

CHAPTER ONE

Dad pulled me out of a deep sleep Sunday morning with the smell of frying bacon and dark roasted coffee. I rolled over in my single bed and moaned. My head felt as if a lawn mower was plowing its way through my brain.

I'd put in a late night working on a case. An insurance company had hired me to find out if a city bus driver's bad back claim was true. I'd followed the man to Montreal, where he helped his daughter move out of her apartment. The bus driver spent the next six hours drinking in a bar down the street. After a few beers, he'd shown some fancy moves on the dance floor. Just in case the photos of him dragging a sofa down two flights of stairs weren't enough.

When the bus driver finally stumbled to his hotel, I made the two and a half hour drive home to my bed in Ottawa, arriving just after five a.m.

“You up, Anna?” Dad yelled from the kitchen. He banged a pot on the stove. “Thought you might like some breakfast.”

I moaned again and rolled onto my side, slowly opening one eye to look at the clock. *Eight thirty*. That meant I’d been in bed exactly three and a half hours. I shut my eye again. I tried to focus on breathing in and out. Dad was working through his worries about my sister Cheri and her marriage problems by cooking day and night. My stomach could hardly take any more new recipes. My head needed more sleep.

“I’ll be right there!” I called. I put the pillow over my head. “Just five more minutes,” I mumbled.

I’d nicely drifted off when my cellphone rang on the dresser.

“Nooooo,” I groaned. What had I done to make the world turn against me?

After closing my eyes for a moment, I tossed the pillow onto the floor and pushed myself out of bed. I grabbed the phone and hit receive before it went to voice mail. I almost dropped the phone from the shock of hearing Detective Johnny Shaw’s voice growl into my ear.

“That you, Sweet?”

“Maybe.” After a pause, I said, “I’m surprised you’re working on a Sunday.” I had no idea what he wanted but knew it had to be something important.

“Not as surprised as I am.” He sighed loudly. “Wonder if you could come by the station this morning. There’s somebody who needs your help.”

The smell of sizzling bacon was making my mouth water. I could hear Dad beating eggs in a bowl. “I can be there in an hour,” I said. “I have some, uh, business to take care of first.”

Shaw gave another drawn-out sigh. “I can wait. Even though my kids and I are supposed to be on the ski hill, enjoying the day.”

I said with fake sympathy, “I’m sorry, but sometimes we all have to take one for the team. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

I hung up and grabbed my housecoat. Shaw really was a piece of work. I knew for a fact that he didn’t have any kids. And the picture of his bear-sized body shooting gracefully down a ski hill was enough to make me laugh out loud.

Plus, the ski hills weren’t open for the season yet.

I needed time to fully wake up. I’d have a quick shower and try to clear my head before making my

way to the kitchen. Whatever Shaw wanted could wait for me to have a couple of cups of coffee and a plate of bacon and eggs—even if his call made me as curious as a cat in a room full of mouse holes.

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I smelled snow in the late-November morning. The leaves had fallen from the trees weeks before and lay soggy and brown on the lawn. For once, I was looking forward to winter. Snow would be better than the damp, chilly days we'd had all month. For weeks on end the sun had been hiding behind low grey clouds, and people were as depressed as I'd ever seen them.

Shaw was waiting for me in his office at the Elgin Street police station, but he wasn't alone. My brother-in-law, Jimmy Wilson, was leaning against the wall drinking a cup of coffee. He was wearing jeans and a soft brown leather jacket and had the beginnings of a beard that hinted of the rugged outdoors. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen him looking so relaxed. Cheri told me that he'd been going to the gym, and he appeared to have lost weight and toned up.

A middle-aged man and woman were seated in two visitor chairs, and there was an empty one next to the woman. As I stepped past them, I noticed the beautiful jade-coloured silk scarf tied loosely around the woman's neck. Her eyes were large behind bright, blue-framed glasses, and she wore a black beret tilted to one side of her head, covering greying curls. Her husband sat taller next to her, a watchful man with a bald head and long face that reminded me of a hound dog. She'd shredded a tissue in her lap and white bits covered her coat like flakes of dandruff. I nodded at them before sitting down.

Shaw's pale blue eyes met mine. He cleared his throat. "Anna Sweet, meet Vanda and Chuck Green. Their son has been missing six months. I think it is time to get a PI involved. The Greens have agreed to hire you."

Shaw closed his mouth as if this was all that needed saying. The Greens and I stared at each other. Vanda's eyes filled with tears. Chuck looked down at his hands. I reached into my pocket and pulled out a pen and a notebook. "What can you tell me about your son?" I asked.

Vanda looked at Chuck and he held her eyes for a moment. Some silent struggle appeared to be going

on between them. Finally, Chuck turned sideways and looked at me.

“Ryan is seventeen and in grade twelve . . . well, he would be if he wasn’t missing. He was a student at Brookfield High School and planned to become a carpenter. Not sure what else you want to know, exactly.”

“Do you have other children, Mr. Green?”

“We have another son. Travis is sixteen and also goes to Brookfield. We live in Ottawa South, not far from the canal.”

“We’ve been frantic,” Vanda said, loud enough to signal that she was close to losing control. “Just frantic. Ryan would never disappear without letting us know where he was going. I need to know where he is, even if the worst has happened to him.” Her voice was rising to a dangerous level. “I need to know if he’s dead or alive!”

Her words rang like a big dose of panic in our ears. Shaw leaned forward in his chair. He rubbed his forehead and spoke before the silence stretched too long. “I have a full file for you to read, Sweet. Why don’t you go through it and get an idea what’s been going on. Officer Wilson is here to help bring you up to speed. I’m sure Chuck and Vanda will be eager to speak with you afterward.”

I nodded and said to the Greens, "I'll put everything else aside to work on finding your son." I was doing my part to help Shaw head off Vanda's total breakdown.

Jimmy gave me a half-smile that I ignored. We hadn't spoken since he and Cheri took a break from their marriage. I knew he was living in a bachelor apartment down the road in Westboro, a popular Ottawa neighbourhood near my PI office. My sister and their seven-year-old son Evan were renting a town house near my dad's place in Alta Vista. I added, "I'll let you know if I have any questions, Officer Wilson."

"I'm here for you, Sweet." Again, with the sleepy half-smile. The way Jimmy looked at me let me know that he wanted to start back up with me. He couldn't seem to grasp that dumping me to marry my sister had been a deal breaker.

I stood up and shook the Greens' hands before picking up their son's file from the desk. "I'll be in touch within a day or two," I said.

"We really hope you can help us," Vanda said. Her bottom lip trembled but she kept her voice level. "All we want is for Ryan to come home. Even if he did something wrong and ran away, we forgive him. If you find him, make sure you tell him that."