

# Regarding Anna



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## DISCLAIMER

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

## Chapter 1

### The Kindness of Strangers

Under different circumstances I could have been a carefree twenty-two-year-old driving to Oak Street Beach for a much-needed reprieve from the sweltering heat instead of sitting on the No. 54 bus headed for a shady neighborhood on Chicago's South Side in search of Erma Fincutter. I had no one but myself to blame for my discontent—I could have simply accepted my uncertain parentage four years ago and moved on with my life in a more conventional way. But if I was right about things, all the aggravation I would endure in search of the truth would pay off in the end. If I was right about things.

Erma Fincutter was a missing teenager whose mother had hired me to find her. I'd named it the Green Teen case—Erma had been wearing a green coat the day she ran away. Naming cases helped me distance myself from the people whose reason for contacting me was almost always something unfortunate. Being a private investigator was not a particularly heartening profession.

If I had a car it would have taken me all of twenty minutes to reach my destination, and I wouldn't have been stuck sitting so close to Mr. Body Odor and listening to the two crabby old hens behind me complain about everything. The bus was full. Summer sweat dripped off the brows of most of the passengers, and the thick air that held us captive in tight quarters wasn't moving.

Louise Fincutter, the child's mother, suspected her daughter had fled to a side of her family about which Louise knew very little—she had divorced Erma's mixed-race father just a few months after their wedding, calling the marriage the biggest mistake of her life. After locating Erma's two half-brothers and having reason to believe she was with them, I was obligated to pay them a visit regardless of the neighborhood. It was broad daylight, so I figured I'd be safe.

The second I stepped off the bus, I realized I was out of my element. Cheerless houses with boarded-up windows lined a potholed street cluttered with beat-up cars and a variety of trash. An unidentifiable smell permeated the air. I was tempted to turn around, hop on a bus headed in the opposite direction, and go home. But I had a job to do.

I walked a block. My stomach churned, telling me to reconsider. But if I turned back, it would have meant I was incapable of doing the job, and I wasn't about to make that admission. I had too much at stake personally.

Stares from the pedestrians and people hanging out of car windows driving down Twenty-fourth Street seemed more sinister the farther I went, and the address I was looking for was another three blocks away. My brain knew I shouldn't continue, but the message hadn't gotten to my legs yet.

As my uneasiness heightened, I tried to imagine who lived here, what their days were like, how they ended up here. I thought about children growing up in this kind of environment, the opportunities they probably didn't even know they were missing. I thought about my own situation, and all of a sudden my troubles didn't seem so bad.

“Yo, gorgeous. You loss er somepin’?”

I nearly jumped out of my shoes at the sound of the male voice. Still walking, I turned my head and saw a dark-skinned man with a huge scar running down the side of his face approaching me. The bile reached my throat so fast I didn't know if I could get the words out.

“I know where I’m going,” I managed to say. I pumped my legs faster, even though it felt as though my knees could have buckled under me at any second.

He grabbed my arm and forced me to look at him. The scar appeared too aged for such a young face.

“Look, sweetheart, you be in the wrong ’hood. You keep goin’ in *that* direction, I promise you, you’ll find trouble.”

I sensed he was right.

“Howdya git here?”

“The bus.”

“Which one?”

I didn’t know if he was trying to help me or had some other motive.

“The fifty-four.”

“C’mon, I’ll walk ya back there.”

“Can you let go of my arm...please?”

He dropped my arm with a thrust.

“I appreciate your kindness, but really...” I knew that sounded lame, but it was all I had.

“Uh-huh. Best know I got betta things to do with my time.”

He turned around and headed toward the bus stop. I wasn’t sure what to do. I wasn’t sure what he *expected* me to do, but it didn’t matter much because my legs felt frozen.

He turned around.

“I’m tellin’ you, don’t you bein’ around here if you don’t want to get hurt.” He gestured for me to follow him.

His walk was fast and full of attitude, and I couldn’t keep up without running.

“What in the hell are you doin’ here anyway?” he asked without turning around.

“I’m looking for someone. Erma Fincutter.” Right after I said it, I realized I shouldn’t have given out her name.

“Breed bitch?”

“Excuse me?”

He turned around to face me. “She mixed? Looks white. ’Bout sixteen, seventeen?”

“Yes.”

The man shook his head. “Stupid private dick. You’ll back outta this one if you know what’s good for ya.” He glanced down the street. “Here’s your bus. I’d get on it if I was you.” He disappeared behind a parked van.

I was embarrassed and offended by his remarks, but that didn’t keep me from getting on the bus. I had gone on this mission totally unprepared and forgetful of just about everything I had been taught—like the importance of traveling with a partner and dressing appropriately for the mission. Criminals can spot parole officers, process servers, undercover cops, and PIs a mile away.

Being a PI isn’t what most people think it is. Forget about images of Sherlock Holmes and Philip Marlowe sitting back in their brown-leather high-back chairs in dimly lit offices talking to a steady stream of clients with intriguing cases who waltz through their doors. That rarely happens in real life—even to seasoned PIs. Your average PI collects information much like a garbage man collects trash but without the perks. When garbage men find treasures among the trash, it’s finders keepers. But when PIs find treasures, they belong to someone else.

I so wanted to help Mrs. Fincutter find her daughter—she was relying on me. After she had reported Erma missing to the police, they had called the hospitals, checked with her friends,

gone to places where runaways tend to congregate, and called a few other precincts to see if anything had turned up, but that had been about it. Unfortunately, when no crime has been committed, the police tend to treat these types of cases as low priority.

I never wanted to be a private investigator. After high school, I'd had aspirations of becoming an interior decorator and had even enrolled in classes at Morton Community College. But when my parents died from carbon monoxide poisoning in their home three months before my eighteenth birthday, with no relatives to take me in, I was left to fend for myself. And that was when everything changed.

As soon as I got off the bus, I walked a block to my apartment and dragged out the ironing board. Ironing relieved stress for me. If I didn't have any clothes or bed sheets that needed it, I'd iron anything—underwear, towels, the bedspread. I even ironed a package of cheesecloth once—the kind you use to cook a turkey.

If I'd had a car to take to that South Side neighborhood, I wouldn't have run into Mr. Scarface nor would I have felt the need to iron a pair of sweatpants, three pairs of socks, two dishrags, a ski hat that I hadn't worn in years, and the white apron from the Raggedy Ann doll I'd cherished since I was three.

And if my parents hadn't died in March of 1960, I wouldn't have found what I did in their attic leading me to believe a woman named Anna Thalia Vargas was my real mother—and that she was murdered, and I was kidnapped, when I was seven months old.

## Chapter 2

### The Back Room

In the office the next day, I got a call from the circuit court asking me to serve a subpoena to someone in Englewood. Fortunately, I had managed to get appointed by Cook County to be a licensed process-server, and the measly ten-dollar fee I got for each person I served was, in fact, making a difference. Unfortunately, the witnesses being served often resided in the worst neighborhoods, and no matter where they lived, they typically didn't want to be served, making this the least favorite part of my job.

"Do you know anyone large and intimidating who can go with me to serve subpoenas?" I asked Elmer after I finished the call. "Someone cheap."

Elmer was the attorney from whom I was renting office space. I had met him when I'd answered the ad he posted for someone to share eight hundred square feet of leased office space on West Irving Park Road. The building was located near Six Corners, the largest shopping district in Chicago outside of downtown. More important to me was the fact that it was less than a mile from the apartment on Belle Plaine Avenue where Anna Vargas died, making it convenient for me to work on my own case, the one I called Attic Finds.

"Sure, I know some people," he said as he put out his cigarette.

Elmer reminded me a little of Gregory Peck, but not as handsome. He was middle-aged, tall, thin-faced, with a full head of dark hair. I was surprised on my first day at the office to catch him checking me out when he thought I wasn't paying attention. I'd never exactly dazzled anyone with my looks—I'm twenty-two years old, five-foot-six, weigh 125 pounds, and have plain-Jane brown hair and eyes—so I don't know why he was eying me that way.

"Would you be interested in subleasing the apartment upstairs?" he asked in his usual monotone. "I could give it to you pretty cheap. My last tenant just moved out...without notice and without paying me this month's rent."

I hadn't realized there *was* an apartment above our office, which was a tiny brick storefront building in a row of buildings all so uniform that I always had to check the street number over the door to make sure I was entering the right one. Closer to Six Corners the buildings had matching awnings with the names of the businesses on them. Here there were no awnings and every third storefront was vacant.

To say I could have afforded an apartment would have been a lie—I couldn't even afford my basic living expenses. I had duct tape on the sole of one of my shoes, cut my own hair, and still wore clothes from high school.

"Maybe. What's it like?" I asked him.

"Want to see it?"

Elmer led me outside to a door not more than fifteen feet from our office that I had never noticed before—some PI I was. He led the way up a dingy, narrow staircase that smelled like dirty socks. When we reached the top of the stairs, I followed him into the apartment.

While I didn't see any actual rotting garbage, inside it smelled like maybe there had been some there recently. I tried not to breathe in too deeply.

"He didn't keep it very clean," he said.

*No kidding.*

The entire apartment was visible from where I was standing. The furniture—which appeared to have come from a thrift store, garage sale, or someone’s curb— included a flowered sofa that had three bricks serving as one of its legs and two shapeless cushions, one of which had a nice, neat cigarette burn right in its center. Two mismatched armless side chairs complemented the sofa along with a coffee table that I wouldn’t have trusted to hold anything weighing over a pound. A TV stand and a three-fixture pole lamp that was missing one of its cone-shaped plastic shades completed the décor. All the comforts of home.

I walked over to the only window in the room and gave the yellowed paper shade a gentle tug. When it came crashing to the floor, I looked at Elmer.

“It comes ‘as is.’”

The view out the window left a lot to be desired: a rusted streetlight in the foreground, and in the background an even row of unsightly rooftops belonging to the time-worn brick buildings across the street, one of which had been completely boarded up.

“Where’s the bed?”

He pointed to the sofa. “It converts.”

I peeked into the filthy bathroom to confirm the existence of a toilet, sink, and bathtub.

“You’d have it cleaned before I moved in, right?”

“I’ll split the cost with you.”

“Elmer...”

“I’ll have it cleaned.”

“How much?”

“It comes furnished.”

Like that made a difference.

“I’ll give it to you for sixty-five a month. Plus another sixty-five security deposit.”

“Sixty-five! I’ll give you fifty, and that shade has to be fixed. I’ll throw in a free skip search to find your last tenant.” My father had taught me the fine art of negotiating when we went to the Maxwell Street flea markets.

“Fifty-five, and you’ve got yourself a deal.”

“First month’s rent not due for thirty days, and you’ve got *yourself* a deal.”

We shook on it and retreated to our respective offices. Despite the deplorable condition of the place, I was grateful to have it. It was time to leave the Millers’ house, even if it meant a steady diet of ramen noodles for dinner for a while. I’d been living with the family of my best friend, Beth Miller, ever since my parents had died.

The Millers had allowed me to stay with them even though early on I’d made some bad choices by dropping out of community college and taking a waitress job at a crummy diner outside of town. There I met some older kids and got into my share of trouble. I tried cigarettes in order to fit in with them and had my first taste of alcohol followed by my first hangover—the kind where you wake up the next morning fearing you’re going to throw up and then a while later fearing you won’t. Then they introduced me to marijuana, and one late night after getting high we all got a terrible case of the munchies and went to a nearby pizza parlor. After we devoured three large pizzas and a couple of pitchers of beer, one of them started talking about “dine and dash,” a term

unfamiliar to me. Before I knew it, they were gone, and I was left sitting there like an idiot. The restaurant manager said he would call the police if I didn't pay the bill. Mr. Miller came to my rescue. It took three paychecks to pay him back.

With some unsolicited but much-needed guidance from the Millers, I came to my senses, quit that waitress job for one in a more respectable restaurant and part of town, and re-enrolled in college.

I was feeling down from the previous day's failed attempt at finding the missing teen, nervous about the deal I had just struck with Elmer, and hungry. I pulled out a box of Cheez-Its from my desk drawer and popped a few in my mouth—not as satisfying as one of those thick ham-and-cheese sandwiches on soft rye bread from the deli down the street but better than nothing.

A small stack of bills beckoned me from atop the secondhand filing cabinet I had purchased at a garage sale, but instead my eyes rested above them on a cheap print of Navy Pier that had been my father's. That and my private investigator license were the only things hanging on my office walls. A Parker mother-of-pearl pen-and-pencil set I had picked up at a pawn shop for almost nothing and a brass nameplate GRACE THALIA LINDROTH that the Millers had given me were the only things on my desk.

I had been in business for three months and had just one client, Louise Fincutter, the mother of the missing teen, and I wasn't even sure if she could pay me. I hadn't had the heart to ask her for a retainer, which went against my common sense and everything I had learned in school, but I felt sorry for her. I needed to stop doing that—I had logged nearly twenty hours trying to find her daughter and had no income to show for it.

Elmer didn't appear to be doing much better. He had hardly any clients, at least not ones who came to his office. He didn't leave the office much, which made me think he didn't spend much time in court. He spent a lot of time on the phone, usually with the door closed as he chain-smoked, leaving me to keep an eye out for walk-ins. He grouched about how much things cost all the time and how he was going to have to cut back on this or that. He never cracked a smile, and he never mentioned having any family.

Still, I couldn't be too critical of Elmer. He'd been nice to me and had said he'd throw me work when he had it—finding people, gathering evidence—stuff like that. And he didn't charge me much for rent.

The layout of the office worked pretty well. Inside the front door, there was a reception desk with a free-standing wall behind it. Berghorn & Associates had been the only signage on the wall until my name was put under it—smaller than his. If someone had actually sat at the reception desk, people walking in the door wouldn't have been able to see much of my sign at all, but what could I expect for only seventy-five dollars a month in rent?

After much thought, I had decided to name my agency NSU Investigative Services—professional sounding, short and sweet. NSU stood for No Stone Unturned. Maybe a little corny, but I thought it worked.

We each had two rooms—a front office on either side of the reception desk that faced the street and a small room in the back. Behind the reception desk was a bathroom with two doors—one on my side and one on his.

I used the back room strictly for my Attic Finds case. Spread out on a large table was everything I had collected from my parents' home that I believed could possibly provide clues to Anna Vargas's life and death. The most promising pieces of evidence

had come from my parents' attic—a place in our home that had been off limits for me my entire life, a place I had trepidatiously explored after they were gone.

Two newspaper articles had immediately caught my attention. The earlier one stated a woman named Anna Thalia Vargas had been found dead in her Chicago apartment on January 23, 1943. One dated a week later referred to her death as a homicide.

There I had also found several pieces of jewelry, a dozen or so photos, a Bible with Anna's name in it, some clothing, and lots of miscellaneous paperwork—116 pieces total, all packed into one box and hidden behind several plastic crates of clothes and toys I had outgrown.

A baby girl named Celina appeared in many of the photos—at least that was the name that had been written on the backs of them—and I believed that baby to be me. One I found particularly interesting was of a young dark-haired woman holding baby Celina while seated in a rocking chair. Another was of the same woman standing, holding a baby. CELINA THALIA VARGAS—JUST HOME FROM THE HOSPITAL had been written on the back of that one. Thalia was my middle name too.

But the photo I was the most curious about was one of a man holding what appeared to be the same baby. He was turned sideways and looking down, so you couldn't see much of his face. I was dying to know who that man was.

A photo I had found tucked inside the Bible was the clue that had convinced me I was the baby. On the back of it had been written SHE HAS MY EYES. It was a photo of the same young dark-haired woman holding a baby wearing a red polka-dot dress. As soon as I saw it, I ran to my dresser drawer where I kept my own family photographs and found one of me wearing the same little dress. On the back, my mother had written 4 MOS—SHE'S SITTING UP NOW.

All this evidence had led me to believe that Anna Vargas was my real mother, but what had me even more troubled was that in order for my parents to have had this evidence hidden in their attic meant they could have had something to do with her death.

The essence of my life was in this back room. There were truths that needed to be uncovered, and I felt that my whole future depended on it. It was all up to me—no one had been interested in helping me solve a twenty-year-old murder case—not the police, not even a private investigator I had contacted. That's why I had changed my studies to law enforcement, served a two-year apprenticeship, and gotten my PI license. How I wished I could scoop up all the tiny bits and pieces of the Attic Finds evidence, toss them in the air, and watch them land in such a way that everything made complete sense. I supposed that was the dreamer in me.

My life was, well, pretty pathetic. I'd never wanted to be a private investigator. The only reason I'd gone down that road was to get answers so as to be able to go on to do something else. I had no friends to speak of, no hobbies, no social life. I didn't care too much what I wore or how I looked, never pampered myself. If a guy had asked me out on a date, I wouldn't have known how to act.

I wasn't happy, but I fully intended to be one day. I was reminded of a list I had found in my mother's Bible titled "The Seven Keys to Happiness." It appeared to have been torn out of a magazine article. I still remember them.

1. Safety and security
2. Relationships with family and friends

3. Being comfortable with one's self
4. Having achievable goals
5. Good health
6. Maintaining a positive attitude
7. Helping others

With the exception of number six, sort of, and a hint of number seven, I didn't have any of these, and sadder yet was that the only one I was doing anything about was number three. I wished she had torn out the whole article. No, come to think of it, that might have depressed me even more.

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of Elmer slapping that day's *Tribune* down on the reception desk, letting me know he was finished with it. I was checking the Used Cars section every day, hoping that at some point I would be able to afford one of my own. I went out to the reception desk and opened the paper to Used Cars, ready to torture myself again looking at what I knew I couldn't have, especially now with the added expense of an apartment.

The ads were the same as always: used cars ranged from \$50 to \$550. I couldn't imagine that a car costing \$50 would be much good, and there was no way I could afford \$550 without dipping into my meager savings, which I wanted to preserve for a real emergency.

Elmer walked out of his office and peered at the open paper.

"Looking for a car?"

Conversations with him were always short and to the point. Never any small talk.

"Yes."

"Don't look in there—too many people trying to pawn off their problems on you. If you want, I can put you in touch with someone who'll sell you a decent car for a reasonable price...and will even service it for you when you need it."

Of course, I would have to figure out a way to pay for a car in addition to several other essential items...like a new pair of shoes. I was getting low on duct tape.

### Chapter 3 Saved By the Bush

“Grace, since Beth is a no-show, would you like one of us to help you get settled in?” Mrs. Miller asked.

Beth had promised to help me move but then had called at the last minute to say she wasn’t feeling well. She had just recently eloped with her boyfriend and was living in Brookfield. I could see the sadness in Mrs. Miller’s face—now she was losing my presence in the house as well.

All my worldly possessions were in the back seat and trunk of my new car—a 1952 Chevy Bel Air I had bought from Bob Conway of Big Bob’s Used Autos. It wasn’t bad for a twelve-year-old car. Tan with a maroon top—a car that would blend in well no matter where my job took me. And he was letting me pay it off on time.

“I’ll be fine,” I told her. “There’s not that much to settle.” I was smiling but privately bummed out that Beth wasn’t there for this turning point in my life.

“Do keep in touch, dear, and if it doesn’t work out for you, you know you’re always welcome here.”

Mrs. Miller was cool.

On the drive to my new place, I thought about what a milestone it was—my being completely on my own—and wondered if other people my age experienced the same sick feeling in their stomach contemplating whether they were going to make it or fall flat on their face. I had to make it. I pulled into one of the parking spaces behind my apartment and carried as much as I could up the narrow staircase.

I opened the door and was greeted by the overwhelming presence of Pine-Sol—a scent I never did like very much, but I supposed it beat the stench of garbage that had been left behind by the previous tenant. After putting away my belongings in their new places, I jumped back in the car and drove to the address on Belle Plaine Avenue where Anna Vargas had once lived...and where she had also died. Armed with the camera I used for work, I headed for the Portage Park neighborhood where I believed I was born and where it had all begun. I had been by the house several times before—the No. 80 bus stopped within just a few blocks of it—but visiting it in my own car as a licensed PI was different.

It was a cool day, unusually cool for September. I searched for the lever that controlled the heater in an attempt to take the chill out of the car, but it appeared to be non-working. I would have to get Bob to look at that for me. I hoped that was the worst thing I found wrong with it.

I first drove by my old house, which was out of my way, but I hadn’t been by it since I’d lived there four years earlier and was curious to see if anything had changed. The memory of the day I had discovered the lifeless bodies of my parents there still haunted me and probably always will. I had just come home after attending my final interior design class before spring break. I had grabbed a hamburger with Beth, who’d dropped me off in front of my house.

As soon as I opened the back door, I sensed something was wrong. I called out for my mom, who was always there, to let her know I was home. When she didn’t answer, I went looking for her.

Within minutes, I became a little lightheaded. Thinking it was just my body reacting to not seeing my mother in her usual places in the house, I continued searching for her. Finally, I looked in the basement, and that's where I found both of them—stretched out on the floor, face-down. I called to them, and when they didn't move, I went to my mother, who was closest to the stairs, and shook her shoulder. By that time, I was experiencing a heaviness in my chest and felt like I was going to be sick, so I ran upstairs and called for an ambulance. Then I went to the back door and stuck my head out for a breath of fresh air.

When the ambulance attendants arrived, they ordered me out of the house. I went next door to use the neighbor's phone to summon Beth who arrived just as they were transporting my parents' bodies out of the house on stretchers. She brought me to her home where I was comforted by her and her parents.

I was later told my parents died from carbon monoxide poisoning caused by a faulty furnace. They'd left no will, and I was underage with few rights. Unfortunately, I was also just a naive kid who didn't know enough to ask the right questions.

Shortly after they died, North Community Bank sent me a letter saying I would have to move out of my home in thirty days. How the bank got away with that, I don't know. I know now they had no business sending a minor that kind of notice. Furthermore, the law was that you had to give someone ninety days to move.

Lucky for me, the Millers took me in and treated me like a second daughter. Beth and I shared a bedroom, but with each of us working different shifts and going to school part-time and Beth's succession of boyfriends, we didn't see too much of each other.

The only things I inherited from my parents were the items I managed to remove from our home that held the most meaning for me, including the box full of things that I assumed belonged to Anna Vargas that now lay strewn on my back room evidence tables and a \$1,000 death-benefit check from the Soo Line Railroad where my father had worked as a general laborer for many years. I used part of that money to pay for school tuition and books, my business license, insurance, and basic equipment.

I turned onto Ferdinand Street and parked the car where I had a clear view of my old house. It didn't look the same as it did when I lived there. It was the same color, had the same tall evergreens framing the side and back yards, even had the same black mailbox with the heart-shaped red sticker I had put on it when I was little. Yet it didn't look the same. Smaller I thought. It looked a lot smaller.

It was a nice neighborhood for families, especially with the park right across the street. We'd been less than five miles from Lake Michigan but had never once gone there. I wasn't sure why. I had taken swimming lessons when I was ten.

Thinking back, I realized we hadn't done much of anything as a family. My father worked long hours, and my mother rarely left the house. We never really went anywhere.

My mother had been overprotective of me. I'd had to come home right after school, even in high school. I assumed she expected me to be like her and stay home all the time. She did allow Beth to come over, but it was only on rare occasions that she allowed me go to Beth's house. That was probably why I'd earned such good grades—I had nothing else to do but study. When I wasn't studying, I learned to entertain myself by making up outrageous stories in my head about what my life would have been like if this happened or that happened. Stupid stories. Nothing better to do.

My mother was always somewhere in the background—doing whatever was required of her to be a mother to me and a wife to my father. She didn't seem to have a life of her own. My father was controlling. I remember times when he told her things that even I knew weren't true, but she believed him. Like, one time she said she wanted to plant a vegetable garden in the backyard, and he convinced her that the dirt had to be sent to a laboratory for analysis first to make sure it was safe. She never planted the garden.

My father ruled the house—there was no mistake about that—and he knew how to make my mother feel grateful for it. But he had his good side too. He would compliment her cooking or what she was wearing or how she had rearranged the furniture. And he supported her in whatever it was she wanted to do—as long as it didn't require her to leave the house. I learned to stay out of the middle of their relationship, even if it did make me feel isolated and alone much of the time.

I think my parents loved me—each in their own way—even if they weren't my real parents.

I studied my old house for several minutes until the recurring image of their bodies lying on the basement floor compelled me to turn on the car engine and start driving away. Fifteen minutes later, I was on Belle Plaine Avenue, a tree-lined street with well-maintained older homes on decent-sized lots. The newspaper articles had referred to Anna's residence as an apartment, which I never did understand—this was a neighborhood of single-family homes.

Arriving at the address, I pulled over and parked across the street in a spot where I had a good view. Anna's home, the place where she died, looked like every other house on the street. It was an old white clapboard house with green shutters, two-stories, almost a perfect cube in shape. A variety of bushes, evergreens, and small ornamental trees landscaped the yard.

When I eased my car past the house and driveway, I was surprised to catch a glimpse of an outside stairway in the back leading up to the second story, something I had never noticed before. A ride around the block and into the alley allowed full view of the back of the house. The stairs were situated ten or so feet away from the house and led up to a deck that provided a partial cover for the ground-level patio. It was only then I understood the references to Anna's apartment—the house was a two-flat.

I rolled down my window, took a few pictures, and drove back to the front of the house where I took a few more. I couldn't wait to get them developed—it was helpful to have visuals when trying to solve a case.

A sharp rap on my passenger-side window startled me. The older woman I saw through the glass couldn't have been more than five feet tall. The shawl she wore carelessly wrapped around her chubby little body looked like something she'd grabbed before rushing out the door.

I reached over and rolled down the window nearest to her. She bent forward a bit to get a better look at me, her facial expression hostile.

"What are you doing here?" Her clenched fists rested on her hips, or maybe that was her waist. It was hard to tell.

"Um, nothing really, I was just admiring these homes."

"And taking pictures. Who are you?"

Something pinched inside my stomach. She was small but looked like she could throw a good punch if she had to.

“I’m Ginger Godfrey.” I’d been taught in one of my college classes to use a fake name in some circumstances. I figured this was one of them. “I love this house,” I told her. “I was just driving down the street and said to myself, ‘If I ever get married and have a family, which I’m not sure I’ll ever get to do given the string of loser boyfriends I’ve had lately. Anyway, if I do, this is the type of house I want to have. You know what I mean?’”

One interrogation technique I had learned was that if you sensed someone was going to give you a hard time, you should try to distract them with personal information about yourself. I hoped it was okay just to make stuff up. I didn’t remember if we had covered that.

Her face contorted into a sneer, and for a moment I thought she was going to blow a gasket or something. She swiped a wisp of her mousy brown hair off her forehead and took a step closer to my car.

“You don’t own that house, do you? I must say you have a real gem there if you do. Yep. I’ll bet it’s gorgeous on the inside too. But I’m sorry. You must be getting cold. It’s even cold in here, so you must be freezing.”

“Get off my block. And stop taking pictures, or I’ll call the police.”

“May I ask you just one question?”

Her glare didn’t waver.

“That beautiful bush in your front yard...is that a winterberry bush?”

I wasn’t sure how long I should wait for her to say something.

“The only reason I ask is because my parents—they’re deceased now—my mother tried many times to grow one in our backyard. She would try everything to keep them alive, but they never did survive, and when each one died, well, she was heartbroken. That’s the only reason I asked. You must have given yours some pretty special attention.” I didn’t have to make up that story about my mother. It was true.

She took another step closer and poked her head in. Her face softened.

“The trick is in the watering,” she said in a completely different tone. “They don’t like to go to bed with wet feet.”

“Go to bed?”

“At night. They don’t like to be watered at night.”

“Really? My mother used to water them every evening.”

The woman gasped.

“Worst thing she could have done?”

“Oh, my...yes.”

“It’s cold. I better let you go.”

She gave me a sympathetic look. “Would you like to see it up close?”

*Bingo!*

“Yes. That would be lovely.”

I got out of the car and triumphantly followed her across the street.

“They do better a little farther south, but if you know what you’re doing, they can thrive up here too. They like full sun, you know.” She glanced over at me. “But not midday. That’s when I pull down the canopy, so it’s in the shade. And then when the sun reaches about two o’clock, I pull it back up.”

Up close, the bush *was* beautiful, nothing like the ones I’d seen my mother struggling with.

“They can get twelve feet high and just as wide if you don’t trim them.”

“No kidding.”

She caressed one of the branches. “They’re like my children.”

“Well, it shows. Your landscaping is beautiful. You do all this yourself?”

She nodded.

“Someday, when I have a house of my own, can I come to you for advice?”

Her expression melted into a soft smile. “Would you like to come in for a cup of coffee, Miss Godfrey?”

I had a feeling someone who cared so well for a winterberry bush couldn’t be all bad.