

Chapter 1

I have to believe that Hercule Poirot and Jessica Fletcher along with the current slate of popular television and mystery novel detectives had to start somewhere. Somewhere unworthy of a book or possible syndication rights. They didn't all begin with "The Case of the Smoking Gun" or by tracking down an ingenious serial killer. Or did they? I'm just assuming they didn't, but I don't know that for a fact. Yet that assumption gives me some comfort when I look back on the last twelve months since I began my life as a private detective. If someone were creating a TV show about some of the cases I've had in the past year, they'd have to resort to titles like "The Case of the Hiding Pussy Cat" or "Midnight Surveillance Sucks". To celebrate my one-year anniversary, I drank passable champagne from a bottle I'd chilled in the small fridge that held up one end of my office desk and finished the paperwork on my most recent case. My client had been a local woman who vacations in Arizona from late fall to early spring every year. She had hired me

to track down a couple whose motor home had sat next to hers in the trailer park the previous winter. Apparently the next door neighbours had forgotten to return a favourite piece of Corning Ware and my client wanted it back. I mailed a bill for fifty-three dollars and fifty cents, for time *and* expenses, and closed the file on “The Case of the Missing Casserole Dish”.

My name is Russell Quant. I’m thirty-one and a former police constable for the city of Saskatoon in the province of Saskatchewan. At about 215,000 people and smack in the middle of the Canadian prairie, Saskatoon is not action central, but neither is it the end of the world. It’s safe and clean. It has four distinct seasons, some of the friendliest people on the globe and it’s home.

My office is on Spadina Crescent, just out of downtown, in an old character house that used to be called the Professional Womyn’s Center. Back in the early eighties when it was very cool to delete the reference to man, a group of, you guessed it, professional women, bought the building and rented space to female tenants who ran female-oriented businesses. For several years the Professional Womyn’s Center was a success. But as the nineties matured and women overall became less hung up about the man thing, what was once politically correct became a bit of an embarrassment and serious-minded tenants moved out. They headed for buildings with less controversial names like The Templeton Complex or better yet, no name at all. A couple of beadmakers and crystal readers later, the owners were near bankruptcy and the house fell into disrepair. In 1998 a young lawyer, Errall Strane, purchased the property, did some remodelling and in deference to a piece of history,

renamed it the PWC Building. I believe, if I was to ask the average myn on the street what PWC stands for, they wouldn't know.

After renovations, PWC was left with four office spaces. Errall runs her one-lawyer practice out of the largest suite on the main floor, the balance of which is rented to Beverly Chaney, a psychiatrist. Two smaller offices on the second floor belonged to Martha Plume, a book editor, and Alberta Lougheed, a psychic. Unfortunate for her but fortunate for me, Martha passed away about the same time I was looking to hang my shingle. My good friend Kelly Doell knew I was searching for four walls and convinced her partner, Errall, to invite me to join the household. I am the first male tenant in twenty years. It was a difficult decision for Errall, one that at times I know she regrets, but... too bad, I've got a lease. Mine is the smallest office, but it's the only one with a balcony and the view more than makes up for the size; from the small deck I can look across Spadina Crescent into beautiful Kiwanis Park and the swiftly flowing South Saskatchewan River. And, oh yeah, the price is right.

I was standing on my balcony, drinking coffee on a chilled late September morning, when the first case of my second year as a private investigator began with a phone call. From the beginning I knew it was going to be big.

Trying not to spill a drop, I raced to my desk to answer the call before my message manager picked it up. "Russell Quant." Nice, short, succinct, what more do you need to say?

The person on the other end of the line hesitated for the count of five but decided to continue. "Mr. Quant, I understand you're a private detective."

“Yes,” I told the deep voice. So far so good.

“My name is Harold Chavell.”

The name told me a lot. Harold Chavell was a local entrepreneur who owned several successful businesses in the province. Off the top of my head I knew about a trucking company and a paint manufacturing company both with subsidiaries across North America. Simply put, he was one of Saskatoon’s who’s who. I was surprised to hear his name. I was surprised he was calling me.

“Yes Mr. Chavell, how can I help you?” Mr. Professional at your service.

“I may be in need of your expertise and was wondering if we could arrange a meeting. I don’t wish to discuss it over the phone and not at work. It’s a personal matter.” His tone was direct and businesslike.

“Of course. What would be convenient for you?”

“Not tonight, but this can’t wait much longer.” I heard the sound of a turning page and an impatient sigh as if he was having difficulty finding a time slot to fit me into. “How about tomorrow afternoon, one o’clock?”

I glanced at my daytimer and took a second to note that Tuesday was blank. So were the other days of the week but he didn’t need to know that. I flipped a few pages rather loudly but held off on the impatient sigh. “That should work out fine,” I said, with a hint in my voice that I’d pushed a few other things around to accommodate him.

Harold Chavell gave me directions to his home and the conversation ended.

As I finished my coffee I tried to recall what I knew about the man from *The StarPhoenix*, Saskatoon’s daily paper. He was apparently rich, obviously successful,

heavily involved in the community, and friends with the mayor and every bank manager in town. Not the type of guy you'd expect to hire a detective who'd just billed a client fifty-three dollars and fifty cents. What did this man want with me?

I spent the rest of the morning going through mail, reading the paper and tidying up a few administrative details on old cases. I was expected at the vet with my dog, Barbra at 2:00 p.m. Time for her annual check up.

Cathedral Bluffs is one of a plethora of acreage communities that sprung up around Saskatoon in the late 1990's and early 2000's. It's about a dozen kilometres northeast of the city and features five-to-ten-acre parcels of land off either side of a gravel road that lazily snakes its way through the development. At the end of a lengthy, sapling-lined, driveway I found Harold Chavell's ostentatious house. Its considerable bulk was crammed at one end of the lot to take full viewing advantage of the South Saskatchewan River valley over which it was dramatically perched. No expense had been spared. Money sprouted from the ground, spurted out of sprinklers, covered the roof, filled the garages and floated in the pool. He was either trying to prove something or had nothing better to do with his cash. Or both.

I pulled up to a twenty-foot-high portico. I hoped my 1988 Mazda RX7 convertible wouldn't leak fluid on the faux rock, burgundy-dyed driveway. Oh well. Isn't that what driveways are for? I rang a doorbell that was actually a small, square pad of light and waited for its symphony to bring someone to the door. I was surprised when Chavell himself appeared. Had he given the servants the afternoon off so we could talk in private?

“Mr. Chavell, I’m Russell Quant.”

He shook my hand and studied my face with something more than casual interest. “Thank you for coming, Mr. Quant. Please, come in.”

Stepping inside I was transported into the foyer of a five-star luxury hotel. It was gorgeous. Slate floor, high ceiling and ancient looking pedestals displaying sculptures of things I couldn’t readily identify. Two of the walls were designed to resemble the sheer face of a mountainside, replete with rivulets of water dribbling from summit to base. His own natural mountain spring? I guess it would save on Evian bills. At the center of the room was a marble-topped table that seemed barely large enough to support an impossibly huge arrangement of fresh cut flowers. I looked around for the check-in counter but saw none.

“I have refreshments in here,” he said.

I followed him from the main entrance into a big room that looked like an office doubling as a sitting room. From this vantage point I was able to assess Harold Chavell without being caught. He was a man of sharp profiles, each handsome and interesting in a way that came only with certain age and experience. I guessed him to be in his mid-to-late forties, maybe a little worn around the edges like a soap opera star who’d appeared in a few too many episodes. His build was not dissimilar from my own. He was just over six feet tall, wide shouldered and slim-hipped. Although it was difficult to be certain with the suit he was wearing, he appeared very fit. His outfit was elegant, a little bland and very expensive. When we shook hands earlier I noticed he wore no jewelry except for a pinkie ring, platinum I think, on his right hand.

While he fixed our drinks, coffee for me, Pellegrino with a twist for him, I sat on an eggplant-coloured, leather couch. I was mesmerized by an oval piece of glass in front of me that seemed to be floating on the backs of two frolicking, solid bronze dolphins. After serving the drinks he sat in one of the two armchairs on the other side of the fish. I'm not even sure how to describe the colour of the armchairs, kind of peachy-orange maybe? It actually worked well together, the eggplant, the orange, the sea-life. Very nice package.

"I called you, Mr. Quant, based on the recommendation of an acquaintance of mine. He assured me that you could be counted on to recognize the special sensitivity of this matter. Even so, I will need your personal assurance today that everything we discuss will remain confidential."

I wanted to ask who'd referred me, but thought better of it. I'd find out later. "You have that assurance," I told him. "Assuming you are not about to tell me anything of an illegal nature."

The man gave me a restrained smile, one he probably normally reserved for unpleasant business matters. "No. Not illegal, but definitely personal in nature. What I'm about to share with you is not common knowledge and I do not wish it to be so."

"I understand."

"Three days ago, on Saturday night, I was to be married."

His tone told me congratulations were not in order. I already knew his wedding ring finger was naked. I remained silent.

"I was to be married to another man."

Now this I didn't expect. Juicy. His hesitation after this revelation, led me to believe he wanted a response. I decided against "juicy". "I'm sorry it didn't work out for you."

"Not as sorry as I am. Obviously my relationship with Tom was ... is not well known in the community. We're not completely in the closet, but neither is the door wide open, you understand? Our ceremony was to be a private affair. We had sixty guests here in my home. Most were friends, family and some close business associates who are included in our personal lives." Chavell paused here and sipped his sparkling water. His presentation was cool, almost impassive, and I wondered about what I was seeing in his face. Hurt? Anger? Embarrassment? Maybe all of it. Maybe something altogether different. He carefully placed the crystal tumbler back on the coffee table and continued, "Tom and I are deeply in love. We've been together for almost three years. We are dedicated to one another. For him not to show up, to leave me standing there alone, like a fool, at the altar, never mind to not even call, is just... well it's something I can't accept."

"I hate to be blunt." A lie. "But it did happen. Don't you have to accept it?"

"No. I can accept that the ceremony did not occur, but I cannot accept that he stood me up on purpose. I think something is terribly wrong."

"So he hasn't been home since the evening of the ceremony?"

"I live here alone," Chavell said formally. "Tom has an apartment in the city."

I gave that a little shrug. "Okay. So you haven't heard from Tom since Saturday?"

“I haven’t seen or heard from Tom since the rehearsal party the night before the ceremony.”

“Oh.”

“Yes! Oh! That’s just not like Tom. He would never do that.”

“What about his friends? Family? Have they heard from him?”

“No,” he answered. “I’ve contacted a couple of his friends but they tell me he hasn’t called and they have no idea what’s going on with him.”

“What do the police have to say about this?”

“Nothing.”

“You haven’t reported him as a missing person? He disappeared Friday night; this is Tuesday afternoon. What about his family? Haven’t they gone to the police?”

“Tom isn’t missing, Mr. Quant.”

Now I was confused. I’m sure the look on my face conveyed that message all too clearly.

“I know where Tom is.”

“So you want me to find out why he stood you up?”

“First you have to find him. And then, yes, I want you to find out what happened.”

More confusion. “But I thought you just said you know where he is.”

“I know roughly where he is, not exactly where he is. He’s in France.”

“How do you know that?”

“The day after our ceremony, Sunday morning, we were to leave for Paris on our honeymoon.”

“So you think he went on the honeymoon without you? I don’t know if…”

“I thought it was crazy too. But his luggage is gone and then I found his plane ticket was also missing. Both our tickets with copies of the itinerary were right over there on the desk.”

I glanced over at the expansive mahogany desk as if doing so would help.

“When did you notice the ticket was missing?”

“Not until Monday morning, right before I called you. I was too distraught and busy doing whatever I could to track Tom down. Until then I never imagined he’d left the country.”

“What about you? After the embarrassment of being jilted, you never thought of escaping it all by going to France anyway?” Okay, it might seem like a stupid and insensitive question, but sometimes those are the best kind.

“Of course not! Up until Monday I was seriously considering Tom might be dead or have been in an accident. It was the only thing that made sense…”

“Until you found his ticket wasn’t where it should be.”

“Yes.”

I may have been shaking my head when I said, “He could be anywhere.”

“You see, I don’t think so. There’s more. I studied at IMEDE in Switzerland and have traveled extensively in France. I am quite familiar with that part of Europe, but Tom… well he barely knows how to speak a few words in French. He’d have significant trouble getting by on his own, unless everything was already planned for him.”

I was catching on. “So you suspect he will follow the plans you made for your honeymoon?”

“Yes. My travel agent and I pre-arranged almost every step of the trip, what routes we’d take, hotels, dinner reservations, everything. It’s all spelled out in a very detailed itinerary. And more than that,” Chavell said as if scoring the winning point, “I now have proof that he is following that itinerary. Our first stop was to be in Paris where we were to visit an old friend of mine, Solonge Fontaine. I called her this morning to tell her what’s happened. Tom showed up as planned.”

“Tom visited your friend in Paris?”

“Yesterday. Monday evening. Or rather, what was Monday evening in Paris. It would have been around noon here in Saskatoon. He had no where else to go, he knew she was expecting us and she speaks English. Imagine the state of mind he must have been in at that point. And tired and jet lagged. Even though she was a virtual stranger to him, he’d be in need of a friendly face.”

“Did he tell her what was going on?”

“It doesn’t sound like he told her much of anything, but that’s where I need your help. Solonge is a marvelous woman and tremendous friend, but she is also somewhat eccentric and can, at times, be a little vague. She may know something important without knowing she knows it.”

“You want me to give her a call?”

“No, Mr. Quant. I want you to go to France. Meet with Solonge. See what you can find out. And then I want you to find Tom. The easiest thing for him to do is follow our itinerary. You should be able to catch up with him in no time.”

“Not if he doesn’t want to be found. It’s the last thing he would do.”

“If he didn’t want to be found he wouldn’t have gone to France and he wouldn’t have visited Solonge.”

He had a point. “So you think he wants to be found, maybe even expects you to come running after him?”

Chavell had an odd look on his face. “In a way, yes, that’s possible.”

“Then ... why don’t you?”

Chavell sat up straight in his seat and gave me a steely look that I’m sure he uses to strike fear into the hearts of his competitors. I, however, took it much better than that. “Are you not interested in taking this case, Mr. Quant?”

“In a case like this, Mr. Chavell, you have to be prepared to answer some difficult personal questions. If I feel I can’t ask them, or that you will not answer them honestly, then the answer is no, I am not interested in this case.”

He nodded as if thinking over my words. “I’m sorry. You’re right.”

“That’s fine.” I could see he was upset, but I couldn’t afford to let him get me off topic. “So, why are you not jumping on a plane to France? Why don’t you save yourself a bunch of money and go find him yourself?”

A lesser man might have gotten up, walked a few feet away, and spoke the following words with his back to me. I had to give Harold Chavell credit for staying in his seat and facing me with his emotions. “I’ve been through many tortured hours believing Tom might be hurt, or worse, dead. Grieving for him. Although it was the most gruesome of possibilities, it was the only one I could accept as the reason why

he didn't show up for our wedding. When I found he had taken his ticket, flown to Paris without me and turned up on Solonge's doorstep, I... I just ..."

I began to understand. "You became angry."

He was quiet for a moment. Now he did turn away and stared into the grate of an unlit fireplace.

I helped him along. "Even if Tom wants to be chased, you're not in the mood to do the chasing."

"It's petty, I know," he said, turning back to me. "But as much as I can't face him right now, I still have to know why he did this."

"I'm sure you've given this a lot of thought. Do you have any guesses as to his reasons?" If I was going to go ahead with this, I wanted as few surprises as possible. "Had you been fighting? Was there something else that was going on in Tom's life that might have impacted his decision about the marriage? Family? Friends? Ex-lovers causing problems? A current lover outside the relationship?"

Chavell gave me a nasty look that told me I was treading on thin ice as far as asking difficult, personal questions. "No," he said. "Nothing. This was not some fling, Mr. Quant. We had a serious relationship. This ceremony wasn't just another excuse to throw a party. We wanted to stand up in front of a room full of people who cared about us and proclaim our love for one another. We had no doubts. Neither of us." Then he shook his head and grimaced. "But I guess I was wrong about that, wasn't I?"

I shouldn't have, but I nodded. I looked in his face and wondered if this man was telling me everything. I felt there was something missing from the story but what

was it? “Can you give me Tom’s address? I’d like to check out his apartment. And I’ll need the names of friends, co-workers and family who were close to him and a list of the wedding guests. I’d like to talk with them myself. Also...”

“I can have the lists sent to your office. But right now there’s no time for that,” Chavell told me. “I’ve booked you on a flight tomorrow morning. I hope your passport is in order. I want you there immediately. Although I’m certain he’ll stick to the itinerary as planned, I can’t guarantee for how long.”

I’m not much of a dawdler when it comes to business, so I could appreciate Harold Chavell’s sense of haste. Sort of. Even though my daytimer was empty, leaving the country with less than twenty-four hour’s notice was not my idea of filling it. I was also a little uncomfortable taking the trip without the opportunity to do a little background work first. But Chavell informed me my Air Canada ticket to Paris was paid for and waiting for me at the airport. I told him I charge ninety-five dollars per hour plus out-of-pocket expenses and applicable taxes. Without wincing even once, he signed the contract I’d taken the liberty of preparing that morning. He gave me a healthy retainer, a copy of the itinerary, and a picture of Tom Osborn. Business concluded.

I was going to Paris.