

swimming with maya

A Mother's Story



Eleanor Vincent

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*For my daughters
who brought me into being,
and for Sarah,
midwife to this book*



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Prologue

When I think of a stranger touching my daughter's clothes it feels like a violation, so donating them to Goodwill is out of the question. But then several months after the funeral, one of her cousins asks if she can have Maya's prettiest formal dress. I examine the dress, opulent as a peony, its hot pink bodice and spaghetti straps, the skirt with its cascade of pink flounces. Maya carried a little beaded purse on prom night. I find that too, then wrap the dress in tissue paper, tuck the purse in beside it in a gift box, and present it to my niece.

The shoes are more difficult. Maya's college roommates had shipped them home to me along with her other clothes. I unpack them and set them in a row in her closet with the high heels at one end, the flats at the other. Each time I pick one up and turn it in my hand I can feel my daughter's missing foot. At last, I decide to call her girlfriends to see if anyone wants the shoes. Jo Anne agrees to take them. I stack the high heels in shoeboxes on the dining room table, and Jo Anne and I stand side by side surveying the pile of shoes. "Do you want to try on a pair, just to be sure?" I ask.

She steps into a pair of black patent leather pumps and walks

✧ prologue ✧

a few steps, pivots, and comes back. Now taller than I am because she is standing in Maya's shoes, Jo Anne opens her arms to me. As I hold her, I feel a tremor in her shoulders. Then she drives away with the shoes, and my daughter's footfalls echo in my mind.

Grief seizes me by the scruff of the neck and will not let me go. Piece by piece I reconstruct the puzzle of our life together, opening myself to the slow truth of what it meant to be Maya's mother.

PART I



Swept Under



Chapter 1

I'm dressed in my corporate clothes, a sharp crease in my brown linen pants, a raincoat thrown over my arm. The smell of rubbing alcohol pricks my nostrils. A burly man in a white coat shakes my hand. He introduces himself as Dr. Garry, the head of the Trauma Care unit.

"Your daughter is in very grave condition," he says, clicking his ballpoint pen in and out. "The fall caused considerable damage and brain swelling."

The hallway folds in on itself as if my eyes are looking down the wrong end of a telescope. Buzzing fluorescent lights make the air glow. I lean against the counter of the nurse's station in the emergency room, lightheaded with fear.

I remember her voice, equal parts taunting and tender, "Mom, *you* phone the mechanic." Maya flips her hair back from her fine-boned face. "Do it yourself," I argue. "They know you," she counters. Did that really happen this morning?

From an exam room in the ER, a voice yells, "Bring me an ampule of Epinephrine, NOW!"

I hear the frenetic voice, then the sound of pounding footsteps. I hold the image of my daughter close, pushing against the weight of the doctor's words.

Dr. Garry paints a vivid picture of her first hour in the hospital: the limp unconscious body strapped to a stretcher, paramedics rushing her in from the helicopter pad outside, nurses frantically cutting the clothes from her body. He describes leaning over her with an ophthalmoscope to examine her pupils. He says they were fixed and dilated. She showed no response to pain when he prodded and pinched her; her muscles were completely flaccid.

I picture my daughter's lean thighs and narrow shoulders. She is thin as a bird, but she works out every other day, and her body is wiry and muscular.

Dr. Garry says he ordered a CT scan and a consultation with a neurosurgeon.

His words bombard me, clinical and scary. "After the CT scan, we rushed your daughter into emergency brain surgery. They're operating now."

Like a mechanical doll, I nod. My head bobs up and down.

One of the emergency room nurses guides me down a long hallway and into an elevator. My hands and feet feel quick-frozen. As if my brain were a seismograph, I record the tremors in my body. We travel up several floors. Three of Maya's friends, including a boy she had dated in high school, are huddled in a corner of the narrow waiting room. When Alex sees me, his body gives an involuntary jerk. He stands and moves toward me. His eyes are vacant and glassy, and when I study his face it seems gaunt, much older than his nineteen years. Stiff and alert, he waits for me to say something. I motion to a row of chairs.

An orderly clanks by us with an empty metal gurney, and before I can speak a stranger's voice crackles over the intercom, breaking my concentration. We sit down beneath a bank of windows. My eyes fix on Alex's hunched shoulders.

"What happened?" I demand. "And tell me the truth."



The outing to the Morgan Territory Regional Park was Maya's idea. She wanted to celebrate the biggest triumph of her life—winning a full scholarship to the Theater Arts Program at UCLA. It was almost impossible to get into this program as a transfer student, even without the scholarship, and Maya could barely believe her good fortune.

Home from community college for spring break, Maya phoned Alex to let him know the good news. They made plans to hang out the following day with Alex's cousin George and his girlfriend Julie.

Located twenty miles from Walnut Creek, the park is a nature preserve that might as well be its own country—it is that different from the urban sprawl of the Bay Area. Rolling pastures checkerboard the hills and thick clusters of trees overhang a narrow road. A compact car is almost too wide to squeeze across the one-lane wooden bridges that lead to the field where Maya and her friends went to celebrate that afternoon. Under a canopy of trees, a green metal gate suddenly appears.

On the forty-minute ride that April afternoon, each of them had suggested at least once that they change their plans. It's too hot; there probably aren't any horses today anyway, only cows; the beer's getting warm, better to go back and get ice-cold beer from the refrigerator. Is this going to be fun or just bogus?

But each time someone suggested turning back, someone else managed to convince the others to keep going.

It was so hot that even after they reached the green gate they almost decided to stay inside the air-conditioned car to finish the beer. But one of the four, nobody remembered who, galvanized the rest of them to pile out, climb over the gate, and hike up to the field above. They had each had a beer or two by now.

When they reached the top of an oak-studded hill, they saw him. A sleek horse with a glossy coat stood by a watering tub, grazing quietly, unfenced and unsecured.

“Go on,” Alex said to Maya, knowing she was always good for a dare. “See if you can ride him across the field.”

If Maya felt reluctant or scared, she didn’t show it. Today she was on fire with joy, a nineteen-year-old streak of a girl whose dream of being an actress had suddenly switched to the fast track. The excitement of a sparkling new future flowed through her. But she wasn’t so giddy that she wanted to do it alone. She talked Julie into mounting the horse with her.

The boys gave Julie a leg up, and she sat in front grasping the horse’s mane. Then Maya mounted and circled her arms around Julie’s waist. They waited, but nothing happened. The horse ambled ahead for a couple of feet and then stopped.

“It’s going too slow,” Julie complained. The girls leaned forward to urge the horse onward.

“Giddy-up,” Maya said like a child to a rocking horse. A sleeve of blond hair fell across her face.

“Kick it,” the two boys urged, taking another swig of beer.

The girls hesitated, so one of the boys gave the horse a smart slap on the flank. It whinnied in protest. Then, without warning, it reared up on its hind legs. Julie started to tilt off to the side as the horse’s mane slipped through her fingers. Maya, helplessly sliding backward toward the horse’s rump, tried to dismount, but her leg tangled with Julie’s. Like a Tilt-a-Whirl ride, she was flung backward.

As Julie slid off sideways and fell on her butt, Maya cascaded off the back of the horse, her arms outstretched in a vain attempt to grab something to stop the fall.

She could have hit the ground in a dozen ways, on her rump like Julie had, or toppling over to break the fall with her hands.

Instead, her head hit the ground with full force at the precise spot on her skull that housed the mid-brain, the section that controls the body's ability to breathe.

It was a classic cantilever fall, the kind that even football players and rodeo riders don't recover from. Maya's friends, however, had no clue. She lay on the ground face up without moving. Julie got up and rubbed her sore butt. She and the two boys approached Maya's limp body, not greatly concerned. Julie, after all, was virtually unharmed, and it wasn't unlike Maya to play a joke on her friends. They were sure she was faking.

As they stood over her inert body, it dawned on them that this was no act. They waited for a few more seconds. Maybe she would open her eyes, or moan. Alex called loudly, "Hey, Maya!"

Julie leaned down and shook her shoulder. "Maya, come on. Cut it out. Wake up!" Nothing.

Alex panicked. "You guys go down to that house we passed and call the sheriff. Get someone up here, fast!"

Unsure what else they could do and very scared, Julie and George ran down the hill to the car to find help.

Alex fell to his knees over Maya's body and lowered his face to hers, giving her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. In between forcing his breath into her slack mouth, he called her name again and again. Once, when he shouted "Maya!" sharply into her ear, her leg twitched. She was taking in just a few breaths a minute.

A ravine full of scrub oak and laurel trees tumbled down to a dry creek bed. Alex was trapped in a bowl of grass under an open sky with a lifeless girl and a grazing horse. Silence reverberated around him.

"Maya!" he called again, hunching over her. Looking north, he could see the jagged face of Mt. Diablo through a gap in the hills that ringed the field. He glanced at his watch. Julie and

George had already been gone almost half an hour. He bent over the lifeless form again.

At last, he heard the whirl of the chopper blades approaching. He looked up as the helicopter buzzed down twenty-five yards away, flattening the grass and sending the horse across the field at a gallop. George and Julie topped the hill pale and out of breath from running. Two paramedics rushed up with oxygen and a stretcher, and Alex stepped back so they could attempt to resuscitate Maya.

She had lain unconscious in the field for a long time—almost forty-five minutes. But once help arrived, everything moved at lightning speed. In one swift motion, the Cal-Star paramedics lifted her body onto a stretcher and strapped her down. They retracted her tongue and shoved a breathing tube down her throat and into her lungs. Then one of them began rhythmically squeezing the breathing apparatus, “bagging” her to jumpstart her breathing.

By air, it was a quick ten-minute ride to John Muir Hospital, where she was rushed to the trauma care section of the emergency room. Eight people immediately assembled to work on her, prodding, sticking, and probing. The respiratory therapist continued bagging her by hand to further assist her breathing, but Maya was profoundly unresponsive.

After Dr. Garry and the ER physician on duty evaluated her injuries, she was sent to the CT scanner and then rushed to the operating room for a craniotomy. Her head was shaved, and Dr. Carr, the hospital’s chief neurosurgeon began to operate.

What he found was a large subdural hematoma, a blood clot. Blood was leaking throughout her brain, trapped beneath the dura, or outer covering. Massive brain swelling caused the ventricles and cisternal spaces to close in, increasing the pressure even more. Maya’s brain was so swollen that Dr. Carr could

not replace the bone flap he had removed from the back of her skull to facilitate the three-hour operation. Instead, her head was wrapped in a sterile turban and she was returned to the Neuroscience ICU in a deep coma. A ventilator supplied oxygen, multiple IV lines administered medications, and two computers monitored her every bodily function.



As I tried to absorb Alex's story, and piece together what had happened to my daughter, I flashed back to how this day had begun.

At six o'clock that morning, I cracked open the kids' bedroom door and looked in on them. This was the way days used to begin when Maya still lived at home. I could hardly believe she was already a sophomore in college. She was sprawled across the bottom bunk, a limp strand of hair covering her cheek, mascara smudges under her eyes. Her sister Meghan's foot peeked out from under the covers on the bunk bed above. Their even breathing soothed me like a mantra. Assured that everything was okay, I shut the door silently.

In the kitchen, three paper plates smeared with chocolate frosting littered the counter, a reminder of last night's party to celebrate the spectacular news about UCLA. I hustled around stuffing trash into the wastebasket and wiping away cake crumbs. I started the teakettle and put bread into the toaster. Now that the tension of waiting for UCLA's verdict was over, I imagined how we would relax that night with pizza and a video.

Already late for a business seminar, I hurried to my room to dress. The girls' voices began to rise and fall in their bedroom. Then, I heard Maya in the bathroom, and remembered that she

had agreed to drive Meghan to school. The girls' activities, the best route to the hotel where the seminar was going to be held, and plans to continue our celebration all flowed through my mind. At last, ready for my journey, I went to check on the kids and tell them good-bye. Meghan was still dressing, but Maya sat in our big easy chair in her pajamas, her hair a rumpled mess.

"Mom, I need to get the oil changed in my car," she said. "Will you call the mechanic for me?"

"Maya, come on, can't you see I'm running late?"

Her face fell. I upped the ante. "You're the big-time actress with the big, fat UCLA scholarship. Don't you think it's time you handled stuff like this?"

"M-o-m," she stretched it out to three syllables, wheedling. "They know you. They don't know me—it will be much faster if you do it."

"Oh, all right," I said. I picked up the phone and dialed, knowing that she was gloating over what a pushover I was.

I called my good-bye to Meghan, and her voice echoed down the hallway. "Bye Mom! Have a good day."

As I headed for the door at last, Maya looked up at me and flashed an impish grin. Then she gave me the thumbs up sign, a family joke from the days when she had a crush on Tom Cruise in the movie "Top Gun."

I ruffled my hand through her hair. "I'm so proud of you, honey." I slammed the door, already planning to order her favorite pineapple, Canadian bacon, and tomato pizza for tonight.

The day went quickly, and the traffic gods were with me. Before I knew it, I was back, and it was only 5:30, plenty of time to make a salad to go with the pizza. As I walked from the car I begin to sing, reviewing our plans for the evening. When I opened the gate, still humming, I found the front door ajar. My

younger daughter confronted me. Her face was drawn and pale.

“Mom, you have to call the hospital. Something terrible has happened to Maya.”

Instantly, the hair stood up on the back of my neck.

Gears ground in my head. My first thought was *No! This is not true!* But already I was trembling. I stared at eleven-year-old Meghan.

With reddish-brown hair and a sturdy frame, she was the opposite of her willowy sister. As I looked at her, she seemed tiny, as if she had physically shrunk. Her voice sounded far away, like a NASA astronaut speaking to a distant command center. She backed away from the door as I came in and set my briefcase on a chair.

Since I had no cell phone, I now realized that this little sixth grader had been alone with this horrible news for the last hour.

When my feet stayed glued to their spot, Meghan urged me on. “A nurse phoned. You have to call the hospital right away.” In slow motion I turned toward the dining room table. My arms felt heavy, as if lifting the phone from its cradle would be too great an effort.

“Mom,” Meghan said with blatant impatience, “please, you have to call NOW.” I knew I should move faster, yet I could not break out of my zombie pace. I removed a notebook from my briefcase and dialed the number Meghan had scribbled on a scrap of paper. I cradled the phone with my left shoulder, the habit of a former news reporter, and took notes with my other hand.

“Trauma Unit,” a businesslike voice said, “Nurse Harris speaking.”

As soon as I inquired about Maya her voice softened. “At about 3:45 this afternoon your daughter was in an accident. She

has a subdural hematoma—a blood clot in her brain—and is undergoing brain surgery now. Please come to the emergency room as soon as you can.”

I set the phone back in its cradle and stared down at my own spiky handwriting. Meghan said she had already phoned a friend, and Laura’s mother Jean was on her way to our house. I waited until I heard Jean’s car pull up out back, then gave Meghan a hug. “I’ll call you as soon as I know anything more.” I left my daughter hunched in a corner of the sofa and closed the door behind me.

Jean was getting out of her car as I ran to mine. “I’ll take care of her,” she yelled. I waved and kept going.

I gunned out of our parking space and onto Brook Street. “Okay, stay calm. She’s going to be okay. *Oh God, let Maya be okay,*” I chanted this prayer over and over as I raced through a yellow light and pulled onto the freeway.

I parked in the lot at the John Muir Medical Center, but I didn’t know how I got there or how long it had taken me. Life had turned inside out and every move I made felt as if I was looking down on the scene from above. Nothing fit.

Then Dr. Garry delivered his assessment of Maya’s condition, and the emergency room nurse guided me up two floors to the ICU waiting room and left me there with Maya’s friends. Paralyzed with fear, I couldn’t even remember how to get back to the front entrance to ask what was happening to my daughter. There was nothing I could do but wait.



As the hours pass, I grasp at any distraction. Basketball playoffs blare from the overhead TV above us. I hear buzzers squawking and tennis shoes squeaking as huge men skid and pivot.

Sweat falls in shiny drops from their foreheads as they stand at the free throw line. Pressure. I understand that.

I look at my watch. Almost 8:30 and still no word.

“What in the hell are they doing to her?” I demand.

“Operating,” Maya’s friend Oliver says. “It’s going to be okay.” He squeezes my shoulder and even though he is young enough to be my son, his presence reassures me. I stare into his dark eyes, survey his tea-colored face, and remember that one of the biggest fights Maya and I ever had was over this boy’s borrowed car. He was her pal, never a boyfriend. They hung out together. In my mind, he is innocent because he wasn’t in the field with her.

In the restroom I rinse my hands over the antiseptic white sink and look at myself in the mirror. My veneer of calm shatters. *Jesus! My child. What is taking so long? Make this bad dream end. Please God, make her be all right.*

Like an automaton, I return to the waiting room.

Alex approaches me, still stiff and pale. “I’ll go get Maya’s car and drive it to your apartment,” he offers. I nod my head. I could as easily strangle this boy as talk to him. He shoves his hands deep in his pockets and walks away. I stare at Oliver, fixated on the warmth in his eyes.

My anger at Alex started long before this nightmare. Three years ago I went into Maya’s room late one night to be sure she had not broken her curfew. To my astonishment, I found Maya curled up with a bare-chested boy in her bed. It was Alex. I went back to my room to think about how to handle this. The drawbacks of being a single mother flashed like a neon sign. A male authority figure would have been a godsend at that moment, but I was it. So, I rolled up my bathrobe sleeves, took a deep breath, and called on my best assertiveness skills.

“Guys,” I said after I woke them, “I think this is not a good

idea. Alex, I'd like you to go home now." There had been other incidents with Alex involving beer busts and broken curfews.

My mind begins to reel off more random memories.

One Saturday afternoon I had both girls with me shopping in downtown Walnut Creek. Driving through the McDonald's parking lot, I almost ran head on into a white Mercedes. "Mercy upon us," I shouted, slamming on the brakes.

"Mom, don't you mean 'Mercedes upon us?'" Maya quipped. The other driver backed away. We burst into laughter. Relieved, we ate our cheeseburgers and fries outside at the picnic table.

My mind skips to Maya's senior year in high school. She went to the prom with a kid she barely knew. He was wealthy and spoiled, and she ended up hating him and his posh parents, his silver BMW, his expensive tuxedo. "He's a pretentious asshole," she sniffed. When I came home from work one day, she had propped her five-by-seven prom photo on the mantelpiece. In her hot pink gown with the spaghetti straps she stands next to the trim body of her date. But to obliterate his face she cut a picture of the movie critic Gene Shalit out of a magazine and pasted it above her date's neck. The bushy hair and handlebar mustache looked ridiculous. I roared when I saw it.

A voice breaks into my memories. "Ms. Vincent?" A tall thin man in hospital greens leans over my chair. "I'm Chris Perez, the nursing supervisor; please follow me."

He leads me into the nurses' break room just outside the Neuroscience ICU. A row of metal lockers lines one wall. A few chairs are neatly arranged in the center of the room and a coffee maker sits on a counter next to a stainless steel sink.

"The operation is over now. Dr. Carr will be here in a moment to talk to you." Nurse Perez leaves me alone in the small room.

I pace between the chairs and the row of lockers. After a few

minutes a dark-haired man with chiseled features comes in. When I reach for his outstretched hand, I feel the coolness of his palm, its smoothness and strength. He smells of soap, and he projects an aura of crispness. His white coat looks as if it has just been pressed.

“How is she?”

I want good answers, simple reassurance. When he doesn’t respond directly I realize I am not going to get them.

“You can see her in a few minutes,” Dr. Carr replies. He glances toward the window and lets his gaze linger there. “I operated for just over three hours. The outer covering of her brain, the dura, was extremely tense, and when I excised it, a huge amount of blood extruded. I must tell you, I’ve never seen a brain more red and angry. It’s extremely swollen. So much so, that we could not replace the flap of skull we removed beforehand.”

My stomach lurches. *You mean the back of her head is gone?*

He looks straight into my eyes for the first time.

“Do you have any other children?”

“Yes, another daughter.” I picture Meghan, her ashen face when she told me the hospital had called, the way she sat huddled on the couch as if trying to disappear into it. “What are you saying to me?” My body bends forward involuntarily, as if standing upright is now impossible, as if his words will break my back.

“I’m saying that your daughter’s odds are very slim.”

Blood surges through my arms. I want to punch him hard in the center of his calm, chiseled face.

“Look, I’ve been sitting out there for hours thinking she has a blood clot in her brain, they’re operating, they’re going to take care of it. Now, you’re telling me that’s not the case?”

“I would say she has a two or three percent chance of survival.” I feel the hammer blow of his words, but I don’t believe them.

“This is not just a blood clot.” He touches the fingers of one hand gently to the fingers of the other, making a tent.

“Her entire brain is extremely swollen, as I said. We’ve put her into a barbiturate coma, over and above the coma she’s naturally in from the force of the fall. We want no brainwave activity at all. It’s the only hope for bringing down the swelling.”

I turn away from him toward the lockers.

“Do *anything*,” I plead, turning slowly to face him again. “This child is my life.”

My entire body goes numb, and I shake uncontrollably.

Dr. Carr nods his head very gently. He offers to tell Maya’s friends about her condition; then he goes to a cupboard, removes a flannel blanket, and wraps it around my shoulders. Nurse Perez returns. “We don’t want to take away your hope, but if you have a minister you might want to have that person here.”

I stumble to the wall phone to place the call. Suddenly, there in that little room, all I have ever done and been as a mother rises up in my heart.



Up to my waist in aqua water, I propped my ten-month-old baby on my hip, holding her tight to my body. She wiggled and bounced against me as she pointed at the other little ones in water wings filling the shallow end of the pool.

I waded out deeper, away from the hordes of bobbing, jumping toddlers. Her father dived in at the deep end and swam to us under water, then surfaced inches from Maya and me. He rubbed noses with our baby girl and teasingly whispered “Peek-a-boo!” then disappeared under the water again like a glittering fish.

Maya laughed, shaking against me with heartfelt ecstasy.

“Where did Daddy go?” I whispered into her ear.

Jeff resurfaced and took her tiny body into both hands, then turned her face to mine. Their wet heads bobbed in unison. I backed away and stretched out my arms.

“Swim to Mommy.”

“One... two... three... GO!” Jeff said, plunging her under water.

Maya propelled herself toward me, a look of competitive intensity on her little face. Bubbles formed as she kicked through the water. Her eyes were wide open, with a startled, mammalian glossiness.

“That’s a girl. Come on, Maya!”

She lengthened her torso in one final effort. When I plucked her from the water, she snuggled into my chest, rubbing her fists against her eyes. By some deep law of the universe, this enchanted being actually belonged to me. I prepared to plunge her back under water and count, knowing her survival instinct would kick in and she would hold her breath. But I hesitated. What if the instinct didn’t work? What if she forgot to hold her breath or struggle to the surface?

“What a good, brave girl you are,” I crooned into her ear and plunged her under the water.

Now, all alone in a suburban hospital, I see that young mother as if she were standing next to me. She was intoxicated with her child’s will to test every limit, drunk with that little girl’s beauty and trust.

I pushed my daughter to take risks and applauded her when she did, believing I was encouraging her strength and independence. Until her life hung in the balance, I never considered the darker side of her behavior, or the motivation for mine.