

THE NEED TO KNOW

By

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CHAPTER ONE

December 31, 1963

It was cold as hell, colder than he remembered the winters being, and the view out of the hospital window was disheartening. A thick bed of fresh snow blanketed the gateway city that sprawled in an illuminated maze of streetlights and high-rises, the auroras dissolving high into the winter sky. But the numbing weather was no respite for Larry Hudd. His thoughts were on his baby being born at any moment in the operating room down the hall and the murders of Murphy Henderson and Roger McMillan. The guilt was deep.

It was nearly midnight and the hospital was quiet. The waiting room decorated with 'Happy New Year' streamers and balloons felt more like a tomb. The nurse's chatter trickled up the hall over the constant din of pinging elevators and jostling medicine carts. Larry could've stood more activity.

A young man who had earlier introduced himself as Roberts was sitting on the couch, dressed in a plaid sport coat and white slacks with shiny black wingtips. A little too over dressed, Larry thought. Roberts flipped through the newspaper, the two fathers-to-be acknowledging each other every now and then with nervous grins. The waiting was hell.

"So." Roberts said. "Hoping for a girl or a boy?"

"Doesn't matter," Larry said, trying to avoid conversation.

"My wife and I are hoping for a girl," Roberts said and flopped the paper back on the coffee table. The front page was a retrospective covering the

assassination in Dallas a month earlier with a large candidacy portrait of Kennedy's smiling face gracing the page. Below the slain president were two separate pictures, the kind taken upon graduation from a Police academy. The red serge uniform and signature hats revealed them to have been Mounties. The headline read;

SLAIN OFFICERS HONORED.

"Shame about those two cops in Vancouver," Roberts said.

"Officers."

"Excuse me."

"They were RCMP officers." The elite of E-special Larry wanted to say in Murphy and Roger's honor. But knowing that much would be like issuing a death sentence. Reticence was now paramount to survival. Time to change the subject. "What are you hoping for?" Larry asked. It was a sloppy diversion.

"A girl," Roberts said. "I believe I already said that."

Larry returned to the window. "Sorry."

"No problem." Robert's eyed Larry closely, as if he could sense something wrong. "Your first one too, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Helluva way to spend New Years Eve." Roberts lifted off the couch and joined Larry at the window. "That means their going to be special. So, do you and your wife live around the area?"

"We're not from Winnipeg."

"Oh really, just moved in?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"Well, listen. If you and your wife are in the market for a house, give me a call." Roberts pulled out his wallet and produced a realtor card. "I'll give you a hell of a deal."

"I'll keep that in mind," Larry said. Plaid coat, shiny wingtips, it all made sense now. But a house was the farthest thing from Larry's mind. What

was about to happen to them sickened him. How would they go on? How would Evelyn heal? Yet he knew he was right. The baby had to survive.

A nurse entered the waiting room, her loafers biting the sanitized tile. The two men faced her, apprehension twisting.

"Mr. Roberts?" she said perfunctorily.

"Yes." Roberts said, grin widening.

"Congratulations, you have a healthy baby girl."

"I'll be damned!" His eyes welled as he snatched Larry's hand, shaking exuberantly.

"Congratulations." Larry forced himself to really smile, but it wasn't easy. There would be no congratulations for them. No celebrations over the birth of their child.

Fucking politicians!

"Thanks! I don't even know your name," Roberts said as he reached in his breast pocket and pulled out a cigar branded 'It's a girl!'

"Larry," he said, politely taking the cigar.

"Larry, uh?"

"Your wife must be waiting."

"Holly shit! My wife! I gotta go! Can you believe it!" He whirled around and kissed the nurse full on the lips. She was one of those older, married a long time ago ones and was definitely miffed.

"Mr. Roberts!" she huffed and turned her red face for the door.

"I have a girl!" Roberts chanted. "It's a girl!" He grabbed a couple 'It's a boy!' cigars from the opposite breast pocket and dumped them into Larry's hand. "I won't need these ones," he sang with a wink and a smile and a slap of Larry's shoulder. "Maybe you will," he said then scurried for the doorway stopping one more time. "Remember to call me about a house."

Larry nodded. The moment was killing him. Robert's elated voice trailed off and the waiting room was quiet again. He eased himself down on the couch, slipped the cigars in his pocket and picked up the paper.

How was he going to keep them alive? How would Evelyn ever forgive

him? It was too painful. And losing their child drew up memories of Roger's kids. Their fresh faces burned in his mind. He could see them tearing into their Christmas gifts, huddled around the very tree he and Murphy helped Roger set up the week before. He stared at the front page. Murphy and Roger's pictures held him cold. He remembered the stakeouts; long cold nights down on the waterfront watching the Scarlet ships come and go. He wondered how cold the water off Jericho Beach was at this time of year and then.... The shots. The screaming. Roger's wife pleading for her children's lives. It was a nightmare that wouldn't go away.

And it all started...

Four days ago

Vancouver, British Columbia

The black Lincoln Continental had been parked on 1st and Yew for the last fifteen minutes. The engine idling, it's front wheels turned into the curb to anchor the car from rolling down the hill towards Point Grey Road and Kitsilano beach two blocks ahead. The two men in the front seat were passing a bottle of good Russian Vodka between them while Bing Crosby sang 'White Christmas' over the radio. The man in the backseat had no desire to indulge the bottle. He just sat there with the stillness of a soldier and the patience of a seasoned killer.

"Turn that shit off," the burly one sitting shotgun sneered before his swig. The driver complied, his white fingers trembling for the radio. And suddenly Bing was gone.

The driver had never killed before. Not even in the line of duty. But what happened to Murphy Henderson only an hour ago wasn't just killing. It was brutal murder. And no amount of Russia's finest distilled would numb that memory. They had driven him out to Jericho beach, dragged him through the slush to the water and went to work on him. Murphy was on his knees, hands tied behind his back, blood dripping from pistol-whipped gashes across his face. Through battered eyes he watched the man climb out of the backseat of the

Lincoln. He was a dark, menacing presence in trench coat and fedora and his mouth twisted with a petulant grin when he spoke. “So, you’re Murphy Henderson.” He lifted Murphy’s battered face.

Suddenly the incredulity left Murphy’s eyes. “You’re Alec Garva,” he said.

“This is bullshit!” the burly one snapped, launching a violent kick to Murphy’s ribs that sent him tobogganing a good couple feet through the slush. A .45 pressed to his cheek, the barrel digging into a nasty gash. “The pictures you asshole,” Jake Munroe hissed. “Where are they?”

“Fuck you,” Murphy slurred only to get another pistol whip across his face.

“Good bye, Mr. Henderson,” Garva said with a nod to Munroe.

Murphy suddenly realized he was really going to die. His eyes locking on the driver as Munroe forced the .45 into his mouth. Murphy gagged, his tongue pushing against the barrel, against dying.

Shame pulled the driver’s face away, eyes screwed shut. Waiting...

The gun fired. The report bounced across Burrard Inlet, ricocheting off the tankers that chugged for the Juan de Fuca. The driver was an assassin now. He was truly one of them. He staggered a few paces from the mess of blood and slush, buckled to his knees and puked until nothing but bile soured his throat and stung his nostrils.

And the killing wasn’t over yet.

An hour after the Lincoln nudged the curb at 1st and Yew, Alec Garva ordered his driver to turn the radio back on. He liked Bing Crosby. What was Christmas without Bing. The driver complied. From here on out he would always comply. They owned him now.

He glanced down at Munroe’s .45 on the front seat beside him, the barrel still speckled with Murphy’s blood. A crumbled list lay under the weapon. A list handed to Garva during a clandestine rendezvous with a corrupt cabinet minister somewhere along the Rideau Canal last week. The two names left were

Larry Hudd and Roger McMillan. Regret swirled but it was far too late to change fate now.

He looked at the quaint house and watched the silhouettes of McMillan's son and daughter frolicking around a Christmas tree beyond the drawn front window.

What's Christmas without murdering children.

The driver gripped the steering wheel tightly. He thought of his father and grandfather, noble men with heads bowed by a disgrace their family has never known before. He polished off the bottle and braced himself for hell.

Roger McMillan's wife was trying to get the children to bed, unaware of the Lincoln parked out front of the house. They said good night to their dad then mom herded them upstairs. Roger, sitting at the roller top desk he had spent the majority of his time at over the past three months, returned to his partner on the phone. A mini reel-to-reel recorder on the desk was still recording. A procedure the team practiced since starting Operation Scarlet back in September. A bit of security in case the old political soft shoe left them in the cold.

Fucking Politicians

"So," the man on the other end said. "Is Murphy back yet?"

The question set Roger on edge. "No." He glanced at his Timex, his only Christmas present from the kids. "The ferry docked over an hour ago."

"Well, maybe he's being a little more cautious than usual."

"Yeah. Maybe."

The young wife leaned over the banister half way up the stairs, her voice bright and giddy. "Hope it's a boy, Larry."

Roger shook his head with that typical chuckle. "Women and babies," he said over the phone to Larry Hudd. "How's Evelyn doing anyway?"

"Anxious," Larry replied.

Roger noticed the reel to reel still recording. "Oh damn," he said. "You're on record, Larry."

He almost flicked it off but the children were stalling at the top of the stairs. "Must've forgot to turn it off when Phillip phoned," he quipped.

"Lehman can be trusted?" Larry asked.

"Yeah," Roger said, shooing the kids to get a move on. "I trust my brother – in – law and if he says Lehman is okay, then he's okay." He reached for the reel to reel again. "Rita says..."

Then it happened.

The front door to the quaint little house on 1st and Yew exploded open and a hail of gunfire forever changed Larry Hudd's life.

The reel to reel was recording.

And so four days later...

A pretty brunette stepped into the quiet waiting room. Larry rose from the couch and hugged his sister-in-law. Maggie Gunthier hugged back.

"Any time now," she said. She unbuttoned her overcoat and tossed it to the couch. Larry knew this was killing Maggie. And he could visibly see it.

"I'm glad you're here," he said. "Evelyn is going to need you."

"Are you sure this is the only way?" Her voice ached and her eyes teared.

"Maggie, we can't risk the baby's life." He returned to the window, to that dismal scene that was cold as hell. "You've made the arrangements?" he asked, a quiver in his voice.

"Uh-huh." Maggie sat down and dug in her handbag for a tissue.

"Where will you two go?"

"I don't know yet."

Larry watched Maggie sob from yet another of his vague responses. He couldn't tell her and he had damn good reasons. Keeping her alive being one of them. The less Maggie knew the better and of one thing Larry was absolutely sure; they would come.

"Don't worry," he said, knowing full well that offered no solace

whatsoever. He wasn't even convincing himself.

Maggie blew her nose then saw the pictures below Kennedy's smiling face on the front page. "What happened?" she asked between tissue dabs.

He sat down beside her and placed his hands over hers.

"Damn them to hell!" she cursed.

Sometime later an exhausted doctor with facemask still dangling around his neck shuffled into the waiting room and sat beside Maggie. He kissed her, their hands locking together immediately. Larry watched them from his post at the window, twisting one of those cigars Roberts had given him earlier between his fingers. "Carl?" he asked as bravely as he could.

It took everything for Carl Friesen to simply say, "It's a boy."

Larry returned to the cold window, crushing the cigar in his fist.

A half hour later a city ambulance sped over the Norwood Bridge, gapping the frozen Red River, then under the Canadian National Railroad overpass and onto Main Street. Carl and Maggie followed in a new '63 Corvette rag top, both rapped in heavy winter coats and thick scarves because the Vette was designed for the sun-drenched California beaches and not the sub-zero climate north of the 49th parallel. The harsh cold penetrated relentlessly and the heater barely thawed the iced up windshield, never mind actually spewing heat. But Maggie could care less. Normally she'd be nagging Carl over the frostbite that was surely reddening her buttocks. She didn't say a word.

Carl cranked the Vette west onto Broadway. The headlights glistened off the ambulance ahead. There were no sirens or flashing lights.

"Are you going to be okay, honey?" he asked with a glance.

Maggie nodded and squeezed herself into the folds of her overcoat, utterly tormented. Her sister's painful cry would haunt her forever. And now, as agreed, she would never see Evelyn again. Life had become incredibly unfair over four short days. Christmas had come and gone, completely uncelebrated.

Twenty minutes later the Corvette came to an abrupt stop while the

ambulance proceeded for an emergency carport. The brake lights flashed in the distance and a paramedic jumped out of the rear door into the cold, running through the exhaust cloud swirling under carport lights. He disappeared into the hospital with a bundle in his arms. A baby.

"It's not fair, Carl!" she said, eyes wet.

He kissed her red cheek and leaned across her lap and unlatched her door. "I know."

Fucking Politicians!!

They entered the hospital foyer and the receiving desk receptionist recognized the young doctor and Children's Aid worker. "Good evening, Doctor Friesen. Hello Maggie."

Maggie looked like she had been crying and simply nodded hello.

"Good evening, Elma," Carl said. "And Happy New Year."

"And the same to you. The infant?" Elma inquired, curious perhaps as to Maggie's state.

"Ambulance attendants took the child straight up to Pediatrics."

Elma reached for the shelf behind her and pulled a fresh form from it. "Are you going to admit the child under Children's Aid or the mother's name, Maggie?" she asked as she fed paper into the typewriter.

Maggie couldn't respond. She watched Carl step into the elevator, knowing the instant the doors closed she would never see her sister's child again. She rubbed her wet eyes.

Damn them to hell!

"Maggie, are you alright?" Elma asked.

"The child is a ward of CAS, Elma" Maggie said as professionally as she could.

Elma started typing. "St. James division, right?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"So I'll need your supervisor's name."

"Lily Atkinson."

"And the mother of the child?"

"Hanis," Maggie lied. "Susan Hanis."

Elma finished typing the name then waited. Maggie sat there for a moment, biting her lip. There was no turning back now. "Deceased," she finally said.

Two months later.

Maggie nervously sat in the tiny confines of her dingy grey office on the second floor of the turn of the century government services building on Portage Avenue. The decor was early Victorian and she looked somewhat out of place at her modern desk, in her modern blue dress with her trendy cat's eye glasses.

She opened the file before her and briefly read the pertinent information. The baby of the deceased Hanis woman weighed in at six pounds, two ounces at birth. Blue eyes. The apgar was a healthy ten. But an unsettling complication had arisen over the past month. The foster parents reported the kid was puking milk with enough intensity to hit the wall. Pyloric stenosis Carl diagnosed. One of the few truths contained in the file. Nonetheless the surgery went well, performed of course by Carl. He said he was a cute little tike. Maggie didn't want to hear it. She would not let herself cry. She missed Evelyn desperately.

Satisfied everything was in order she closed the file and braced herself for the final step in the adoption. She hated herself for what she had done and what she was about to do. At this point she pretty much hated everybody and everything.

"Maggie Gunthier?"

A thirty something woman stood in the doorway. She was a pretty blonde and Maggie figured her to be an ex-cheer leader. She had an overcoat draped over her arm and a brief case in her other hand.

"Julie Grossman?" Maggie asked with her hand extended over her desk. Julie Grossman was another Children's Aid worker from the North Winnipeg division.

Damn her too!

Grossman set her brief case down. "Am I late? The traffic was terrible. I think there was a stalled car at every light."

"No, not at all." Maggie hung Grossman's coat on the rack just inside the door.

Grossman sat down. "I hate this time of year," she said.

"Yeah. So do I," Maggie said thinking, 'whatever.'

"I don't even know what the wind chill is. All I do know is my car barely started."

"I know what you mean." Maggie resumed her desk. "My fiancé's car barely started, too. Not much of a winter car, I'm afraid."

"Sports car, right?" Grossman nuzzled herself in close to the desk. "My husband still has one, too. He just drives it with the darn radio blaring and those big tires on the back." She pulled a file out of her brief case. "I think it's some kind of arrested adolescence. You know, men and their toys thing."

Grossman laughed and Maggie tried her best at faking. She got right down to business. She just wanted to get this mess over and done with.

"Well, Mrs. Grossman, I understand you have a couple for our little infant," Maggie said and opened her file. Grossman followed and forty minutes later was placing her signature on a guardianship transfer, thus changing onus of responsibility for baby Hanis to her North Winnipeg office. The two women said good-bye and Maggie watched Julie Grossman walk through the bustling Children's Aid Society. She had never felt so alone in her entire life as she did at that moment sitting in her dingy grey office. She hoped the Spencer family would be loving parents.

Sometime after lunch office supervisor Lily Atkinson stuck her head in Maggie's door. "How did it go?" Lily asked.

"Fine," Maggie said. Lying was getting easier.

"How's your sister?"

"Fine."

"Good," Lily said. "Archie and I want you and Carl to come for dinner

tonight. What do say?"

"That would be nice," Maggie said, a faint smile. She was numb again.

"Okay. About seven," Lily said then dissolved back into the hectic environment she commanded.

Once Lily was comfortably out of range Maggie slipped open the bottom drawer of her desk and retrieved another file similar to the one that Grossman had just taken. She opened the file on Larry and Evelyn, covertly removing a slip of paper with a phone number and the name "Sam Mitchell" scribbled below. The paper found it's way into her purse.

She made it unnoticed to the boiler room in the basement. The maintenance man was nowhere to be found when she approached one of the four large boilers that heated the turn of the century building. She opened the steel furnace door and stepped back from the oil stoked fire blazing within the boilers belly. She tossed the file inside then stood for a moment watching it boil and bend to black as the fire swallowed it up.

Damn them!

It was done.

CHAPTER TWO

Present Day.

Wednesday. Day 1

Winnipeg

The Prime Minister of Canada sat back in his luxurious limo and puffed contently. The Federal/Provincial conference meetings had spilled into the late afternoon and after two of the most tedious hours he had ever lived through had surpassed the scheduled adjournment time, he desperately felt withdraw kicking in. It was enough to give anybody a royal sized hammering between the temples.

The limousine rounded the corner of Broadway and assumed the center lane, heading north on Main. It stood out like a sore thumb in the rush hour congestion. The sidewalks teemed with pedestrians who took notice of the impressive car with twin Canadian flags fluttering over the front fenders. Some even lowered sunglasses to get a clear view of their leading dignitary.

He loved the notoriety. He snapped up the driver's phone. The air conditioning was a little too high. All those years smoking can deteriorate a bronchial sufferers tolerance. The driver apologized a few too many times and assured he would not be inconvenienced again. He liked it when people referred to him as Mr. Prime Minister. The affluence and power stroked an ego that struggled the political ladder for some forty years. From Nanaimo city councilor to holding the Attorney-General's chair in British Columbia when Pearson ruled supreme in Ottawa. It was a bad time for the PM back in '63. He barely survived - politically of course - the Operation Scarlet mess. But he had a knack for landing on his feet.

He took a long puff. Besides there were far more critical and sensitive scandals bearing down on him in the present. Malfeasance is a terrible thing and

if not carefully and skillfully contained can wreak havoc with a politician's ascent. Thank god Premier Graham hadn't made the trek from British Columbia. The whole Coastal Holding fiasco only compounded the hot issues simmering the PM's administration. And the media were picking at him enough already.

The limousine broke through an intersection under repair and sped like a freed animal for an open lane. A disk of Oscar Peterson's latest soothed the Prime Minister and his press secretary, Allison McKay. He admired her while she dozed beside him. A pass time he would never admit too. She wore dark dresses and over sized frame glasses with her auburn hair spun tightly into a ball. As far as he was concerned – and gladly so - she never could achieve the asexual I-can-make-it-in-this-man's-world image. Some women just have allure that cannot be camouflaged by overt professionalism. Allison McKay was one of those women. Ironically enough she was also damn good and the Prime Minister knew he would be lost without her. He also knew there was no chance of ever sleeping with her so he didn't see the point in frustrating himself. But what was the harm stealing a few minutes fantasizing while enjoying a smoke. The arousal would never be anything more than that anyway. She was merely a child at twenty-five compared to his sixty-three years. He stroked his silver hair he had become incredibly conscious over since being thrust on the world's stage. Three years ago to be exact.

Allison stirred from an overzealous speed bump as the limousine descended into an underground parking lot. She adjusted her glasses on her perfect little nose. "Sorry," she said.

The Prime Minister quipped, knowing full well the guilt she would inflict upon herself. "You've earned it, Allison," he said.

They arrived in Winnipeg four days ago amid a media blitz and Allison had been on vigil since. She was up before dawn and asleep long after dusk, planning and organizing a ridiculous itinerary. Allison McKay was an obsessive compulsive, the best kind of right hand the Prime Minister could have, and while they were in Winnipeg she was still directing media operations in the

Prime Minister's Office - referred to as the PMO – from her cell phone and blackberry palmheld. She placed trust in no one, especially when a fall election loomed only four months away.

Premier Roy Graham's mess in British Columbia wasn't helping either. A conflict of interest scandal born out of a mis-appropriated slot of land in the Jervis Inlet by Stillwater, BC. Graham's Coastal Holding firm was caught red handed trying to purchase an old government fishery site before the actual sale went public. And they were acting on behalf of Westfor International, a lumber conglomerate that unfortunately the Prime Minister held a boardroom chair in and a sizable share of the stocks climbing the TSX, NASDAQ and NYSE. The Prime Minister and Mr. Graham both swim in the same circles - it had been reported - and so speculation of guilt by association loomed. Above all this he was rumored of licentious behavior, a characteristic that has ripped electoral victory from the hands of more than one politician. No doubt about it. Allison had her hands full.

"Do I have time for a shower?" he asked.

She checked her watch. Three o'clock. "Afraid not, Mr. Prime Minister." She was the only person in his camp he wished would call him by his name. It would make fantasies a whole lot more believable. "The press are already waiting," she said.

"Let them wait." he said as the limousine rested to a stop in front of the lobby access elevator. "I'm worth it."

She smiled at his bravado then noticed the half smoked cigarette between his fingers, smoke weaving around his knuckles and floating above.

"Sorry." He gave a flimsy swoosh through the air.

"My air too," she said then snatched the cigarette and deposited it in the ashtray before firing up her palm held. He knew from past experience not to rebuff her. He also knew she was under direct authority from the wife. For a moment he mourned that last drag.

The driver got out and stood at the back door, poised professionally

while a squad of RCMP disembarked black SUV's and rushed strategically to their points around the limo. Upon the nod of the Superintendent in charge of the brigade, the Prime Minister's door opened. The force huddled around their leader and walked him into the elevator. Allison breezed out, already checking the rest of the day's itinerary on her palmheld. She had a good feeling about the conference. But that intuition was about to be proven horribly wrong.

The main banquet room on the ground floor of the prestigious Westin hotel was the site of the first press conference to be given since the Federal/Provincial caucus descended upon Winnipeg. The room teemed with reporters, cameramen and boom microphones. There was a definite buzz. Then...

The double doors to the right of the podium flung open and two RCMP sentries rigidly assumed a stance on either side of the entrance. An instant later the Prime Minister entered, flanked by six security officers and Allison McKay, who headed for the rear of the room. Reporters clamored for their seats, HD cameras and BetaCams hoisted to shoulders and diffused light bleached the room white. Pads and palm helds opened, recorders clicked on, and flashbulbs popped from all corners.

The Prime Minister leaned against the podium with a confident air. He loved the media. Allison was in plain view behind the back row. He opened with his trademark sense of humor.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to apologize for my tardiness. The Premiers and myself fell a little behind today. All these educated men in one room and no one knew how to turn on the air conditioning." The assembly conjured a laugh. He checked his press secretary's countenance. She was smiling. The faces of the RCMP remained in disciplined stone, their eyes combing the crowd.

"I'm sure that after four days of suspense, you all have your share of questions. I will try to do my best to answer most of them. However, I would just like to add at this moment that I am very pleased with the outcome of the

conference, and feel we have made headway with some of the issues facing our Federal/Provincial assembly." He checked Allison at the back. Five fingers flashed twice. "We have only ten or so minutes to field your questions, so we may as well get started."

A barrage of raised hands begged for selection. He pointed out a vivacious reporter who introduced herself as Tabitha Reynold, BCTV. "Mr. Prime Minister, can you tell us of the general atmosphere of the conference in the wake of several of your ministers suddenly resigning?"

He smiled. He wanted her. "Well, Tabitha, no one seemed to bring the subject up. The Premiers seemed more concerned with Medicare and other federal subsidies." He was good at side stepping any real answers. He quickly pointed to another reporter.

A gruff looking guy rose above the crowd. "Ralph Forbes from the Sun, Mr. Prime Minister. I was curious if you had anything to add on the softwood trade problem. Since Premier Graham isn't attending this conference from BC we're wondering if any headway is being cleared to deal with the US duties?"

The Prime Minister glanced at Allison who shook her head and flashed eight fingers. Then he eyed the reporter. The man from the Sun looked like he just rolled out of bed with his suit on and couldn't find his razor in the bathroom cabinet.

"Well the issue is more federal and hasn't be discussed, Mr. Forbes."

Forbes was about to push forth with another question but a rival reporter in the first row bolted out of his chair and cut him off.

"Michael Spencer, Mr. Prime Minister. Winnipeg Free Press." Michael shot Forbes a rival stare then zeroed in on the Prime Minister. "It's obvious the softwood issue has kept the Coastal Holding situation front and center. Now granted this is not the agenda of the Federal/Provincial summit but you've yet to comment on Premier Graham's acquisition attempt, Mr. Prime Minister."

The Prime Minister held his composure like a true professional while Allison shuddered like a true neophyte. Her nervousness could be read on her face plainly. Even at the back of the room. That politician's smile spread from

ear to ear. He had to stall. "Good Morning, Mr. Spencer."

"Good morning," Michael said suspiciously.

"Premier Graham is not in attendance," the Prime Minister said pleasantly.

"Yes sir," Michael said, "we're all aware that Premier Graham was asked to not attend. My question is; was there action on the part of the Federal Government or more specifically the PMO in the purchase?"

"The Coastal Holding affair is completely a BC provincial matter, Mr. Spencer."

"Is it?"

"Yes, it is."

"Was SeaCorp not involved in the bid as well?"

"SeaCorp?" the PM feigned understanding.

"They are the parent corporation over Westfor?"

"Well SeaCorp is in the business of transporting lumber. Why wouldn't they be involved," the Prime Minister said with his hands raised as if suggesting 'why even ask the question.'

"Yes, but Mario Morelato is still the CEO of SeaCorp despite the allegations against him."

"What has that got to do with anything?" The PM didn't even glance in McKay's direction. He could see her finger slicing across her throat out of the corner of his eye.

Michael Spencer had that look when a reporter is about to go for the jugular. "Well we all know he's currently under investigation by several agencies. I've even heard the Canadian Securities Commission is drawing up a case on SeaCorp, especially after Coastal Holding's impropriety. So, Mr. Prime Minister, with all this and your position on the board of Westfor International, don't you think that just a little suspect? I mean it looks like you're all in bed together."

"What!"

Allison McKay headed for the podium to save her Prime Minister while

the congregation erupted and flashes began popping again.

Michael persisted. "Premier Graham just as much as insinuated last week that Westfor, which you are a major shareholder, initiated the move to bid on the property at the behest of SeaCorp, sir. How was a Premier able to make that bid before trading even opened on it? That had to of come from Ottawa."

The Prime Minister eyed Michael as a cameraman stepped closer to get both of them in frame. It was not personal, he reminded himself. This insignificant shit knows nothing. A disarming smile, the kind that won enough votes to give him a majority in the House. "Well, I am not aware of Mr. Graham's disclosures Mr. Spencer, but these questions are not very relevant to the issues of today's Provincial conference."

"Were Taxes one of those issues?" A television reporter asked from the back of the room.

"Yes, they were," The Prime Minister replied, his voice brighter to hit the back row. He proceeded to point out another reporter in the second row. But then...

Michael interrupted again and the cameraman zoomed in on him. "Did that include discussion of the \$450.000 of tax money spent on 24 Sussex Drive since your occupation of office three years ago?" A little moan was felt from the group and now most of the RCMP guards focused on the reporter from the Free Press.

Tabitha Reynold strained to get a clear view of the brave reporter. Meanwhile Allison was nearly to the front row now, entering the cameraman's frame. And cameras don't lie. The panic was evident. Michael Spencer had hit a nerve. Flash bulbs were still popping like radical strobe lights when Allison brushed past an RCMP bodyguard and assumed position beside her boss.

"Mr. Spencer," the Prime Minister quipped. "There were other people involved in refitting 24 Sussex. Heck, I'm lucky if I even get out in the backyard. I hear the view is nice." That garnered a laugh. "And as far as the Coastal Holding impropriety... Do you honestly think I'm that stupid? Do you think I'd throw away my career, this country's respect, for such a trivial thing?"

Or do you think I'm just a stockholder, who - I might add - relinquished my voting seat on the board once I was elected, and was simply not told until after the events transpired."

Michael couldn't reply, his face commingled incredulity. He noticed a camera lens rotating for a close up of him.

"I assure you I'm a little smarter than that," the Prime Minister said with a grin. Amused chortles sprang up through the room. Behind him Allison glared at the reporter and touched the Prime Minister's elbow. The leader of Canada smiled confidently, lifting his hand to quiet the room and close off the session. "That's all the time we have, ladies and gentlemen. There will be a press release with all the Premiers in attendance following the closing of meetings tomorrow at two o'clock. Thank-you." The Prime Minister waved to his audience, well aware of the camera's fixed on him. A victory! With all the bad press surrounding his candidacy, this was exactly what he needed. The last word.

With a final wave he and Allison stepped into the huddled bodyguards and were gone. The popping cameras and television lights ceased as television crews scurried out to edit their copy for the six o'clock broadcasts. Cell phones were already speed dialing and palm helds emailing editors and producers. In the midst of the exodus some were glancing at Michael Spencer. They were all mumbling about the Free Press reporter.

"And that's the guy who cracked the Tattletale story," one reporter blurted to her cameraman as they passed by Tabitha Reynold.

Michael caught Reynold's grin from the other side of the room. She shook her beautiful head as if saying, 'I'm glad it's you and not me,' then headed for the doors. But Michael got what he came for. There was something there. There was an angle to Roy Graham through the Prime Minister. And Michael Spencer was known for his tenacity. His reputation was well known. But today he was leaving the conference with a little egg on his face. That's hard for anybody's ego.

As he exited the banquet room a hand grabbed him out of the flow of

media filling the grand lobby. "Hey!" Michael said. "What's this, Forbes?"

Ralph Forbes was a man of forty-five but looked more like a man of sixty-five. His suit tie was undone a little with the top button of his shirt unlatched, no doubt to lessen the stress. And Forbes life was stressful. His dark hair thinned prematurely for his age and tasseled from the constant habit of running his hand through what little there was. He sported five o'clock shadow from three days ago and was in need of some extra strength breath mints. And yet, lacklustre appearance and numbing personality not with standing, the irony to the man was he possessed a healthy dose of misplaced hubris.

"What was that bullshit in there?" he scoffed with a little squeeze of Michael's arm.

"My elbow," Michael warned. "Its called reporting, Forbes. Ever heard of it? You must have taken that at journalism school."

"You're going to be on the six o'clock news as a buffoon. Did you learn that at journalism school?" Forbes leaned into him. "Cut the crap. You got an angle on the Coastal Holding deal. Does it involve the Prime Minister?"

Michael was smiling. "You honestly think I would give that to you."

"What about Westfor?" Forbes said. "If there is a story involving the Prime Minister and ____."

"Read about it," Michael said then turned away but Forbes grabbed his elbow again.

"Shit, Michael, I don't like it when you and I do this. I don't want to spar for headlines with any of these other idiots. So there, ya see, you have my undying respect and admiration. So let's cut the song and dance crap."

"So." Michael pulled his elbow free again.

"You better have your facts hard, Michael. If you implicate the Prime Minister in the Stillwater mess, you better know what you're doing. That would be the biggest scandal to hit Ottawa since the Munsinger fiasco."

"You're up on your political history. I think there's been a few scandals since then."

"You know what I mean." Forbes leaned in even closer. "They will be

on your ass so fast. They'll kill your career, Michael. And it wouldn't be the first time I've had to help your ass out of a shit hole would it? "

Michael sighed. "What do you want, Ralph?"

Forbes grabbed Michael's elbow again, pulling him away from the crowded foyer. Once they were safely out of earshot he said, "You can't dig up this story by yourself."

Michael smirked. "What makes you think I would elicit your help. We're not on the same team anymore."

"Hey, don't forget who taught you the ropes." And there was the irony. Forbes was fired from the Free Press when he did a story on a court judge caught in a homosexual tryst involving minors. He fed the story with out confirmation from his sources and refused to name the RCMP officer who gave him the story. The paper had to let Forbes go or face litigation from both the judge and the Justice Minister's office. Forbes was a bitter man. But a collaborative story on the Coastal Holding scandal involving the Prime Minister could put his reputation back in place. The salary he received now was considerably lower. Bacardi rum wasn't cheap. Neither were his payments to his ex-wife who left him when his career went south.

"I'm the best at this," Forbes said, "and you know it." His finger pressed into Michael's chest.

"No," Michael poked back. "I'm the best and we both know it. I'll take the heat, Ralph, if there is any heat. Collaborating sources is the key, right?" Michael's wry grin had a way of cutting right through to the bone. And it stopped Ralph cold.

"It could get hot, Michael, even if there is some truth to it. You know where to find me if this thing is to big."

"Smiley's is not my style, Ralph."

"Neither is being a buffoon on the six o'clock news," Forbes said then strolled out of the hotel lobby.

"Are you out of your mind!" John Lund, the executive editor of the Winnipeg Free Press, was a round, stumpy man with a baldhead and sweaty underarms. And a temper. He eyed his star reporter while he paced.

"You should've seen his reaction to the question, John," Michael said. "Even Forbes was pushing for a bit of the story."

Lund opened his door, the newsroom clatter flooding his office. "Forbes is an asshole," he said then yelled out the door, "Neuwerth, get in here!" There was no doubt. Michael's ass was about to get chewed off.

"See we agree on something," Michael said the instant Lance poked his head inside.

Lance Nuewerth was a timid and shy kid of twenty-three years with short red hair and his black-rimmed glasses sliding down the skinny bridge of his nose. Lance needed work. "You call, Mr. Lund."

Lund scanned his desk. "Coffee, Nuewerth! I don't see any coffee," he said, grabbing the door. "A reporter who doesn't want to write the obits anymore is on top of those things, huh Nuewerth."

"Yes, sir. I di__." The door slammed, the impact slapping through the newsroom.

Lund commenced with the pacing. "For your information, Michael," he said, resuming his chair that cried out under the stress. "It's nearly five o'clock and it's been one helluva day. Luckily my wife's bingo night is tonight, so I get to sit at home by myself and watch TV. Maybe even have a cold beer. I enjoy my Wednesday nights, Michael. But this one is ruined. Know why?"

"Okay, I'll bite. Why?"

"Because one of my reporters is pulling some bullshit during the only press conference given over the last four days since our Prime Minister graced our lovely city." Lund leaned back while Michael settled in for the lecture. "I get a call, Michael, and you'll never guess from who?"

Michael just stared. Speaking would just fuel the fire and prolong the spiel.

"From my friend at channel 5, Leonard Blackstein. Guess what he tells me, Michael?"

"I'm going to be on the six o'clock news," Michael guessed.

"He even commented on your profile. Said, 'that guy should be doing television'. And now I find out that all this free publicity was for a shot in the dark assumption that the goddamn Prime Minister of Canada may be, and I emphasize, *maybe*, involved in the Coastal Holding scandal."

"He is."

"Shit, you have nothing," Lund said, his volume pitching. "Tell me you have a reliable source to collaborate your accusations in a fucking conflict of interest scandal!" Lund leaned forward in his chair, his elbows on his desk, his mouth twisted, anticipating some lame answer.

"C'mon, John. You sound like you never followed your hunches."

"Hunches." Lund sighed then said, "I was following my hunches when__."

Nuewerth proudly knocked as he entered the office, boasting his best smile. The newsroom suddenly alive in John Lund's office again, he glared at the clerk with a well-practiced scowl. Nuewerth set the coffee on the desk and retreated before the reprimand came.

Lund continued. "Like I said. I was reporting news when you were in diapers. But I remember collaboration still being the first rule, even back then. You'd think Forbes lesson would've sunk in for you."

"Not fair, John."

"Not fair my ass."

Michael could only sigh again. Not much longer, he told himself. He just wanted to submit his column and go home. He had been checking his palm held for Jessica Ingham's message all day. She was digging up something very important for him. But, Lund wasn't done with him yet, so what was there to do but sit and tolerate it.

"It wouldn't surprise me," Lund said, "if the Prime Minister was involved in the Stillwater mess somehow. But you have a problem, Michael. You need a

damn source. A reliable one.”

"I think there's a story there," Michael said.

"I think you got shit. Besides you're not supposed to go digging for a story that may be there a whole three fucking provinces away." Lund's fat hand slapped down hard on the desk. "We have plenty of stories here. Report them. When I need you to cover a correspondence assignment, I'll let you know. In the mean time, don't make us look like a bunch of assholes from the National Enquirer." Lund rubbed his face and moaned. "\$450,000 to redecorate 24 Sussex. Jesus, Michael, what's next, he spends too much time at Harrington Lake?"

"I didn't know you were a fan," Michael jabbed, rising out of his chair.

The editor grit his teeth at that one. "No, no, no, don't pull that crap. That has dick to do with quality reporting, Michael." Lund waved at the door. "Now get the hell out of my office. I have a paper to get out." He snapped up his coffee. "And watch the six o'clock news so you don't cover a press conference like that again."

Michael didn't even bother answering. He knew the threat was coming. It always did.

"Next time, I'll clamp your ass. Then you can brush up on your obit writing. You and Lance can work together all damn day."

"Can I go now?" Michael had heard enough.

"Yeah, just bring me something on the conference I can print tomorrow." Lund raised his coffee, sipped then gagged. "Shit," he cursed, once again cracking open his door. "Nuewerth!"

Michael headed for his desk grinning with slight pleasure. He knew Lund needed spoonfuls of sugar in his coffee to curb hunger pangs that hit him late in the afternoon. And Nuewerth knew that too.

A few staff cursed secretly to their computers. And Lance, the want to be reporter, froze his menial duties and headed for the coffee room, mumbling something derogatory under his breath. Lund scorned the inner sanctum of his

office on Nuewerth's inability to even get coffee right as his door slammed. Again.

Michael sat down at his desk and clicked on his computer, pondering the first few lines for his column while it booted up. He had nothing. The hectic newsroom usually invigorated him, but not today. He checked his palm held. His cell phone. No messages yet. He checked his emails, even his Internet account. Nothing. Not even a voice mail. She should've had something by now.

Dammit!

His eyes swept over the motley staff. Crunch time. He loved it but over the years laid witness to others who literally fell to the way side from an inability to survive. But Michael was a survivor and the newsroom was his domain. Yet, there had been times when he had come close. Ralph Forbes wasn't kidding when he had said he had saved Michael's ass. Forbes own experiences were shining examples of the abyss that could swallow a reporter's career. And Michael and Ralph Forbes shared one terrible weakness. Alcoholism.

It all started Michael's first year with the paper back in '85 and the first Tattletale victim lying dead in a dumpster. The killer liked to brag and he chose Lund's extension for a sounding board. Forbes, who was an investigative reporter at the height of his career, thought the call smelled like the work of a prank and besides he was deep into the prominent judge and his illegal trysts. He was too busy and important to chase prank calls. So Lund gave it to the rookie.

The call turned out to be anything but a prank and Michael reported the heinous murders of four little girls all under the age of ten. He had never figured on that kind of news when he dreamed of the career. He had dreamed of the big corporate crime scandals that made newsmen famous. All the President's Men was his favorite movie growing up. Nevertheless, the Tattletale killer reined his terror for well over a month. The papers subscription went through the roof. It became a morbid, national pass time. His career catapulted.

The bottle soon became a companion.

A week after the fourth girl was found the case suddenly turned. The killer had gotten careless and cocky as they all eventually do. A rookie cop named Milt Smith, who was assigned to work with Michael through the ordeal, ended up shooting the killer moments before victim five became a national headline. Michael's salary doubled and he won the investigative column of a dismissed Ralph Forbes who was already lost in his own bottle. A year later he met Jasmine Vincent and married her after six months of dating and great sex. Katie was born in August '87 and Michael spent the first two weeks of her little life crying by the crib in the middle of the night. The nightmares of slain little girls lying in little pink coffins didn't fade as fast as the headlines. He drank heavily.

The second blow came a little closer to home. Katie had developed cerebral meningitis forcing Michael and Jasmine to alternate vigils by her bed. Jasmine cried with his mother. Michael drank. His father cursed him. Then he did something he never really believed in. He prayed. Almost out of sheer desperation he begged the Almighty to spare his beautiful daughter. And, thus, the miracle of faith proved itself to Michael for the first time in his life. Katie's condition miraculously improved and within a week she was back home. Something happened in that hospital room that night. Maybe it was coincidence but he began believing a little more. He sought help to deal with the Tattletale murders and his companion became sobriety. The weird part of the experience is that to this day Katie will get on his case if he mentions the need for a drink. Maybe God had asked her to keep her Dad to his word. Even her grandfathers were under her watchful eye.

Michael's phone rang just as Lance shuffled past with a fresh cup for his highness. "Hang in there, Lance."

"I'm trying," Lance said, pushing his glasses up his nose.

The kid should get some contacts, Michael thought as he picked up.

"Hello, Michael Spencer."

"Hi, Michael." A familiar voice.

"Jessica!" Michael sat upright in his chair. "Any news?"

"Yeah," Jessica said. "I didn't get the file till late yesterday."

Michael checked the little digital clock Katie gave him for Father's Day. Jasmine, Katie and Sabien's pictures were inset in the face. Sabien was the family Great Dane. Michael hated him. It was 4:30pm.

"I think you should come by my office," Jessica said. There was something in her voice.

"Bad news?" he asked – fingers crossed.

"Can you stop here on your way home?"

"I have to finish my copy and by the time I get there it'll be five thirty."

"I'll wait if you'll come."

"Did you find her?"

"My office, Michael."

"Did you talk to her?"

"Michael."

"Are you going to talk to her?"

"We need to talk ."

"She didn't want to meet me did she?" His voice dropped.

"Just get here as soon as you can."

There was only one reason for Child and Family Services counselor, Jessica Ingham, not to contact Michael's birth mother. His hopes were about to be defeated by a single question.

"Is she dead?"