

Chapter One

On a narrow street in the grey of dawn, in a row house with stained glass, a sixteen-year-old girl lay motionless. Her hair was blonde, short, gelled in spikes, her legs unshaven, her pink nightgown straining over a nine-month belly. Her sister leaned against her, whispering her name, while far away in a watery world, the baby opened her eyes. She tried to turn the other way, her heart beating quicker as she searched for the sound of her mother's heart. She kicked hard, but she was wedged downward, stuck. All she could do was wait, watching shadows darkly drifting. Watching light shine crimson through a membrane. And while she waited, the sun rose through a veil of sleet, rainwater licked the gutters in front of her house, alarm clocks rang up and down the streets nearby.

The house was in Seaton Grove, a city neighbourhood south of the railroad tracks, a refuge for academics and artists with kids. They'd given up protests and all-night cafés and wearing black to renovate tall, gaunt houses with peculiar wiring and gasping plumbing. They sank into Seaton Grove, they nestled into it, a village annexed in 1888 by the growing city on the shore of Lake Ontario, a bubble of the golden age where cultures and races mixed and met, married and celebrated every tradition. As their houses rose in value and people who were better off bought into the neighbourhood, they felt confirmed in all their virtues. This was not the suburbs where trees were spindly and neighbours too far from each other to hear what went on behind closed doors. Here the streets were lined with old silver maples, lindens, cherry and mulberry. And though the trees were bare, sap was rising with a promise of shade and fruit for anyone who happened to reach up.

A block and a half from the railway tracks, in a house on Ontario Street, Sharon Lewis was lying in bed that Friday morning, listening to her husband, Dan, sing in the shower. Their bedroom was under the slanting roof, facing east, and as clouds broke up, the sun touched the curtains and the wall hanging and the cushions kicked onto the floor, colour springing back from the neutrality of night, gold and russet, earth colours in the velvety fabrics Sharon loved to touch. She sewed, she baked, both of which she enjoyed, and she kept the accounts for Dan's company, which she did not. There were three children asleep on the second floor, a teenage son in his room at the back and little sisters in the front bedroom, a seven-year-old in the top bunk and a five-year-old in the bottom. There would have been more children if Dan hadn't said enough is enough.

He showered for exactly fifteen minutes, and at 7:15, when the second alarm rang, he turned the water off, dried himself and walked into the bedroom. He bent to kiss Sharon, whose eyes were still closed. He made her beautiful with his kiss, even though she believed she was too skinny, too flat, too red-haired, too freckled, and now, at forty, too old to have another baby without the assistance of modern medicine.

He'd just turned forty-two, his birthday on Groundhog Day. His father was Jewish, his mother Chinese, joining the planet's least and most populous peoples who, in a symbiotic miracle, share the same taste in food. In Dan they'd produced a man of average height with brown hair, black eyes, a smooth chest and a mole on his shoulder, which Sharon regularly checked for changes. His teeth were perfect due to his own diligence, wearing out a toothbrush a month. He owned a company that ran fundraising campaigns for causes that were both good and respectable.

“Did you call the plasterer?” he asked, getting cotton briefs and wool socks from the dresser.

“I forgot.”

“How could you forget?” From the wardrobe he extracted a freshly pressed shirt, polished shoes, a good suit and a hideous tie, which was a birthday present from the girls. They’d picked it out and paid for it on their own, making Sharon wait near the entrance of the dollar store. “It’s on the list,” he said as if she ought to notice a list on the fridge just because she knew exactly where everything was in the dining room, where she kept a mess of cloth and yarn in various stages of completion. A finished sweater was in a bag on the table. The quilting squares were on the third shelf of the cabinet. On the bottom shelf, in the back, was her money jar, with cash and cheques that she was always forgetting to deposit because her head was filled with too many thoughts, too many opinions, too many silent arguments.

“Daddy, you’re wearing the tie!” Nina shouted as she ran into the bedroom, jumping on the bed, Emmie right behind her.

“Of course,” he said. “It’s my birthday tie.”

Her older daughter and her son both looked like Dan, and Sharon was glad of that. Only Emmie took after her, with curly red hair, green eyes, and chipmunk cheeks, pinchable cheeks that she would probably outgrow as Sharon had. She closed her eyes. Maybe she could sleep for another five minutes while they jumped on the bed. She’d been up late again, chatting online; morning always seemed so far away at midnight.

“Mom! I can’t find my calculator,” Josh shouted up the stairs. Sharon kept her eyes closed.

“You’d better get up,” Dan said.

“You look,” Sharon said.

“I’d just be wasting time. You’re the finder in the family.” He glanced at the mirror on the dressing table, giving his tie a twitch to straighten it.

They’d celebrated Dan’s birthday at the rink in Christie Pits, yesterday. She was someone else skating, lithe and free and not shy at all. That was how she’d met Dan, by skating backward right into him, laughing as they both fell. They always celebrated Dan’s birthday by going skating with their children and his sister and her family, who lived around the corner. Yesterday Josh’s girlfriend, Cathy, had come, too, and afterward they’d all had cocoa at Magee’s. Cathy was his first girlfriend, and Sharon was glad she was a nice girl—her mother a doctor and her father a professor. Sharon knew the family, who lived near the public school.

A thaw hinted at spring, mud under the sprinkling of snow. They’d gone home along Seaton Street, stopping to look at the funny house painted candy colours, the yard a display of plastic frogs and superheroes arranged around the fountain of the naked boy, turned off for the winter. A knife grinder had come along in his truck, his bell ringing, and stopped when the owner of the house flagged him down. Josh and Cathy had walked ahead of them, two gangly kids with skates slung over narrow shoulders, ignoring his sisters who’d followed making kissy noises. Cathy had a white jacket. How she kept it white was a mystery. She had straight blonde hair, too, and a perfectly straight part. Perhaps people with that kind of hair simply repel stains.

“Mom!”

“All right.” Sharon opened her eyes and sat up. “You can stop shouting, Josh!”

Halfway down the stairs, she heard his cell ring, and she was certain that it was Cathy calling because the girl was on her mind. Dan would say, *Don’t be silly, even if you’re right, it’s only a coincidence. A statistical inevitability. How many people do you need in a room to have*

better than a fifty percent chance that two of them share the same birthday? Only twenty-three. Don't treat it as a miracle. That was the kind of thing he'd say at Sunday dinner. His father would nod and say, *Of course not a miracle. Very natural. God makes it happen.*

She found Josh at his desk, computer on, browser minimized so she couldn't see his Facebook page or perhaps it was Twitter or something newer whose name she hadn't yet picked up. His room was spare and neat, his bed made, hockey posters in a straight line on the blue wall. The sun shining through the window made squares of light on the floor. Outside the cardinals were singing, celebrating the February thaw as if snow wouldn't return.

Her son played hockey, he played the guitar, and if he was in a good mood, he'd do magic tricks for his sisters. His ears stood out from his head. At night he taped them back with masking tape and Sharon pretended not to notice. He was fourteen.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"Cathy," he mouthed. Why had she called instead of texting?

"Right." She turned to his bookcase, thinking of Cathy and her sister, Heather. Last week they'd been looking at the high chair in Sharon's basement, standing with their arms around each other's shoulders. Cathy, fourteen years old, in pink and white; Heather, just two years older, with heavy boots and a heavily pregnant belly. Two girls golden-haired, one sister's long, the other sister's spiked like rays of the sun. The sweater in the dining room was for Heather, who'd kept her coat on because she was cold.

"Uh huh, uh huh. Seriously. I'm so sorry. Okay. Yeah." Josh pressed the off button.

"What's up?" As her hand ran idly over the top of the bookcase, it fell on the calculator.

"Mom."

She looked over her shoulder. Her son's eyes were wet. His girlfriend must have dumped him. How could anyone dump her kid? But it wasn't that. She knew it wasn't though she pushed away any other thought of what it could be.

"Mom." Her boy was trying to talk and getting no further than, "Mom." She went to him and knelt. "Cathy . . ." Josh flung his arms around his mother.

His heart beat against her chest, her arms tightening as he clung to her. "What did she say?"

"Her sister. She . . ." He stopped, swallowed, began again. "Cathy's sister killed herself."

"No!" What about the high chair in the basement? Sharon had offered her the high chair. How could Heather do this?

Josh leaned against her as she stroked his hair, letting his words crash into her, waves against a rock. Cathy's sister was dead. She'd put a gun to her ear and shot herself. Her mom used a kitchen knife to get the baby out and then called 911. The baby was a girl. Heather was still lying there on the bed with a hole in her when Cathy had called Josh and screamed into the phone, "I hate her!" Josh didn't even know who she hated, her sister or her mother or the little baby.

This was Sharon's first born, the child who'd made her a mother, now shrugging out of her arms, his pained eyes a shade lighter than his father's, a bit of tape still stuck to his right ear. "What am I supposed to do, Mom?" he asked, twisting a rubber band around his fingers.

"You can let her friends know," Sharon said. "Then Cathy doesn't have to tell them."

"Okay." He turned to the computer, tossing the rubber band on his desk and reaching for the mouse.

Dan was calling, *I can't find my keys*, and the girls were calling, *Where are you, Mom*, and before she could get out of her son's room to ward them off, they were here. She had to get them away from Josh and she needed to talk to Dan and she had to figure out what to tell the girls. Her hands went up to herd them out, but there was too much noise in her head, her ears ringing. Nina said, *Josh is crying!* and he said, *Shut up!* and Sharon was thinking of a kitchen knife used for chopping mushrooms and onions in a mother's hand, descending on a daughter.

She looked down for an instant, the room receding, every sound faintly muffled. When she was able to look up again, her face was paler, the freckles across her nose standing out, her eyes the green of bracken and moss. And she was someone else, someone who could carry on the day.