

## Chapter 1

It was dark. The road was slick from an earlier rain, and damp leaves squelched underfoot. Wendy, my three-year-old, shepherd/labrador cross, trotted ahead of me down Wistler Road. I would have worried about walking alone on a dark country road almost anywhere else, but Crane was a small town and its crime rate was practically non-existent, so I felt safe. Still, it wouldn't do to take a tumble on this moonless night, so I was being careful.

I heard Wendy snuffling and digging at something up ahead in the bush. Removing the slim flashlight that I always carried on our bedtime walks, I shone the beam in her direction, afraid that she had found something disgusting to roll in just before bed. Nothing like having to deal with a stinking, soaking-wet pet when all you wanted to do was crawl under the covers.

"What did you find, girl?" I called. The noise stopped, and I waited for her to pop out of the trees and trot back to me, but she didn't appear.

"Come here, Wendy," I called. All was still, and then I heard a piercing howl that made my hair stand on end and my breath catch in my throat. It was a primitive, uncanny sound, and it unnerved me on this lonely stretch of road.

"What's gotten into you?" I muttered. Stepping up to the trees, I peered into the dense shadows.

"Wendy?" She whined softly, and I sidled between the trees, picking my way through last year's undergrowth. She was up ahead in a small clearing.

"Come on, girl," I commanded. Instead, Wendy lowered her head and nosed at something on the ground. I trained my beam downward, and jumped. It was a man. He was lying face down, dressed in jeans and a black leather jacket, his arms lying straight beside his body. He wasn't moving.

"Hello?" I called, "are you alright, mister?" There was no response. I wanted to turn and run, but forced myself to creep closer for a better look. Taking a deep breath, I crouched down beside him. His hair was dark and wavy with silver flecks in it, but I couldn't see his face. Wendy leaned against me and nudged my neck with her wet nose. All I could hear was my own

pulse roaring in my ears. I reached out to touch the man's hand, and snatched my own back again. His skin was cold, too cold. I knew that I should check to see if he was still breathing, but the thought of turning him over repulsed me. Sick with dread, I reached for his shoulder and rolled him over anyway.

I gasped and sprang back a few steps, horrified when his eyes seemed to stare straight up into mine. Wendy barked and shot past me into the trees. I took a few deep breaths and shone the light full into his face.

"Holy shit," I whispered. Sculpted cheek bones, blue eyes, generous mouth. It was Jack.

I stared down at him. My ex-husband, whom I hadn't seen for four years, was lying dead beside this country road in the middle of the Alberta Foothills, and I didn't have a clue how he had got here.

Looking past his face, I spotted a hole in the front of his jacket, right over the chest. I pulled the jacket open with hands that wouldn't stop trembling. The grey shirt beneath it had a big patch of dried blood spread across the front. I stumbled back a step, a wave of nausea overwhelming me.

Something crackled in the undergrowth behind me, and I whirled around. A brilliant light flashed in my face and blinded me. I threw up an arm to shield my eyes, but the light dropped and inched along the ground, coming to rest over Jack's body. I pointed my own light at the black shape advancing toward me. Wendy crept toward him with a menacing growl, her jowls dragged back over her teeth, but the man didn't budge an inch.

"Anna Nolan, what the hell did you do?" he asked.

## Chapter 2

I sighed with relief as I recognized Steve Walker, one of our local RCMP officers, until the impact of his words cut through my thoughts like a slap in the face.

“What? What are you talking about? I didn’t have anything to do with this.”

Steve bent to examine the body. I tried to slip past him, wanting to escape this horrible sight and let Steve deal with it, but he grabbed my arm and spun me around.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he demanded. Steve was younger than me, in his late twenties, tall and good-looking with a slow grin and a low boiling point, but he was all cop as his eyes delved into mine.

“Go to hell,” I said as I tried to jerk my arm out of his grip, but he held me fast. We glared at each other as Wendy slunk to my side, still growling.

“Control your dog, Anna.”

“Wendy, sit,” I said, looking down at her. She hesitated and sat. “Good girl,” I said, patting her head automatically with my free hand before turning back to Steve. “Now what?”

“Now, you tell me what’s going on here.” He let me go, and I rubbed my sore arm. Steve and I sometimes ate together at The Diner with some of the other locals, and I was inclined to like him. Now, I calculated how best to handle him.

“There’s not much to say. I was taking Wendy for a walk and she found him. He was dead when I got here.”

Steve shone his flashlight back over the body. “I don’t recognize him,” he said. “Do you?” I hesitated, wondering how much to give away, and Steve shot me a suspicious look.

“Yeah, I know him,” I said, letting out a deep breath. “It’s my ex-husband, Jack Nolan.”

Steve inhaled sharply through his teeth. “What’s he doing here?”

“Steve, I have absolutely no idea.”

“What do you mean? What’s he doing here in Crane?”

“I mean that I haven’t seen or heard from Jack in years. I have no idea why he’s here.”

Steve's face was grim as he thought for a moment. "Let's go back to my cruiser," he said. "I've got to call for back-up." He indicated that I should precede him, so Wendy and I marched ahead through the trees while he trailed behind.

The brilliant red and blue lights from his cruiser sliced through the darkness at the side of the road. Steve unlocked the back door, and I waited for Wendy to hop inside before climbing in behind her. Steve shut us in and crawled into the front seat to call for back-up. When he had finished, he turned around to stare at me through the metal grill that separates the officers from their "guests."

"What are you doing here anyway?" I asked.

"We got an anonymous tip that something suspicious was happening out on Wistler Road. I drove by and heard a dog howling in the bush. When I pulled over, your dog burst out of the trees, barking like crazy. By the time I recognized her, she had turned tail and run back in. I followed her, and there you were with the body." He paused, glancing out the window at the enveloping trees before turning back to me. "Look, Anna, this is going to take a while. The forensics squad will be along in a few minutes, and I'll have to take them back to the crime scene. You're going to have to sit tight until I'm done, and then I'll take you into the station to make a statement."

I stared at him, my jaw aching from the effort of trying to stop my teeth from chattering. The impact of Jack's death, plus my horror at being implicated in it, were hitting me hard.

"All right."

He studied me. "Are you okay? You look pretty shaky."

"I guess it's colder tonight than I thought."

"Or maybe you're going into shock. Wait a minute." Popping open the trunk, he got out of the car and fetched a blanket. "Here, wrap yourself in this," he said, opening the back door and handing it to me.

"Th-thanks," I said, not trusting myself to look at him. I didn't want to admit how much finding Jack's body upset me, to him or to me. Jack and I were old history.

Steve nodded and leaned against the side of the car until another cruiser sped up, lights flashing, and pulled in behind us. Steve walked back to confer with his colleagues. A few minutes later, three officers climbed out of the vehicle and began unpacking equipment. A female officer erected orange cones and flashing lights in the middle of the road and glanced at

me on her way back to the car. I stared straight ahead, refusing to make eye contact with her. Another vehicle pulled in behind them, and a man got out carrying an official-looking black bag. He joined the others, and together they donned white forensic suits. Then Steve led them back into the bush, their powerful flashlight beams bouncing off the tree trunks until they disappeared.

I collapsed against the seat, shaking all over, the memory of my ex-husband's dead face haunting me. Wendy leaned against me, and I hugged her tight for comfort. What was Jack doing in Crane, anyway? Did he have an acting job nearby?

It was his acting career that had brought us to the Alberta Foothills in the first place. Four years ago, Jack had been filming a movie in the nearby village of Longview. Longview was small and housing had been pretty limited in those days, so we had rented a neat little cottage here in Crane. I had loved the cottage from the minute I had seen it, a one-storey bungalow with ivy clinging to weathered wood siding and a pretty rose garden out front. The location had seemed ideal on the outskirts of town with lots of privacy and access to long walks in the countryside. The shoot was scheduled for a few months, so we had enrolled our son, Ben, in the local high school just as he was ready to start grade ten. Then my Aunt Sharon died and left me the queenly inheritance of \$93,000. We had been getting by on Jack's acting jobs up until then, with me picking up whatever temporary secretarial work I could find, so I was thrilled to have some financial security at last.

When the inheritance cheque arrived, Jack, Ben and I had gone out to an expensive steak house to celebrate – just the three of us, with none of the usual movie crowd around. That meal was my last happy memory of Jack. We laughed a lot, and Jack and I got pretty friendly later that night after Ben had gone to bed. When I woke up the next morning, I was feeling more optimistic about our marriage. Maybe having the money would take some of the pressure off our relationship. I made pancakes for my two men and kissed them both goodbye before walking into town to do some shopping.

But while standing in line at the bank later that morning, I overheard a movie extra telling her friend about an affair Jack was having with one of the film's stuntwomen. I shouldn't have been surprised; Jack had cheated on me religiously over the course of our seventeen-year marriage. This time was different, though. I had a nest egg, thanks to my wonderful aunt, and it would tide Ben and me over until I could find a decent job. Crane was as good a place as any to put down roots, so I made a beeline into the loan manager's office to talk about mortgages right

then and there. Later, when I got home, I called the owner of our house to see if she was interested in selling. She was. A chunk of my inheritance money went into a down payment, and when Jack left town at the end of the shoot, Ben and I stayed on.

I looked up to see Steve returning through the trees. I pushed Wendy away and sat up as he climbed into the front seat and turned to face me.

“I’m going to have to take you to the station now, Anna.”

“What about a lawyer?” I asked, my stomach clenched with tension.

His face hardened as he looked at me. “You have the right to have a lawyer present. Do you want one?”

I looked down at my hands. “I’m not being charged with anything, am I?”

“No, but you do have to make an official statement about how you found your ex-husband’s body.”

“Fine, I guess I don’t need a lawyer for that. There’s not much to say, since I’m not guilty of anything.” He nodded and started up the cruiser. “Steve, it looked like Jack had been shot,” I blurted.

“The coroner is with him right now. We’ll have to wait for the report.” His eyes caught mine in the rear-view mirror. Usually, Steve’s eyes had a twinkle in them, but they looked plenty worried as we pulled away.

We drove to the RCMP station on the other side of Crane. Steve couldn’t leave Wendy alone in the cruiser, so he led us both through the station’s back door and down a concrete hallway to a small interview room. It was furnished with a scarred wooden table, a tissue box, and three plastic chairs. The overhead fluorescent lights made the room look flat and dreary. I glanced around, trying not to cringe, and chose the chair facing the door.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” Steve said, shutting me in with Wendy. I stared at the back of the door, feeling like I was wrapped in some kind of fog that prevented me from feeling or thinking straight.

“Jack is dead. Jack is dead. Somebody shot him. Jack is dead,” my mind chanted over and over while Wendy sniffed around the room and finally settled at my feet. The door opened a few minutes later, and Steve re-entered carrying a glass of water and a plastic bowl. He set the glass down on the table in front of me, and the bowl on the floor for Wendy.

“Here you are, girl,” he said. As Wendy rose and began lapping up the water, my eyes began to tear. I was just about to thank Steve for his unexpected kindness when the door opened and Staff Sergeant Eddy Mason sauntered into the room. He hesitated, his eyebrows rising when he saw Wendy drinking from the bowl.

“You providing room service, Walker?” he asked. Steve looked coolly back at him without saying a word. “Evening, Ms. Nolan,” Eddie said, shifting his gaze to me. He shut the door and took the seat opposite me. Steve pulled a notepad from his pocket and slid into the chair at the end of the table.

I knew Eddy by sight. We bumped into each other from time to time at the Post Office, where we chatted about the weather or complained about the number of advertising flyers stuffed into our mail boxes. He was a short, rotund man with glasses perched on the end of his nose who didn’t in the least resemble Santa Claus, despite the similarity in their proportions.

Eddy didn’t waste any time with pleasantries. He plunged right into questions, asking me to describe the events leading up to the discovery of Jack’s body. Steve took notes, keeping his face buried in his pad.

“I got home from work tonight about five fifteen. Traffic was bad – there was an accident leaving the city.”

“Where is work, Ms. Nolan?”

“I work at Chinook University in Calgary. I’m the administrative assistant for the Kinesiology Department.”

Eddy nodded. “How long have you worked there?”

“Four years.”

“And?”

“And I had a book club meeting at the library at six, so I didn’t have a lot of time to get ready. I let Wendy out and fed her, changed my clothes, and made a sandwich. I left the house about five forty-five and walked to the library.”

“Who else was at the meeting?”

“There were only three of us tonight. May Weston, Erna Dombrosky, and me. One of the other ladies was sick, and Helen McDonald was away on vacation.”

“Were Erna and May already there when you arrived?”

I thought for a moment. “Usually I’m last, since I’m the only one who works outside of town, but Erna came in a couple of minutes after I did.”

“So then what happened?”

“The meeting broke up early because there were only the three of us. Around seven thirty. I left the library and walked home.”

“Did the other two ladies leave with you, Ms. Nolan?”

“No. Erna said something about wanting to find a book, and May stayed to give her a lift home. I left on my own.”

“And what happened next?”

“I walked home and read for a while.”

“Did you see anyone on the walk home?”

“I don’t remember seeing anyone. It was raining and I was using an umbrella. My head was down.”

Eddy nodded. He seemed relaxed and in control of the situation, while my nerves were frazzled. “So, you went home and read – for how long?”

“Till nine thirty. Then it was time for Wendy’s walk.” Wendy stirred at the mention of her name and started to get up. “Lie down, girl,” I murmured.

“It would have been dark by then. Do you always walk your dog at night? You live right on the edge of town, don’t you?”

“Yes, but the dark doesn’t bother me. I know the area really well and I feel safe.”

“Go on. Was it still raining?”

“No, it stopped sometime after I got back from the library.”

“Where did you walk?”

“Down Wistler Road headed out of town.”

“Did anyone see you?”

“No, no one.” I went on to explain how Wendy had found Jack’s body, finishing with an abridged history of my marriage and divorce, including my lack of contact with my ex-husband over the past few years.

“When was the last time you saw Jack Nolan?” Eddy asked.



“About four years ago when we met at the lawyer’s office to finalize the divorce details. Jack gave me full custody of Ben and was supposed to contact me whenever he wanted to see him.”

“So, did he?”

“No.”

“Never?”

“No. Jack wasn’t around much when Ben was growing up. He’d be away for weeks at a time on a film shoot. Other times he’d be at home, but with theatre rehearsals and evening performances, he wasn’t home a lot. After we separated, he just didn’t bother to see Ben.”

“Yeah? Seems pretty odd, a father not bothering to see his son all those years. Must have made you pretty mad, cheating on you and being a lousy father.”

I coloured. “Who said anything about cheating?” I glanced over at Steve, whose face was expressionless as he stared at the table top.

Eddy balanced his chair on its back legs. “Pretty common knowledge in a town this size. That why your marriage broke up?”

I met his eyes and looked away, flustered. It was bad enough to find Jack’s body; I didn’t bargain on having to explain my marriage to the police, too. “It was more complicated than that,” I muttered.

“You don’t say?” I didn’t elaborate. “So your husband didn’t visit you or Ben after the divorce. What about telephone calls or e-mails?”

I clasped my trembling hands together to steady them, and leaned my elbows on the table. “I’ll tell you something, Sergeant. A year ago, I wrote to Jack care of his agent to invite him to Ben’s high school graduation. Jack didn’t bother to show up. That was the extent of my correspondence with my ex-husband.”

Eddy grunted. “One last thing, Ms. Nolan. When you found the body, was it damp or dry?”

“Dry,” I said.

He glanced at Steve, and they both stood up. “That’s good enough for now. Steve will get your statement typed up and be back to have you sign it. You wait here until it’s ready.”

They left, leaving Wendy and me shut up in the interrogation room. I stared at my folded hands on top of the table and thought about Jack lying there all alone on the cold ground. Soon the tears started to come. Damn that man. He’d given me plenty of trouble during our marriage,

but now that he was possibly murdered, and probably deservedly so, I grieved for him. I lay my head down on top of my arms and sobbed. Wendy crept over and nuzzled my leg before lying down at my feet.

After a while, the tears turned into sniffles, and I began to think. I loved mystery novels and had read plenty of them, especially Agatha Christie. In all of the mysteries I'd ever read, the police always suspected the person who found the body.

"Pull yourself together," I urged myself. "You're in a bad situation and you've got to start using your brain." I grabbed a few tissues from the box on the table and mopped my face. By the time Steve returned with the paperwork, I was in control. I noticed that he left the door open this time.

"Okay, Anna, please read your statement and sign it," he said. I did as he asked and handed it back to him.

"Okay – that's it for tonight. I'll drive you home. Just make sure you stay in town for the next few days so that you're available for questioning." Steve's bearing was stiff and he didn't make eye contact as he spoke. I wondered what he had to feel uncomfortable about. Maybe the other officers had come back from the crime scene with some damning information.

"Have you found out anything, Steve?"

"Yeah – maybe – nothing good," he replied, squatting down to pat Wendy. She licked his hand, now that the situation was non-threatening. He stood up as I got out of my chair and came around the table to lean beside him.

"Look, Anna," he said, glancing sideways, "that stuff you said about Jack not talking to you all those years – are you sure about that?"

"Positive. Once our divorce was settled, Jack disappeared."

He glared at me. "Come on, don't lie to me. We know that Jack called you earlier tonight."

My stomach somersaulted and I grabbed the edge of the table for support. "What are you talking about? Jack didn't call me," I said.

"No?" he replied, his eyes boring into mine. "The call history on his cell phone says otherwise. Did he call you at other times, too?"

"No, he didn't. I swear he didn't. What time was he supposed to have called me, anyway?"

"At seven. Was he waiting for you somewhere? Did he call because you were late for a meeting with him?"

“I don’t believe it. Why would he call me?”

“You tell me,” Steve said, his expression stony.

“No, I’m telling you the truth. Is this some kind of trick?” I was starting to panic and my voice grew louder. “I told you, I wasn’t even home at seven. I was at the book club meeting from six to seven thirty. Talk to May and Erna. They’ll tell you that I was at the library with them.”

I was fighting hard not to cry. Wendy began to whine, and I squatted down to pat her while trying to control my emotions. I glanced out the door and saw a woman officer peering down the hallway at us. Steve nodded, and she disappeared.

“You believe me, don’t you, Steve?” I asked, looking up at him from the floor.

“Look, we’ll be checking with the other book club members tomorrow. There’s no need to hold you any longer tonight.” He took my hand and hauled me to my feet. “Come on, Anna, it’s late. Let’s get you and your dog home.” The anger had faded from his eyes.

I laid my hand on his arm. “Look, I’m sorry I shouted just now. I guess I’m pretty shook up. I just can’t believe that this is all really happening.”

“So, sleep on it, and maybe you’ll remember something useful in the morning.”

Steve drove us home and waited while I turned the key in my front door before backing down the driveway and pulling away. I went inside, dead tired and numb.