

## CHAPTER ONE

“It’s not like Nick to be late.” Jada Price, my partner at Storm Investigations, tilted her beer bottle so that it pointed toward our closed office door. “He said that he’d be here early to help celebrate.”

“Something better must have come up.” I rammed the knife hard into the Black Forest cake I’d bought at a bakery down the street. We were having a little party to mark the end of a big case—we’d reunited a missing teenager with her family after a year on the street. It looked like the kid was happy to be home and that felt good. What Jada didn’t know was that our office assistant, Nick Roma, had asked me to dinner after the cake cutting.

I’d been looking forward to seeing if the spark I felt for him could grow into something deeper. But Nick must have had second thoughts about his offer. He could have at least called to let me know he was backing out.

“Refill your beer?” Jada asked as she pulled open the small fridge door.

“No thanks. I’m going to head out for a burger after this cake. You can come along if you like.”

“I’ve got a date. Sorry.”

Jada had a string of men eager to take her out. She rarely had to cook a meal or eat alone. I raised the knife and gave the cake another whack. Nick Roma was the only date I’d accepted since I’d come back to Ottawa the year before. Now he’d stood me up and I felt like a fool.

I flipped the piece of cake onto a plate and handed it to Jada. She looked from me to the knife and back again, but didn’t say anything. I hacked off a second piece for myself before we took our chairs side by side, and put our feet up on the desk.

Jada scooped a forkful of icing into her mouth. She followed it with a swallow of beer and said, “I hear your sister Cheri is back in town.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“You haven’t seen her?”

I shook my head. “It’s complicated.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“She missed Evan’s seventh birthday.”

I had mixed feelings about my flighty sister, mostly angry ones. What kind of mother left her

family for a year to work overseas? Cheri's claim that she needed the time away to further her career had been the height of selfishness in my book. Evan and my brother-in-law, Jimmy, had coped okay after a few months of moping around. They'd both spent a lot of time at my dad's house, where I was staying. Maybe too much time.

Jimmy and I had been engaged before he took up with my sister and married her instead. I could tell the last few months that he was rethinking his choice. I hoped Cheri's return from China would get things back to normal. I'd also been hoping a date with Nick Roma would get my thoughts off Jimmy. So much for good intentions.

I ate the last of my slice of cake and stood up. "I'm heading out. If Nick shows up . . . tell him . . . tell him I couldn't wait any longer."

"Where are you having supper?"

"I'll wander up Wellington Street until I find a place."

I left the office and climbed down the stairs. When I reached the sidewalk, I walked west along the busy Hintonburg street, which was lined with stores, restaurants, and coffee shops. The evening was warm for October, but the summer had been a hot one. In daylight, the leaves were brilliant yellow, red, and

orange. Some crunched under my feet but most were still on the trees. By now, though, the sun had sunk behind the tall buildings and the streetlights were on. Thanksgiving was just over a week away.

After I crossed Holland, I entered a pub called The Wood. The food was good and I could sit at the bar and watch sports on the flat screen. I ordered a pint of local beer and a cheeseburger platter.

The pretty bartender flicked through the stations on the television in front of me and stopped on a breaking news alert. She turned to me, her brown eyes wide. “Have you heard about this?”

“Heard about what?”

“One of the TV stars from the show *A Model Life* was murdered near the Rideau Canal. Dow’s Lake, to be exact.”

“No way.” I leaned closer and she turned up the volume. The reporter’s face was upset. She said into the camera, “Lena Caruso was found by a passing jogger early this morning. Police aren’t saying much at this time but are asking for anyone with information to come forward.”

A photo of a stunning Italian girl in her twenties filled the screen. A hotline phone number was just below her image. She had masses of long black hair, giant eyes the colour of dark chocolate, and high

cheekbones. She'd been one of a trio of models from other countries being filmed as they adjusted to life in Ottawa. The reality show was a hit in the city and the three women were instant stars.

"What a tragedy," I said.

"Isn't it? Nobody is safe." The girl switched channels to a football game as my burger arrived.

My cellphone rang while I was popping the last French fry into my mouth.

"Nick's being held at the police station on Elgin. They say he murdered his girlfriend in a jealous rage and left her by the canal. Can you get down to the station and check it out?" Jada's voice was loud and worried.

"That can't be right," I said. My eyes returned to the television screen then back to my empty beer glass. I pictured Lena Caruso's beautiful face with the hotline number below. Nick had been a movie star in Italy before he moved to Ottawa to be with his dad. And he liked to keep his past a secret. If what Jada said was true, all that was about to change.

I signalled with my hand for the bartender to come over. "I'll get down there as soon as I can," I said to Jada.

"Good. Phone me when you know what's going on." The line went dead.

“Was everything okay with your meal?” The girl waited while I fished in my pocket for my wallet.

“It was great. But I have to cancel the beer I just ordered. I got called into work.”

“I know what that feels like. All your plans go down the toilet.”

“Yeah.” *As if I'd had any plans to flush away.*

On the way back to my car, which I'd left parked near the office, I mumbled, “Stupid, stupid, stupid.” What was it with me and men? The second I start letting one of them close to me, they end up being a murder suspect. I should never have let someone as secretive as Nick Roma into my world. Killer or not, he had enough baggage to fill an Ottawa city bus.