

Chapter 1

“Russell Quant, will you marry me?”

I gulped.

The old, vine-fortified *banyuls* I’d been blissfully sipping, along with our shared Grand Marnier and *lilikoi* soufflé, suddenly turned sticky in my throat. I wished for a draft to cool my rapidly crimsoning cheeks. Although only seconds passed before I responded to the unexpected question, it seemed as if the world around me had slowed to half speed. Visions of my life passed before my eyes. Or at least the last seventy-two hours of it.

The telephone call had been unexpected. There are no sweeter six words than: come to Hawaii for the weekend. With the possible exception of: Your ticket is paid for, Russell. That’s when the cyclone first hit. After that, it was such a whirlwind, I hadn’t even been aware that I was being swept off my feet—until those final six words: Russell Quant, will you marry me?

We were staying on Waikiki beach in Oahu, at the plush Halekulani Hotel. Halekulani means “House Befitting Heaven.”

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And from what I'd seen so far, I was so becoming an angel. Our days began with boogie boarding or kayaking in the mornings. Afterwards we'd grab a bite at House Without a Key, the hotel's outdoor gathering place immortalized by the Charlie Chan novel of the same name. Then it was time for lazing on the beach or around the pool with its stunning orchid mosaic. In the early evening, after cleaning up, we'd return to House Without a Key, wearing our tropical whites and shirts that billowed in the perfect breeze and find a spot under the kiawe shade tree. From that glorious place, we'd sip on surprisingly strong Mai Tais (regular ice, not crushed), watch the sunset, and enjoy the hula of a former Miss Hawaii. This wasn't the hip-rattle-roll stuff you get at the tourist luaus either. This was graceful hula, accompanied by ukulele, steel guitar, slack key, and the lilting falsetto vocals unique to traditional Hawaiian music. Later we'd have dinner at popular eating spots like Keo's or Alan Wong's. But tonight, the eating experience had been ratcheted up a notch or two.

We were dining at La Mer, on the second floor of the hotel. The menu featured "neo-classic French" cuisine. I didn't know what that meant, but I liked it all the same. I liked it a lot. It might have been the champagne they served us before our butts were even in our chairs. Or the unimpeded view of Waikiki beach, the Pacific Ocean, and Diamond Head. Or the fact that they brought a little stool just to set my camera on. Or maybe it was the fillet of *opaka-paka* baked in rosemary salt crust. And still, despite it all, I was completely oblivious to the portentousness of all this luxury and excess. I thought he was just *really* happy to see me.

Then came THE QUESTION.

Even though I never took my green eyes off his cocoa brown ones, I was acutely aware of our waiter, Raymond, standing not far off. He'd obviously been in on the whole thing. I could feel his ear-to-ear grin even though I couldn't see it. And I was pretty sure a few neighbouring diners were also monitoring the drama at our table. How could they resist? Two well-dressed men seated at the best table in the house, a tropical paradise as our backdrop, the sultry haziness of too much, too-expensive wine that begs close acquaintance from perfect strangers, romantic island music, one of

us with a ring in his hand and hopeful look on his face, the other with a wide open mouth and shock on his (that would be me).

For a second I looked away. At Raymond. He gave me an encouraging nod. My eyes fell back on Alex Canyon. I gave him my answer.

“Yes.”

I had a couple of hours to kill at the Honolulu International Airport after seeing Alex off on his flight to Australia before my own flight home to Canada. Alex is a private and corporate security specialist and had been working a job in Melbourne for the past couple of months. Hawaii had been playing the role of handy halfway point for our not-regular-enough liaisons. It was going to be weeks before we saw each other again. That seemed like a good enough reason to head for the nearest bar to drown my sorrows.

The place had a name, I'm sure, but I decided to call it Hawaiian Kitsch. It was stuffed to the rafters with everything Hawaiian, from surfboards to drinks served in fake coconuts. It was also stuffed with *haole* (non-Hawaiian) customers. It seemed everyone was desperate to get one last hit of island flavour before they returned to their real lives, sadly lacking in plumeria leis, grass skirts, and *kalua* pig burgers. There wasn't even an empty stool at the bar to be had. My eyes jumped from table to table assessing whether anyone was about to leave. It didn't look that way, so I decided to forgo the drink and simply find a comfy spot near my gate and dig into the Josh Lanyon book I'd been saving for the plane.

This far ahead of departure, I had plenty of choice spots to pick from, and selected one with a good view of the tarmac. Even tarmacs in Hawaii somehow manage to look tranquil and tropical. I settled in with a bottle of water (poor replacement for a double gin and tonic) and a bag of the licorice I always keep in my carry-on.

Half an hour later, having difficulty concentrating on my book with my head full of this and that, I heard loud voices. Someone wasn't happy. I looked around to find the source, half-thinking I wanted to shoot them an irritated look for interrupting my non-

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reading. What I found were three guys, about a hundred metres off: two Hawaiians and a *haole*.

One Hawaiian was much smaller than the other two guys, short and wiry, with a tortoise-like face, and looking extremely jumpy. He was the one doing all the caterwauling. The other two were showing him something—ID maybe? Weapons?—and I guessed they were either some kind of airport security or the Hawaiian version of mafia hit men. From my experience as a once-upon-a-time-cop, and something about the stance of the two big guys, I was betting on the former. Either way, things did not look so good for the tortoise.

And just like that, the jittery-looking guy took advantage of a passing parade of Japanese tourists, and, using them as a shield, made a dash for it, heading my way.

I heard a muffled “Stop! Police!” come from one of the pursuers, temporarily waylaid by the tourists. I instinctually leapt to action. Things were happening so fast, I didn’t have much time to make plans, other than to decide I had to do what I could to stop the fleeing man. He was barrelling (not very tortoise-like) toward me at breakneck speed. I was either going to have to get into a footrace with him through the airport terminal, or find a way to stop him.

I never made the high school football team. It wouldn’t have been difficult, though, growing up in Howell, Saskatchewan. Most graduating classes numbered under a dozen, and were half female, a statistic that practically guaranteed a spot for anyone who wanted to suit up. But despite being built as sturdy as a tree by grade nine, it just wasn’t for me, so I never tried out. But, from my days at the police academy, I do know a thing or two about tackling goons.

My airport runaway was moving too fast to assure a quick takedown from behind. Instead, I needed to break his momentum. That’s the thing about speed—the faster you’re moving forward, the faster you go down when you meet with an obstacle. I decided to be that obstacle.

Timing myself as carefully as I could, with bowed head and hunched back, I propelled myself into tortoise’s path.

He never saw me coming. I felt the man's body fold over mine as I rolled over the floor, and looked up just in time to see two legs flailing in the air. Success!

I'd barely come to a stop before the two cops were on the guy like icing on cake. For big fellows they moved like cheetahs. In one slick move, the *haole* had the smaller guy up and in cuffs, while his partner pushed his nose into the tortoise face and said some words that probably weren't very nice.

I stood up and was brushing myself off when I saw the Hawaiian cop coming over.

"Hey," he said as he approached, his dark eyes covering every inch of me.

He was tall, well-built, and casually dressed for a cop, in nice fitting jeans and a worn, surfer's T-shirt, the kind The Gap sold to kids who'd probably never been on a board. But something told me this guy was one-hundred-percent authentic. And he certainly wasn't a kid. The face was handsome, and on closer inspection didn't look all Hawaiian after all; there was some other influence in his exotic features. Strong jaw. Sharp cheekbones. Nice lips. I only noticed the lips because I thought I detected a slight grin there.

"I'm sorry," I said, palms out. "I know I shouldn't have interfered. It's just that I used to be a cop."

The guy cocked an eyebrow. "Instinct, right?"

I nodded. "Yup. Never goes away, I guess."

Surprising me, he reached out and took my left hand in his. Aw crap. Was I gonna get a set of stainless steel bracelets for all my trouble? Was I about to share a cell with tortoise man?

Instead, the cop turned my hand palm up and inspected a scrape I must have gotten from my tumble.

"You need some medical attention."

"Nah, nah," I said looking at the wound. "It'll be fine. I'll just clean it up in the bathroom."

"Uh, if you're done chit-chatting over there," the other cop called over with a funny look in his eye, "maybe you could pay some attention to the perp we got over here?"

The Hawaiian released my hand and shot his partner a well-

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practiced look of annoyance just as the other officer's radio beeped for his attention.

"You'll have to excuse Ray," the Hawaiian said. "He's not real good in public."

I smiled. He smiled back. I felt an odd tingle in some odd spots and inwardly chastised myself. I really needed that drink.

"Thanks for giving us a hand with Huei. He must have forgotten that the Honolulu police frown on people leaving the island when we have an arrest warrant with their name on it."

"Maybe his memory isn't what it used to be."

"That must be it."

"Hey, Kimo," the other cop said as he dragged a sullen-looking Huei closer. "That was the chief. One of us gotta hang out here to unruffle the feathers of some airport guys who wanna know why we're disturbing their passengers. They say they'll be right down. Which probably means half an hour. You wanna do that while I take in our friend here?"

Kimo winced at the idea, but nodded. "But I'm only waiting ten minutes. After that I'm heading for the surf."

Ray grunted agreement and led his charge away.

"Looks like I've got a few minutes to wait," Kimo said. "Can I buy you a coffee to thank you for your heroics?"

I could tell he wasn't exactly serious about the "heroics" part, but who was I to turn down coffee with a handsome surfer dude cop?

After scoring a couple of drinks from a nearby vendor, we returned to where I'd left my stuff and took spots next to one another.

"Let me see," Kimo began in serious earnestness, "you're at the airport, you have a carry-on, I see a ticket in your pocket; my superior detecting skills tell me you're heading home."

I laughed. "Yeah. I can see you must be one of Hawaii's best and brightest."

He smiled easily. "Where's home for you?" he asked.

"Saskatchewan."

He tried to repeat the name of the province. He blundered badly, but with a pleasing boyish smirk that made up for it.

"It's a tough one," I allowed.

"I can relate," he said. "With a name like Kimo Kanapa'aka."

I felt obliged to try it out. It came out something like: Kimokalawakala. I grimaced. "Sorry."

"Just Kimo is okay."

"I'm Russell. Russell Quant."

We each took a sip of our coffees while regarding the other with inquiring eyes. That done, we put our cups on our laps and tried out matching silly grins. We were strangers cast together unexpectedly but somehow drawn to one another. The silence wasn't exactly comfortable, but I didn't care. There was something immediately likeable about this guy.

"I'm glad to see you smile," he finally said. "I was thinking you looked a little miserable when I first saw you. I hate to see anyone leaving Hawaii without a big, fat grin on his face."

"Could have been because I was on the ground after tackling your bad guy."

"Nah, *brah*, it was before that. I noticed you when we were staking out the terminal looking for Huei."

Had Mr. Hawaiian surfer dude, he-man cop been checking me out? "Oh really?"

"We were about to apprehend a criminal," he explained, possibly having read my mind. "As a former policeman, I'm sure you know that in a situation like that, a good cop is always fully aware of his surroundings and exactly who and what is around him."

"Oh," I said, a little disappointed. "Of course."

"So why were you sitting here looking so miserable? Bad book?"

He really had been fully aware of me and what I'd been doing. I was impressed. "I wasn't miserable, really." I told him. "Just a little bummed out. I won't see my...fiancé..." The word felt weird coming from my mouth, as if I'd just made it up. "...for a few weeks. So I guess I'm a little sad about that."

Kimo bobbed his head in an empathetic gesture. "That's too bad. How come? Your *ku'uipo* from here then? That why you won't see her, she lives here?"

"She's a he," I told him, followed by a sip of coffee.

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The man's eyebrows rose over his eyes.

I shrugged and grinned. "Yeah, that's right," I said, "I'm Canadian."

After a beat, he grinned back and said, "Me too."

I realized what he was really telling me. He was a *gay* Hawaiian surfer dude, he-man cop. Very cool. We clinked coffee cups and drank a toast.

"Where's the wedding gonna be?" he asked. "Here on the island maybe?"

My eyes widened. Never even thought about it. "I dunno."

"When's the big day?"

"I dunno."

"Are you big, white wedding kind of guys, or into something small and intimate?"

Jeeppers! Who was this guy? A reporter for the Oahu six o'clock news? "I dunno."

Kimo frowned. "You have actually *met* the guy who you think is going to marry you, right?"

I gave him a face that said, "Very funny, smartass."

He gave me an apologetic look. "Okay, okay. So what's your fiancé's name?"

And for one horrible moment that lasted an eon, my mind went blank.

Kimo let out a nervous chuckle. He checked his watch as if hoping it was time to go. "You're kidding me, right?"

"Alex!" I finally got out. "His name is Alex. Alex. Alex. Alex."

"Russell," he asked, his face suddenly serious. "Did you just meet this guy, *brah*?"

"No! Of course not. It's just all so new for me. He only asked me to marry him last night. I haven't quite processed it yet." I was beginning to feel a little uneasy with the way the conversation was going. It was time to take it on a less intrusive detour. "So you're a cop?"

He nodded.

I eyed up the T-shirt and silver bracelet embossed with surfboards. "And a surfer?"

He gave me a strange look before answering, "I like to surf,

yeah.”

“Is that...a good hobby?” It didn’t come out quite as I’d meant it to.

Kimo chuckled. “You mean for a guy my age?”

I gave him a mischievous smile. “Well, I’m sure there are many seniors’ surfing competitions you’d do really well in.” Even in the short time we’d spent together, there was something about this guy that told me our senses of humour jived.

He made a move as if pulling a knife from his heart. “You wound me, *brah*.”

We shared a look. The kind that two people attracted to one another, but knowing it can’t ever go anywhere, share. We drank some more coffee.

During the nearly six-hour flight from Honolulu to Vancouver, and the layover until I could board my plane for Saskatoon, I did more reading and eating than sleeping. So by the time I was winging my way home, I was ready for a nap. I snuggled into the CRJ’s seat with about seventy other passengers and prepared for some shut-eye. But fate had another plan. It began with a series of sighs from the seat next to me.

I admit to being as curious as the proverbial cat. How can I not be, given my chosen career? So, although I was a little vexed by the noisy exhaling, it wasn’t surprising that I found myself abandoning the promise of pleasant dreams for a peek at my neighbour.

The man sitting next to me was a little odd in appearance to say the least. If there were a human version of Mr. Magoo, he would be it. Through the slit of one eye, I could make out a hugely bulbous nose, sticky-outy chin, wobbly jowls, sunken mouth, and a completely hairless, perfectly round head. His eyes, nearly hidden behind pouches of skin, sat below eyebrows shaped like inverted “V”s. Although it was summer, and the forecast for our evening arrival was balmy, he wore some kind of trench coat with a uniquely patterned scarf of orange and blue wound about his neck. If I had to guess, I’d say he was nearing seventy.

Just as I was about to lose myself back to sleep, the man sighed

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again. This time it was accompanied by a gentle but definite “har-rumph.” I saw that he was intently studying a piece of paper. His scrunched-up mouth was travelling from one side of his face to the other, as if worrying over a particularly recalcitrant piece of gum.

I saw a crew member making his way down the aisle with water. Deciding that wouldn’t be a bad idea, I sat up and waited to be offered some. I exchanged a polite glance with Magoo.

“Good evening,” he said. “I hope I didn’t wake you.”

“No,” I lied. “I never sleep long on planes.”

He nodded absentmindedly as he returned his attention to the paper on his lap.

Dropping my seat table, I accepted water from the steward.

After one more sigh, the man carefully folded the paper and placed it in the breast pocket of his coat. He looked over at me with a lopsided, lip-less smile. “Going home?”

He even sounded like Mr. Magoo. Or was it Thurston Howell III from *Gilligan’s Island*? “Yes,” I told him. “It’s nice to get away, but always nice to come back home too.”

“That’s refreshing to hear from a young person,” he said. “I suppose with the local economy booming the way it is, more and more youngsters like you are staying in Saskatchewan.”

I was enjoying being called a youngster. Especially since I’d just turned thirty-eight. A few years back, my ultra-stylish friend Anthony had cajoled me into using a line of Clinique skin products for men. I guess they were worth the ultra-stylish cost. Although I steadfastly refuse to wear a moisturizing mask to bed. “Yes, I hear that’s true.”

“What line of work are you in?”

“I’m a private detective.”

That answer is always good for a reaction. And Mr. Magoo did not disappoint. He shifted in his seat to get a better look at me. Although the flaps covering his eyes were nearly impenetrable, I spied a flash of blue, brilliant as a newborn’s.

“No!” he said, truly astonished.

I’d run into this before. I dug a business card (you never know when you might meet a potential client) from a pocket of my cargo shorts and handed it to him. He studied it carefully before burying

it in his jacket pocket.

“So you investigate murders and that sort of mayhem?”

I nodded. It was the truth. I had been involved in at least a few murder cases—granted, sometimes peripherally—since leaving the Saskatoon Police Service several years earlier. There was Tom Osborn found afloat in Pike Lake. James Kraft shot in a New York City hotel room. The drag queen who looked like Phyllis Lindstrom from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* pushed off the side of an ocean liner. And Tanya Culinare, who jumped from the eighth-floor balcony of her Broadway Avenue apartment. Oh yeah, I investigated murders all the time.

“I wouldn’t have thought there’d be much call for that sort of thing in a city the size of Saskatoon,” the old man commented.

At about a quarter of a million people, Saskatoon is not a big city. And indeed, in between my higher profile cases, most of my time as a prairie detective is spent chasing down errant husbands, runaway kids, lost pets, and, in one instance, discovering whether a local restaurant had indeed used Mrs. Galabruch’s perogy recipe and passed it off as their own. But no one needed to know about that. I nodded again and said, “A hot economy has benefits for my line of work too. More people, more action, more crime.” Gosh, I love prosperity.

His mouth made a chewing motion as he considered what I’d said. Then he asked, “You wouldn’t be interested in something a little less dramatic, then?”

I was very interested. Not only do I like being able to pay my bills (that damn Clinique stuff is expensive), as compelling as my infrequent murder cases are, they aren’t necessarily my favourite kind of work. Murder means death. Death means grief. Usually for many people. Death is gruesome. Death is just not a nice thing to spend all your time around. So, although I might outwardly whine about being asked to find out if Sophie Underwill’s beagle from down the street is responsible for the daily deposits of doody in Mr. Kindrachski’s bed of prize-winning lilies, inwardly I rather enjoy the work.

Then again, sometimes there’s nothing better than a good murder.

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"I might be," I told Mr. Magoo.

"What about treasure maps?" he asked. "Are you any good with treasure maps?"

Now it was my turn to look astonished. Treasure maps? I suddenly had memories of being eight. I loved movies and books about adventurous pirates in exotic locations in search of treasure. I daydreamed of chests filled with gold and jewels and countless coins. But the man sitting next to me did not at all resemble a pirate: no eye patch, no bandana around unruly black hair, no peg leg or missing teeth. I was going to be disappointed. I was sure of it.

Magoo rifled around in his pocket and pulled out the piece of paper I'd spied him studying earlier in the flight. He pulled down his seat table and flattened the paper on top of it. Although I hate being snoopy—okay, that's a lie—I couldn't help taking a peek. It was a rather crude drawing, a few squiggles and symbols, interspersed with lots of words. The thing looked more like a poem than a treasure map. Treasure maps were supposed to have a compass rose and a trail of arrows over sketched terrain, which usually included mountains and valleys and swamps. And there should be a castle and a few warnings about quicksand or dragons or something good like that. So yup, I was disappointed.

"I don't know what she was thinking when she did this," Magoo muttered. "But I shouldn't be surprised. Helen always was a quirky one."

"I'm sorry," I said. "What exactly is this?"

"Helen, my...friend...left this for me," he said, his fingers busily fumbling over the surface of the paper. "It's a map of Saskatoon."

I leaned in and peered closer. "It is?"

"Sure it is," he said, pointing at a blob that I suppose could have been a castle. "See, that's the Bessborough Hotel." His finger moved from blob to blob. "And there's the river. And the university campus. Downtown."

I thought he was giving the artist greater credit than deserved, but geographically speaking, if I squinted and turned my head just right, I could see a general resemblance to the city where we were

about to land.

“And what’s all the writing over top of the map?”

“Those are the clues,” he whispered in a way that urged me to do the same. “You see, I have to figure these out in order to find it.”

“Find what?” I asked, my curiosity gene on full alert.

The man stared at me. For a moment he seemed uncertain, as if suddenly realizing that maybe he’d said—and shown me—too much. Finally, his cartoonish face broke into a conspiratorial smile. “A treasure,” he enthused quietly. “If I decipher the clues correctly, I find the treasure. Simple as that. It’s like a game.”

“I see.” The man didn’t need to hire a detective. He needed a playmate.

“I’ve been going over the clues,” he said, thick fingers pointing at the first stanza of the treasure map poem. “I think I’ve got some of them figured out. But the rest, well, I just can’t seem to. I need help. I guess maybe I’m getting a little too old for this sort of thing. The brain isn’t working at top form anymore.”

“Maybe you’re just tired,” I suggested helpfully.

He nodded. “Travelling does take the stuffing out of me these days. Perhaps I’ll be more clear-headed in the morning.”

“Yes, I’m sure you will,” I assured him. “Why don’t you give it another go when you’re feeling better? If you still need help after that, you can give me a call. You have my card.”

“Do I? Oh, my, yes I do. You just gave it to me! See what I mean? Dotty as a drunken donkey.”

I chuckled. “I haven’t heard that one before.”

“Feel free to use it, my boy.”

And with a ping of the seat belt sign, we began our descent into Saskatoon. It was good to be home.

I felt the arm thread through my own just as we entered the second floor arrivals lounge that overlooks the main concourse—okay, the only concourse—of the John G. Diefenbaker International Airport. I looked down at the little person who’d attached himself to my left side. It was Magoo.

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"I hope you don't mind," he said, staring up at me with a sweet smile. "I feel like a doddering old auntie, but my gout is acting up, you see. Would you mind escorting me to where the bags come out?"

There was something odd about the smile on his cartoonish face. It didn't quite go with the look in his eyes. Was he ogling me? I couldn't be sure. But how could I turn him down? "Of course not," I said.

Together we traversed the short distance down the escalators to the luggage carousels. Within a few minutes the track began moving and my unexpected companion clapped his hands with glee when his one small, argyle-patterned bag was among the first to arrive. I pulled it off the carousel and handed it to him with a goodbye at the ready.

"What about you?" he asked, seeming a bit discombobulated by the sudden farewell.

"I'm afraid my bags haven't come off yet. Do you need help getting to a taxi?" I offered. "I can come back for my bags after we get you set."

"Oh," he said, looking a bit vague. "No. I have my own car in the lot."

I wondered how he was going to drive if his gout was bothering him as bad as he'd claimed. My mother suffered intermittently with gout, so I knew about the pain associated with it. "Are you sure you can drive? Maybe you should take a cab home tonight. You could come back for your car tomorrow."

"Of course I can drive. Why not?"

"Your gout?"

"Oh. Oh that. Well, I'm suddenly feeling much better."

"That's good news."

He stood there, unmoving, a perplexed look on his face.

"Would you like me to walk you to your car?"

"I wouldn't want you to go to the trouble. Are your bags here yet?"

I searched the conveyor for my luggage. Even though most of the other passengers had already retrieved their bags and begun migrating toward the exits, mine were nowhere to be seen. This

was not a good sign, and neither was the approaching Air Canada representative.

"I'm afraid that is all the luggage from this flight," he announced to the half-dozen of us left. "If you could follow me to the booth right over there, I can take your information."

What followed was a chorus of discontent that I knew from past experience was utterly useless. I looked at Magoo and grimaced. "My bad luck, I guess."

He nodded, looking even more disgruntled than I was. His eyes made a quick sweep of the concourse as if looking for something or someone, then he shrugged and said, "Well, m'boy, I guess I'll be off then. It was a pleasure meeting you. I hope we get a chance to talk again soon." And with that, he toddled off.

I joined the unhappy throng at the lost luggage counter.

Twenty minutes later, with Air Canada promising to home deliver my two suitcases as soon as they returned from their own getaway vacation to who knew where, I was in the airport long-term parking lot trying to recall where I'd left my silver Mazda RX-7. I usually park near a walkway, to make spotting the small vehicle a little easier. On the bright side, at least I didn't have to bother with hauling a couple of heavy pieces of luggage after me.

It was getting dark out and I'd just spotted the car when I noticed a flurry of activity not far off. People were gathered in a dim corner of the lot, but something told me this was definitely more than just an impromptu tailgate party. There was unmistakable tension in the air. Voices were raised, and I thought I could hear crying. Something was wrong. I trotted over to take a look.

Squeezing through the circle of gawkers, I finally saw what the fuss was about. Someone had collapsed next to a car. He didn't seem to be moving. A couple of parking lot security guards were attending to him, but the situation didn't look good. Heart attack maybe? I could hear one of the guards talking to a 9-1-1 operator, asking for both an ambulance and police.

Although by virtue of my chosen career I am a professional snooper, I try to hold it to a minimum in times of private misfortune.

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I was about to step away from this bad luck story when something familiar caught my eye.

An orange and blue scarf.

I drew in a sharp breath.

It was Mr. Magoo lying lifeless on the ground.

Then I noticed one more thing. Alarm bells started ringing in my head.

I charged forward, and yelled: "Seal off the parking lot!"

Chapter 2

Detective Darren Kirsch was not amused when after asking me—five separate times—to identify the dead man in the parking lot, all I could answer was: “Mr. Magoo.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. I was. “I never asked his name. We were strangers who met on a plane. We chatted. I helped him with his suitcase. That’s it.”

“How did you know he was murdered?”

I winced. It turned out the orange and blue scarf around Mr. Magoo’s throat was tied *very* tightly. He’d been strangled. In the Saskatoon airport parking lot of all places. It was shocking. On average, there are fewer than ten homicides each year in my prairie hometown. Most of those happen within a very specific area of the city. Most involve alcohol and knives, not an orange and blue scarf. A quick visual survey of the people still milling about the murder site revealed that everyone, cops and medical professionals included, was just as taken aback as I was.

“I didn’t know it was murder.”

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"Then why did you demand the parking lot be sealed off before anyone even suspected the death was suspicious?" Kirsch barked. It was his favourite manner of speaking, particularly to me. We'd worked together years ago when I was still a cop. We enjoyed being thorns in each other's sides ever since. Well, me more than him.

"I told you already. His luggage. I'd helped him, so I knew he had a carry-on and an argyle suitcase."

Kirsch stared at me. He was probably wondering what "argyle" meant.

"They were missing. And the body was too far from the car for him to have already stashed them in the trunk. I assumed he'd been robbed, not murdered. I thought if we stopped people from leaving the parking lot, we might be able to identify the thief by searching cars and finding out who had the luggage. I could have been wrong, I suppose, but I thought it was worth the effort."

The big cop grunted. "I suppose."

"Was that a compliment? Was that a, 'Hey, good call, Russell?'"

Kirsch snarled. Unfortunately for him, despite the requisite dark brooding eyes, shovel jaw, and cheesy mustache favoured by Saskatoon cops, he was simply too teddy bear cute to pull it off.

"Don't leave town," he said as he stalked off. "I'm gonna need to talk with you again."

"I'll look forward to it." I turned to go, then stopped and called out: "Have you been able to identify Mr. M...the dead man?"

"Angel," he called back. "His name was Walter Angel."

As I walked away, a troubling thought entered my mind. Had I read the look in Walter Angel's eyes incorrectly? Had he been ogling me? Or was he afraid?

It was late—after ten p.m.—by the time I got away from the airport. I knew stuffing two happy-to-see me schnauzers in the RX-7 would be a bit tricky, but I was desperate to be reunited with my pups Barbra and Brutus after being away for a whole week. Using my cellphone, I dialled Errall's number and got a two-word reply to my request. "Yeah, fine."

Errall Strane is my landlord, lawyer, sometime dogsitter, sparring partner, and oftentimes reluctant friend. She owns PWC, the downtown building that is home to my workplace, as well as her own one-woman law practice, Beverly Chaney's psychology office, and Alberta Lougheed's psychic realm of bizarreness. Errall was also Brutus's former owner.

Her greeting upon my arrival was just as verbose. She had both dogs on their leashes, waiting for me on the front porch. It was Saturday night, but it was obvious she wasn't entertaining guests. All the windows were dark. Even the front porch light was off. I could barely see her face when she said, "Here," and handed me the leads.

Barbra and Brutus are not effusive dogs. They lean more toward graceful and reserved, but I could tell they were thrilled to see me. As I was them. Their little tails were whirring fast enough to set them into flight, and they were letting out barely restrained whimpers of delight. Errall, on the other hand, was in a black mood. No tail wagging from her. She didn't bother to invite me in.

I took the leads. "Did Barbra and Brutus behave themselves?" They always did, but I liked getting a report anyway.

"Sure."

"Errall," I said, "Is everything all right?" I suspected it wasn't.

"Yep." She pulled back inside the house and turned away, kicking the door shut with her heel.

It was a beautiful August evening, but I didn't dare leave the top down. Not with two antsy dogs in the seat next to me. So I went through the machinations of covering up. I love my little car, but it is twenty years old. It doesn't have any of the push-one-button technology of newer convertibles. I had to unfold the top canopy, flip some flaps and doohickeys, get back in the car, turn a knob, wait for it to lift and fall into place above our heads, flip the flaps and doohickeys again, and then it was done. Barbra and Brutus watched and waited with admirable patience. It was a little tight quarters for all three of us in there, but all the better for a few minutes spent cuddling, petting, patting, and licking (I was the lickee,

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not the licker). We'd missed each other.

When that was done, I shifted into drive and headed off, planning to go straight home. It was late. I hadn't had much sleep in the past twenty-four hours. Someone I knew, however briefly, had just been murdered. You'd think home was where I'd want to be. But somehow I found myself steering the car in an entirely different direction.

I ended up on a leafy lane in an old part of town. I parked across the street from a charming house painted in hues of burgundy, harvest yellow, and dusk blue. A hand-carved sign swinging from a newel post identified it as Ash House, the home (and business) of Ethan Ash. Ethan was a man I'd met while on a case a couple of years earlier. I waited for a truck to pass before rolling down my window for a clearer view.

What are you doing here, Quant? I asked myself. Barbra snuffled her wet nose into my ear, asking the same thing. Or maybe she was wondering when she could finally get out of the cramped car. Both very good questions.

I shook my head. This was insane. I shouldn't be skulking around outside some guy's house like a lovesick schoolboy. I'm an engaged man. I love Alex Canyon. I'd accepted his offer of marriage. So why, oh why, can't I let this go? Another vehicle passed by. Damn traffic.

For years, my friends had chided me for being devotedly single and liking it. I'd been in love once, a long time ago. But when that was over, it seemed, so was my ability and desire to fall that far again. I'd had my crushes—usually on men who were totally unsuitable or un-haveable—like my best friend's boyfriend, or a Roman Catholic priest, or a guy who lived in New York City, or my best one yet: a murderer. Was I unlucky at love, or just not trying very hard? I'd been happy enough without it. Complete without it. I had great friends and family, a great job, great home, great dogs. I loved my life. But now I *had* fallen in love. Twice. With two different guys. At the same time. Rather inconvenient to say the least.

No, that wasn't true. It couldn't be. I couldn't be in love with Ethan Ash. We first met when I was hired to find a man who turned out to be his ex-lover. Ethan ran Ash House—kind of a frat

house for the senior set in Saskatoon. Oldsters who were in pretty good health but maybe needed a little help with day-to-day chores, preparing meals, or just wanted to avoid loneliness, moved into Ash House where Ethan looked after them. He also looked after his twelve-year-old daughter, Simon (short for Simonette).

Ethan is a sweet, caring, gentle bear of a man. He's smart, jovial, and loves to laugh. He's a big, beefy guy, with poker-straight, shiny brown hair, rosy, dimpled cheeks, smiling eyes and an open, friendly face. The natural set of his features seems to be stuck on "happy," but when you catch him unaware, maybe looking a little wistful, his pleasant face turns downright beautiful. And although it's difficult to pinpoint exactly how he does it, sex appeal just oozes from his pores like syrup from a waffle.

When I first met him, I felt an unfamiliar spark—well, actually there were several sparks, in several different parts of my body. During the course of the case I was on, Ethan had been badly beaten and I visited him in the hospital. It was then, while sitting next to his bed, holding his hand, that I first fell in l...

No!

Not love. I had a crush. That's all it was.

Jeez, how old was I? When was I going to stop with the crushes?

Normally, it wouldn't have been a problem. Cases eventually end. Time passes. People move on and I don't see them again. But that didn't happen. As fate would have it, Ethan had become a bigger part of my life. Or at least the lives of my circle of friends.

Ethan and my boutique-store-owing friend, Anthony Gatt, were already acquaintances. Anthony's long-term partner, Jared Lowe, had recently ended his life as a jet-setting, internationally acclaimed supermodel. This was due both to the end of his thirties and the loss of his unblemished beauty when a maniacal stalker threw acid in his face. Although surgeries had taken care of some of the latter, when combined with the former, a screeching halt to his career was the undeniable consequence. So Jared had been looking for new opportunities, and now, he and Ethan were about to become business partners.

An aging Saskatchewan population and booming economy

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had combined to make Ash House more successful than ever. The place was bursting at the seams. In shrewd contemplation of this, Ethan had purchased a small acreage just outside the city limits, right before local real estate prices went through the roof. His plan was to build a bigger and better facility (and a home for himself and Simon). But then construction costs went crazy and he needed a bigger loan than he could handle.

Enter Jared with his buckets of modelling profits. With Anthony's guidance, he'd invested his savings wisely and the asset side of his ledger had added up rather nicely over the years. After some research and soul searching, Jared offered to assist Ethan in the financing and building of the new Ash House, with the proviso that he could help run the expanded operation once it was done. Ethan was more than grateful to get the investment dollars, as well as the help with taking care of the much bigger property and its residents. Jared was thrilled to find something he could pour his passion into. He hadn't been looking forward to the nine-to-five world of regular, non-model folk. When completed, the new Ash House would be right up his alley. It would allow him a flexible schedule and the chance to help other people. The fact that some older people had poor eyesight and most simply didn't care about his altered looks, were side benefits he never publicly admitted.

So, like it or not, Ethan was in our lives. My life. And I, god help me, was drawn to him, like metal shavings to a magnet.

I don't like being metal shavings.

My betrothed (that word just makes me want to spend a weekend in the English countryside playing cricket and sipping cordials with women in hoop skirts), Alex Canyon, however, was not in my life. Not in a day-to-day way, anyway. That, I was guessing, was the problem.

Alex is a security expert, hired by people or companies with issues and lots of money to deal with them. The problem was that those issues rarely occurred anywhere near Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. We'd been doing the long-distance thing for more than two years, and for the most part, it had worked out fine. Deep down, I'm an introvert. I like my alone time. I like not

having to consider someone else's taste when ordering pizza or watching a movie or selecting a bottle of wine. It's nice. At least that's what I told myself.

Unlike Ethan, Alex is an in-your-face kind of guy. He's aggressive, powerfully built, Clark-Kent-handsome and super masculine, with a dry wit and global intellect. And did I mention smoulderingly sexy?

I suppose being part-time lovers over a long enough period should be enough to tell two people if they are meant to be together. I love Alex, I do, and I know he loves me.

Conclusion: I was being an idiot.

It was time to start the car and get the hell home.

As I prepared to pull away from Ash House, I waited for a white Ford F-150 with a cab over the bed to pass by.

Hey. Wait a second.

A white Ford F-150 with a cab had passed by a minute or so earlier. And a couple of minutes before that, too. What was going on here?

Was someone else staking out the house of the man I had a crush on? That didn't seem right.

I screeched out of my spot and made a sharp right off Elliott onto Wiggins Avenue. The Ford was not far ahead of me. I saw him make another right onto Temperance Street heading for Clarence Avenue. I did the same.

At Clarence, the white truck turned right. If I was a good boy and heading for home, I would turn left. I sat at the intersection and watched the progress of the suspicious vehicle.

He turned off Clarence back onto Elliott. What the hell? The driver was going in circles.

I, of course, had no way of knowing whether White Truck Guy was watching Ash House or one of the many other houses on the tree-lined suburban street. But something told me this was no father waiting to pick up his daughter from a babysitting job. Wisely or not, I made up my mind.

I switched the direction of my turn signal and headed right onto Clarence then turned down Elliott. As soon as I did, the white truck, dawdling down the street, suddenly lurched forward and

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sped off. The driver had caught sight of me and obviously did not want to be followed.

I sped up. So did the Ford. Once again he swung right onto Wiggins Avenue, then really floored it.

Oooooee! A car chase! And I wasn't even on a case. Oh well, the Mazda could use the exercise after sitting in an airport parking lot for a week. The dogs seemed happy enough to go along for the ride. So, off I went.

This time the driver kept going straight, heading south, as if his next stop was Antarctica. We were speeding through what was mostly a residential area with uncontrolled intersections. The driver of the Ford was making tracks like he had the uncontested right-of-way. I watched as pretty little streets with their benign yards and mature treescapes whizzed by at double the posted speed. Given the time of night and part of town, the sidewalks were barren. For that I was glad.

Despite the empty streets, this was still unsafe. I knew I had to let the Ford go. As far as I knew, the guy behind the wheel of the white truck had done nothing wrong, except speed. But the fact that he was running away from me told me he'd probably been up to no good. How did he know I wasn't after him to tell him he had a flat tire, or to ask for directions?

I began to slow down. I was pretty sure there were no lights at the upcoming busy intersection with 8th Street. The chase was over. We'd both have to stop there.

Except he didn't.

I watched as the white devil shot across 8th, barely missing being broadsided by a Camaro going one way and a Kia heading the other. I was not so cavalier with my life. The car chase was over—for me.

I screeched to a halt and watched as the truck got away.

I swore a little, but I should have known better. Car chases never turn out well. Either you end up like I did today, with nothing to show for it, or somebody gets run off a cliff and explodes in a ball of fire à la *Charlie's Angels* or *The Rockford Files*. Neither a very appealing result.

Feeling a bit sulky, I made my way back to Clarence Avenue

and headed south for home. This had not been my finest hour. It was time for me to skulk off with my tail between my legs before I did something else stupid.

I squinted and swore a little when a pair of headlights, set on bright, pulled up behind me, getting closer by the second. I checked the rear-view mirror.

Holy Mother of Moby Dick.

It was the same white truck.

I immediately checked for a licence number and swore again when I remembered that Saskatchewan no longer required front licence plates. So instead of a number I could trace to an owner, the plate on the front bumper of my mouse-turned-cat bore a cartoon. It looked like some kind of boat next to something that I took to be a beehive. Made no sense to me, but I had better things to figure out, like what this guy was up to.

A tap on my rear bumper gave me my first clue.

Did this guy really intend to ram me? In the middle of a city street?

True, it had been a little presumptuous of me to follow him just because I saw him circle a street once or twice. I'd overreacted. I knew this and I was sorry. But metal kissing my bumper seemed a little on the excessive side of things.

I stepped up my speed, just to see what he would do.

He followed. Only inches from my rear, the big white mass was indisputably threatening. This guy was serious.

What to do? Home was out of the question. No nearby police station.

We were approaching a four-way stop. I debated zooming through. Maybe a cop would come after us. Where was a hidden spot check when you really needed one?

I looked left. Empty. I looked right. Oh crapola. Some guy was out for a late night bike ride. I wouldn't hit him, but I couldn't guarantee that GI Jackass behind me would be so careful. I didn't want to put anyone else's life in jeopardy. I slammed on the brake and came to an abrupt stop.

The white truck zoomed up behind me and I felt another tap. The asshole revved his engine and slowly began pushing me into

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the intersection. Thankfully, this was Saskatoon, late at night, on a suburban street. But still!

This guy was really beginning to piss me off.

The cyclist made it safely through the intersection. It was my turn to go. I hit the pedal and raced through. The truck came with me. Hey! This was a four-way stop! Bugger wasn't even going to wait his turn. Now that really burned me.

I'd had enough. This idiot was cruising for a confrontation. I'd just have to give it to him. I'd started this stupid game. I knew that had been stupid. So the first thing I'd do—through clenched teeth—would be to apologize. If that did nothing, all bets were off. What he was doing was dangerous. I had pooches in the car. I didn't want Barbra, Brutus, the Mazda, or me getting hurt over something so ludicrous. At least with a face-to-face, the odds went down to only me potentially getting hurt. (Depending how big the other guy was.) I was hoping, however, that we could deal with this in a more civilized way.

As we progressed southwards, I scoured the street for potential battlegrounds. And then, almost running out of Clarence Avenue, I found the perfect spot: the parking lot of St. Martin's United Church.

I cranked the wheel and made a left into the empty lot. I parked with my nose pointing toward the slat fence that separated the church grounds from its nearest neighbour. The white truck followed me in.

I told Barbra and Brutus to wait for me in the car, and to call 9-1-1 if I wasn't back in ten minutes.

Shifting about to open the driver's side door, I looked out. What I saw took my breath away. The front end of the white truck was rushing right for me. I shrieked—I'm not proud of that—and drew back in shock and surprise. I cringed as I listened to the sickly crunch of the truck's bumper making contact with the Mazda's door, effectively blocking my exit unless I wanted to crawl over the dogs to the other side.

Fortunately, he stopped just short of a full-on bash. The bright lights of the other vehicle filled the inside of the Mazda with enough wattage to make me believe this was some kind of alien

abduction. I could barely hear my own heavy breathing over the powerful rumble of the big truck's cruel engine.

Fear quickly turned to anger. "What the hell?" I bellowed, shielding my eyes.

Barbra and Brutus seconded my outrage with one annoyed bark each.

Then came another, unexpected, noise.

My cellphone.

Talk about bad timing for a call.

Then again, maybe it was excellent timing. I obviously needed help.

I reached into my pocket, pulled out the phone, and answered, "It's Russell."

"When I pull back, I want you to drop it out of your window to the ground. Then I'll let you leave," a hushed, whispering voice—male? female? I couldn't quite tell—instructed me. "Or else I'll ram you. *And your little dogs too!*" (Okay, I made up that last part about the dogs.)

"What?" I screamed into the phone. "What are you talking about? Who are you?"

"I know you have it. Now drop it out the window. Or else."

What was going on? Obviously this had nothing to do with the trucker being mad that I'd unnecessarily tailed him. This guy thought I had something he wanted. Trouble was, I didn't.

"You have to believe me, I don't have what you're looking for. You've got the wrong guy here."

Once before, a couple of years ago, I'd caught the attention of a bad guy outside of Ash House. What was with that place? The sooner they moved to the new location the better, as far as I was concerned. That time, I'd initially thought the bad guy had something to do with Ethan. I was wrong. But what about this time?

All I'd been doing was stalking Ethan, minding my own business. Now this guy comes after me? Unless he was a superaggressive Neighbourhood Watch member, he was after the wrong man.

"My name is Russell," I shouted into the phone. "And I'm telling you, you have the wrong guy."

"I know who you are, Mr. Quant," came the weird sounding

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voice.

Oh, jeez. How did he know my last name? Jiminy jumping beans, it *was* me he was after. But why?

"I don't have what you're looking for," I told him again.

The engine made a menacing sound, indicating rising rpm's. I felt a shudder as the truck inched into us. Shit, shit, shit! He didn't believe me.

"Wait!" I yelled.

I looked over at the dogs. They were admirably controlled, given the circumstances, but I could tell they were growing increasingly antsy. They could sense something was not right. If they decided I was being threatened, there'd be hell to pay. They'd start jumping about, barking and growling. Not only would that be distracting, there simply isn't room for pandemonium in an RX-7 convertible. I knew I couldn't deal with them and this tense situation at the same time. With as calm a voice as I could muster, I whispered sweet nothings to them. It seemed to work. For now.

"Are you going to do as I say? Or do I ram you?" the voice wanted to know.

Man? Woman? I was still unsure, but the choice of vehicle was making me lean toward man. An ugly one with a thick neck, bitten down fingernails, hairy back, and a low forehead.

"Yeah, yeah, okay," I said, my voice steady for the dogs' sakes. "But I need to get it first. I'm going to hang up now. Call me back in a minute."

I heard the caller begin to protest, but I hung up anyway. I quickly searched the cellphone's directory and hit a speed-dial number.

With each ring I pleaded for an answer. I knew it was late, and Dane and Jim would be asleep, but they were my only hope for immediate help.

"Yeah," came a groggy voice.

"Dane? It's Russell."

"Wha...?"

"Never mind. I'm parked in the parking lot between your house and the church. There's a white truck about to ram into me. I need you to get eggs and tomatoes and whatever else you have

in your fridge and start throwing them over your fence at the truck. Do *not* come into the parking lot. I repeat, *do not* come into the parking lot. This guy is dangerous."

I hung up and hoped for the best. As soon as I did, the phone began to jangle. I waited a beat, then answered. "Yeah?"

"Don't hang up on me!" the voice warned.

I already did, you idiot. But I didn't say it out loud. Instead, I said, "Sorry, but I can't talk to you and get...it... at the same time. It's in my bag in the back seat."

"Just get it."

"Okay. Hold on."

Please, please, please, Dane and Jim, I chanted in my head. Remember the time I gave you a jar of my mother's homemade pickles? Surely that has to count for something.

And then I saw a light switch on through the slats of the fence that separated the parking lot from Dane and Jim's yard. Good sign. At least they hadn't fallen back to sleep.

I heard a thump.

Then another. Then an egg splattered all over the centre of my windshield.

Typical gay guys. No aim.

Next came a head of romaine. Then I heard a sprinkling on the hood. Yup. Croutons. It was Caesar salad night.

"What the...?" I heard the voice on the other end of the phone. I guessed some of the produce was making its way onto his windshield as well.

I rolled down my window just a tad. I could hear voices: "Get out of here! Get out! We're calling the cops! Get out!"

I could have kissed those boys. At the least, I'd replace the groceries.

"This isn't over!" I heard the phone voice hiss before the connection was cut.

I watched as the truck pulled back, then squealed out of the lot, barely missing hitting me one last time. Asshole.

As soon as we were in the garage and the Mazda's rotary engine

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whirred to a stop, Barbra and Brutus began to fuss. They wanted out. Now.

While they raced off to do their business, I assessed the damage to my car. There was a pretty major dent and scrape on the driver's side door, and a few smaller ones on the rear bumper. Then, adding insult to injury, she was covered in smashed and shmooshed produce. Poor baby. I petted the car's hood, yanked a piece of lettuce from under her windshield wipers, and promised to get her into the car spa as soon as I could.

Before lowering the garage door, I did a quick check of the back alley. Although I'd been extra careful to ensure no one was following me home, I wanted to be sure. Last thing I needed was White-Truck Crazy finding out where I lived.

I still had no idea who he (she?) was, or what the "it" was that he was so certain I possessed. How desperate did you have to be to get your hands on something to chase someone down and threaten bodily and vehicular harm? The only thing I knew for sure was that whoever it was in that truck did not want to be identified. He'd not once stepped out of the cab of his vehicle, he'd blinded me with his headlights so I couldn't see in, and he'd done a pretty fine job of disguising his regular speaking voice on the phone.

Was this all some kind of bizarre mix-up? The fact that he knew my name and cellphone number convinced me otherwise.

What a night. Welcome home, Russell Quant. Never a dull moment.

With my luggage lost in space, I wasn't in any particular hurry to get inside to unpack. So I decided to saunter around the backyard until Barbra and Brutus were ready to come in.

My home is my castle, a place where I re-energize and seek refuge from the world. If I could build a moat around it, I would, but I think the city has zoning restrictions on drawbridges. The house is on a large lot at the dead end of a quiet, little-travelled street. A grove of towering aspen and thick spruce neatly hides it from the view of the casual passerby. Inside, the house is a unique mix of open, airy rooms and tiny, cozy spaces, each appealing to me, depending on my mood. The backyard is a wonderful never-

never land of lovingly planted flora, clay pots, metalwork benches, and stone pathways that lead into leafy enclaves hidden throughout the expanse. At the rear of the lot, accessible by way of a back alley, is the two-car garage with a handy second storey I use for storage.

As I entered the backyard, I took a deep breath. As much as I love to travel, Dorothy was right, there really is no place like home. It was nearing midnight, but the air was still toasty after a hot day and perfect for a late night stroll. An arrangement of solar lights along the pathways, in the flowerbeds, and even hanging from the boughs of trees, created enough light for me to enjoy the familiar landscape. I deadheaded a few geraniums, pulled out an errant weed or two, checked on the progress of my gladiola patch, and finally settled on a Muskoka chair on the deck. I sucked in a lungful of sweet air and beheld my kingdom. Once my two royal subjects were done relieving themselves and snuffling under bushes to confirm that no other animal had marked their property while they were gone, we proceeded inside.

Barbra and Brutus immediately visited their dishes, looking up at me with disappointment when they found them empty. I tossed my carry-on onto the kitchen island and filled their bowls with cool water. Not quite what they were hoping for, but good enough for a few slurps.

Since it was Saturday night after all, and I was suddenly not tired, I opened a bottle of 2006 Granada Creek Vermentino for myself. It was so crisp and clean, it tasted like fruit just turning from green to gold. Exactly what I was hoping for, and good enough for several slurps.

Knowing that I'd pocketed a couple of dry doggie treats, Barbra and Brutus trotted after me down the hallway to my bedroom. I deposited the carry-on and washed my hands and face. Then we headed to my den, hidden in a cozy corner further down the hallway, at one end of the house.

I wanted to check my phone messages, hoping for a call from the Air Canada lost luggage gods. I put the message manager on speaker and joined the dogs on the inviting, toffee-coloured couch. All six of our ears perked up when the mechanical voice informed

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me that I had fourteen messages. But I'd checked them only three days ago from the island!

Getting home to find real life crashing in all around me is the one part of travelling I hate. I wasn't ready for it. I debated jumping up and switching off the machine, but it was too late. I heard Sereena's voice: rich, clear, and unmistakably imperious in a the-queen-who-lives-next-door kind of way.

"Russell, you'll be home in a day or two. I've been watching over your house as you asked me to. All is well. There was an unfortunate incident with a pollster, but more on that some other time. Missing you dreadfully. I hope you've had a chance to visit Louis Pohl's Gallery. Or have you been spending all your time cavorting on beaches and in bed with Mr. Canyon? Don't forget skincare. And did you try Hoku's at the Kahala? You shouldn't miss the wild mushroom and truffle consommé. Anyhow, enough of that. With Anthony and Jared's wedding coming up the Saturday after you get home, I'll need your assistance with a few small things. I'll expect your call. *Aloha, darling.*"

That was Sereena. My next door neighbour. A woman with a pedigree of well-earned mystique. She's a complex, fantastical creature with a mythical past no single person knows the whole of. Somewhere north of middle age, she's an imperfect, damaged, raving beauty with an unrivalled, give-me-all-you've-got outlook on life. It comes from being a survivor who barely survived, a woman of the world in a world that showed her equal parts treachery and extravagance. She's a modern day Cleopatra, except without the lands to rule and fewer asps.

Although I knew my good friends, Anthony and Jared, were indeed taking the plunge in less than seven days, it was still a shock to hear the word "wedding" being spoken. I'd barely had time to swallow that reality when the next message filled the room. Speak of the devil, it was Jared, reminding me that I'd promised to help build the deck for the new Ash House. How drunk was I when I made that commitment? Then came Errall. She'd finally decided to spread Kelly's ashes and wanted me to join her. Was that why she was so morose earlier on? Why hadn't she said anything to me then? There were a few hang ups, a carpet cleaning service offering free, no obligation quotes, and then my mother.

Even though I'd told her exactly where I was going and exactly when I was coming back, she sounded as if I'd disappeared off the face of the earth, had been gone for a decade, and she was wondering when I was planning on seeing her. Another few hang ups. Another call from Errall about wanting me at some PWC meeting. A dentist appointment reminder. A don't-forget-you're-my-best-man-on-Saturday reminder from Anthony. The last call was from Alex.

"Hi sexy," he began, his deep voice rumbling over the miles of cable (or whatever it is that telephone companies use these days). "I miss you, guy. I guess I don't really know why I'm calling. Just feeling a bit punchy after all the flying. Loved our weekend together." There was a pause, then: "I'm glad you said yes."

Even though it was the shank of summer, all I wanted to do was hide myself under a blanket until sometime next week. I glanced at Barbra. With a vaguely accusing look, she gazed at me, at the phone, then back at me. Damn dog. I tried my luck with Brutus. He was snoring by the fireplace. Much better.

I gulped the last of my wine and decided to distract myself by unpacking my carry-on. We padded back to the bedroom. Barbra and Brutus quickly claimed spots on the bed, from where they could keep an eye on me while still being comfortable. I pulled out my Dopp kit and put my airline-regulation-sized toiletries back in their regular places. My book went on the bedside table. I reached into the outside pocket of the bag for the slip of paper the lost luggage guy had given me. It had the claim number and the address for a Web site where I could apparently check the retrieval status of my bag. Along with the claim tag came a second piece of paper. I unfolded it and frowned.

Suddenly I knew exactly what it was the maniac in the white truck had been after.