

Chapter 1

It was late on a mid-August afternoon. Through south-facing windows, slanted spears of gilded sunshine pierced my office. At the sound of Lilly's songbird voice I gazed up from where I was slouched behind my desk lazily studying the fleeting marvel. "Flora Wiser is here to see you," she told me, a wide smile on her sunny-side-up face.

As I dutifully rose to greet my four o'clock, Lilly moved aside to let the woman through my office door. Flora Wiser, although younger than I'd imagined—in her early twenties—presented herself as a much older woman. But not in any of the positive ways. She lacked the energy and exuberance I generally equate with her age group. Rather, she moved with a nervous hesitance, reminding me of a brown rabbit in a brown field, sniffing the air for danger, not sure if she should dash or stand perfectly still in the hope of remaining unseen. Her face was an oval of colourless skin untouched by sun or cosmetics, highlighted by...well, by nothing. It was a wholly unremarkable face; greenish eyes dulled by the unreflective lenses of wire frame glasses, a nondescript nose, a line for a mouth. Her dun coloured hair, woven into a thick, bristly braid, hung heavy down her back like jute rope. She was medium height and slender, with bony shoulders permanently clenched forward in the manner

of someone who is much taller but doesn't want to be. That was about all I could surmise about her body, well hidden beneath baggy layers of grey-tone clothing; a long-sleeved, man's shirt beneath a vest-like tunic and a thick skirt that swung sluggishly about her ankles. At her waist was a bulky macramé purse and on her size ten feet she wore all-purpose, all-weather, slip-on Birkenstocks.

I held out my hand and readied myself for a limp fish or the dreaded fingers-only shake. The unexpected strength and substance of her grasp and full palm-to-palm contact surprised me as her wiry fingers firmly encircled my hand. I offered her a seat in front of my desk and returned to my own. The beams of sunlight I'd been admiring earlier had dissipated, as if they'd been disturbed by our sudden movements and decided to move on to more tranquil realms.

"Can I get you more huckleberry herb tea, Ms. Wisser?" Lilly asked from her spot in the doorway.

Huckleberry? We had huckleberry tea? What is a huckleberry?

Flora gazed back at Lilly with a doe-eyed smile; a smile that told me Lilly had made Flora Wisser fall in love with her, as does anyone who spends any time in the PWC waiting room. "Oh, thanks Lilly, but I think I'm fine," she answered, her voice flat and nasal.

"Okay," Lilly responded. "Make sure you stop by the desk on your way out and I'll have that saskatoon berry jelly recipe ready for you."

Flora nodded so enthusiastically I thought her rope of hair must have been chafing her neck. "Okay, I won't forget."

"Russell, can I get anything for you?"

Huckleberry eh? “Uh, no, Lilly, thanks,” I told her.

Lilly left us alone then, closing the door behind her.

I returned my full attention to my potential client, landing a pleasant smile on her. “How was your trip?” I asked, knowing Flora Wiser had driven up from Regina to meet with me.

“Oh it was good,” she replied, noticeably less smiley than she’d been with Lilly.

All right then, enough with the idle chit chat. “In our telephone conversation you mentioned that your...” I made a move as if to check my notes, even though the details of her call were still very clear in my mind, “...grandmother asked you to come see me?”

“Yes, she did. She wants me to hire you,” Flora Wiser told me.

“I see.” Overstatement. “Do I know your grandmother?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said with a quirk of her head as if she hadn’t considered that possibility. “Her name is Charity Wiser. She lives in Victoria.”

The name didn’t ring a bell. I had thought it would. Why else would someone from two provinces away ask her granddaughter to travel over two hours specifically to hire me? I was on the eve of my third anniversary as a private detective and I am darn good at my job, but I could hardly convince myself that my reputation had spread as far as British Columbia. Or maybe... “Did she tell you why she wanted you to hire me in particular?”

Flora winced. I couldn't tell if it was because she didn't know the answer or simply did not want to discuss it. "I think you'll have to talk to Grandmother about that, Mr. Quant. I'm sorry."

"That's not a problem," I said, picking up a pen and flipping to a blank page on the pad of paper in front of me, ready to take notes. "I was just curious. Maybe we could discuss why your grandmother is in need of my services?"

"Well," she began with a hapless expression on her face, "Grandmother thinks someone is trying to kill her...for her money...and she wants you to find out who."

Oh my. I was expecting to be asked to track down a wayward ex-husband behind on his alimony payments or play I spy with a cheating paramour. And even at that I was being overly optimistic. Many of my cases are about as exciting as a weekend of back-to-back hockey playoffs, eating submarine sandwiches and guzzling beer while the spouse is out of town...for a gay man. You see, most gay men (and most straight women) actually *prefer* to be in the company of their special someones, maybe even a little dressed up, watching *Designer Guys*, and eating sushi.

"Can you tell me why she thinks someone is trying to kill her?"

With some effort, because the edges kept catching in the holes, Flora withdrew a large manila envelope from her macramé pouch. "Most of what you need to know is in here," she told me. "But I can tell you what I know," she added with a voice that made me think it wouldn't be a lot.

"That would be very helpful," I said, noticing with a decided tinge of dissatisfaction that she wasn't handing over the envelope just yet. Now, I'm a detective. Curious as they come. I wanted to get my hands on that envelope and its

contents worse than Smeegle wanted that damned piece of jewellery in *The Lord of the Rings*.

“My grandmother owns a company called Wiser Meats,” she began.

Aha. Now I recognized the name. At least the Wiser part of it. For it is emblazoned upon the shrink-wrapped visage of my most guilty pleasure—Wiser Hickory Smoked Hot Dogs. Although I rarely admit to it, one of my all-time favourite meals is a Wiser hotdog wrapped in a squishy blanket of processed, pre-sliced, no-grain, white bread. No fancy hotdog bun or even ketchup or mustard or sauerkraut. And sometimes...sometimes I don't even cook the hotdog. I had no idea that Flora Wiser and her grandmother, Charity Wiser, were the Hotdog Wisers. Wiser Meats is a meat processing and packaging giant in Canada, head officed in Alberta and best known for its smoked hams and bacons. Thanksgiving is not Thanksgiving without a smoked Wiser turkey and a barbecue is not a barbecue without Wiser hamburger patties. I was impressed. And confused. Why would the renowned Wiser company send this whippet of a girl to hire me if a potential murderer was threatening their matriarch?

“Although she's still president of the board of directors,” Flora continued, “she retired from day to day duties some time ago. She's lived on an estate on Vancouver Island for many years. It's where I grew up after my parents were killed in a car accident.”

“You were raised by your grandmother then?”

“Partly. Since I was fourteen,” she said matter-of-factly, using her forefinger to push the frame of her glasses back up her nose. “A lot of people say Grandmother

is tight with her money, but the one thing she does spend money on is her Charity Events.”

“You mean fundraisers, that sort of thing?”

“No. Charity Events is just what she calls them, you know, after her own name. She’s hosted one every two or three years for the past twenty or so. And all members of the family are expected to attend.”

“Her children and other grandchildren then?”

“My father was her only child. And I’m her only grandchild. But Grandmother’s two sisters, Faith and Hope, had children. So the family is mostly my uncles and aunts and cousins. There are fifteen of us in all.”

Faith, Hope and Charity. Cute. “So these Charity Events are actually family reunions?” I questioned, trying to understand.

Flora winced again, knitting her furry brows together. “I suppose.”

“Well, that’s very nice of her to keep the family together like that.”

“Welllllll, not really,” Flora said with an awkward laugh. “That’s not really why she does it.” She looked down at her hands, whittling away at an invisible piece of soap. “Or how the others see it.”

“Oh?” I could smell a juicy story. Gosh I wanted that envelope. “Why does she do it then? Why does your grandmother hold these Charity Events?”

“She thinks that the only reason the family is nice to her is because they want her money when she dies. Because of that she treats them a certain way. I think for her the Charity Events are entertainment, like a game.

“These aren’t just parties or nice quiet family dinners or anything like that, Mr. Quant. Charity Events are grand extravaganzas, sometimes going on for several days, and usually revolving around some kind of theme. I suppose the activities hold interest for Grandmother, but for the most part their goal is to embarrass or make the rest of the family as uncomfortable as possible.”

“I see,” I said, not wanting to provide any judgement of my own. “Why do they put up with it?”

“I suppose because Grandmother is right. They *do* want to be included in her list of heirs. They *do* want her money. And they’re willing to do whatever it takes to get it. It’s a weird, twisted, unspoken agreement.”

“What kind of activities are we talking about here?” I asked, intrigued and more than a little stupefied. My grandmother was a wizened little woman who handed out onion ring chips, chocolate Wagon Wheels and one-dollar-bills (when we still had one-dollar-bills) in exchange for hugs and cheek pinches. And, come to think of it, she looked a lot like Smeele in a babushka and shawl.

Flora screwed up her face and rolled her eyes behind her glasses as she recalled past Charity Events. “Let’s see, there was the *Star Trek* convention in Las Vegas. And it wasn’t sufficient just to be there. You had to come prepared, complete with blue skin and tentacles, or whatever, and attend all the meetings and rallies. A few years ago we spent a long weekend at a nudist beach,” and here she grimaced at the memory, “playing sports.” I cringed in sympathy. “We’ve gone whitewater rafting, herded cattle at a dude ranch, learned to drive Formula One race cars.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad,” I observed.

Flora gave me one of those looks as if she were putting up with the naive comments of a little kid who knew nothing. “For some people. But you have to understand Mr. Quant, most of the family is not what I would call...physically adventurous. They’re just not into these kinds of things or aren’t physically able to do them. But,” she shrugged, “they do. They live from one end of the country to the other, but they all make the trip and take part in whatever it is Grandmother concocts, pretending to enjoy it.”

Wow. Charity Wiser must have one very dark sense of humour, I decided. She must to put her family through a continuous circus of events as a means of admission into her will. I was beginning to see why someone might be compelled to put an end to it all. “So somebody is fed up?” I said, hoping to lead Flora into telling me the rest of the story—’cause if she wasn’t, I wanted that precious envelope!

Flora Wiser had a habit of quick head bobs whenever she was agreeing with something you’d said, and did it now. “I think so. The last Charity Event was in May, about three months ago and that might have been what finally sent someone over the edge. It was held at the estate in Victoria. Grandmother had the grounds retrofitted to resemble a military boot camp and each of us was expected to spend six hours a day over a four day long weekend being whipped into shape. She hired a platoon of trainers who put us through gruelling physical training. Nobody enjoyed it, not even the older folks who were given more rest periods.

“Now to be fair, Grandmother was right there with us, sweating and grunting and groaning through it all. The only pleasure was at the end of the day when we’d return to the house. Grandmother had the best chefs and masseurs and relaxation

therapists available to cater to our needs. But mostly we were too tired to take advantage of any of it. It was dreadful, truly.”

Not my idea of a pleasant time either. “And something happened at the boot camp? Someone made an attempt on your grandmother’s life?”

She stared at me for a second or two, as if still shocked at the thought of it, before telling me: “Someone poisoned her tea.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t really know much about it. You’ll have to get the details from Grandmother. All I know is that she thinks someone tried to kill her that weekend. But she can’t prove it. That’s what she wants you to do.”

Very cool, was my first thought. Quickly followed by, how the heck am I gonna do that with my client in Victoria and all the suspects spread throughout Canada? Flora must have read the look on my face and hurried to tell me, “There’s another Charity Event planned for next month. Grandmother wants you to attend. She thinks that if she gets the family together again, the killer will make another attempt. And having everyone in one place will make it easier for you to figure out who it is.” She did her nodding thing again and added not very helpfully, “Or something like that.”

“But didn’t you say these events are usually held every two or three years? If there really is a killer, won’t he or she be suspicious of another one so soon?”

“Probably so, except that Grandmother has told everyone that this is a very special Charity Event in honour of her eightieth birthday.”

That bit of information took me aback. The woman making her family jump through flaming hoops of fire and play nude volleyball was eighty years old? I couldn't help but give the octogenarian a virtual high five.

"I think most of the relatives are grumbling about having to put up with another get-together so soon, but they're buying it with the hope that it signals the end. Given Grandmother's age, they're betting she doesn't have many more Charity Events left in her. And besides, none of them would dare turn down an invitation to their meal ticket's eightieth birthday party."

I had to agree. The logic seemed sound, but I was beginning to wonder if the same could be said of Charity Wiser herself. "So where is this party?" I asked, somehow knowing I was going to be surprised by the answer.

"Well, as I said before, Grandmother isn't interested in throwing what you might consider a regular party. She thought it would be a good idea to host this event where you'd have all the family in one, confined space."

I was having visions of one of those Agatha Christie TV murder mysteries prevalent in the 1970s and '80s. The action always took place in a spooky house on a deserted island where all the guests—mostly aged movie stars trying to revive fading careers—arrived on sputtering motor boats with some Crypt Keeper-looking character at the helm who told them he wouldn't be returning for several days...by which time most of them would be dead. Except for the detective. Sounded like a good deal to me. I was in.

"You'd leave middle of September," Flora told me.

“Leave?” I asked, trying to blunt my excitement. Oh my gosh, we *were* going to Murder Island!

“That gives you about a month...to do whatever you need to do to prepare and make yourself available for the trip.”

“Trip?”

More head bobbing. “The next Charity Event is on a cruise ship. We’ll be sailing from Barcelona to Rome. To make it more enticing...” Like I needed that. “...Grandmother told me to tell you that you could invite a guest. All the cabins are booked for double occupancy anyway, so you could bring along your wife or whoever you wish.”

For a moment I was speechless, not only for the grandness of what was being offered me but, realistically and logistically, I was wondering if I could...and should...accept it. Did I buy Charity Wisser’s contention that her life was in danger? Or was she just some rich wacko looking to add another player to her real-life game of Murder Mystery? And could I get away so easily? It wasn’t much notice. So for the moment I only nodded.

“Grandmother says you could pose as her business advisor—she’ll tell everyone she plans to do some work during the week and that your presence will provide her a valid reason to write off the trip for tax purposes. Given her reputation for thrift, no one will question it and you’ll get a bird’s eye view of the family. So what do you say, Mr. Quant? Grandmother is holding open two reservations on the ship, all you need do is give me your answer and I’ll give you this envelope. In it is a retainer cheque and remaining details my grandmother thought might prove helpful.”

I eyed the envelope with lust. Suddenly my questions about the validity of the case and my availability to make the trip seemed trivial. I am generally a person with his feet planted firmly in reality, but I do love to dream. I never believe anything is impossible. You never know, do you? That's why I left my stable, dependable career as a cop with the Saskatoon Police Service for a much riskier turn as a small city private eye. It was my dream. A whole new exciting way to live my life. And this case fit my dream perfectly: a swashbuckling adventure on the high seas. It was *Murder on the Orient Express* on water. I'm not convinced my decision would have been different otherwise, but I found myself answering in the affirmative before I'd thought the whole thing through. But really. A free Mediterranean cruise? Come on!

Colourful Mary's is a restaurant-slash-bookstore owned by my friends Mary Quail and Marushka Yabadochka. Its reputation for fabulous food, much of it influenced by the Aboriginal and Ukrainian heritage (respectively) of the couple, far outdistances that of it being the only gay-owned and run restaurant in Saskatoon.

That spring, Mary had scooped-out a portion of the abandoned lot next door to use in an experiment with outdoor dining during the summer months. She pulled together a collection of cheap auction sale doors and windows, set them on their sides to act as a fence to separate the space from the rest of the graveled area, then filled it with round bistro tables and folding chairs. She set the tables with royal blue linens and purple dinnerware, added some lipstick-red wine goblets and mustard-yellow handled flatware, hung a few strings of multi-coloured bare bulbs in a criss-cross pattern above the dining area, threw in some tattered streamers and a few plastic

parrots, and they were ready for business. It vaguely resembled the after-effects of a Mexican fiesta party I'd once attended and was exactly the kind of thing that kept Colourful Mary's one of the city's most unique and popular hangouts.

Except for a cooing twosome a couple of tables away, Errall and I were the only leftovers from the evening's dinner rush. Over the wacky door/window barrier we'd see the occasional passerby heading for a downtown movie theatre, nightclub or late night coffee-and-dessert place and we'd exchange smiles, but other than that we were pretty much alone. Mood music floated above our heads from hidden outdoor speakers; someone had changed it from the spunky dinnertime salsa to something smooth and sensual, not unlike the red wine we were halfway through the second bottle of. It was one of those perfect Saskatchewan summer nights. No wind. No mosquitoes. And hot. The air felt surprisingly moist—given prairie penchant for dryness—and even at quarter of ten, there was still a sliver of light at the horizon. All this perfection made the evening more desirous and almost heartbreakingly glorious because of the certain knowledge that tonight—or one night very soon—would come the first nip of chill, no stronger than a child's breath, signalling the sure sign of summer's end.

Errall and I regarded each other over a collection of fat candles Mary had come by to light once it began to get dark. In deference to the weather, Errall wore a sleeveless, V-neck white T-shirt, tan shorts and sloppy sandals. With intense facial features and blue eyes to match, Errall is a striking woman. She had recently cut her dark tresses short, to just below her ears where it naturally flipped out in a jagged edge. It was a sportier, casual look for the normally severe looking barrister. At close

to six feet, she is tall and lanky and her smoking habit, reacquired only two years ago after a five-year hiatus, was undeservedly given credit for keeping her slim. Errall Strane is my lawyer and owns the building, PWC, that houses my office, which also makes her my landlord. But our relationship is more complex than that. An apt description remains elusive. She's argumentative, crass, bossy, opinionated. She can be manipulative, particularly in business. She can be cold-hearted. She's a workaholic. She's driven. She'll sometimes say black, only because I say white. She's smart, sharp, clever and very honest. She'll always let you know where you stand in her books. I have seen her be brave, loyal, fiercely protective and empathetic if not sympathetic. She can be hard. She can be soft...I suspect. And if it wasn't for my highschool chum, Kelly Doell, I don't think our paths would have ever crossed, or if they had, I doubt we would have loitered long in each other's company. Kelly and Errall were a couple. For years.

Now Kelly was gone.

In February, after a year of turmoil following Kelly's diagnosis with cancer and resultant loss of a breast, the eight-year relationship had ended. Kelly had become a different person. A person who couldn't be in a relationship. At least not a relationship that also included Errall. The storm of it all only ended when Kelly suddenly and unexpectedly packed her belongings and moved to Toronto, rarely to be heard from since, by any of us. Not only was the relationship over, but so, it seemed, were her other friendships, including the one with me.

So Errall was undeniably the person I knew who was most in need of a getaway. But, obvious as it might seem, she was not my first choice for

companionship on the Charity Event Mediterranean cruise. The friendship had existed between Kelly and me. Not Errall and me. Errall was not a friend, she was someone who slept with a friend. Yet, here we were. Part of each other's lives. With no Kelly in sight.

Even so, and shame on me I suppose, I first asked my neighbour Sereena and then friends Anthony and Jared to join me. But as it turned out they were already planning to be away in September. Then there was my mother. But I was hoping she'd agree to look after my animals and house while I was gone. And there were other possible choices too, but by the time my finger was moving farther down the list of potential pleasant and fun travelling companions, another thought began to fester...er...develop in my mind: Perhaps Errall *was* a friend. Just on her own. Without Kelly. I wasn't ready to conclude that I actually enjoyed her company, but I did know that our times together were often invigorating. Fun? I don't know about that. But given current circumstances, she did need to be on this boat. She had a wound and I had the salve.

"I'm going to do it," she spoke after several moments of careful contemplation. "I'll have to reschedule my root canal with John MacPherson—as if that's not reason enough to leave the country—and check with Sheila to see if she can look after my clients while I'm gone...but Russell, I really think I'm going to do this thing. It's crazy. You and me on a cruise? It's nuts. But God, do I need it."

"The cruise is only a week," I encouraged her further. "You won't be gone that long. And after we get off the boat Anthony and Jared have invited us to their house in Tuscany before we go home. It'll be perfect. And yeah, you need this."

“Okay, quick, before I change my mind, give me all the details. Spain to Italy, right?”

I pulled out the itinerary Charity Wiser had included in her package and handed it over to Errall. “We set sail from Barcelona then do the Balearic Islands, Tunis...”

“Tunis!” she came as close to squealing as someone like Errall can, eyes fully ablaze. “Africa!” Then she went into her best Meryl Streep-Danish-*Out of Africa* accent, “I hahd a fahrm in Ah-fri-cah.” She looked to me for applause. Got none. “That’s Northern Africa, right?” she asked in her regular voice.

“Uh, yeah,” I said, quickly flipping through some tour brochures to check. “It’s the capital of Tunisia. Then we do Sicily and finally up the coast of mainland Italy to...” More checking. “...Civitavecchia.” I said, outrageously slaughtering the pronunciation of the town’s name with something like Cityvicky-ah.

“Huh?”

“Well,” I responded, sounding much more knowledgeable than I really was, compliments of the bottle of shiraz in my belly, “Rome isn’t a coastal city. The closest port is this Silly-victor-victoria place.” I checked the brochure. “It says here Rome is about a ninety minute taxi ride from Silly-oh-toe-sis.”

“I bet that’ll cost a few Euros,” she said, wisely paying no heed to my silliness. “And where exactly are Anthony and Jared staying?”

“Tuscany, the opposite direction. But they tell me they’re just a few hours from Stichy-Vichy-ah, near a town called Castellina in Chianti.” Finally, a name I could pronounce. And how civilized of those Europeans, naming towns after wine.

“Russell,” Errall said, her nose deep into the pages of our itinerary. “You didn’t tell me we’re sailing on the FOD Cruiseline.”

I looked up from where I was straining in the dim lighting to find Castellina in Chianti on a map of Italy I’d now unfolded and held over our table—so close to the candles I worried it might catch fire. “Yeah. Ever hear of it? Is it kind of like Carnival or Holland America?” I asked, not adding my real question: “Or Titanic?”

Although I’d told no one, not only had I never been on a cruise before but I’d rarely in my lifetime stepped foot on a boat, big or small, of any kind. On purpose. Truth told, I was a trifle nervous at the thought of getting on this vessel. I was game of course, but nervous nonetheless, and desperate for as much assurance of safety as I could get. I’m a true prairie boy. If I’m going to be surrounded by something endless and flat and blue, I expect it to be a field of blooming flax.

“Have you been living under a rock?” Errall looked at me with an unattractive curl in her lip. “What kind of gay person are you? It’s FOD! It stands for the Friends of Dorothy Cruiseline. It’s right up there with the Radisson or Silversea cruiselines. Not only does it cater primarily to gay clientele but it is top of the line, luxury plus. They win all sorts of awards in the small, luxury ship category.”

Small! Whaddaya mean small? How small? That’s a friggin’ big sea! “What do you mean small?” I asked calmly.

“Well, I think they only have two ships: The Dorothy holds maybe three-hundred-and-fifty passengers...”

I could feel my skin shift. “How many does the big ship hold?”

“That is the big ship.”

Oh shit.

“The other one is just a schooner. I think it holds a hundred, hundred-fifteen at most.”

Gulp. “Which one does it say we’re on?”

Errall checked the papers in front of her. “The Dorothy. Too bad, eh, wouldn’t it have been a blast to be on a schooner, really feel the waves crashing under you?”

“Yeah, really.” Yeah, Yody ho hum, and a bottle of rum, or whatever that pirate song says. I wondered if they had a song about gin. Sheesh. Three-fifty huh.

“How do you know all this?”

“Kelly and I looked into a cruise last year.” She stopped there and pretended to suddenly be entranced by something on the itinerary. We didn’t talk about Kelly much anymore.

I replenished our wine and used the momentary dearth of conversation to reflect on what I’d just learned. Charity Wisser was sending her family on a gay cruise. What a pip! And suddenly it became clear to me why she’d obviously gone to some trouble to track me down and hire me. It wasn’t because I’m a particularly skillful detective. Humph!

It’s because I’m a particularly gay detective.