

## CHAPTER 1

*Fickle mirrors reflect our lives*

*Reality comes and goes.*

*Images appear radiate then yield –*

*To light and shadows...*

s.t.b.

*Previous year...*

Jim Baker listened to the sound of his whirring tires as he sped under the Elbow River bridge then beyond a stand of poplar. It was so much easier and faster to take the bike paths between home and work down town. This way he only needed to cross eight streets that shuffled congested vehicle traffic.

He expected Laura would be surprised to see him this early in the afternoon. He'd left in such a hurry he hadn't even changed from his suit and tie before leaving the office. He also anticipated she'd be excited about his latest promotion and their transfer opportunity to Nova Scotia from Alberta.

He smiled to himself imagining the expression on his wife's face while he pointed his bike toward the gate that opened out onto the neighborhood street six blocks from their restored 1926 bungalow.

The Canada Post driver was running late. Taking a shortcut, he maneuvered up the hill and around the corner of the quiet, vintage neighborhood.

A broken tree branch obscured a faded stop sign just before a bend. As the driver accelerated out of the turn the blur of a speeding cyclist emerging from the park became the sound of a hollow thud against his front right fender.

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Sergeant Neil McKenzie found the address and stopped his unmarked police car at the curb. He took a deep breath checking the home address on the driver's license of the deceased a second time. He noticed that he and the late Jim Baker were the same age. The family photo in the wallet of the traffic victim made this part of his job and what he needed to do next a task he dreaded.

He removed his nightstick and revolver, locking them in the car trunk then headed up the brick walk and onto the wide front porch.

The woman who opened the front door had sweetest

smile he had ever seen. She reminded him of the Walt Disney drawing of *Snow White* with pale clear skin, dark shoulder length hair, dark lashes and expressive dusty blue eyes.

Neil McKenzie wished he could run, instead he swallowed hard and did his job. "Mrs. Baker?"

"Yes, I'm Laura Baker." Her expression was completely open and trusting. "May I help you?"

"I'm Sergeant Neil McKenzie, Alberta 'K' Division of the RCMP. I have some news Mrs. Baker may I come in for a few minutes?"

The woman opened the door wider indicating a chair just inside the living room to the right of the front entrance. As he scanned the room Sergeant McKenzie heard the laughter of young children playing in the backyard.

The uniformed officer didn't sit, but handed Laura her late husband's drivers' license. "Is this your husband, James Matthew Baker ma'am?"

Laura nodded then tilted her head looking back at the officer confused.

"It is with deep regret I must inform you that James Baker was killed this afternoon."

She frowned then stared unable to absorb the officer's

words. "What?" And then in a heartbeat it hit her. Jim was late and this man was in her living room and Jim's driver's license was in her hand...

Sergeant McKenzie caught Laura Baker in his arms before she hit the wood floor. And he was carrying her to the sofa when her children came running from the kitchen through the swinging dining room door.

"Mom! Mom, guess what...?" Megan and Matthew Baker burst through the doorway just as a policeman laid their mother down on the living room sofa.

"Who are you?" Megan frowned.

"I'm Sergeant Neil McKenzie with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police." He responded formally, judging their ages to be about four or five. "I came to talk to your mother. She just fainted."

"Where's your gun?" Matthew moved cautiously from the corner of the dining table across the front entrance hall and into the living room. He peeked over the arm of their leather sofa to check on his mother.

McKenzie pointed out through the living room window. "It's there, in the trunk of my car. Is there a neighbor one of you can call for me? Your mother shouldn't be alone."

"Is she sick? Dad will be home soon." Megan joined her brother at the end of the sofa.

Sergeant McKenzie cringed inside.

"Our Aunt Susan just lives down the street on the corner. Her business office is in her house." Matthew offered. "I'll get her."

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Sergeant McKenzie had watched for the funeral announcement in the newspaper, but was conflicted about attending the gravesite service. When he checked the duty posting for the first week of June and discovered he had that day off, he decided he would drive by the cemetery, but park away from the funeral procession.

The expression on Laura Baker's beautiful, innocent face was still vivid in his memory.

He deliberately arrived late hoping that no one around the gravesite would notice him, but as he came up the hill behind a lilac hedge almost all of the attendees were returning to their cars except Laura Baker, her daughter Megan and Laura's sister Susan. He looked, but didn't see the little boy, Matthew.

"Hi Mr. Sergeant." Matthew landed on his feet.

"Where did you come from?" Matthew Baker startled McKenzie.

"I climbed that tree." The small boy pointed to a mountain ash that grew at the end of the lilac hedge. "You look - kinda different in a suit. Did you quit bein a RMP?"

Sergeant McKenzie tried not to smile. "No, I didn't quit. This is my day off. How's your mother?"

Matthew shook his head. "She's not doin so good."

McKenzie knelt down putting both hands, on Matthew's shoulders. "How are you and your sister doing?"

Matthew shrugged. "I don't know. I wish I could see my dad. He was at his office a lot, but he promised to take me fishing. Aunt Susan says when someone dies that means they don't come home again."

"M-a-t-t-h-e-w." Megan's young voice pierced through the cool morning air.

"I'm over here." He waved. "I'm talking to Mr. Sergeant."

Laura and her sister turned to follow Megan as she ran in Matthew's direction. When Laura Baker spotted Sergeant McKenzie, she gave him a weak smile.

Taking both kids by the hand McKenzie walked toward their mother and aunt. Laura Baker looked to Neil as if she had lost weight and her fair skin was even paler, contrasted against dark sunken eyes.

"It's my day off." He explained. "I just thought I'd stop by and see if there was anything I might do for any of you."

"It's wonderful that you'd make such an offer." Susan took her sister's arm, cautious and protective. "Sergeant McKenzie, is that correct?"

Neil nodded. "Neil McKenzie."

Laura looked up at the rugged, handsome face that looked back at her with such calm strength, she wanted to ask him to share his composed authority, instead she said. "I planned to call your office in a few weeks and thank you for looking after me and my children until Susan arrived."

Laura's voice was almost a whisper. "I don't know how often you must give people news like you had to give me, but I'm sure it doesn't get easier with time."

"Mom, can we go now? Can we get some ice cream?"

Laura's attention shifted to her son. "Ice cream? For some reason that sounds like a perfect idea. Will you join us Sergeant, I mean Neil?"

The sound of his name from her voice caused him unexpected turmoil with an internal warning. "Thank you. That does sound like a perfect idea, but I have another appointment." He lied.

"Since you still have my card, call anytime if you think I can help in anyway."

He gave both kids a hug and left after walking Laura and her family back to their waiting limousine.

