

† BOOK ONE †

Living in the Shadow of The Invisibles

I was born in the arms of the City of Lakes. It was not a big city like New York or L.A.; not a city that had yet learned to swallow you whole. It was a place where the seasons never lingered long enough to tire of them, always having somewhere else to go; a place where majestic elm trees lined the quaint neighborhood streets, arching their woody tentacles to lend refuge from a multitude of elements; a place where the alluring beauty of the Minnehaha captivated all who walked beside her as her sensuous waters snaked through the urban landscape for miles, gliding toward her graceful demise over an ancient precipice and into the mouth of the thirsty Mississippi.

The year was 1965.

I was a tiny, toe-headed girl, the second child of two parents who were madly in love with me. I will never forget those early years before *The Invisibles* came to cast their dark, permanent shadows upon our unsuspecting walls. Mom would lovingly cradle me for hours in the mod 60s rocking chair that resided in a corner of our humbly furnished living room. “Hush Little Baby” she’d softly sing, or coo “This Little Piggy Went to Market” as she gently tickled my chubby, curled-up toes. In between performances, she’d smother my face with affectionate kisses, altering the peach hue of my delicate skin to that of a glowing blush.

Despite Mom's intense love, it was really through Daddy's eyes that I first discovered the splendor of my existence, and it was through his strength that I grew to embrace it. He had the passionate spirit of an adventurer, and because of him we were never a family to linger idly at home. If ever there was a parade to attend, well by God, we attended it; if there were fireworks to gaze at, we gazed from start to finish; if there were zoo animals to be adored, we lovingly adored them; if Santa Claus came to town, we were the first in line to welcome him with open arms. For a brief moment in time, our lives were full, as were our hearts, and the world was ours to receive without consequence.

The four-bedroom house we lived in wasn't much, but it was the nicest one in the working class part of town that Daddy could afford on his modest teacher's salary. A mournful, gray-colored paint clung to its interiors, and the once-beige carpet had gracelessly aged into a stained shade of brown. But, Daddy was never one to be conquered, and with the passage of time he transformed our simple dwelling into something the four of us could proudly call our home.

The postage stamp backyard was just as practical and unadorned as our house and harbored more dirt than the tired grass that withered beneath our maple tree. As we grew, my brother and I never used it much anyway, preferring to spend our time a few blocks away by the creek in Longfellow Park, not far from where Daddy had proposed to Mom beneath the watchful eye of a bronzed Iroquois warrior. Daddy had told us that story so many times

On a sunny afternoon in the summer of '61, Daddy had brought his beloved Rainy to a favorite spot upstream from Minnehaha Falls. Underneath a stately, old oak he laid out the blanket he kept in the back seat of his Volkswagen, and together they feasted on a picnic meal that his Ma had packed for the special occasion. After Mom and Daddy had eaten the

last of their dessert, he took out two champagne glasses, poured a bit of bubbly into each, then raised his high in the air and toasted his future wife. "Here's to you, Honey! The prettiest girl in this whole city!" Daddy told us it took a while for Mom to discover the diamond engagement ring that was lingering at the bottom of her glass, but when she finally did she lovingly threw her arms around him and wept tears of joy.

Soon after the story's finale, my brother and I would often lose Daddy in a place unknown to the two of us as he gazed beyond the field's legions of pirouetting dandelions toward the statue of that fateful warrior, the one cast in an eternal embrace with his beautiful beloved. "Yep," he'd quietly muse in a hushed voice more to himself than to anyone else, "I got the prettiest girl in this whole city."



I will never forget my earliest traumatic childhood memory. I was only five years old. It was late in the evening, and the living room's night-light was the house's only illumination. Mom was lying on the sofa and softly crying, still garbed in her pretty evening dress and silver high heels. Her distress unsettled me, and I awoke. With sleep in my eyes and blankie in hand, I crawled out of bed, drowsily crossed the threshold of my room and shuffled over to her.

"Don't cry, Momma, don't cry," I urged, gently caressing her forehead just as she had done to me so many times before.

"I'm okay, Sweetheart. Toddle back to bed. Momma will be all right."

"Momma, how can I make you better?" I asked with great concern.

"I'll be better in the morning, Baby."

Mom slowly sat up and wrapped her arms around me. As she kissed my cheek, I could feel the dampness of her sorrow.

She turned me toward the direction of my bedroom and gently pushed me away. "Go on, Honey. Momma loves you more than anything."

Not sure of what else to do, I did as she instructed and headed back to bed.

"I love you, Momma," I told her earnestly.

"I love you, too, Baby."

When I awoke the next morning, the pleasing aroma of freshly baked cinnamon rolls was tickling my nose. As I lay half awake, the events of the past evening scurried to fill my head, urging me to get up and check on Mom. When I rushed into the kitchen, I began to gleefully exclaim, "Momma, Momma! You're all better!" before realizing that the person tending the stove was not my mother. "Oh, it's you, Grandmama," I said, giving her a toothy grin before walking up behind her and encircling her thigh with my small arms.

"Well hello there, Dear," she greeted in her thick German accent. She looked down upon me and returned my gaze with a weak smile before asking, "Are you hungry? I'm making breakfast. Would you like something to eat?" She then guided me toward the kitchen table and helped me into my booster seat. "Come. Sit down, Dear," she instructed, then returned to her post in front of the stove. My older brother, Mikie, entered the kitchen, still suited up in his Superman pajamas. I glanced at him before looking back at Grandma and asking, "Where's Momma and Daddy?"

Grandma kept a watchful eye on her task at hand and was slow to answer. "Your Daddy had to take your Momma someplace where she can get some rest. Yes, Honey, yes. God have mercy." She made a quick sign of the cross before grabbing a pot of freshly made oatmeal from the stove and pouring its contents into two colorful bowls on a nearby counter.

"Are they going to be back real soon, Grandma?" Mikie asked as he was saddling up across the table from me.

“You’ll have to ask your Daddy about that when he gets home,” Grandma replied as a matter of fact. “Right now we’re going to have something to eat, and then I’ll take you to the park.” She placed our bowls of cereal onto the table, then poured each of us a glass of orange juice. “Say Grace, Kids.” We obediently bowed our heads and rapidly rambled through our memorized prayers. While my brother dutifully dug in and began to fill his belly, I picked away at my food. Grandma gave me a disapproving look, so I gingerly swirled my spoon in the oatmeal, then licked the tip of it in a halfhearted attempt to appease her. I worried about Mom and Daddy.

Dear God,
Please bring Momma and Daddy back soon.



Daddy came back later that afternoon looking worn out and sad. He told us not to worry. In our world, whatever Daddy said was as good as gold, so we readily accepted that Mom’s troubles were nothing more than temporary.

Grandma moved in with us, and we went on with our lives. Daddy continued teaching at Roosevelt High while Grandma stayed home and took care of us after school. She played all kinds of games with us, bandaged our owies and let us watch hours upon hours of afternoon variety shows while she churned out oodles of noodle casseroles and platefuls of homemade sweets from the kitchen. “Eat! Eat!” she’d cluck as fiercely as a devoted mother hen. “You kids need to keep up your strength!”

Mom’s unexpected departure predictably took its toll, and I could sense the underlying sadness behind Daddy’s forced smile. As time went on he gradually adjusted and resumed his active lifestyle, always quick to include my

brother and me in his adventures, always sure to shield the two of us from our painful reality.

It was during this period when Daddy decided it was time to teach us how to downhill ski. He took it upon himself to outfit us with the best skis, boots and poles that money could buy. To complete our ensemble he treated us to a rare shopping spree at an exclusive downtown department store. For me, Daddy selected a soft pink, cotton sweater with a matching turtleneck, while Mikie was given a white sweater of Scandinavian design embellished with red and blue snowflakes. Each of us received our own pair of black ski pants, and we were finally ready to storm the bunny hill.

Daddy often drove us to Theodore Wirth Ski Park on the weekends. Since he was quite an accomplished skier, he took on the task of instructing us personally instead of enrolling us in kiddy beginner classes. My brother took to the slopes immediately. He was stocky for his age and a natural daredevil, so a few tumbles in the powder posed no threat. Up he'd go to the top of the hill, and then bomb it all the way down with a huge grin on his face, poles never touching the ground. On the rare occasion when he did take a spill, he'd just laugh it off before repeating the entire routine until he was one with the snow.

I, on the other hand, did not possess a single "need for speed" bone in my body. I'd cautiously make my way over to the towrope like an old granny with a hip replacement, then firmly grab a hold of it. Once at the top of the hill, Daddy would encourage me to follow Mikie's carefree lead, but I wouldn't have any part of it. Instead, I'd painstakingly scope out the gentlest dips and bumps in the landscape, then slowly ease my way down the slope, always relieved to make it to the bottom in one piece. Because Mikie was so much braver and faster than I was, he'd lap me time and again, relentlessly

teasing me as he whizzed past, “Chicken! Bak, bak, bak!!!” he’d yell while Daddy laughed at us from his bird’s eye view above.

The three of us would ski for hours at a time, revitalized by the freshness of dense winter air and surrounding bustle. Only the incessant nip of the chilled breeze and our overflowing noses could urge us to retreat inside the lodge for a round of hot chocolate and marshmallows. When it was time to go home, Daddy packed up our gear and loaded it into the old Buick while Mikie and I competed for his attention, chattering like little magpies about all of the fun we’d just had.

As a special treat on those evenings, Daddy would swing by the drive-thru of our favorite fast food joint and pick up several grease-stained bags full of goodies before racing home in time to gather around the tube and watch *The Lawrence Welk Show* with Grandma. Our sweet granny was none other than a bona fide Lawrence Welk groupie. “Oh, isn’t that Lawrence just so handsome!” she’d exclaim. “And those costumes . . . would you look at those beautiful costumes!” My brother and I would unfailingly roll our eyes, not caring much for Lawrence or the “beautiful” costumes, but whenever he uttered his famous “An-a one, an-a two . . .” line we sure had fun flailing our invisible conductor’s batons enthusiastically in the air.

It was times like those that made me feel as though we still had some semblance of a normal American family life. It was times like those that now make me realize just how hard Daddy had tried.



As the days turned into weeks, and the weeks turned into months, the essence of the mother I once couldn’t live without

began to fade from my memory, and I hardly knew who she was on the day she returned from some faraway place.

It was during that following spring at the end of a bright afternoon. The sun was beginning its descent, forcing my brother and me to retreat home for dinner after spending several hours building a sand castle for a frog we'd found at the park playground.

"Messy! Why do you kids have to get so messy when you play?" Grandma scolded as we walked in the door. "Dinner's almost ready. Go change your clothes and wash up before we eat now, Dears."

We did as Grandma instructed, then made our way to the kitchen, sat down at the table and waited for Daddy to join us just as he always did. After several minutes he finally emerged with a gigantic smile spread across his face.

"Kids! You won't believe what a wonderful surprise I have in store for you!" he teased, knowing full well how much my brother and I loved surprises.

Mikie sat up straight, then happily clapped his hands and squealed, "Daddy, Daddy, what is it?!"

Mom's petite, pretty face appeared over Daddy's shoulder, and she slid past him to enter the room. She looked thinner and more pale than I'd remembered. Mustering a fragile smile, she glided over to each of us, bent down and affectionately hugged and kissed my brother and me, then took her old spot at the table. "I missed you kids so much!" she quietly gushed, suppressing fresh tears.

At first, I simply stared back at her, not knowing what to say. She'd been away for so long that I had forgotten what my life had been like with her in it.

"Momma?" I asked timidly. "Is that you?"

Mikie swiftly kicked me under the table and answered for her, "Of course it is, Dum-Dum."

Mom's expression transformed into a look of mild bewilderment. "Why . . . don't you remember me, Baby? It's

Momma,” she explained. “I’m back. I’m home for good now. You don’t have to worry about me anymore.”

Still ill at ease, I turned to Daddy for reassurance. He was the happiest I’d seen him in such a long time. “It’s true, Twink, Mommy is home for good.”

I looked back at Mom. I had forgotten how good it felt to accept the warmth of her gaze. It took a moment for me to realize that our little family was finally complete once more. I smiled back at this strangely familiar woman seated across the table from me.

“I love you, Momma,” I told her.

“I love you, too, Baby.”



Things were never quite the same as they’d once been before Mom’s unexpected departure. Although the gentleness of her spirit and genuine love for my brother and me never faltered, she often became listless and distant. I would notice how her eyes would momentarily drift away and focus on something that was outwardly unapparent to me. She’d shake her head “yes” or “no” and mumble inaudible words under her breath. This scared me and I tried to ignore it, but her odd, new mannerisms seemed to be here to stay.

After a while I began to ask, “Momma, what are you doing?”

My question seemed to startle her from her shallow trance, and she’d wearily explain, “I’m fine, Baby. Just fine.” I never believed her.

After Grandma moved out of our house and back into her downtown apartment, Daddy was hell-bent on resuming the life we’d once led as if nothing unusual had occurred. No mention was ever spoken of what had happened to Mom or where she’d been. Mom simply took Grandma’s place just as

Grandma had taken Mom's months earlier, and Daddy continued teaching at Roosevelt High.

Summer was fast approaching, and renewed hope filled the air. On those warm, sunny days Daddy would treat the three of us to picnics by the lake. Sometimes we'd go to Lake Harriet, sometimes Lake Calhoun, and occasionally we'd make the drive out to Lake Minnetonka. Daddy absolutely loved the water. It didn't much matter which body of water we were near, he found joy in the endless smell of coconut suntan oil and the silky, smooth feeling of sand underneath his bare feet . . . and, of course there were the boats. Daddy couldn't get enough of them. Sometimes before hitting the beach, he'd trot down to the boat launch, pull out his favorite camera and snap a whole host of photos . . . close-ups, artistic shots, and sometimes he'd even ask my brother and me to pose next to one of the particularly nice vessels. All types of watercraft intrigued Daddy, to be sure, but there was one in particular that had captivated his heart, and that one just happened to be the Catamaran. Whenever he'd spot one at the launch he'd wave us over and flood our small minds with the minute details of its capabilities as we tried to pretend like we knew what he was talking about. "Kids," he'd say pensively, "someday we're going to have a Cat of our own."

The summer festival known as the Aquatennial soon was upon us, and every year Daddy took us to several of its events that, naturally, all focused around water. Daddy knew how much Grandma enjoyed the water skiing show at Lake Nokomis, so he invited her to go with us that year. It was a lovely July day. Not a cloud hung in the sky as the pretty, female skiers rode upon the backs of their muscular counterparts, performing spectacular tricks behind a large powerboat. Being as small as I was and unable to see over the crowd, Daddy hoisted me up and planted my small frame squarely on top of sturdy his shoulders.