

Regarding Anna

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 home 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.