

# Chapter 1

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MONDAY, JULY 5 – WEDNESDAY, JULY 7

I don't want to go on another working vacation!" Ruby Smyth had long since outgrown stomping her foot, but her face flushed and her green eyes flashed.

"We *always* go wherever the annual convention is, and you end up working all day while the kids and I sit in a hotel room watching reruns on television!"

Her husband sighed. "But the church will pay most of the cost of the trip, and you know . . . otherwise . . ." He brightened. "Maybe we could leave the kids with my parents and drive out, just the two of us—spend some extra time and just be tourists. It could be fun," he coaxed.

"But I want to go to the Maritimes! I want to see Louisbourg and Green Gables and Oak Island and Peggy's Cove and Newfoundland!"

She was softening, but she hadn't changed her mind. "I'm glad you have the job you do. I think it's what you're supposed

to be doing. But this year, I just don't want to go on holiday with the Grace Evangelical Church."

That conversation had taken place in February, but it was still very much on John Smyth's mind in July when he guided the battered old gray station wagon out of the lane behind their modest story-and-a-half stucco house in inner-city Winnipeg. It stayed in his thoughts as he and Ruby turned onto the Trans-Canada Highway and headed not east toward Canada's Maritime Provinces, but west, across the vast prairies, toward British Columbia.

Ruby, on the other hand, seemed to have forgotten about their earlier disagreement. She sat next to him with an unfolded map on her lap and an iced cappuccino in her hand, ready to make the best of the vacation she hadn't wanted. Her flaming red hair glinted in the early morning sun.

John looked at her and sighed. He loved his wife. He would have liked to have taken her to the Maritimes or, for that matter, on a cruise around the world. But in the end there had been no real choice. His meager church salary dictated that they either took their vacation where the annual convention was or didn't take one at all. And Ruby knew that as well as he did. It was an inevitable consequence of the decision they had made years earlier to serve the church. They had both learned to accept things that could not be changed and to look for the positives even in generally negative situations.

"Do you think your parents will be able to handle the kids all right?" Ruby asked as the towers of Winnipeg receded slowly in the rearview mirror and the old car settled into a steady pace, like an ant starting to crawl across a football field. "We're going to be gone three weeks," she added. "We've never left the kids that long."

"That's precisely why we're doing this. You need a holiday

from your job too. My parents are perfectly capable of taking care of the kids. They raised me, didn't they?"

"Turn the car around right now!"

"Very funny. Matthew and Elizabeth are going to spend a week at camp, so you wouldn't be with them for one week anyway."

"I know, but Anne is so little."

"She's six."

"Yes, and Michael is thirteen." There was a long silence before she continued quietly, "Do you really think your parents can handle Michael? He's already taller than your father, and your mother is . . . well, when it comes time for the meek to inherit the earth, I think she's got a lock on it."

"Michael," John sighed, staring at the empty road ahead and thinking of his sullen, angry firstborn. He had no idea why Michael had been so hard to live with recently—or what he and Ruby should do about it.

He sighed again. "Well, they'll probably handle him as well as we've been doing."

The afternoon sun shining in through the cheap Venetian blinds drew dark bars across his face. He was looking down, as if it took all of his concentration to keep the band of his wristwatch rotating slowly on the fingertips of both hands.

"Not this weekend," he said stubbornly. "I don't think it's a good idea."

"Come on, Mike," the other was saying earnestly, leaning forward on the edge of the other bed. "It's the perfect weekend for it."

"But they're right there in the house. They're gonna notice somebody sneaking out in the middle of the night."

"Naw. The kids'll be asleep, and the old folks—you know

they're totally clueless—always believe the best about everybody. They'll never suspect a thing."

"I don't know." His eyes were still fixed on the rotating watch. "I still think we should wait."

"I'm tired of waiting, man. Tired of being pushed around. You know?"

"Yeah, I know."

"So I'm gonna do it, no matter what. I just need to know if you're in or not."

There was just a moment's pause before the answer came. "I guess I'm in."

That first day, John and Ruby passed out of their home province of Manitoba and most of the way across the neighboring province of Saskatchewan, a distance of about four hundred and fifty miles. Other people traveled faster and farther in a day. But other people weren't driving battered old station wagons, and they did not enjoy the same sense of peace that was gradually settling over the Smyths.

There was something relaxing about being alone with no phones or children or any responsibilities other than driving. It provided opportunity for conversation, for being quiet together, and for reflection.

On the second day, they continued on along the Trans-Canada Highway, through the dusty grazing lands of southern Alberta, and into the heart of the Rocky Mountains, the first and most beautiful range of mountains in Canada's westernmost province, British Columbia.

"John," Ruby asked as they neared the mountains, "do we keep secrets from each other?"

He glanced at her in surprise. "Why do you ask that?"

"I don't know. I was just thinking about Deborah."

"Your friend Deborah from church? Whose husband left her?"

She nodded. "She thought he was traveling on business, but he was really seeing another woman."

"You think I'm doing that? When I say I'm at a church convention in Calgary I'm really with a call girl in Grand Forks?"

She rolled her eyes. "You know perfectly well I don't suspect you of anything. I just think it's easy for couples to drift apart, to start leaving things out of conversations."

"And that's another reason we need a vacation, right?"

"Right. But you didn't answer my question. Do we really tell each other everything?"

"I think we tell each other everything that's important."

"But how do we know what's important?"

He didn't know how to answer that, so he just shrugged, and she had the grace to let the matter drop.

A black late-model Oldsmobile lurked in the shade of trees lining a quiet side street. The muscular, surly-faced man at the wheel stared straight ahead, as if totally disinterested in what was taking place beside him. Next to him, a paunchy older man with a ragged goatee leaned against the passenger-side door, talking through the open window to a slender, blond teenager in a gray jacket.

"Come on, kid," the older man said. "You know I deal in cash only. No credit. You don't bring me money, I don't give you nothin'. Got it?"

The boy outside the car swallowed hard and nodded but said nothing. As he turned and slouched away, there was anger in his eyes.

The third morning took John and Ruby Smyth through more mountains, green and forested, in contrast to the gray rock

and snow of the Rockies. Then they traversed a flatter, drier, hotter section between mountain ranges before following the Coquihalla Highway up and over a final mountain range and down into the lower Fraser River valley. As they neared their goal, their conversation turned from what they were leaving behind to what they were heading toward.

“Did we really need to allow three weeks for this trip?” Ruby asked.

“I think so. The convention will take up the rest of this week, and then I want to write articles on the Grace Evangelical churches in Abbotsford.”

“There are only two of them.”

“I know.” John grinned. “But they are quite different churches, and I want to attend a Sunday service at each of them.” John Smyth was editor of *Grace* magazine, a periodical produced by Grace Evangelical Church, a century-old Christian denomination based in Winnipeg.

“John, promise me you’re not going to spend the whole three weeks working.”

“Of course not. I’ve already told you that. There’ll be plenty of time for vacation, too, side trips and things. We can go to Vancouver, see Stanley Park and the ocean. And some days we’ll just sleep in and relax.”

“Relax? At Doctor John’s place?”

“You don’t like Doctor John very much, do you?”

“It’s not that I don’t like him. It’s just that I find him . . . well, cold. It’s like he’s always thinking, and you never really know *what* he’s thinking. And why does everybody call him *Doctor John* anyway?”

“Well, no one calls him that to his face, of course. It’s just a sign of respect. He’s one of the few real intellectuals in the Grace Evangelical Church. He’s only in his late thirties, but

he's already written three significant books, not to mention all the money he and his family have contributed to the church."

"Oh, I know they're very generous, and we should all be grateful."

"Remember when his parents lent us their cottage on West Hawk Lake for our honeymoon? We couldn't have afforded a place like that, maybe not even a honeymoon at all—and yet we got it all for nothing."

Ruby smiled in remembrance. "When they offered us their cottage, we pictured a rustic log cabin out in the bush. We weren't expecting a two-story house with wall-to-wall carpet, six bedrooms, three bathrooms, a fireplace, and satellite TV."

"I suppose that may be the Robinsons' idea of rustic." John became serious. "One of the pitfalls of being rich, I guess. But anyway, why don't you like Doctor John?"

"That was his *parents* who lent us their cabin."

"Yes, but he's the one who invited us to stay at his house for the convention."

"That's okay for you. The two of you will sit and discuss theology and church politics for hours on end, but there will be no one for me to talk to. He has a large house, and he hasn't invited anyone else to stay there but us. He could probably put up a half-dozen delegates without any crowding."

"I don't think Doctor John would feel comfortable with a lot of strangers in his house. In fact, it's really an honor that he invited us. He's pretty careful about guarding his privacy. And he's been even more private since Deirdre died."

As the Trans-Canada Highway winds down out of the mountains following the Fraser River, the enclosing mountains abruptly angle off in both directions, and the road enters the broad triangular floodplain of the lower Fraser River valley, a

land as flat but not nearly as extensive nor as dry as the Canadian prairies. The vast majority of British Columbia is covered with mountains and dense fir forests, but this is one of four broad, fertile river valleys where agriculture flourishes. The mighty Fraser runs sedately through this fertile land for a hundred miles before pouring its mud-brown waters into the Pacific Ocean near Canada's major west-coast port and third largest city, Vancouver.

More than half of British Columbia's four million people live in this tiny corner of the province locals call "the Lower Mainland," their burgeoning suburbs pushing up the sides of the mountains in order to preserve the fertile valley floor for agriculture. Halfway along the valley, perched atop a series of low, rounded, sand-and-gravel hills and surrounded by raspberry and dairy farms, sits the city of Abbotsford. The homes and businesses of Abbotsford's 130,000 people have now covered almost all the low hills available and have started to drift eastward up the western end of an even higher prominence known as Sumas Mountain.

It was to this higher, newer Abbotsford that John and Ruby Smyth were headed.

"There's Whatcom Road," Ruby said, pointing to the sign.

John guided the aging station wagon off the highway. With Ruby reading off directions, he followed the twists and turns of various streets up the side of Sumas Mountain. As they rose higher and higher, the homes became larger and newer and more expensive, perched like castles on the rocky cliff side. The fire hydrants, instead of the usual red-and-white painted metal, were faced with polished brass.

"Turn right here," Ruby said, "on Mountaintop Drive. That's Doctor John's house—number 36031."

John pulled the old car into the wide driveway of a two-story pink stucco house with a sculptured cedar-shake roof



and white pillars holding up a front portico. Off-white mini-blinds covered all the visible windows. The front yard was artistically landscaped with large brown granite rocks, cedar chips, and spiny bushes.

John and Ruby sat for a moment looking at the building. “Welcome to our home for the next couple of weeks,” John said.

“That’s not a home. That’s a . . . a . . .”

“It’s just a house, Ruby, the home of Dr. John Robinson. If it had a white picket fence out front, it would look just like our place.”

“Yeah, right.” Ruby gave him a lopsided smirk as they climbed from the car and started up the walk.

When John pressed the doorbell, a chorus of deep bells reverberated within. He looked puzzled.

“Westminster chimes,” Ruby said.

“Oh.”

The door swung open to reveal a tall, well-built man in his late thirties with neatly trimmed dark hair and a dark mustache. He wore expensive casual clothes—a cotton knit shirt and pressed khakis—but he was the type who would look distinguished in ragged blue jeans.

“Ruby,” John Smyth said, “I think you have met Dr. John Robinson.”

“Call me John,” the tall man said.

Ruby smiled, looking across at her short, bearded, bespectacled husband and then up at her elegant host.

“Two Johns,” she said. “That might be a bit confusing.”

As they were unpacking their suitcases in a spacious guest-room, Ruby whispered, “This place feels like a first-class hotel. Did you see that living room—white carpet, powder-blue velvet upholstery, those glass and polished-brass end tables?”

And the bedrooms . . .” Sitting on the bed, she slid her stockinged feet back and forth on the plush carpet. “They’re as nice as the living room.”

“So, enjoy it. We don’t often get to stay in a place like this. Let’s get unpacked and go down for supper.”

“Doctor John cooks?”

“I think he has a housekeeper.”

“Housekeeper?” Ruby thought about that for a moment. “I’m not sure I could live in a house like this and not even have to clean it. I think I would feel—I don’t know—guilty or something. Do you think Doctor John ever feels guilty?”

They ate their supper of assorted salads and grilled steak outside on a wide sundeck. The house, cut into the steep hillside, turned out to have three stories instead of the two it showed to the street. Each floor commanded a panoramic view of the Fraser Valley, with bright green squares of farmland stretching out to the south, the U.S.-Canadian border two or three miles away an invisible line on the valley floor. To the west, beyond the rounded hills, houses, and trees of Abbotsford, the valley ran on to the Pacific Ocean forty miles away. A row of fir-covered mountains angled southwest. And behind them, to the south-southeast, dominating the view in almost every part of the valley, rose a majestic cone-shaped white peak.

“What a beautiful mountain!” Ruby enthused. “What’s its name?”

“That is Mount Baker.” John Robinson smiled. “It is actually in Washington state, but some of the best views of it are in British Columbia. It’s volcanic of course, over ten thousand feet high, and receives more snow than any other mountain on earth—a hundred feet a year. That’s because of the prevailing southwesterly winds coming in off the Pacific. There is

a joke about our rainy season lasting from January 1 to December 31 every year, but the heavy rain actually only lasts from October to April. Summers are generally dry. It is a remarkably efficient system. What falls as rain in the valleys falls as snow on the mountains, and the melting snowpack from the mountains provides water for the valleys all summer. That makes agriculture possible in the valleys and sustains the rain forest on the mountainsides.”

“Oh,” Ruby said. This was a little more information than she’d been asking for. “Anyway, it’s a fantastic view.”

“Yes, you can see the whole valley from here. That view is what makes the houses up here so expensive.”

“That and the fact that they all look like mansions,” John Smyth put in.

Robinson smiled. “There are some disadvantages to living up here.”

“Like what? Icy roads in the winter . . . ?”

A chilly silence suddenly descended on the conversation, and John and Ruby Smyth exchanged embarrassed glances.

Ruby hurried to break the silence. “Is it a friendly neighborhood? Do you know the neighbors?”

“Not really. The people on that side are Chinese or Korean, I think. They keep their blinds drawn, and I hardly ever see them.”

“What about the other side—that lady over there, for instance?”

The two men looked down at the neighboring yard, where a well-proportioned, thirty-something blonde woman in shorts and a tee-shirt was weeding her flower garden.

John Robinson seemed to take a moment to collect himself. “I don’t have many women friends. I’ve met her husband. He’s a lawyer. We’ve talked a couple of times and exchanged

business cards.” Robinson brightened. “Did you know that Abbotsford is known as Canada’s Bible Belt?”

“Of course,” John Smyth replied. “I want to write some articles about that while we’re here.”

“There has been a very fine doctoral thesis written on the subject. I’ll get you a copy. Weekly church attendance here is still almost 60 percent of the population. That is not very high, certainly not when compared to the Bible Belt in the United States. But with the Canadian average for church attendance now at less than 20 percent, 60 percent is unusual indeed. Churches flourish here—there are about eighty-five of them—and Christianity still influences a lot of people. A majority of the city council, in fact, are evangelical Christians. They put restrictions on bars, and a referendum a few years ago turned down a proposal to establish a casino. That kind of thing makes Abbotsford an attractive place to live for many Christians, but it is also an anomaly, out of step with trends in the rest of the country. There are few places left in Canada where Christianity is as accepted as it is in Abbotsford, though even here you’ll find a lot of indifference and even hostility toward the faith.”

Robinson seemed to have settled into a comfortable groove, as if he were lecturing one of his classes at Abbotsford College, and it appeared he might go on for some time. Catching a pointed glance from Ruby, John said, “I’m sorry to interrupt this, John, but we’re feeling pretty tired, and we have a busy day tomorrow.”

## *Chapter 2*

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THURSDAY, JULY 8

There it is," John Smyth told Ruby. "Athens has the Parthenon. Paris has Notre Dame. Toronto has the CN Tower. And Abbotsford has this."

Mountaintop Grace Evangelical Church was two curves and a quarter of a mile down the road from John Robinson's house, set back over the brow of a hill in a slight depression. It was not a traditional church building—a rectangular box with a steeple—but was designed to fit into its affluent neighborhood, all glass and brick with a green steel roof sculpted to look like a range of mountains. A paved driveway curved through a landscaped front lawn and under a covered portico so that passengers could be let off at the door in bad weather without fear of getting wet. The drive then continued around behind the church to a multistoried parking garage designed to take advantage of the natural depression in the terrain.

Inside, the wide, curving foyer was already filled with jostling people, their excited chatter drowning out serene

gospel music played over speakers. A number of light oak doors on the inner curve of the foyer gave access to a spacious amphitheater that sloped toward a hundred-foot-wide central stage. The royal blue carpet supported row after row of pews, made of more light oak and cushioned with more royal blue. The space could seat twenty-five hundred people, about five hundred more than had actually shown up for this annual North American convention of the Grace Evangelical churches.

“This place reminds me of Doctor John’s house,” Ruby whispered to John.

A tall, good-looking man in a well-cut dark-blue suit strode to the podium. “Good morning! I am Marv Andreason, senior pastor of Mountaintop Church.”

The audience erupted into applause. Mountaintop was a success story. One of the wealthiest and most dynamic churches in the denomination, it had grown from the handful of people who started the congregation twenty years earlier to a weekly attendance of over four thousand.

John Smyth, sitting in the very front row with Ruby, took a photo of Andreason and noted the man had the politician’s knack of reacting to the click of a shutter, so that he always appeared in photos face on and smiling.

Smyth took a few more shots of the dignitaries seated on the stage behind Andreason and then began taking notes. Writing a full report of the annual convention was one of his regular job responsibilities. He had been doing it for a dozen years and had developed a level of competence at it that the church now took for granted. He didn’t really mind. The annual convention was also where he met ministry colleagues, old friends, and interesting people.

At midmorning, when the convention adjourned for a half-hour coffee break, Smyth took advantage of the break to

catch Andreason's arm as he stepped off the stage. "Marv, we agreed we would find some time to get together and talk about your church."

"Hello, John." Andreason gave Smyth a fully attentive smile that seemed as enthusiastic as a bear hug would have been from a lesser man. "It's good to see you. As my secretary told you in her e-mail, Monday is my day off, Tuesday is the day I spend in prayer, and Wednesday is reserved for sermon preparation. Why don't we meet in the Starlight Café for breakfast on Thursday? You know where it is? Good. Now, I know you want to talk to some other people in the church as well, so I had my secretary set up some appointments for you. You can get the list from her."

Before Smyth could say anything further, Andreason had laid a hand on his shoulder as if in blessing and slipped off into the crowd.

The brown-haired, broad-faced man gripped his expensive briefcase with a manicured hand and shifted his weight, impatient for the door to be opened.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Halvis," said the guard.

"Afternoon!" the other grumbled. "It was morning when I got here."

"That was five minutes ago. Sorry you had to wait for the shift change." Ralph Hearne grinned. "I suppose you're here to bring justice and freedom to another of our unfairly convicted residents?"

Halvis grunted. "I'm here to see a client, yes, but that has very little to do with freedom and justice. If it was a matter of justice, most of my clients would never leave this place."

Hearne nodded. For once he was in complete agreement with the lawyer.

"As for freedom," the lawyer went on, "the only freedom

I'm interested in right now is my own. I am trying to discharge my obligations here at Matsqui so I can get away. I was at Ferndale earlier this morning, and a couple of my clients asked if I could come back to see them on Saturday to work on their appeals. I told them I was going to Kelowna to negotiate a multimillion-dollar real estate deal, and that was far more important than their appeals."

Hearne nodded again as he swung the door open and stepped aside.

Sunset comes late in the Canadian summer, and darkness falls even later. It was well past ten when the boy in the gray jacket first hit the streets, moving with practiced silence from shadow to shadow, his blond hair catching a gleam from a street lamp. He intentionally avoided the woman who stood forlornly on the street corner by a bank. He knew what she was there for, and he despised her for it. For that matter, he despised all women and their weak, silly ways.

But he forgot about the prostitute almost as soon as he rounded the corner. He had things to do that night. And it was still a long walk to where he wanted to go.

About the same time, nearing the end of a long shift, Ralph Hearne was also walking—down long, artificially bright institutional corridors, looking for trouble as surely as the boy, and just as likely to find it.