

Chapter 1

Interrogation: **Friday, August 29**

They've sent Detective Deitrich out from Regina. He's with the RCMP Major Crimes Unit. Not exceptionally large, he's definitely a presence with those powerful shoulders, close-cropped greying hair and gunmetal blue eyes. He seems to have suffered a sense of humor bypass, probably several years before I was born. Deitrich has been sent to Kettlebank because the death—suicide? *Murder?* —of Tristan Everleigh is considered a high-profile case. Tristan's parents are rich.

"Ingrid Johanson?" His cold eyes meet mine. He indicates the chair across from him in the interrogation room.

I slide into the chair. "That's me." I'm not trying to be rude, but I can hear the faint sarcasm in my voice. Of course he knows who I am. Sergeant Grant was at the bridge the night Tristan died, but Deitrich met me at Two Bit Tubby's when he talked with several of us who knew Tristan. I can read my name upside down on the file in front of him.

Now, four days after the fatal "accident", which apparently is somehow now a murder, Deitrich has "invited" me in to make a statement. I can't believe this guy thinks I could possibly be responsible for Tristan's death. Don't get me wrong, I had plenty of reason to wish him dead. As did Mariah, Jared, and probably half the population of Kettlebank. Tristan could be a jerk. But wishing someone dead and actually killing him are as far apart as Kettlebank, Saskatchewan and Timbuktu. "What can I do to help?" This time I lean a bit forward and add a note of sincerity.

He remains standing behind his chair, arms crossed, staring down at me. "Tell me about your relationship with Tristan Everleigh."

Relationship? In spite of my resolve to stay cool, I swallow hard. "Well," I say slowly, "I've known Tristan since grade school..."

Deitrich finally sits down. He nods for me to go on.

My mind races. What can I say here and what do I need to leave out? I remind myself to stay as close as possible to the truth. Just not necessarily the *whole* truth... "Tristan Everleigh and his parents moved to Kettlebank from Alberta when he was in grade five, in the same class as my brother Eric and Jared Jack. You've met Jared."

Deitrich nods.

I continue, carefully reporting, “Tristan’s parents, Houston and Yvette, are a wealthy couple—oil money, I believe—who sold their ranch in Alberta to expand their operation near Kettlebank. They built that big mansion on their new property, the old Ramstead place, added corrals and outbuildings using all the latest technology, and brought in their herd of Black Angus cattle. Their arrival was a big deal in Kettlebank. Any available men got jobs building fences, landscaping and doing whatever Houston paid them to do. The Everleighs brought in a housekeeper, a cook and a maid—all fulltime help.”

I pause, recalling the hoopla of having a Big House in the neighbourhood—like something out of a Bronte sisters’ novel. “The couple were charismatic and eventually earned the grudging acceptance of their neighbours—not easy for people ‘from away’, especially people with a lavish lifestyle. More especially rich people who’ve bought land the locals bid on.” I stop again to consider how that came about. “They made donations to all the right causes and hosted an open house, with free drinks and catered food, when their mansion was completed. They were the talk of the town.”

I half expect Deitrich to tell me to get to the point, but he sits still, watching me closely.

I let the memories in. Even at ten years old, Tristan was movie-star cute and aware that his good looks and charm would let him get away with anything. He was the first boy I ever met who had a hair style. The Kettlebank guys got an army-short buzz cut each spring, and had it trimmed when it started to poke out under their ballcaps. Tristan’s sun-bleached chestnut hair was long enough on top to flop with artificial carelessness onto his forehead, or be tossed out of his eyes with a casual flick of the wrist. And those eyes. He had sooty-lashed, silvery eyes, unreadable, reflecting rather than letting you see what was behind them. The first week of school, he latched onto Eric and his best buddy Jared. Jared resisted at first, as did I—neither of us trusted Tristan—but Eric convinced us to welcome the new kid and he became part of our group.

Aloud, I say, “Tristan became friends with Eric and Jared and we all hung out together growing up.”

“You, Eric, Tristan, Jared and—” he checks his notes “—Mariah McCulley.”

“That’s right.” The five of us. *The Viking Five*.

“So,” Deitrich fiddles with his pen. “Your brother Eric died in a car accident the summer after you graduated.”

I stare down at the arborite table top and nod. Eric. My brother, my best friend before Mariah. Gone, just like that. Tristan was there that night, too.

“And you, you left for Mississauga, to Ontario Architectural College that fall, got your diploma and went to work in Toronto.” He looks up from his notes. “Haven’t been home in, what, six years?”

I blink. “My parents came to visit a couple times.” I hear my defensive tone. I shrug. “I was studying, there was Covid, then I was working long hours at the firm. Building a life for myself.”

“Away from Kettlebank.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “When my brother died, it broke my heart. I came back in August for my dad’s funeral.”

“Your dad died August 10th.” The detective flips a page in his notebook. “And you came home shortly after...the funeral was August 15th.” He isn’t looking for confirmation from me; he’s simply stating facts. “The autopsy says your father died of a heart attack. Your mother and a neighbour, Jared Jack—your buddy—found him in the hayfield, leaning against a tire on the shady side of the baler. No signs of a struggle. Seems to have died peacefully.”

I’m not sure what to say. That’s all true. When Dad didn’t come in for supper or answer his phone, Mom called Jared, who farms just a mile away. Jared had noticed Dad’s tractor and baler stopped in the field, but assumed Dad was unplugging hay or repairing something. When Mom called, he picked her up and they went together to check on Dad. And that, as they say, was that. Striving for numbness, I say nothing, but I’m sure my face reflects grief and surprise—not to mention resentment of his callousness.

If I expected sympathy from Deitrich, I should’ve known better. “And now,” he says, “another one of your circle has died, and I don’t think you’re telling me everything you know.”