

## Prologue

Years later, Antonia would see her walking down Queen Street, talking on the payphones outside the library, in the back of a bar, sometimes, smoking. She'd grown to be the kind of woman Antonia loved; her hair cropped close to her scalp, a sturdy pair of boots, a leather jacket, a permanent scowl. The kind of woman who's tough until you run your fingers through their hair and let out a breath of warm air on their neck. Sometimes Antonia would imagine their bodies pressed together, dancing slowly. She knew exactly what she'd smell like. Leather, old spice, smoke.

They were so unpractised. They were making it up as they went along. There are no instructions for lonely, hungry girls who need each other, and who hate themselves for it. Later, they'd both learn the dance, and get good at it. If they'd found each other just a few years later, Antonia would have caught her eye from across the room, raised her eyebrows, clicked her nails against the table. She'd have let her think it was her idea. She would have come over, asked if Antonia was with anyone, and leaned in close to light her cigarette. They would have danced together, her hands drifting down Antonia's back, Antonia's on the back of her neck, a finger running across her shirt collar. A few years later and they would have spoken the same language.

Antonia often thought about saying hello. What are you doing these days? Did you ever wind up teaching? How's your brother? Your mom? I guess you never made it out of this place. Neither did I. Not that I wanted to. I've made a home here. My own home, a home without ghosts, half-dead women, cockroaches, or corners to slink away to. I never thought it was possible, but it happened. Want to come up for a cup of coffee? A slice of pie? Are you writing? Do you have anyone to tell you stories?

If she were to come up to Antonia, pull up a chair next to hers and strike up a conversation, ask how she's doing, Antonia would lean against her and sob. *I love you. I'm sorry, I love you. I love you, I'm sorry.* The time has passed. They were kids, now they aren't.

Everything Antonia wanted to say to her would go unsaid. Which isn't to say that she didn't still mean it. If things could have ended up differently, they would have. If Antonia could have ended up differently, she would have. But there was no use to that sort of thinking. They would have ended up in the same place no matter what anyone did: the two of them in Parkdale with the same memories, the same regrets, the same hunger.

## Chapter One

There'd been a death in the house. You couldn't tell by looking – it was a house like any other, with grand windows and a gabled roof, a front lawn overgrown with dandelions and nettles, a lilac leaning against the rain spout. It was a tall house, a lonely house that stood at the end of the street and looked out past the fence, past the railway, the highway, out to the lake which stretched on and on, dissolving into sky. Death made a home there, in the cupboards and between the floorboards. The absence, the loss, the hole that was left. It was more real than the house's bones.

It was the first day of summer and already the city was hot enough for the air to shimmer above the sidewalk. Antonia was sitting on the front step, looking out at the row of houses across the street and wondering if death filled them just as they filled hers. Before now, there had been nothing before Antonia but life, her own life, pushing forward into some unknown future, the years piling up upon each other. Death only existed in the corner of her eyes, a flash on television, a few hours at a funeral, the shadow of her mother crying at the kitchen table after dinner had been eaten and all the dishes put away. Now death hung around her, heavy, filling the air.

Antonia was barefoot. She was playing a game where she'd put her feet against the hot concrete of the path leading up to the house and count the seconds until it became too painful to keep them there. She'd keep her feet there until they were nearly burning, then lift them up, then put them down again. She was waiting for her mother.

Antonia's mother, Marie-Therese, had cut her hand on her coffee cup that morning after finding the body. Antonia had not seen the body, but she had seen the cut, the blood rushing from her mother's palm. She had helped her mother wrap it in a tea towel and watched as the blood stained it. Then her mother had sent her to her room, something that had not happened in a very long time, and Antonia had tried her best to read as the ambulance took them both away. When she was alone in the house Antonia had carefully swept of the shards of ceramic and put them in the dustbin.

It was only after the mess was cleaned up that Antonia realized how empty the house was. The rooms were huge and silent. There was mold in the living room. It stained the wallpaper. Antonia had never noticed the mold before. Now the mold spread throughout the room, following the steams of the wallpaper flowers and turning their petals grey. Antonia was sure the spores were drifting in the air, making her way into her lungs and staining them black. She wondered how long it had been there. How many afternoons had she spent in the living room thinking she was safe?

Antonia wandered outside. She'd wanted to see the world overexposed, midday sunlight driving out the shadows. Everything was cast in stark relief. The row of houses across the street, all red brick, pulsed against the sky.

The neighbourhood was never quiet, even in the middle of weekdays. Nobody on her street seemed to have a job. Antonia sat on the stoop and listened to the chatter of her neighbours, the barking of dogs, the sounds of the highway and the train going by. She sat and she looked, and she let herself be looked at, by the cars passing on the other side of the fence, by the old man smoking on the street corner, by the sun.

Now the sun was dipping behind her neighbour's houses and Antonia had still not moved from her place on the front step. A few times she'd thought of leaving, going to the corner store for something cold or down to the lake to put her feet in the water or to the library for something new to read. She was fourteen, it was summertime, and the world should have been open to her. Still, Antonia found she could do nothing but sit at the threshold and watch the street for some sign of her mother's return.

Marie-Therese had come across the body early in the morning, as she went down to the cellar for a new tin of coffee. The staircase going down to the cellar was long and steep. It made its way deep into the earth, into a place with no light that stayed cold in the summer. The cellar was lined with cedar shelves,

shelves that gave off a lovely scent, and those shelves were stacked with rows of cans: jams, pickles, tinned tomatoes, sardines. When she had been very young, before she knew enough about the world to recognize those cans as ordinary things, Antonia had liked to spend her afternoons sitting on the staircase, admiring them. Back then the house was magical. Basements filled with jewels, staircases leading to heaven. Antonia could spend hours lost in her daydreams.

After the light had flickered on, it took Marie-Therese a second to recognize the body. She took in the shape of it, the way the body was laid out on the floor, and only after gazing into the open eyes did she realize that there was nobody looking back. Then the details clicked into place and Marie-Therese realized the body belonged to her mother and that the bit of blood on the last step was her mother's and that her mother was dead.

As she looked at the body Marie-Therese thought that she had never seen her mother look so young before. She was in her nightgown, barefoot, her lips parted, her hands open in supplication. Her hair, which was long and grey and nearly fell to her waist, was splayed out on the concrete floor. Her lips were turned up at the corners. She was beautiful. Her eyes were a pale blue, looking up at the cellar ceiling as though watching the clouds.

As the shadows lengthened, the silhouette of the houses across the street growing long enough to brush against the lawn, Antonia watched as a cicada crawled out from the grass and onto the walkway. It was a big thing, nearly the size of Antonia's thumb, with a sleek black body and orange eyes that seemed to look at her. Its wings were translucent and shone gold in the evening light. Antonia had heard the high buzz of the cicadas for weeks now, but this was the first time she had seen one since their singing started. The cicada crawled along the walkway, across Antonia's bare feet, and disappeared into the grass once more.

When Antonia looked up from the ground, she saw a woman standing at the edge of the lawn. This woman was tall, slender, with a hawk nose and a cloud of black hair floating around her head. She was wearing a brown blouse, untucked, and a pair of jeans that looked soft and worn with time. Her left hand was wrapped in gauze. The woman lifted the bandaged hand in greeting, smiling at Antonia as if they knew each other. Antonia suddenly felt self-conscious, nervous to be seen with her bare feet, sitting between the lawn weeds and the house. She stood up as the woman made her way up the walkway.

"All I've done today is paperwork," The stranger said, "You'd think they'd have a bit of compassion for the recently bereaved but getting my signature seemed to be more important than anything. Who knows if I filled it out correctly. At least they stitched up my hands."

Now that she was closer, Antonia could see spider-web lines under the woman's eyes, around her mouth, and on her forehead. She wrapped Antonia up in her arms. She smelled of sticky, sweet perfume, cigarettes, and sweat.

It was only when the woman pulled away from their embrace that Antonia recognized her as her mother. There had been no great change. Marie-Therese was wearing the same clothes she left the house in that morning, her eyes were the usual brown, and her lipstick, although faded, stained her lips the familiar, mulberry purple. The only change was imperceptible, a stoop in her shoulders. It was a change so slight only someone who really knew her would notice it. Antonia noticed it then and thought about how well

she knew her mother and how well her mother knew her, better than any two people had ever known one another before. An uneasy feeling settled in her stomach, but Marie-Therese was patting Antonia on her back and opening the front door as if nothing had changed.

The two made their way inside together. For a second, in the front hall, they were immersed in darkness, then the light flickered twice and lit up the house. Antonia trailed behind her mother as she walked through the living room, the dining room, and into the kitchen. She tried her best not to think about the mold growing in their wallpaper, particles drifting through the house alongside her, making their way into the woodwork and eating away at the walls. How long had it been there? How long had they been breathing it in?

Antonia thought about mold as she watched her mother make her way into the kitchen. She watched as Marie-Therese opened the cupboard to pull out a can of soup and thought *this is my mother*. She thought the words again and again, turning them over in her mind, so that she did not have to think about the mold, so that she would remember what her mother looked like next time they were apart.

Marie-Therese looked impossibly small. The kitchen had grown in the time she was away, so that the flowers on the wallpaper were almost bigger than her hands. The walls were taller too, and the appliances had all grown, so that Marie-Therese was swallowed by the room and the task of cooking.

Marie-Therese switched on the stove. As the burner warmed up, the rings slowly turning red, she pulled a packet of smokes out from her jean pockets. When the stove was glowing hot, she pressed the tip of a cigarette against the burner. She smoked as she pulled out a pot and opened the soup can, working with her right hand and holding the cigarette with her left. Antonia had watched this same scene every night for years. Marie-Therese leaned on the counter and took a long drag as the soup began to bubble. Nothing had changed, save the slouch in her shoulders and the gauze around her palm.

As she watched her mother cook, Antonia imagined that it was her who had died that morning. Would the evening look different then? Or would her mother still warm up some dinner and do the dishes? The Palmolive would smell the same and she would hang her dish gloves to dry. She would watch an hour of television, brush her hair, put on her usual nightgown, sleep eight hours and run her errands the next morning. Antonia had always imagined that if she were to die, the world would stop turning, but death didn't seem to put an end to anything.

The soup was tomato. They ate in silence, and afterwards, as Marie-Therese did the dishes, the kitchen filled with the chemical smell of green apple. She hung up her dish gloves.

When she had finished cleaning the kitchen, drying the dishes and wiping down the counters, Marie-Therese came into the dining room, where Antonia was still sitting on her chair and peering into the kitchen.

"I'm going to have to make some phone calls," She said, "Maybe you should go to bed early today."

"I'm not tired," Antonia said.

Marie-Therese gave her a strained smile, "Go to your room and read then."

Antonia looked up at her mother. She was asking to be alone. Antonia had never known her to want to be alone before – at least not alone completely, alone without her daughter around. Antonia didn't know what to make of it. She couldn't understand what sort of phone call her mother could be making that she wasn't allowed to listen to.

Begrudgingly, Antonia went up the stairs and into her bedroom. She had not been inside her bedroom since that morning, and now she felt as though the room did not belong to her. It was a small room, a child's room, with a stack of science fiction pulps on the desk and a bright quilt covering the bed. Antonia closed the curtains, blocking out the last of the evening sun. She sat on the floor in the darkness.

This was the kind of house where the residents were always pressed up against each other. Long before Antonia was born, it had been a house for a rich family with maids and cooks who slept in the back rooms. Then it had been cut up into apartments, living rooms split in two by false walls, stoves in what were once bedrooms. When Antonia's grandmother had moved in, she had done her best to make it a house for a family once more, but despite her work the house was still cut into pieces. Everything was simultaneously too close and too far away. There were doors and walls where there shouldn't have been, bedrooms accessible only through bathrooms, rooms without windows enclosed in one another like nesting dolls. Perhaps it was the house's history, or the expectation of neighbours, but for all her life in this house, Antonia never felt like she was alone. Voices travelled easily. Light made its way through cracks in the doorway and the floorboards. Once, Antonia spilled a cup of water in her bedroom and the liquid went right through floor, dripping onto the living room carpet and warping the paint.

There were benefits and drawbacks to the situation. Anything her mother did, Antonia knew about. Anything Antonia did, her mother knew about.

Her mother, on the phone in the kitchen, sounded as though she were in the room with Antonia.

"Is Marie-Helen there? This is her sister calling." her mother said. There was a voice on the other line, saying something Antonia couldn't make out. Her mother laughed politely.

There was a pause, and then, "Hi honey... yes, I'm alright. How are you? The kids?"

And then, "I've got bad news, I wish I wasn't the one to tell you this..."

Her voice was loud but warbled, imperceptible. Following along gave Antonia a headache. The night wore on, eventually the phone calls ended. Silence filled the house. Even then, Antonia sensed that she was not alone in her quiet, dark, room.