

## ONE

I woke up hot. My eyes burned. Images of cellar windows, angled light faded into joy. I pulled the duvet over my head and tucked in my feet.

“Kiss me so I can go to work,” Alex said. He stood over me in his trench coat, two plums clutched to his chest. I lifted my head off the pillow, eyes shut, and we pressed lips.

In June, after we graduated, Alex and I had rented the bungalow on Shelby Street. Flats Mills had a Lucky Dollar, a diner, two churches and a strip of antique and craft shops. Beyond the town sat hundred-acre fields of corn, potatoes, soy, and sod. The land moved higher to the north, and in certain darkneses, its hills gave a view of Toronto lit-up, an hour away. We’d got what we wanted. Country and city. Space and each other.

We painted the living room Chimayo red and hung it with nudes. Some originals, some prints. Nobody dropped by, nobody had our phone number. Living here felt like an escape trick.

“I’m bushed,” I said.

“You screamed last night. And punched me once.” He sat on my feet. Images of wet hands, a dripping mattress seeped into me.

“I do that sometimes.” I stroked the sheet.

“Nightmares are hot. And I get to do the protective guy thing.” He swelled his chest and sucked in his cheeks.

I scratched his beard where the skin was peeling underneath. Last night Alex hugged me as we walked around Flats Mills inhaling our skunky weed and our

neighbours' sweet maple firesmoke. We shared a pocket and a glove and talked about his internship at St. Mary's Hospital. He called me his girl and said he'd buy us a farmhouse once he set up his practice. I liked his love, though it felt simple, finite. My own, lesser love dwelled on his staying and left it at that. I'd clutched his cuff and called him Sweetness to stop myself from showing him anyone but the person he knew he loved.

“You'd be surprised what I know, my dear.”

I found Alex's statements cryptic but they had their appeal. They kept us from talking about what made us uncomfortable.

We never said 'I love you' or discussed what our love felt like and what it meant to us and we didn't talk about marriage or children or why he gave up art for medicine. Cozy, we stayed hopeful.

“What do you know?”

“Everything is good between us and we made a good choice coming here.”

“Any choice we made would have worked.”

“But we made this one and we're happy.”

“We are happy,” I said.

He got up and the nerves in my feet sputtered. Then he was leaving — shutting off the stereo, rattling keys, closing doors. The hatchback's engine turned over with a screech, tires swashed puddles, and the house fell silent.

I called Vangie and said I had a migraine.

“The flashes and bangs stopped an hour ago. I'm taking a break. Next comes the weeping and vomiting.”

“Make sure you have plenty of tissues, dear,” she said.

“It’s the season. You know —” I said, ready to talk, but Vangie had an interview and had to go.

Vangie was the head editor at InfoText. She had her own office and suffered from migraines so I let her think I did, too. Once, I drove her to Emergency at ten in the morning. I had to pull over three times so she could throw up. The hospital gave her a shot and she slept for two days. Afterward, discomfited, she took me to dinner and I consoled her with a false list of my own symptoms. I liked the closeness, the shared burden. At InfoText, I sat in a cubicle cluster with five other grunts entering data. On a good week, I could do a whole book.

Afternoons I watched talk shows until Alex got back from the hospital. Whenever I brought up serial killers, Alex said, “Why do you want to glorify those losers?”

“Good point,” I said, “But successful couples keep some separate interests. All the magazines say so.”

“Why not get a more useful hobby, then? Make us a toilet paper doll. A driftwood centerpiece. A Popsicle stick lamp.”

“Because then you’d want to join me.”

Sometimes I worked on the outline of my novel about a sculptor who’d made a box that conjured up the ghost of a runaway slave. Mostly I built the box, so I’d know what to say about it when I was ready to write. It took up most of the second bedroom.

The box – my character’s box – tapered like a cone and had six sides made of chicken wire, foam rubber, and canvas. It could hold one person, two in a pinch. It needed a door, though, with a lock. I planned to use brass.

After a bath, I wrapped myself in towels and did a slow air-dry in front of *The Heidi Roth-Lopez Show*. Heidi, a former alcoholic soap opera teen, hectored a forty-five-year-old man engaged to a seventeen-year old girl who’d gone to the same school as his sons. The sons scowled from the audience. The girlfriend sat behind them, in her eyes an animal sheen. She looked caught, sore, her tight mouth unyielding. The man’s eyes were clear pools of unexpected, inane light.

Heidi emphasized key words in her questions then turned her sly gaze on the audience, who shouted “Perv!” and “Sickie!” at the father, the girl, even the sons. Throughout, the man looked lusty and contrite, the girl ready to bolt, yet their stories had a veneer of joy and rightness that aroused in me a quizzical respect. Clearly, they relished the spectacle as the holes inside them gaped for all to see.

I turned the TV off, got dressed, and fastened my hair with a barrette shaped like a fish. In the foyer I double-knotted my boot laces and buttoned a trench coat against the dripping fog.

Head down, I fixed my gaze on the road. Corroded leaves rimmed the ditch. I stretched out my sweater neck, the air warm despite the damp. I stepped around potholes and puddles. Gravel and mud packed the grooves of my soles.

I walked the half block to Queen Street, past Sandy White Woolens and Beard of Bees Crafts, open weekends only. Tires slapped the wet asphalt. I crossed to the post

office. The mail contained a hydro bill and a flyer for Drainy Days Plumbing. Only one letter had come for me since we moved here, from Jenna, my first-year roommate, who taught in Czechoslovakia. None of my friends lived close.

I passed the Cannonball Diner with its smoke and oil pong then ducked into the Lucky Dollar for a paper. The tabloids didn't come in until Tuesday so I got the *Toronto Telstar*. Outside, I checked out the front page. Yet another offensive headline: "Lawyer dead, wife nailed." Beside it walked a tanned woman in a pink turtleneck and jean jacket flanked by two police. My breath cinched and I sank into a crouch, back against the ice freezer, the paper on my knees.

At twelve, I wrote my first story about a homicidal mother. I wrote more at thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen, right up until I moved to Cloud Lake. I typed the stories fast and made them bloody, amoral. In each one the mother swings her hair and looks over her shoulder the way my mother did the day she drove off with the man she met at the Dominion Hotel.

When he read them, Alex rubbed my earlobes and said, "It's always the same story with you, Pauline," and he was right. Only this one, I hadn't made up. I knew the victim and I knew the killer. The accused. The woman on the front page. The police had arrested her because they believed she'd murdered her husband.

Fog buried the treetops and swathed the Bethany United Church steeple. Even under arrest, Ramona Hawkes wrapped confidence around sickness and fear. She'd gained weight. It was hard to see specifics, but I did check, then, ashamed, dug at my ear and scanned the highlights. She'd stabbed him — *someone* had stabbed him — thirty-one

times. She was stronger than I remembered. But that was wrong. She had been strong. I remembered her strong.

At home, I dropped the *Telstar* on the floor. Ramona stared past me. Alex would comment on her body, compare it unfavourably to mine. I didn't want to hear it. I placed the folded paper face down in the slave-box and picked up some sandpaper. As I tried to block out James Hawkes and his wife, I ended up thinking about the profound connection between killer and victim. I missed my shows and didn't hear Alex as I rubbed the brass to the smoothness of old skin.

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That was October, 1990. One cold morning the following summer, I lay wrapped in towels on the couch watching Heidi Roth-Lopez interview the mother of a giant baby. The baby sat in a separate room with a camera trained on him. A screen behind Heidi and the parents showed the baby to the audience. He had floppy legs and a wet, vapid face. His eyes were smart and dazzling, drugged. The audience tutted and moaned. Someone yelled, "Freak!" I wanted him to be real as much as I didn't. Maybe more. The mother wanted it, too, and I admired her show of helpless need. Shellacked with tears, she exposed the space in her the size of a fat, diapered teenager. I'd quit data-entry by then and was collecting unemployment insurance and trying to write.

When the knocking started, I muted the TV and crouch-walked to the window, dropping towels. Two people in windbreakers stood on the stoop, their faces blocked by the awning. A cop car nosed my Hustler's tail.

"Answer the door please, Ms. Brown," a woman's voice called. "It's the police."

*I haven't done anything. What about Alex? I don't want to know.* I skittered into the bedroom and got under the covers.

“Pauline Elizabeth Brown?” a man’s voice asked through the screen. I’d left the bedroom window open.

“Yes.”

“Let us in please. You’ve already got two neighbours hanging over the fence. Or we’ll climb in through here. Suit yourself.”

I tugged the curtains across and crawled to the dresser. I had no clean underwear so I put on a one-piece bathing suit under an Indian print skirt. By the time I opened the door I had goose bumps. The damp suit smelled of chlorine. The cops stepped into the foyer.

“I’m Detective Debra Young and this is Detective Wayne Stanton. We understand you used to live in Cloud Lake.”

Detective Stanton was black-eyed and tall with a mean-wise smile that poked into one cheek. Detective Young had pink cheeks and a severe blonde ponytail. They held open leather wallets with gold badges on one side and photo IDs on the other.

“What’s the problem?” Behind them, the empty street looked expectant, prying.

“We need you to confirm that you lived in Cloud Lake, in Brampton.” Detective Young’s voice had a pleasant gloss that strove to make you like her even as she extracted something dear.

“That’s right. I did.”

“Good. Did you know Ramona Hawkes?”

Cornered, I croaked a yes, with dread and relief. The *Telstar* with Ramona's picture sat in my box but I hadn't read about her since that day. I'd avoided the news, too. Without details, my mind had offered flashes of pores, stubble and knuckles — my body greased with a smell that brought me up to three baths a day. I snapped the bathing suit strap and agreed to let them drive me to the station.