

Chapter One

The air around my mother's face glows white as she starts to die. It's a sparkling white that sucks her in, a lonely white because I know I'm the only one who can see it. I've seen colour around people all my life, but never white. This white seems more permanent than flashes of orange or strokes of pink. This white fills in the space inches above my mother's head in every direction, blinding me, covering her up like she's not there at all. I squint to try and dim it but it shines stronger through my eyelashes, humming its way into my skull.

It hardly hurts anymore, she says then, though her lips don't move and no sound comes out. I'm glad to hear inside her head, but I don't know if she's telling the truth. For the last six months I've been startled by snippets of what other people are thinking — doctors, teachers, strangers — I can't tell if the words are real or if I'm making

them up, but when they come from my mother I listen harder. Her thoughts are the only ones I really want to hear, especially now.

I pull the hospital blanket up. Underneath, her arms have weakened and the iciness I felt yesterday in her hands has moved into the room around us. The nurses notice only the temperature from her fever, her matted hair, and the dirt under her nails when she pulls at the skin on her sunken face.

My mother's eyelids flutter open and closed with each gasping breath she takes. When they are open, she seems to be looking past the white light to something only she can see. When they are closed, I feel the invisible part of her pulling away, snapping imaginary strings connecting her to the sky.

I adjust the plant beside my mother's bed, the one with the yellow flowers matching her skin. One nurse said it would be better on the windowsill, but when she stopped coming around I moved it to the bedside table, close enough so it could almost touch my mother's face if she rolled the right way. And now, it almost does. I wish its tiny green fingers would spread and reach out to her, comfort her with the garden smell from its soft faces.

I tell her then that she can go, and I force myself to smile even though I don't mean it. I run my fingertip over the collar of her mint-green hospital gown and then look at the ceiling, wondering if she's up there yet, watching me.

I reach into my denim purse, hanging by a string near the belt loops of my shorts, and pull out the envelope creased in half, coated in the incense she was burning when she wrote it.

"Read this out loud at the very end," she had said. I unfold the single white paper inside, one folded rectangle turns into eight and

in the middle, her handwriting. I can only manage a whisper that shakes: “Death is as sure for that which is born, as birth is for that which is dead. Therefore grieve not for what is inevitable.”

I wonder: how can these words help me now? Does she really think I can believe something she copied from a book? Or was she just trying to make herself feel better when she wrote this out?

Tears choke the back of my throat and flood my vision. I hear what sounds like my mother’s final thought, again from inside her head. *None of it is real*, she says. And then she disappears. She disappears and takes my sister with her. And there’s nothing more I need to do to try to save them.

My heart folds itself into a hundred tiny parts, folds until I wonder if it’s still there. I clench my teeth and feel tears pushing to get out. But I hold on.

My father comes in right away, like he knows the instant it’s safe to return, the moment he will no longer have to see her looking at him. He stands on the far side of the room and says my name, his tie hanging loose around his neck like a weary businessman’s. I look at him and nod. He hangs his head so that his hair, dark with grey bits, completely hides his eyes.

Later, when they are covering her up, I tell my father, “She hated the hospital.”

“I know, Maya.” He rubs his jaw, then smooths his hand up over his forehead and through his hair.

“She shouldn’t have been here.”

“But they might have been able to save them.” He stares into open air.

“Did you even want to save her?”

“There was nothing I could do. It was too early, you know that.”

“I meant Mother.”

“You knew this was coming, Maya,” he says, leaving a second of thick silence. “I guess we should go now.” He looks at the floor and taps his right arm on the leg of his black pants, which have become creased from sitting in a hunched over position.

Cold air hits my cheek and I wonder: can Father feel it too?

I put the white piece of paper I have been clutching back into my purse and zip it up, catching a strand of my hair in the zipper, black hair inside a metal mouth. It stings when I yank it out.

My father’s shiny shoes squeak on the floor as I follow him down the stairs at the end of the hallway, through the front lobby and out the entrance doors. On the other side, the August sun attacks my eyes. I suck in humid air and cough when I release it.

A news reporter, cameraman, and a small crowd of women wait in the parking lot of the hospital. They have signs that say, “Prayer Can Save a Life,” “Tragedy of 1985,” and “Marigold, You Are Divine.” When we walk by, a woman thrusts a microphone close to my father’s lips.

“Mr. Devine, can you give us a quick update on your wife’s condition?”

“My wife’s condition . . .” he holds me behind him with his arm, “. . . has deteriorated to the point of expiration.”

Then he grabs my wrist and pushes us past the lady, bumping her with the side of his body. Someone behind us starts to cry and I

turn to look at her: large hips, permed hair, bouncing shoulders. “Be strong, dear!” she shouts out to me. “You have two angels watching over you now!” I don’t turn back as we stagger across the concrete. I don’t want to tell her the truth, that I’m not sure if Mother ever did enough nice things to become an angel.

When we are seated in my father’s car, and the leather seats have attached themselves to my thin legs, he speaks. “I was glad they let you stay in there by yourself. Those damn nurses didn’t think you were old enough, but I told them you were a hell of a lot more mature than any eleven-year-old I knew.” He reaches out to touch the top of my hand, but then pulls away.

“It was fine,” I answer without looking at him. “I’m almost twelve.” He turns the key in the ignition and the engine sputters, then stops.

“Fucking piece of shit,” my father says and I shoot him a stare that fills the entire inside of the car. “Sorry,” he says. I glimpse the colour swirling around his head, brownish and muddy like a river after a storm. He has no idea what he is in the middle of.

He tries to start the car again and this time it goes, winding up to spew cool air into my face from a vent on the dash.

We say nothing, express nothing.

As we drive home, I concentrate on the world through the glass of the window. Trees, buildings, cars, all a blur to me — Saskatoon has never seemed so big. When we drive over the river, I look down into the water at a person in a silver boat. Is he waving at me? Or is he just sitting there, alone, waiting for something to happen?

Emerald Crescent looks the same as when my mother lived there, houses lined up behind green lawns, fathers starting mowers

and whackers, cats laid out on the sunny sidewalk. A couple of kids run through a sprinkler in the grass, screeching each time the water sprays the naked parts of their bodies. Their mother sits on the front step, smiling at the rainbows growing in the mist above their heads.

When we reach our house, the windows from my bedroom look like eyes and the door, a closed mouth. We fill the empty driveway and get out; two car doors slam. No one greets us.

“We’re not taking it down,” I tell my father.

“What?”

“The teepee. It’s staying there. Maybe forever.” I’m surprised to be feeling sentimental about the stained pieces of tarp holding in the stinky space where my mother gave up on her life.

“Fine, Maya. Whatever you want.”

I have not won the argument — teepee or not, my mother is not coming back. And this man I call my father, this man fumbling with the lock on the front door of my house, makes me feel like I have just been orphaned.

“You must be hungry,” he says in the kitchen, taking a box of Kraft Dinner out of the cupboard and shaking it in the air. Its rattle scrapes against my backbone, causing me to wince in irritation.

“I don’t want that!” I snap at him. “I’ll just eat grapes.” I look down at the bowl of shrivelled green grapes on the counter, the ones we tried to get my mother to eat days earlier. The ones she touched before she refused them. I pop the grapes into my mouth, ingesting my mother’s fingerprints one by one, squirting tartness between my teeth.

“I’m going to sleep for a while then,” my father says, throwing the box on the counter and whipping his tie out of his collar. “We’ll

talk later.” His voice shakes a bit when he says it. He hobbles away from me and up the stairs, a defeated man, leaving me with nothing but the smell of his aftershave — cedar and citrus. I wrinkle my face until it fades. I wonder then if it was true what Mother said before she went, that she didn’t deserve him. And if he meant what he said back, that he wasn’t a very good husband.

My mother’s leather mules are staggered on the floor beside my feet. We wanted her to wear them after we dragged her in from the backyard but she insisted on going barefoot. I reach down and hold one in my arms like a baby, running my finger along the side. A shoe without a home. Misplaced. I stick my nose in and breathe the last few steps my mother must have taken as a whole person. I put my hand inside and point the toe to look at me. “Sorry you will be without a foot from now on,” I say. “I promise to wear you as often as possible.” I nod the mule on my hand and drop it to the ground. I slip my bare toes into both shoes, oversized for my feet, and stomp my way upstairs in my father’s invisible footsteps.

I land with bare knees on the pink carpeting of my bedroom and open the white chest in the corner. Inside are my old toys, the stuff Father brought back from extended business trips, the stuff I packed away the day the doctor told us Mother was sick.

I see the scary doll first. The one Father bought for me in Toronto, the one he said looked just like me. I don’t think this doll looks like me at all. She stares up at me with her glazed yellow eyes, much creepier than mine, and her stiff black hair. Aunt Leah called her the “Devil Doll” once. I toss her aside to see what else I’ve kept underneath.

Picking up each toy and placing it on the carpet around me, I

repeat the following words: “At least I still have my hairstyle Barbie, at least I still have my Strawberry Shortcake, at least I still have My Little Pony, at least I still have a family of Pound Puppies, at least I still have my Rubik’s Cube, at least I still have my 3,000-piece *Mona Lisa* puzzle.”

But none of this stuff means anything without my mother. Will I ever have a family again? Be happy? I feel my mouth start to sweat and my eyes grow itchy with sadness.

I imagine that each Barbie, each doll, each glittering pony is reaching out to console me, catching my tears in their little hands, their faces morphing into sympathetic smiles.

Because I’m crying, I almost don’t see her standing there. My mother. Like a faded picture in the corner of my eye looking down at me from inside the closet, my hanging clothes creating fabric hair around her see-through head.

And in her open palm she holds my baby sister, small like a Christmas orange, hugging her legs into her tiny chest.