

# Leaves and Shadows

## Chapter One

### The Slide

*How are we going to do this?*

Erin looked down despondently at her hands resting on her distended abdomen. For seven months now, she and her husband had considered its growing size to be an absolute blessing. Now, she wasn't sure what to think. How could something so beautiful be so utterly corrupted? It wasn't the first time she had asked herself that question since this nightmare began last week.

Erin looked up from her hands to the playground in front of her where her five-year-old son, Evan, played. Not for the first time, she asked herself, *How am I going to explain something so complicated and so dangerous to him?* Tears began to burn and she fought them back desperately, "He's not going to understand." She shook her head, "I don't understand."

Erin watched her son as he climbed the ladder of the playground. She tried to push down the anxiety boiling inside her chest, but it seeped around her mental walls trying to draw her focus away from her son and back onto her troubled thoughts.

Evan's laugh brought her back to reality. He threw his arms high as he slid down one of the straight slides. The fall leaves that covered the playground equipment reduced the friction on

the slide, giving him an extra boost of speed that made the experience that much more satisfying. He plopped down to ground rump first giggling.

He grabbed handfuls of leaves from around him and tossed them into the air like confetti. He closed his deep blue eyes, elated as the red and gold leafy rain fluttered down over his sandy blond hair.

He looked up at her, beaming. "Did you see that, Momma? Did you? Did you see how fast I went?"

She returned his smile, albeit with a weary one of her own. He hopped up and ran for the ladder again to repeat the oh-so-fun process.

*He's so cute*, she thought.

Unbidden, her silent worries pushed back into her mind: "*Like your baby was supposed to be.*"

Tears welled back up and stung her eyes, causing her vision to blur. She rubbed them vigorously, then took a shuddering breath and told herself fiercely, *Stop it, Erin!*

She looked on as Evan sat just inside a red tunnel slide. She looked away as he descended and found herself thinking about yesterday. She could still feel the paper gown against her skin in that cold exam room. The loud ticking of the clock behind her resonated the passing of each second. Her husband Scott's calloused hand gripped hers painfully tight as her OB/GYN came into the room.

*"Mrs. Dearborn," he begun, "there is never an easy way to say this . . ."*

"No!" She shook her head violently. *I do not want to think about that!*

"Momma?"

She almost shrieked, not having noticed Evan approach her. His little-boy face furrowed at the brow as he looked at her with open concern.

"Momma, are you all right?"

"Yes, honey. Momma was just thinking about something. That's all."

He held up his little arms in an invitation. "Do you want a hug?"

Tears filled her eyes again. She had to force her voice to remain steady. "That would be nice." She grabbed his shoulders and pulled him into a tight hug. He hugged her back warmly. His little hand patted her back, a gesture he had picked up from his daddy.

With her own free hand, she wiped her eyes clear. She gently broke the embrace and stared into his smiling face. "So do you like the park?"

"Uh huh." He nodded. "I like this park."

"I'm sorry that there isn't anyone here for you to play with," she told him.

He shrugged. "That's okay, Momma. It's kind of nice to have this place to ourselves, just you and me hanging out together."

She felt a pang of love spike through the darkness in her spirit. He was such a wonderful boy. She smiled at him. "I'm so glad that you feel that way. Why don't you go play for a little bit longer? We'll probably have to leave in another ten minutes or so. It's starting to get dark."

"Okay." He kissed her on the cheek and ran back to the playground equipment. She touched her cheek. His kiss warmed her.

She berated herself for letting him see her like that again. That was not what she wanted. Evan had seen his parents fret too much of late, noticing the tension and fear in their home escalate dramatically. Until a week back, these emotions were all but foreign to him.

She hated putting her little boy through such distress. That was how the two of them ended up at this park. Scott had other pressing business to attend to, so she decided to do something special with Evan. If what she had been told was correct, she might not be able to get away for some time.

She could not remember specifically where she had heard about this park, but whoever mentioned it had insisted that it was phenomenal. It truly was. Evan was thrilled with it on sight. She could hardly blame him for his enthusiasm. The playground itself occupied a small patch of woodchip-covered ground within a clearing of autumn trees. The trees proudly showed off their fall colors of red, orange, brown, and gold. The ground was a leaf-covered carpet that mirrored the tree limbs above. Thirty feet to the west of the playground was a small babbling creek. The tree line held back the noise of the nearby city so that all Erin could hear were the sounds of her son playing and the nearby creek.

This was a place of tranquility. If not for the rising tide of dark emotions within her, the moment would have been perfect. But, the nearly-perfect silence provided its own special version of hell for her, right now she didn't want to hear her own thoughts.

She pushed herself out of her dark reverie and looked around. It was getting darker much faster than she had anticipated. Their light was quickly dwindling as the sun set behind the tree

line. The last rays seemed to shine down only on the playground itself. Evan's hair shined like a beacon as he beamed down at her. He was standing by the opening of another tube slide.

"Momma!" he called to her excitedly. "This slide is so cool!"

"Cool," she mused. It was another word from her husband's vocabulary that Evan had just adopted within the last few months. Now it was his favorite descriptors.

She looked at the slide that bore such an honorific title. It was a faded aquamarine curlicue style tube. Evan was standing at its top holding the handlebar, ready to launch himself down its dark spiral. He looked at her from his ready position with a radiant smile, picturesque in fact.

Erin looked up at her son at the top of the slide, and a sudden sense of dread gripped her heart. Something about that slide made her feel uneasy.

*But why?* she asked herself. *You're being stupid, Erin!*

"Watch me, Momma!" Evan called.

Terror leapt into her throat. A hysterical shriek burst out of her before she could stop herself. "No, Evan!"

Evan stopped at the top of the slide. Frozen by her words, he looked down at her with a mixture of confusion and worry. "What's wrong, Momma?"

*What was wrong?* she asked herself. She didn't know what her problem was. *That slide was evil*, she thought with some amusement. The amusement felt forced, and however odd that

statement was, it was how she felt. *Was that slide even there a moment ago?* she asked herself soberly.

She scoffed at herself. *Okay, Erin. Now you're just being dumb. Of course that slide was already there.*

A small voice from the back of her mind asked unbidden, *"Are you sure?"*

Evan was still staring at her, and shame welled up within her as she him growing more and more fearful. This was not what she wanted for him today. She forced a smile on her face. "Nothing's wrong, honey. It's just . . . it's just time for us to go now."

"Aw, Momma." He looked crestfallen. "Do we have to?"

"Yes, honey." She nodded to him. "It's getting late and it's almost dark. Now come on down here."

He sighed. "Okay." He swung from the handles of the spiral slide to sit down inside it."

"Not that way!" she shrieked. Again the force of her words came out before she could restrain herself.

Evan jumped back at the shout as if he were struck physically. He looked at her tearfully. His lower lip began to tremble. "But why?"

She shook her head. She didn't know why. She just could not understand why she felt such a sense of foreboding. Logically, she knew it was just her anxiety and hormones running on overdrive. She was freaking her son out for no apparent reason.

"Just come down, honey. We need to go home now."

His face imploring, it looked almost angelic in the dying light of day. "Momma, can't I go down this slide? Just this one time. Please?"

Her instincts were screaming at her to get him down, were warning her some the impossible danger of this odd twisty slide. It was quite dark inside there. Could something have crawled up inside it? In the end, it was Evan's hopeful expression that won. She would not disappoint him again, not after everything else this week. Taking a deep breath through a clenched jaw, Erin nodded. "Sure, honey. One time down the cool slide, then we have to go."

He gave her a bright-eyed smile. An instant later, he catapulted himself down the slide with an elated, "Whee!"

Erin felt her heart clench in a vice as he disappeared down the tube. She stared anxiously at the bottom opening of the slide. The seconds crawled by with agonizing slowness. She sat on that bench paralyzed as the sun dropped further in the sky. The shadows had already begun to fall on the top of the slide, darkening the interior further.

"Evan?" she called out quietly, almost tentatively.

Only the sound of the nearby brook answered her call.

"Evan!" Erin called again. Panic began to fray at her self-control.

There was no answer.

"Evan!" she screamed louder.

Still no answer. This time she stood up and trotted over to the slide as quickly as her pregnant belly and locking joints allowed her.

"Evan, this is not funny." Reason struggled to reassert dominance again.

She stooped down on her knees in front of the formerly colorful slide, now washed dark by the descending shadows. Her ample belly made the short stoop awkward but not entirely unmanageable. Once she lowered herself, she looked up into the tube. The closing shadows of night had now made the interior pitch black. There was no hint of her son.

"Evan!" she shrieked. Her voice was oddly metallic as it resonated off the plastic. She tried to crawl up into the tube, but her pregnant abdomen made the task too difficult.

She shouted into the slide, "Evan! Come down here now! I mean it!" She annunciated each syllable perfectly with a blend of fear and anger.

The unbidden voice in the back of her head spoke again. *"He can't hear you."*

*Shut up!* she told herself harshly. *He's just stuck in the middle of this stupid slide. Of course he can hear me. He's just scared. He played a joke on me and took it way too far. Now he's just scared of the consequences of making me angry.*

She forced her voice into a soothing tone. "Honey. Please come down. You just scared Momma, that's all. Just come down now and we'll go home."

*"Evan doesn't play cruel jokes . . . but he is scared."*

*Shut up!* she told herself. She tried to push herself up the tube, but between the angle and her belly it was impossible to negotiate her way up. She frantically crawled out backwards and made for the ladder leading to the top of the playground equipment. Night had now fallen completely on the park and the surrounding forest. Above the tree line, the stars began to blink in the sky.



She puffed vigorously as she ran, partly from exertion, but mostly out of fear. She began to climb clumsily up the ladder. In her haste, her foot slipped off the rungs. Only her sweaty white-knuckled grip kept her from plummeting backwards and severely injuring herself. She took a deep breath and climbed the rest of the way up without incident. At the top, she awkwardly forced her way past the playground's side railing.

Once she was on top of the equipment, she ran over the pretend bridge to the villainous slide. The soles of her shoes slapped down on the playground equipment with metallic *clomps* as she ran across it. She came to the top entrance of the slide and shouted down into its recesses. "Evan!"

Erin strained her ears to listen for anything. Silence was the night's only response. The darkness even seemed to swallow the sound of the brook. She sat down into the slide, putting her legs and feet into the abyss of the tube and waddling her hips as she tried to ease herself further down into the tight confines of the spiral.

By now she knew that something was definitely wrong. Her maternal fear for her son's safety banished all thoughts of self-preservation.

"Evan! Momma's coming, baby!" she called.

She descended further down into the tube. She rounded the spiral as she gingerly felt ahead with her feet, deeply afraid she would come across her son's injured body.

"*Or worse,*" the dark voice added, though she was concentrating too much on her descent to command it to silence.

Suddenly the hands that she used to brace herself came down on a small pile of crunching leaves that her legs somehow missed in their initial sweep. Her hand slipped out from beneath her and she lost control. She plunged forward into the darkness screaming.

She did not appear at the bottom of the slide.