

“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like the shifting shadows.”

James 1:17

Preface

The wind was blowing hard the night I left. I remember because the grass on the hills swayed violently, with each fragile blade bending and screaming in total chaos. It wasn't the grass that was in anguish, although it might have looked that way. No, the only living thing I knew that felt such absolute despair and confusion...was me.

I willingly turned my back and drove away from him; the one person who had ever truly loved me and wanted me. As if it was nothing...as if he *meant* nothing. Yeah sure, he had told me to go. He had begged me to go, but I shouldn't have listened.

I should have been strong enough to stand up and face it. I should have been strong enough to stay, for him. But I was a coward, and I did the only thing I knew, the only thing I was good at. I ran.

Chapter 1

It was late April, and the sky reflecting off the white-capped waves of the bay was a beautiful clear blue. Not a single cloud was present in the vast space above my head, and the sun glistened off of every dew dropped flower...the perfect day. I should have known that this day would be different. Special.

I was sitting on my favorite bench beside the beach, doodling in my sketchbook when it hit me. Who would have thought that a Frisbee to the head could hurt so badly, but it did. The collision knocked me out of my reverie, and knocked my sketchbook out of my hands. After a few unpleasant words escaped my mouth I reached down to retrieve my book, and that's when I realized I wasn't alone.

There he was, kneeling in front of me with a sheepish smile on his face, and my sketchbook in his hands. Usually I hated it when people tried to look at my private sketches, but I wasn't thinking about that just then. I was thinking of his smile.

It was confident and beautiful, and probably the most symmetrical mouth I had ever seen. He had two perfectly plump lips with a set of just as perfect dazzling white teeth. It was intoxicatingly flawless, and I would have been happy to continue staring at it all day, except that I was diverted by the peculiar emotion visible on his face. He looked guilty, apologetic, but why?

What did he have to be sorry for?

I crinkled my forehead in contemplation, but I couldn't think properly. My head was hurting too much from the...

"That was your Frisbee?" I asked the handsome stranger, lifting my hand to rub the sore spot on my head.

"Yeah, sorry about that," he apologized. "I thought I had it. Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I shrugged, dropping my hand to my lap and fiddling with my pencil. "It... you just startled me, but I don't think there's any permanent damage."

With a rueful grin he slowly stood, giving me the opportunity to check out the rest of his appearance, which had gone completely unnoticed until then due to his rather distracting mouth.

Tall and slender in his long sleeve polo and jeans, he towered over my small frame. His muscular arms were visible beneath the fabric of his shirt. He was strong. Although it was just barely spring, his olive complexion was nicely tanned, unlike my pale, freckled skin, and the highlights in his short sandy blonde hair glinted brightly in the light of the sunny day.

"I think you dropped this before," he said, holding out my drawings and distracting me from the perusal of his gorgeous body.

"My sketchbook! Thanks," I said, taking it from him and shoving it under my arm.

"Don't mention it."

There it was again, that smile. It automatically made me feel at ease and it made me smile too. I was all of a sudden very brave.

"So, do you spend most of your time hitting girls with Frisbees when they're not looking?"

Where did that come from?

He half smiled, half smirked at my comment, and then answered, “Only the pretty ones.”

That definitely shocked me, and I blushed. Something I didn’t do often since talking to boys was a very uncommon occurrence for me. I must have done it wrong too, because his face changed suddenly. It became hard, and he was no longer smiling. I knew that I had blown it. I was always messing things up.

“Maybe we started this all wrong,” he said. “Let’s pretend like this never happened.”

I knew it.

Then out of nowhere he took a step forward, and asked, “Can we try it again?” and for the third time in less than a few minutes he captivated me with a smile so strong and warm that I blushed for the second time.

What was wrong with me?

I had no idea how to handle this type of situation, so I just stood up, extended my hand to him, and said, “Hi, I’m Selkie.”

“Hi, Selkie. It’s nice to meet you. I’m Aidan.”

He extended his own hand, gently grasping mine in his, and what happened next was so surprising that I actually gasped. His hand touching mine sent tingles down my spine and made my heart race. I even thought I felt sweat beading behind my neck. It was as if I had received an electric shock...and then it was gone. Although my arm was still outstretched toward him, he no longer held my hand. I lowered my arm and looked at his face. For a mere second I could have sworn his face looked almost feverish, but then it was gone as quickly as it had appeared and only his smile remained.

This was so strange.

I was glad when he started to speak again. It helped take my mind off what had just occurred between us.

“So, Selkie, that’s an interesting name.”

Interesting. Yeah, I’d heard that before, along with weird, strange, funny, and stupid. I mean, let’s face it, *most* girls grew up with normal names like Mary or Susan, with parents that loved them and wanted them...but I wasn’t like most girls.

My parents, who obviously never cared a lick about me, left me alone to grow up with a name that everyone else loved to make fun of. At the age of nine, tired of being tormented everyday by other children, I went to the library to research my interesting name, and discovered that it was derived from some ancient Irish myth about a female seal that could shed its pelt and become human. At first, I thought that the story was kind of creepy, but then I put it all together. My pale skin, my red hair, and my unusual yet authentic Irish name. I had finally found a piece of my past that for so long had been empty and uncertain. I was Irish. I wasn’t just an orphan with no connections or things of her own anymore. I had a true bond to something or somewhere on this earth that no one could ever take away from me.

I lifted my chin and looked Aidan straight in the eye. “You say interesting...I say different.”

Aidan smiled and leaned forward slightly. “Different is good.”

On impulse I leaned away from him and hugged my sketchbook tight against my chest. He noticed my retreat and quickly changed the subject.

“So...you’re an artist then.”

It wasn’t a question.

“No, not really,” I replied. “It’s just something that makes me happy. I’m not very good at it.”

“Mind if I take a look?”

I automatically grimaced and closed myself off. I wasn’t used to letting people in, to showing people my feelings. My sketches were a part of me somehow. It was hard to explain, but whenever bad things happened in my life, and there had been a few, I could always open my sketchbook and draw a world that was full of joy and beauty and hope.

Whenever I set my pencil to the page, it felt like I was home. Safe. No one could touch me, or hurt me, or leave me. It was just me inside a dream world.

Now this stranger was asking to be admitted into this fantasy of mine. To enter into the one place that only one other person in my life had ever traversed. He wouldn’t have known it, but it was like he had asked me to rip open my chest and give him my beating heart.

Almost every part of me wanted to leave, just turn around and walk away. It would be easier. I had done it before. Countless times. Almost every part of me wanted that...but there was another part, small and uncertain, hidden far away where I didn’t even know where it was, that was yearning to show him; to give him just a glimpse of the real me. It was the same place that still trembled from that first electric touch.

So I gave in. I released the tension that had built up inside of me from his request and slowly opened up my chest, retrieving my most valuable and fragile treasure. As I freed my inner self I felt a rush of fear, but pushed it aside. For some reason I trusted him.

Be gentle with me, I thought, before I handed him my soul. As he took the book, it was as if he understood completely. He held it tenderly in his large hands, and then he opened to the picture I had just finished sketching prior to the Frisbee attack.

The picture showed a large magnolia tree in full bloom. Tiny pink petals lay scattered around the base of the trunk. Vibrant green grass surrounded the tree and small patches of yellow daffodils and purple wild flowers were dispersed through the field. The sky was clear and untainted by clouds.

While he examined my picture I closed my eyes, imagining the world I had created in my book. A sense of peace and calmness filled me. I slowly opened my eyes and looked around. The picture I had drawn was very similar to the world outside of my sketchbook. It really was the perfect day.

I turned to Aidan expecting him to be engrossed in the book still. Instead he was staring at me. I returned his gaze ready for whatever would come next.

“It’s beautiful,” he said.

And I knew he meant it.

“You’re a very talented artist. What a beautiful vision of the world you have. I haven’t seen anything like it before.”

“Are you a fan of art?” I asked.

“You might say that.”

“Well, in that case. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Aidan beamed at me, and then cautiously took a step forward. This time I didn't cower, but just smiled back at him, unable to hide my newfound confidence.

"Hey Aidan, what's taking you so long?" inquired a voice from behind me.

I quickly turned my head to discover three sweaty guys striding briskly toward us with looks of impatience. Though they were clearly friends of Aidan their faces were strange to me, and I found myself slowly retreating back inside myself, fleeing from the onslaught of unwelcome fears and emotions.

I also found myself again with my sketchbook. Had I taken it back, or had Aidan given it to me? I quickly glanced in his direction and his face said it all. A moment of understanding flickered between us, and I felt even more attuned to him.

How strange to feel so close to a person I had barely met.

As his friends came near, Aidan's smile faltered. "I guess...I should be going," he said uncertainly. "But it was very nice to meet you...Selkie."

The way he said my name was as if he was singing it, a tune that only reverberated in the short space between our two bodies.

He was leaving.

"Wait," I said before I even knew what I was doing. "Is that it? I mean, what I meant to say was...well...you did just hit me with a Frisbee!"

What a stupid thing to say.

That smile that I had grown to love in such a brief time began to appear once more. "Your right, I did."

"Well aren't you going to make it up to me?"

“What would you suggest?”

“Well, I come here often...and it does get pretty lonely sometimes. I wouldn't mind some company. Maybe some company that happens to like art.”

I was vaguely aware I was blushing, and that Aidan was not the only one watching this exchange, but I didn't care. I was being reckless with my thoughts and my heart, and I felt alive for the first time in my life.

As I spoke my request, Aidan's face was almost unreadable. So many emotions seemed to play off it in such a short time. I recognized a few. Excitement. Curiosity. Anticipation. And one that was confusing to me, because I thought the last few minutes had been the best of my life. The feeling was pain, or sadness, or something that had no name, but then it was gone and his smile was once again his most admirable and prominent feature.

Finally he took a deep breath, and said, “How about tomorrow?”

When he spoke, it could have been my imagination, but it seemed as if his friends all seemed to react all at once, and I swear the looks on their faces were filled with disapproval. As if they found me unworthy of his attention. I even thought I heard one of them grunt his displeasure, but none of them actually spoke or took a step in our direction. Aidan didn't seem to notice, so I guess it was nothing.

We quickly said our goodbyes, agreeing to meet again at the park the next day, and then his friends, who didn't give me another glance, whisked him in the direction of the parking lot. I stood beside my bench, my arms wrapped tightly around my sketchbook, and watched as Aidan piled into the car with the others.

As they drove away, I was overwhelmed by a strange tinge of sudden loneliness, as if all the warmth from our electric encounter had burned a hole through me leaving me empty, and only he could fill it up again.