

Chapter 1

Murder.

There are many reasons to commit it.

Mine? My mother asked me to.

The snow was crunchy underfoot as I approached the weathered house where he lived. Although in my head I knew it was impossible, I had a feeling in my sour gut that he knew I was coming for him. As I hesitated outside the door, I passed the knife from hand to hand, feeling its unfamiliar heft in my sweating palms, then tested the glistening blade's sharpness against my thumb.

My eyes crinkled against bright morning sun. "Quant," I muttered under frosty breath, "what the hell are you doing?"

But, disgusted as I was, I could not turn away.

The door shuddered, then made a scraping noise as I slowly pulled it open, throwing in vain my hope for silence so as not to announce my arrival to Mr. Crow—or anyone else—inside. Not that it mattered much; my course was set. I poked my head inside and was instantly assaulted by an acrid scent; eau de ammonia. Cloying

warmth encircled me. As my pupils adjusted to the darkness, I heard sounds of burbling disturbance and discontent. Our eyes met. And so it began.

I quickly circled behind him, grabbing him and locking him in my arms. Surprisingly, he barely struggled as I took him outside. He knew. I splayed him on the white ground beneath my greater bulk, my knees and thighs keeping him in place, and shivered at the thought of what I was about to do. I began to entertain wild thoughts of what alternatives might be open to me.

It was too late to turn back now.

I pulled back his head, revealing his vulnerable neck to the nippy air. Only then did he make gurgling sounds of protest. Maybe he hadn't really believed I'd be capable of this until right then, that last, defining moment of his life. But it was too late for Mr. Crow. Way too late. It had to be done.

Tightening my grip around the wooden handle of the knife, knuckles white, I pressed the sharp cutting edge of the instrument against his throat. I was surprised by the ease with which the knife did its evil duty. I was even more surprised by the amount of blood that followed and how it spurting and spewed. The body underneath me shook with a death fury that unhinged me with its intensity. Although he was no match for me in size, I felt myself being bucked off; I fell back, slipping on an ice patch as I attempted to get purchase with Timberland boot grip and pull myself up.

Dumped on my ass, the first thing I noticed was the knife, still in my hand. It looked perfectly clean, as if I'd wiped it off, yet I hadn't. The steel had been cold, the blood hot, the two did not stick together.

The second thing I noticed was the headless body of my victim as he rose to his feet.

My face contorted in horror as I realized that Mr. Crow was not dead.

He turned a full three-hundred-and-sixty degrees, swayed left, then right, hopped from one foot to the other, then he turned again.

I haltingly made it to my feet, the knife falling to the ground, burying itself beneath reddened snow. Mr. Crow made a jarring move towards me.

Then he charged.

I turned heel and ran for the hills, a scream burning in my throat.

“Dat’s goot, uhuh?” my mother, Kay Quant nee Wistonchuk, asked for the millionth time as I forked another heap of her home cooking into my mouth.

March had come in like a lion, a roaring storm chasing me from Saskatoon to Howell as I’d headed for my mother’s homestead farm for what was supposed to be a two hour visit. That was two days ago. I’d been storm-stayed. And desperately trying to shovel my way out ever since.

“You haf no chicken?”

Damnation, she noticed. I thought for sure that with all the other meats—meatballs, beef slabs, veal cutlets, farmer’s sausage—she wouldn’t.

“You don’t like de chicken, den? It’s goot.” She passed me the platter, heavy with deep fried, golden pieces of Mr. Crow, and urged me with her eyes. “Have the letka.”

“My plate’s full right now, Mom,” I begged off her offer of the drumstick, the leg of the same chicken who had tried to chase me down in that bloodied field of trampled snow, even after its owner had lost his head. “Maybe later.” Like never.

I just couldn’t bring myself to eat it, and perhaps I will never eat chicken again. Each time I see a leg or some other readily identifiable chicken part, I picture the *Braveheart* battleground of Mr. Crow’s last stand. Sure, although he’d come to his execution willingly, with uncommon dignity even, things got ugly after that. That damn Mr. Crow, named so—by my mother—after his morning ritual, seemed as capable of living without a head as he was with one (at least for several, horrifyingly long minutes) and he’d made the best of them. At my expense. By the end of his pursuit, during which he demonstrated an uncanny sense of where I was (sans eyes to see me with), the previously pristine landscape surrounding the hen house—once gleaming white from the storm’s snowfall—was splattered a grisly crimson, like the result of a game of paint ball gone dreadfully wrong. I had taken refuge atop a nearby grain seeder turned flower pot, amongst brittle stalks of long dead delphiniums and Shasta daisies, and watched in utter horror as Mr. Crow danced headless to his sloooooooooooooow death.

“Vell, ve go to town tomorrow and I buy odder meat mebbe, uhuh? You tell vhat you like and I buy,” my mother offered.

I finished chewing a tasty pickled beet before giving the reply I knew she’d been dreading. “Mom, I’m going home tomorrow morning. I’ve been here two days and I really have to get back to work.”

“Not two days,” she argued back. “You want cream in coffee? What for dessert? I heat up some nalesnehkeh.”

“Yeah, Mom, two days.”

“But the roads, not safe yet. You wait one more day, they be much better then, uhuh.”

I knew it wasn't the roads she was particularly worried about; it was loneliness, the result of cabin fever that commonly sets in with farm folk, particularly near the end of long winters. She wanted me to stay. She always does, as a matter-of-fact, winter or summer. It makes me feel wanted, for sure; but it's difficult being a detective from a desolate farm house, nestled in the hills that surround Howell, Saskatchewan, population too low to count.

In terms of where I prefer to lay my head at night, I am much like my mother: stubborn. If at all possible, I want to be in my own bed in my own house with my dogs and things surrounding me like a nest I've worked a lifetime to build. I want running water that is consistently hot, rather than on a whim like it is on the farm. I want it gushing from the shower head, not dribbling out between globs of rust. I want to flush the toilet with careless abandon, rather than with bitten lip in fear of the septic system acting up as it so often does. I want internet access, and more than three channels on the TV. I want 7-11 and Mr. Sub, and a gym to go to rather than an exercise routine that includes a few laps around the barn with a moldy German Shepherd-Husky cross nipping at my heels and looking at me as if I'm crazy for running around with nothing to chase.

I do not want to murder my supper.

But she was lonely. I got that. My father died several years earlier and Mom had decided to maintain status quo and remain on the farm. And she did what she could to keep things as they were, which included blocking her son from returning to his life in the city every chance she got.

“The graders have gone by a couple of times,” I told her. “The roads are good. I checked when I was outside earlier.” While escaping the beheaded Mr. Crow.

She nodded as if not really caring, and rose to re-heat that morning’s coffee in an old tin pot which sat atop the stove.

“Why don’t you come into the city with me for a few days?”

Some time ago we’d even talked about her moving in with me—well, into the space above my garage, so technically she would be moving in *next* to me. Mom’s only sixty-seven, but I worry about her living in relative seclusion. Even I get a bit creeped out being on the farm—it’s *really* dark, and when the coyotes start to howl at night it sounds as if they’re right at your doorstep.

What a city boy I’ve become.

“What for? What I do in city? You go. You go and take care of dose dogs, your poor dogs, what’s happened to dose poor dogs?”

“Carol is looking after them,” I told her. By Carol I meant Errall and by Errall I meant Sereena. When I called her about being stuck in the country, my neighbour Sereena had agreed to look after my pooches, Barbra and Brutus. My mother and Sereena have met, but their very essences are at such polar extremes, they’ve chosen to ignore the existence of one another. So that’s why I told Mom that my friend, Errall—which she pronounces as Carol—is looking after the dogs.

“We can hang out, go to movies, whatever, but Mom,” I said with an unpleasant, lump of guilt in my stomach. “I’ve really got to get back.”

“I know, Son, I know.”

Clara Ridge was half an hour late for her appointment, which was going to make things tight; I had to be at the airport by 5 p.m.

“I’m very sorry,” she apologized as she lowered herself into the chair in front of my desk, pulling off black leather gloves by their fingertips. “I hate being late.”

Usually a statement like that is followed by an explanation, but when it became apparent none was forthcoming I moved along. “Are you sure I can’t take your coat? Would you like a coffee or something else to drink?”

She shook her head and I noticed her hair, styled to within an inch of its freshly dyed life, moved along with it, without one follicle falling out of place. “Thank you, but your receptionist already offered. I’m a little chilled so I’ll keep my coat on.”

Clara Ridge was a handsome woman in her mid fifties who’d obviously gone to some trouble to appear in my office looking made up. Along with the too perfect hair was a spotless makeup job and fresh manicure complete with bright red nail polish. Her coat was dark fur, real fur; don’t see those around much anymore.

“I saw your ad in the Yellow Pages,” she told me. “I hope that’s okay, I haven’t been referred or anything. You know how it is with doctors—specialists especially—if you haven’t been referred by another doctor, they simply won’t see

you, no matter how long you're willing to wait for an appointment. Are private detectives like that? I don't know, that's why I'm asking."

I smiled. "Not this one."

In fact, I wasn't too picky at all on how my clients came to me. Being a detective in Saskatoon, a small prairie city, has its challenges. There isn't a mysterious dame (or dude) smoking a long, slim cigarette, wearing a jaunty hat low over worried eyes, silhouetted against the frosted glass of my office door at midnight, nearly often enough to keep a private dick like me in continuous work. I'd been lucky of late though, working fairly regularly, usually on rather pedestrian cases, affairs of domestic or financial distress, but they pay the bills and allow me a few indulgences (nice coats and scarves in winter, bedding plants in summer, shoes and good wine always).

"How can I help you?" I asked the woman.

"I want you to find my son. Can you do that?"

Immediately my mind went to some likely scenarios: runaway, druggie, custody battle victim. I nodded. "I can certainly give it my best, Mrs. Ridge." I reached for a pad of paper and pen. "Let's talk about details. What is your son's name and when did he go missing?"

"His name is Matthew and he's been missing—or rather I haven't seen him—for about twenty years."

Holy Amelia Earhart! And you're just realizing it now? Not a very observant parent. "I see," I said with little conviction. "How old was Matthew the last time you saw him?"

Mrs. Ridge was staring straight at me, eyes wide, as if waiting to be led into telling a story she didn't want to tell but knew she had to. "Sixteen."

"Can you tell me what happened?" I was betting on a runaway.

"He didn't run away from home," she said, guessing my thoughts. (Either that or I'd said it out loud and didn't know it.) "He was...taken."

For a split second I had an unsettling feeling that aliens were gonna come into this story, but I brushed it off. More likely a divorce custody arrangement gone bad.

"By whom?"

"The police."

Although I wrote the two words on my pad, I didn't quite comprehend the connection between the cops and a missing kid. I stayed silent.

"You see Matthew was a good boy, he really, really was."

Uh oh, the disillusioned—and usually misguided—parent's refrain. How many teachers and police constables and social workers and babysitters and detectives had heard that one before?

"He was such a beautiful boy too; tall, with the most beautiful blond hair, like straw, and a sweet, sweet smile. He enjoyed school, did well, loved sports and had lots of friends. And we tried our best with him, but you know how it is, you get busy with life, work and all. We had a struggling business, a corner grocery store that my husband and I ran; we had no other employees to help out. Matthew seemed so well-adjusted, and well, we just didn't realize he was having problems; he got in with the wrong kind of kids I guess.

“By the time he was thirteen he started getting into trouble with the police. At first it was petty vandalism, bullying kids in school, that kind of thing, not serious really. Even so, my husband, Clement, would punish him, severely. We thought it helped, but I guess...well, I guess it didn't. Things got worse. By the time Matthew turned sixteen he started stealing things, getting involved with drugs.” She seemed a bit flustered and began to peel off her fur. “I'm hot now, perhaps I will take off my coat. Could I have a glass of water please?”

While Mrs. Ridge de-furred herself, I retrieved a glass of water from my office sink and found ice cubes in the bar fridge that holds up one end of my desk. She accepted the drink and downed half of it, her eyes glued to the ceiling.

“Was Matthew arrested?” I queried to get her going again. “Is that why the police took him away?” I knew at sixteen Matthew Ridge would have been a minor and subject to different laws than an adult, but even so, there was punishment available for serious crimes committed by a teenager.

She nodded. “Yes. The summer after he completed grade ten. He got caught one too many times. He had multiple charges against him, a long history with the police by this point, so they decided—and we agreed—he needed to be rehabilitated. He was sent to reformatory school.”

I do not know a lot about reformatory schools, but I was pretty certain they weren't in the habit of cutting off all contact between parents and their children. So then why did the Ridges never see their son again? “Did Matthew escape from the school?”

“No,” she whispered. “I’m sorry, Mr. Quant,” she said, dabbing at her upper lip with the cocktail napkin I’d given her with her drink, “this is very difficult to talk about.” She dug around in her purse and pulled out a neatly folded pile of Kleenex, no doubt softer than the napkin. Withdrawing one from the pile she dabbed at the area under her eyes.

“Take your time,” I said, touched by her obvious torment. There was something she wasn’t telling me yet, but I could almost see it on the tip of her tongue. “Can you tell me why you didn’t see Matthew after he went away? Did something happen to him at the school?”

“That’s not it,” she said. “You see, Mr. Quant, we hadn’t seen Matthew for several weeks *before* he was sent away to reform school.” She wrung her leather gloves and Kleenex together into a twisted rope of leather and...whatever it is Kleenex are made of. “You see, grade ten was a difficult time for Matthew and he got into a lot of trouble. When it continued into the summer, my husband finally got fed up. He kicked Matthew out of the house and told him to never come back. Matthew’s actions were influencing our business; most of our customers were local, friends and neighbours, but no one wanted to shop in a store owned by the family of Matthew Ridge, the biggest troublemaker in the area. People knew he was into drugs, they thought he might be a dealer—although I’m sure he wasn’t—and they didn’t want their children anywhere near Matthew or his bad friends.

“I know it sounds stupid, I know it,” she said, her voice growing hoarse with sorrow and despair. “We should have tried to help Matthew rather than put him out on the streets, but I was powerless against my husband’s wishes. I told Clement it was

better to have Matthew at home where at least we could watch over him, try to teach him some sense. I begged. But there was nothing I could do. When we heard that Matthew had continued to get into trouble and had been arrested, that was just the last straw for Clement. He washed his hands of him, as if he had no son. They sent him away. Matthew never called us, we never visited him, I don't..." she sobbed, "I don't even know if he ever got out of that horrible place, if he even survived it. I don't know whatever became of him. Oh God, Mr. Quant, I feel so horrible. I've been a terrible mother."

And she cried.

I offered her a box of Kleenex even though I knew she had her own stash somewhere in her lap. She took one and gazed pleadingly at me through a curtain of tears. "Can you help me?"

I looked at her, not immediately answering, wondering what happens to a middle-class but troubled sixteen-year-old boy abandoned by his parents and left to fend for his own in the world.

"There was nothing I could do twenty years ago, but there is now," she told me, her voice suddenly strong, belying the tears.

"Has your husband had a change of heart?" I inquired.

"In a manner of speaking," she said. "My husband had a heart attack."

"Oh," I said, for some reason surprised. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. He's dead. Six months ago." She didn't seem too broken up about it, so I swallowed any further words of sympathy. "In his will he left me everything. And do you know what that bastard did?"

I didn't, but I had the feeling I was about to find out. Something about a wife calling her dead husband a bastard sends a guilty trill of anticipation through me. This was gonna be good.

“He left me over a million dollars.”

I cocked an eyebrow. Bastard wouldn't be the first name that came to mind for someone who left me a million bucks, but okay.

“We lived like paupers all our married life,” she explained, her cheeks grown pink with emoting. “Clement always led me to believe that we were on the brink of bankruptcy, that we should eat hamburger rather than steak, repair our clothes rather than buy new ones, stay home rather than go out. And that's what we did. Year after year after year. No joy in life at all. None of those special treats that people need sometimes. We just need them. Don't we? Sometimes? I hope you don't think me a frivolous woman, Mr. Quant, a pleasure seeker, because I'm not. I just wanted...I wanted...something more out of life than what we had.”

She readjusted herself in her seat and kept on. “But do you know what the truth was? All along, instead of improving our lives, Matthew's life, my husband was using the earnings from the grocery store to invest in real estate, mostly houses near the university. Houses. He bought and sold houses. According to the people at the bank, most of them became little gold mines and netted him big profit, so I suppose he knew what he was doing. But we could have used that money, not only for ourselves, that's not what I mean, Mr. Quant, but we could have used it to get help for Matthew; he obviously needed it. We could have been a real family. We could have

gone on vacations and done things together. Instead, our poor boy, our poor little boy, just disappeared....oh God," she sobbed, "how will he ever forgive me?"

I couldn't answer that. Although I admired Clara Ridge's desire to reconnect with her son, I couldn't help but wonder what twenty years of abandonment does to a young person's mind. But then again, he wouldn't be a child any more. Assuming Matthew Ridge was still alive, we were now dealing with a thirty-six year old man.

"Mrs. Ridge, are you certain this is what you want to do, to find Matthew? Have you thought it through." Her son could be anywhere, he could be anyone. He could be alive or dead. He could be the president of a company or a low-life criminal. He could be married with six kids and living a happy life he didn't want interrupted by a woman who had, for all purposes that mattered to him, given him up to the streets. Or he could be a manipulative piece of scum who'd more than welcome a millionaire mama to take advantage of. At this point, the possibilities were endless.

"I've thought of nothing else since Clement died, and certainly since I found out about the money. I want to share it with my son. He deserves it, certainly more than I do. Who knows how hard his life has been. This could really help him. I hope it can help him," she told me in a voice confident that she was doing the right thing.

"But I know what you mean, Mr. Quant. I may want to find him, but he may not want to be found. I've thought about that too. And that's why I want you to keep your investigation a secret. I want you to find him, but when you do, don't let him know, don't tell him anything about me. I don't want to scare him off. Just find him, tell me where he is, what his life has become, where he lives, where he works and then...well, then I'll decide what to do. Maybe...maybe I'll just send him some

money anonymously. All I know for sure is that I want to know if my son is alive or dead. And if he's alive, I'm going to help him.”

I finished up my business with Clara Ridge—collecting what little data she had about her son, her contact information, a signed contract and a retainer cheque to get me started—by about quarter of five. After asking Lilly to show her out the front, I dashed down the back fire-stairs like a crazy man, jumped into my Mazda and headed for John G. Diefenbaker airport.

Downtown and Idylwyld Drive were sausage-packed with rush hour traffic and I was running about ten minutes late when I pulled into a metered spot in front of the terminal. Lucky for me the flight was running about twenty minutes late—weather delays in Vancouver—so I was waiting next to the luggage carousels (like a dutiful boyfriend should be) when Alex Canyon walked through the security doors.

Eight months earlier in a set of complex circumstances involving my missing neighbour Sereena, my not-so-dead Uncle Lawrence, and a killer named Jin Chau, super hunk security specialist Alex Canyon first came into my life. Originally, although immensely attracted to one another, things were just too complicated to consider acting on our desires. Well, to be absolutely honest, Alex had proclaimed his attraction to me and I sloughed it off because that's just my way of doing things around devilishly attractive men. So off he flew into the blue yonder to a world I knew nothing about. But then, under the guise of chaperoning Sereena back to Saskatoon, he returned. So I showed him exactly how I felt about him, and continue to show him each time he is able to pull himself away from his *Get Smart*-secret-

agent-type security duties long enough to catch a plane to Saskatoon—which was working out to be about once every six weeks or so.

“We just have time for a quick shower before we’re expected at Sereena’s for a fundraising dinner,” I told Alex on the drive home, grinning to myself at the way he’d had to scrunch his Superman-sized body into the tiny confines of my Mazda RX-7 convertible.

“You’re getting a different car,” he announced with a mimicking grin of his own. “What fundraiser?”

“She’s calling it her Robin Hood fundraiser; taking from the rich to give to the poor.”

“Couldn’t we just slip a cheque for a coupla hundred bucks under the door and stay home?”

My eyes moved from the road ahead of me to the man next to me. Of anyone I knew, Alex Canyon was the person most like the Energizer rabbit, with a seemingly endless source of oomph keeping him going and going and going. So, if he was tired, I knew he must have just come from a doozy of an assignment. We had an understanding whereby I didn’t query him about his work—I had no clue whether he still worked for my uncle or even if my uncle, fatally ill when I last saw him, was still alive—and he didn’t interrogate me about how many times I ate bologna sandwiches while he was out of town. “Tired?” was all I asked.

He shifted in his seat, as best he could, to face me. “That’s not why I want to stay home.” His left arm went behind my neck and I felt his lips zoom in on the spot between my right ear and where my hairline begins—one of my erogenous zones.

(He'd been extraordinarily adept at finding every one of them in surprisingly short order given our minimal time together). His right hand began doing other stuff I was finding to be pleasurable but quite distracting. Fortunately by this point, I'd reached the turnoff into the back alley behind my house and, although it was difficult manipulating the gearshift without disturbing Alex's actions, thanks to remote door openers, I made quick work of pulling into the garage. Within seconds I had many fewer clothes on than I'd started with and used a lever under my seat to recline back to enjoy the ride.

After several minutes of snuffling about below my waist Alex looked up with a serious look on his face.

“Is something wrong?” I asked, concerned.

He sniffed at the air. “Not really. I just think it would be a good idea if you turned the engine off.”