

chapter one

June

Texas

Age seventeen

"I'M SO SORRY...BUT THERE'S NOTHING MORE WE CAN DO."

The words hit my ears in pieces, like scattered drops of rain. Numbness spread along my limbs until it rendered me immobile. Dr. Long's sorrow-filled face blurred before me as my eyes seemed to lose focus and every inch of my body froze.

I'm so sorry...

Dr. Long's voice repeated in my head like it was caught in a wind tunnel, circling and echoing, trying to reach my shocked heart. I was trapped in some kind of cocoon. A distant, loud wail could be heard outside of it, but I couldn't move to see where it came from. I caught a flash of movement in my periphery but couldn't shift my eyes to see

what it was. I heard crashing, then a deep, sorrowful cry filling the room, like it had been ripped from the depths of that person's soul.

...but there's nothing more we can do.

My heart began to pound, Dr. Long's words still trying to break through, along with the outside cries and wails clattering at my impenetrable walls.

I shook my head, tried to think, tried to get my bearings, but it was no use. My breathing came quickly, and I distantly felt wetness falling down my cheeks. A hand wrapped around mine, clutching it tight like they would never let it go. I blinked and blinked again, trying to focus, trying to find my way back from this frozen, shadowed state. Then the comforting feel of my mama's arms wrapping around my neck hurtled me back into the present, until the doctor's office slammed back into twenty-twenty view. Until the raw rasp of my daddy's broken cries whipped around me and my mama's shaking arms seemed to ground me. I gasped and allowed the cool air from the air conditioning to inflate my lungs.

Dr. Long still sat before me, and I stared at his sorrowful face. *I'm so sorry...but there's nothing more we can do.*

I waited for the heavy weight of reality to push down upon me, for the cries and screams to rip from my mouth, for the anxiety that I'd been fighting for so long to take me in its unyielding grasp. But none of it came. My mama cried into my neck, my daddy dropped to his knees before where we sat and encased both Mama and me in his strong arms, but I was completely still. There was no shaking. No cries or screams. Just...stillness.

I was going to die.

I was seventeen, and I was going to die.

After all the fighting over the past couple of years—the chemo, the drugs, the panic attacks, all the pain—it was coming to an end. I was surprised to find that there was a morsel of relief to that. No more pain, no more medication, no more needles, just the realization that it was time to let go.

“June,” my mama whispered, lifting her head from the crook of my neck.

As I stared at her, my lips began to tremble. Not for me but for *her*...for my daddy.

Daddy lifted his head, his eyes filled with so much pain, raw and acute.

“It’s okay,” I managed to say, my voice barely audible. “I’m...I’m okay.”

“Baby...” my mama said, placing her hands on my cheeks. She searched my face like she was seeing me for the very last time.

Dr. Long rose from his seat. I followed his movements. My parents looked up at him as if he were going to tell them he’d gotten it all wrong. That he’d read the chart incorrectly. That, actually, the results said there was a chance. Hope...

But there wasn’t.

Dr. Long pressed his lips together and said, “Take as long as you need in this room. I’ll be in touch in the next few days with a plan for palliative treatment.”

