

Part One

1988: Cheryl

Based in Canada  
or USA

→ Better examples  
Mount McKinley

**I believe** that what separates humanity from everything else in this world – spaghetti, binder paper, deep-sea creatures, edelweiss and Mount McKinley – is that humanity alone has the capacity at any given moment to commit all possible sins. Even those of us who try to live a good and true life remain as far away from grace as the Hillside Strangler or any demon who ever tried to poison the village well. What happened that morning only confirms this.

It was a glorious fall morning. The sun burned a girly pink over the mountain ranges to the west, and the city had yet to generate its daily smog blanket. Before driving to school in my little white Chevette, I went into the living room and used my father's telescope to look down at the harbor, as smooth as mercury, and on its surface I could see the moon dimming over East Vancouver. And then I looked up into the real sky and saw the moon on the cusp of being overpowered by the sun.

My parents had already gone to work, and my brother, Chris, had left for swim team hours before. The house was quiet – not even a clock ticking – and as I opened the front

door, I looked back and saw some gloves and unopened letters on the front hallway desk. Beyond them, on the living room's gold carpet, were some discount warehouse sofas and a lamp on a side table that we never used because the light bulb always popped when we switched it on. It was lovely, all that silence and all that calm order, and I thought how lucky I was to have had a good home. And then I turned and walked outside. I was already a bit late, but I was in no hurry.

Normally I used the garage door, but today I wanted a touch of formality. I had thought that this morning would be my last truly innocent glance at my childhood home – not because of what really ended up happening, but because of another, smaller drama that was supposed to have unfolded.

I'm glad that the day was as quiet and as average as it was. The air was see-your-breath chilly, and the front lawn was crunchy with frost, as though each blade had been batter fried. The brilliant blue and black Steller's jays were raucous and clearly up to no good on the eaves trough, and because of the frost, the leaves on the Japanese maples had been converted into stained-glass shards. The world was unbearably pretty, and it continued being so all the way down the mountain to school. I felt slightly high because of the beauty, and the inside of my head tickled. I wondered if this is how artists go through life, with all of its sensations tickling their craniums like a peacock feather.

\* \* \*

I was the last to park in the school's lot. That's always such an uneasy feeling no matter how together you think you are – being the last person there, wherever there may be.

I was carrying four large binders and some textbooks, and

when I tried shutting the Chevette's door, it wouldn't close properly. I tried slamming it with my hip, but that didn't work; it only made the books spray all over the pavement. But I didn't get upset.

Inside the school, classes were already in session and the hallways were as silent as the inside of my house, and I thought to myself, *What a day for silence.*

I needed to go to my locker before class, and as I was working my combination lock, Jason came up from behind.

"Boo."

"Jason – don't do that. Why aren't you in class?"

"I saw you parking, so I left."

"You just walked out?"

"Forget about that, Miss Priss. Why were you being so weird on the phone last night?"

"I was being weird?"

"Jesus, Cheryl – don't act like your airhead friends."

"Anything else?"

"Yes. You're my wife, so act like it."

"How should I be acting, then?"

"Cheryl, look: in God's eyes we're not two individuals, okay? We're one unit now. So if you dick around with me, then you're only dicking around with yourself."

And Jason was right. We were married – had been for about six weeks at that point – but we were the only ones who knew it.

\* \* \*

I was late for school because I'd wanted everyone out of the house before I used a home pregnancy test. I was quite calm about it – I was a married woman, and shame wasn't a factor. My period was three weeks late, and facts were facts.

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