

CHAPTER ONE

Guilty people have a certain look. The most obvious sign was a shiny forehead. Sweat was a poor detective's lie-detector test; where there was perspiration, there was always criminal motivation. If the suspect was doing the got-to-pee shuffle, she was probably guilty. No one other than shoplifters and two-year-olds who drank too much apple juice did that two-step dance. The surefire sign of guilt? Zigzag eyes.

Walking the beat in my parents' grocery store, I'd seen it all. Last year, I caught a teenager stuffing a car magazine down his pants, and I stood back as the red-faced boy tried to explain the bulge in his pants to Mom. Last month, the shifty gaze of a teenage girl gave her away. I found two chocolate bars under her Bedazzled jean jacket, and she tried to convince Dad that she had bought them at a convenience store, but

burst into hiccup tears when he asked her to show him the receipt. Today, I was sure I was staring at the sweaty forehead of another thief.

The raven wing of hair dangling in front of Samantha McNally's pale face couldn't hide the bead of perspiration rolling down her cheek, and her heavy black eyeliner couldn't mask her shifty gaze. I was sure my grade six classmate was looking for a five-finger discount as I watched her tug the bottom of her black T-shirt and stretch out the silk-screened emo teddy bear.

She stopped when she noticed me eyeing her hands. "Um . . . I'm looking for . . . uh . . . shampoo. Where is it?" she asked.

Silence melted a shoplifter's nerve like a hair dryer blowing on a soft-serve ice cream cone. All I had to do was keep quiet and watch Samantha's resolve dissolve into a milky puddle of excuses to be anywhere but here. She wiped her moist forehead with her wide, black wristband and shuffled from one foot to the other, but she steeled her nerve and asked, "Are you going to tell me or not?"

This shoplifter was a tough one. "Third aisle, halfway down. Follow the smell of lilacs."

She turned on her heels and walked away. As soon as she rounded the corner, I fished out a black and

silver walkie-talkie from my pocket and pressed the talk button. “Alpha One to Alpha Two,” I said. “Do you read? Over.”

I released the button and waited for an answer.

Static blasted out of the speaker followed by a boy’s voice. “Alpa . . . erk . . . Ober.”

“Say again, Alpha Two. Over.”

“Werk jer yu bay? Ober.”

“Remi, can you hear me? Over.”

Now only static burst from my walkie-talkie’s silver speaker.

I pushed the talk button. “Say again,” I said. “Over.”

My walkie-talkie was half of an ancient set that belonged to my best friend Remi Boudreau. He claimed they were weapons in the war on crime, but mine was jamming and I didn’t have time to fix it. I glanced at the large security mirror hanging at the back of the store. Reflected in the shiny fish eyeball glass, Samantha reached for something on the shelf. My body tensed ready to spring into action, but she stepped back and glanced at Mrs. Johnson who rolled her shopping cart to a stop beside her. Samantha wouldn’t try anything as long as there was a witness — shoplifters were cockroaches who skittered away when people came near — and Mrs. Johnson wasn’t going anywhere soon. She always read

the nutrition labels to find the healthiest food. She constantly harassed my dad about the food he stocked in the store, claiming he'd get more customers if his groceries had low sodium, low fat, and low sugar. Her son Eric complained her cooking had low flavour, which was probably why he was always stealing lunches from grade three kids.

As Mrs. Johnson read a can of tomato sauce, I pressed the walkie-talkie button and whispered, "Alpha Two, come back to rendezvous point. Hurry. Over."

"Pull the antenna up and you'll get better reception," Remi said, his voice now sounding crystal clear.

"Don't need to. The problem's fixed," I said into the walkie-talkie. "It sounds like you're next to me. Over."

"That's because I am," he said.

I spun around. Remi held his walkie-talkie in one hand. Through his long brown bangs, I could see the frustration in his brown eyes. He pointed at the extended antenna on his walkie-talkie.

"No time to worry about that," I said. "Goldilocks is in the bear's house."

“Really?” he said, brightening. He scanned the store as he rolled up the sleeves of his Toronto Maple Leafs hockey jersey. “Where?”

“Momma Bear’s chair,” I replied.

“Which aisle is that again?” he asked.

“Salon supplies . . . shampoo . . . moisturizers . . . far right,” I said.

“Couldn’t you say far right in the first place? Your code is confusing, Marty.”

“It’s simple, Remi. Goldilocks is the one who ate the bears’ porridge.”

“So that means you’re Momma Bear.” He grinned.

“No, yes. Never mind,” I said. “You got your badge?”

“Yup,” he said. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a cardboard star that read, “Remi Boudreau, Store Detective.”

“Keep it close. You might need it if things get ugly.”

Remi cocked his head to the side. “Ugly? How?”

“This one looks like a runner,” I explained. “The badge should stop her.”

He practiced flashing his badge. “Hey, you. Yeah, I’m talking to you. You better believe I’m talking to you. You deaf or something? I said I’m talking to you. Put your hands behind your head.’ How’s that, Marty?”

“You got the hang of it. Now head to the far end of the aisle and keep your eyes on Goldilocks. I’ll watch from this end. Right now, all we do is watch. Don’t do anything until she starts to eat the porridge.”

“Sure thing, Momma Bear,” Remi said.

“Alpha One,” I corrected.

“Sure thing,” he said. “Momma Bear.” He flashed me a goofy grin.

I shook my head. “Get going,” I said, “Baby Bear.”

He smacked my arm and jogged down the middle aisle to get into position. I looked back at the security mirror. Mrs. Johnson was still reading the label on the can of tomatoes. A few feet away, Samantha picked up a small bottle. Too small to be shampoo. I crept to the end of the aisle to get a closer look.

Samantha held a bottle of pink nail polish. The bottle was one of the oldest items in the store. Dad said the dust on the bottle was probably older than me, but he refused to stock any new bottles until this one was sold. Bright pink nail polish was an odd choice for a girl who was constantly painting her fingernails black. She placed the bottle back on the shelf, jammed her right hand in her pants pocket, pulled out her hand, and grabbed the bottle again. I inched forward. Samantha flicked her head in my direction. I jumped back around the corner, pulled

out my walkie-talkie, extended the antenna and pressed the talk button.

“Alpha Two, my position has been compromised. Put your eyes on Goldilocks. Over.”

“Eyes on Goldilocks. Got it. Over.”

No matter what went down, I knew I could count on Remi. As the top hockey player on the Bouvier Bobcats, he was the most popular kid in town. Everyone wanted to hang out with him, but he’d rather spend time with me. When his teammates made fun of the thick lenses of my new glasses, he stood up for me and told them he’d use their noggins for slapshot practice if they didn’t shut up. I knew he’d always have my back and I’d always have his.

In the security mirror, Samantha fidgeted as if she were standing on hot coals. She hadn’t made her move yet, but soon. She kept picking up the bottle and putting it back on the shelf, and I started to wonder if she was going to try to make her move with Mrs. Johnson behind her. Suddenly, Remi entered the reflection.

He lifted his cardboard badge and announced, “Store detective. Freeze! You’re busted.”

I scrambled to back up my partner, but Remi wasn’t aiming his badge at Samantha. He was staring at a very irate Mrs. Johnson.

The sharp-nosed woman huffed, “I don’t have time for your childish games.”

“Save it for the police, ma’am. Marty, Goldilocks ate the porridge.”

I rushed to my friend’s side, slipping past Samantha.

“What are you doing?” I asked Remi.

“She put something in her purse,” he said.

“I told you to watch out for Goldilocks.”

He pointed at the blonde-haired Mrs. Johnson. “I am.”

“Not her,” I said. “Her!” I pointed back down the aisle, but Samantha was gone.

“I demand an apology,” Mrs. Johnson said, her shrill voice rising higher and louder like an opera singer. Any higher and she’d shatter the glass in the security mirror.

“What did you see, Remi?” I asked.

He pointed at Mrs. Johnson’s purse. “She ripped a piece of paper from one of the cans and slipped it in there.”

“Which can?” I asked.

Remi pointed at the cans of corn. All but one can had a coupon attached to the front. The coupon gave the shopper a discount on a can of tomatoes; the same can sitting in Mrs. Johnson’s cart.

Mrs. Johnson glared at him. “I could easily shop at the IGA if this is the treatment I’m going to get here,” she threatened.

Every Saturday, she bought enough groceries to make up for our lack of business during the rest of the week. She was our family’s life preserver. Without her, my parents’ store would sink like a lead weight. We couldn’t afford to lose her business even if Remi was right, but still he was my partner.

“I want to talk to your father, Marty.”

“You have to buy the corn to get the coupon,” I said.

Remi looked up from her purse. “Actually, I was wrong about the coupon. I should have been asking you about the stolen grapes.”

“What grapes?” she huffed.

He nodded at her purse. Inside, I could make out a barren grape stem. I grinned at my sharp-eyed partner.

“Then why do you keep that grape stem in your purse?” I asked.

Mrs. Johnson snapped her purse shut. Her gaze zigzagged and I thought I saw a bead of sweat on her temple as she did the got-to-pee shuffle. “What’s in my purse is my own business, but if you’re such a stickler for rules, I’ll buy the can of corn.”

She reached for a can on the shelf.

“No, Mrs. Johnson. You should buy the one that you took the coupon from,” Remi said.

She glared at him. “I was getting two cans.”

She also picked up the can with the missing coupon and placed both in her cart. Remi beamed. I turned back to where Samantha had been. Not only was she gone, so was the nail polish.

“Follow me,” I ordered. “Hurry!”

We skidded to a stop by the cash register where my dad was bagging Samantha’s purchases. His fingertips were blackened with the ink from the Chinese newspaper he was reading. Even his gold-rimmed glasses were smudged with ink. He had plenty of time to read, because we had so few customers. His dirty hands left fingerprints all over the plastic bag, which he handed to Samantha. She smiled at him, flashed me a dirty look and walked out.

“Dad, what did she buy?” I asked.

“Why are you not working?” he asked, fixing us a look over his gold-rimmed glasses.

“We think that girl stole something. Did she pay for nail polish, Dad?”

He played with the rolled-up cuff of his white shirt for a second as he thought. Then he shook his head.

“No, she just bought some gum and a box of mashed potatoes,” he said

“Are you sure there was no nail polish, Mr. Chan?” Remi asked.

He nodded, the light glinting off his shiny bald head.

I turned to Remi. “Goldilocks ate the porridge!”

He nodded. We bolted after the thief.