

CHAPTER 1



It was near dawn on a wintry January morning on the outskirts of Minneapolis. A pickup truck rolled through the quiet subdivision, disrupting the stillness and compacting the recent snowfall into the frozen asphalt. Despite being plowed two days before, new flurries now blanketed the road and covered the surrounding landscape.

The truck u-turned just short of a small house and parked with the engine running. A hooded man wearing a winter jacket stepped out and walked toward the driveway, nervously glancing at nearby homes. Feeling reassured that everyone was asleep, he looked at his wristwatch. It was 5:45 am; everyone would be rising soon. He convinced himself that this prank was long overdue and trotted up the steep driveway to the rear of the car.

Kneeling behind the trunk, he peered up at the front windows of the house. After making sure there was no movement, he plunged his hands into the embankment beside the driveway, cupping up handfuls of snow and packing them into the tailpipe. He filled the exhaust, pushing the powdery snow deeper until no more would fit. He patted the end of the exhaust and hastily brushed the area which he had disturbed. He thought it humorous as he trotted down the driveway toward the running truck.

Good luck starting your car. Payback is a bitch. Just like you. Have a late, great Monday morning, compliments of the Pack.

Shivering, he climbed into the warm truck and drove back to the primary road, a dog's bark rippling through the darkness after him.

At 7:00 am, the cell phone alarm sounded with Jim Carroll's music as 27-year-old Madison Sanders stretched her arms out beneath her goose-down comforter. She shunned the generic alarms on her phone. They dulled her motivation to start the day and were annoying. As always, she stayed still for five minutes, using the brief period before rising to set her daily intentions for the day, and establish a positive mood. She craved these private moments. She needed them. It was her time and space when no one else had set demands or expectations of her. She reminded herself that she was in control and responsible for her daily goals - and mindset. Her former therapist had drilled this mantra into her during several sessions.

Her current job was going well and, after a rough first three months, things had settled down. Her work life had finally transformed into a delicate routine of normality. She reflected on the day when she had nearly submitted her resignation to Human Resources. It seemed the only way to escape her hostile and sexist work environment. But that chapter was over, and she was relieved that the tumultuous episode had passed. Had it not been for her four-year-old son, Elijah, she wouldn't have given another minute of her life to the company and would have resigned soon after their arrival.

Elijah. The thought of him triggered her smile. He was her first and only child, and the light of her life. She sat on the edge of the bed for a

minute and turned on the nightstand lamp, allowing her eyes to adjust to the brightness. After sorting through her emotional inventory and confirming a positive mindset, she energetically began her daily morning routine, despite having a cold.

She walked to Elijah's room and turned on the light. As usual, he didn't budge. So she took a moment to watch him sleep before sitting on the side of the bed and rubbing his back.

"Elijah, it's time to wake up, sweetie," she whispered.

He stirred, frowning with his eyes closed, and stretched his tiny limbs. Madison smiled, cherishing the sight of him rousing from slumber. She kept on tenderly massaging his back.

"Come on, let's go to the bathroom." She helped him down from his bed and led him over to the commode. "Lift the seat, remember?"

He raised the lid and relieved himself, splashing between the water of the outer rim, his indiscriminate overspray dousing outside the commode.

"No, Elijah put it in the water," she said, helping him to control his hand.

Although only four years old, he was doing well with potty training. She lifted him over the sink. There, he turned on the water, fumbling with the soap. After letting him down and giving him a hand towel, she spread toothpaste to his toothbrush and watched as he brushed his teeth. Elijah adapted well to the routine. His height was the only limitation. But he was becoming heavier every day, and she was now straining to hold him.

On the next payday, buy him a step stool. He's wearing you out.

After washing his face, she helped him get dressed, and they both went into the kitchen. She sat him on his booster seat on a kitchen chair and opened a cabinet door.

“What cereal would you like this morning? Honey Nut Cheerios or Captain Crunch?”

He stared at the boxes for a moment. “I want Cappy Crunch,” he eventually said, pointing a chubby finger.

“Captain Crunch it is, sir!”

A minute later, she placed a bowl in front of him along with a cup of orange juice.

“Mommy will be right back.” She left him eating, hurrying off to fix her hair and put on makeup before returning to the kitchen. She helped him down and he ran into the living room, plopping down in front of the television. She walked over and turned it to his favorite show on the Children’s Network, *The Funny Farm*. She left the room and prepared her breakfast. Then she sat on the couch to eat.

“Ha, ha!” he laughed at the characters’ on-screen antics as Madison chuckled at his amusement.

When she’d finished her breakfast, she glanced at the clock.

Get your butt moving!

She rushed into the kitchen to put the dish in the sink. Then, grabbing her jacket and car keys, she opened the front door. Instantly, an icy wind hit her, prickling her red cheeks and blowing her back. She scrunched up her face in disgust. She still hadn’t got used to the long Minnesota winters, much preferring the warm drizzle of her hometown, Seattle. Shuffling through the snow, she clambered into her car and turned the

key. But today, there was no throaty growl; instead, there was total and utter silence.

“Damn it!” she huffed.

The chill of the seat stung her buttocks, radiating cold through her thin dress. Shivering, her teeth chattering, she shakily turned the key again. The engine cranked over but wouldn’t ignite. She repeatedly tried, her anxiety increasing with every passing second. She licked her chapped lips and clenched her teeth.

“You piece of shit car! You carried us across the country. Now start!”

But all her efforts were futile. Stopping, she closed her eyes and hugged the steering wheel. She needed a moment. “God, please don’t let me be late to work again. Not today. I’m begging you.”

She turned the key.

Rar – rar – rar – rar.

There was a loud pop, followed by intermittent sputtering.

“Yes! Thank you!”

She set the heat to maximum, checked the time, and rushed back inside.

After putting on Elijah’s hat, coat and gloves, she carried him to the car and strapped him into his safety seat. The sunrise brightened the neighborhood, giving light to the passing students as they walked toward the school bus stop. She slipped inside the warm interior, instantly noticing the car was vibrating abnormally and didn’t sound healthy at all.

That’s just great! Now you have to take the car to a mechanic. What else could go wrong?

While backing down the driveway, she felt she'd forgotten something. She stopped and searched for her cell phone.

Where is it?

She fumbled through her handbag and probed her pockets.

Shit! It must be inside.

She drove back to the top of the drive and parked. There, she reset the emergency brake and left the car running, fearing that it might not start again.

She glanced in the rearview mirror. "Mommy will be right back, okay?"

Elijah gazed through the side window, seemingly oblivious to his frantic mother's mutterings. She raced back inside the house. After five minutes of frantic searching, she found her phone in the bathroom.

Why did you leave it in here?

Panting heavily and breathing through her mouth, she blew her stuffy nose and scampered back to the car. She climbed inside and peeked at Elijah, who was now asleep. Then, slowly, she backed down the slippery driveway. She blinked her eyes as they began to water, and then sting.

What's going on?

She couldn't smell anything or inhale through her congested nose, but her lungs were beginning to burn.

Something's wrong. What's happening to me?

Her vision grew cloudy, making it difficult to focus. By the time she reached the bottom of the driveway, her head was drooping and she was beginning to lose consciousness.

Get out of the car. Get Elijah out of this car.

She was confused, disorientated, and steered toward the curb to try to park, but fumbled the gear shift while pressing the brake. With her vision nearly gone, she reached for the key. Her fingers were numb, and she was beginning to panic.

Roll the windows down and get Elijah out!

She grasped at the door panel, haphazardly stabbing at the window switches until she felt a sudden jolt. The car had hit the lip of the curb. Her hand found the gearshift, and she instinctively pushed it forward into Park. She hadn't realized the window locks were engaged and now couldn't locate the switch.

Get out. Get Elijah. The door. Open the door!

Blindly, she felt for the handle.

Please. Plea...

The door flung open and her unconscious body tumbled headfirst onto the frozen asphalt.

A student, standing at the bus stop, yelled, "Hey! Look at that lady!"

"What's wrong with her?" asked another.

Some of the children meandered towards the car, while a passing neighbor who was leaving for work slowed down, saw Madison on the ground, and stopped.

He got out and ran over to the motionless body lying face down in the road. He was about to kneel beside her when he noticed Elijah in the backseat. He reached inside and turned off the car, gagging from the potent smell of the exhaust fumes flowing out. Without hesitation,

he opened the rear door, unbuckled Elijah, and pulled him out. Then he called 911.

After speaking with the operator, the military veteran pocketed his phone and resorted to his combat first aid training, checking for breath and pulse. Elijah wasn't breathing, so he began CPR, oblivious to the students gathered around him.

The sirens of the ambulance drew closer as he checked for Elijah's vitals. None were present. The paramedics arrived and continued resuscitation, deploying oxygen and a defibrillator. But Elijah would not revive. He was dead.

“What's wrong with him? Is he sleeping?” a boy asked.

The tearful neighbor stood up. “Yes,” he choked. “He's asleep. All you kids, please go back to the bus stop.”

They sauntered off, chatting excitedly and peeking back.

The horrific events which transpired would set in motion an unrelenting wave of grief and guilt for Madison. But, unbeknown to her, it would be the catalyst to set her soul on fire, revealing the unknown parts of her inner being and bringing to light the dark secrets of her family. Those unspeakable things withheld from her knowledge had already shaped her future, and would soon reveal what she carried inside. This is her story.