

Chapter 1

It was a little after 11:00 p.m. on a frigidly cold Tuesday night. I kept the Mazda's engine running while I waited, having little desire to lose my nose and ears to frostbite. And for the umpteenth time that evening, I wondered if this rendezvous was a good idea. What was I doing here, meeting a man I didn't know on a cold, dark, stormy night? Okay, it wasn't stormy but it was really cold. He had my cellphone number and the colour and make of my vehicle. I knew nothing about him. But since I was already there, I decided I might as well see it through.

I didn't have long to wait. A dark green Dodge Intrepid, a few years old, pulled in front of McQuarrie's Tea & Coffee Merchants two parking spots ahead of mine. I watched as the sole occupant of the car released his seatbelt, fumbled with gloves and pulled his coat's hood over his head. The door of the car stuttered open just as a gust of bracing December wind, laden with razor sharp ice crystals, bore down upon it. The man threw his shoulder into the door and successfully swung it out far enough to allow him to exit. Without hesitation he approached the driver's side of my car and leaned down to look in at me. I rolled down the window.

"You're Russell?" he asked with a bit of an accent I couldn't quite place—Aussie maybe.

I checked him out. He had dark eyes under heavy brows, a thick jaw covered with a later-than-five o'clock shadow and big teeth that were very white. Maybe thirty. Something about the

texture of his skin, his wintertime getup and cold-tinted cheeks made him look like a ski instructor—and given that this was flat Saskatchewan, no doubt an out of work ski instructor.

“Yeah,” I said with a smile to return his. “I’m Russell. You’re Hugh?”

He only nodded. “Whaddaya say we go somewhere more private to do this?”

“Uh, sure,” I agreed, lamb-like.

“You follow me, right?”

“Okay. Where are we headed?”

“Got your cell with ya?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll jes give you a ring if it looks you’re not keeping up. Mother, it’s gettin’ brisk out here.” He trudged back to his car calling over the wind, “Follow me, right?”

This couldn’t be a good idea. What was I doing?

The traffic on Broadway Avenue was almost non-existent as the Intrepid headed south with me and my Mazda on it’s tail. We passed by the darkened windows of the street’s retail shops, salons, art galleries, butchers, bakers and candlestick makers and saw only a smattering of latenightnics entering and exiting the area’s pubs and restaurants. The Broadway Theatre was just letting out a couple dozen fans of some funky foreign independent film. We quickly reached 8th Street and Hugh made a right turn, speeding down several blocks obviously not taking time to enjoy the Christmas decorations hoisted high above the street by some brave city worker. He hung a left onto Lorne Avenue and we continued our journey south. Before long I caught sight of the gaudy Las Vegas-lite sign of the Emerald Casino. Its parking lot was bursting to capacity, as it is almost every night of the year, and across the street a statue of a rearing stallion marked the entrance to Early’s Farm & Garden Centre.

Suddenly the situation had changed tenor.

We were leaving town.

It was one thing to follow someone I didn't know to somewhere I didn't know within city limits, but leaving the safety of the city was an altogether different matter. I had to make a decision. And time was running out. We passed the woodsy fairytale setting of the German Canadian Club Concordia and the spartan lot of the Schroh Sports Arena. And that was it. Urban street became a two-lane rural highway and our speeds quickly upped to ninety kilometres an hour. The lights of the city fell behind us like the dying embers in a fireplace. What to do?

I thought back to my first contact with the man I was now following. It was an end of workday phone call from a person in distress. He told me his name was Hugh and that he desperately needed my services as a private detective. He told me he was wary of meeting in public or talking too long on the phone. So we arranged to meet on Broadway Avenue. This might sound a bit strange to some, but after all, I am a detective and few of my client meetings take place between 9:00 and 5:00 in a comfy boardroom with an urn of designer coffee. But in the country after dark? Hmm.

In the end, propulsion made up my mind for me. With no ready exits or approaches, there wasn't an easy way to get off the road and besides, I had nothing else planned for my Tuesday night, so why not keep going? I maintained a several-car-length distance behind Hugh on the straight and narrow road. We were on Highway 219, that's all I knew. I wondered what the heck was out here. Where was he taking me?

As we drove in a southerly direction on the dark, lonely highway, a pitiful parade of two, my headlights cut a slender swath through the night. I watched as drifts of snow passed lazily over the pavement before me like feathery ghosts. The sky was black. No streetlights or traffic

lights, farmyards were few and far between and the moon had gone into hiding. There are times, driving at night, when abandoning the noise and glaring brightness of the city for the countryside brings me comfort; darkness and silence enveloping me like a protective blanket. At other times however, the same blackness and quiet seem ominous and threatening as if something is out there, lurking behind the curtain of darkness, something...not good. And tonight it was the latter that was knocking at the door of my brain. Funny how things can turn around so quickly. A slightly elevated pulse and body temperature along with a general creepy feeling slowly overtook my tough P.I. guy bravado.

I began to notice the distance between our vehicles growing. Hugh was speeding up. Eventually, my only guides were the two red lights of his rear end. And every so often as the Intrepid sunk into a dip in the highway I would lose sight of him completely. Was he trying to lose me? Just as I accelerated in an effort to catch up, I saw the brake lights of the Intrepid flash once, then twice, his right turn signal blinked its intention and then...he was gone.

I sped up to one-hundred-and-twenty clicks.

I followed his right turn onto an intersecting gravel road identified by a sign that simply read Landfill. I made the turn and soon found myself idling past the entrance of the South Corman Park Landfill site. The Intrepid was nowhere to be seen. I came to a stop and took a quick glance around. A chained and padlocked gate blocked access to the property and I could see no other obvious way for Hugh to have gotten in unless he'd had the key, which I doubted. So I put the car back in gear and kept on rolling. I topped a hill and about a kilometre later came to a full stop. My headlights had fallen upon the unmistakable yellow and black checkered pattern of a dead end sign. Next to it was another sign telling me that I was at the "T" intersection of Twp 354 and Rge Rd 3055. Okey dokey. Right or left? Which way did he go?

It was as dark outside as I'd ever seen it and even with my headlights on high beam there were no obvious telltale signs of recent travel. The snow on the road had been well worn into the gravel so there were no conspicuous tracks to follow. Although there wasn't much in the way of precipitation, over the sound of my engine I could hear the howling of the wind, which every so often built itself into a powerful blast that rocked the body of my little car. For a moment I sat there, wondering yet again what madness had brought me here. It was never a good idea to be caught in the countryside, late on an ice-cold, winter night, perhaps a little lost. Had I taken the wrong turn off the highway? Or was my future client somewhere nearby, waiting for me, wondering where I was? But which way? Right or left? I had no obvious clue. But I had an idea. I couldn't see anything, but maybe I could hear something.

I rolled down the window, but the wind and car engine were still too loud. I turned the ignition key to silence the car but the wind was blowing right into my ear. I'd have to get out. I buttoned the top buttons of my coat, readjusted my scarf, pulled on a pair of lined, leather gloves, opened the door and pulled myself out of the Mazda. (I seldom wear a toque, preferring a hooded coat or earmuffs instead—the damage to my hair just isn't worth it.) I rounded the car to the north side for protection and bowed my head against the wind, listening for anything that would give me a clue as to where Hugh had gone.

It was then that I heard it.

It was all the more surprising because, despite my actions, I hadn't really expected to hear anything except perhaps the distant howling of a hungry coyote.

But it wasn't a night creature that I heard. It was the sound of an engine.

There was someone else out there. In the dark.

The engine rumbled and grumbled as some engines do, sounding not unlike an animal...biding it's time until it could...attack...

From the cadence I could tell the vehicle was idling. Whoever was in the car was just sitting there, lights extinguished. Waiting. Watching.

But why? Was it Hugh? Was it someone else? How far away? It sounded...close. Or was this just a trick played on my ears by the wind?

My eyes strained to cut through the night, as black as a flock of crows, but to no avail. I could see nothing. I could feel my heart begin to race faster. And even though it was bitterly cold, a thin line of perspiration trickled from my forehead towards my neck, almost freezing on its way.

This wasn't good. Something wasn't right here. And just as that thought entered my head a set of headlights illuminated, appearing suddenly, like two bright orbs, two-hundred metres down the road to the right of me. I shielded my eyes in a useless attempt to get a better look, but I couldn't tell if they belonged to the green Intrepid or some other vehicle. And then, two-hundred metres to my left, another set of headlights flashed on.

Shit.

There were two of them.

An ambush.

Beating my own hide by several seconds, I skidded around my car and jumped into the driver's seat, battling the wind to pull the door closed. I glared at the two lighted sentinels, each the same distance away but in opposite directions.

Cripes! They began to move.

They were coming after me!

I turned the key in the ignition and despite every movie I've ever seen, the rotary engine of my sweetheart of a car turned over on the first try.

They were coming, from either end of the "T". I had to somehow get turned around and get the heck out of there. I tried a U-turn but only made it half way. The road was too narrow. I stopped, backed up, frustrated at losing the time, and pointed myself back in the direction I'd come from. In my haste and growing anxiety, I was having a difficult time getting the stick shift into first gear. My eyes flew to the rearview mirror. They were coming. They were coming! Both vehicles had arrived at the intersection and were turning in my direction. They were coming!

I think I swore and grimaced and somehow managed to get into first, second, third and forth within the next few nanoseconds. My car fishtailed wildly as I accelerated and caught tufts of roadside snow and gravel under my churning wheels. If only I could get to the highway, I would feel safer.

The reflection of the chase car's lights in my rearview mirror became blinding as they caught up with me. Holy Moses Boat Builder! They were right on my tail. We were all climbing to speeds in excess of one-hundred kph on a gravel road and the highway was coming up fast. How would I make the turn? Suppose there was oncoming traffic? Should I signal? Should I signal left but then go right? Stupid, stupid, stupid!

Not so stupid.

I had one advantage. I was in front. I could pay attention to where I was going rather than whom I was chasing. I only had time to make, consider and carry out one plan. So it had to be a good one. I slowed down to just below ninety, took a good look at where I was heading, then extinguished my headlights, making it seem—I hoped—as if I'd disappeared. In the next few seconds I was either going to (a) end up in a ditch, (b) be rear-ended by one of the other cars, or

(c) make a left turn onto the highway heading back towards Saskatoon before the bad guys behind me realized what was happening.

I was shooting for (c).

It sort of worked. I made the turn, just barely missing a collision with the snow banks of the opposing ditch, and after a bit of amusement park ride-like action, was firmly on the road facing north. I turned my lights back on and dared a look in the rearview mirror. As hoped, car number one had been totally bamboozled and sailed right through the intersection. Car number two however had been far enough behind me and car number one to have figured out what I was doing. He too made the turn. I had gained some distance but he was still on my tail. My only hope was to reach city limits before he caught up with me. I didn't know what he'd do with me if he did—shoot out my tires or try to force me off the road?—but I was not about to find out and become an action flick cliché. I floored it and aimed straight ahead like a rocket bound for the moon.

About halfway to town I noticed the lights behind me getting smaller and smaller and finally I lost sight of them. Had he turned around to check up on his buddy? Did he want to avoid the revealing lights of the city? Didn't matter, at least he'd given up on me.

It was not until I was back in Saskatoon and slowed to city street speed that I noticed my hands. I watched them on the steering wheel, as if they weren't my own, twitching crazily like bags full of jumping beans. My head felt odd, as if I was in the cabin of an airplane that had just lost pressure. Was it going to implode? I pulled into the brightly-lit lot of a Petro-Canada gas station. I craned my head over my left shoulder. I had to confirm they weren't coming up behind me. Who were those guys? What would they have done if they'd caught me? Was it a

coincidence this had happened while I was following Hugh? Probably not. So then the question was, who the hell was Hugh and why had he set me up?

My skin shifted as the cell phone on the seat next to me began to jangle. I eyed it warily, the normally innocuous ring now ominous. I reached for it as if it were a stovetop that might be hot, finally grabbing hold of it and bringing it to my ear.

“Hello,” I croaked.

The voice that answered was Hugh’s, but a different Hugh from the smiling ski instructor I’d met on Broadway Avenue. In a menacing, flat tone he said, “Drop the case, Mr. Quant. Or next time...we’ll catch you.”

My name is Russell Quant. I’m thirty-two, a former police constable for the city of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan and have had my shingle out as a private detective for over two years. I get to set my own hours, answer to no one and indulge my active extrovert or solitary introvert as my mood dictates. Now that being said, the life of a private detective can certainly be a capricious one. So to balance everything out, I crave and maintain a certain level of calm, steadiness and predictability in my day-to-day routine.

Enter Kay Quant, nee Wistonchuk.

Mom.

Mom is a sixty-two-year-old Ukrainian lady who speaks with a heavy Ukrainian accent replete with rolling *r*’s and wailing *oi*’s. Even so, I’ve never considered myself half-Ukrainian. Not because I didn’t want to be, but because my mother rarely mentioned the fact and my father, a very proper Irishman, ignored his own heavy brogue and my mother’s penchant for garish colour combinations and told us we were Canadians, plain and simple. My mother is just shy of

five feet tall and although leaning towards stocky she has generally kept the same dress size since giving birth to her last child, which was me. She sports a tightly permed head of dark hair with the occasional sprouting of white, horn-rimmed spectacles and a face that can alternately scowl away a pirate ship or warm the heart of its captain.

For the first time since knowing her, which is pretty much since my birth, my mother agreed to stay overnight in my home. And not just for one night but for every night of the two weeks leading up to Christmas. When I'd first called and asked her if she'd like to spend Christmas together, as I do every year out of repetitive obligation, I was truly shocked by her reply. My good friend and neighbour, Sereena, had been with me at the time and believed I was about to go into cardiac arrest. You see, normally, when all is right with the world, ever since my father died several years ago, my mother spends Christmas with either my sister or my brother. Never with me. It made sense. Or, if truth be told, I had never thought about it hard enough to question whether or not it made sense. I just figured she was more comfortable with the other choices—my sister, because mothers and daughters supposedly have that extra special bond, or my brother because he has two children to whom she enjoys playing grandmother. Or is it four? I can never keep track. The holidays together would be spent eating, playing cards, eating some more and then, all involved being sated, Mom would toddle off home to the farm until next year. Everybody was happy, right?

I suppose I did sometimes wonder (when I had absolutely nothing else to do) if she never came to my house because I am gay. She's known the fact for years, she doesn't like talking about it or hearing about it, but she knows. Does it make her uncomfortable? Is that why she had stayed away?

Yet this year something different was afoot. She'd said yes. After some blathering and blubbering to cover my surprise I'd hung up, drank the half carafe of wine Sereena'd thoughtfully set before me, and called my siblings. My sister, Joanne, couldn't have Mother for Christmas because she was planning to spend the holidays in Hawaii. My brother, Bill, who lives the next province over in Winnipeg, Manitoba, said that he had made the offer to Mother but she'd refused with no apparent reason. I'd reached a dead end. I realized I'd have to swallow my feelings of...what? I didn't even know what I felt about my mother coming to visit. I loved her well enough. So what was the problem? Was I worried she'd be bored? Afraid we'd have nothing to talk about? Anxious that my Christmas would pale in comparison to my sister's or brother's version? None of those seemed quite right, but they'd do nicely until I had time to sit down and think about it. So I hired a house cleaning service, took my dog, Barbra to the groomer, stocked the fridge with things I barely recognized, like butter and whole milk, and welcomed my mother into my home.

As I shuffled into the kitchen on that chilly December morning, I was still more than a little dazed from the bizarre incident on the outskirts of the city the night before. The venomous sounding words that spewed from my cell phone had echoed in my brain ever since: Drop the case, Mr. Quant. Or next time...we'll catch you.

First of all there was the matter of the implied threat. Next time they'll catch me and what? Introduce themselves? Trade recipes with me? Kill me? And then, just for that nice added touch of confusion, was the first part of the message telling me to drop the case. The problem was, I had no case.

I'd wrapped up my most recent investigation—a fairly benign matter involving a misplaced and highly cherished curling broom (don't ask)—about a week ago and since had been toying with the idea of taking some days off. I was looking forward to using the free time to properly get into the Christmas spirit: shopping, decorating, partying, sleeping.

So what was this idiot talking about? Drop the case? What case? I'd taken some preliminary information from Hugh when he first called. All bogus of course, including his phone number. So now what? Even if I wanted to I couldn't do what the bad guys wanted me to. So much for the caprice part of a private detective's life. Now I needed a dose of serenity.

Nuh-uh.

As soon as my bare foot hit the tile floor of the kitchen, I knew my daily existence had drastically changed, and would remain changed for the next two weeks. My usual routine is to let out the dog, prepare her food and mine, set the coffee and retrieve the *StarPhoenix* from the front walk. I then let the dog in and finally settle down surrounded by paper, food, dog and coffee in my pleasant kitchen nook to quietly welcome the new day. The first sign that things were different was Barbra. With my mother having already taken care of her doggie needs, my gentle five-year-old pepper and salt Schnauzer was sitting in one corner of the kitchen, far enough away from Mom's busy feet to keep from being stepped on, with an odd look on her face. I think she was grinning, waiting in anticipation for my reaction to the scene in our usually peaceful home.

Instead of tranquility there was mini-pandemonium as Mom tried to acclimate herself to a new kitchen, her indigenous habitat. Most of the surfaces were covered with pots and pans and non-perishables. There were paper Safeway bags and plastic SuperStore bags brimming with groceries and other items she'd brought from home—obviously things she suspected I wouldn't have and she couldn't possibly do without. She'd already brewed a pot of weak coffee and

poured me a cup laced with heavy cream and a heaping teaspoon of sugar. She'd also somehow found the newspaper and was now using the Lifestyle section, my favorite for light early morning reading, to soak up the fat from a heap of freshly fried bacon. And, by some mystery, she had perfectly timed my arrival in the kitchen, as she had most days of my corpulent childhood, with the cracking of three eggs into a hot pan, spitting with butter.

Even though it was not quite 8:00 a.m., my mother was wearing a freshly pressed, robin's egg blue housedress under a flowery apron (not mine), what she calls house shoes (these were hard leather dress shoes, always black with a chunky heel) and thick nylons. Her hair was immovably perfect and her eyeglasses were magnificently shiny. I, on the other hand, had barely managed to fasten the belt around the waist of my bathrobe.

"You seet and I feex more bacon if dat's not enough," she said, her back to me, intuiting my presence in the room.

I looked at the two pigs worth of bacon sitting on my newspaper. My mother comes from a generation of prairie farmwomen accustomed to cooking meals for men who spent their days plowing fields, herding cattle and picking rocks. The closest I come to any of those agrarian activities is selecting the perfect head of lettuce—ok, romaine—at the organic produce store. I fell into a chair, picked up an unfamiliar coffee cup from an embroidered place-setting and sipped at its contents. It tasted something like a hot, mocha milkshake. Barbra and I exchanged glances. Her lips were definitely upturned on each side of her face. I began to wonder. Schnauzers aren't given to smirking unless they have very good reason. "Mom, you didn't give Barbra people food, did you?"

"Vhat kind peoples food? Vhat you mean?" She was busy flipping my eggs and I took from her tone that I was lucky she had answered me at all.

“People food, you know, anything other than the dog food in the bag in the cupboard I showed you. If she eats people food she gets sick and throws up. I wouldn’t want you spending your first day cleaning that up.” I tried to sound light and airy about it, but I’m not sure I succeeded, especially since hot milkshakes just don’t do it for me first thing in the morning—particularly after my harrowing experience the night before.

“I haf tree egg here, dat enough? You start dese, I feex more.”

No matter how many people she is cooking for, one or twenty-one, I cannot remember even one occasion seeing my mother actually sitting at a table to eat. She cooks. While others eat—she’s cooks. Long after the meal is done—she’s cooks. When the guests have left and are home in bed—she’s still cooking. I don’t get it. What happens to all this food? “Mom, I don’t eat a big breakfast.”

“Not beeg,” she informed me as she slipped three sunny-side ups onto a plate along with a nice splash of boiling butter. All the better to dunk my toast in. “Tree small egg.” The platter landed on the table. This was her way of giving me a morning hug.

“I’m trying to watch what I eat.”

“What’s dat?” she said, already back at the stove. Hadn’t heard a word I’d said.

“I have high cholesterol.” A lie.

“Ya, okey den. What I feex you? Dere’s ham, mebbe nice hot porridge?” She reached for the porridge bag inexplicably within her reach. Where did that come from? Whose kitchen was this? And since when is ham a low-cholesterol food? Porridge I’m not sure about.

I stood up from the table feeling like a stranger in my own home. An under-dressed stranger. “You know what? I have to go. I have a meeting at work.” Another lie. Great. My mother was in my home less than twenty-four hours and I’d already lied to her twice. Oh well.

Lies are like peanuts—ok, macadamia nuts—after two it's hard to stop. "I have a client coming in. A big case." I knew she wouldn't ask me any questions about that. I don't think she really knows what I do for a living. She loved it when I was a cop. It was something she could understand. And I think it gave her certain bragging rights with friends and neighbours. My decision to leave the police force had confused her. She never understood why I did it. And never asked.

I backed out of the room as if I expected her to make a run at me with a plate of deep fried prune dumplings and hash browns or something. Instead, she said nothing, just added more butter to the frying pan and hummed a Ukrainian ditty. I gave Barbra one more look—still making like a Cheshire cat that damn dog—and hightailed it for my bedroom.

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. A few years ago a young lawyer, Errall Strane, purchased the property, did some remodelling and in deference to a piece of history, renamed it the PWC Building. 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 belong to Alberta Lougheed, a psychic and me. Mine is the smallest, but the only one with a balcony and view that more than make up for its size. From the small deck I can look across Spadina Crescent into beautiful Riverside Park and beyond it, the South Saskatchewan River.

I parked in one of the four spots behind the building, next to Beverly's sensible sedan and Errall's bright blue Miata, and plugged in the car. Instead of taking the metal staircase that hugs

the rear of the building up to the second floor, I braved the minus twenty degree Celsius temperature, circled around the building to the street and entered through the front door.

The reception area is a large space filled with expensive art chosen by Errall, plants donated by Beverly, and a colour scheme coordinated by Alberta's aural projections. My contribution is a pencil-holder. A massive circular desk presides over the room and divides the space in two: a waiting area for Errall's clients to the right and one to the left for all the rest of our clients. Behind the desk is home to the ever-cheerful Lilly, our group receptionist.

As I approached Lilly's desk I noticed Errall's side of the foyer was full. A half-dozen or so serious people in serious business suits were waiting to be shepherded into the boardroom to do some serious business. Our side was as quiet as a turkey on Thanksgiving. Errall appeared at her office door, resplendent in coal-black Chanel, her chestnut hair in a severe bun. I gave her a girly wave. She averted her eyes.

I exchanged some idle chitchat with Lilly and then headed up to my office. Over the summer I'd finally given the space a bit of a facelift—a comforting terra cotta and gumleaf green colour scheme for the walls and flooring, and a new couch to replace the stuffing-less version that had been left me by a former tenant. It was out with the old in with the new, except for my beloved desk with the bar fridge holding up one end of it.

I had just hit the brew button on my coffee maker when I heard a soft knock on my door. I turned to find Beverly standing at the threshold with her usual friendly smile.

“Do you have a moment, hon?” she asked, her voice as close to being warm syrup without being sticky.

“You bet,” I said. “Just put some coffee on.”

When she closed the door behind her I knew this wasn't a social call.

“Let’s sit,” she said, already heading for the client chair in front of my desk.

Okay, this wasn’t going to be couch-type talk either. I took my spot behind the desk and smiled at our resident psychiatrist. Beverly is a pretty brunette in her mid-forties with twenty extra pounds that look just right on her. She was wearing a plain grey skirt that showed off her curvy hips nicely and a nondescript cream-coloured blouse under an unbuttoned grey sweater that looked soft enough to be made of kittens.

“I may have a client for you.”

I nodded my understanding. This was unusual indeed. Beverly and I had never before referred clients to one another. Not because we don’t respect each other’s abilities in our respective professions, the situation had simply not come up.

“I’ve been seeing Daniel Guest for about a year,” she began. “Of course I won’t go into any of that, but something new has come up...something very new. I received a phone call from Daniel three days ago, very early Sunday morning. He was in an extremely agitated state and I convinced him to come see me right away.” She hesitated there for a brief second then continued, “These issues we’re dealing with, Russell, relate to...well, criminal activity.” She added quickly, “By someone else, not him.”

I was about to interrupt but Beverly wordlessly indicated her desire to finish her thoughts.

“As you can imagine Daniel and I have spent many hours over the past few days discussing this. He needs more help...different help...than I can give him. Fortunately he’s now reached the same conclusion. Given the special nature of his circumstances, I suggested you. I hope you have the time to see him?”

Did I? What about my planned time off? What about spending time with my mother? And Christmas was just around the corner. But there was a bong sounding in my head. Was this

the case Hughie and his little friend Dewey, thought I was on and wanted me to drop? Well then of course I'd have the time. Nothing I like better than to pee in some pisser's corn flakes. And besides, Beverly had certainly piqued my interest. What kind of crime was this guy involved in? And what were the special circumstances?

"I guess I've got some time," I said. "And thank you for thinking of me, Beverly, but if this has something to do with a crime that's been committed, shouldn't your client first talk to the police?"

"Believe me, I've suggested it, but he wants to keep this quiet."

"Those 'special circumstances' you mentioned?"

She nodded. "Russell, I'm worried about him. What happened to him has...well, it's shaken his world. He was reticent about getting any kind of outside help at first—other than me, that is—but when I told him about you and your practice, he came around."

"You mean about how cute I am?"

She raised an eyebrow over one rim of her granny glasses but continued on without comment. "He's in my office right now if you're willing to see him."

This surprised me. "Right now? Downstairs in your office?" Nice sum up of the facts, Quant.

"Did you have an accident last night?" This interloping voice was from Alberta Lougheed, her head, a-jangle with earrings, was pushing through a crack she'd made in the doorway, her face expressing genuine concern.

"Wha...?" Was she talking about my run-in with Hugh? I have never come to a conclusion whether or not I believe in Alberta's psychic powers. I have no doubt *she* believes she has a special gift. She's no con artist. I'm just not certain she isn't just plain ol' crazy. She

looks like a younger version of Beverly except for tons more make up, hairspray and peculiar fashion choices. Today she faintly resembled Elizabeth Taylor in the role of Cleopatra. “Ah, no,” I finally mumbled in answer. I decided a white lie would be easier this morning.

“Oh, okay,” she said, not completely convinced, and floated off to her office, likely to feed her asp.

I looked at Beverly and shook my head like a dog with fleas.

She was holding out a white envelope. “Take a look at this. Daniel gave me this to show you. He received it during an awards ceremony on Saturday night—while he was onstage accepting an award. I think it will give you an idea about his problem and why you’re just the guy to help him out.”

I reached across the desk and took it from her. I withdrew a single piece of paper and unfolded it. It looked a little worse for wear, as if someone had crumpled it and then tried to straighten it out.

I read the typed words and understood what she meant by special circumstances. “Send \$50,000 by December 15 to P.O. Box 8420, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, S7T 1B5. If you don’t—I will tell your wife and the whole city everything I know.”

It was signed, “*Loverboy.*”