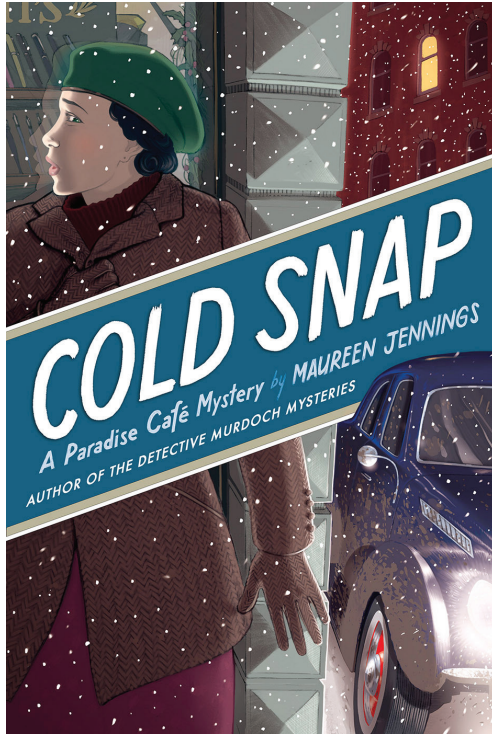


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by Maureen Jennings



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CHAPTER ONE

The air, hinting at snow, hit my face as I stepped out onto the street. My nostrils pinched together in self-defence. We were experiencing a cold snap. Just a brief one, the *Daily Star* reported reassuringly, but I knew it was a warning. Yes, we'd had an extreme summer heat wave and a mild, if wet, autumn; but, like the horses of the night, winter was coming fast, and don't expect anything ahead but the usual frostbite and lethal hypothermia to grip the land.

I was on my way to meet my boss, Thaddeus Gilmore, and I was running a little late. I'd been at the office typing up our invoices. It never ceased to surprise me how many clients, who had astonishingly precise recall of the injustices that had been meted out to them by erring spouses, seemed to have poor memories when it came to paying their bills.

Mr. Gilmore had telephoned first thing this morning to ask if I would meet him after work at his house. He wanted to introduce me to a man he referred to as Stephen Lucas. Frankly, it was quite mysterious. Mr. Gilmore had sponsored a family named Locash to immigrate to Toronto. He said they were relatives of his, a man and his wife and two young children. Mr. Gilmore had impressed upon me that I could not reveal their real name. I was to refer to them as Mr. and Mrs. Lucas and say they were from Berne, Switzerland, although I knew they were coming from Munich. "I will explain later. A small prevarication of no real consequence," Mr. Gilmore had murmured.

This turned out to be far from the truth, but more of that anon.

I pulled my scarf tighter around my face and headed down Yonge Street, walking as briskly as I could. The late afternoon was already giving up the ghost, and the dying sun was flaming over

the lake, gilding the windows of the city. I supposed that if the city couldn't be hospitable, at least it could be beautiful. Pedestrians were sparse at this time of day, and most of them were inclined to linger wistfully in front of the brightly lit shop windows, which promised to fulfill Christmas dreams.

I picked up my pace.

On my way over to Mr. Gilmore, I was planning to drop in at the Paradise Café to see how things were going. Gramps had been helping out in the kitchen for the last while. The work wasn't too hard, and I knew he enjoyed himself thoroughly. Given that I was, shall we say, romantically involved with one of the café partners, Hilliard Taylor, I took every opportunity to spend some time there.

I suppose it was the thought of Hilliard that was almost my undoing.

I was turning right on Queen Street, where there was an elegant stationery store on the corner. I had been considering buying him an expensive pen for Christmas, and the store was displaying a couple of sleek writing instruments that I'd noticed previously. I stopped to have a closer look, and the man who was walking quickly right behind me bumped into me.

"So sorry," I blurted out. "My fault for not signalling."

That might have been it, one of those slightly socially uncomfortable urban exchanges that happen on a regular basis; however, before we could move on, I heard the squeal of car tires, and I saw a car that had turned fast into the intersection heading straight for us. I didn't have time to even yell out a warning before the man I'd bumped into grabbed me by the arm and pulled me back at the same time as he himself jumped sideways. We both fell to the ground. The car swerved and, with hardly a break in speed, veered off and raced away. I had a glimpse of two men, a driver and a passenger, both muffled, caps low on their heads. The car itself was

nondescript, dark in colour, splattered with mud. All I could do was yell helplessly after it.

“Idiot! What do you think you’re doing?”

I had landed on my rear end, but fortunately I didn’t seem to be much damaged. I got to my feet and turned to help my companion, who was also struggling to stand up.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“Yes, quite well. Thank you. And you?”

“My heart is about to leap out of my throat, but otherwise I’m fine. What a total idiot that driver was. He should be charged. He could have killed us.”

The stranger’s eyes met mine. His expression was inscrutable, which I thought was surprising. I’m sure my face was red with anger.

“I’ve a good mind to call the police.”

“Did you by chance catch the licence number?” he asked.

“No, I’m afraid not. He was moving too fast.”

“Then a charge would have no effect.” He waved his hand vaguely. “No doubt he hit a patch of ice.”

“I don’t care if he hit an iceberg, he didn’t even stop to make sure we were all right.”

The man smiled at me. “But we are so, thank goodness.”

A few passersby were regarding us with curiosity.

His words were conciliatory, but he seemed as shaken by the incident as I was. He was by no means elderly, probably not that much older than me, but his face was drawn and pale. I wondered if he had been, or was perhaps still, in poor health.

He seemed embarrassed and bent to brush off some of the muddy sidewalk residue from his coat.

His hat had fallen to the ground near me, and I picked it up for him. His salt-and-pepper hair was cut very short. I handed him

his hat, an old fedora, and he put it on, tugging it down low on his forehead.

“As there seems to be no harm done, I shall continue on my path.”

He touched the brim of his hat politely and went to move off. I caught at his sleeve.

“Wait. That was quite a shocking experience. Where are you heading? I can hail a taxi for you if you’d like?”

Almost immediately, I regretted saying that. It was difficult to tell if this was something he could afford or not. He sounded like a well-bred Englishman, and there was a confidence to his manner that suggested a higher standard of living than was immediately apparent. He was wearing a shabby brown overcoat that had long ago seen better days. The Depression lingered, and I knew how many people had fallen on hard times. I didn’t want to hurt his pride.

“Thank you, but that won’t be necessary.” He gave his feet a little stamp. “I am all right, as you can see. And if you yourself are healthy, I shall leave you.”

“I am quite healthy, thanks to you.”

“I apologize for my roughness.”

“Not at all. You acted with great speed. I am in your debt.”

He saluted me again and walked off, heading up Yonge Street.

I set off myself. Bloody driver. I was still tempted to report him. It was all very strange. I couldn’t shake off the feeling that it had not in fact been an accident and that the driver of the speeding car had deliberately headed directly at us. Mentally, I shook myself. Suspecting nefarious doings when there were none was an occupational hazard of the private investigator. I didn’t think I had made that sort of enemy, and my fellow pedestrian seemed unlikely to have engendered so much animosity.

CHAPTER TWO

I was keeping a fairly watchful eye out for careless or homicidal drivers as I hurried to the Paradise. Fortunately, they all appeared to be obeying the rules of the road, and I arrived at the café unscathed. The first dinner sitting was already underway, and the lights from the windows spilled out in their usual cheery manner onto the dark pavement. I could see that the place was packed, but then it always was these days. Why wouldn't it be? The Paradise offered tasty, hot meals at very reasonable prices, not to mention warmth and welcome.

I pushed open the door and went inside. An appetizing smell wafted toward me. I must say that sometimes the odour coming from the customers' unwashed clothes and bodies could overwhelm any smell of beef stew emanating from the kitchen, but today that was not the case. The customers were chatting in between swallows; the atmosphere was animated.

Pearl Reilly, the waitress, pushed through the swing door from the kitchen. She was carrying a loaded tray of salads, which she started to distribute among the tables. When she saw me, she nodded a greeting. Usual Pearl, not too much enthusiasm, but today she seemed decidedly irritated. Not with the customers. Never with the customers. I started to head to the kitchen, and as I passed her, she said, "Where's your grandfather? I was expecting him at four-thirty. Wilf's had to help out."

I was a touch alarmed. "He is supposed to be here."

"Well, so far, he's a no-show."

"Did he ring?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"Where's Hilliard?"

“He had to go out for some jam. Calvin dropped the last jar, and we need it for the plum duff.”

“I’ll just nip home then. See what Gramps is up to.”

“I hope he can come in for the next sitting. I could do with an extra pair of hands.”

At that moment, the door opened, and a man entered. In his plain dark suit and homburg, he didn’t look like the usual clientele. Everything about him said, “Official.” I hadn’t advanced very far into the café when he chose to address me. He tipped his hat.

“Excuse me, madam, I’m here to see Mr. Morrow. Do you know where I might find him?”

On cue, Wilf came through the swing door carrying two bowls of stew. He halted abruptly. We weren’t the closest of buddies, but I didn’t think I was the one he was addressing when he exclaimed loudly, “Oh, no! Can’t come in. Sorry. We’re full.”

The man nodded. “My name is Buckley. I’m from the city. You must be Wilf Morrow? We’ve met before, I believe.”

“What can I do for you?”

Wilf was not one for finesse, or self-control, for that matter. Some of the customers glanced up curiously, but they didn’t stop eating. Mr. Buckley didn’t seem fazed by the rudeness of Wilf’s greeting.

“We sent you a notice a week ago. We want to discuss what you are planning for the Christmas festivities.”

“Something festive.”

“Good, good. But, as we said, we need a detailed agenda of what you have in mind. This is a public venue, and you’ll be charging for admittance. That brings it under the auspices of the city council.”

I could see that Wilf was righteously annoyed, but Pearl had gone back into the kitchen, and those customers nearer to the two men were starting to take notice. I stayed where I was, and perhaps

Wilf caught some whiff of warning from me. He turned away from Mr. Buckley and plonked his bowl on one of the tables. Some of the stew slopped over the rim of the bowl, but the customer didn't seem to mind. He started to eat immediately.

"I can't talk at the moment," said Wilf. "I have to serve dinner."

"I'll come after you're finished. What time would that be?"

"Not tonight. I can't deal with it tonight. Come back tomorrow afternoon. You can take this up with Hilliard. He makes the final decisions."

"Very well. I'll come about two."

As Buckley headed for the door, Wilf called after him.

"We're thinking of putting on 'Christmas Day in the Workhouse.' Nice and festive. Makes people weep at the injustices of society. Then they want to take action."

The inspector was not to be drawn in. "I know it. Very touching story, as I recall."

He noticed I had been hovering close by, and he tipped his hat politely.

"Good evening, madam."

He left.

Wilf put down the other bowl, which he also spilled. "Sorry about that, Jimmy," he said to his wizened customer, who didn't look as if he was about to complain. "Tell you what, finish that up, and I'll bring you a second helping."

"Hey, what about me?" said Jim's neighbour. "I only got half a bowl myself. Don't I deserve seconds?"

He was one of those men with a perpetually aggrieved expression that warded off charity. Wilf shrugged.

"The whole world deserves seconds, Stan."

The table seated four. Wilf leaned forward and spoke to them quietly.

“For God’s sake, don’t let on. Everybody else will want a free helping, and if we do that, the café will go broke in no time. But tell you what, you’ll all get an extra cookie. How’s that?”

“Chocolate?” asked Stan.

“Yeah.”

Wilf nodded his head in my direction — his way of saying thanks, although my contribution to appeasement had only been as a silent observer.

“I’ll go and check on Gramps,” I said as I left.

As I headed back along Queen Street, I exhaled the breath I hardly knew I’d been holding. Wilf’s temper was short at the best of times, and any officialdom trying to interfere in the world of the café was guaranteed to set him off. Usually, Hilliard was the one who calmed him down. I paused briefly to scan the gloomy street, but he was nowhere to be seen. I wondered where he’d gone for the jam.

I set off again, almost at a trot. I was anxious. It was unlike Gramps to not fulfill a commitment he’d made. He was also looking forward to helping out.

I was going to be late meeting Mr. Gilmore, but I thought this was a priority.

CHAPTER THREE

I live with my grandfather on Duchess Street, a short, pleasant street nowhere near as grand as its name would have you believe.

As I approached the house, I could see there were no lights showing in the front. It seemed dark and lifeless. I realized I wanted the glow of a lamp saying, “Yes, I’m home. I’m home.” No lights in the front wasn’t unusual. Gramps liked to sit in the kitchen, which was at the back of the house. Nevertheless, my anxiety mounted. Gramps was getting on and not as spry as he used to be. My grandma had died suddenly from an aneurysm, and I was always afraid the same thing might happen to Gramps.

There was a spiffy-looking van parked near the house. It had a large red sign on its side that advertised something called Tolliver’s Family Entertainment. Various faces with big, smiling mouths surrounded the lettering. Families enjoying themselves, I presumed. I hadn’t seen it on the street before, but I certainly didn’t pay much attention at this point.

The fox doesn’t see the trap before it snaps.

I climbed the steps and pushed open the door.

“Gramps. I’m home,” I called. “Are you ready to go?”

“In here, Charlotte,” he answered from the kitchen. I was relieved at that. He was alive at least. But I could tell from his voice something was up. And it was under unusual circumstances indeed that he’d call me by my full name. I’d been “Lottie” since I was a child.

I walked down the hall to the kitchen.

He had company. A woman dressed in dark, sombre clothing was sitting across from him at the table. There was a strong smell of violet perfume in the air. As I entered, she turned to face me.

“Charlotte,” said Grandpa. “This is er ...”

He hesitated.

He didn’t need to go on. I knew who it was. The woman was my mother. Returned from the dead, obviously.

✱

She smiled. At least, I assumed that was what she did. She was wearing a lot of rouge and powder, but one side of her face didn’t move. Her eyes didn’t operate simultaneously. The left crinkled with the smile; the right didn’t even blink. Her red lips slipped downward to the right.

“I always knew you’d grow into a beanpole,” she said. “You take after my brother.”

Her Irish accent was as pristine as if she’d just disembarked, which she had done thirty-three years ago.

I didn’t reply. You couldn’t cut air like this with a knife. A jack-hammer wouldn’t have made a dint.

Gramps spoke first. “Lottie, you look like you’ve had a tough day. I’ve just made a pot of tea. I’ll get you a cup.” He shoved back his chair. I saw that he had brought out the old wedding photograph of her and my sire. It was lying on the table.

I stopped him. “We don’t have time, Gramps. Don’t forget you’re helping out at the café tonight. They’re expecting you.”

“Oh dear. Well, you should at least have a bit of a visit with Moira. Sit down for a minute.”

I stayed where I was and addressed the woman. “To what do we owe this unexpected pleasure? Passing by, were you?”

To my surprise, she pulled out a black-edged handkerchief from the cuff of her glove. Tears spilled out and rolled down her cheek; that is, one eye was weeping, the other wasn’t.

"I'm sorry to come like this with no notice, I really am, but I wasn't sure if you'd want to see me if I warned you in advance."

There was a short, black veil attached to her hat, and she pushed it away from her forehead. To my mind, the hat expressed ambivalence. There was the conventional black veil of mourning, but she had left a jaunty red feather on one side. As well as the paralysis of her face, she also sported a long scar near her temple that disappeared into her hair. There was not a trace of grey in those strands, so I assumed she knew how to use the dye bottle. We shared the same eye colour. Hazel.

She turned attention back to her cup in its saucer. "I must say, you always did make the best cup of tea, Arnie. I still remember it."

"More than you can say about your offspring?" I asked. "Thank goodness for Grandma Annie and Gramps. I guess it would have been an orphanage for me if they hadn't stepped in."

"You know perfectly well there was never any question about that," said Gramps. His voice was sharp.

The woman gazed at me. "We established who would take care of you before I left." Her voice was crisper. She wasn't about to be flattened by guilt after all.

"I apologize for Lottie," said Grandpa. "This has come as a shock."

"Of course. I hope we'll have lots of time to talk further." She put the cup down and dabbed at her mouth. The paralysis meant she dribbled a little. I edged back to the door.

"We really do have to be somewhere. Gramps, you're hardly going to be in time for the second sitting. They're counting on you."

"My goodness, let me take you," said Moira. "I'm parked just outside."

"You have a car?"

My incredulity was vaguely insulting. She frowned.

“I have had for quite some time. It’s the troupe’s van. Not only that, I know how to drive.”

Gramps jumped up. “Thanks, Moira, that would be grand. I’ll get our coats.”

Rat that he was, he went to leave the room. I had no desire to be left alone with my long-lost mother.

And now here she was.

Gramps had halted at the door. “Moira, didn’t you say there was something in particular you wanted to talk to Lottie about?”

“Yes, there is actually.”

“I’ll leave you to it then.”

He flashed a warning glance at me. I was stuck. I sat down. Moira waited until the door closed, then she gave me one of her lopsided smiles.

“You might say there are two reasons I’m here. First, I wanted to see you, my own flesh and blood, after all this time.” She halted and stared into space for a moment. Perhaps she was sifting through memories to confirm that we were indeed related.

My anger started to abate. After all, it wasn’t as if my childhood without her had been terrible. Far from it. My grandparents had been as loving as could be.

“And the second reason?”

“I understand you work with a private investigating firm. I want to engage your services.”

Now that was unexpected.

“Why do you need a private investigator?”

“Before I answer, perhaps we could confirm the nature of the work you do.”

I decided to deal with this as I would any client. Mr. Gilmore had taught me the ropes, especially with the nervous ones, the ones who look as if they could do a runner at any moment. Like

my mother did.

“T. Gilmore and Associates is a legally registered private investigating agency. We take on jobs that the police won’t investigate or have been unable to resolve for a variety of reasons. Or jobs that they think are outside of their purview. Beneath them, as it were.”

“Such as?”

“Such as finding missing pets. We get a lot of that sort of thing. You haven’t lost your pet dog, have you? Misplaced a valuable bracelet?”

“No. No pet dogs or cats or jewellery. But I am interested in finding a missing person.”

I was about to say, *A husband?* But even in my snippy frame of mind, I couldn’t be that cruel. There were signs that indicated she was widowed. The scar on her forehead was stark. Life hadn’t been easy for her.

“And who is it you wish to locate?”

She took a deep breath. “As a matter of fact, I was hoping I could hire you to find my son. Your half-brother.”

Dead silence. How to deal with that little bombshell?

She rubbed her right cheek lightly, a gesture I was to see often when she was under stress. As if she could bring those dead nerves back to life. I waited.

“I suppose I should elaborate?”

“That would probably be helpful.”

“A couple years after you were born, I met a man —”

I didn’t let her finish. “As I understand it, you ran off to join the circus. You wanted to be a singer.”

Again, she showed a little more steel than was first apparent. “I know you’re, er, shall we say confused, Charlotte, and I can understand why. But all that’s in the past. We can talk about what happened with me and you at a later time. Right now, I just want to see

if you are willing to help me or not.”

“Do carry on.”

“As I was saying, I met a man. Joe Anderson was his name. Yes, he worked in vaudeville. Not a circus, I might add. I was a silly girl, desperate for some excitement, I suppose.”

I bit my tongue. I suppose bringing up a child can be very boring.

“I was barely twenty years old. Being silly goes with the territory. Anyway, Joe and me hooked up together.”

“I’m curious. How did you meet each other?”

“I was watching his act.” A small smile. “It might sound strange, but I suppose I fell for him right there and then.”

“What did he do?”

“Do? He was a knife thrower. Marched on stage in a pair of briefs, no shirt.”

“I see.”

She frowned. “As I said, I was a young, foolish girl with little experience in the world. I hung around afterward to talk to him. He liked me. As it turned out, he needed a new assistant. And so ...”

“And so, no singing, you accepted the job, and off you went.”

“Exactly. I had no idea how long it would last, and Annie and Arnie were more than happy to look after you.”

“And the years flew by.”

She sighed. “They did indeed.”

“Just for curiosity’s sake ... did you ever consider returning? You did have a young daughter, after all.”

Her eyes met mine. For the first time, I thought she seemed sad.

“If you want to know if I missed you, Charlotte, the answer is yes. I’m not completely devoid of maternal feeling, as you seem intent on implying. But I was caught up in the world of vaudeville.”

“And it was exciting.”

“Precisely.”

“At least you did send two postcards over the next year, so that counts for something.”

She shrugged. “I knew you were in very good hands, so I had no worries on that score. I thought it best if I faded out of the picture.” She looked away with that particular searching-through-memories look. “Time moved on.”

I made a point of checking my watch. “Speaking of which, I do have to go very soon. You were going to explain why you wanted my help. To locate your child. Your lost child, that is.”

“Quite so. As I was saying, Joe and I hooked up together. We were all right for a while.” Again, the small smile hovered around her lips. “More than a while. We were together for ten years. He was a good man, when he was sober.”

She couldn’t stop herself from touching her scar. So that’s where that came from.

“It was after being in an accident. He’d drunk too much,” she said as if I’d commented out loud. “Unfortunately, my facial nerve was damaged, which is why I’m a bit wonky looking. Then came the Great War and all that excitement. *Men Wanted* was the cry. Before I knew it, Joe had taken off and signed up. Didn’t take long for him to get himself killed. Blown to bits, so I heard. He’d listed me as next of kin, so I got the telegram.”

There were actually tears in her eye. Genuine. The war had ended eighteen years ago, but the aftermath kept on rippling through the world.

She continued. “Shortly thereafter, I found I was with child. Joe and I hadn’t exactly found time to make our union legal. He’d listed me, but there was no marriage certificate I could produce so I could claim his pension. I was, you might say, destitute. No insurance. No pension. Nothing.”

“You could have got in touch with my grandparents. I’m sure they would have helped.”

She pursed her lips. “I was too proud. I didn’t want to come crawling back.”

I also knew that although Gramps would have welcomed her, my grandma would most likely have given her a frosty reception. She’d lived by the book had Gran.

“Fortunately for me,” she continued, “the other members of the troupe weren’t about to pass judgment. They know what it’s like to be on the outside. With their help, I kept going, and I managed to hide my condition for a while. Still, shame is shame, as they say. I was not legally wed.” She cast a quick glance at me to see if I was paying attention. I was.

“One of the troupe told me about a home for unwed mothers in Toronto, run by an order of Catholic Sisters. I could give birth there, and the Sisters would take care of the infant, find it a good home. The troupe was to move on soon —”

I interrupted. “You intended from the start to give up the baby for adoption?”

She looked surprised. “It would have been next to impossible to keep a child moving about the way we did. It was for the best.” She started to stare into space again. “I did what I thought was necessary.”

It would have taken somebody with a heart of stone not to be affected by this story, and I hope to God that isn’t me.

“I’m still with the troupe. Tolliver’s, they’re called. I manage the bookings and payroll.”

“Am I right to assume you wish to hire an investigator in order to trace this child?”

“Exactly.”

“Have you checked with the orphanage?”

"I went there immediately, but the nuns are adamant. All conditions of adoptions are absolutely confidential."

"I'm not sure I will have any more luck, then."

She shook her head. "I made the mistake of saying who I was, you see. That made them clam up as if the Pope himself was in danger. Absolutely not, madam. No information. I thought somebody more official might have better luck."

"Have you thought of advertising in the newspapers?"

"There isn't time. I don't want to waste time sorting out bogus claimants." Her eyes met mine. "Will you take the case?"

I hesitated, and she seemed to misread that.

"I can pay."

"No, it's not that ..."

She didn't wait for me to finish.

"I will admit I will have to defer payment for a short period of time. My income is totally tied into the troupe, and we don't settle up until the end of the month."

I chose not to get suspicious about that.

Again, she answered the question I hadn't asked.

"I remarried. The owner of the troupe, as a matter of fact. Harry Tolliver. Alas, he died earlier this year of a massive heart attack." She waved her hand over her dark clothes. Not deep mourning, but an acknowledgment.

At that moment, there was a discreet tap on the door.

"All done?" Gramps called.

"Come in," I called back. "Does he know the story?" I whispered quickly to Moira. She shook her head.

"I'd feel better if he knew."

"Knew what?" Gramps asked.

He was dressed for the out-of-doors, and he was carrying a fur stole that had to belong to Moira. What the heck. Some women

don't mind having some poor dead animal draped around their necks. Not my taste.

She shrugged at his question. "Knew all about my wild and wonderful past."

He grinned at her. "Sounds interesting."

"You'd better have a seat," I said.

And then she told him. Succinct, brief. He didn't say anything, just listened, but near the end he reached over and put his hand over hers. The gesture brought tears to her eye and frankly almost to mine. He was a good, kind man was my gramps.

"If I know my Lottie, I'm sure she'll help you."

I have to admit I wasn't quite as confident.

She addressed me. "Well? Will you see if you can find my boy? He is your blood relative, after all."

Unfortunately, that last remark threatened to wipe out the goodwill she had slowly built up.

"How nice for us both."

Gramps looked over at me. "Think of it, Lottie. You've always said you'd like to have more family around us."

"This isn't really my decision. I will have to talk to my b— er, my associate, Mr. Gilmore." I'd almost said "boss." I probably should have said it.

"I see."

"I do have one question, though."

"Yes?" I didn't miss the wary expression that flitted across her face.

"You said just now that you went there 'immediately.' What did you mean by that?"

"I don't know what you're getting at."

"Were you referring to your husband's death? After he had passed, did you feel a pressing need to gather your lost chicks? So

you went ‘immediately’ to see if you could find the infant you’d given up all those years ago?”

“Yes, I suppose that’s what I meant.”

“Is there money involved?”

“Lottie!” Gramps exclaimed. “Where are your manners?”

“It’s all right, Arnie,” she said. “Charlotte is right to ask.” She was twisting her black-edged handkerchief. Wringing my neck, perhaps?

“If we do take on this case, I have to know all the facts.”

She nodded. “Yes, there is some money involved. It turns out that Mr. Tolliver had himself run away from home when he was but a youth. He came from a wealthy family in Shropshire, England. His father lived to a ripe old age, but he died intestate. The estate was to go to the oldest son. That was Harry. In the event of his demise, the money would be inherited by his oldest son.”

I interjected. “Hold on, you’re not telling me the infant you gave up was fathered by your recently departed husband? I thought you said Joe Anderson, the knife thrower, was your lover?”

She had changed from twisting the handkerchief to fiddling with the narrow gold band on her wedding finger. It looked too tight for her.

“That is true. He was ... but so was Harry.”

And Tom and Dick?

She pressed her lips together. “When Joe was killed, Harry was, shall we say, kind to me.”

“Did he know the child you conceived was possibly his?”

“No. He was married at the time, although later a widower. I thought it better for all concerned to say it was Joe’s.”

And now nobody could prove otherwise.

“When did you admit to Mr. Tolliver that he possibly had a son out there in the world?”

Her eyes met mine. I could see her anger. "I never did tell him. He was not a well man in the latter part of his life. Heart disease runs in his family. I saw no point in waking up sleeping dogs. The past is the past."

"And he had no other children?"

"No. He always said he had enough to do, looking after the troupe itself."

I let silence sit before us. Gramps shifted. She waited. It seemed she had long ago learned the art of defence. See what they throw at you first before you dodge.

"How much inheritance money is involved?" I asked, my voice calm as I could make it.

She glanced away. "They were quoting it in pounds."

"Which was?"

"Close to thirty-five thousand."

"How much is that in Canadian money?" asked Gramps.

I answered for her. "About a hundred thousand dollars."

Gramps whistled through his teeth.

"Quite a powerful reason to locate this child," I said.

"It's more than just the money. I am his mother, after all."

"Of course, and that can be a powerful bond, as we know."

"Lottie!" said Gramps. "Perhaps we should continue this later. You're the one said we were in a hurry."

"So we are. I have just one more question."

"Yes?" Another wary look.

"Earlier, you said you'd discovered I was employed by a private investigating company. How on earth did you do that? There are other investigation companies in the city. It's rather miraculous that you ended up on my doorstep."

She brightened up a little. "It does seem that way, doesn't it? But it's simple, really. I saw the advertisement in the newspaper."

Ha. I could hardly wait to report back to Mr. Gilmore. It had been like pulling teeth to get him to pay for that advertisement. I swore it would bring us clients. I'd got more than I bargained for.

"I saw your name was listed," she continued. "Charlotte Frayne is not that common a name, so I thought I'd check out if it was indeed you, my daughter. I took a chance and came to the old address, and sure enough here was Arnie."

She tilted her head in that winsome way. "Looking not a day older, I might add..." For a minute I caught a glimpse of the pretty young thing she must have once been. Gramps patted his slightly paunchy stomach.

"Don't know about that, Moira."

I addressed her. "You don't mind if I call you 'Mrs. Tolliver,' do you? 'Mother' feels a little awkward at this stage of the game."

She shrugged. "We're all grown-ups. You can call me Moira if you like."

"Very well, Moira. As I said, I will have to discuss this with my associate, Mr. Gilmore. He decides what cases we take on."

"When will you know? This is a matter of some urgency. The English solicitor has only given me until the end of the year to prove my claim."

"And if you can't find the erstwhile baby?"

"The money will go to a distant cousin. It seems only fair that Harry's true heir should not be cut out of his rightful inheritance."

"But you don't know what has happened to him. What if he doesn't even know he was adopted? He might not be too happy to discover he was a foundling child."

"I'll deal with that when it comes up. And I have no doubt he will be overjoyed to reunite with his own flesh-and-blood mother."

I could see which way the land lay. She was hoping this long-abandoned child would cut her in on his windfall. Who knows?

Maybe he would.

“According to my calculations, this child would be twenty years old by now?”

“That is correct.”

“Close to his majority, but still legally a dependent?”

“Correct.” She was still and tense as a feral cat ready to run. “If you do decide to take on the case, how shall I get in touch with you?”

“Tell you what, why don’t we meet at the Paradise Café? That’s where we usually are in the evenings. Let’s say tomorrow evening. Seven o’clock? That’s the last sitting, and if we need to, we can hang around. All right with you, Gramps?”

“Sounds excellent. I’ll ask Calvin to make a special dinner. Fish, maybe. You used to like fish.”

Moira actually clapped her hands. “Wonderful. I remember those times when you’d go down to the market and come back with smelts fresh off the boat. You’d fry them up in butter.” She smacked her lips. “Heavenly.”

“Not sure about smelts, but we’ll see what we can do,” said Gramps.

I struggled for equanimity. “I should remind you, Gramps, that Calvin is planning the meal for tonight. He won’t want fish two days in a row.”

Gramps shrugged. “It’ll be a good dinner regardless. I’ll see if he’ll bake some tarts. They’re always delicious.”

I resisted the urge to tap on the table like a schoolteacher.

“Now that we’ve settled the menu, perhaps we could conclude the business at hand.”

Moira scabbled in her handbag and took out an envelope.

“I wrote down the details. The date I went to the Sisters. The date of birth.” She grimaced. “I was only thirty at the time, but

I felt ancient compared to the others who were there. They were girls. My own predicament was exaggerated tenfold in their faces. Fifteen, sixteen years old with no prospects.”

“Did you get to see the baby?”

Her eyes flicked away. “That was not the policy. Out he came, and the midwife whisked him away. I left as soon as I was able.”

“Did the Sisters give you any details as to his fate?”

“None.”

“Did you inquire? Before now, I mean?”

“No. I thought it better to get on with my own life. They made it clear further contact was not permitted.”

“Would they have informed you if he hadn’t survived?”

“No. That was not the policy.”

“It is not out of the question.”

Her hand flew to the scar. “I realize that, but I want to know regardless.”

She pushed the envelope across the table.

“Here’s all the information I mentioned. I should mention I did not use my proper name.”

She paused, waiting for my reaction.

I shrugged.

“I also left a token for the child. It was a little bracelet I’d woven with red beads. And a heart.”

My own heart gave a little jolt. She hadn’t left me with a woven bracelet.

“It might help identify him. It’s likely they gave it to him.”

“That was the policy?”

“Precisely.”

She stood up. She was short, really. Perhaps on the dumpy side. No beanpole for sure.

“I know we have a lot of catching up to do, Charlotte, but I am

most truly glad to see you and see that you have thrived.” She went around to Gramps’s chair, bent over, and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “You were always one of my favourite men, you know that.”

He patted her arm. “Get on with you, you little minx.” But he was chuffed.

“Sure I can’t give you a ride, Charlotte?” she asked me.

“Quite sure, thanks. I’ll see you later, Gramps.”

He was helping Moira with her lush fox stole and was momentarily distracted.

“I’ll see you soon,” she said to me as they left. I could tell the fox wrinkled his little snout.

“Better be sooner than thirty years, Moira,” I called after them. “Not sure who’ll be around if you wait that long.”

*

I held the envelope, turning it slowly in my fingers. I realized I was treating it as if it might explode any minute. That was how I felt. What other little bombshells were enclosed that Moira hadn’t yet revealed? Funny how odd it seemed to be referring to her as Moira, but at the moment it was next to impossible to refer to her, or even think of her, in any remotely maternal way. What do adults call their long-lost mothers? Mum? Mother? Mater?

I had to trust Gramps that he hadn’t known she was going to show up so unexpectedly; but, by the time I had arrived, he’d seemed quite comfortable with her company.

He and Gran had talked to me about Moira on and off, especially early on, but eventually I stopped being curious. I knew she was originally from County Mayo, Ireland, and that she had come to Canada as a maid for a rich English family when she was only seventeen. “A pretty little thing,” was what Grandpa called

her. She met Philip Frayne, who would become my sire, shortly afterward. He was on leave from serving in the Boer War. He was barely twenty. They married shortly before he returned to South Africa, where he had the misfortune to get kicked in the abdomen by a mule. Peritonitis followed, and he died before his twenty-first birthday, leaving behind him a baby daughter, me, that he'd never seen and a young widow, Moira.

I remembered quite vividly the time when Gramps was telling me all of this. "He was a good lad, was our Phil," were his words, and, even then, I could feel his grief. "Your grandma was took hard by his death. Her only child. She was more than happy to take you on when Moira asked us."

"Did you know she wouldn't return?"

"Of course not. She was just going to establish herself as a singer. She had a good voice did Moira. Clear as a bell. She said she'd come back soon as she could and resume her responsibilities. But as the weeks went by, we heard no more. No. That's not true. That first year, we did get two postcards. One from Niagara Falls, one from Winnipeg. She included an address, but when we wrote the letters came back."

"Did you try to find her? Maybe she was dead?"

"No point. We thought we'd be informed if she was no longer alive, and we heard nothing." He'd smiled at me. "To tell the truth, your grandma and me was more than happy to be raising you."

I remembered I'd said, "I have virtually no memories of her."

"You was not even three. You were a good child. You fretted just a bit at first, but that didn't last long. You soon stopped asking for her."

I took a deep breath and opened the envelope Moira had left. Inside was a single sheet of paper. Moira had printed the necessary information.

Baby was born at 1:00 a.m. on March 17, 1916, at St. Mary's. The delivery was without incident. A Sister Philomena of the Order of St. Joseph was the midwife. A Doctor Berenger dropped in for a few minutes to make sure all was going well, said I was dilated sufficiently to start pushing, and left. I pushed as instructed and delivered a male child, robust and already howling. I had already declared my intention of giving the baby up for adoption. I had also declined the invitation to stay at the hospital and act as wet nurse for a few months, which the Sisters expected the new mothers to do. A payback for the service they had been given. The Sister took the baby away, and I didn't see him again. As the delivery had been a smooth one, I was quite recovered by the next day, and I left. The troupe left for Vancouver immediately.

I had given my name as Bridget McHale, a widow, but said I was destitute. Regardless, I left the Sisters ten dollars. They had been kind to me. I also left a token for the baby to give him. I said I was of the Roman Catholic faith.

There were no more surprises, but I actually felt sad. I would think it must be difficult to carry a baby to term, give birth, then never see that child again. Truthfully, Moira hadn't seemed particularly distressed, but maybe she was good at hiding her feelings.

I tucked the envelope into my purse.

The garish van, which I now knew belonged to her, had gone. It was quite dark out, and a lot colder, but I didn't mind. I could have had a fever for all intents and purposes. I was burning hot. A walk felt like a necessity.

A small group of Salvation Army soldiers were standing at the

corner of Yonge Street. One was ringing the bell to get attention; the other three, a man and two women, were singing. They weren't getting a lot of response from the passersby, although I thought they were all beautifully musical. Maybe it was a little early for carols, reminding most people that Christmas meant buying presents you couldn't afford and rejoicing in what you didn't feel. The man in particular had that kind of soaring tenor voice that transcends time and place and connects up with heaven somewhere. "Oh Holy Night, the stars are brightly shining."

In fact, they weren't shining tonight. All was overcast.

I fished in my wallet and took out a two-dollar bill. I stuffed it into the kettle, and the man ringing the bell beamed at me. "Bless you."

The tenor turned to look at me as he sang, "Peace on earth, the weary world rejoices."

For a moment, I almost felt like crying. Peace on earth was looking more and more unlikely, and we were a weary world indeed.