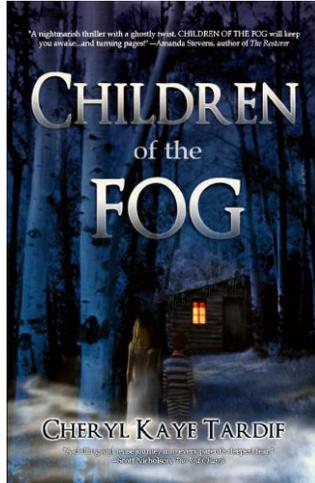


CHILDREN of the FOG



Cheryl Kaye Tardif

CHILDREN OF THE FOG

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Praise for Children of the Fog

"A chilling and tense journey into every parent's deepest fear." —Scott Nicholson, author of *The Red Church*

"A nightmarish thriller with a ghostly twist, *Children of the Fog* will keep you awake...and turning pages!" —Amanda Stevens, author of *The Restorer*

"Reminiscent of *The Lovely Bones*, Cheryl Kaye Tardif weaves a tale of terror that will have you rushing to check on your children as they sleep. With exquisite prose, *Children of the Fog* captures you the moment you begin and doesn't let go until the very end." —bestselling author Danielle Q. Lee, author of *Inhuman*

"Ripe with engaging twists and turns reminiscent of the work of James Patterson, Tardif once again tugs at the most inflexible of heartstrings...*Children of the Fog* possesses you from the touching beginning through to the riveting climax." —Kelly Komm, author of *Sacrifice*, an award-winning fantasy

This novel is dedicated to
Sebastien, Jason & Ben
and all 'missing' children...

To those who have been taken too early,
Who left on their own accord,
Who were given away in love,
Or those stolen from caring parents.

To the ones who have disappeared in spirit,
Lost souls on our city streets,
And those whose minds have betrayed them,
We will always remember the real 'you'.

To those who have been left behind,
Searching endlessly and tirelessly
For mother, father, sister, brother, daughter or son.
May you find Strength and Hope.

For the abandoned, forgotten and missing,
May you find an eternity of love,
And for those who are still, always and forever missed,
May you all find your way... Home.

~CKT

prologue

May 14th, 2007

She was ready to die.

She sat at the kitchen table, a half empty bottle of Philip's precious red wine in one hand, a loaded gun in the other. Staring at the foreign chunk of metal, she willed it to vanish. But it didn't.

Sadie checked the gun and noted the single bullet.

"One's all you need."

If she did it right.

She placed the gun on the table and glanced at a pewter-framed photograph that hung off-kilter above the mantle of the fireplace. It was illuminated by a vanilla-scented candle, one of many that threw flickering shadows over the rough wood walls of the log cabin.

Sam's sweet face stared back at her, smiling.

Alive.

From where she sat, she could see the small chip in his right front tooth, the result of an impatient father raising the training wheels too early. But there was no point in blaming Philip—not when they'd both lost so much.

Not when it's all my fault.

Her gaze swept over the mantle. There were three objects on it besides the candle. Two envelopes, one addressed to Leah and one to Philip, and the portfolio case that contained the illustrations and manuscript on disc for Sam's book.

She had finished it, just like she had promised.

"And promises can't be broken. Right, Sam?"

A single tear burned a path down her cheek.

Sam was gone.

What reason do I have for living now?

She gulped back the last pungent mouthful of Cabernet and dropped the empty bottle. It rolled under the chair, unbroken, rocking on the hardwood floor. Then all was silent, except the antique grandfather clock in the far corner. Its ticking reminded her of the clown's shoe. The one with the tack in it.

Tick, tick, tick...

The clock belched out an ominous gong.

It was almost midnight.

Almost time.

She drew an infinity symbol in the dust on the table.

∞

"Sadie and Sam. For all eternity."

Gong...

She swallowed hard as tears flooded her eyes. "I'm sorry I couldn't save you, baby. I tried to. God, I tried. Forgive me, Sam." Her words ended in a gut-wrenching moan.

Something scraped the window beside her.

She pressed her face to the frosted glass, then jerked back with a gasp. "Go away!"

They stood motionless—six children that drifted from the swirling miasma of night air, haunting her nights and every waking moment. Surrounded by the moonlit fog, they began to chant. "*One fine day, in the middle of the night...*"

"You're not real," she whispered.

"Two dead boys got up to fight."

A small, pale hand splayed against the exterior of the window. Below it, droplets of condensation slid like tears down the glass.

She reached out, matching her hand to the child's. Shivering, she pulled away. "You don't exist."

The clock continued its morbid countdown.

As the alcohol and drug potpourri kicked in, the room began to spin and her stomach heaved. She inhaled deeply. She couldn't afford to get sick. Sam was waiting for her.

Tears spilled down her cheeks. "I'm ready."

Gong...

Without hesitation, she raised the gun to her temple.

"Don't!" the children shrieked.

She pressed the gun against her flesh. The tip of the barrel was cold. Like her hands, her feet...her heart.

A sob erupted from the back of her throat.

The clock let out a final gong. Then it was deathly silent.

It was midnight.

Her eyes found Sam's face again.

"Happy Mother's Day, Sadie."

She took a steadying breath, pushed the gun hard against her skin and clamped her eyes shut.

"Mommy's coming, Sam."

She squeezed the trigger.

March 30th, 2007

Sadie O'Connell let out a snicker as she stared at the price tag on the toy in her hand. "What did they stuff this with, laundered money?" She tossed the bunny back into the bin and turned to the tall, leggy woman beside her. "What are you getting Sam for his birthday?"

Her best friend gave her a cocky grin. "What *should* I get him? Your kid's got everything already."

"Don't even go there, my friend."

But Leah was right. Sadie and Philip spoiled Sam silly. Why shouldn't they? They had waited a long time for a baby. Or at least, *she* had. After two miscarriages, Sam's birth had been nothing short of a miracle. A miracle that deserved to be spoiled.

Leah groaned loudly. "Christ, it's a goddamn zoo in here."

Toyz & Twirlz in West Edmonton Mall was crawling with overzealous customers. The first major sale of the spring season always brought people out in droves. Frazzled parents swarmed the toy store, swatting their wayward brood occasionally—the way you'd swat a pesky yellowjacket at a barbecue. One distressed father hunted the aisles for his son, who had apparently taken off on him as soon as his back was turned. In every aisle, parents shouted at their kids, threatening, cajoling, pleading and then predictably giving in.

"So who let the animals out?" Sadie said, surveying the store.

The screeching wheels of shopping carts and the constant whining of overtired toddlers were giving her a headache. She wished to God she'd stayed home.

"Excuse me."

A plump woman with frizzy, over-bleached hair gave Sadie an apologetic look. She navigated past them, pushing a stroller occupied by a miniature screaming alien. A few feet away, she stopped, bent down and wiped something that looked like curdled rice pudding from the corner of the child's mouth.

Sadie turned to Leah. "Thank God Sam's past that stage."

At five years old—soon to be six—her son was the apple of her eye. In fact, he was the whole darned tree. A lanky imp of a boy with tousled black hair, sapphire-blue eyes and perfect bow lips, Sam was the spitting image of his mother and the exact opposite of his father in temperament. While Sam was sweet natured, gentle and loving, Philip was impatient and distant. So distant that he rarely said *I love you* anymore.

She stared at her wedding ring. *What happened to us?*

But she knew what had happened. Philip's status as a trial lawyer had grown, more money had poured in and fame had gone to his head. He had changed. The man she had fallen in love with, the dreamer, had gone. In his place was someone she barely knew, a stranger who had decided too late that he didn't want kids.

Or a wife.

"How about this?" Leah said, nudging her.

Sadie stared at the yellow dump truck. "Fill it with a stuffed bat and Sam will think it's awesome."

Her son's fascination with bats was almost comical. The television was always tuned in to the Discovery Channel while her son searched endlessly for any show on the furry animals.

"What did Phil the Pill get him?" Leah asked dryly.

"A new Leap Frog module."

"I still can't believe the things that kid can do."

Sadie grinned. "Me neither."

Sam's mind was a sponge. He absorbed information so fast that he only had to be shown once. His powers of observation were so keen that he had learned how to unlock the door just by watching Sadie do it, so Philip had to add an extra deadbolt at the top. By the time Sam was three, he had figured out the remote control and the DVD player. Sadie still had problems turning on the TV.

Sam...my sweet, wonderful, little genius.

"Maybe I'll get him a movie," Leah said. "How about *Batman Begins*?"

"He's turning six, not sixteen."

"Well, what do I know? I don't have kids."

At thirty-four, Leah Winters was an attractive, willowy brunette with wild multi-colored streaks, thick-lashed hazel eyes, a flirty smile and a penchant for younger men. While Sadie's pale face had a scattering of tiny freckles across the bridge of her nose and cheekbones, Leah's complexion was tanned and clear.

She'd been Sadie's best friend for eight years—*soul sistahs*. Ever since the day she had emailed Sadie out of the blue to ask questions about writing and publishing. They'd met at Book Ends, a popular Edmonton bookstore, for what Leah had expected would be a quick coffee. Their connection was so strong and so immediate that they talked for almost five hours. They still joked about it, about how Leah had thought Sadie was some hotshot writer who wouldn't give her the time of day. Yet Sadie had given her more. She'd given Leah a piece of her heart.

A rugged, handsome Colin Farrell look-alike passed them in the aisle, and Leah stared after him, eyes glittering.

"I'll take one of those," she said with a soft growl. "To go."

"You won't find Mr. Right in a toy store," Sadie said dryly. "They're usually all taken. And somehow I don't think you're gonna find him at Karma either."

Klub Karma was a popular nightclub on Whyte Avenue. It boasted the best ladies' night in Edmonton, complete with steroid-muscled male strippers. Leah was a regular.

"And why not?"

Sadie rolled her eyes. "Because Karma is packed with sweaty, young puppies who are only interested in one thing."

Leah gave her a blank look.

"Getting laid," Sadie added. "Honestly, I don't know what you see in that place."

"What, are you daft?" Leah arched her brow and grinned devilishly. "I'm chalking it up to my civil duty. Someone's gotta show these young guys how it's done."

"Someone should show Philip," Sadie muttered.

"Why—can't he get it up?"

"Jesus, Leah!"

"Well? Fess up."

"Later maybe. When we stop for coffee."

Leah glanced at her watch. "We going to our usual place?"

"Of course. Do you think Victor would forgive us if we went to any other coffee shop?"

Leah chuckled. "No. He'd start skimping on the whipped cream if we turned traitor. So what are you getting Sam?"

"I'll know it when I see it. I'm waiting for a sign."

"You're always such a sucker for this *fate* thing."

Sadie shrugged. "Sometimes you have to have faith that things will work out."

They continued down the aisle, both searching for something for the sweetest boy they knew. When Sadie spotted the one thing she was sure Sam would love, she let out a hoot and gave Leah an I-told-you-so look.

"This bike is perfect. Since his birthday is actually on Monday, I'll give it to him then. He'll get enough things from his friends at his party on Sunday anyway."

Little did she know that Sam wouldn't see his bike.

He wouldn't be around to get it.

"Haven't seen you two all week," Victor Guan said. "Another day and I would've called nine-one-one."

"It's been a busy week," Sadie replied, plopping her purse on the counter. "How's business, Victor?"

"Picking up again with this cold snap."

The young Chinese man owned the Cuppa Cappuccino a few blocks from Sadie's house. The coffee shop had a gas fireplace, a relaxed ambiance and often featured local musicians like Jessy Green and Alexia Melnychuk. Not only did Victor serve the best homemade soups and feta Caesar salad, the mocha lattés were absolutely sinful.

Leah made a beeline for the washroom. "You know what I want."

Sadie ordered a Chai and a mocha.

"You see that fog this morning?" Victor asked.

"Yeah, I drove Sam to school in it. I could barely see the car in front of me."

She shivered and Victor gave her a concerned look.

"Cat walk over your grave or something?" he asked.

"No, I'm just tired of winter."

She grabbed a newspaper from the rack and headed for the upper level. The sofa by the fireplace was unoccupied, so she sat down and tossed the newspaper on the table.

The headline on the front page made her gasp.

The Fog Strikes Again!

Her breath felt constricted. "Oh God. Not another one."

A photograph of a blond-haired, blue-eyed girl sitting on concrete steps dominated the front page. Eight-year-old Cortnie Bornyk, from the north side of Edmonton, was missing. According to the newspaper, the girl had disappeared in the middle of the night. No sign of forced entry and no evidence as to who had taken her, but investigators were sure it was the same man who had taken the others.

Sadie opened the newspaper to page three, where the story continued. She empathized with the girl's father, a single dad who had left Ontario to find construction work in Edmonton. Matthew Bornyk had moved here to make a better life. Not a bad decision, considering that the housing market was booming. But now he was pleading for the safe return of his daughter.

"Here you go," Victor said, setting two mugs on the table.

"Thanks," she said, without looking up.

Her eyes were glued to the smaller photo of Bornyk and his daughter. The man had a smile plastered across his face, while his daughter was frozen in a silly pose, tongue hanging out the side of her mouth.

Daddy's little girl, Sadie thought sadly.

Leah flopped into an armchair beside her. "Who's the hunk?"

"His daughter was abducted last night."

"How horrible."

"Yeah," Sadie said, taking a tentative sip from her mug.

"Did anyone see anything?"

"Nothing." She locked eyes on Leah. "Except the fog."

"Do they think it's *him*?"

Sadie skimmed the article. "There are no ransom demands yet. Sounds like him."

"Shit. That makes, what—six kids?"

"Seven. Three boys, four girls."

"One more boy to go." Leah's voice dripped with dread.

The Fog, as the kidnapper was known, crept in during the dead of night or early morning, under the cloak of a dense fog. He wrapped himself around his prey and like a fog, he disappeared without a trace, capturing the souls of children and stealing the hopes and dreams of parents. One boy, one girl. Every spring. For the last four years.

Sadie flipped the newspaper over. "Let's change the subject."

Her eyes drifted across the room, taking in the diversity of Victor's customers. In one corner of the upper level, three teenaged boys played poker, while a fourth watched and hooted every time one of his friends won. Across from Sadie, a redheaded woman wearing a mauve sweatshirt plunked away on a laptop, stopping every now and then to cast the noisy boys a frustrated look. On the lower level, one of the regulars—Old Ralph—was reading every newspaper from front to back. He sipped his black coffee when he finished each page.

"So..." Leah drawled as she crossed her long legs. "What's going on with Phil the Pill?"

Sadie scowled. "That's what I'd like to know. He says he's working long nights at the firm."

"And you're thinking, what? That he's screwing around?"

Leah never was one to beat around the bush—about anything.

"Maybe he's just working hard," her friend suggested.

Sadie shook her head. "He got home at two this morning, reeking of perfume and booze."

"Isn't his firm working on that oil spill case? I bet all the partners are pulling late nights on that one."

Sadie snorted. "Including Brigitte Moreau."

Brigitte was her husband's *right-hand-woman*, as he'd made a point of telling her often. Apparently, the new addition to Fleming Warner Law Offices was indispensable. The slender, blond lawyer, with a pair of breasts she'd obviously paid for, never left Philip's side.

Sadie wondered what Brigitte did when she had to pee.

Probably drags Philip in with her.

"It could be perfectly innocent," Leah suggested.

"Yeah, right. I was at the conference after-party. I saw them together, and there was nothing innocent about them. Brigitte was holding onto Philip's arm as if she owned him. And he was laughing,

whispering in her ear." She pursed her lips. "His co-workers were looking at me with sympathetic eyes, pitying me. I could see it in their faces. Even *they* knew."

Leah winced. "Did you call him on it?"

"I asked him if he was messing around again."

Just before Sam was born, Philip had admitted to two other affairs. Both office flings, according to him. "Both meant nothing," he had said, before blaming his infidelities on her swollen belly and her lack of sexual interest.

"What'd he say?" Leah prodded, with the determination of a pit-bull slobbering over a t-bone steak.

"Nothing. He just stormed out of the house. He called me from work just before you came over. Said I was being ridiculous, that my accusations were hurtful and unfair." She lowered her voice. "He asked me if I was drinking again."

"Bastard. And you wonder why I'm still single."

Sadie said nothing. Instead, she thought about her marriage.

They'd been happy—once. Before her downward spiral into alcoholism. In the early years of their marriage, Philip had been attentive and caring, supporting her decision to focus on her writing. It wasn't until she started talking about having a family that things had changed.

She flicked a look at Leah, grateful for her loyal companionship and understanding. Fate had definitely intervened when it had led her to Leah. Her friend had gone above and beyond the duty of friendship, dropping everything in a blink if she called. Leah was her life support, especially on the days and nights when the bottle called her. She'd even attended a few AA meetings with Sadie.

And where was Philip? Probably with Brigitte.

"Come on, my friend," Leah said, grinning. "I know you really want to swear. Let it out."

"You know I don't use language like that."

"You're such a prude. Philip's an ass, a bastard. Let me hear you say it. *Bas...tard.*"

"I'll let you be the foul-mouthed one," Sadie said sweetly.

"Fuckin' right. Swearing is liberating." Leah took a careful sip of tea. "So how's the book coming?"

Sadie smiled. "I finished the text yesterday. Tomorrow I'll start on the illustrations. I'm so excited about it."

"Got a title yet?"

"Going Batty."

Leah's pencil-thin brow arched. "Hmm...how appropriate."

Sadie gave her a playful slap on the arm. "It's about a little bat who can't find his way home because his radar gets screwed up. At first, he

thinks he's picking up radio signals, but then he realizes he's picking up other creatures' thoughts."

"That's perfect. Sam'll love it."

"I know. I can't believe I waited so long to write something special for him."

A few months ago, Sadie decided to take a break from writing another Lexa Caine mystery, especially since her agent had secured her a deal for two children's picture books.

"It's been a welcome break," she admitted. "Lexa needed a year off. A holiday."

"Some break," Leah said. "I've hardly seen you. You've been working day and night on Sam's book."

"It's been worth it."

"Is it harder than writing mysteries?"

"Other than the artwork, I think it's easier," Sadie said, somewhat surprised by her own answer. "But then, Sam inspires me. He's my muse. Kids see things so differently."

"Wish I had one."

Sadie's jaw dropped. "A kid?"

"A muse, idiot."

Sadie grinned. "How's the steamy romance novel going?"

"I'm stumped. I've got Clara trapped below deck on the pirate ship, locked in the cargo hold with no way out."

Since the success of her debut novel, *Sweet Destiny*, Leah had found her niche and was working on her second historical romance.

"What's in the room?"

Leah gave her a wry grin. "Cases of Bermuda rum."

"Well, she's not going to drink it, so what else can she do?"

"I don't know. She can't get the crew drunk, if that's what you're thinking. "

"What if the ship caught on fire?"

Excitement percolated in Leah's eyes. "Yeah. A fire could really heat things up. Pun intended."

They were silent for a moment, lost in their own thoughts.

"Hey," Sadie said finally. "I've been tempted to cut my hair. What do you think?"

Leah stared at her. "You want to get rid of all that beautiful hair? Jesus, Sadie, it's past your bra strap." In a thick Irish accent, she said, "Have ye lost your Irish mind just a wee bit, lassie?"

"It's too much work," Sadie said with a pout.

"What does Philip think?"

"He'd be happy if I kept it long," she replied, scowling. "Maybe that's one reason why I want to cut it."

Leah laughed. "Then you go, girl."

Half an hour later, they parted ways—with Leah eager to get back to the innocent Clara and her handsome, sword-wielding pirate, and Sadie not so thrilled to be going back to an empty house. As she climbed into her sporty Mazda3, she smiled, relieved as always that she had chosen practical over the flashy and pretentious Mercedes that Philip drove.

She glanced at the clock and heaved a sigh of relief. It was almost time to pick Sam up from school.

Her heart skipped a beat.

Maybe there's been some progress today.

The instant Sam saw her standing in the classroom doorway, he let out a wild yell and charged at her, almost knocking her off her feet.

"Whoa there, little man," she said breathlessly. "Who are you supposed to be? Tarzan?"

"We just finished watching Pocahontas," a woman's voice called out.

"Hi, Jean," Sadie said. "How are things today?"

Jean Ellis taught a class of children with hearing impairments.

"Same as usual," the kindergarten teacher replied. "No change, I'm afraid."

Sadie tried to hide her disappointment. "Maybe tomorrow."

She studied Sam, who could hear everything just fine.

Why won't he speak?

"Did you have a good day, honey?"

Ignoring her, Sam pulled on a winter jacket and stuffed his feet into a pair of insulated boots.

"It was a great day," Jean said, signing as she spoke. "Sam made a friend. A real one this time."

Sadie was astounded. Sam's first real friend. Well, unless she counted his invisible friend, Joey.

"Hey, little man," she said, crouching down to gather him in her arms. "Mommy missed you today. But I'm glad you have a new friend. What's his name?"

When Sam didn't answer, Sadie glanced at Jean.

"Victoria," the woman said with a wink.

Grinning, Sadie ruffled Sam's hair. "Okay, charmer. Let's go."

With a quick wave to Jean, she reached for Sam's hand. She was always amazed by how perfectly it fit into hers, how warm and soft his skin was.

Outside in the parking lot, she unlocked the car and Sam scampered into the booster seat in the back. She leaned forward, fastened his seatbelt, then kissed his cheek. "Snug as a bug?"

He gave her the thumbs up.

Pulling away from the school, she flicked a look in her rearview mirror. Sam stared straight ahead, uninterested in the laughing children who waited for their parents to arrive. Her son was a shy boy, a loner who unintentionally scared kids away because of his inability to speak.

His lack of desire to speak, she corrected.

Sam hadn't always been mute.

Sadie had taught him the alphabet at two. By the age of three, he was reading short sentences. Then one day, for no apparent reason, Sam stopped talking.

Sadie was devastated.

And Philip? There were no words to describe his erratic behavior. At first, he seemed mortified, concerned. Then he shouted accusations at her, insinuating so many horrible things that after a while even she began to wonder. During one nasty exchange, he had grabbed her, his fingers digging into her arms.

"Did you drink while you were pregnant?" he demanded.

"No!" she wailed. "I haven't had a drop."

His eyes narrowed in disbelief. "Really?"

"I swear, Philip."

He stared at her for a long time before shaking his head and walking away.

"We have to get him help," she said, running after him.

Philip swiveled on one heel. "What exactly do you suggest?"

"There's a specialist downtown. Dr. Wheaton recommended him."

"Dr. Wheaton is an idiot. Sam will speak when he's good and ready to. Unless you've screwed him up for good."

His insensitive words cut her deeply, and after he'd gone back to work, she picked up the phone and booked Sam's first appointment. She didn't feel good about going behind Philip's back, but he'd left her no choice.

By the time Sam was three and a half, he had undergone numerous hearing and intelligence tests, x-rays, ultrasounds and psychiatric counseling, yet no one could explain why he wouldn't say a word. His vocal chords were perfectly healthy, according to one specialist. And he was right. Sam could scream, cry or shout. They had heard enough of *that* when he was younger.

Sadie finally managed to drag Philip to an appointment, but the psychologist—a small, timid man wearing a garish red-striped tie that screamed *overcompensation*—didn't have good news for them. He sat behind a sterile metal desk, all the while watching Philip and twitching as if he had Tourette's.

"Your son is suffering from some kind of trauma," the man said, pointing out what seemed obvious to Sadie.

"But what could've caused it?" she asked in dismay.

The doctor fidgeted with his tie. "Symptoms such as these often result from some form of...of abuse."

Philip jumped to his feet. "What the hell are you saying?"

The man's entire body jerked. "I-I'm saying that perhaps someone or something scared your son. Like a fight between parents, or witnessing drug or alcohol abuse."

Sadie cringed at his last words. The look Philip gave her was one of pure anger. And censure.

The doctor took a deep breath. "And of course, there is the possibility of physical or sexual—"

Without a word, Philip stormed out of the doctor's office.

Sadie ran after him.

He had blamed her, of course. According to him, it was her drinking that had caused her miscarriages. *And* Sam's delayed verbal development.

That night, after Sam had gone to bed, Philip had rummaged through every dresser drawer. Then he searched the closet.

She watched apprehensively. "What are you doing?"

"Looking for the bottles!" he barked.

She hissed in a breath. "I told you. I am *not* drinking."

"Once a drunk..."

She cowered when he approached her, his face flushed with anger.

"It's *your* fault!" he yelled.

Guilt did terrible things to people. It was such a destructive, invisible force that not even Sadie could fight it.

She looked in the rearview mirror and took in Sam's heart-shaped face and serious expression. She wondered for the millionth time why he wouldn't speak. She'd give anything to hear his voice, to hear one word. *Any* word. She'd been praying that the school environment would break through the language barrier.

No such luck.

Suddenly, she was desperate to hear his voice.

"Sam? Can you say Mommy?"

He signed *Mom*.

"Come on, honey," she begged. "*Muhh-mmy*."

In the mirror, he smiled and pointed at her.

Tears welled in her eyes, but she blinked them away. One day he *would* speak. He'd call her Mommy and tell her he loved her.

"One day," she whispered.

For now, she'd just have to settle for the undeniably strong bond she felt. The connection between mother and child had been forged at conception and she always knew how Sam felt, even without words between them.

She turned down the road that led to the quiet subdivision on the southeast side of Edmonton. She pulled into the driveway and pushed the

garage door remote, immediately noticing the sleek silver Mercedes parked in the spacious two-car garage.

Her breath caught in the back of her throat.

Philip was home.

"Okay, little man," she murmured. "Daddy's home."

She scooped Sam out of the back seat and headed for the door. He wriggled until she put him down. Then he raced into the house, straight upstairs. She flinched when she heard his bedroom door slam.

"I guess neither of us is too excited to see Daddy," she said.

Tossing her keys into a crystal dish on the table by the door, she dropped her purse under the desk, kicked off her shoes, puffed her chest and headed into the war zone.

But the door to Philip's office was closed.

She turned toward the kitchen instead.

The war can wait. It always does.

Passing by his office door an hour later, she heard Philip bellowing at someone on the phone. Whoever it was, they were getting quite an earful. A minute later, something hit the door.

She backed away. "Don't stir the pot, Sadie."

Philip remained locked away in his office and refused to come out for supper, so she made a quick meal of hotdogs for Sam and a salad for herself. She left a plate of the past night's leftovers—ham, potatoes and vegetables—on the counter for Philip.

Later, she gave Sam a bath and dressed him for bed.

"Auntie Leah came over today," she said, buttoning his pajama top. "She told me to say hi to her favorite boy."

There wasn't much else to say, other than she had finished writing the bat story. She wasn't about to tell him that she had ordered his birthday cake and bought him a bicycle, which she had wrestled into the house by herself and hidden in the basement.

"Want me to read you a story?" she asked.

Sam grinned.

She sat on the edge of the bed and nudged her head in the direction of the bookshelf. "You pick."

He wandered over to the rows of books, staring at them thoughtfully. Then he zeroed in on a book with a white spine. It was the same story he chose every night.

"My Imaginary Friend again?" she asked, amused.

He nodded and jumped into bed, settling under the blankets.

Sadie snuggled in beside him. As she read about Cathy, a young girl with an imaginary friend who always got her into trouble, she couldn't help but think of Sam. For the past year, he'd been adamant about the existence of Joey, a boy his age who he swore lived in his room. She'd

often catch Sam smiling and nodding, as if in conversation. No words, no signing, just the odd facial expression. Some days he seemed lost in his own world.

"Lisa says you should close your eyes," she read.

Sam's eyes fluttered shut.

"Now turn this page and use your imagination."

He turned the page, then opened his eyes. They lit up when he saw the colorful drawing of Cathy's imaginary friend, Lisa.

"Can you see me now?" she read, smiling.

Sam pointed to the girl in the mirror.

"Good night, Cathy. And good night, friend. The end."

She closed the book and set it next to the bat signal clock on the nightstand. Then she scooted off the bed, leaned down and kissed her son's warm skin.

"Good night, Sam-I-Am."

His small hand reached up. With one finger, he drew a sideways 'S' in the air. Their nightly ritual.

"S...for Sam," she said softly.

And like every night, she drew the reflection.

"S...for Sadie."

Together, they created an infinity symbol.

She smiled. "Always and forever."

She flicked off the bedside lamp and eased out of the room. As she looked over her shoulder, she saw Sam's angelic face illuminated by the light from the hall. She shut the door, pressed her cheek against it and closed her eyes.

Sam was the only one who truly loved her, trusted her. From the first day he had rested his huge black-lashed eyes on hers, she had fallen completely and undeniably in love. A mother's love could be no purer.

"My beautiful boy."

Turning away, she slammed into a tall, solid mass. Her smile disappeared when she identified it.

Philip.

And he wasn't happy. Not one bit.

He glared down at her, one hand braced against the wall to bar her escape. His lips—the same ones that had smiled at her so charismatically the night they had met—were curled in disdain.

"You could've told me Sam was going to bed."

She sidestepped around him. "You were busy. As usual."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

She cringed at his abrasive tone, but said nothing.

"You're not going all paranoid on me again, are you?" He grabbed her arm. "I already told you. Brigitte is a co-worker. Nothing more."

Jesus, Sadie! You're not a child. You're almost forty years old. What the hell's gotten into you lately?"

"Not a thing, Philip. And I'll be thirty-eight this year. Not forty." She yanked her arm away, then brushed past him, heading for the bedroom.

Their marriage was a sham.

"Doomed from the beginning," her mother had told her one night when Sadie, a sobbing wreck, had called her after Philip had admitted to his first affair.

But she'd proven her mother wrong. Hadn't she? Things seemed better the year after Sam was born. Then she and Philip started fighting again. Lately, it had escalated into a nightly event. At least on the nights he came home before she went to sleep.

Philip entered the bedroom and slammed the door.

"You know," he said. "You've been a bitch for months."

"No, I haven't."

"A *frigid* bitch. And we both know it's not from PMS, seeing as you don't get that anymore."

Flinching, she caught her sad reflection in the dresser mirror. She should be used to his careless name-calling by now. But she wasn't. Each time, it was like a knife piercing deeper into her heart. One of these days, she wouldn't be able to pull it out. Then where would they be? Just another statistic?

Philip waited behind her, flustered, combing a hand through his graying brown hair.

For a moment, she felt ashamed of her thoughts.

"Are you even listening to me?" he sputtered in outrage.

And the moment was gone.

She sighed, drained. "What do you want me to say, Philip? You're never home. And when you are, you're busy working in your office. We don't do anything together or go any—"

"Christ, Sadie! We were just out with Morris and his wife."

"I'm not talking about functions for the firm," she argued. "We don't see our old friends anymore. We never go to movies, never just sit and talk, never make...love."

Philip crossed his arms and scowled. "And whose fault is that? It's certainly not mine. You're the one who pulls away every time I try to get close to you. You know, a guy can only handle so much rejection before—"

"What?" She whipped around to confront him. "Before you go looking for it elsewhere?"

He stared at her for a long moment and the air grew rank with tension, coiling around them with the slyness of a venomous snake, fangs exposed, ready to strike.

When he finally spoke, his voice was quiet, defeated. "Maybe if you gave some of the love you pour on Sam to *me* once in a while, I wouldn't be tempted to look elsewhere."

He strode out of the room, his footsteps thundering down the stairs. A minute later, a door slammed.

She released a trembling breath. "Coward."

She wasn't sure if she meant Philip...or herself.

Brushing the drapes aside, she peered through the window to the dimly lit street below. It was devoid of any moving traffic, just a few parked vehicles lining the sidewalks. The faint rumble of the garage door made her clench the drapes. She heard the defiant revving of an engine, and then watched as the Mercedes backed down the driveway, a stream of frosty exhaust trailing behind it. The surface of the street shimmered from a fresh glazing of ice, and the car sped away, tires spinning on the pavement.

Philip always seemed to get in the last word.

She watched the fiery glow of the taillights as they faded into the night. Then the flickering of the streetlamp across the road caught her eye. She frowned when the light went out. One of the neighbors' dogs started barking, set off by either the abrupt darkness or Philip's noisy departure. She wasn't sure which.

And then something emerged from the bushes.

A lumbering shadow shuffled down the sidewalk, a few yards to the right of the lamp. It was a man, of that she was sure. She could make out a heavy jacket and some kind of hat, but she couldn't distinguish anything else.

The man paused across the street from her house.

Sadie was sure that he was staring up at her.

She shivered and stepped out of view, the drapes flowing back into place. When her breathing calmed, she edged toward the window again and took a surreptitious peek.

Gail, a neighbor from across the street, was walking Kali, a Shih Tzu poodle. But other than the woman and her dog, the sidewalk was empty.

Sadie locked all the doors and windows, and set the security alarm.

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