Chapter 1

"Aaron! Aaron!"

"AAROOON!"

Sharon's voice echoed from downstairs.

It was a school day.

Upstairs, Aaron's alarm clock was ringing.

Every five minutes, it rang again.

And again.

For Sharon, this was nothing new. It was the same ridiculous routine every school morning.

Buckaroo was racing up and down the stairs, apparently enjoying himself.

Nathan, meanwhile, was fast asleep, snoring away in his own dreamland.

Sharon couldn't decide whether to admire her husband's remarkable ability to sleep through anything or be thoroughly annoyed by it.

Ding-dong! Ding-dong!

The alarm refused to give up.

Sharon took a deep breath.

She relaxed her shoulders and walked toward the staircase.

She placed one foot on the first step.

Then she stopped.

Something occurred to her.

She stood there for a few seconds, thinking.

Buckaroo, who had spotted her approaching the stairs, bounded upstairs excitedly.

He reached the landing and turned around, waiting for her.

"Woof! Woof!"

Sharon looked up at him and smiled.

Buckaroo stared back, confused.

Then, still smiling, Sharon stepped backward, turned around, and walked into the kitchen.

She picked up her coffee, sat down at the dining table, and opened the newspaper to the crossword puzzle.

Ah!

What a wonderful feeling!

It was almost a Zen moment.

She could practically imagine peaceful chanting surrounding her.

A few minutes later, the alarm finally stopped.

The house fell silent.

Sharon continued working on her crossword.

Then came the unmistakable sound of someone racing around upstairs.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

"Aaron must be awake," Sharon thought.

She didn't say anything.

"Mom! Mom!"

Aaron's voice came from upstairs.

Sharon continued studying her crossword.

"Mom! Where's my school planner? I left it here last night!"

A pause.

"Shoot! It's so late! I've got to be at school in ten minutes!"

Another pause.

"These alarm clocks are useless! They never ring when you actually need them!"

Sharon almost burst out laughing.

For the next few minutes, the house sounded as though a tornado had swept through it.

Aaron came charging down the stairs.

"Mom! Don't you know I'm late for school? Why didn't you wake me up earlier? My stupid alarm didn't even ring!"

When Aaron wanted something, he expected everything around him to cooperate.

At moments like these, he rarely stopped to consider anyone else's convenience.

"Mom! Where's breakfast?"

Then, almost as an afterthought, he added, "By the way, my school planner was in my backpack."

Sharon said nothing.

"Mom! MOM! I'm talking to you! Can't you hear me?"

For a moment, Sharon felt her temper rising.

The old Sharon would have shouted so loudly that the entire house would have shaken.

But things were different now.

For the past few months, she'd been practicing Zen meditation.

And she loved the results.

She was learning to control her reactions, concentrate on what she could control, and stop worrying about everything else.

From the kitchen came the sound of Aaron moving dishes around.

Sharon let him continue.

"Mom! Where's the peanut butter?"

No answer.

"Mom! Bagel or bread? Which one am I supposed to have today?"

Sharon remained absorbed in her crossword.

"Mom! What is wrong with you? I'm going to be late!"

Sharon calmly picked up her earbuds and put them in.

She selected some peaceful devotional music on her phone.

The volume was low enough that she could still hear every bit of commotion around her.

Just then, someone began coming down the stairs.

Nathan appeared, yawning and rubbing his eyes.

"Sharon, is there any coffee?"

He looked toward the kitchen.

"Hey, why hasn't Aaron left for school yet?"

Then he turned toward Sharon.

"Sharon! Don't you realize how late it is? If he gets another tardy notice, we'll be the ones who have to go to school and explain!"

Question after question poured out of Nathan's mouth.

Sharon took another deep breath.

She didn't look up.

Aaron and Nathan exchanged glances.

Aaron pointed discreetly toward his mother and placed a finger over his lips.

Shhh!

Nathan understood.

Neither of them was going to get anywhere with her this morning.

They collected whatever they needed and went about their business.

Within moments, Aaron was ready to leave.

"Bye, Mom! See you this evening! I've got everything I need!"

"Bye, sweetheart."

Aaron stopped in his tracks.

He turned around.

"Wow! Mom! You CAN hear!"

Sharon looked up and winked.

"Yep. Selective hearing. Just like both of you."

Aaron hurried out the door.

Sharon removed her earbuds and placed them on the table.

Nathan returned with his coffee and settled into the chair beside her.

Sluuurp!

Sharon winced.

Nathan took another noisy sip.

SLUUURP!

"Could you please drink your coffee a little more quietly?"

Nathan didn't seem to hear.

He took another enthusiastic sip.

"Ah! Now that's good coffee, Sharon! You know, there's something special about drinking it this way."

He smacked his lips.

"Wonderful! Great to the last drop!"

He chuckled at his own joke.

Then he slurped even louder.

Sharon felt another wave of irritation.

She took a deep breath.

Zen, Sharon. Zen.

Over the past several weeks, meditation had brought her considerable peace.

She no longer felt the need to shout about every little thing.

Let things happen.

That was her new philosophy.

"Hey, Sharon! Working on the crossword?"

Nathan pulled the newspaper slightly toward himself.

Sharon remained silent.

This was her private time.

Her *me time*.

She had no desire to share it with anyone.

She tapped her pencil against the table.

Nathan, apparently unaware of her feelings, began reading the clues.

"One down. Annoy."

He grinned.

"Sharon, put that one in."

He continued.

"Three across. Pester."

Then another.

"Seven across. Irritate!"

Nathan looked delighted.

"Wow! These are easy!"

That was enough.

Without saying a word, Sharon picked up the newspaper, stood up, and walked away.

She opened the back door, stepped outside, and settled into a chair.

There, surrounded by the peace of her backyard, she resumed her crossword puzzle.

Nathan opened his mouth as though he wanted to say something.

Then he thought better of it.

Why invite trouble?

He went upstairs to get on with his work.

Some time passed.

The clock inside the house struck eight.

Sharon decided it was time to get ready for work.

She returned to the dining room.

Nathan was nowhere to be seen.

But his empty coffee cup was still sitting on the table.

Sharon picked it up and carried it toward the kitchen sink.

Then she stopped.

She looked at the cup.

She turned around.

And she placed it right back where Nathan had left it.

"I'm not a housekeeper," she declared to herself.

"Nope. I'm not here to clean up everyone else's mess."

She smiled proudly.

"This is Sharon 2.0. A brand-new version!"

She took a satisfied breath.

"Zen works! What a wonderful way to start the day!"

Sharon went upstairs, got dressed for work, and came back down.

She looked around for Nathan.

He was nowhere in sight.

She picked up a sticky note, wrote a few instructions, and attached it to the refrigerator where everyone could see it.

Then she grabbed her car keys and left.

Once inside her car, she checked her phone before starting the engine.

There were several messages from Aaron.

Should she read them now?

She glanced at the time.

It was five minutes before eight-thirty.

She opened the latest message.

Mom, sorry about interrupting your me time this morning. BTW, I noticed a really interesting ad in today's newspaper. I want to talk to you about it this evening. BFN.

Sharon smiled.

She immediately typed a reply.

No worries. Take it easy. Can't wait to talk.

Still wondering what Aaron had discovered in the newspaper, Sharon started her car and drove to work.

End of Chapter 1