

## PROLOGUE

Paulette Landry, a 33-year-old woman of manufactured beauty, was sealing two envelopes by the light of a small desk lamp; the first guaranteed next-day delivery, the second, a nondescript manila, kept her adrenaline-fueled heart racing by virtue of its very presence. Once both envelopes were in her handbag, she rushed through her foyer out the front door.

She slipped her key into the deadbolt, the whimsical key chains it was connected to clanking in rhythm with her quaking hand; their presence was the last remnant of a time when levity and joy were a part of her life.

*Woosh. Hissssss.*

"Sonofabitch," she screamed.

A fear disproportionate to the sudden loss of ambient light rendered her temporarily paralyzed. Logic finally prevailing over panic, Paulette looked up, the terminally dark lantern above her was another worry for another day. She took several steadying breaths then finished locking the door, albeit with still trembling fingers. She shoved the key and attached cluster of key chains deep into her handbag; *it would be safer there.*

"It'll all be over soon," she whispered.

It happened in an instant. A squelch, a slip, her handbag suddenly a foot away.

"Fucking teenagers," she raged. *Who celebrates a holiday about death by smashing defaced gourdes?!* she wondered bitterly.

The waiting cab driver rushed to her aid as she scrambled for the envelopes and keychains now covered in the innards of the vandalized pumpkin.

"Here, let me—"

"No! I've got them."

Determined to assist, he picked up her phone, then helped her to her feet; pumpkin seeds falling to the ground around her. She didn't notice. The cabbie opened the door for her, the flustered woman got in and closed it without thanks.

"Where to?"

"Fifth street and hurry."

With a sly grin that went unnoticed, the driver abruptly steered the cab in the commanded direction. Paulette clutched her handbag tightly and took another deep breath, one of the last of her life.