

CHAPTER 1

I JERKED AWAKE AT THE SUDDEN SILENCE. Staring at the baby monitor on my bedside table, I waited for Gam's next gurgly inhalation. It always came, but I worried about the day it didn't. How long can a heart pump in a 450-pound body?

Gam's resigned sigh echoed, electrified, through the monitor. Glancing at the clock, I realized she was awake and waiting for me to go downstairs and make her breakfast. Morbidly obese, hungry and trapped in a bed a few feet from the kitchen – the irony wasn't lost on me.

"Morning, Gam," I said as I stumbled past her room, my face swollen with sleep.

"Good morning, love," Gam called in her sweet, sing-song voice, just like she had every morning since I could remember. All the family I had left and I wouldn't have traded an ounce of her, not after everything she'd done for me.

My mom left when I was two months old. I look like her – blond hair, pale skin, blue eyes and slim. But even in photos of her as a child, my mother had a defiant tilt to her chin and a devilish gleam in her eye. My gleam, if I even had one, is more wistful than mischievous.

After so many years, I'd given up on a tearful, apologetic reunion. The realist in me understood why my mom left me here with Gam. She was seventeen. How could she have looked after a baby? Especially in Edelburg, where the probing eyes of neighbours are quick to judge and slow to forget.

After filling up the kettle for tea, I flicked on the radio to the sound of jovial patter about the price of grain and the weather. Gam liked to hear the local news first thing in the morning, even though not much happened in Edelburg, population 1,867, between the hours of 10 p.m. and 7 a.m.

Leaning against the counter, I waited for the water to boil. The view from the window above the sink was like a painting of a summer day. Framed by tall poplar and oak trees on either side, the grassy prairie stretched out behind the house marred only by our dilapidated garage that had paused mid-collapse.

I poured steaming water into two mugs and carried them into Gam's room, hip-checking the door to open it.

"Thanks, love," Gam said as I set her mug on the bedside table. "What would I do without you?" It was rhetorical. We both knew what would happen without me.

"Sleep okay?"

Gam nodded. The fat under her chin wobbled, but her head barely moved. She was encased in her own body, a prisoner of its suffocating weight.

When I was little, those fleshy arms encircled me in bed as she rocked me to sleep. I used to cushion myself in the pillowy softness of her stomach for movie marathons that stretched late into the night. She'd done her best to make my childhood a magical time. I didn't have a lot of friends, but she indulged my imagination, setting up fairy tea parties, complete with hand-sewn costumes and forts, in the living room. She'd never been like other grandmothers in town, spindly and bursting with energy. But Gam's quiet protectiveness had kept me safe and loved, despite everything. Sometimes, I wished there was still room in her bed for me to nestle against her. I could never love anyone as much as I loved Gam.

She was watching me, her eyes hidden beneath folds of skin. I smiled at her and put my feet up on her bed, leaning back in my chair. Her hand inched forward and rested on my bare ankle. The reassuring weight of her flesh seeped into me.

I slurped my tea, cringing at the scalding heat on my lips. “Aunt Mim will be here after lunch for your bath.” The real appeal to her sister’s visit wasn’t the bath, but the gossip. A regular churchgoer, Mim would be bursting with news. And while they were hooting and chattering, I would be able to sneak upstairs and write in blissful, uninterrupted quiet.

I’d been working on my novel for two years and it was almost finished. A fantasy about a kidnapped princess who discovers she has magical powers, its convoluted story lines sometimes left me shaking my head, wondering how I would draw it to a close. Between school, my boyfriend, Rich, and looking after Gam most days, there wasn’t time left for writing. But I’d graduated in June and summer holidays stretched in front of me, swollen with time. Rich didn’t understand why I’d rather be inside, typing in Grandpa’s office, than spending the day with him at the beach.

I’d explained to him how, after Grandpa died, losing myself in another world filled the space his death left in our lives. But I don’t think Rich understood. Coming from a family of seven, he was an uncle three times over before he was twelve. His life was spent in a dizzying array of family celebrations: marriages, births, graduations, anniversaries, birthdays with a whirlwind of relations.

He’d never watched sickness strip someone he loved of their dignity until there was nothing left but a small, shriveled shell of a person. And the emptiness afterwards, when you cried so much you wondered how there could be any tears left. Rich had never been through that, either. I wondered if he ever would. You have to love someone a lot to know that kind of sadness.

Rich and I started dating the year Grandpa died. He said he’d never noticed me before, a typically blunt Rich thing to say. But all of a sudden, that year, I was on his radar. He’d seen me at the store, walking home from school, at church. I was probably mysterious to him, a girl removed from the social workings of Edelburg, and ripe for the picking. In a strange twist of fate, my

body finally started to develop, curves replacing baby fat, at the same time as I lost my grandpa. I became someone worth looking at in a town of fresh-faced blonds.

He was a distraction too, at first, taking my mind off the sadness that pressed on my chest and made it hard to breathe. Gam was nervous about me dating. Rich was a few years older than me, and she'd eyed him warily when he first came over. But he'd worn her down and never once commented on her weight. I loved him for that, gratitude shining so bright it blinded me to other things. He was part of my life. An installation. Rich was comfortable and loyal and all the things a boyfriend should be.

"Sara Jean." Gam turned her eyes to the colostomy bag hidden under the sheets.

Sighing, I put down my mug. What *would* she do without me? My heart lurched at the thought of leaving Gam, but one day it would happen. Now that I'd graduated, she had to know it was only a matter of time. It was one of the few things we never spoke about. Maybe Gam thought if she didn't bring it up, it wouldn't occur to me.

Someone knocked on the screen door. Gam frowned at me and I shrugged. "Maybe it's Mim?" I hoped it wasn't some other relative or neighbour performing their monthly do-gooding. I'd have to invite them in for tea and a chat, and my whole morning of writing time would be wasted. Or was it Rich, surprising me with a trip to the beach? I groaned and hoped not. Telling him I couldn't go because I had to write would start an argument.

But, it wasn't a relative, or Rich. It was a tall, good-looking boy, on the cusp of being a man. He had dark brown eyes ringed by long eyelashes and looked at me as if I should know what he was doing on my front steps.