

## October

Luke stood beside me at the end of the pier. His arm was wrapped around my shoulder, shielding me from the wind. It wasn't cold, but my body shivered in spite of the warmth. We stood there silently, gazing out across the vast stretch of inky blue. Fog was pressing in from the deep, a bleak touch to the already miserable day. I could hear a bell tolling in the distance, a buoy warning sailors of possible hazards in the bay. It was an eerie sound, but the steady rhythm of the toll against the waves was strangely soothing. I could lose myself in it, like watching the swinging pendulum of a pocket watch, easing into a hypnotic trance.

My twin, Gabriel, had once taught me how to separate the chaos, and I used the technique like a crutch—creating an artificial place to escape.

My mind was empty.

“We should probably get back soon,” Luke said. “It’s getting dark.”

I nodded, picking at the dirt that was caked beneath my fingernails. It was a ceremonial tradition to sprinkle dirt on a loved one's coffin; a symbolization of the deceased returning to the earth. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. A final resting place. Only, I wasn't ready for the final goodbye. My beloved brother was taken too soon.

Luke helped me turn away from the railing, making sure I was balanced on my crutches before we started walking. There was a deep ache in my arms from the pressure of the padding

pushing into my skin. My right leg was engulfed in a thick cast that made it nearly impossible to maneuver without looking like a clumsy toddler learning to walk. The pain was always there; ebbing at the surface, reminding me that I could still *feel*... reminding me that after everything was done—I was still alive.

## Chapter One

Today marked exactly four months since my twin brother had died, and left me forever. Four, long, lonely, miserable months...

There was an empty quietness that seemed to echo through the halls of the too large house, with its too many rooms, and its pristine white walls. It was always dark, no matter how bright the sun shone outside. The curtains were always drawn, but if you looked closely, you could still see particles of dust drifting lazily through the haze of the muted light.

After Gabriel died, home stopped feeling like home. It was difficult to be locked inside the walls, surrounded by the ghost of his memories. *Everything* reminded me of him. I'd wake in the early hours of the morning, pass by his room on my way to the bathroom, and I could still smell the cologne he used lingering in the air. His green toothbrush was still next to mine in the holder on the bathroom sink. His comb still had strands of auburn hair collected between the small, blue tines. His pictures lined the hallway, and his running shoes were still sitting on the mat beside the garage door; mud caked to the bottom of the soles. Everywhere I turned, there he was, but wasn't all at once. It was almost as if the house was clinging to an invisible hope that he would return, and pick up right where he left off.

For some, it was easier to move forward by packing up and cleaning out the belongings of a passed loved one. Maybe the physical act of moving forward made all the difference, but my

mother wasn't ready for that. She needed to see his pictures, his intense brown eyes and wide smile, a mirror image of my own, gazing back at her from the silver frames. Like the house, she too was under the pretense that there would come a day when he'd come back home.

I could almost see it; he'd come in through the door and toss a water bottle in my direction. "Get your shoes on," he'd say, "we're going for a run." And *God*, how I missed those days. I missed sharing in the laughter and the freedom we felt as our legs carried us across the ground. I missed feeling like I was flying, but the reality of it all was that I'd never fly again.

Every moment or memory that ever meant anything, started and ended with my brother, and he was gone now.

The door in the kitchen opened and closed with a neat little click, bringing me back to the present. "Darcy?" my mother called out, the brass sound of her keys clinking against the marble counter top.

"In here," I responded. I was lying on my bed opposite the pillows with my legs propped up against the wall. I'd been lying on my back, watching the ceiling fan spin in dizzying circles above me. I had picked up a habit of watching or listening to things that had a consistent tick, or movement—something like a metronome. If I concentrated on those things long enough, I could sometimes pull myself into a state of what I liked to call the "in-between." It was somewhere between reality and a kind of peace—a peace where I could just exist and turn off my feelings. It had all started that day on the pier, and I had become obsessed with finding it in every situation so I could just make myself get through the dragging days. Call it a coping mechanism.

"Knock-knock," my mother said as her knuckles rapped softly against my wooden door. I didn't move to acknowledge her presence, but I felt her weight shift the mattress in her favor at the end of the bed.

“How was your day?” she asked, her voice cheerful.

I shrugged my shoulders in response.

“Did physical therapy go well?” She reached out, taking a strand of my auburn hair between her fingers, like she had done to comfort me when I was a child. I looked down at my legs, bare beneath the hem of my shorts.

The cast had come off a little over a month ago, and I had been in physical therapy to relearn how to walk with the new equipment holding my bones together on the inside. My right leg was practically bionic, and I had the ugly, rigid scars to prove it. There was always a certain level of pain and stiffness that never subsided, but it was a small price to pay, considering I was the one on the green side of the grass.

“Fine,” I replied.

“Today was your last clinical appointment,” she stated. “Did Luke go with you?”

“He did,” I said.

“Well what did the doctor say?”

“I’ve been cleared to do home therapy on my own now,” I said. “My leg has healed as best as it can, so as long as I keep up with my routine, I shouldn’t have to go back for anymore appointments.”

“Well that’s great news, honey.” Mom squeezed my shoulder in approval. I felt the mattress give a little as she stood from the bed, moving so that I could see her standing before me.

“Listen, there’s something I wanted to talk to you about,” she began. I watched her tuck a strand of mahogany hair behind her ear—a nervous habit. She wiped the palms of her hands across her scrub pants, buying time.

“Mom?”

“It’s work,” she said finally. “They want me to start traveling again.”

“Where to this time?” I asked. My mom had been an RN at the local hospital since Gabriel and I were children. It wasn’t until we were in high school, and our father lost his job at the accounting firm, that she had even considered becoming a traveling nurse. Nursing jobs were always in high demand, but the pay for a traveling nurse was substantial enough to support our family while my father searched for a new job. My mother possessed an uncanny ability to care for people she didn’t know. It was a rare gift of compassion, and truly an incredible thing to see.

I knew she always felt a little guilty for leaving us—sometimes for a couple of months at a time—but out there, she was in her element. She was good at her job. Though, “job” was a term I used loosely when it came to my mother’s profession. She was really one of a kind; an angel sent down from heaven, disguised as a nurse. She could take someone’s worst day, and somehow find a way to make them smile—even when it seemed impossible. My mother always knew the right thing to say, or when to say nothing at all. Sometimes a simple touch was enough.

My father eventually found a new job, but my mother had fallen in love with her traveling position and decided to continue with that lifestyle. Of course, she had returned to the hospital after Gabriel had died so she could be close to home. Mostly, I think it was so she could keep a close watch over me.

“Phoenix,” she answered. “Desert Pine’s Nursing Home.”

“Desert Pine?” I lifted an eyebrow.

“I guess it sounds better than Desert Cactus.” She shrugged and leaned up against my bedroom wall.

“When do they want you start?” I asked.

She tilted her head back and forth as if weighing her response. “If I accept the position, I’ll

start a week from tomorrow.”

I shifted on the bed so that I was sitting up, feeling the rush of blood pooling from my head. There was a pit in my stomach, an aching hollow place that dreaded the thought of actually being alone for months. Ironic, since I craved desolate solitude. I wanted to be left alone, but I also liked knowing that someone else was sharing the emptiness with me. Sharing a space with someone—even if you weren’t speaking, was a more comforting notion than being completely alone.

“You should go,” I said instead. I tried to make myself sound enthusiastic. I knew how much the job meant to her, and I knew it would be a good opportunity. I couldn’t allow myself to be selfish with this one. If my mom was ready to get back out there and take on the world, I wasn’t going to be the one to stand in her way. This was a good step for her—a *needed* step. Besides, there wasn’t a good reason that the both of us should stay here collecting dust.

“Darcy,” Mom lowered her voice, and reached out to take my hand. “If you’re not ready for me to leave, I can put it off for a while longer.” I knew she meant it, but there was a sparkle in her eye; a yearning that I recognized and couldn’t deny.

I had learned from a young age the tell-tale signals of my mother’s body language. It was something most people didn’t pick up on because her face was always calm and collected—a delicately poised mask that she had perfected over the years. In part, it was because of her job, but also because she was truly selfless. I admired that trait, and wanted to be like her, but sometimes I thought I was the furthest thing from selflessness.

Before Gabriel had died, I was very... *complicated*, according to my mother. My father called my behavior “willful” but I could admit to (at times) being a stubborn teenager. I wasn’t disrespectful, but my emotions tended to pull rank. Anything I felt, I felt it all, and I felt it

deeply. I was sentient, and raw with emotion, showing every inch of them with a realness that unhinged my soul. You could read me like an open book because everything was there on the surface. I was high on life, and full of a bright energy... But after Gabriel died, it was like the fiery light had gone out inside me. Someone had flipped the switch, and I didn't recognize myself anymore.

"Darcy?" My mother was looking at me, waiting.

"I think you should do this, Mom. You're too good at what you do; I shouldn't keep you to myself. It would be a crime against humanity." I pressed my lips into a smile, more so for my own benefit, trying to convince myself that I would be strong without her.

"You're sure?" she asked me, squeezing my hand.

"Yeah, absolutely. Maybe I'll stay with Grandma and Grandpa MacKenna while you're gone." It had been a while since I'd been able to visit them at the farm. At least there, I would be surrounded by constant movement.

"Or you could stay with your father..."

I shot her a pointed look.

She held up her hands; a halting gesture. "I know I can't force you to speak to him, Darcy. You're eighteen and you have the right to decide who's in your life, but I really think you need to hear his side of the story."

"I'm not interested to hear his side of the story," I said. My father and I were currently on the outs, and I wasn't remotely interested in listening to anything he had to say. Not after what he had done.

"Okay," she said in defeat. "I'm sure your grandparents would love to see you." This was my mother's subtle way of changing the subject. She didn't like conflict; she was noncontroversial

by nature.

“I’m sorry,” I said, remembering to check my attitude.

“Hey, are you hungry? I’m hungry, and I don’t really feel like cooking anything tonight,” she said. “What do you say we run out and get a bite to eat?”

I nodded. “Sure.”

“Grab your coat.” She smiled at me. “I’ll go start the car.”

I collected myself at the end of the bed, searching for a warmer pair of clothes to change into. Though it went unspoken, we both knew what today represented. The anniversary of his death hung over us like an ominous cloud, promising a lifetime of regret and sorrow. We each had our own ways of coping, but I kept Gabriel close to me in my own way. I kept his class ring around my neck on a thin silver chain. It hung low, nestled against my heart. This way, I’d never really have to say goodbye.

## Chapter Two

The morning sun sifted through the bare branches of an old oak tree, and the February wind nipped viciously at my face. I had always disliked winter and the cold that seemed to last infinitely. Though winter couldn't be classified as "miserable" on the coast of Carolina, to me, it felt like the warmer months would never come again.

"Okay, I'm all set," Mom said as she loaded the last suitcase into the trunk of her Subaru. She was wearing her best wool coat; beige, with large black buttons. It was a classy choice, and went nicely with her sensible black winter boots and matching knit hat. Her short hair curled underneath her chin, framing her angular face.

I had rarely seen my mother out of her scrubs, but even with the simple clothing it was easy to see how naturally beautiful she was. Faint lines pulled at the corner of her gray-blue eyes; the only sign that showed her age of forty-one. She was tall, like me, but had curves where I was lacking. I was built more like my father—more like an athletic runner. Lean. Wiry. My long waves of auburn hair may have been the only attribute working in my favor.

"I'll miss you," I said, wrapping my arms around her.

"And I'll miss you. Say hello to your grandparents for me, and be sure to call me if you need anything."

"I will," I said.

She planted a kiss on my forehead and cupped my cheek with her gloved hand. “I love you, Darcy.”

“I love you too; now get out of here before you miss your flight.” I forced myself to smile as she climbed into the driver’s seat.

My mom was stronger than me. She had always been this indestructible force, radiating a sense of security and sureness. I had seen her cry twice only, and since I had been sharing in her misery I was never sure how to be there for her. She had been the able one, stepping in to take care of me.

I watched as she backed out of the drive, and then pulled onto the road. I waved until I couldn’t see her car, and there I was, suddenly alone.

I could hear the branches swaying, and creaking above me. I stood for a moment longer, wrapping my arms around myself to keep out the cold. The too-big house loomed behind me; I couldn’t bring myself to go back inside. I didn’t want to face the sudden silence. Instead, I started for the porch and sat on the front step with my back to the house. My breath billowed out in front of me; the frosty cloud lingering only for a moment before dissolving entirely. I reached into my pocket to pull out my phone, dialing Luke.

He answered on the second ring. “Hello?”

“Hey,” I said. “What are you doing right now?”

“Lying in bed,” he replied sleepily. The morning grog was thick in his voice.

“So, today’s the day,” I said.

It took him a minute to catch up, but then he said, “You’re leaving?”

“Yeah. Would you mind coming over? Keep me company while I pack?”

There was a slight pause before he answered, “Okay, see you in a few.”

“Thanks,” I said, and then pressed the end button and pocketed my phone. Luke lived across the street, which made our life-long friendship all the more convenient. My front porch faced his garage, and it wasn’t long before I heard the hinges groan in complaint, and the slow give as the door lifted off of the concrete. Luke emerged from the darkness, the sunlight playing in his golden blonde hair as he crossed the street. He was wearing track pants, and I could see the green and silver lettering of his university T-shirt poking out beneath the collar of his jacket.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“For what?”

“Getting you out of bed early on a Saturday. I know how important sleep is to you.” Luke was a sophomore at the Havenport University, taking sixteen credit hours a week on top of trying to keep up with a part-time job at the mall working retail.

“Don’t worry,” he said, mussing the top of my head like he had done since we were kids. “I was awake; I just wasn’t motivated to get up.”

“I know the feeling,” I said with a pinch of sarcasm.

He brushed past me on the way up the front steps, and pulled open the large oak door. The warmth of the house enclosed around us as we stepped inside the foyer. Luke headed straight for the kitchen, opening cupboards here and there, and helped himself to a bowl of cinnamon Life cereal.

When I was a kid, I thought eating that particular brand of cereal would somehow magically extend my life, or at least boost the quality of it. Boy, had I been wrong. In spite of that, it was still my favorite.

I sighed, sinking down into the chair across from him at the center island. I reached for the box, and decided to pour myself a bowl.

“How long did your mom say she was going to be gone this time?” he asked around a mouthful of cereal; his words garbled, nearly indecipherable to the human ear, but I had long since acclimated to his jumbled vocabulary.

“Between eight and twelve weeks,” I answered.

“Wow, she’s really jumping back into it.”

“It’s been four months,” I said. “I know she misses it. It will be good for her.” As I said this, I started tracing invisible circles on the counter top.

“Yeah, but what about you?” Luke’s blue eyes leveled on mine.

“I’ll be fine,” I said hesitantly.

“I get why you don’t want to stay here.” His eyes bounced around the room, noting all of Gabriel’s things that were still lying out in the open; all endless reminders that he was gone, and I wasn’t. “But do you really have to go to Havenport?” he asked me.

Havenport was a thirty minute drive from here; Luke still made the daily trek to campus since it was cheaper than staying in the dorms. My grandparents lived just outside of town, closer to the coast, but tucked away on a nice little piece of country land. They lived in my grandfather’s family farmhouse, a dated, two-story brick home that was full of character.

“You could stay with me,” Luke suggested nonchalantly when I didn’t answer.

“I appreciate the offer but you’re hardly home as it is. You’ll come visit me though, won’t you?” I sounded hopeful.

“You know I can’t stay away from you for too long.” He winked.

“Good.” I reached up to run a hand through my disheveled hair. I probably looked terrifying, but I was way past the point of trying to impress Luke on account of my looks. He was my best friend foremost, and he’d seen me at my lowest of lows, my darkest of days, and still he stayed.

Luke had finished his cereal, and had gotten up to rinse the bowl out before loading it in the dishwasher. He turned, leaning up against the counter in that suave, cool-guy way, flipping his hair out of his eyes. “When are your grandparents expecting you?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Anytime, I guess. I was thinking of leaving soon.” The less time I had to be in this house, the better.

Luke nodded, and glanced down at his watch. “I have to be at work in an hour. What can I do to help while you pack?” he asked.

“You don’t have to do anything,” I said.

“I want to.” He reached out; his fingertips brushing lightly on my forearm.

“I guess the fridge could probably use a cleaning.” I shrugged.

“I’m on it,” he informed me, heading in that direction.

“Please. Take anything you want,” I said. “It’s not like I’ll be home to miss it.”

“Well you know me,” he said, grinning, “I can’t say no to free food.”

I shook my head, and turned for my bedroom. I pulled my green cross country bag from the top shelf, plopping it open on my bed. The silver embroidery of my name had started to fray, and the Tiger Shark’s emblem had a dirt stain smeared across its fin. I ran my finger over it absently, knowing it was a permanent fixture. It didn’t matter though; it wasn’t like I would ever use it again for the actual purpose it was intended for. I turned, gathering the essentials, and started stuffing them in the bag.

Softly, I sat on my bed and opened the drawer to my nightstand. Inside was a mixture of prescription bottles that had been prescribed by my doctors and therapists. I paused, running my thumb along the edge of the drawer.

It's funny how there seemed to be a pill for everything these days... Can't sleep? There's a pill for that. Can't eat? There's a pill for that, too. Scientists had developed a pill for all sorts of scenarios, creating a synthetic state of mind along with a complete dependency epidemic. Was some of it useful? Sure... but it was just so easy, taking a little pill that magically made all your problems disappear. At least for a little while, anyway.

I reached into the drawer and pulled out a blue bottle that was prescribed for pain. Another that was meant to help me sleep, and a third that was for anxiety. In the beginning, I abused them all. I lived in my false synthetic reality, feeling as little as I possibly could. I'd float for days, unaware of time or space. I was completely comatose in my every day existence, and then suddenly it wasn't enough. They called this stage: Denial.

I went through a phase where I refused any medication. I wanted to feel the pain, and know that I was suffering. I wanted—no—I *needed* that physical ache that coursed through my body and mind. I needed that absolute feeling of destruction. If Gabriel was gone, then I would endure that suffering, too. They called this stage: Anger.

I didn't rely on the pills to get me through the day anymore, but sometimes I would find the pain to be just a little too much to handle and I'd cave. My bionic leg ached severely every time the weather changed, particularly with a coming storm. I'd find myself in overwhelming situations and need to pop an anxiety pill, or the worst yet... when I'd wake from a reoccurring nightmare and I'd need all three. I wanted to say that I was getting better—*stronger*, but truthfully the thought of not having one of my little magic pills "*just in case*" terrified me beyond reason.

I swallowed around the lump in my throat, and packed the medication in a small black bag, tucking it safely in the smaller zipper compartment of my bag. You know, *just in case*.

I finished packing, changed into a pair of jeans and a comfortably warm sweater, and washed up in the bathroom before meeting Luke back in the kitchen. He had a black garbage bag in one of his hands, and a container of sour cream in the other. I sat my bag on the counter, and the sound caused him to look up.

“Do you realize this expired in November?” He shook the container.

“Gross.” I made a face.

“I’m going to open it.”

“Luke, please don’t—” I started to protest, but he was already peeling back the lid. I braced myself for the putrid smell as Luke flashed the container in my direction. Green, fuzzy goop had taken over the contents.

“Sick,” Luke muttered, poking at it with his index finger.

“What are you, *twelve*?” I chastised. “Throw it out.”

He laughed, dumping the goop into the trash bag. He turned for the sink, rinsing the plastic container before launching it into the recycle bin.

“It’s a good thing I got my hands on your fridge,” he declared a moment later. “That oversized Petri dish would have definitely been a fascination to the scientists, and a major red flag for the health department.”

I narrowed my eyes at him.

“I’m kidding,” he said, “maybe just a yellow flag.”

I laughed. “Thank you, for doing that.”

“You don’t have to thank me,” he said. “Are you all set?”

“I think so,” I replied. “Oh!” A thought popped into my head. “Can you get the mail for me while I’m gone?”

“Sure, I’ll keep an eye on everything. No need to worry.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“You’ll never have to find out,” he said with a wink, taking the bags from me and heading out to load up my car. Luke had always done that—the looking out for me bit—but ever since the accident, he had started treating me more like a wounded animal that couldn’t look out for herself. I appreciated his help and concern, but I had been so independent prior to the accident that I worried he’d treat me differently for the rest of my life. I didn’t want that, nor did I want him thinking that I needed fixed in some way. I didn’t want to be anyone’s “project.”

I hobbled out after him, turning to double-check the locked door. I met him at the driver’s side door of my car as he opened it for me. “Text me to let me know you made it safely,” he said.

“I will, and, thank you, for everything.”

Luke scooped me up in a hug, the top of my head resting just under his cheekbone. I felt his lips brush against my hair, and just as quickly he released me. “Drive safe,” he said, and closed the door, tapping the hood of my Juke twice before crossing the road back to his house.

I pushed the key in the ignition, the gear in drive, and started off down the road. It was a quarter past nine, and the sun was shining brightly above me. That was one thing I liked about the winter sun, once it was up, it just moved lazily across the sky and illuminated the world in a halo of gold.

I turned on the radio and turned up the heat as I pulled out of our suburban neighborhood, turning onto the highway that would take me to my grandparent’s farm. The road stretched out before me with miles and miles of endless, undulated countryside up ahead.

It wasn’t long before I was making all of the familiar automatic turns that would take me past a field of ancient oak trees that were draped in dying Spanish moss. The sage colored threading

clung to the branches like spider webs; the dew from the morning catching the sunlight as I drove by.

I slowed as I rounded a bend and the farmhouse came into view. I pointed my car down the tree-lined gravel drive, and tried to avoid the dangerous looking potholes as my car bumped down the lane.

The farmhouse was a magnificent red brick with deep blue shutters. The paint might have been a little chipped but it was still a stunning sight to behold. The house had a wide wooden wrap-around porch with a couple of rocking chairs, and a swing that faced the east. Empty flowerpots hung from the awning, the stems of the dead flowers left to wither in the winter sun.

I parked my car near the back gate, next to the barn. Zipping up my jacket, I braced myself for the cold as I slipped out of the car. My footsteps crunched against the gravel as I made my way across the drive and stepped onto the porch. Before I had a chance to reach for the handle, my grandma burst from the screen door, letting it slam shut behind her. She crooned in delight as she wrapped her thin arms around me, and squeezed with a strength that surprised me for her small size.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” she said against my ear. She held me out at arm’s length, scrutinizing me in only the way a grandmother can. “You’re too skinny,” she decided. “Come inside, I’ve got breakfast on the table.”

I laughed involuntarily, shaking my head as I followed her inside. A blur of black-and-white fur and feathers surrounded my ankles, moving quickly in dizzying circles. I could hear excited barking and something that sounded like squawking coming from the cartoon tornado in front of me.

“What in the—”

“—Luna! Oh, for heaven’s sake.” Grandma was in the midst of the chaos bending to separate the dog and the—*duck*.

“When did you get a duck?” I asked, narrowing my eyes as she bent to pick up the white feathered creature. It quacked happily in her arms.

“She’s our latest rescue,” Grandma said. “She’s an American pekin duck but she thinks she’s a dog. She certainly gives poor Radar a run for his money.”

I bent slightly to pet the border collie who was now sitting calmly at my feet. I scratched his ears as he licked at my chin in a happy greeting. “I missed you too,” I said, and then turned back to Grandma. “And what on earth is your duck wearing?”

“Oh, this?” Grandma pointed to the pink contraption that was strapped to the duck’s back. It wrapped around her body and created a pouch under her backside. “It’s a diaper,” she clarified.

“Interesting.” I lifted an eyebrow skeptically.

“Luna is a very special case.” Grandma said, placing her back on the floor next to Radar.

Most of the animals on the farm were “special cases.” All of the animals here had been adopted or rescued at some point in time. It was all part of the charm that captivated me so much.

“Where’s Grandpa?” I asked, following Grandma into the kitchen.

“He’s running some errands in town, but he’ll be back around lunch I imagine. A man is like clockwork when it comes to his stomach,” she said, retrieving a mug from the cupboard.

“Coffee?”

“Please,” I said, pulling out a chair at the kitchen table. My grandfather had hand-carved it years ago. The kitchen smelled amazing; hazelnut coffee, maple syrup and blueberries perfumed the air in a delicious mouthwatering scent. My stomach seemed to grumble on cue.

For as long as I remembered, my grandmother's kitchen had always been bountiful with food. "It's the one thing that brings us all together," she would say. And it was true, too. Out of the five senses, they say that scent is the strongest trigger of memories. When I reached back into my memory bank, the first thing I recalled about my grandmother's kitchen was the smell of baking pie. These weren't your typical store-bought pies, either. Every ingredient—including the crust—was made entirely from scratch. It was the only time I'd ever seen the kitchen in complete disarray; tin cans and baking ingredients spread out over every inch of the counter and table surfaces. Flour was strewn across floor, cracked egg shells and dirty, used utensils lay in the sink basin while Grandma worked meticulously to perfect her craft.

Nothing about her pies was ordinary. They were really more like art. I remembered pushing a chair up to the counter as a small girl, standing on it, and cradling my arms through the pegs for balance while I watched her work. She had an array of pastry tools that she used to carve designs into the top layer of her pie crusts. I remembered being mystified, watching her take a plain, flat piece of dough and turn it into something that only she could see was there—like Michelangelo bringing forth David from a block of marble.

At Christmas, pies would be presented in the shape of snowflakes and holly leaves. At Thanksgiving, her crusts were made from three dimensional fall leaf patterns, and in the center of the pie would be a cornucopia with fruits and vegetables spilling from its mouth. Every detail was precise and carefully constructed.

Every year for our birthday, she would make Gabriel and I our own individual pies; his favorite being peach cobbler, while mine was apple crisp. Gabriel's pies were mostly covered in sports paraphernalia, while mine were mainly decorated with animals. It wasn't until we got

older than the pictures turned into more detailed patterns, or things I thought should be seen in an art museum instead of eaten.

Sometimes, I thought watching her turn those pies into masterpieces was what sparked my love for art. If it hadn't been for her letting me help, carefully guiding my hands with the tools, teaching me to be patient—then maybe I wouldn't have developed an affinity for it. Though pie crusts were not my medium of choice, I certainly held a certain level of respect for hers. Ironically, Grandma had never been interested in working with art on a professional level. "It's just a hobby," she'd say, shrugging whenever someone complimented her work.

Although she may have been candid about it, I knew for a fact there was a box in the barn filled with her yearly prize-winning blue ribbons she'd collected from State Fair and local county festivals.

"Here you are, dear." Grandma slid a plate of blueberry pancakes in front of me along with a steaming cup of coffee.

"Thank you," I said as I dug in. I glanced around the kitchen while I chewed, thinking to myself that nothing had changed around here. The walls were still painted a candy-apple dusty red color. A crystal, shaped like a hummingbird, hung from the window above the kitchen sink, casting rainbow colored prisms against the white lace curtains. The strong oak cabinets still looked brand new, but I imagined it was due to the handy-work of my grandma's regular polishing routine.

"It's been a while," Grandma said as she sat in the chair across from me. She took a sip of her coffee and then tucked a loose strand of silver hair behind her ear. She had the deepest blue eyes I had ever seen. So deep they were almost gray, and refracted light like the ocean. "I wanted to see you at Christmas, but your mother said you were staying at the physical rehab facility."

I nodded. “The holidays were kind of rough.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “How is your leg healing?”

“Better,” I said around a mouthful of pancake. I swallowed so I could speak more clearly.

“I’m finished with my clinical visits, for the time being, anyway. I just have some stretches and things I do at home, but I guess it’s progress.” I pushed at the remaining few bites of pancake on my plate. I didn’t want to talk about me, or the accident. I just wanted my time here to be an escape from the daily reminders of my broken life. “How’s the farm?” I asked.

Grandma sighed and lifted her eyebrows at the question. “Your grandfather took on more work than he should have for the winter... We took in a couple of rescue horses a few weeks ago, and he’s having trouble with one in particular. Trust issues,” she said, “strong personality, too.”

“The horse, or Grandpa?” I said facetiously.

“Very funny,” she chuckled in spite of herself.

“Does Beau Stevenson still help Grandpa with farm chores?” Beau was a good friend of my grandfather’s, and lived not too far up the road. When Gabriel and I were growing up, Beau used to give us rides all over the farm in his old truck. Sometimes, he would even let Gabriel drive around the property, and I was always so worried that he would drive us over the creek bank and we’d end up stuck in the mud, but, he never did.

Grandma shook her head. “He doesn’t get around quite like he used to,” she said, pausing briefly. “We did hire a part-time stablehand, however.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Can you afford that?”

“Not really.” She shrugged. “He’s helping us more then he’s profiting. There’s just too much work for your grandfather, and he won’t admit that he can’t do it all on his own.”

“Well who is this guy, where did you find him?” I asked. My grandparents had never hired anyone to work on the farm before.

“He’s working his way through Havenport University and saw our advertisement a couple of months ago—” she started to say, but I cut her off.

“Advertisement? What advertisement? Does Mom know about this?”

Grandma chuckled with a sound of disbelief. “We’re quite capable of making our own decisions, Darcy. We simply decided it was time to get some extra help, so your grandpa put up a few signs around town. It’s nothing to fuss about, honestly.” She stood from the table, making her way to the counter to refill her coffee mug.

“I just wish I had known you needed help,” I said, feeling responsible in some way. Granted, I couldn’t move like I used to, but I’d been existing in my room for long enough while my grandparents could have used my help and I hadn’t known.

I hadn’t exactly quit my job at the mall with Luke, but I hadn’t gone back since the accident, either. My boss, an overly friendly type, had pardoned me and said that I could come back anytime I was ready. I appreciated the leniency she was willing to give me, but I didn’t really see myself returning to the land of retail.

Grandma returned to the table and reached out to cup my hand in her own. “Darcy, we didn’t say anything because we had hoped you’d be going back to school this semester. Besides, the farm is our burden, and we’ve always managed to make it work.”

“I’m not going back to college,” I said. “It’s not for me.”

“You were doing so well while you were there,” she said with an encouraging tone.

After graduation I didn’t really know what I wanted to do, but Gabriel and I both applied to Havenport University on running scholarships. I took some general classes that held my interest—

art and art history, English—basic things that spelled out just how undecided I was about my future.

Gabriel, on the other hand, knew he wanted to be a veterinarian, and he would have been good at it, too. Many years ago, there had been a windstorm that nearly wiped out the back stables. One of the horses had been injured, receiving a nasty looking gash on its neck from a splintered piece of wood that had collapsed from the rafters. Gabriel and I had found the poor thing, and while I hid behind him—desperately averting my eyes from the sight of blood—Gabriel had reached out to comfort the horse. He stroked his coat with a soothing calmness, whispering to the animal until medical help arrived. From that point on, it had become clear that he was destined to help animals.

I enjoyed being around animals and helping them, but I couldn't bring myself to look past the surgery aspect of saving a life. My hands had never been steady—nothing about me had really ever been steady.

I didn't know what my future held; I just knew that Gabriel had been the bright shooting star of the family, and I was the light trail chasing after him.

## Chapter Three

Grandma and I chatted for a bit longer on lighter subject material as I helped her with the dishes. Shortly after, she had gotten a phone call from one of the ladies at her church, so I took the opportunity to grab my luggage from the trunk. Clumsily, I made my way back into the house, dragging the suitcase behind me. With my backpack slung over my shoulders, I started up the stairs in a painfully slow rhythm; the wooden steps creaking beneath me as I made my way up onto the landing.

The guest room (or rather, my mother's old bedroom) was located at the end of the hallway. It was a small room, just large enough for a full-size bed, a tiny antique writing desk, and a wooden dresser with mismatched knobs. There was a woven blue rug at the foot of the bed, matching the storm-shade color of the walls. My favorite part about the room was the large window that faced the barn. It opened up to the slight slope of the roof and the porch below.

As kids, Gabriel and I had spent most of the summer with our grandparents on the farm. Since our parents worked during the day and couldn't afford a sitter, (at least at the time) it seemed like the only logical solution. I missed those days, and would give anything to go back, even if just for a moment.

There were stories of sibling rivalry, but aside from the rare and occasional spat, Gabriel and I had been inseparable. Perhaps it was a "twin" thing—the fact that we shared the same genetic

material that literally split us in half. Though we were born from one, our personalities couldn't have been more different. He was the one that everyone relied on, the smart one—the strong one. He'd take charge in a sticky situation and calmly dissect the broken pieces until he could fit them all together in a neat little puzzle, making sense of it again. He was the calm before the storm, and simply put, I was the storm.

I liked it that way, with Gabriel in the lead; it gave me the freedom to be the free-spirited one—the *willful* one. The girl who took more chances, stayed up too late and partied a little too hard... until I didn't.

When Gabriel died, it was like losing the closest part of myself. The *better* part of myself was lost and gone forever. I didn't know who I was without him, or where to begin.

I heard Grandma shuffling up the staircase, her light foot padding softly down the hall until she was leaning in the doorway. "Are you settling in all right?"

"Yes," I said, lugging my suitcase up on the bed. I unzipped it, and started sorting my clothing to go in the dresser.

"The air is chilly up here," she said, crossing her arms over her chest. "This old house doesn't have the best insulation. Let me get you a warmer blanket for the bed."

"I'll be okay," I said. She waved me off and returned a moment later with a patch-work quilt with colors that mimicked a blue summer sky.

"It's an old thing, *too*, I'm afraid." She patted it, her fingertips tracing the threading in the patterns. The quilt had been a wedding gift that my great grandmother had made for my grandparents.

"Thank you," I said. "It's still beautiful."

She sat it on the bed and straightened the hem of her flannel button-up. “Do you need any help unpacking?”

“No thanks.” I shook my head. “I won’t be long.”

“I’ve got some paperwork to do, bills and things.” She waved a hand dismissively in the air. “I’ll leave you to it, then.”

I smiled at her. She turned, and then disappeared from the doorway.

The green numbers on the small alarm clock beside the bed told me that it was only eleven forty in the morning. I finished unpacking, and carefully tucked my medication pouch in the top drawer of the nightstand. I told myself I wouldn’t need them, but it was good to know they were. I felt like a closet alcoholic of sorts. I didn’t need the bottle of vodka tucked away underneath the kitchen sink, but I liked having it there anyway, *just in case*.

I walked over to the window, and spread the curtains so that a pool of light gathered on the wooden floorboards at my feet. The barn was a magnificent red structure in front of me, separated from the house by only the driveway. Beyond that, rolling fields and pastures that eventually disappeared at the base of the creek bank. It was the fairy tale place of my childhood, and remained one of the only things in my life that seemed to stay the same. Time had weathered the look of things, stripping paint and rotting planks here and there, but the memories were perfectly preserved within the confines of a place that refused to change. The rest of the world could keep its fast-paced progressive way of living. I didn’t want it anymore.

I shifted away from the window, deciding to visit the barn. I made my way into the small nook at the back door, borrowing a pair of boots that belonged to my grandma. They were a little snug, but they’d make do for my short trek to the barn. I zipped up my winter jacket, and donned a pair of gloves that were stuffed inside my pocket.

The frosty air nipped at my nose, and the silver mist of my breath billowed out in tiny puffs before me. I gripped at the handles, the rusted joints on the iron track whistled and moaned as I pulled the heavy sliding door open. The sound echoed in the loft above me, causing a bird to take flight and disappear through one of the opened doors on the opposite side of the barn.

The barn was still; its giant structure seeming nearly impermeable. Golden sunlight sifted between the cracks of the ancient wooden boards, illuminating the particles of dust that drifted idly in the winter air. I made my way down the dirt aisle, careful to avoid the cobwebs that were sweeping down from the rafters above. Stalls lined the left-hand side of the barn and all six horses grazed on their feed. The familiar sounds surrounded me; the swishing of tails, the grinding of hay, and the shuffle of hooves in the dirt.

I recognized the four horses that belonged to my grandparents. They were rescues that my grandma had fallen in love with, so she'd decided to give them a forever home. The two on the end must have been the new additions. There was one horse in particular that caught my eye. He was an opulent creature with a gleaming, dapple gray coat. A mixture of charcoal gray and white strands made up his long mane, but as I stood in front of his stall, the color of his eyes halted me. They were icy blue, surrounded by a thick veil of long, white lashes. I watched as his ears pricked curiously in my direction, but he never quite turned his head to face me.

"Hey boy," I whispered, slowly approaching his stall. The other horse beside him was a pretty buckskin with a tangled black mane. He was munching on his hay and otherwise uninterested in my presence.

I moved closer to the gray horse's stall, calmly. He lowered his head, but backed further away from the railing. I rested my arms along the edge of his stall, making sure not to make any sudden movements. I could hear the sharp pull of his breath, the way he seemed to test the air

and take in my scent. I kept my eyes averted from his, and found a half-moon shaped scar that traced along his flank. The scar could have been a result from a number of things, but I wondered if it hadn't been abuse related. The horse seemed to sense me staring, so he shifted his weight, and turned so that I couldn't see the scar.

"I'm sorry," I said softly. "I've got scars, too."

He snorted, and took a step toward me. I risked a glance and looked up into those big beautiful eyes. He stilled, but his ears remained forward, interested. I wanted to reach out and touch him, but I had a feeling he wasn't ready for that. I sensed that if a relationship was going to develop, it needed to be on his terms. "*Trust issues, strong personality*" Grandma had said. I knew without a doubt that this was the horse she was talking about.

I left the stalls and visited the chicken coop, noting all of the different types of hens sitting on their nests. The chickens had all been rescued from a slaughter house, and since there was an array of different breeds, all of their eggs also came in a unique display of colors, shapes and sizes. There would be speckled eggs, brown eggs, and even blue eggs. Like snowflakes, they were all so individually unique; you never quite knew what you were going to get.

I stopped to say hello to Loretta, the Jersey cow, (and yes) she *was* named after the famous country singer. Grandma was a big fan. Loretta had been rescued from a farm a few counties away. She arrived to the farm completely malnourished and practically a walking skeleton. My grandparents nursed her back to health, and now she was a fat, happy cow living it up like a spoiled-rotten house pet.

I loved the work my grandparents did; it was so humbling and meaningful. Being out here was making me feel like I could be a part of something worthwhile, too. I left the barn around

the same time my grandfather's nineteen-fifty blue Chevy truck came bumping down the driveway. I waited until he'd closed the door before I attacked him with a bear-hug.

"Darcy," he said in a happy singsong tone. He tightened his arms around me before releasing me. "It's so good to see you."

"I missed you," I said in response. My grandfather was a tall man, wiry, but remarkably strong for his lean build. He still rocked the classic thirties styled haircut, though his once dark brown hair was now a dark silvery-gray, matching his thick mustache.

"Did you see the horses?" He gestured to the barn door where I had exited.

"I did," I said, "Grandma told me about the rescues you took in. The dapple gray is magnificent."

"Magnificently stubborn more like," he said as we started toward the house.

"What happened to them?" I asked as we entered the mud room off of the back porch, hanging our winter jackets on the free wooden pegs.

"I got them from a farm that was forced to sell off their property—they couldn't afford to pay their taxes, and by the looks of the horses, I'd say they couldn't afford to feed them either." Grandpa shook his head. "I'd say it was a bad case of neglect. The family didn't appear to be very stable."

I nodded thoughtfully. "I noticed the one had a flank scar, do you know how it happened?"

Grandpa reached up to scratch his head. "Flank strap wound, I think."

"Like what they use in the Rodeo?"

"Possibly; can't get anywhere near him with a saddle, I think he's traumatized."

"That's terrible," I said.

“He’ll come around,” Grandpa said with a smile that creased the corners of his eyes. My grandpa had always had more faith in animals than he did in the human race. It was like he could relate to them, and understand them on a deeper level. He’d always had a quiet, thoughtful nature about him. He was the type of man who liked to sit and watch the world around him, content to be on the outside looking in. He was a man of few words, but on the rare occasion he had something of importance to share, you’d better be listening. Chances were the power of whatever he had to say packed more of a punch than Muhammad Ali. And *that* was really saying something. It was one of the many characteristics I admired about him.

“There you are,” Grandma said as we entered the kitchen. She had two loaves of bread sitting on the counter-top with varying deli meats and cheeses displayed off to the side. Steam was rising from a pot on the stove, and with it carried the light scent of a hearty chicken-noodle soup. “I hope you’re hungry.”

I was still full from my late breakfast, so I settled for a small bowl of soup. We all sat down at the kitchen table, and talked about life on the farm and the latest gossip from the church ladies in town. It was an easy, lighthearted conversation that made me feel like I could forget all of the bad in my life; at least for a small while.

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Later on that night I had climbed up the stairs to my bedroom, and checked my phone for any missed messages. My mother had sent me a text to let me know she had landed safely in Phoenix.

The weather is incredible here, she proclaimed. I miss you already!

I responded to let her know that I had made it to the farm, and that both Grandpa and Grandma (and myself) all sent their love.

Next was Luke. Hope you're enjoying farm life, he said. I just wanted to let you know I had Mexican food for dinner, and the sour cream in my fridge was *also* expired. It wasn't anything to alert the press about, but it was still a total bummer.

I giggled as I read his text, and wrote him a quick reply. After, I gathered up some clothes and headed for the bathroom to shower. The hot water felt amazing against my skin, even better on my right leg as it alleviated the stiffness brought on by the winter cold. I reached for the bottle of apple scented soap, and lathered up a cloth to wash the dust of the day away. I stayed under for a few minutes longer, enjoying the warmth before reluctantly reaching for the nozzle. I toweled off, and dressed in a pair of green and black flannel pajamas, complete with a pair of woolen socks.

I reached out to wipe the layer of fog from the mirror, and paused when I saw my reflection. I tried not to focus on the dark half-moons that lined the hollows of my eyes, or the sunken skin under my already angular cheekbones. I pushed a section of hair over my right brow to help hide the hideous scar that cut right through it. It was about two inches long and had a curve to it that was shaped like a boomerang. It was just another unwanted reminder of the accident—a permanent souvenir.

I gathered up my laundry, and tossed the pile into the hamper at the end of the hall before ducking back into my room. Below, I could hear the muffled voices from the television and the steady rhythm of Grandpa's older rocker swaying. It was one of those consistent noises that would take me to the "in-between" if I focused on it long enough.

I moved my empty bag from the end of the bed, and decided to store it in the closet. The latch seemed to stick a little, and squealed when it finally gave. Inside, a few knit cardigans and old jackets hung from the rail. Shoe boxes and picture books were stacked on the top shelf; things

that had belonged to my mother and were never cleared out. My grandma wasn't necessarily a pack-rat, but she liked holding onto things for the sake of memorabilia. She was sentimental in that way; a trait my mother must have inherited.

Even at five-foot-eight, I still had to stand on the tips of my toes to wedge my bag onto the upper shelf. As I stuffed it onto the top rack, it jarred the lid of a flowery shoe box, and out popped a folded piece of notebook paper. It had turned yellow with age, and felt frail to the touch as I bent to retrieve it. Carefully, I unfolded the letter and stilled at the recognition of the neat, box lettering. I knew it belonged to my father, and scanned the note with curiosity.

It was a love letter, I realized, feeling my face flush with color. My parents had met their junior year of college and had married shortly after graduation. I knew it had been a whirlwind romance from the start. Boy and girl fall in love, get married, and start a family. It was a classic tale, and seemed to be the feature presentation until Gabriel caught our father in the passionate throes of love with another woman...

That was the first thing that kicked off an unfortunate series of events that would change my world forever.

I finished the letter, folding it gently before tucking it back inside the safety of the shoe box, and closed the closet door. It was hard to imagine how someone could claim to love you so much, and then toss you away like you didn't matter anymore. It was like everything you thought you had was just suddenly gone. *Changed.* The world was unpredictable like that, I guessed. If anything, it taught me to never get too comfortable, because in the blink of an eye, what meant most to you in life could be taken away. It was all so temporary, so obsolete. We were just the product of chance, after all, never really having control over anything.

Grandma knocked on my door then, leaning against the door frame. “Just wanted to say goodnight,” she said.

“Goodnight,” I said, pressing my lips into a smile.

She walked over to give me a hug, wrapping her small arms around me. “It might get a little cooler up here than usual. The wood-burning stove isn’t running like it used to. It’s just another thing on the list of things that need fixing.”

I nodded.

“If you get too cold, there are more blankets in the hall closet,” she said. Even though she had already given me an extra one earlier in the day that I was sure would more than suffice. That was just Grandma, though. She had to make sure everyone was being looked after properly.

“I love you, Grandma.”

“I love you too, darling.” She smiled then, and closed the door softly behind her. There was a small lamp on the nightstand beside me; I leaned over to turn it on before getting up to shut the big light on the ceiling off. I hated the dark, and couldn’t bring myself to sleep in it. There were too many shadows, too many monsters that liked to play tricks on my mind. In the pitch black of the darkness, all I could see were the bright flashing beams of headlights.