

CHAPTER ONE

CELIA

The morning betrayed her. No evil portent, no cool northern wind, no ominous cloud hinted at what the day would bring--only the cool scent of leaves and pine needles and river-smell.

Celia had been working toward this morning for more than a month. She stepped out of the house, anxious to get to the schoolyard and check on preparations for the soccer fundraiser, when the phone rang. She ran back in and grabbed it. Melissa Foster on the other end, her voice low and scratchy said, "I'm sorry, Celia. I don't think I can come today. I'm real sick. Do you think you can get someone else to run the doughnut booth?"

The cancellation was the second disappointment of the morning. Multiple tries to Sarah's cell phone were fruitless. Sarah had all the pumpkin and apple pies, the raffle tickets, and the last of the donated items for the silent auction. And she was supposed to be running the haunted house.

Celia stepped back outside and down the steps and took a breath of autumn while she waited for Caleb. Hershey, their chocolate Lab, ran up and shoved his muzzle into her hand. She gave him a scratch behind the ears and looked out over the property. The lawn needed mowing and the garden hadn't been weeded, but still the sight of the yard made her smile.

When they built this house in Point-du-Fleuve on the edge of the Renous, one of the smaller rivers on the Quebec side of the Ottawa River, they'd overlooked few details. The home fit perfectly into its surroundings as though native to them. Large windows faced every direction

but north, where tall spruce trees lined the drive and would have obscured the view. On certain autumn mornings, the announcement of daybreak broke forth from flocks of ravens inhabiting the stand of trees behind the house. This morning, though, the only sounds were the first of the fallen leaves skittering across the gravel drive and the ever-present whisper of water moving.

The screen door slammed and Caleb bounded down the steps from the deck. He shrugged one strap from his backpack onto his shoulder and leaned against its weight.

“You ready?”

“Yup.”

“Nervous about the shoot-out?”

“Naw. Justin and I are the best scorers on the team.” He smiled, eight-year-old mischief emanating from him like sunlight.

Jeff had loaded up the van before he left this morning on a last-minute errand. Celia made a quick survey of the boxes and bags stacked in the back, shut the hatch and climbed in the van.

She turned the ignition. “Okay, Mr. Confidence, let’s go have a soccer fundraiser.”

#

At Caleb’s school, she scanned the yard for Sarah as she lined up cups and poured cider.

“Not here yet,” Jeff said. He managed to keep the I-told-you-so out of his voice.

“Put out an all-points bulletin on her, okay?” Just like Sarah. What would it be this time? Justin took too long getting dressed, the car wouldn’t start, she’d had to run back for something forgotten at the house. She tried not to let Jeff see her frustration. After all, she had no choice but to forgive her best friend.

“She’s not answering her cell?”

“No. I’ve given up trying.” She pushed a box of cups under one of the tables. “That should be enough for now, don’t you think?”

Jeff stepped to her side of the table and surveyed her work: eight perfectly aligned rows

of plastic cups, evenly filled. "I believe your work here is done." He laughed and planted a kiss on her head as she stood.

Coach Lassiter strode up with Aidan McCall, Caleb's friend and a midfielder for the team. "He's bleeding," Coach said.

Aidan's face glowed red. His chest puffed out, as if he held his breath to keep from crying. He maintained a steady focus on his knee. Grass stains and dirt covered it, and underneath, blood oozed out.

Celia leaned down to take a better look. "We've got bandages and antiseptic. Don't worry. You'll be okay, honey." She put her arm around Aidan and led him to a chair behind the cider table, dug out her first aid kit, and set to work. "Would you hand me that water bottle, Jeff?"

"I'll leave him in your capable hands," Coach said. He jogged back to his station near the goal posts where he and the team prepared for the shoot-out between our team and the Rideau Raiders from across the river in Ontario.

"Hey babe." Jeff touched her on her shoulder as she crouched in the grass in front of Aidan. "You have any of that acetaminophen for kids?"

"Another headache?" She cut through the gauze, tucked the scissors back inside the first aid kit, and peered over the table. Caleb stood on the other side drinking a cup of cider. Something gripped her in the pit of her stomach, but she pushed it aside.

"Yeah. He says it's not too bad."

"They're in my purse." She pointed under the table. "In the box right here."

She ripped off a piece of tape, put it in place over the gauze and smoothed it over the wound. Aiden winced.

"Sorry." She smiled up at her patient. "You're all set now."

The red was fading from his face, his chest deflating. "Thanks, Mrs. Bennett."

“You’re welcome.” She stood up and smiled at Caleb. “You okay, baby?”

He made a sideways glance at Aiden and glared at her. She tried again. “How’s that headache?”

“Fine.” He made a face at the bottle in Jeff’s hands. “I’m okay, Dad. I don’t need those.”

“All right, Champ. If you say so.” Jeff tossed the bottle back in the purse, and smiled at her. “Sorry. False alarm, I guess.”

She ignored him and studied Caleb, her eyes dark under a furrowed brow. “Are you sure, sweetie?”

Jeff waved his hand in the air. “Go on. You have things to do. I’ll hold down the fort.”

She glanced again at Caleb, but he was already heading across the field to catch up with Aiden. She gathered the few things needed for the auction and crossed the field, still wet and glistening with the rainfall the night before. Father Lafontaine had agreed to run Melissa Foster’s doughnut stand when she suggested he was also free to give out some of the church’s literature. It was hard to tell which was doing stiffer business--the doughnuts or the diocese.

Spry for his age, the Father clung to tradition--he still held mass in Latin, a practice regularly protested by younger members of the parish. He was nevertheless surprisingly evangelistic, which often offended the sensibilities of the older congregants. Celia had heard stories of barely clad girls showing up on a Sunday morning and causing one dear old parishioner to lose consciousness. She couldn’t be sure if they were true, since she wasn’t in attendance. St. Francis had mostly francophone members, and she had no interest in religion. But in Point-du-Fleuve, a tale like that hit the streets before three o’clock on a Sunday afternoon.

During the last hour, the field had filled with families and all the stations, including the doughnut booth, were busy. She squeezed through the cluster of people and joined the priest on the business side of the booth.

“*Bonjour, Madame* Bennett. How are you today? It’s a beautiful day for your event, *n’est*

pas?” He smiled, took a customer’s money, dropped it into a glass jar on his table, and handed her a flyer photocopied on pink paper. A picture of hands folded in prayer adorned the cover.

“It is. Do I have you to thank for that?”

He chuckled. “Me? No, I’m afraid not, but perhaps our Wednesday morning prayer ladies. You must be on their list.”

“How are the sales going?” She peeked into the jar.

“*Ah, bon.* Such a lovely day, everyone is ready to support your cause.”

She smiled. The pile of literature had shrunk by half. “Yours too.”

He flushed and smiled. “*Ah, oui,* I suppose so.” He nodded toward the pile. “Take one.”

“Oh no, thank you, Father.”

He leaned in and pressed one of the leaflets into her hand. “*J’insiste.* Take one,” he said. “You should read it.”

She laughed. “Well, thank you. I need to check and make sure everything’s ready for the auction. Will you be able to stay the rest of the day?”

“*Ah oui, pas de problem.*”

“I appreciate this. Keep up the good work.” She turned toward the school building and shoved the leaflet into her jacket pocket. Next to the building she found a trash can and reached for the brochure to throw it away, but the bottom of the can was already lined with them. Poor old man. She’d dispose of it at home.

Before walking into the building, she scanned the schoolyard and checked her watch. The auction was an hour-and-a-half away. The soccer shoot-out would be starting soon, and she didn’t want to miss Caleb’s turn. The field crawled with people. Long lines snaked their way toward the face painting booth and the haunted house. She’d conscripted a teenaged brother of one of the boys on Caleb’s soccer team to run the haunted house until Sarah arrived. He fumbled with tickets and ignored the person talking to him from the front of the line. He peered out

dubiously from under bangs that hung too long over his eyes, as though he hoped they would shield him from being recognized by anyone he knew.

Where on earth could Sarah be?

She stepped inside the school building and took the first right into the kindergarten classroom. It had been the best room to use, since no desks needed to be moved out of the way. All the auction items had been set up on tables around the perimeter of the room.

Something rustled in one of the closets at the back where Mrs. Davies, the kindergarten teacher, kept the art and craft supplies.

“Hello?” she called.

Sarah emerged from the closet and closed the door behind her. She wore a long skirt, a knit cap, and her sunglasses. “Couldn’t find the darn tape.” She held up a roll of masking tape. “Figured Mrs. Davies would have some in there.”

“Sarah! You’re here.”

“Hey, do you have any more clipboards? I set up all the auction items, but two don’t have a clipboard.” From behind the sunglasses, her eyebrows raised in expectation. “You know, so people can write their bids?”

Celia stared in disbelief. She’d been waiting for well over an hour, called Sarah’s cell phone innumerable times. She expected an apology, at least.

Sarah shrugged. “I guess I’ll just use some Scotch tape or something and stick the paper to the tabletop.” She pulled out the tape, bit off a piece with her teeth and ran it down the side of the paper. “Yeah, Sarah, that’s a great idea. You do that.” She changed the inflection of her voice, supplying Celia’s side of the conversation.

“This tape sticks to everything. It’s ridiculous. Look. Now it’s stuck to itself.” She wadded up the piece of tape, searched for a trash can and finally shoved the sticky ball in her pocket.

“Pens. Where did I put the pens? I mean, the bidding lists are here, but no pens now. Think I’d be able to find any in Mrs. Davies’ desk?” She opened drawers and slammed them shut. “Oh look. Here. On the desk. There’s a whole pencil holder thingy with pens.”

“I’m not sure you should--”

“I’ll put them back later, silly.”

“Did you bring the raffle tickets?”

“Oh yeah. Right here.” She pulled them out of a cardboard box and handed them to Celia.

Celia glanced at her watch again. “Okay, well, I guess I’d better run these over to the sales table. You going to the soccer field to watch Caleb and Justin in the shoot-out?”

“Wouldn’t miss it.” She flashed her broadest smile. “I’ll come over after I finish taping these.”

“Okay,” Celia said, lost in her flurry. She walked away without mentioning how important today was, how she had been counting on Sarah, how disappointed she was.

Sarah wasn’t easily ruffled--something Celia envied her for--but this morning went beyond good composure. She wanted to forgive, but Sarah hadn’t even asked. Shouldn’t she at least acknowledge being late?

As she crossed the field, raffle tickets in hand, Celia tried to talk herself out of holding a grudge, but succeeded only in making herself angrier. After all, Sarah had been her principle sounding board while she coped with the frustrations of gathering donations, recruiting volunteers, and soliciting school and board cooperation. It wasn’t as though she had begged her to be involved. Sarah had volunteered to take on everything she was supposed to do this morning. Celia tried to call up Jeff’s voice of reason, but the thought only made her more irritated. Sometimes Jeff could be too reasonable. She dropped the raffle tickets at the booth without a word to the volunteers, and marched back to the soccer field for the shoot-out.

She couldn’t come up with a reason not to stand with Sarah. The shoot-out was the day’s

main event. Everyone had gathered at the field. She walked past the unmanned food sales table. Only five full cider cups remained and a dozen or so tipped-over empties. Where was Jeff? Sarah's long slender arm appeared above a group of heads. She smiled and indicated the spot she'd saved beside her.

Celia cringed. She wouldn't be able to pretend nothing had happened.

Coach held a clipboard and the boys circled around him, peering over its edge. He flipped through a stack of papers and blew his whistle sharply. "Okay, Justin MacKenzie, you're up next."

Sarah erupted in loud cheering, raised her fingers to her mouth and whistled long and hard. Justin put his toes on the painted line.

"You must have had quite the morning," Celia said.

She scowled and nodded toward the field. "Hang on. It's Justin's turn."

Justin was attacking, the Rideau Riders on defense. Justin dodged in front of the goal, took his chance, and sent the ball past the goalie. Sarah held her fingers to her lips and whistled. She called the kids in from the playground blocks away with that whistle. Justin usually blushed when his mom made her ruckus, but as he jogged across the field to take his defensive position, he didn't hide the smirk of pride over his accomplishment.

Sarah let out another whoop, and another of the boys' teammates squared up to take his turn, focus on the goal, tongue tucked into the corner of his mouth in concentration.

"So, your morning?"

"What about it?"

Celia studied her face. Was she really so immune to the frustration she'd caused? "Must have been eventful."

"You could certainly say that." She let out another loud cheer. "Did Jeff ever get back?"

"Get back?"

“Yeah. From the errands he was running. He stopped at the store this morning.”

Her husband owned the hardware store in town. But what did that have to do with anything? Why was she being evasive? “Jeff came back a long time ago.”

“Some kind of bucket emergency?” she said.

Celia touched Sarah’s arm. “Listen, you really messed me up this morning. I was counting on you.”

Sarah glanced around at the people standing nearby. Her face first registered agitation, then sadness. She turned back to the field. One of the boys took a run at the goal, dodged around an opposing player and ran smack into another defenseman. A few seconds of silence followed until he stood to his feet and brushed himself off. More loud cheering erupted. Coach Lassiter boomed from the sidelines. “Great work, son. You’ll get ‘em next time.”

“If you’d just apologize--” Celia said, bothered that her tone sounded like Caleb’s when he wasn’t getting what he wanted.

Sarah ignored the words and pointed across the field, her voice distant. “Caleb’s up next. You don’t want to miss that.”

Celia took a deep breath and focused on her son as he lined up against the opposition. He ran up the field and dribbled the ball, the other boys in pursuit. He tackled, dodged. The other boys were sharper now, having adjusted their strategy, and warm from their last victory. Caleb dodged again, went for the goal. He had a clear shot.

Celia tensed, ready to cheer. Then in an awful, awkward moment, Caleb landed on his face and chest in the grass. All the air left her lungs, as though she felt the thud in her own body.

He didn’t move.

Justin screamed, and the clear morning air shattered with the sound of perfect terror in his small, shrill voice.

[Buy *After the Snow Falls* now from Amazon.](#)