

## CHAPTER ONE

*When I awake, the cottage is hushed.* The kids are still sleeping, but Joel is already on the screened-in porch, eating breakfast and reading a section from yesterday's newspaper. No need to hurry here, a place where time doesn't matter. That's one of the things I love about it. That and the calm glassy lake that beckons my canoe. I grab a plum and brush Joel's bent neck with my lips before setting off across the bay.

Little things are etched into my memory of that Sunday, the last one of August, such as Jonathan parading around with the canoe overhead. "Mom, this is how I portaged on our trips in the wilderness. Remember, it was much harder with all those mosquitoes and a seventy-pound pack on my back."

I marvel at the lean muscles in his fourteen-year-old arms. My youngest child looks so much like his father, the same lanky build, gangling legs, long skinny face. He and Joel share the same colouring too, fair skinned with green-grey eyes, just like Alyssa, our eldest. Right now, she's relaxing in the hammock, enjoying some light summer reading before boring into her university texts. She stretches. Her skimpy bikini straps pull tautly and then settle back into place. Even when she crosses her ankles, her thighs don't touch.

Maybe in my next life, I'll look like that: five-foot-four, slim, and with cleavage. I stare down at my thighs, rubbing together on the edge of the dock. Middle-aged spread indeed. At least no varicose veins spider their way up my legs yet. I unbutton my beach top and slip into the water, swimming a few laps of front crawl back and forth between my neighbour's dock and ours. As I dry off, Daniel and his friends stride down to the lake, flicking each other with their towels. Three of his friends are spending the weekend, so we've had a full house of laughter, music, and the constant roar of the boat engine. Water-skis, kneeboards, tubes — it doesn't matter. The boys are happy to be pulled on anything so long as they can go fast.

"Hi, guys. Had any breakfast?"

"Yes. Thanks for the blueberry muffins, Mrs. Cohen," John says. "They were delicious."

Daniel doesn't waste any words. Peeling off his T-shirt and exposing a bronzed tan, he dives off the end of the dock, barely rippling the surface; his powerful arms slice through the water. When he emerges from the lake, he shakes his head back and forth like our dog, squeezes the excess water from his long hair, and then pulls it

back into a ponytail. He'll never have to worry about being bald like his father, I think. Daniel has my family's thick dark hair, deep brown eyes, and long eyelashes that his sister so envies. I turn to look at my husband, whose shiny dome is covered by a wide brimmed hat, even in the shade. No point taking any chances, he feels. Grey hairs sneak out from behind his ears and infiltrate his trim brown beard.

Was it just last month that we celebrated our twenty-fifth anniversary? Our first holiday in years without the children — what a treat! Ten days of touring the Normandy coast through towns of cobble-stoned streets and stone houses so close to the road that I could practically pick the flowers from the window-boxes as we drove by. I recall the fragrance of fresh ocean air and the smell of buttery croissants wafting from the patisseries. I look at Joel absorbed in his book and think about walking hand-in-hand through paths in the woods, my head just brushing his shoulder.

“Hey, Dad. We're low on gas. Where's your credit card?”

Daniel bounds up to the cottage and quickly returns, swinging the boat key in one hand. The credit card is tucked into the waistband of his bathing suit. He and his friends scramble into the boat. The dog jumps in too, claiming her favourite seat on the right-hand side of the boat just behind the driver. When he pats her, she settles down, curling up with her head neatly resting on her paws.

He primes the engine. It revs briefly, then sputters and dies. “Dad, when are you going to replace this tub with a real ski boat?”

“Maybe when you give up camp, so you can use it. It serves us just fine,” Joel replies.

The engine roars to life again, drowning any further talk. Daniel

reverses the boat slowly out of the boat port. When the bow is pointing eastward, he guns the motor and takes off down the bay.

After lunch, Alyssa announces, “I’d like to leave soon so I don’t have to sit in traffic for hours. Besides, I’ve made plans tonight. Daniel, do you want to drive back with me?”

“Naw, I’ll catch a ride later with one of the guys. They’re talking about heading out to another cottage soon, but one of them will be driving back around five.”

Joel and I welcome the quiet that descends when our son and his friends leave. My husband pours himself a glass of red wine and I arrange a plate of veggies and dip to nibble on. We walk back to the dock together, finding the bay peaceful now with the boaters gone. The other shoreline is already in shadow, the sharpness and rough edges of the pine and spruce needles transformed into blurry smudges of green. Silver slivers of birch reflect in the stillness of the water. In the quiet, there’s just the sound of our voices and the swish of a canoe paddle. The lengthening shadows signal us. Reluctantly, we gather our things and head back to the cottage. During dinner, we watch as the sun — burnishing to a coppery ball — begins its slow descent behind the hillside.

Jonathan is setting up the video he’s rented when the phone rings.

“I’ll get it,” he shouts and seconds later calls out, “Mom and Dad, take the phone. It’s Alyssa.”

I pick up the phone in the kitchen and Joel gets on the extension in our bedroom.

“Hi, Alyss,” I say cheerily. “I thought you were going out

tonight.”

Her voice trembles and cracks in reply, “It’s about Daniel.” She relays the message in telegraphic fragments: “Police called . . . car crash . . . both boys thrown . . . no seatbelts on . . .”

“What? Where is he?”

“York County Hospital.”

“Is he okay?” Joel asks.

“Badly hurt. Head injury — that’s all they said. John was hurt too. Got to go. Meet me there.”

I don’t remember starting to scream, but a wail reverberates throughout the house. Jonathan comes running into the kitchen to find me clutching at Joel for support. The phone receiver dangles down the kitchen wall, swinging like a coiled serpent.

“What’s wrong?” he cries.

In a voice that’s lost its usual control, Joel blurts, “Daniel’s been hurt. We’ve got to go.”

Like robots, my husband and I start to go through the motions of closing windows and locking doors. Jonathan stands there, dazed, uncertain what to do.

“Go to the Gordons’,” Joel says.

Jonathan races next door. As I’m tying up my sneakers, he rushes back in with our neighbour, Marilyn.

“Don’t worry. I’ll manage,” Marilyn says.

She hugs me before we hurry off.

It feels cold in the car and I move the air vent, deflecting it into the back where my youngest sits silently. The winding road from our

cottage is only three kilometres long and when we reach the highway, Joel picks up speed. Traffic is moving well here. He reaches for my hand and grips it on top of the stick shift. The knob feels solid in my palm and his fingers warm mine.

We are cut off from life in our enclosed space. Joel and I ask each other questions that neither can answer. What has happened? Will Daniel be okay? All our hopes rest on news from the cellphone that doesn't ring.

We pass familiar sights: two marinas, the garden centre, a video store, and the stand selling wild blueberries with its Sold Out sign in place. Fields of empty corn stalks form darkening shadows at the side of the road. Now and then neon lights flicker from a roadside doughnut shop or gas station.

Joel phones the hospital and speaks briefly to a staff member in Emergency.

“Your son is unconscious and has just been transferred to the trauma unit at Sunnybrook Hospital.”

“Does our daughter know?”

“We tried to call her but there's no answer at your home. She's probably en route here.”

Joel hangs up and immediately dials his brother's number. “David, I need you to go to Sunnybrook Hospital.” He relays the little information we know. “If you hear any news at all, please call us.”

I'm startled to see Joel smashing his hand against the dashboard. “That goddamn kid. Has he no brains? Why wasn't he wearing a seatbelt? I bet they were going too fast. Daniel always drove too

quickly. I told him, but did he listen? No! Remember when he took the turn too quickly and went into a ditch? Smashed up the car. Wish he had hurt himself then.”

“What? You wanted him to be hurt?”

“Not a lot. Just a little. So he would’ve learned a lesson.”

“Joel, Daniel wasn’t even driving today. It was his friend, John, remember?” I touch his hand and he returns it to the stick shift. My fingers cover his.

“I know.” He glances briefly at me, his face contorting with pain. “Did you see that car John was driving? A small car. I hate small cars for teenage drivers. I should never have let him go in it. Should have insisted he go home with Alyssa.”

“That’s crazy. He came up with John. He wanted to go back with him.”

“I shouldn’t have let him.”

This isn’t our fault, I want to say. Then I question myself. Did we do something wrong? I think back to all those years I spent driving carpool to hockey practices and games. A mother whose head couldn’t even be seen from behind the headrest of the largest station wagon on the market. Thump. A hockey bag thrown in the back. The slam of the door and then the click. The sound of the seatbelt fastening. Three boys, three clicks. Daniel knew I was a stickler for the rules. My car didn’t move unless all the seatbelts were on. What went wrong?

The landscape passes in a blur of darkness, familiar shapes transformed into the menacing unknown.

We’re racing. I glance at the speedometer and yell at Joel, “Are

you nuts? Slow down! There's already one of us in the hospital."

The car slows and we drift back into silence. I start to shiver despite the summer's heat and place my hands under my bottom to warm them. The leather seat feels so cold. I gaze forward, mesmerized by the trail of red lights ahead, two abreast, then three when the highway widens. We're still an hour's drive away from the city.

I think of hospital emergency rooms — the bright lights, sticky vinyl chairs, and long waits. Like many parents with active kids, we've had our time there, anxiously anticipating the results of X-rays and then waiting patiently for the fitting of splints, plastering of casts, or sizing of crutches. Only once, when we raced to the hospital with Jonathan in the midst of an asthma attack, did I feel as much panic as I do now.

Another twenty minutes pass and still there's no call from Alyssa or David. Joel phones Sunnybrook's emergency room. Over the speakerphone I hear a female voice, "A doctor is with your son. We'll call you back when the doctor is done."

"Please, tell me," I ask, "is he alive?"

The nurse avoids answering by simply repeating her previous message. Joel presses the end button as I start to keel, "We've lost him."

Jonathan leans forward from the back seat and holds my shoulders firmly while I wail; his father clenches the steering wheel and curses the traffic that has slowed almost to a standstill. My chest continues to heave as my sobs subside.

If the doctor is still with him, then Daniel must be alive, we reason. Beneath this hope lurks the worry that Alyssa and David

would not share news of his death over a cellphone.

Joel turns on the radio. The reporter announces, “Traffic is unusually heavy on Highway 400 due to heavy volume and construction delays. The alternate routes are also very busy. Stay tuned for an update in fifteen minutes. This report is brought to you by . . .”

At long last, we reach the emergency department. A nurse immediately ushers us into a small waiting room. In the cramped space are Alyssa, David and his wife Roz, my brother Yaron and his wife Sue, and two of our friends. How did they know to come? We grab Alyssa and clasp her to us. Her body quakes as she nods tearfully, “He’s alive.”

Then we notice the stranger — a young doctor with the traditional white coat. How could I not see him standing there?

“Your son has a massive blood clot in his brain. He’s being operated on right now.” The doctor tips his head towards Alyssa. “Your daughter, here, signed the permission papers. Why don’t you all wait upstairs? You’ll be more comfortable there. The procedure should take about two hours.”

We’re led to an elevator and invited to wait in the visitor’s lounge on the seventh floor near the surgical intensive care unit. The room is filled with couches and chairs, a room that could be considered comfortable in other circumstances. But we find no comfort here. The room is empty, save for us, and the silence eerie. The only sounds heard are the ones we make. No hustle and bustle of emergency room clamour. No P.A. system announcing calls for physicians. There’s a

hushed solemnity in the room and our friend Al's voice seems to boom with its forced cheeriness.

“Daniel is strong. He'll be okay. You'll see.”

We want to believe him.

David drapes his arm around Joel and together they pace back and forth around the room. When I collapse on a couch, Yaron and Alyssa hug me. The others stand around, trying to offer support to Jonathan, who looks frozen in place like a deer startled by car headlights. Which way can he bolt?

Someone boils the kettle and makes cups of tea. I hold the cup without drinking, warming my fingers on the porcelain. Pressing the cup against my belly, I wait.

The door to the lounge opens and we jump up anxiously. The chaplain, in a dark suit suggestive of mourning, walks in and introduces himself. He sits and talks but I don't hear his words. I watch his fingers splayed out against his knees. His right arm lifts gracefully as he gestures his concern like a conductor in front of an orchestra. Sinking against the plush cushions of the couch, I sip my tea. Consolation seems far away.

Shortly after the chaplain leaves, the door opens again and a large woman in a white uniform enters. Her face is broad and serious-looking but her voice is caring, “How are you coping?”

“My stomach is churning,” I reply. “I've been to the washroom five times already.”

“I'm sorry I can't dispense any medication to you directly. Why don't you go to the emergency room to get something? Don't worry. You have time. We won't hear from the surgeon for at least an hour yet.”

My friend, Ellen, comes with me back downstairs. It's strange approaching the emergency room from inside the hospital. Everything seems backwards, as if we were rewinding a video and watching the jerky actions unfold in reverse. This time, as we wait in the usual place, my back rubs impatiently against a vinyl chair. I feel foolish to be here — in an emergency room for an upset stomach — and I'm worried that there will be a long delay, but I'm seen quickly and receive some pills.

Ellen and I head outdoors. The night air is crisp and stars light the dark sky, each one shining in place, unaware of any earthly crisis. We decide to take a short walk and pass by K-Wing, the veterans' nursing home section of the hospital. My seventy-nine-year-old father lives there. I visit him often and think about the quality of his life. My father's former erect walk has turned into a shuffle as he peers into rooms looking for his mother. "Have you seen her today? She knit this sweater for me. I wanted to thank her and ask her to take me home."

Life is not like literature. We cannot make deals offering to trade our earthly goods, or to barter one's life for another, although for a fleeting moment that thought crosses my mind.

I think about death — my father-in-law's fatal heart attack in mid-July. It was so unexpected, but he was seventy-five; our son is only seventeen-and-a-half. My thoughts race with fear. Joel and I recognized Daniel's immaturity and saw him struggling to establish an identity. He so often wanted to do things his way and was prepared to take foolish chances. How could he and his friend have been in such a hurry that they would take such risks? With all the

training he's had and with our constant reminders, how could he ride in a car without wearing a seatbelt? I'm so angry with him for almost destroying himself.

At 1:30 a.m. the neurosurgeon strides into the visitor's lounge. Her green cap is slightly askew, allowing brown curls to escape onto her forehead. She shows no signs of fatigue despite the late hour, exuding an air of confidence and accomplishment. Alyssa, Joel, Jonathan, and I cling to one another. Gathering around, our friends and family create a circle of palpable support.

The surgeon is frank with us. "I've just removed a massive blood clot that was fairly deep in Daniel's brain. Had this happened to an older person, I wouldn't even have tried to operate, but he has age and strength in his favour. The first seventy-two hours are critical. His chances of survival are about eighty per cent."

She tempers the positive by warning us of the dangers: possible seizures, internal haemorrhaging, or build-up of intracranial pressure.

"I've left a flap open in his skull to accommodate brain swelling, and I'm prepared to operate again if necessary," she tells us. "Because of the location of the blood clot, I expect that there'll be residual neurological damage, probably affecting expressive speech and motor areas on Daniel's right side. The other doctors will close up and finish the operation. It will be several hours before you may see him."

As the doctor leaves, I look around the room. Everyone looks drained. Joel's shoulders are sagging and Jonathan can barely stand upright. My whole body feels numb, as if I've just had a giant injection of freezing to prevent the awareness of pain. My mind seems frozen

too. Words bounce into resistant barriers and refuse to form coherent thoughts. Inside my bubble, I hear Joel's voice take charge.

"There's no point in all of us being here. Alyssa can take Jonathan home. Lainie and I will wait to see Daniel."

Jonathan looks relieved, as if hearing his father's voice — once more in control — guarantees that everything will turn out all right.

"I'm staying too," Alyssa says.

"We'll take Jonathan home with us," David and Roz offer.

When everyone leaves, we continue our vigil.

At 4:45 a.m. Joel, Alyssa, and I are finally allowed into the surgical intensive care unit to see Daniel. As we walk down the hall, Joel pulls ahead, his stride like that of a speed walker approaching the end of a race, determined and fatigued. Alyssa and I clasp hands. We pass white-curtained windows before we approach his bed. I can see the steady rise and fall of his chest under the crisp sheet. My heart races. My son is alive!

His eyes are closed and his face looks so still. Cheeks and chin, darkened with shadow, are almost hidden behind the pale blue tube that snakes from his mouth to the ventilator on the wall, controlling his breathing. His head is wrapped in white gauze bandages covered by a blue cap; the indigo corona pierced by a thin wire poking out above his left eyebrow. My gaze follows the wire to a machine that flashes with bright shiny lines and buzzes in a language I don't understand.

Joel and I are stricken dumb as we stand by our son's side. But Alyssa reaches out and touches him gently on his right arm that rests at his side.

“Daniel, we’re here now. You’re fine. Everything is going to be fine.”

My voice croaks as my throat tries to squeeze out words: “Daniel, we love you.”

All Joel can manage is, “Daniel.”

Our legs are rubbery when we turn to leave. We walk as if our feet were bound together, Joel in the middle, his arms weighted on our shoulders. Somehow we make our way back to the car. Alyssa drives home.