

Chapter 1



It was the spring when Carole came to stay that something went wrong with the linden.

Veronica stood on the curb to inspect the tree, mindlessly kicking the gravel that buttressed the concrete. Gravel that turned into ridges of frozen dirt from the city's attempt to tame a winter of snow and ice that lasted long into spring, when lawns were already lime and the crocus already singing. What caused the heart-shaped leaves of the linden to curl into small cigars of green, much too brittle to touch? And where were its flowers? Normally by now buttery buds hung low and dazzling. Veronica knew the linden was tolerant of urban pollution, and what made it a darling were its fragrant flowers. Hugh said the perfume smelled more like semen than anything.

Hugh had called early that morning, "How about if I get some Dungenese crabs for dinner?" She wanted to say *Dungeness* – ess, ess – his clastic endings for words more entertaining than irritating; she answered, "Crab, sure," although she wondered at prairie people eating seafood, glaucous eyes of cellophaned fish or eviscerated intelligent squid camouflaged into spicy calamari, or, like the crab that would end up in her tiny kitchen – homelessly plucked from a crowded tank, claws muted by rubber bands. But Hugh might know something about the linden, and Carole loved crab.

Carole was still sleeping after arriving late last night from Nightingale. She was in the room opposite Veronica's, the second and spare bedroom above Veronica's flower shop. Hugh might be a landscaper, but it turned out his porn was decorating magazines, so it wasn't without delight that he gave the room a coat of the lightest rose, set up an old wrought iron bedpost, ordered a new mattress from Casper. He fixed the finicky toilet until it flushed without fuss – if Carole was getting chemo, she'd need a well-functioning toilet.

Veronica looked at the dog waiting at her feet. Frankie was a gift from Hugh, a pooch both cute and cursed – half-hearted curls covering her eyes and zealously loyal. Not every dog was a loyal dog, and despite the devotion displayed at the moment, Frankie was loyal only to Hugh. Like Hugh was revealing himself to be toward Veronica, and like Veronica was expected to be to Carole.

"C'mon then." Frankie's tail wagged in anticipation of the walk to River Park. Veronica stepped from the curb, leash in hand, looking briefly for traffic but hoping to see a street cleaner.

The misshapen linden was piss-poor advertising for Bloom, the flower shop on 34th that was now Veronica's and fast becoming her albatross. (Veronica sighed at her own use

of a dead and crusted metaphor, no longer meaning a weighty noose, now that oceans of plastics caused literal gut-wrenching deaths of baby albatross, fed to them unknowingly by their seafaring mothers.) She knew nothing about running a business but had always loved the beauty of flowers; quickly she learned to loathe the never-ending list of to-do that had nothing to do with Beauty. She recently stopped accepting same-day orders at noon so she could be more efficient with deliveries, but then lost last minute orders and, well, now there were no orders and a cooler bursting with eager ranunculus. If she was a more gregarious and generous type, she might deliver free posies to neighbouring businesses in an effort to introduce herself. But that would require cheery hellos, an extroverted move akin to karaoke, which she did once and planned never to do again; she could simply smile and leave a business card, but she didn't have any. Yet. However, delivering posies would be a distraction over making sense of the bills waiting for her in back at Bloom.

She wouldn't be surprised if the day she signed the papers for Bloom a skywriter flew overhead leaving a trail of disintegrating letters spelling F O O L. She purchased the shop with her share from the sale of the house she had owned with her husband – soon to be ex-husband; it would have been her ex hiring the skywriter, knowing as he did her whim for rashness. Having an ex, thought Veronica, her latest cataclysm. Such a loaded pitiable ring to the sound of ex. X delineated her as a target that made her feel like a marked woman, although from the outside she looked normal enough.

X was also an absence, something (else) missing. And while the absence of her ex was a relief, she mourned their shared past – the only person who unerringly knew all they had lost. What about that shared life graduating into a shared future? Where, if nothing else, someone had your back, who would accept your fallen arches, your sciatica, who knew the source of your blue moods each October. I'm alone, Veronica thought, not quite brooding, but not not brooding either.

X also meant the unknown, and the unknown held so much angst that Veronica lay most nights in dreamless dread at What now?

Frankie stopped to scratch at greener-than-green grass. Veronica's eyes widened: someone had paved their entire yard with one-inch emerald-Oz plastic turf. As Frankie spread her haunches, Veronica realized the hot turd could petrify on this synthetic non-microbial manicure. That this fakeness existed solely for somebody's no-maintenance pretty. Why not xeriscape wild grasses or butterfly plants if you didn't want to mow? What was wrong with people? Veronica thought about ringing the doorbell to ask, but realized a plastic lawn was the type of thing her ex would do, and she had no wish to meet a clone. Veronica straightened and sighed at the irony of tying a knot in a plastic poop-bag. She and Frankie continued the route to River Park, thinking of Jane's suggestion that Veronica refer to her ex as her 'first' husband. That having a first husband (which is entirely accurate, too, if you thought about it) might

incite pity from an implied widow-state, instead of the disdain Veronica feared she'd catch from I'm divorced, although the legal papers hadn't arrived and she had yet to say the words I'm divorced out loud.

To prove this theory (if you could call it a theory), she remembered the sorrow she felt last week when she created a spray of white freesia, *lasting friendship* – its fragrance of baby honey-bees and lavender – for a thirty-year-old woman who had died falling from a ladder. Her bereft partner spent an hour at the wooden worktable in Bloom as Veronica snipped her secateurs and secured stems with sea-green wire, arranging the blossoms in a large fan that was to rest on a white velvet blanketed casket. Veronica simply refused to take any money – I am so sorry for your loss – and surprised herself by saying god bless (small “g” god of course). If she felt that sort of kindness from people it would help her imagine the What now? for divorce was a loss, too, wasn't it? And what if the compassion bestowed upon her might be an indulgence she could also div out to herself?

X was also the twenty-fourth letter of the alphabet, and she and Dick had been married for twenty-six. Maybe X was simply beyond the crossroads, a ditch, or a dead end.

Veronica was back on 34th and stopped to look at Bloom. The flower shop filled the main floor of a fatigued 1912 builder's knockoff of a Sears or Eaton's or Aladdin mail-order house. A scuffed front porch centered by a glass door led into a room big enough to work in but small enough for cozy. The worn wooden worktable stood in the centre and to its right, a cooler filled with whatever she thought was Beautiful. Yesterday at the suppliers? Jewel-coloured ranunculus. The Kenyan spray rose *Rosa Loves You* was a hit when Bloom opened last month; she had been drawn to their flushed faces, pink petals ringing round and round an onyx centre, the blooms generous but sadly scentless, the genetic trade-off for a longer vase life. Since her grand opening, the days had been quiet, too quiet for a new business. She could not afford to give any more flowers away no matter how sad people were. Mother's Day was looming, the Hallmark day guilting nearly the world over into what could (should) be her busiest day. Here's hoping, thought Veronica, but she knew she'd have to up her game (but how?) despite the simple fact that flowers represented life, and who gives life but mothers? The truth that flowers were a dying business was obvious to Veronica: the moment their umbilical stems are snipped they start to expire; even unsevered, the blossoms open, fade and die, sometimes in a single day – consider *hemerocallis*, called the day lily because it flourishes one day and wakes shriveled the next (Veronica had a visual of the last time she saw her backside in a changeroom, a three-sided mirror of TMI). What a waste blooming is, all that work and energy. Still, and this was the crux – there was a manifest moment with all flowers when they were

very much alive. Like the allure of ranunculus, *you are radiant with charms*, able to last for weeks, even the tiniest buds, the babies, never failed to open and charm. Stunning on their own or in bunches, and versatile, stand-ins for out-of-season and more expensive peonies, or considered roses of the spring. And, as far as ephemerality went, flowers outlived the lift from a glass or three of wine, the hit of morning coffee, the dissolve of fine milk chocolate. Gesture, texture, form, colour, scent. Flowers asked nothing for their Beauty.

Veronica refused to look up as she passed under the linden; nursing the sick tree would have to wait now that Carole had arrived. She unlocked the front door and flipped the CLOSED sign to OPEN, pleased as she always was at the brume of humidity. Carole was sitting on the stool behind the counter. Veronica unleashed Frankie, who plonked beside the front door.

"You're up?" Veronica asked but not surprised, knowing Friday mornings brought the rev of garbage and recycling trucks down the back alley.

"Nightingale is pretty quiet. But, you wouldn't know that." Carole said this, revealing the familiar chip in her left front tooth. An obvious fault that perhaps hid fractures or fissures less obvious.

Veronica ignored the quip about not visiting her sister's latest home, to which No, she hadn't visited. Nor the one before that. "How are you feeling?" she asked instead, skirting the obvious: she chose *How are you feeling?*, more caring than *How are you?* and less invasive than *How bad is it?*

Carole looked at her lap, then abruptly sat upright, as if realizing she was on Veronica's stool and stood with a scripted yet genuinely enough, "Thanks for letting me land on you like this."

"Not at all," Veronica replied briskly, adding "Please, sit." Thinking, Did I have a choice? Carole had nowhere else to stay, nor funds or friends. Veronica had a low tolerance for overly friendly dogs and certain people, although Jane cautioned her into lumping people into certain-types-of-people categories, like her latest – boppy girls born in the 90s. She found herself annoyed now, without being sure why.

"Oh!" Carole grabbed a notepad and said, "A woman phoned about a wedding." Her chipped tooth again.

Veronica took the paper from Carole: seven centerpieces, six corsages and five boutonnieres, four bouquets. Veronica's mind started doing the mental math of how long and how much. Then she read, 3pm.

"3pm?"

Carole offered her chipped tooth in a smile, a tilt of her head and her eyes motioned to the metal buckets overflowing with ruby, fuchsia, tangerine, and gold ranunculus. "Tomorrow."

"Wait – you said yes?" asked Veronica.

Carole nodded.

Carole insisted on helping Veronica, who decided to create nosegays of ranunculus, the kelly-green shoelaces she found at the dollar store a few weeks ago (vowing never again to shop its cascading aisles of plastic) coming in handy because she had under-ordered florist tape, which she calculated she could save for the boutonnieres. Veronica would begin the anti-clockwise wrapping of the stems and then hand off to Carole, who would all but finish, letting Veronica knot and trim. Carole broke their silence by saying she had seen Jane.

"She detoured to Nightingale the last time she was on her way home from Winnipeg seeing her father."

Veronica answered with a neutral "Jane certainly is loyal to a man she barely knew."

Carole stopped wrapping. "She says he's got no one else."

Veronica calculated how long since Carole had seen their own father. "Jane's got a good heart."

"Vee – he was never there, and proved to be an ass and a drinker." Carole said.

Veronica used to think alcoholics had a choice. That it was as simple as saying no. No to drinking, No to lying, no to capsizing your life and pulling under those around you. Their own father had never missed a day of work, but often arrived home with the rank of beer after the girls had already eaten, when Mrs. McCrostie excused herself to her own home down the block, the after-school care of the motherless girls and the making of dinner done. Their father would sit with his hand around a fork until his plate was clean, then his armchair and the newspaper. The girls would get themselves ready for bed. He rarely asked about school, but had plenty to say if the girls' rooms were messy or he tripped over their shoes in the back porch. His approach was reproach. Always a way to do something better. Carole, younger and lithe-spirited, ignored him; but his criticism wormed its way into Veronica's confidence. She learned it was better to finish their own dinners before he got home, keep their noses and rooms clean. When they were teenagers and didn't need Mrs. McCrostie, the girls both spent more time at Jane's. One afternoon, Veronica went over to find the glass in the back door gone. Jane answered with her forearm wrapped in a tornado of gauze. In a rush, Jane said, the glass door closing on her, having to go to Emergency. Veronica was sympathetic but curious about Jane's ordeal of stitches and shards of glass until Jane laughed and called her Misery Chastain. They both loved Stephen King. Veronica's lack of queasy pushed her into nursing at U of A, although years later, Veronica learned it was impatience and a push into the door by Jane's father on the rare occasion he was in town. It confirmed for Veronica that others had less than ideal families, too, although neither Jane nor Veronica – she couldn't speak for Carole – saw it then. But it sprouted

the question – were they even or ever a family? Nothing could be farther, or more random, than where she found herself this afternoon, tying posies with her sister.

A whirl from the cooler intruded into her thoughts: her (their) father was living in what Veronica respectfully called a retirement home to his face, but was really an institution. Struggling with dementia, he was still articulate with language. For instance, he wrote in perfect longhand of his paranoia, Question to lawyer, I would like to have a clear and simple understanding how the original Will was manipulated into a legal operation. This referred to Veronica manipulating the law that allowed her to take his house, and therefore his life, away. He thought his wife was alive and sitting on the other side of the dining room and was he paying for her, too? because he would but how to arrange it? Still, he sat cross-legged in his old armchair in the front of her conscience because surely, she could do better for him? Veronica wanted this flower store so she could simply work in peace, to block thoughts like those both bothersome and real. She watched as Carole held a gold ranunculus next to a fuchsia one, then chose instead a small tangerine bloom to pair with the fuchsia. Her intuition for colour was better than her coordination – she couldn't manage to secure the sprig of eucalyptus, *protection*, behind both flowers, so Veronica took it from her, securing the pin stick-side down. Carole simply said, "Thanks." Nonchalantly. No dig at what a perfectionist Veronica was. Which she was.

Relaxed by or relieved at not getting mocked, Veronica started to talk. "I remember the coldest day this past winter. Jane was visiting. She and I wore every layer and walked for Indian. Jane said the windchill had to be minus hell and back and thought her thighs would freeze, which made me laugh. I swear, though, the food never tasted so good – like we earned it." Veronica thought of the tables in Moti Mahal with their small copper vases of red-purple flowers, *crocus sativus*, so elegant, the orange filaments lighting the room like electro threads. How many she would need for a pinch of saffron. With the memory of the cold night and the summoning restaurant and Jane's company, Veronica allowed herself a sigh. For a moment she imagined something else, a freedom, a return to her old inquisitive self. "We talked about going to India. Jane said she'd get another tattoo, or, better – maybe it was my turn."

Veronica glanced at Carole and witnessed the smallest cringe, yet Carole had smiled and said, "Oh, what a great trip that would be." Her tongue found the space in her chipped tooth. "Can you drive me to the Tom Baker tomorrow? I can figure out the bus after that."

Saffron, *beware of excess*. Did Carole choose that moment to end Veronica's waxing with a sobering request of treatment? A rare moment when Veronica was letting herself imagine the future, a moment when she was relaxed with Carole? Yet it was, after all, why Carole was here. Veronica felt her mistake. A waterfall of time was waiting for Veronica, spilling beyond Bloom and her life as she chose to live it, into a

future where Carole had nothing ahead but trying to live, her therapy in Calgary experimental at best. Veronica was an expert at grief and the feeling of drowning. But Carole was in over her head, whereas Veronica was only in two feet of water, and all she had to do was stand up.

Hugh arrived at seven to find the two women sweeping an understory of stems and befallen petals. His arms held a Styrofoam cooler that emitted scratchy creaking, his face awash with a grin as he pronounced dinner had arrived. Frankie was a pogo-stick at Hugh's elbow, to which Veronica said, "Knock it off, Frankie." She pictured a viewmaster moment of crab claw-to-claw with her feckless dog.

"Hello, Carole!" Hugh spoke first. His smile was as looming as he was.

Veronica put her hand on Carole's shoulder and motioned with the other, "Carole, this is Hugh." Veronica noted Carole's face held both warmth and curiosity.

"Hello." Carole stood and the two shook hands awkwardly around the Styrofoam.

Hugh excused himself with the cooler of crab, dipping through the doorway that led to the tiny kitchen at the back of the house, Frankie tight at his heels. Veronica watched Carole's amber eyes follow Hugh's trudging gait, careening as it always did with an invisible weight. Despite his pleasant demeanor, he also carried a fragility that threatened to topple him at any moment, despite and often offset by a whistle in a minor key that made Veronica rub her neck as if at a stubborn kink.

But today Veronica was pleased with Hugh's enthusiasm, and lured Carole's attention back by telling her the kitchen was more Hugh's than hers, Hugh's desire to – as he said – Unearth an oak floor from a layer of shitbrown tile, Free moldings and baseboards from a death-sentence of lead paint.

Carole nodded. She had made herself tea early that morning amongst the original cupboards painted in the tealiest peacock blue. "So that's him?" she said, her eyes settling back on Veronica.

"That's him," Veronica replied. Was she imagining the look of amusement, or was it judgement, or wide-eyed horror on Carole's face? Veronica began again to sweep the last of greenery, listening to the rising tune of Hugh's whistle amongst the batter of pots, feeling the expectant look on Carole's face urging Veronica to say more. Back off, thought Veronica. She worked hard to master existing on her own. Learning the vexing art of solo decisions. Shunning the weight of loneliness. Becoming a person she found, at best, oddly entertaining. Then Hugh arrived, and while wondrous, he was unexpected. And now, Carole, who anticipated what? Family? Veronica's vow to be affable towards Carole was dissolving like cheap rouge in the rain.

The air in the now tidy flower shop became too close with the feel of an old antagonism that only Carole could induce. Veronica told herself to stay stay stay but

turned her back on Carole, on Hugh, on Bloom, not bothering to call Frankie, not offering an explanation, and making sure she closed the door behind her hard enough to rattle the glass.

The evening air was cool and Veronica wrapped her arms around her shoulders, wishing she had grabbed a sweater, resentful that she had to leave her own home for privacy. She avoided the linden in front of Bloom and walked away from the lowering sun, swatting the insult of a mosquito, and wishing a second time for a sweater. Her eyes started to smart and she swallowed hard. She automatically walked the path to River Park, stopping when the air unexpectedly became arrested by perfume. Veronica knelt over a front yard garden to find dropping heads of lily of the valley –*return of happiness* my ass, she thought. With a second gulping breath, and another, the tears came.

Veronica and Carole had never been close, nothing like the friendship she had with Jane, or that even Carole had with Jane. It wasn't dislike or disregard, nor even indifference, which Veronica supposed was worse than hatred because it involved zero emotion. No, it was distance. Distance from Carole where Veronica had watched how joyful her little sister was, how easily she could talk to anyone, how she cared less than Veronica, who was always careful. Growing up, the kitchen was not a You wash I dry chore, because there was a dishwasher, and Veronica felt a right way for items to be loaded, the plates aligned from back to front, largest to smallest, glasses on one side and mugs on the other, knives pointing down for safety, and her sister was How weird are you? Said uncaringly, but Veronica would wonder How weird am I? Her sister existed in a way that flaunted its ease in Veronica's face. Using Veronica's Clairol Essence until Veronica found the bottle empty, taking Veronica's basketball when she needed it for practice, gouging her eyeshadow. When Veronica found her well-loved Levi's shirt on her sister's floor, crumpled and clotted with something red and crusty – ketchup? – her sister had smiled So? Veronica had whipped the cord of a curling iron at her, relieved to have missed, but then found herself connecting on the second try. She cannot remember how her sister responded, but Veronica carried the shame of striking out, being thought odd, of not being liked by Carole, or likeable. No, they were never close. And then of course, there was Hugh.

Veronica shivered against the cold and her distrust. Carole being here was a mistake.

When Veronica returned, she found Hugh and Carole in the kitchen. He was adjusting the flame on a large pot of boiling water. Carole was standing at his side watching. Frankie walked to the front of the shop to greet Veronica, her tail sauntering between love and politeness.

"I'm heading to hell for all the pain I've caused boiling these alive. I finally found on YouTube how to do this humanely," Hugh said. He grasped a large purplish-brown crab from behind its back legs, and with a whack, hit the nerve centre of its belly sharp against the pointy edge of the counter. The crab's claws and legs instantaneously fell limp as juice ran from the shell onto the floor. "Painless."

Veronica stayed silent, busying herself with the order book, but could see Carole watching Hugh drop the crab into the simmering water. He repeated the crack and plop twice more, placing the lid on the pot and turned in time, he said afterwards, to see Carole's eyes vanish to the back of her head as her knees gave out.

Carole woke minutes later on the sofa, Hugh sitting beside her, and Veronica standing at her feet with a glass of water. She looked confused, "I feel like I've had the sleep of the dead."

"I'm glad I caught you before you smoked the floor."

"Oh. Well, thank you, and I'm sorry. It's not the first time I've fainted, but it came on fast." Carole looked at Hugh, and Veronica recognized Hugh's loyalty now bestowed upon Carole.

"Sorry," Hugh apologized. "Killing crab's pretty brutalistic."

"It's not that," Carole said.

He reached for the glass of water from Veronica and offered it to Carole, then added, "You okay? I mean, for now?"

Carole nodded and drank. The three were silent. Frankie came and rested her head on Hugh's lap. Carole ran her fingers over her hair as if suddenly aware of how exposed she was. Veronica had always admired Carole's slender hands.

Hugh looked at Veronica, "You worked Carole too hard today."

"Well, that wasn't the plan." Veronica didn't look at Carole but instead busied herself with a hangnail on her left thumb.

"I took an order – a big one – for tomorrow while Veronica was out, the woman was frantic." Wanting to do her own flowers from Costco resulted in burgundy peonies that collapsed into piles of petals. Peony? *Anger*.

What is this? Veronica thought, her lungs sucking for a deep breath. Trying to win-over Hugh as an impartial judge? She owned a flower shop, it's what she did. Carole taking the order meant the loss of the careful control she surrounded herself with, even if she did have a cooler full of unspoken for flowers. Her work was (building) her reputation. Meant she had missed talking to the client, hearing what they wanted, not in words, but in their voice. (In this case, she would have heard the franticness that Carole responded to, but Veronica ignored this.) Besides, Carole had failed to secure a deposit, which Veronica awkwardly had to ask for before she started the order, plus, she had to improvise with the green shoelaces, and the delivery tomorrow was past Longview. Veronica was new to this business, but she needed to sell flowers and create

beauty the way she wanted. When she wanted. But today, they all got lucky – not everyone wanted the bright charm of ranunculus for their wedding flowers.

If Hugh felt the tension between the sisters, he ignored it and smiled at Carole. "Veronica told me about the old set of stairs in your neighbourhood, when you were growing up."

Carole nodded, "I hope she told you *she* was the one who painted the railings and risers? You should have seen it! A million five-petal flowers in all the flower colours – what did you call it, Vee, the Floweralia?"

Veronica released her breath slowly. "Wow. Carole. You remember." They never talked about those years.

"Of course I do. I thought it was magical." Carole looked at Hugh. "Our grandma used to say flowers are only flowers until they're seen – that's when they're beautiful."

Veronica thought of being young in their grandma's garden heavy with the spice of geraniums. The squadron of tall marigolds at the front, the wall of sweet peas at the back, overshadowing rows of vegetables as if they were second string instruments, essential only to support the melody of flowers. The ranunculus weren't meant to live out their beautiful lives in her cooler – even with the ones she pulled out for her kitchen counter, the bathroom sink, and Carole's room, there had been plenty for the wedding. But she didn't remember Carole loving their grandma's garden, only Carole whining for Veronica to give her underducks on the wooden swing made by their grandpa.

Hugh stood, "I'm gonna go pluck those dunganeese from the boiling rapids," then paused, chewing the lower edge of his cheek which never failed to make Veronica wince. He looked back at Carole, "I'm sorry, Carole, you know."

Carole looked calm. "Me, too."

As Hugh left, Veronica half-smiled, a technique she learned from marriage counselling used to regulate your own emotions when you wanted to say WTF. She looked at Carole. "You rest."

The sofa sat in a bay of windows at the back of the kitchen and looked out over a small yard of overgrown suckering lilacs and a clothesline moaning under the weight of towels. A small garage smiled with a faded red door, paned square windows for eyes on either side as if a guardian of the old house.

"I was only trying to help, Veronica."

Hugh was right, her flowers needed to be seen, and Carole had helped. But like a warm day in January, the unexpected shift of benignity, especially from Carole, was uncomfortable. And not like Carole at all.

Veronica stepped into the backyard and reached for the towels on the line. Dropped them one by one from their pegs where they fell into a heap in the basket.

Veronica looked inside to see Carole reach her arms out to Frankie as Frankie shied away, instead heading to the front of the shop, to where she knew Frankie would choose the warm worn spot just inside Bloom's front door.