

Excerpt, from *The Day After Death*

Chapter 3

Duncan died in December, one month after our twelfth birthday. We were born on November 21, on the cusp of Scorpio and Sagittarius. Is it possible for fraternal twins in that configuration to lean in astrologically opposite directions—me tending toward the secretive traits of the scorpion, seeking dark mysteries, while Duncan evolved into the curious archer, always questing for adventure? Maybe it's not likely, but it happened.

The winter solstice that year was a cold day in a very cold month. Winter had begun early in rural North Dakota with snow falling by mid-October. We had a brief return to milder fall temperatures until November, but by the end of the month, ice covered the shallow sloughs in the pasture by our farm.

My brothers and I often skated together. Those were the days before other winter sports, like cross-country skiing or curling, had become popular in the upper Midwest. A barn-like structure in town housed an indoor ice rink. Unheated, of course, but at least the walls kept out the harsh winds that regularly scoured the prairie in midwinter.

I loved the movement of skating, the fluid motion of legs and hips and shoulders, my body angled forward as I glided across the ice. But I didn't like the cold, especially the wind that penetrated through my clothes and left my fingers icy. I had a recurring dream at that time of being left by my parents at an outdoor rink at dusk, of circling

around and around as the ice emptied of other people and darkness came. Until there was only me, a small figure turning slowly into a frozen statue as my limbs stiffened in the deepening cold.

And so that day, the twenty-first of December, I stayed inside while Adrian and Duncan shouldered their skates and hiked to a nearby pond in the afternoon. I've learned since that ancient peoples celebrated that time of the year, the winter solstice, with a ritual called the Saturnalia. The reputation of the god Saturn, fierce and stern, colors the word, making the event sound like a fearsome pagan rite, but really it simply ushers in the arrival of Capricorn, the sign of boundaries and definition. And it was true, that day came to define my life more than any other. It was the day that part of me broke off and disappeared beneath the ice.

Of course later I wished I had gone with my brothers. When I replay that afternoon, I fervently wish that instead of reading in the old maroon upholstered chair in a corner of what my father still called the parlor, I had swathed myself in sweaters and gloves and trailed behind them. If only I had trudged on in their wake, kicking at the dirty crust of snow and ice at the top of the hill where the pasture began, dreading the wind as I tumbled down the slope.

I knew just where they'd gone. In the field bordering the slough, as big as a real pond that year from a wet summer, Adrian had hauled a makeshift bench from the ruins of our great-grandfather's barn. That dilapidated structure had collapsed long ago. Hidden in a tangle of juneberry bushes, the rubble provided raw material for dramas played out in castles and forts. But once Adrian resurrected the bench for skating purposes, we'd sit on its splintery slab, our fingers numb and clumsy in the sub-zero

weather as we'd lace our skates. I'd wear leather gloves under my mittens, then take off the mittens, skilled at using my gloved fingers to weave the laces through the metal-encased openings, the leather hardened in the cold.

When I looked back on that day, I easily saw myself out with them— falling and sliding on the steep hill, cheeks rough and red, nose running. Because if I had been there, watching his back, Duncan wouldn't have skated to the center of the slough where the ice barely covered the water with a brittle sheet. We'd had a couple of thirty-five degree days that week, and the center of that slough was deep. The ice glittered there, black and shiny, but really it was whisper thin. It only looked solid. If I'd been there, he might have teased me for being a wimp, but I would have nagged Duncan off the ice.

Adrian didn't nag Duncan, not that day. He couldn't have. Because at three-thirty I heard a strangled sound outside the window, then a hoarse bleating. I couldn't tell if the sound signified fury or sorrow. And then came the slap of boots against the linoleum on the back porch. The heavy feet tramping into the house, pushing through the back door with the force of a blizzard slamming into the side of a car, spinning it around full circle.

As I leaped out of my chair, the book I was reading toppled onto the floor. In a few steps I reached the kitchen. I braced myself in the doorway. Adrian was slumped on a chair by the table, my mother standing over him, cradling his head against her stomach. Eva's breathing, harsh and ragged, filled the room as she held Adrian. Adrian's clothes and hands were wet; he was covered with a glaze of ice. Eva's arms and hands were wet too, the front of her jacket and the knees of her pants streaked with dirt. When she shifted her weight, the folds of her coat, ice encrusted, cracked.

They didn't notice me; they could see only each other. "What's going on?" I said, a sickening wave of dread making me light-headed.

The two of them stared at me. My mother gasped as if she'd seen a ghost. One of her arms beckoned to me, but she didn't move from Adrian's side.

My mother's stunned look suspended time in a bloodless freeze. The ghost she'd summoned brushed by me in a whisper of cold air. "Where's Duncan?"

Adrian jerked his head out of Eva's grasp, coughing and sputtering as though he'd been brought up from the deep. Like a startled bird flushed from its nest, his head bobbed on his neck. "I couldn't get him out," he said, his voice raw, rising and falling in an eerie kind of keening.

He didn't look at me. My eyes bored into him, though. I wanted to penetrate his skull, to steal the evidence of what really happened.

"I tried." Adrian's voice rose in a panic. A prickling rash of red crept up his neck and onto his cheeks.

"Shhhh," Eva said, the skin between her eyebrows furrowed. Her eyes looked wild and she kept blinking, as if to refresh what she was seeing. Or what she had seen. She left Adrian then and came to me, encircling me in her arms. I wanted to lean into her but I was too frightened. My shoulders ached from the weight of her embrace. I held my breath until my lungs threatened to pop like an overstretched balloon.

"I did," Adrian said, his voice pleading—with me, with himself? "I tried. He fell through the ice and I went after him." He covered his face with his hands. They were big hands, the fingers thick and red, the nails crusted with dirt.

“He fell?” I repeated those two innocent words. I didn’t believe him. Duncan moved like a dream on the ice, by far the most skilled skater of the three of us. I imagined the ice cracking beneath him. “You mean he broke through and drowned?”

“He didn’t drown.” Adrian shook his head, and a single drop of gray water coursed down his forehead. His hair looked as if it were melting.

I tried to take this in. “He didn’t drown,” I repeated. “Then why isn’t he here?”

Eva left me and rushed back to her son. She looked frantically from him to me. I saw a mute appeal in her face that confused me. Adrian struggled to stand, but Eva pressed his head tighter into her body. She held him as if she’d never let him out of her arms again.

Adrian’s voice was muffled. “I couldn’t get to him in time. Then Mom came and we dragged him out.”

I didn’t understand. Both of them were there, but they couldn’t help Duncan?

“His heart stopped. The cold,” Eva said. “The shock of the water.” Her eyes turned inward. I couldn’t read her expression.

Did twelve-year-old hearts stop just because they were cold? Mine was bursting in the hot room. “How can you know that?” My voice sounded shrill in my ears. “I don’t believe you. He’s still alive. I’m going down there!”

“No!” Adrian’s lips trembled around the word. “Don’t go down there! I won’t let you!” Adrian’s gray eyes glanced crazily around the room as he broke away from Eva’s grasp.

“It’s not safe,” Eva said dully and then she began to croon to Adrian, “You’re safe. You’re safe now, baby.” She motioned for me to come closer, to nestle under her other arm. I hung back. “You too, baby,” she said to me. “You’re safe.”

I watched the two of them together until I felt the room beginning to tilt. Her arm was still outstretched and I imagined it as the crooked wing of a dark bird of prey, one that would pierce rather than comfort.

My skin prickled. I forced myself to breathe but inhaling irritated my dry throat. “No one is safe,” I muttered. “Not now.” Where was Dad? I had to find him, but the room seemed suddenly too big to cross.

“Manda, listen.” Adrian’s voice was urgent. “I want to tell you something.”

“Shhhh,” Eva said. Tears were running down her face and she was breathing in jagged gulps. “It’s not your fault, sweet boy,” she said over and over again. “You did all you could. Amanda, come here.”

I didn’t say anything. What they were saying was unspeakable. And unbearable. My head swam as my mind turned off.

In the long silence, Eva abruptly left Adrian and stepped into the space between us. She put a hot hand in the middle of my back. I felt a gentle pressure and then her voice in my ear: “Honey, I’m so sorry. You mustn’t think we didn’t try. We did everything we could. You weren’t there. Honey?”

I shook my head and backed away from them, noticing Adrian’s hands again, their bulky clumsiness, yet their hardness and strength. Adrian could have saved Duncan if he’d wanted to.

I ran toward him and threw myself at him. “You bastard! You pushed him!” I pummeled his shoulder with my fists. “You did it, you finally did it. And you’re glad you did!”

Eva turned to me and her hand came toward me. I didn’t know if she wanted to console me or slap me and so I ducked. I kicked Adrian and then ran out of the room. My heart bumped and skipped as I staggered up the stairs and into the hall bathroom just in time to vomit on the floor. Bile scalded the back of my mouth. But it woke me up too. I went into my parents’ bedroom and lifted up the phone. Had anyone called an ambulance? Just then I heard a siren as a van slid around the corner and chugged up the short road to our house.

And that was when I looked out the window toward the back of the house and saw a slight shape lying under a blanket on the snow-covered lawn: Duncan’s body, thin and bony. Someone had carried him up to the house. Adrian? Or maybe he and Eva together had hauled him that half mile up the hill and across the yard. Duncan didn’t weigh a lot at twelve, but still, a hundred and five pounds was a lot to carry in the cold when you were exhausted yourself.

Had they left Duncan alone in the cold yard? But then I noticed my father’s car parked at a crazy angle—a deep skid mark by the rear tires scarred the yard. Dad, bundled in a parka and gloves, appeared in the frame of the window; he bent over and said something to the ambulance attendants as they emerged from the van. My father had gone to town for the afternoon. I’d thought my mother had been with him. When had she come home and gone down to the pasture? And who had called Dad? I felt the day dissolving inside me, my insides a mash of snow and ice and fear.

I ran downstairs, tore out of the house, and threw myself against my father. He looked at me, his eyes wide and staring. “Manda?” He pressed me to him for a few seconds, but then he set me aside.

“Don’t look, honey,” he said while my body cried out for his comfort. Then, he dropped to his knees beside Duncan and pulled aside the blanket. “Take her inside,” he said to one of the medics.

But I didn’t go inside. I wriggled away from the attendant and watched my father pull Duncan to him, saw him lay the small head tenderly on his lap. He touched Duncan’s lips, which were blue and yet translucent like alabaster. Duncan’s mouth was curved up in a small smile, his forehead smooth, his face beautiful as if he were a prince in a trance.

Duncan! I wanted to whisper, *wake up! Stop playing...are you playing?* But Duncan didn’t stir and I watched my father’s body slowly lowering to his son’s. He rested there a moment and then his face turned toward the sky. But Dad’s eyes were closed and his mouth stretched open in a ragged oval like the entrance to a dark cave. I waited for the scream I knew would come, but he made no sound. *This is how the world will end*, I thought—in silence, my father frozen in grief and Duncan dead. And both of them lost to me.