

CHAPTER ONE

Ottawa was into its second week of steamy July heat and people were grumpy. Passers-by who used to say hello now couldn't be bothered to smile. It was so hot by mid-morning that people were frying eggs on the sidewalk. Well . . . they *could* have fried eggs on the sidewalk if they'd felt up to it.

"Somebody is going to kill somebody," said my PI partner Jada Price, wiping sweat off her forehead. She'd tied her black dreadlocks into a soggy ponytail on the top of her head. The air conditioner in our second-floor office in the Hintonburg neighbourhood was broken. Two fans were pushing hot air around like a pea soup bath. Jada opened a beer bottle from our little fridge. "I know *I* feel like strangling the repair guy. How hard can it be to fix an air conditioner, anyway?"

Of all the grumpy people in Ottawa, Jada was leading the parade. I accepted the cold beer from her and rested it on my cheek. "The repair company

says the warranty has run out. Our landlord is fighting over who pays to fix the unit.”

“And we boil like lobsters in a big pot while they argue. Nice.” Jada leaned her face into the fridge to cool off. She took out a beer for herself and sat in the seat next to me. We leaned back in our chairs with our feet on the desk.

“So, when does Nick get home?” Jada asked.

“Friday. The film shoot wraps up Thursday night with a cast party.”

“You should go. New York City isn’t that far away.”

“I’m not part of that world.” *Beautiful actresses, glitz and glamour.* “I’d be like a duck out of water.” I didn’t tell Jada that Nick had asked me a few times to fly down. I’d told him that work was too busy. Nick worked for us at Storm Investigations when he was in town. But his acting career was keeping him away from Ottawa longer and longer. Somehow, we managed to keep our one-year relationship going long distance . . . at least we had so far.

“You’re one big chicken, Sweet.”

“Maybe, but I’m a chicken happy in my own nest.”

Jada took a sip of beer. She rubbed the cold bottle down her neck. “I can’t believe how slow business is. It’s as if people are drained by the heat.”

So, I'd lied to Nick about being busy. He'd be in Ottawa soon enough. I was banking on him being so happy to see me that he'd overlook my little fib.

We both jumped as we heard footsteps stomping up the stairs to our office. Jada grabbed the beer from my hand. She tucked the bottles into a desk drawer. I leapt across the room to my desk and put my fingers on the keyboard. Jada opened a file and pretended to read.

The door opened. A short, grey-haired woman entered first. She was in her late fifties and wore a sleeveless silk blouse and knee-length shorts. She was followed by a six-foot-tall man in his early thirties. He was muscular and good-looking with jet black hair and dark blue eyes. The woman had the same eyes but a paler shade of blue. The man looked familiar but I couldn't place him.

Jada looked up as if surprised to see them. "Yes, can I help you?" she asked.

"I hope so," said the woman. "My name is Carol Rose and this is my son Brent Rose. He's got himself into a fine mess."

Brent slouched into a visitor chair with a sigh. She took the one next to him. I moved across the room to sit next to Jada.

“My partner, Anna Sweet,” said Jada pointing at me. “And I’m Jada Price. Can you tell us about your problem, Brent?”

Brent took a few seconds to clear his throat. He glanced at his mother. “I still say I can handle this on my own. You’re over-reacting big time.” He sounded annoyed. But he smiled at her before looking across the desk at us. He gave us a sheepish grin. His dimples were like a weapon he was using to charm us. “I’ve, uh, been dating three women . . .”

“At the same time, without them knowing,” added his mother. The look she gave him could freeze water. “But somehow they all found out four weeks ago.”

Brent shifted positions to lean as far away from her as he could get. “The thing is,” he said, “one of them is really upset.”

“I should say so,” said Carol, “and while I understand the anger, she can’t carry on this way. It’s . . . it’s criminal.”

“I don’t think she’ll follow through, Mom.”

Jada tapped the desk to get their attention. “What exactly has been going on, Brent?” she asked.

“The three women broke up with me the same day.”

“How did they find out about each other?” I asked.

Brent shrugged. “Not sure.” He crossed his long legs at the ankles and stared me in the eyes. His seemed to be checking out my interest. “But believe me, none of them wants to see me anytime soon.” The dimples were back like an open invitation.

Jada looked from Brent to me with a half-smile on her lips. I thought I heard her say, “Good grief.”

Carol took a deep breath. “One of them is sending Brent threats. Leaving notes taped to his town house door. She says ...” Carol took a deep breath. “She says that cheaters like him deserve to die. She told my son to start planning his funeral.”

Brent rubbed his head. For the first time, worry entered his eyes and his smile disappeared. “The thing is ...” he said, “I have no idea which one of them is doing it.”