

Chapter 2

"What have you got, Dave?"

"Man dead upstairs. Hotel guest. The maid found him when she went in to clean."

"Have you seen him?"

"Yes."

"Is this likely to be our business?"

"I'd say so, Sarge. Shot in the back of the head."

A small crowd had gathered in the lobby. Staff and hotel guests stood in silence, watching the police. Two paramedics stood by the elevator with their stretcher, the sheets clean and crisply folded.

Sergeant John Winters recognized the hotel manager. "I'm going upstairs for a quick look, Peter. Can you and your people remain here?" It was phrased like a request. It wasn't.

He headed for the elevator. Constable Dave Evans followed.

"Is anyone upstairs?"

"Molly's guarding the door."

"Who was first on the scene?"

"Molly."

"You stay here. No one in or out of the hotel, and no one unofficial upstairs until I get back. When Detective Lopez and the coroner arrive, send them up."

He nodded to the paramedics. The elevator door opened as soon as he pressed the button.

The Hudson House Hotel was the best hotel in Trafalgar, British Columbia. It was an old building, old by western North America standards, built in the late 1800s. For most of the twentieth century, it had been lodging for itinerant loggers and miners. It turned into a backpackers' hostel when young people discovered the area's skiing and climbing opportunities. At the beginning of this century, as tourists got older and more affluent, less inclined to rough it, the hotel attached a new wing, underwent major renovations, and the old building was refurbished to a degree of luxury it had never before known.

Sergeant John Winters of the Trafalgar City Police looked at himself in the spotless glass paneling of the elevator. He and his wife had been reversing down the driveway, heading for a much-needed few days of hedonism in San Francisco, when his cell phone rang. He'd taken the call, and driven back up the driveway. Eliza had not been pleased at this change in plans. She'd taken it quite badly, and that surprised him. It wasn't as if this was the first time in their long marriage plans had been canceled at the last minute. She was scarcely mollified when he said it would probably turn out to be nothing important and they'd catch the next flight. She slammed the door getting out of the car and dragged her suitcase to the house with shoulders

set in anger while her boots, and the wheels of the suitcase, made the ground shake. He made a mental note to call her once he'd seen the body. Young police officers had been known, in their enthusiasm, to mistake an accidental death for a deliberate one. Nevertheless, he'd already called the forensic guys.

He stepped out of the elevator. The thick beige carpet muffled his footsteps.

Constable Molly Smith looked up at the sound of the elevator doors opening. Her face was pale under her skier's winter tan, and she looked pleased to see him.

"Anyone been in there?" he said, without a greeting.

"The chambermaid, the hotel manager, me and then Dave, but no one else, far as I know. I took the call. All I was told was that someone was dead. Soon as I saw him, I shut the door behind me and called for backup."

"Who found him?"

"A hotel maid. She ran out of here screaming her head off and the manager came up and went in. He's the one who called us."

"Where's the maid?"

"Taken to hospital. Shock."

"Let's see it then."

"In the bathroom."

The room was beautifully, and expensively, decorated in shades of green and peach with heavy wooden furniture, thick drapes, deep carpet. Winters noted the disarray, the uneaten food, the dirty clothes, papers scattered across the desk and spilling onto the floor.

Smith didn't need to tell him where to go. The scent of death, of blood and bodily waste and vomit, came from the bathroom.

The man was kneeling over the toilet, his face planted into the bowl. *Worshiping the porcelain god*, some people called throwing up into the toilet after a night's drunk. The back of the head was matted with dried blood and gray matter. Blood had spattered across the walls around him. About a foot inside the door a puddle of vomit, fresh by the look and smell, lay on the floor.

"Whose is that?" he asked Smith, without turning around.

"Maid."

"You touch anything?"

"Only the side of his neck, not that it was necessary to check if he was dead, but, I thought... I guess I thought I should."

"Not a problem."

"That footprint there, I think it's mine." The faint marks of the edge of a boot tread were beside the body.

"Okay," he said, "I've seen enough for now. Let's wait for Ron."

As they left the hotel room, the elevator bell pinged and the doors opened to let out Ron Gavin, the forensic investigator, with his partner and their equipment. The Trafalgar City Police was small, and Winters relied on the RCMP for forensic assistance in major cases.

"You stay on the door," Winters said to Smith. "Keep the log. Ron, Alison, we've got work for you. This way."

Molly Smith pulled out her notebook, and jotted down the time and who had gone into the room.

The elevator pinged again. This time it was a Mountie in uniform. He was tall and handsome and the edges of his mouth turned up when he saw her standing in the hall.

He sauntered towards her. She bent her head back to her notebook.

"Guys inside?" he said.

"Yes. Wouldn't have thought this would need the dog."

"It doesn't. Norman's in the car. Thought I'd drop by, see if anyone needs a hand, or something."

The door to the hotel suite was open, low voices came from inside. Winters laughed. The Mountie grabbed her arm and pulled her to one side. He bent and kissed her, full on the mouth, and his right hand grabbed the seat of her uniform trousers.

She pulled away, both angry and pleased. "Adam. Stop that."

He reached for her again, and she swatted at his hand. "I mean it."

"No one's watching," he said with a wicked laugh.

"The sergeant catches us having a grope, I'll really be in for it."

"The sergeant should be so lucky." He ran one finger down the length of her nose. "I can't stop thinking about that thing you do."

He jumped back at the sound of footsteps.

"Molly, have the station contact Doctor Lee at KBRH and tell her we're bringing someone for her careful attention." John Winters looked at her. "Your hat is crooked. Straighten it. Adam, if you're not here to see Corporal Gavin, get back downstairs."

Hot flames rushed up Smith's neck into her face. *Goddamnit*, no one would think anything less of Adam for fooling around on the job; they'd probably give him a wink and a nudge. But her, they'd say she was too unprofessional, too wrapped up in emotions. She lifted a hand to her hat. It was not crooked.

"Thought I'd see if you need a hand, Sarge," Adam said.

"I don't. Molly, contact Ray and ask if he's got the coroner yet."

"Catch you later." Adam headed for the elevator.

Everyone knew they were dating, Molly Smith and Constable Adam Tocek of the RCMP, nothing wrong with that. Many, if not most, police women dated and married fellow officers. Men outside the job just didn't understand. But to be caught in public, it would be the woman who was called on the carpet. Why if...

The door at the end of the hall opened. The heat rose again in Smith's face. If that woman had been two minutes earlier she would have gotten a nice picture for the front page. Constable Smith necking while supposedly guarding a murder scene.

Meredith Morgenstern, reporter with the *Trafalgar Daily Gazette*, pasted on a smile as fake as her boobs and marched down the corridor as if she had a right to be here. The photographer, a weedy young guy, working part time while finishing college, slunk along behind her. He lifted his camera to take a picture of the constable guarding the scene.

"I don't think you're allowed up here, Meredith," Smith said.

"Sure I am. The people want to know."

"Constable Smith," said a voice from behind the door. "This is a restricted area. If Ms Morgenstern won't leave, she will be escorted out."

"Once you've made a quick statement, Sergeant Winters, I'll leave you to your work."

"Constable, call a car to take Ms Morgenstern to the station."
He stood in the door, blocking the way.

"All right, all right. We're going."

The photographer took another picture. Fortunately there was nothing to be seen from the doorway. All the action, past and present, was in the bathroom.

"Christ, I can't stand that woman," Winters said once the stairwell door had closed behind the reporters. He spoke into his radio as he returned to the room. "Evans, if I'd wanted you to let people up the back stairs I would have told you."

Smith let out a puff of air. Winters' attention was shifting to Dave Evans. That was good.

This time the elevator doors opened to reveal Detective Ray Lopez, Winters' partner, and the coroner.

Smith wrote their names in her notebook.

"She ran into the hall, screaming and crying. Maria, who was working the other end of the corridor, along with a good number of guests, came to see what was wrong. Maria ran downstairs and got me. When I arrived, people were standing around outside the door. Two women were trying to calm Rachel. I don't think anyone else went into the room, but I can't be sure. I..." He turned away and swallowed. "I went inside. Took one look and called 911. Then, or maybe it was before I made the call, I shut the

door, and told everyone to go back to their rooms. I doubt if anyone did."

"Probably not," John Winters said. They were in the hotel manager's office. Splotches of bright red covered Peter Wagner's normally ruddy face, his ample jowls shook, and he tugged at the wedding ring, buried in fat, on his left hand. Upstairs, Ron Gavin was hard at work, itemizing everything in the dead man's hotel room while his partner crawled around the bathroom floor. The coroner had declared the death, and the medics had been allowed to remove the body. It would be taken to Kootenay Boundary Regional Hospital in Trail for autopsy. The cause of death couldn't be much clearer, single gunshot to the back of the head, but the formalities had to be followed. You never knew what stories that gunshot might hide unless you looked. Winters had immediately ruled out suicide. Not only was the wound at a bad angle, there was no sign of the gun.

"What can you tell me about the dead man? Is he staying here alone?"

"Name's Rudolph Steiner. He's with his wife and assistant. I don't know where they are. I went to their rooms but no one answered, and I checked the restaurant and gym." Wagner was hugely overweight and breathing much too heavily. Rivers of sweat poured down his cheeks and forehead. Winters hoped he

wouldn't have to call the ambulance back. Wagner held his hand to his mouth. "Oh, no. Do you think...?"

Winters pulled out his cell phone. "What room numbers? Send someone with a set of keys to meet Detective Lopez there. Steiner's wife doesn't share a room with him?"

"Mrs. Steiner has the adjoining room, and his assistant is at the end of the hall." He reached for his phone and gave the order before dabbing at the sweat on his face with a cheerful yellow polka-dot handkerchief.

Winters asked Ray Lopez to check that the rooms were indeed empty and put his own phone away.

"Fortunately, it's the end of the season," Wagner said. "I've been able to get all the guests off that floor. The ones who want to stay, that is. We've had several premature check-outs. You'll let us know when people can go to their rooms and get their things?"

"Yes. I'll need a list of the premature checkouts." Winters checked his notes. "The maid who found the body. Rachel Kowalski. She been with you long?"

"Came at the beginning of the season. She's a ski bum, working to make money to stay in Trafalgar and ski on her days off. I'm expecting that she, along with several others, will be quitting soon. Moving on."

"You have any reason to think she knew this Steiner guy?"

"No. Although..."

"Although?"

"I'll check with the head of housekeeping, but I seem to think she was assigned to the top floors. Not the second."

"Find that out, will you? Anything else you can tell me about Steiner?"

"He was a photographer, a big name apparently, although I've never heard of him. Not that I would. Good clothes, expensive watch. In the company of a wife who probably needs fake ID to drink in the bar and a personal assistant, female. That's about all I know."

"Where's he from?"

"I checked the register. Address in Vancouver."

"You ever see him with anyone other than the wife and assistant?"

"I don't live here, John, I just work here." Wagner cracked a weak smile. His breathing was starting to settle down, and his color was already looking better. "I'll ask the staff, if you like."

"Please."

"He used room service a lot, and all the restaurant charges to his account were for one person at a time."

"When did they check in?"

Deep in his pocket, Winters' cell phone rang. He checked the display: Ron Gavin, the forensic investigator. "Excuse me a moment," he said. "Yes?"

"John, I'm taking a break. Need to stretch my legs, get a coffee. Come with me."

What? "I'm sort of tied up, Ron. You can't be finished already?"

"Still plenty to check out." Gavin's voice was low and tight. "I need a break, John. And I'd like you to come with me."

"Okay. Give me half an hour."

"Now would be good. There's a back door next to the kitchen leading out to the service area. Take it." Gavin hung up.

Winters stared at the phone in his hand.

"Problem?" Wagner asked.

"Something I have to check out. I'd like to speak to anyone on your staff who was on the second floor last night or this morning. I'm guessing your night manager is home in bed. If you can get me his address, I'll go around later."

"Okay, sure."

"And the guests. Prepare me a list, please, particularly of those on the second floor. And then, if I can give you some advice, you'd better go home and have a rest. You don't look too well."

Wagner shook his head, and the bags of fat under his chin wobbled. "Too much to do."

The lobby was quiet when Winters crossed it. The desk clerk watched him with wide, curious eyes. Dave Evans was at the front door, and almost snapped to attention when he saw the sergeant approaching. Winters ignored him, and headed out the back.

If someone didn't stand up and confess soon, this would take a lot of time and effort. A hotel full of staff and guests. It would be a nightmare to interview them all.

Nestled deep in the mountains of the southern interior of British Columbia, Trafalgar was a small, low crime town. There was no security, not even a doorman, at the hotel entrance; the upper floors were open to anyone who wandered in off the street. As soon as he saw the body, Winters had called his boss, the Chief Constable, to suggest he contact the RCMP Integrated Homicide Investigative Team, which helped with major crime cases in the small towns and rural areas of British Columbia.

That reminded him, he'd forgotten to phone Eliza. Something was bothering her lately, and he'd thought a few days in San Francisco, one of her favorite cities, would cheer her up. He'd been working a lot, with a rash of break and enters around town, and she'd been left at home, moping and restless, waiting for a spring that was taking a long time to arrive.

Gavin stood by the service door, waiting, and Winters decided to call Eliza after he'd discovered what the Mountie was in such a knot about.

Gavin didn't say a word, just held the door open and let Winters through. The alley was dark and narrow and thick with mud after days of melting snow and last night's rainstorm. Gavin walked away from the door, his hands in his pockets and his head down. The yellow stripe on his uniform pants shone faintly in the gloom. Winters followed, puzzled at his friend's strange behavior.

"We go back a long way, John," the Mountie said, coming to a halt about halfway between the back door and the street corner.

"Yeah, I know. What are you on about?"

"First time in all my years I've ever done this."

"Done what? Spit it out, man. Are you in some sort of trouble?"

"No. But I might be."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. "Found this upstairs. Figured you'd want to see it. You can decide what you want to do with it."

"What the hell?" Winters snatched the paper. "You removed evidence from a crime scene. Are you nuts?"

"Look at it, John."

It was a photograph, about four by six inches, the color faded, the paper worn, one corner torn. It showed a woman, a young woman, naked, sitting on the floor with her knees bent and her legs parted, holding her small breasts towards the camera like an offering.

"So the guy was a pervert."

"That picture was taken with film, not digital. I'd say it's about thirty years old. They haven't made a carpet like that since the 70s, and her hair's cut in that shaggy mess you don't see any more."

"So he's been a pervert for a long time. I don't see..."

"Look at it, John. Look again. *Look* at the woman."

He looked. Her lips were moist, her mouth partially open, the tip of her pink tongue trapped between her small white teeth. The pupils of her eyes were large, the gaze unfocused. Cocaine probably.

She was young and beautiful, with thick dark hair, long slim legs, and a narrow waist. Her eyes were the color of olives in a very dry martini.

Those green eyes. The first thing he saw every morning.

His whole body shuddered.

The woman in the picture was Eliza, his wife.