

CHAPTER 1

“I NEED YOUR HELP.”

Those four words were the ones Detective Sergeant Christian Anderson forever despised—not just now, but always. Yet there he sat on the edge of his bed with his iPhone pressed against his ear. A quick glance at the clock on the nightstand: 3:45 A.M. His heavy eyes closed, and his breath slowed.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s Cassidy. She’s vanished.”

He rubbed the crust from his eyes. “How long?”

There was a pause on the line. “Two days. I didn’t want to call, but I can’t trust anyone else.”

Her voice cracked. In all the years he’d known her, she’d never been this shaken before.

“I need to make a few calls, so it’ll be a few hours. That okay?”

“So, you’ll come?”

Christian sighed. “I’m only doing this because it’s you. But, yes—I’ll come.”



NOT ONCE DID RETURNING TO THIS derelict town filled with ghosts of his past ever cross his mind. At least that was the plan ten years ago. But then Gemma, his best friend and only real attachment left to Cedar Lake, phoned in hysterics. Without hesitation, he upended his entire world, loaded his sedan, and traipsed six hours across the vast province.

The ankle-deep snow buried the street he remembered as a kid and the vehicle sliced through like a champ. With the flick of his wrist he shook his digital watch awake. One o’clock on the dot. As he maneuvered the thoroughfare, happier memories flooded his mind, yet one thing was certain, *Same old shithole it always was.*

He crossed over Fourth Avenue, and the last house on the block dwarfed anything else on his mind.

His foot slammed against the brake pedal, and the car skidded along the unplowed pavement. Frazzled, he gripped the steering wheel, let up on the brake, and seconds later glided into an empty space along the bare-treed avenue outside a neglected, gray, split-story house.

Everything Christian remembered about Cedar Lake had changed, although none of those transformations would anyone with half a brain consider an improvement. His shaky hand pushed the gearshift forward, and after several minutes he turned

his head toward the front lawn where he spent the better portion of his childhood.

His eyes remained transfixed on the exterior, which in its prime was one of the most attention-grabbing houses on the street. Now, as he scrutinized the chipped-away paint, the screen door hanging on for dear life, it was evident the pizzazz had faded and what remained was one of the worst houses he'd seen in some time.

He diverted his eyes away from the front door and rolled toward the driveway. Ten years ago, as he pulled away in a cloud of smoke, the junk collection pile had been small, but somehow in a decade the tiny pile of crap had sprouted and consumed a majority of the yard.

He twisted back the key in the ignition and the flow of warm air stopped. He clenched the steering wheel while his heart raced, and his palms grew wet. He closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. After a few repetitions, he opened them and caught sight of himself in the rearview mirror.

“Just breathe like the therapist taught you.”

For all his effort, the exercise failed and soon the *what ifs* engulfed his soul. What would he say when he saw him? Would the man who raised him recognize him after so many years? Worse, would *he* even recognize his own father? Much had changed over a decade; then again, Christian was naïve if he supposed deep down anything in the Anderson household were different.

He flung the car door open and plodded his black snow boots against the packed snow. After the long car ride with no pitstops, he inhaled deeply. A hint of smoldering cedar lingered in the frigid air, and the familiarity dredged up more unsolicited

recollections. He shook them off and slammed the heavy door behind him.

During the six-hour drive from Regina, Christian had ample time to deliberate how he'd explain his presence. However, as each justification grew more intricate than the former, Christian questioned why he even wasted his energy concocting pointless lies. His intuition told him the moment the front door swung open, he'd find his father with his fingers wrapped around a bottle of booze. At least that's the vivid picture he remembered from the evening after his high school graduation. The day he packed his bags and bolted as fast as he could from this one-stoplight town.

He trudged along the icy walkway, unsure if his hands trembled from the cold or the anticipation of what he'd find behind the front door. A quick glance to his right and he found his father's 1980s Dodge pickup covered in a foot of snow.

Must have been a while since he was last out.

He stood at the screen door, which hung on by one hinge, and he contemplated how he'd get past without tearing it away from the doorjamb. With precision, he pulled lightly back and pressed his knuckle against the door.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

Believing a changed man would fling open the door, his optimism faded when mere stillness greeted him.

Undeterred, he banged again three times and twisted the door handle. No surprise to him, the door popped. He extended his hand and pushed against the substandard barrier between the inside and outside.

The moment his left foot crossed the threshold, the stench of urine and body odor attacked his nostrils. He sprang back to prepare for what horrid scene awaited him. Christian turned his

head, gasped his last nip of unsullied air, and forced the door inward.

“Pop?” he called out.

Only the eerie calm greeted him.

The floor creaked beneath his feet, and he took two steps into the foyer. “Pop, you home? It’s Christian.”

He rotated in a circle, and the mounds of garbage alarmed him. After the initial shock of surveying how his father was living (if one could call what he had a life), his hazel eyes perused upward. There was the man who from the time Christian was a child overlooked him, slouched in his beloved lounge from circa 1988, with his emaciated fingers clasped around a fifth of cheap gin. He squinted and gave a long, hard stare at the man who he shared half of his DNA with.

He had changed, all right. Now, the short hair his father had sported his entire life was scraggly and greasy. His beard was unkempt. There were holes punched in the walls, and Christian stopped counting at five. Time sure hadn’t been kind to Matthias Anderson.

“Christ,” Christian whispered underneath his breath. “Pop, wake up.”

The house was in sadder shape than the day he left. With uneasiness, he tiptoed around the empty pizza boxes, liquor bottles, and bugs that speckled the brown Berber carpeting. With each additional step he gained, his skin crawled from the crunch of roaches underneath his feet.

He hovered over his father, yanked his pants legs up, and crouched. The stench of booze wafted, and Christian deliberated if waking him was a wise decision.

Leery, he set his hand against the older man’s shoulder and shook vigorously. “Pop. Come on, wake up.”

His eyes fluttered. He slurred three words. "Leave me alone."
"Pop, it's me. Please wake up."

The older man opened one bloodshot eye. "Christian? Is that you?"

Christian couldn't bring himself to confirm. All he could do was shake his head.

Matthias opened both eyes and glanced at the bottle he clutched in his hand. "I can explain."

"Here we go again; I don't need another rationalization. Face the facts, Pop, this is just who you are and have been since the day Mom disappeared."

The tattered man adjusted his body in the chair, dropped the half-drunk bottle to the ground, and rubbed his hands across his haggard mug. "Wh-why are you here? God, how long's it been?"

With a snarky tone in his voice, Christian responded. "I'm not here for you. I came for Gemma."

The name provoked an immediate, sobering response and Matthias started to panic. "Has something happened to her?"

Christian pressed against his father's chest and he fell back into the lounge. "Relax. Gemma needs my help with a family matter. I only dropped in to check on you since I'm in town."

Matthias pressed his hand against the chairback in an effort to get to his feet. With too much liquor pumping through his bloodstream, he let his equilibrium get the better of him, and he dropped back into the chair.

Christian hung his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Jesus, you're an absolute mess."

The father and son stared at each other in silence, and eventually, Matthias labored to stand to his feet again. With some sort of miracle, he managed this time to keep his balance, and

Christian wrapped his arm around his father's back and steadily guided him to the couch.

He tossed a stained pillow against the armrest and lowered his father onto the couch. The old man plonked against the tweed cushioning. Christian squatted next to his head, and again, his father grilled him for answers.

"Tell me the truth, boy. Something's wrong with Gemma? . . . No, wait, there can't be, I saw her two days ago and she was fine."

"Gemma's good. It's Cassidy who's in trouble."

He scrunched his face at the mention of her name. "Hopeless girl's in rehab. The third time, you know. Tried to overdose on whatever brew she got her hands on this time."

Christian shook his head. "No, Pop, they released her two days ago."

His slurred speech continued. "And she's in trouble already? What'd she do now?"

"It's not what she *did*." He wiped his hands across his face. "Gemma says when she arrived to pick her up, Cassidy had vanished, and no one has seen her since she signed out of the rehab center."

Matthias strained to sustain eye contact but babbled in a judgmental manner. "Most likely ran off with her low-life, drug-dealing boyfriend. You're a cop. You should know rule number one: junkies never change."

Christian exhaled and scanned the place he once called home. "Yeah, they don't, do they?"

He crinkled his nose in disgust and refocused his attention on his father, who had once again blacked out. With a snap of his fingers, Matthias resurrected. "Pop. I'm heading out. Do us both a

favor and get some rest, perhaps a shower if you sober up long enough, and I'll come back to check on you tonight.”

The man smacked his dehydrated lips together and shoed him. Christian stood to his feet, turned, and walked to the door. As he reached the foyer, he rested his hand against the wall and turned his head around to catch one more glimpse of the man he previously considered his idol. With a quick tap against the wall, he continued on and stepped back into the winter white world of Cedar Lake.

Once in the car, he slid the key into the ignition and right before he turned over the engine, he stopped. The radio revived, and a sappy song from 2009 filled the hollow space. As much as he wanted to turn over the engine and head back to Regina, or anywhere far away from this godforsaken place as he could, his repressed feelings had other plans.

He arched forward, his forehead rested against the steering wheel, and the reality of everything sank in. All the guilt and resentment ambushed Christian, and soon what started out as a drip escalated into a full-fledged stream of tears that spurted from his eyes as if he'd learned his father had died.

Midway through his emotional collapse, the lively ringtone from his cell phone interrupted. Without lifting his head, his hand rummaged about for the phone. With a tap of the power button, the ringing quieted. What should have worked the first time didn't, considering seconds later the phone rang again. This time he wiped the wetness from his stained face, and through the blurriness the name on the caller ID slowly came into focus.