
Chapter One

LIFE USED TO be so beautiful. So full of magic and possibilities. Wonder and excitement. There wasn't anything I couldn't do. Couldn't be. Couldn't go.

When I was a child, I would sit for hours drawing and dreaming up crazy stories to tell all my friends. Multicolored crayon tales etched by wild imaginings. Stories about a place where the sun always shone. Or a place where a tin man could carry a little red-headed girl to the farthest point of the universe, way above the earth, on feet made of fire. Or a lonely island way out in the middle of the ocean, where a deer and a platypus lived in disharmony. They sat back-to-back on this tiny piece of land, never acknowledging each other. Until one day when they were both thirsty, the deer climbed up a coconut tree so they could share a drink. After that, they were the best of friends.

I thought my stories would inspire the world, make it a better place somehow. I was such a dreamer. And for a while it seemed that all my dreams would come true.

Billy Crawford was my world. The man of my dreams. The man I promised to love and honor and cherish until "death do us part." Believing, of course, that death would never really come.

Or that if it did, it would be a long way off in the future. Too far away to worry about today. Or even tomorrow.

Billy worked for the power company. I used to brag, “Wherever it’s dark, Billy brings light.”

Billy would laugh and say, “But only if there’s a switch to flip.”

While Billy made the world brighter, I wrote children’s books, letting all who would read them know that the fairy tale did exist. Everyone and anyone could have all they wanted and more. All they had to do was believe in their dreams.

But how quickly dreams can be shattered. In one second. With one gun. One bullet cracking the silence of one night.

A dragon had come to slay my knight.

But that killer didn’t just take Billy’s life. He took mine too. Like Rapunzel, he locked me in a cold, dark tower where I lived alone, unable to climb down to where the world was green and warmed by sunshine. Colors had faded to black and white. The places that—once upon a time—had freely been mine were now barred to me.

WHEN IT CAME to Billy’s murder, the only thing the police knew was that the killer wore a red hoodie and left behind a red mechanic’s rag. They investigated for a few days. Maybe even weeks, if I think about it. They asked questions of all the wrong kinds of people. And then, without a single lead, they gave up their search. They placed Billy’s file under the heading of “cold

case” and also started investigating the next homicide, which they probably never solved.

But I could never move on.

Instead, I spent hours in my tower, drawing a new kind of story. Shadows of a man dressed in red. Tales of an oily, filthy rag, dropped like some kind of claimer’s stake, marking off the deed. I drew those pictures and kept them tacked over my desk in the hayloft of our barn—mine and Billy’s. And while the police moved on to other things, I stared at my dark art, determined to make a new kind of difference.

After a while, as prisoners will sometimes do, I grew to love my place in the tower, to relish the hours in the dark, studying those drawings. I found myself not minding the bitterness. Instead, I was somehow unexplainably existing on my sheer determination to right this horrible wrong. Those hours and those drawings kept me close to Billy, close to the final minutes of his life. Without them, nothing that was left to me made sense.

What do you do when you’ve lost your faith? Your hope? Your will to go on? What do you do when life doesn’t make sense anymore? When drawing a breath—a single breath—takes all your effort, until even the effort is gone?

I used to dream of telling stories.

But I never dreamed mine would end like this.