

Chapter One

V I N N Y

I run six miles of sun-warmed morning and finish in a sprint toward home, happy in the power of my legs, happy in the surprise slice of Newport summer in April. Mimi and I will spend this day at the beach. I look down at my legs, already tanned from running track, grateful for their strength and my good run today.

Perfect day. Perfect Mimi.

I make the sandwiches. I plan the day carefully, this spring-break day. I am eighteen; will lifeguard the summer away, go to college in the fall. "I feel like dancing." Leo Sayer sings my thoughts on the car radio as Mimi and I drive down the long hill past the easy swells of First Beach. I reach over for Mimi's hand. She smiles. We have been going out for three weeks. We are more comfortable together every time. I think I love her. It will last forever.

We park in the empty lot at Third Beach. I will be a lifeguard here in a few months.

Every day I lift weights to get ready. Mimi and I find a small bowl of a sand dune and have lunch. She looks wonderful in her bikini.

I decide to go swimming "You coming in?" I ask her.

"I'll watch, thank you." Mimi folds her arms against the breeze and stops about thirty feet from the water's edge. "You sure?" I'm walking slowly towards the water. Mimi follows.

"O.K." I sign out, a signal for count down. 4-3-2-1. I begin to run, picking up speed like a pole vaulter. I look back at Mimi, watching me show off my pumped-up male ego. Her head is thrown back, breeze fluttering her hair away from her face. My daring sprint into the ocean is for her.

First the cold sand, then the water, slap my feet, pinching them numb. I run faster to ease the pain, to get it over with, to dive in and feel the headachy cold, then run out and laugh and live forever with Mimi in our warm sand dune.

I run faster, up to my knees. One last step – stretch out, out, airborne, then skimming like a stone you skip on the surface. I hit the water hard, so hard it feels solid in the longest second of stopped time I've ever known. And in that longest second of frozen floating I can feel the sharp heat of an electric current slice open my neck, burn down my

back inside me, traveling a steady pace through my body, down my legs and out my feet – a white hot current that begins and ends – and I look down into murky water, the bottom, a mile away.

And I cannot move.

Nothing works.

The frozen floating moment stretches beyond my eyes. There is no me. No Vinny, whole and entire.

I am now a head – a floating head that must breathe.

I cannot feel my arms or legs. Only the slap of tiny waves against my face.

My head thrashes for air, to the left, to the right, churning the water to foam, beating it with my nose, poking holes for air that isn't there.

I breathe cold water. My throat and nose are liquid ice. I bite the water, filling my head, my balloon head, ready to burst.

I P P P

I am in a big compartment facing a bright light and two faces above me. I hear a muffled siren. I am drowsy, thick, slow. Ocean everywhere in me. A man stares at me.

“Can you feel this?” he asks.

“Whaaa?” My mouth won't work, tongue stiff. What does he mean?

“How about this?” But he does nothing.

“Whaaa?”

I look at the eyes of the two men for some sign of what is happening. Their mouths hang open; their eyes stare as if they are being forced to look at something ugly, strange. I don't know what it is. I am so tired. My neck is numb.

I P P P

I wake up in a large room with glaring lights. My brother Mark is over me, holding my hand. “Well,” he says, “you always wanted to lift weights. You're doing it now!”

What does he mean? Two men stand behind Mark and next to them are my parents, Sonja, my sister and Mimi.

“Whaaa happennn?” No one answers. They all look at me as if I am dead.

I must have broken my arm. Maybe my legs. It'll be okay. This will be over soon. My head itches. Cold. So cold.

“Pull!” Mark is holding my hand away from me. I pull so hard he should fly across the room.

“Pull!”

Why should I pull? I am pulling, you jerk. I want to tell him. I’ll pull you into Middletown. But nothing comes out.

I look at my hand. But it is not mine. It is just a thing next to me that Markie is holding up like a mannequin’s. It can’t be mine because the fingers won’t move.

I am pulling with all my might, but the hand doesn’t move. Must be anesthesia. It’ll wear off.

Mimi comes over. And Sonja. They are squinty eyed, numb. I can’t move my head to face them. My head is itchy. Scalp feels full of sand. I want to sleep.

I P P P

My eyes blink in the morning sunlight. I am being loaded onto another truck. Maybe I am dead. Maybe this is what happens. You can see through the casket when they load you into the ambulance to take you to the undertaker’s. Your spirit is still there with your body and it can see through things and see all the people at your wake like some T.V. camera, transmitting messages back to your lifeless body.

A man guards my inert form. We must be headed for the undertaker’s, then the funeral. Then they will bury this dead body. It will be eaten by worms soon. What then will happen to my spirit?

MOJCA

When he reached the emergency room, Vinny was lying as if he were still on the beach, his hair full of sand, face sunburned.

“Vinny, all this sand!” I’ll never forget all the sand. He didn’t look sick or injured, except for the weights hanging from his head. The doctors had drilled two holes in his skull; into the holes they had placed rivets. Attached to these anchors were long ropes that were tied to weights, fifty pounds worth, keeping Vinny’s spine straight so he could breathe. So he could lie.

“Vinny, look at all the sand,” I scolded again and tried to smile. I reached for his hand. Mark, my other son, held his other hand. “I can’t feel anything,” Vinny said in an astonished voice. I touched his feet. Nothing. His hand again. “I can’t feel a thing.” Vinny was sleepy and dozed off. Reality was finally sifting through to me, but nothing looked wrong. Vinny’s handsome face was tranquil, his eyes closed. Walking by, one might have wondered why he was here.

Vinny had been born with a hare lip and a cleft palate. There was something visibly wrong with him then. In fact, the nurses didn’t want him shown in the nursery. They kept him in the back of the viewing room.

Here he was, eighteen years later, the hare lip and cleft palate long since corrected, the learning disorders worked through. He had overcome so much. Just two days before, at my daughter’s confirmation, the bishop had praised Vinny to the whole congregation for his fine trumpet solo. He was going to major in music in college.

“I can’t feel anything!” Vinny woke up again. His face was pale, mottled beneath the sunburn, and his eyes swept from left to right across the ceiling, as if looking for escape. I could feel a great ball of tears and pain begin to well up in me, but I could not let go. We waited until Vinny dozed off again and then left the room to speak to his doctor. We were told that Vinny had come in clinically dead. When he dove he hit the water at such an angle that his head snapped back, breaking his vertebra and pinching off his spinal cord. He had almost drowned because he could not move. Mimi and a passerby had pulled him to shore.

Until the traction was in place to pull the neck up and free the nerves to the heart, Vinny could not breathe on his own. After explaining his condition, the doctor told us the name of a neurologist in Providence who was on staff in Newport and who would, if necessary, operate. “But,” the doctor said, “I am open to your suggestions.”

My husband and I were like most people who, when serious illness arises, think there is someone who can make it right, some doctor, some hospital to help us. But I learned through this crisis that what can be accomplished depends largely on the level of expertise of the doctors and hospitals where you are. There are no miracles anywhere. If you want more than they can give, it is up to you, the individual, to find it.

“There are experts in Boston, I’m sure. I don’t know where. There must be.”

Again he said, as if we were the experts, as if we knew what to do, “Whatever you’d like to do.”

What happened next was the same instinctive response I learned as a child: cry later. Be sad later.

During World War II, when I was 7 years old, my family used to cross the border from Yugoslavia to Italy, where my grandmother lived. She had a huge garden and she gave us gold coins to help us in occupied Yugoslavia, where paper money was almost worthless. The produce could be taken across the border without difficulty but the gold had to be smuggled in. I was the oldest child so my father hid the money in my shoes.

“Don’t let me down. Smile at the soldiers,” my father would say. So while the soldiers pointed the bayoneted rifles at us and searched all the adults, and while my feet throbbed from the shoes filled with coins and I was so nervous I thought I’d give us away and we’d all go to a prison camp, I smiled and walked as normally as I could past the bayonets.

I couldn’t be nervous. I knew the consequences. As a child I saw consequences all the time. Walking to school I saw men hung on lamp posts, their fly-covered tongues hanging out, dead because they defied the Nazis. When you are seven years old and you realize that the happiness of your whole family depends on your actions, you learn quickly that actions can be much more important than feelings. You learn that feelings have to go.

When the doctor said, “I am open to your suggestions,” I realized what a short distance he was willing to go. I knew that Vinny had to get more than that.

I told him I had been in a doctor's office in Boston when I heard the news of Vinny's accident. That doctor suggested we call Veterans. "Could you call someone there?" I asked.

"No, I can't call. The doctors at the hospital where Vinny's going should contact me."

"But I don't even know anyone there or how to go about it" I pleaded.

"Well, I'm not calling because I'm not on the staff of that hospital." He glared at me, daring me to challenge him.

I was very upset by now. My son was unconscious and time was a critical factor. Much more, I found out later, than I knew. I had no choice but to start making phone calls.

Before the night was over I would be on the phone for seven hours.

Veterans' Hospital had no beds available, a nurse told me. She suggested I try Boston University's unit. I asked the doctor, "If we can get a bed for him at B.U., how do we get an ambulance?"

"An ambulance? No. Absolutely not. He can't be moved. He has fifty pounds on his head. Any jarring could shatter his skull." His voice was rising.

"But you told me we had options!" I shot back.

"Well, not with fifty pounds on his head!" And he walked out of the room leaving me with two problems to overcome: I had to find Vinny a bed and I had to get him there.

I began to dial again. I called emergency vehicle rentals all over Rhode Island and Connecticut. Always the same answer. No one would move him because of the excessive weight on his head. I even tried air travel. I called the Coast Guard to see if I could arrange for a helicopter; they could not leave the area, a small jet company said the door to the cabin was too small. Time after time I repeated my story "My son has broken his neck. Can you help?" I was going to get my son out of Newport no matter what, but nothing was happening.

In and out of Vinny's room. More phone calls. The clock moving. Markie, my daughter Sonja, Mimi, my husband and I all like zombies as helpless in some ways as Vinny himself. Finally around nine P.M., we left the hospital, utterly defeated.

Friends came to the house and I eventually broke down. I cried, and prayed with a priest, and tried to smile when everyone said, "Mojca, it will be O.K. He'll get the best treatment."

When the priest left, I saw everything in a clear light. I could see the way things had to happen and what I would do to keep Vinny alive. Not because I knew what to do, but because things had to be done and no one else seemed to be doing them.

At eleven o'clock the doctor from B.U. unit finally called back. Yes, he had a bed for Vinny, and, no, Vinny could not be moved with weight that heavy. But he saw no reason why the weight couldn't be dropped to thirty pounds, which would make it possible to transport Vinny to B.U. the next morning.

Pounds had been taken off my head.

We stumbled into bed around two. We had worked for almost ten hours to ensure the proper care for my son.

During the night I woke up several times screaming. As I slept, my defenses must have fallen, because images of Vinny running into the water when he was a little boy kept playing in my mind. Vinny laughing and splashing, his little legs running so fast.

I managed to gain control. I thanked God for the training he had given me at the age of seven. Though the bayonets were pointed at me again, I would not be nervous. I would do my best for Vinny. We would smuggle him past those guards, He would make it.

V I N N Y

“What the hell’s going on here?”

“First time this ever happened man.”

“What do we do now?”

Men are laughing around me. At me.

“Goddamn bed’s stuck.”

I am in an open elevator surrounded by four men.

“Don’t worry about it, Vin, baby. We’ll get you outta here.” One smiling face leans over me.

“Don’t count on it. Could be here all night.” They all laugh again. I am caught up in it and I laugh too until it chokes me. I want to ask where I am. But I don’t really care. I want to say just leave me in one place so I can sleep. But I can’t stop laughing. And choking.

“You guys are sad, man.” Another voice. Then another giggle.

“Vinny, you will spend the rest of your life stuck in this elevator, if those guys don’t let me get you outta here”, says the first voice, a young man’s.

I feel my laugh bubbling up in my throat and feel tears creep into my eye, and laugh some more. An elevator. I will live forever in an elevator. I wanted to live with Mimi in a sand dune at Third Beach.

Finally someone pushes the bed free and I see a grey ceiling over me and light from a window.

“Vinny, welcome to Boston University Hospital, Robbie Seven!” A new voice, a girl’s. Her tanned face hovers over mine. I don’t know anyone here. Who are what is Robbie Seven?

“Watch his head. Be careful of the weights.” The young man again.

“We’re placing you on a water bed now, Vinny.” A water bed. A bed of water. So hard it hurts you.

“Okay.” I fall asleep.

“Time to turn you!” The tan-faced girl wakes me when she and another nurse begin to move me. Pillows go between my legs and they move me as if they are tilting a heavy marble statue.

My sheet falls away. I am naked to those pretty young nurses. I have no control, not even over my position on the bed, not even over my own humiliating nakedness.

They leave. In my new position I can see a section of curtain around me as well as the ceiling. Grey ceiling and green curtain. Puke green. Slime green. I am in something called Robbie 7 with a grey ceiling and puke green curtains. I count the zigs and zags of patterns on the curtain. I hear the TV’s gurgling, voices, machines, and a deep guttural cough from somewhere. I feel like the baby rabbit I once saw in a pet shop window. The other baby rabbits were scurrying around him, over him, and he lay staring at the wall of the cage. Dead, with his eyes open.

I P P P

“Hi, Mike! Time to turn you!” The same smiling voice. “Damn it Mike. You playing with that bed bag again? You get that condom kinked, you’re going to wet the bed and float away!”

“Yeah, yeah, sweetheart. Just make sure you wash your hands. After all, this is a sterile procedure.” A young man’s voice on the other side of the curtain. Who were these people? What were they talking about?

“Watch your mouth.” Another voice from behind the curtain.

What is wrong with me? Who can I ask? My dead body won’t tell me. My shoulders hurt. How do I stoop the pain? These people are busy. I don’t know them, don’t want to bother them. Sleep is all I want. Rabbit facing the wall.

“How are you, Vinny?” A nurse pokes through the curtain. I want to ask her where I am, what am I doing here, what time it is, what’s wrong with me – everything at once, but I can hardly breathe. “Fine,” I gasp and close my eyes.

I P P P

Time passes in blinks. Daylight. Blink. Night. Blink. Nothing but the curtains and the ceiling and the voices washing over me.

I wake to coughing, hacking noises not far from my bed.

“Get it up, Al! Come on. Get it up.” A nurse is encouraging someone to cough up phlegm. “Harder!” I hear him gagging.

“More.”

“Vinny?”

“Yeah? Mike?” We were whispering in the predawn quiet.

“Hear that guy?”

“Yeah.”

“The guy’s a quad and he’s got lung cancer. Coughs all day. All night. You gotta get used to it, that’s all. What do you have?

Does he mean a cold? Sore throat?

“What?”

Mike laughs softly, “I mean, like wrists. Do you have wrists?”

“I don’t know.”

“Kathy came back yesterday for rehab. She’s been in and out for almost two years. She doesn’t have wrists. Never got ‘em back. But, man, is she beautiful. Blonde. Blue eyes. This knockout smile. Totaled in an accident. Her boyfriend was driving. The guy’s still gonna marry her. He’s learned to do her care. Anyway, she heard you have your wrists. She’s pissed. She’s jealous.”

“Of me?” I am wide awake now. “Hey, Mike, why are you here?”

“I’m a C-5-6.”

“What do you mean C-5-6?”

“I broke my 5th and 6th cervicals and I injured the nerves in my spinal cord. Car accident. Lucky to be alive.”

“So why can’t you move?”

“The spinal cord controls everything, you know.”

“Yeah? So? Does that mean you can’t move anymore?”

“Haven’t moved in over two years. So I guess so.”

For some reason we both laugh.

“So, you have wrists?” Mike asks again.

I try to move my arms. “I don’t know.”

“Kathy’s probably right. You’ll get ‘m back.”

“You got’ m?”

“Yeah.”

But I don’t want to hear anymore. Or talk anymore. Wrists. Not worth thinking about. Shut up about dead bodies. Look at what they’re trying to do to you. Every day, must be two weeks now, they stick a tube in your mouth. You inhale the mist; supposed to keep your lungs tough. Then they put a blue pad under you and you smell your own stink, but you don’t know how it happens. Then they stick needles in you and roll you to X-ray and turn you every two hours and you drink cranberry juice, listen to the TV noise and the guy cough up his insides, and they wash you but they only scrape the surface. You want a shower to wash away the sand that’s deep in your head.

“Time for lunch!” On my side facing the curtain, towel under my head. The nurse brings a piece of sandwich to my mouth. I look at her eyes watching my mouth. I want to talk.

“How are you today?” I try to ask but it spills out in a soup filled drool. She pats my face dry. I want her to be comfortable. I want to be the host; but I can’t make the sandwiches. Instead, she feeds me as if I am an infant.

She puts more sandwich into my sideways, awkward mouth. “How long you worked here,” I ask. Like talking to a girl for the first time on the phone. Only she’s here putting food in my mouth and watching me drool into my pillow.

The next day, like every day, my parents visit me, in the smelly, coughing world inside my curtain. My sheets are up to my chin. Sonja, my sister, and my mother each hold a hand. My father stands back.

“How is Mimi?” my first words.

“She’s fine. She sent you this.” An envelope. My mother opens it, holds it up for me to read. Mimi wants to see me. Misses me.

“I care for you very deeply,” it says.

“What’s happened?”

I look at my father who stands so stiffly. He knows what I mean. And finally he says, “Dr. Freed told us about it. You broke C-5 and C-6. You are in a spinal shock, which lasts about a month. When it wears off, when the swelling goes down, we’ll see.”

“We’ll see what?”

My father doesn't answer. He touches my shoulder. He never does that. I hear the cougher. "Get it up, try harder, Al."

My neck. C-5, C-6. Just like Mike? He hasn't moved in two years.

"Mimi wants to see you this weekend." My mother says.

The wrong words. I started to cry. Tears stream out of me. No way for me to hide them or even wipe them away or curl away from everyone staring at me gagging and sobbing as if all Third Beach ocean chose now to boil out of my eyes, nose, and mouth. I feel my father's gaze. He says again "We'll see" and goes into his safe little place, a place where I have never been able to reach him.

And then I stop crying.

"Sorry," I say to my mother, who is crying, too. She and Sonja wipe their eyes and my face while I search the ceiling for control.

Later a physical therapist turns me from the curtain. "Time you earned your keep around here." She says as she slips weights onto my wrists. I try to move my arms, to be strong for Mimi.

"Can I have a mirror so I can see what I'm doing?" And they fit one over my bed. I look into my own face. Hair straggly, open mouth and my neck, huge as a pro football lineman's. Strong. In shape. A weight lifter who last week pressed two hundred pounds, who ran five miles the last time he saw Mimi.

The weights are a half pound on each wrist, and I move them maybe one inch, and then they collapse onto the bed.