his missing fiancée and their life together. He gave me his cellphone number and asked that I call him if I found out anything, no matter the time, day or night. He looked out the window before leaving.

“Bad driving tonight,” he said. “Are you on the bus or did you drive in?”

“Drove. I’ve got a parking spot behind the building.”

“Good snow tires?”

“Not really. It’s a loaner and has all-season tires.”

“You really need good winter tires in this weather.”

“Yeah, I plan to visit the Chevy dealership when I have a free day.”

“Well, take it easy on the way home.”

I sat sorting through my notes long after he’d gone and began outlining my interview list. Albert had met Shelley in college when they were both twenty-one, some four years earlier. They’d been engaged and living together for more than two years before she disappeared. Shelley had a business certificate and helped manage a Tim Hortons

coffee shop in the east end. Albert was a computer programmer working for the government.

He'd given me a photo of her before leaving: Shelley standing in the kitchen, looking up at him as he snapped the picture. She was of medium height and build with long brown hair and hazel eyes. Pretty, but not a woman who would stand out in a crowd. She had a startled look in her eyes, as if Albert had surprised her, but I couldn't detect any other emotion on her face.

Albert had snapped the picture the morning that she drove him to the airport. "It was taken in the last hour that we were together," he'd said as he handed the photo to me. "I keep looking at it, trying to figure out what was going on in her head."

I stood and stretched before checking my watch. Nearly five o'clock and darkness had settled in. I crossed to the window and craned my neck to see the street below. The snow was falling faster and the road was bumper to bumper with barely moving traffic. I decided against visiting Shelley's workplace at the other end of the city, but I'd stop at the Elgin Street police station on my way home.

Albert had given a copy of the police report to me, and my soon-to-be-ex brother-in-law Officer Jimmy Wilson's signature was scrawled across the

bottom. He and my sister Cheri had been living apart. She'd filed divorce papers a month earlier, and last I heard, he hadn't signed them. Hopefully, I'd catch him before he left for the day. Jimmy and I had a history that included being engaged before he dumped me for Cheri.

With any luck, he wouldn't hold a grudge against me for turning down his offer of getting back together the last time I'd seen him. That was about as likely as seeing reindeer fly across the sky pulling a sled full of toys.