

Prologue

“Not the basement—I won’t go in the basement.” The old woman fought to keep the quaver from her voice. A draft from below brushed the flannel nightgown against her aching knees as she stood, barefoot, on the well-worn pine of the top step.

At the bottom of the stairs glass shimmered in the weak yellow light of a single bulb. Row upon row of canned produce in immaculate jars lined the walls of the cellar. Gleaming jars of crisp pickled carrots, sweet apricots—the space was a testament to her hard work.

Now the place would be a shrine for her death.

She braced one gaunt hand against the cool damp of the concrete wall at the top of the stairs. And waited for the final blow. When it came, she registered only brief surprise at the depth of the pain.

As she plunged forward, a thick mustiness filled her throat. The shattering of glass was followed by the redeeming, cleansing tang of vinegar. Vinegar and dill.

Chapter 1

Three Days Earlier.

She had a smile on her like poison come to supper. The woman’s face pressed up to Lucy Beam’s kitchen window could pass for a dried crab apple, with a smirk so wide that the hairy mole on her cheek almost disappeared in the wrinkles.

A small ridge of fear prickled up along Lucy’s spine. Half-blinded by the sun streaming into the kitchen, Lucy stood motionless, her brain spinning. Who was peering in her window?

A passing cloud suddenly dimmed the fierce sunlight, and she could see. It was her neighbour, Clara. What the heck was she doing, gawking in like that?

Lucy opened her mouth to holler but a movement on the other side of Clara’s thin shoulder caught her eye. A man dangled from the tree—Lucy’s tree in fact. It was Clara’s son. A fine-toothed saw glinted in the sunshine.

Lucy launched herself through the back door and into her backyard. She might be new in town and would dearly like to fit in, but there were some things she would not overlook. A man hacking limbs off her hundred-year-old elm was one of them.

As she rounded the corner of the house, the sharp scent of fresh sap seized the back of her throat. A branch lay on the ground at the base of the ninety foot elm tree. The branch was as thick as a man's thigh—almost as thick as Lucy's own—and its emerald leaves showed all the signs of vigorous growth and perfect health. All thoughts of genteel, neighbourly behaviour flew out of her head.

"You know, there are rules against things like that!" she yelled. "What is Gilbert doing to my tree?"

The woman crossed her bony arms in front of her chest and stepped away from the window. Lucy wondered how she managed to keep her slight frame upright in the gale force wind that whipped through the streets of Saskatoon. In spite of the heat, Clara Krause wore a dark brown polyester dress, circa 1969. It must have been her Sunday best—four decades ago. Her varicose-veined legs were all sinew and bone and encased in beige knee-high stockings that almost, but not quite, met the hem of her dress. The black lace-up shoes might have belonged to any self-respecting nun of the same era.

Looking down, Lucy realized, with a flush of annoyance, that she was barefoot. Her toes were completely submerged in the lush coolness of the grass. Hard to feel in control and ladylike without shoes. At least she was wearing a dress, albeit a pea-green jersey sundress that had fit a whole lot better three years ago. The relentless sunshine made her squint.

"I'm sick of all your leaves in my yard. Every fall I take twenty bags off my property." Clara Krause's voice, strident and grating, had traces of a German accent winding through her words. "And every June it's the seed pods. They sprout all through my vegetable garden."

"So you decided to prune the tree. My tree." Lucy struggled to keep the indignation out of her voice. The heat that burned her cheeks had nothing to do with the sun.

Clara shrugged. "I figured you're too busy to look after your own yard. I see pretty much everything that goes on around here. You're lucky that my Gilbert is a professional tree pruner." The sun glinted off the thick lenses of her spectacles, giving her wizened eyes a demented gleam. "Here in Canada we work hard to take care of our own property. I've heard about you lazy Americans—you just hire those Mexicans with leaf blowers."

Clara's words momentarily rendered Lucy speechless. *This woman is unbelievable*, she thought. *Keep your cool. Remember, this is your new life and it's supposed to be a whole lot different. The new, suave Lucy. No more yelling.*

She glanced up at Gilbert Krause, suspended by a harness and a rigging of ropes and pulleys twenty feet above her head. He calmly sawed through another thick branch.

"You just stop that!" Lucy hollered up at him.

He paused, leaned the saw in the crook of the branch and took off his hard hat, wiping his hand through grey-streaked hair. The belt of his harness cut into the soft belly that hung over his blue jeans. "You really did need this tree pruned," he said. "And the tree pruning ban's just been lifted in Saskatoon. We can't prune all summer, because of the risk of Dutch Elm disease." Gilbert threw the newly cut branch down at Lucy's feet.

"You didn't think to ask me before you started chopping at my tree?" Lucy's blood surged higher in her cheeks. The squawking sound she heard—her own voice, in fact—started a sharp throbbing behind her eyes.

Gilbert pulled himself up to the next branch, his arms thick with muscles under his green Saskatchewan Roughriders t-shirt. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I’ll put a bill in your mailbox. You can pay me next week.”

“A bill?” Lucy’s voice reached an octave she’d have thought impossible. Whirling on Clara, she yelled, “This is all your doing, you old bat!” She reached up to massage her pounding forehead. “I hope one of these branches falls on you and cracks your nasty—”

Gilbert’s exaggerated throat clearing halted her words. He folded the saw into its plastic sheath and pulled wood-handled pruning shears from his belt. “By the way, I think I hear some kid calling.”

With a jolt, Lucy tuned in to the plaintive sound. “Mama!” She didn’t know which, but one of her twins needed her. As she turned to run into the house, she saw the malevolent grin on Clara Krause’s thin dried-apple face.

Lucy barrelled into her kitchen. The twins were busily eating their porridge in their high chairs—sticky dollops of oatmeal lay on their trays like miniature mole-hills. The large kitchen burst with dappled light and with each gust of wind, the huge elm tree—with Gilbert still hanging from it—danced outside the window and broke the July sunlight into a hundred gems that scampered across Lucy’s tiled floor.

Leaning against the long expanse of countertop, her fingers touched a fine grit, spread like sugar, across the surface. The wind blew something wicked, and with each gust it hauled dirt into her kitchen through the open window.

Lucy shut the window, after first giving a evil eye to Clara and her faithful son. Her neck muscles tightened as she acknowledged that she hadn’t handled herself very well. She’d have to do better—much better—if she was going to build a social network for her kids.

As she pulled a clean cloth from her towel drawer and wet it under the faucet, Lucy committed herself—again—to her goal. She was determined to give Anna and Peter a much different life than she’d had. Their young lives would be woven into the fabric of this town, and they’d never feel like outsiders. This, however, meant that Lucy had to make friends and connections for herself. And, she had to decide how to accomplish this—soon.

She shook her head to dispel her thoughts and began wiping the counter. Where in heaven had all the grit blown in from? Saskatoon was as heavily treed, flowered, and Kentucky blue-grassed as any small university town she’d ever seen. There didn’t appear to be any loose dirt laying around, waiting for the chance to blow into her kitchen. She’d heard about the vast prairie outside the city—the “land of endless sky” they called it. Lucy had flown into the airport in the dark of night, and she hadn’t seen any prairie yet. She wasn’t sure she wanted to.

There was a sudden clatter, and she whirled around. Her son, Peter, had thrown his spoon against the glass front of the oven. Sighing, Lucy stooped over, feeling blood rush to her head as she attempted to dislodge the spoon from under the stove front.

From the corner of her eye, Lucy saw, too late, Peter’s pudgy hand raise the bowl to strike. The blow came with stunning accuracy.

“Ow! Shi—” Lucy bit off the final letter of the word. Dazed, she clutched the cold enamel of the stove to keep herself upright. She raised her arm protectively to ward off the next blow.

“No!” screeched the little voice. “Pida ... no hit!” Lucy’s daughter, Anna, bounced in her highchair as she watched her twin brother lift the metal bowl for another strike at his mother’s head.

Lucy ducked out of Peter’s reach and, standing up, removed the bowl from the twenty-month-old’s chubby hands. “Peter, no hitting! That hurts Mommy.” Rubbing the back of her

head, Lucy squatted to get the spoon she'd been about to retrieve when her son had launched his assault.

"Mama ... hat!" Peter beamed at his mother, his oatmeal streaked face suffused in the warm morning sunlight.

A knock at the front door spared Peter any further lecture. Lucy grabbed two wooden mixing spoons from the counter and handed them to the twins in their highchairs. "Mommy'll be right back." The babies immediately began beating out a tattoo on their chairs with accompanying babble and laughter. She raced to the door, pausing to slip her feet into some webbed mules that lay next to the door.

On the front porch stood the most windblown couple Lucy had ever seen. The man, a tall streak of down-home, wore a checked shirt and tie. If he'd only used a tiepin, she thought, he wouldn't be in danger now of losing his eye to the wind-whipped tie that he struggled to keep out of his face.

The woman fought to keep her lemon-coloured suit covering what it should be covering of her stocky figure. The hot summer wind ripped a blue pamphlet from the woman's bejewelled hand and sent it sailing down the branch-and leaf-strewn street. The sun dazzled, and Lucy squinted. She eyed the couple for any conspicuous Bibles or other signs of impending conversions.

The thin man extended his hand. "My name is Duncan Dash, and I'm your Member of Parliament." His tie, now set free to frolic in the wind, flew up and across his nose. He smiled ruefully; an easy-going smile that crinkled his calf-like eyes. "And this is Geraldine Wallace, my constituency manager."

The woman extended her hand. She grasped Lucy's firmly. Her skin was soft, with the sheen of the well-maintained. "My goodness, what a dreadful day. This wind is wreaking havoc with my hair, I'm afraid." Geraldine Wallace reached up one hand to pat the silver curls that framed an almost unlined face. Her voice sounded vaguely British. But then, Lucy thought, all Canadians sounded English—what with their clipped vowels and careful enunciation.

"Member of Parliament! Whew, that's a relief," said Lucy. "It looked like you were coming to rescue me from my perch on the brink of Hell. I thought you were coming to 'save' me."

The couple on the porch exchanged a quick glance. The M.P. cleared his throat but said nothing. A hot flush crept up Lucy's neck.

Duncan Dash managed to give her a benevolent yet uncomprehending smile while trying to tame his wildly flapping tie. "I'm out door-knocking my constituency, and I heard that your family had just arrived in Saskatoon. I wanted to welcome you."

The wind ripped another identical pamphlet out of the pocket of his shirt. By now, the Member of Parliament's straw-coloured hair stood up in tufts on the crown of his head. He took a half-hearted swipe at his hair. "You can always tell people from Saskatchewan. When the wind stops blowing—we fall over," Duncan Dash said. He winked at Lucy and shoved his hands into the pockets of his trousers.

Geraldine Wallace raised her eyebrows and shook her head at the corny joke as she smoothed her skirt back into place. When she smiled, reassuring lines appeared at the corners of her eyes. An unexpected warmth passed over Lucy as she looked in the grey eyes, which were the same shade as her mother's.

She did a rapid-fire mental review of the state of her house. It would do. “Would you like to come in out of the wind? I’ve just put coffee on.” Lucy had not, in fact, made coffee, but she had every intention of doing so if it meant she would have some adult company this morning.

Not just any company, either. Member of Parliament! This was going to be the day that she made some friends and started her climb up the social ladder.

Lucy didn’t buy the MP’s line about wanting to welcome her to the neighbourhood. Politicians always wanted something—either votes or money. But that was okay. The old *you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours*. Lucy’s back was very itchy. In fact, she was desperate to fit in, and she finally saw a way. There was no way she’d let her kids live on the outside as she had. An old taunt of nearly thirty years ago—*Freaky Freckles Fraser*—still rang in her ears, the high-pitched children’s voices as stinging today as when she was six.

She stepped back and bent over to right the overturned table. Realizing that she’d just given her guests an unobstructed view of her bottom, Lucy shifted to a squat and reached for the scattered mail. She gathered the letters and quickly hoisted herself upright.

“Come *on in*,” she said, hoping the heartiness of her voice covered her embarrassment.

Murmuring their thanks, Duncan Dash and Geraldine Wallace stepped into the house and hesitated politely on the rug that covered the hardwood in the front hall. Lucy took her cue, “Oh, please, don’t worry about your shoes.”

She’d been living in this small Canadian city long enough—three weeks—to know that people considered it very rude to go tramping into someone’s home wearing their shoes. You should, at least, act like you had every intention of taking them off.

Lucy couldn’t figure it out—the sidewalks might be perfectly dry, but still no shoes inside. The ritual reminded Lucy of the Japanese custom. At least she had Miss Manners, the etiquette guru, on her side. Miss Manners felt that your guests were more important than your precious floors and carpets. Lucy loved etiquette books, especially when they agreed with her.

Seating her visitors at her large wooden kitchen table, she settled the twins on the floor to rummage through a pile of plastic containers. “You’ll both take coffee?” She already knew what the answer would be—these two were political beings and, therefore, were fuelled by coffee and the pursuit of power. Lucy had met many politicians in her career. She set about making coffee for the three of them.

Duncan Dash breathed in deeply through his nose and said, “It sure smells great in here.”

Lucy had, that morning, put a batch of pumpkin muffins in the oven and they were due to come out. Lucy lifted her chin, and she stood a little straighter.

Duncan stood up to see better out the large window. His shoulder blades jutted out beneath the checked shirt. With his tousled hair, he looked like a skinny young boy. All he needed were patched jeans and a tree-house to complete the picture. “I see you’ve had Gilbert Krause at work on your tree,” he said.

Leaning on the counter, Lucy waited to reply as her electric grinder noisily reduced the oily, dark coffee beans into a fragrant mound, the kitchen redolent with the scent of coffee and hot muffins. “Do you know him? His mother, Clara, lives next door and has begun a vendetta against me. I can’t seem to please the woman.” Dumping the coffee grounds in the French press, Lucy added boiling water and slowly lowered the plunger. Her brain boiled along with the water at the thought of the tree pruning episode. *The nerve of that woman*.

Geraldine Wallace stood and bent her sturdy frame over the toddlers, helping Anna open a lid on an empty yogurt container. Lucy had a glimpse of a pair of surprisingly youthful legs enhanced by sheer stockings and two-inch heels.

“Clara Krause can be a dreadful old woman.” Geraldine’s eyes crinkled, as if to soften the words. “It’s surprising Gilbert turned out as well as he did, considering his mother’s influence. What has she done to you?”

Lucy looked up in surprise in the midst of pulling butter and cream from the refrigerator. *Ha, I’m not the only person who dislikes Clara.* What a relief. She shut the door with her foot.

“Well, just this morning I found her outside my house with Gilbert.” Lucy paused, and satisfied that she had her guests’ full attention, continued her story while setting steaming cups of coffee, cream, and a plate of muffins and butter on the table. “She almost gave me a heart attack. That creepy face of hers peering at me through the window.” Lucy shivered at the memory. Her hand clenched on the back of the chair. “I have a mind to—” Suddenly she stopped.

Something about Duncan’s and Geraldine’s faces had changed her mind. She itched to call the police and have Clara and Gilbert charged with trespassing—at the very least. But she wouldn’t. She’d just suck it up and keep calm. She’d have to do that if she was going to fit in around here. *Calm and polite.* Her new mantra.

“Never mind,” she said.

Seating herself at the table, she reached for the sugar and, in the process, knocked her own cup of coffee. As if in slow motion, the blue cup teetered on its circular bottom edge and began an arc toward disaster. Lucy shot out her arm, and, grabbing the mug, stopped it from tipping. *That was close.* She took a deep breath and refocused on her guests.

“Clara said—” Squinting, Lucy tried to remember. “In the spring that elm puts seed pods all over my garden.” She mimicked a shrill, German-accented voice. “And in the fall, the leaves—I take twenty bags of leaves off my garden every fall.” She took a big sip from her coffee and leaned back in her chair. “You know, some people are alive only because it’s illegal to kill them.” She laughed and took another sip.

Suddenly she noticed that the two Canadians in her kitchen—polite smiles on their faces—were no longer looking in her eyes. *What now? I’m just telling it like it is.*

Duncan Dash sighed and looked at Lucy. He ran a long-fingered hand over his hair, still suffering the effects of a morning out in the wind. “She’s a bit interfering, I’ll give you that, but that might just be loneliness. Her husband passed away—with a stroke, as a matter of fact—about ten years ago.” He leaned back in his chair and linked his fingers behind his neck. “She’s a real hard worker, and she always helps out on my political campaigns.”

Lucy looked sceptically at him. With his kindly face and home-spun manner, this man was too good to be true.

“Volunteers like Clara are really important,” Duncan added.

Suddenly it dawned on Lucy that she had just been chastized—albeit kindly. Perspiration sprang to her brow and she shifted in the hard oak chair.

As if noticing her discomfort, Duncan smiled his lop-sided grin, glanced at Geraldine and said, “But *this* woman is the powerhouse behind any political success I’ve had. Geraldine took me under her wing, and she managed my very first election campaign. I was mighty glad when she switched from being a volunteer to a paid position in my office.” He smiled. “Me, I couldn’t organize a one man race to a two hole outhouse.”

Geraldine, her grey eyes bright, reached over to pat Duncan’s arm. Lucy, admiring the older woman’s long French-manicured fingernails, carefully kept her own stubby fingers hidden under the table.

“I’ve always been involved in politics,” said Geraldine. “But never to the extent of managing an entire campaign. My usual role has been fund-raising.” She sipped at her coffee and

set it gently on the table before continuing. “I truly didn’t know a lot about how to run a campaign. We, in the Conservative Party, were just fortunate that the voters knew a good thing when they saw Duncan Dash.”

Lucy thought, *Jeez, the poor man has a name like a chain of donut shops*. But she planned to use this opportunity to meet some of the movers and shakers in this town. She had grown up looking in at the cozy worlds surrounding her friends and their mothers—mothers volunteering at bake sales, mothers meeting at P.T.A. gatherings. Lucy’s mother hadn’t done any of these things. She’d left by the time her daughter was ten.

“I’d love to help out sometime. I’ve got a lot of experience in event planning. In fact, I made event planning my career—before I decided to stay home with the babies.” Lucy leaned toward her guests, hoping that her enthusiasm sparkled in her eyes. “I worked for a company called Woods and Tyrell—an event-planning firm—in Davis, California.”

The fact that her career had lasted only ten years didn’t bother her. She came from a working class neighbourhood near San Francisco, where most aspirations didn’t extend past life-long employment at the local fish cannery.

Geraldine Wallace beamed at Lucy and took a dainty bite of her muffin. “Wonderful!”

Not sure if Geraldine had referred to the muffin or to her offer of help, Lucy said heartily, “Any time.” Seeing that Duncan had finished his muffin in only three bites, Lucy passed him the plate. The man needed fattening up.

The conversation moved to the topic of rain—or the lack thereof. Duncan Dash’s constituents, he said, judged the government by how they were feeling about the weather, and right now, verging on a drought, the government was being judged harshly.

Setting his coffee cup down with a satisfied sigh, he unfolded his long body from the oak chair. “It’s always a pleasure to meet the voters in my constituency.”

Lucy’s vocal cords tightened. “Well, um ... I’m not exactly a voter,” she said, her voice squeaking. “I’m an American citizen and working on getting my Permanent Resident status here. I understand that I’m not eligible to vote. But,” she added hopefully, “my husband’s Canadian, he can vote.” Karl Beam, a newly appointed associate professor in the University’s College of Agriculture and Bioresources, had been born and raised in Saskatoon. “And I’d certainly be willing to help in any capacity. Anything at all.” She suddenly realized her voice had the ring of desperation and that she was leaning too close to Geraldine. In fact, although the older woman’s mouth was still curved in a smile, Geraldine now leaned back slightly, as if to put some space between herself and this crazed would-be volunteer.

Lucy’s back tensed, and she sat up straight, her hands clenched in fists. She was screwing up royally. They’d think she was a boor and an idiot and were probably vowing to get out of her kitchen as fast as possible.

Duncan pulled back Geraldine’s chair as the older woman extricated herself gracefully from behind the table and hooked her purse over her arm—Queen Elizabeth style. “Here’s my card and one of our pamphlets. We certainly would love your help. We’ve got a fund-raising barbeque coming up.”

A swell of pleasure rolled over Lucy as she rose from her seat. She was in! She realized she had a big goofy grin plastered across her face. She quickly schooled her expression into what she hoped was a demure, modest smile.

Duncan Dash bent and tousled the heads of the twins, who had moved on to playing with the pedal of the stainless steel garbage can. He said, “Did you read the article about diapers in

today's paper?" Lucy shook her head. She'd barely had time to get dressed this morning, let alone read the paper.

She groaned inwardly. She felt a lecture coming on. Lucy forced herself to focus her attention on the M.P. She'd put up with a lecture or two if it meant that she and her family made some headway in this town. She pasted on her best attentive expression.

His lean face serious, Duncan Dash continued, "Can you believe that diapering a baby uses, on average, six thousand diapers? I find it hard to believe that some people persist in using disposable diapers when we have really good diaper services available here in town." He shook his head and sighed. "There's no issue of more importance than the environment. We've got to think about what kind of footprint we're leaving on this earth."

He leaned back against the refrigerator. "Did you know that about three thousand tonnes of disposable diapers go into the city's landfill every year?"

"Oh, I agree completely," Lucy said. She was sure her voice rang with fervour. "I never use disposable diapers. Even with twins, a diaper service is the only way to go."

* * *

The mountain of Pampers in Lucy's shopping cart obscured her view as she manoeuvred through the crowded aisles of Sobey's supermarket. She was in a rush. Karl had stayed at home with the twins and he needed to be at a meeting at the university in one hour. But the flyer advertising Pampers at \$28 for a box of ninety diapers was a deal she couldn't pass up.

A few other specials caught her eye, and she piled two bottles of Clorox bleach and three cans of Lysol spray disinfectant onto the trolley, perching them carefully against the looming mass formed by the large boxes of diapers. One bottle of toilet cleanser topped the summit in the cart.

Warmed by the exertion of pushing the overloaded trolley, Lucy paused by the dairy coolers, enjoying the blast of cold that made her shiver. Toilet paper. She needed toilet paper. Lucy glanced at her watch and, seeing that she had time, headed off to the paper products aisle, where she took two packages of twelve double rolls and shoved them onto the shelf at the bottom of the cart. She added a jumbo package of paper towels.

Lucy Beam didn't shop from a list. That is, she always made a list, but once she had written it down, she didn't need it any longer. Lucy had an unusual gift—a perfect memory for anything she'd seen in a list.

She trundled the shopping cart down the aisle, humming. The vast supermarket stretched before her, and she realized she had a lot of distance to cover before she reached the check-outs. She picked up her pace.

Lucy spotted a familiar shape at the far end of cosmetics and health care aisle. Duncan Dash stood there. Her arms tingled. It had only been yesterday that they'd met. She smiled and instinctively raised her hand in greeting but—*wait...*

He looked right at her and then turned on his heel and walked away, his small green shopping basket knocking against his long legs as he moved. *Why did he snub me?* Then the horrible realization dawned. He must have seen the Pampers in her cart. Damn.

She groaned as she surveyed the contents of her trolley, stuffed with enough diapers, paper products, and chemicals for a Proctor and Gamble industry fiesta. What would this ardent, eco-friendly politician think of her? And just as she had made some headway in the social life department. Lucy's stomach churned, and her hands, gripping the handle of the cart, became slick with perspiration.

Ducking her head behind her purchases, she whipped the cart around and headed, at full tilt, the opposite way. Fleeting, she considered abandoning the cart and leaving the store. No way—she wasn't going to lose these deals. She'd just stay out of Duncan Dash's path.

Peeking around the corner of the next aisle, Lucy saw that the coast was clear and she headed, once again, at full speed toward the cashiers. She saw a blur of long legs as Duncan Dash passed quickly through the intersecting aisle ahead of her. His head turned toward her, then, as if on recoil, jerked away. *He was purposely avoiding her, too.* Lucy torqued the cart around, almost taking out a stack of Campbell's Tomato Soup in her haste.

Passing the feminine products display, she spotted the M.P. again. He had his back to her, his shopping basket on the floor at his feet. Lucy ducked out of sight. Peering around the corner, she saw him bend over and take a small rectangular package, about the size of a pack of Fig Newtons, out of the basket and shove it into the pocket of his blue windbreaker.