

DEER EYES

Book One

Prologue

It's hard to imagine your parents having sex.

I feel sure I'm fairly typical of my generation when I state that I have never been able to picture mine engaged in the mechanics of lovemaking. Not ever. It didn't enter my consciousness that they "did it," although of course they must have, and on a pretty regular basis. To me, they were just Mom and Dad. Period. They weren't the kind of couple who paraded around the house naked in front of their kids. Neither of them ever left the bathroom door open when they sat on the toilet. They were too private, too reserved. An atmosphere of intimacy wasn't prevalent – or encouraged – when I was growing up. It wasn't until I was in my late teens that I saw my dad's penis. And I confess that the sight kind of shocked me.

It was on one of those steamy nights in July, when the thermometer shot up suddenly and humid air rolled over Fortune Hill like a thick blanket of wet wool, smothering everything in its path. The maple leaves hung limp outside our house. The spruce branches didn't creak. Not a rustle, not a whisper of wind, not a twig cracking anywhere. The air inside my bedroom was as thick as a can of old paint. I couldn't breathe or sleep. So I got up to go to the john. Their bedroom was down the hall and they'd left the door open. They normally never did, but Dad didn't believe in air conditioning, and they couldn't have breathed if it had stayed shut. He and Mom were lying on the top of the bed, without a sheet covering them.

They were asleep, breathing heavily and Mom was turned away from Dad, curled up on her left side, almost falling off the edge of their queen-sized mattress. She was wearing the prissy pink cotton nightgown with bows on the front that I always hated and it had ruckled up, almost to her waist. Her bare, plump buttocks and thighs looked shiny with sweat and very white in the light from the hall. But Dad....

He lay sprawled on his back, buck naked, legs and arms stretched out. He was a burly guy, the kind who fills a room the moment he steps into it, and still very fit at nearly 50, with a broad, hairy chest and muscular thighs and shoulders, because he was always out in the woods, clearing trees and chopping firewood. But what struck me was his penis. It looked so small. Unbelievably small. And shrivelled. Like a balloon after the air's gone out of it. Flopped sideways on his left thigh, enthroned in wiry greyish hair, it made me think of the dead baby bird, poor creature, that I'd discovered lying

in a nest that had fallen out of a tree in a thunderstorm that day. I stood there for a few moments, fascinated. Had Dad really once thrust this pathetic-looking object inside my mother, humped up and down and created me? And then Chrissie? It seemed beyond belief – and kind of laughable – at the time.

So when I got the news about what he'd been doing, my mind went blank. Totally blank. I couldn't take it in. I didn't even cry. I remember wandering around stunned for a couple of hours saying no, no, no. This can't be true. Can it? This must have been someone else's Dad, not mine. You're kidding me. That's impossible. My own father? It was too preposterous to contemplate.

I knew, of course, that he and Mom weren't getting along – and that women, all kinds of women, liked him, although I never really thought about that much. Perhaps I was naïve but you don't go there when it's your parents. I was also aware that love between Mom and Dad – if indeed it ever existed, because they'd married far too young, in my opinion – was now as dried up as the lemons she used to leave for months in the fridge. I never saw them kiss. Not once. Never saw them touch or hug, even at times like Christmas or birthdays. And they performed contortions like circus performers to avoid bumping into one another in the kitchen. Even so, I presumed – indeed expected – that they'd just jog along into old age, placid as the dairy cows over at Charlie Cousins' place. Sitting in their armchairs placed side by side in the living room, getting mildly excited on winter evenings about something new on TV or a good book Mom had discovered in the library at Marsh River, as they slid into the difficult years that face all of us when two-thirds of our lives are over and we've begun the slow, inevitable descent to the end.

I was in Africa when Chrissie called me in a state of panic. I'd been there for nearly six months, totally involved in the new school we were building for a village in the Sikasso region of Mali. Our aid project, our modest attempt to make the world a better place, so long in the making, was taking shape at last.

So home seemed distant, detached, a part of my life that I'd put on hold. I hadn't been in touch with anyone in Fortune for months, and I no longer found it important to email my parents or Chrissie, like one of the other aid workers, Rachel Abernethy. She was always Skyping with her family in Wisconsin, annoying everyone in the bunkhouse with her silly chatter. But work absorbed me. I was always so beat at the end of the day, I just wanted to collapse, read a few pages of the books Chrissie sent and pass out. But neither Mom nor Dad bothered to email me either – they never had, even when I was away at university – so I simply took it for granted that everything at home was as it always was, the way kids do.

When Chrissie reached me on my cell phone – I was standing in the schoolyard, the line was crackly, I could hardly hear – I didn't want to believe her. I sank down on the front steps, getting the red African dust all over my shorts and the backs of my calves, shaking my head, trying to convince myself that this was all just some crazy nightmare. Then assured by her that it wasn't, I managed to

get a flight to Frankfurt the next day, then another on to Toronto. And there she was waiting for me at the airport, still dazed and uncomprehending, her face ashen. Poor Chrissie.

I didn't cry. Nor did anyone else in the family except Auntie Hanni, who always burst into tears at the slightest thing anyway. The rest of us were all too stunned to get emotional. We didn't even talk much. Perhaps it was that Tanner reserve kicking in. And then it was over, sort of – although, of course, it won't be over for a long while for Tyson. Or Chrissie. She's standing by him, she really loves the guy. I'm not sure I would, after what he did, but then I've never been in love, and I don't want to be. Love does strange things to you. Look at Dad.

But it's all in the past now. Dad's gone. He never let on to anyone what he did at his deer hunting cabin in the woods, and I don't really blame him. If it made him happy, I'm glad. Though I do wonder sometimes... What happened at the end. Was it an accident? Or deliberate?

But I try not to dwell on it. There's no point.

Chapter One

Folks in Fortune (population 540) knew it was going to happen. And probably in the fall, before the snow came. After the first mild frost zapped the last of the tomatoes, and scarlet maple leaves started fluttering to the ground like playing cards, was when they could expect it. The arrival of the mystery relative, that is. The one Gow Rivers mentioned in his will. This person would show up and lay claim to Gow's hundred sprawling acres up on Fortune Hill.

Yet some old timers didn't like the idea. Not one bit. A city slicker? Coming from New York? They'd tolerated Gow, but that was different. The prospect of this long-awaited newcomer appearing on the scene filled them with a sense of foreboding.

"You mark my words. We'd all better watch out now," warned Gracie Piloski, after news circulated that the relative had been found at last. "Things are going to change around here. And not for the better."

"You think so?" said Charlie Cousins.

"I know so."

"Perhaps you're right, Gracie," he murmured.

"I know I am," she repeated. "City people always change things, Charlie. They move out to the country and expect us to fit in with them instead of the other way around. Never fails. And this

relative of Gow's will set the ball rolling here.

"Just you wait and see."

Gracie made her prediction on a dark, gloppy morning at the beginning of October. An unexpected early snow squall had blown in overnight, throwing a white shroud over the beat-up buildings that constituted the village of Fortune. They squatted at the eastern end of Bounteous Lake, looking ghostly and deserted, like some old abandoned mining town up north. The street by the lake was empty. Not many people had ventured out of doors, the poor visibility made driving dangerous. Yet Charlie, who farmed on Second Line, had climbed into his pickup and headed down to the general store *cum* post office because he'd put off mailing a package of forms to the Farm Credit Program – and if he procrastinated any longer, the bean counters would start pestering him again. Gracie ran the store. He stayed for a coffee, as he often did, and though pretending to agree with the postmistress, inwardly he thought she was being absurd.

Charlie unzipped his grey windbreaker and leaned against the store counter. He was a big bulk of a man with a kindly, florid face. He watched the snow flakes outside the store window form a thick swaying curtain of white, so that the snack bar across the street kept hovering into view, then disappearing again, swallowed up by the dark lake. The place was already boarded up, its red and white sign with the crude illustration of french fries and ice cream cones taken down, because the cottagers and tourists stopped coming to boat and fish after Labour Day. And that wasn't good, in Charlie's view. He thought the mystery relative would be a refreshing new face. Might perk the place up. Inject some new blood and ideas. Tish Boddington thought so too. She'd come home to Fortune – bringing along her son with the weird name, Flavian – and opened a bed and breakfast on the south side of the lake. And she was surviving, but could use more customers. So could Nathan Knockenhammer, respected throughout the county for his skill in renovating neglected old houses. Nathan, known by everyone as Knock, had itched to get his hands on Gow's place for years. "Such a lovely old place," he often wailed, "but it is falling apart."

Yet the amiable farmer wasn't about to make his feelings known that morning. Not to Gracie. He disliked confrontation. In any case, Charlie knew the postmistress to be a sad soul, soured on life after her Polish parents lost their battle to save the family farm – expropriated to make way for a new highway through the province – and then, at only eighteen, dealt another blow when her childhood sweetheart, Bob Lumsden, jilted her for a prettier girl over in Dufferin County. Poor Gracie never recovered. As a consequence, she liked nothing more than making gloom and doom pronouncements about anything that came into her head, whenever she had a captive audience. So Charlie stirred cream and two heaping spoonfuls of sugar into his coffee and waited, snow dripping off his work boots and making a puddle on the red linoleum of her clean store, for her latest diatribe.

It wasn't long in coming.

“Gow’s relative will be bad for this place. Bad things are going to happen now. I can feel it in my bones,” Gracie declared with relish, taking his package and slapping a label on it.

“You think so?” Charlie said, keeping his expression deliberately blank.

“I know so. I’ll have to change. So will you,” she shot back. “This person will come in here asking if I stock organic vegetables, free-range eggs and gluten-free this and that. You know, all those trendy things city people insist on eating these days. And I won’t have any choice, if I want to stay in business.”

Charlie nodded noncommittally.

“And olive oil. Expensive stuff from Italy,” she huffed like an old steam engine. “What city folks call extra virgin, whatever that is. Surely a virgin is a virgin, eh Charlie?” She chortled in a coarse way. “Yes sirree. Fancy-schmancy olive oil will certainly be required. As if canola, made from crops grown right here in our beautiful county isn’t good enough for them.”

“Everyone looks down on canola, not just people from the city,” Charlie murmured. “It’s the fault of the marketing guys, Gracie.” He sighed. “Canola needs a more glamorous image.”

She ignored him and carried on.

“Then there’s pumpkin lattes. Mustn’t forget their pumpkin lattes. A New Yorker is definitely going to want those.”

“Pumpkin what?” Charlie raised his eyebrows, interested now. Five years ago, he’d tried growing pumpkins, then given up after two rained-out Halloweens in a row stuck him with hundreds of the big heavy orange balls he couldn’t sell. Even his cattle had turned away, though he’d tried to entice them by mashing the lot to a pulp under the wheels of his tractor.

“Pumpkin lattes. They’re the latest thing,” said Gracie, scorn in her voice. “You know what lattes are, don’t you, Charlie?”

“Yes, I do, Grace,” said Charlie. Her authoritarian tone was starting to get under his skin. “But pumpkin? That’s a new one on me.”

“Well, get with it, you old fogey. You buy some kind of pumpkin powder that you mix in with the hot milk. Weird, eh?” She chortled again. “I saw it last week on TV.”

Gracie kept a small TV under the counter permanently tuned to the Food Network. Whenever the store was empty, she watched it with the fascination of a voyeur, and bizarre though this preoccupation was – because she refused to stock anything in her store but standard fare like hot dogs, frozen burgers and chicken pot pies – Gracie had become addicted to watching trends in food.

“Pumpkin lattes are another silly city fad,” she pronounced. Then she stopped and put a balled-up fist to her mouth, as if struck by a horrifying revelation.

“Oh my God. You know what Gow’s relative coming here is going to mean, Charlie? I’ll have to get rid of the old Kona.”

Gracie's drip coffee maker was a fixture on the store counter. She kept it on a red and white gingham tablecloth beside the cash desk, meticulously scrubbed the glass container and put the cloth in the washing machine every week. She was very proud of her coffee.

"I do it right," she bragged to any newcomer who dropped by the store. "A fresh pot every half hour. Real spoons to stir in the sugar. No way I'm making you guys use those plastic sticks, like they do at the Kaffee Klatch in Marsh River. Want to try mine?"

"Your coffee is the best," agreed Charlie. And he was being honest now, for Gracie's coffee was indeed good. Always fresh and hot. You could smell it on the street. He took a pleasurable sip. "People in town say it's worth the drive out to the lake just to have a cup."

Gracie beamed – but then her face fell.

"I'll have to replace the Kona with one of those fancy new machines," she said, panic creeping into her voice. "You know. They're all big and shiny, with names like Smashaletti written on the side. They're Eye-talian. Then I'll have to learn how to make espresso and cappuccinos and lattes and stuff like that if I want to still have customers...."

"You're being silly, Gracie," interrupted Charlie. "Of course you won't have to change. You know that everyone around here loves your coffee the way it is."

"You do?" She patted her hair, dyed chestnut and permed into tight curls every six months at A Cut Above in Marsh River, then shot him a grateful smile.

"Well, sure. Why do you think I come by and drink so much of it?"

Poor Gracie looked almost coquettish now. Charlie felt a rush of affection for the prickly old postmistress. But it dissipated quickly when she opened her mouth again.

"City people always change everything," she repeated. "And you—"

"Well, Gow sure didn't," he broke in, wanting to stop the flow. He smiled. "Remember when he showed up in that amazing car? What a day that was."

Gow's car is a red-and-cream Ford Fairlane, a hard top with a retractable roof that folds back like a Venetian blind. And a beauty, in mint condition. The afternoon in the 1970s that he drives it into Fortune, the roof is closed because it's wet and windy. Wads of sodden maple leaves are clinging to the back window. The chassis gleams in the rain. Yet in spite of the inclement weather, people immediately troop out of the Bounteous Bar and Grill – then a popular watering hole on the edge of the lake – to ooh and aah over the car and its polished chrome bumpers. One of the admirers is Charlie. He's back for the weekend from agricultural college in Guelph. Sits having a beer in the bar with his buddy, Shep Tanner, who's also home from flight school in Thunder Bay. They watch as the driver parks in front of the bar and gets out. He's haggard-looking, this newcomer, thin as a beanpole, of indeterminate age, and kind of scruffy, like a hippie. His long hair hasn't seen a comb in

weeks. He smiles with the showmanship of a magician as everybody crowds around the Fairlane. Then he goes inside, sits at the bar next to Har Brydges and orders a double scotch.

Lighting one cigarette after another in a feverish way, he tells Har that he's just driven all the way to Fortune from the Big Apple.

"I crossed the border at Buffalo and decided to stop now because I like the sound of Fortune," he croaks through a fog of smoke, with an accent that's hard to pin down. He asks Har how the community got the name.

"Oh it's nothing to do with it being lucky here, my friend. Quite the opposite. It's always been tough in Fortune to make a go of things," says Har sourly, shaking his head. "You can blame Merrie England for that name."

Har explains that villages in this part of Canada, now south-western Ontario, were often named after colonial settlers who were United Empire Loyalists. One, named Rothesley Fortune, originally owned thousands of acres in the area.

"Lord knows what the guy did to deserve it," says Har, with a bitter laugh into his rye as Charlie and Shep sit at the other end of the bar, listening in. "The Brits just swiped a whole lotta land from the Indians back in the 1700s and dispensed it as they pleased. And for sure," he takes a big swallow, "Mr. Rothesley Fucking Fortune had friends in high places."

Gow seems mildly disappointed by this revelation and looks into his glass, rubbing the stubble on his chin. Har says later that he thinks some private matter is troubling the guy, because his eyes water.

But then Gow brightens and says, "Well, to me, Fortune rhymes with opportune. I'll take that to be a good omen. Mind if I stay?"

And Har, who has just got his real estate licence, promptly hauls Gow up to Fortune Hill Road and sells him the old Maxwell homestead, with its hundred acres, on the spot. For the full asking price. Cash, too. Gow shakes his head when asked if he needs financing. Har is thrilled. Everyone in Fortune is agog, particularly the Maxwells. They've been dying to get the uninsulated brick farmhouse, in Laureen Maxwell's family for generations, taken off their hands for over a year. They've built a new, much warmer place with a wrap-around porch next door to Charlie on Second Line, and the land is better for farming over there than around the woods on Fortune Hill.

Then Gow just stays. And stays. He parks the Fairlane at the side of the house. Lets it rust and fall apart until a scrap dealer carts it away. He treats the house the same way – and he allows Laureen's perennial garden, once full of lovely flowers like monkshood and foxgloves, to turn into a tangled mess. He only goes into Marsh River, six miles away, to pick up groceries and booze and visit the library. As the years go by, he stops doing that, too. He calls Gracie instead. Makes do with her scant selection of provisions from the general store. And he gives young Joel Sprauge, who lives up on Sixth Line, a hefty tip for picking up his Johnnie Walker in town and then delivering it in his dad's old

pickup.

Gow just sits by his woodstove in winter and swings in a threadbare hammock on the porch of the house in summer, swatting bugs with hunting magazines that Shep, who lives next door, gives him.

He's an oddball, all right. Has an aura of something mighty strange about him. Rumours circulate, put about by Gracie. Gow must have run away from something. An unhappy marriage, perhaps. Or a gambling debt he couldn't pay, because he sometimes plays poker with Shep. Or worse, he's a fugitive from justice.

"A lot of American criminals flee up here, you know. I keep seeing them on TV. Perhaps Gow killed somebody," she whispers to regulars like Charlie.

But no one pays much attention. They're all used to Gracie's gloomy pronouncements. They wind up accepting Gow for what he is – a quiet loner who gives them no trouble. People know he's there, part of their little community, but they aren't bothered because they hardly ever see him.

But then he dies. Unexpectedly. Without any warning. Just before Christmas.

"Sure I remember the car," Gracie said, pouring herself a coffee. "Perhaps the relative will arrive in one of those big old American gas guzzlers, too."

"You think so? I doubt it," said Charlie wistfully. "Those days are over, Gracie. Everyone drives little Toyotas and Nissans now."

"Well, let's just hope the guy has plenty of money to spend – and that he doesn't go and die on us like Gow did."

Gracie shuddered, recalling how she sent Joel Sprague up to Fortune Hill during the worst white-out of the year because Gow hadn't called to order groceries for a couple of weeks and she feared the worst. And Gracie was right for once.

Poor Joel knew something was wrong the moment he pushed open the unlocked front door. The house was like an icebox, the woodstove gone cold. Then he discovered Gow's corpse, slumped on his brown corduroy sofa, clad in blue flannel pajamas. The old man's body had turned the bluish-white of bone china, and mice – perhaps attracted to a half-eaten cheese sandwich lying on the floor – had defecated on his forehead. Joel retched on the spot. Couldn't even face his Mom's turkey dinner the next day. Then when he recovered, he found an empty bottle of whisky and a glass on the floor beside the sofa. Also a pill container with its lid off, the medication all gone, lying in the kitchen sink. It had contained Xanax, an anti-depressant.

This discovery prompted Gracie to assert that Gow had killed himself.

"He must've swallowed the pills and washed them down with the scotch, because he wanted to end it all," she declared. "It's obvious."

But was it? A shadow hung over Gow's death. Now, over two years later, Charlie wondered if the relative could throw light on the matter. He drained his coffee. Said he'd better be off.

But Gracie was reluctant to let him go. She leaned across the counter with a gleeful smile.

“Being as this guy is coming from the city,” she said, “you’d better watch your back, Charlie Cousins.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said watch your back, Charlie. After he gets here, you’re going to start hearing complaints about the smell of cattle manure. And then some meddler from the township office will show up out of the blue to inspect your farm and give you a list of improvements to be made within 30 days, saying that a neighbour – some unspecified neighbour – has complained that you’re a health hazard. Not environmentally friendly. Not green enough to operate as a farm anymore.”

Gracie paused to catch her breath, pleased by this little speech. She glanced fretfully at the plastic bags of carrots and paper sacks of potatoes piled on a wire rack in the corner of the store.

“City folks sure do love two words. Green. And organic,” she declared, frowning. “Guess I’ll have to find a supplier of organic vegetables now. Will you grow some organic carrots for me, Charlie?”

Charlie shook his head.

“No way, Gracie.”

What with soybeans, corn, winter wheat and 200 head of dairy cattle, the last thing he needed to think about was frigging carrots.

Charlie frowned himself. Gracie had initiated doubts. He wondered for the first time if she might have a point, even though there was no way he wanted to be drawn into a debate. Not now. Not when he needed to get back home and put the blower on the tractor before the snow got heavy. He put his mug back at exactly the designated spot on the gingham cloth (Gracie was touchy about such things), and
headed
for the door.

But the postmistress had one more shot up her sleeve.

“And something else, Charlie,” she called out as he pushed the store door open, letting in a blast of cold, damp air. “You can forget hunting on Gow’s land this year.”

“Excuse me?” He stopped in his tracks.

“City folks hate hunters. They hate ‘em so bad,” Gracie said, wagging a finger. “So your days of bagging deer with Shep are over. You realize that, don’t you?”

No, Charlie hadn’t realized that. Truth be told, he hadn’t even thought about it. Outside the store, he brushed the snow off his pickup, digesting this information. He felt perturbed. Gracie had hit a raw nerve.

He wondered if Shep had considered the implications of the mystery relative coming to Fortune – because his property was right next door to Gow’s. He’d make a detour on the way home. Go ask him.

Charlie climbed into the cab. Turned the key. Looked up at the sky. More white stuff lurked up there, waiting to descend. A flock of starlings flew over the lake swooping and diving in unison like a

school of fish. Three brilliant yellow leaves, somehow still clinging to a branch of a maple at the lake's edge, provided the only dab of colour in the dreary day. Winter had arrived all right. This weather wasn't going to let up. Then it would freeze tonight. That would mean plenty of business for tow trucks by morning, because not many drivers had bothered to get their snow tires on yet. There'd be vehicles stranded in ditches all over the county. Fall in this neck of the woods was as unpredictable as a buck in the rutting season. You couldn't tell which way it was going to turn next. But people never learned.

As he drove up Fortune Hill, Charlie thought more about Gow's relative.

Who was this person? Would it turn out to be a man or a woman? No one knew. Because what the old guy specified in his will had been tantalizingly incomplete.

He simply said his property must go to someone called A.D. Coulter. That was all. No address, no nothing.

It was a mystery that demanded answers. Perhaps the people of Fortune were finally going to get some.