Chapter One

*Ellie*

She wanted to get it just right. Ellie was trying to capture the way the little tuft of feathers on the bird’s head made the slightest curve upward, the way that its feet were positioned so that they pointed away from each other, the way that they were wrapped around the fence, stabilizing it, even the way her stomach warmed when she looked at it, all in a few swift strokes of her charcoal.

Nature drew Ellie in, but it wasn’t just the smell of cobblestone after a spring shower, the contrast of colors in the flowers and trees, or the feeling of the wind shift just before a storm that she found alluring. Nature was a conundrum of both perfect and imperfect things happening at the same time. The same animal that can steal the breath from a person simply by the grace of its movements also has to eat, and will viciously kill another “perfect” animal without care. The same flower that blooms more brilliantly than any other will shrivel and fall, like the rest, in an uneven, scattered pattern of brown petals. *It is not sad, though*, Ellie thought. This was the way of the world. Nature, just like people, holds a host of secrets; the biggest of which being that even the most perfect creatures will transform into imperfect beings because of necessity.

The European Goldfinch hopped from one bar of the fence to the other, singing its sweet song all the while. Every so often it would slip under shadows from small tree limbs and be outlined by the darkness, making the black around its eyes more prominent. That small black area intrigued Ellie. It made the bird seem more mysterious, and more important than it actually was. She thought it was strange how a bit of a facade could do that.

Ellie slid the charcoal across her paper, making wispy lines, so as to get the general outline of her muse against the backdrop. As she sketched, she remembered receiving her first set of charcoal and parchment from her aunt Louise on her seventh birthday. Ellie was always close with her aunt and saw her often because of Louise’s closeness with Ellie’s mother over their shared hatred for their parents, Ellie’s only grandparents. She was ecstatic at receiving this escape and used up the parchment in the first week after her birthday. Every birthday she asked for a new journal to house her sketches, and every birthday, her aunt fulfilled her request. Drawing allowed Ellie to manifest her feelings into a form easier to deal with than thoughts, and the journals allowed her to remember all of the beautiful things she had seen over the years.

Ellie knew that she was Louise’s favorite, even if she would never say it, because she saw some of herself in Ellie. They shared a love of art and ferocity for protecting their loved ones that would not soon be matched. Louise and her husband Otto never had children of their own, and treated Ellie and her brother Michael as their own. Both Louise and Ellie’s parents had always told her that she saw the beauty in the world, even when there wasn’t much to see, and that this was a gift of hers that she mustn’t lose.

Still sketching, Ellie realized that this was one of the few times that she wished that she had colored pencils. She preferred to draw in the dark gray-black that charcoal is known for, but she wanted to capture the bird in its entirety. She held the opinion that color helped enhance emotion, and right now, the way its vibrant red, white, and black coloring highlighted the greenery of the apple tree, which was starting to crawl up the charcoal iron fence, made her happy, and in a way that she didn’t understand, hopeful. Still staring at the bird, another feeling crept its way into Ellie’s thoughts; her intuition was telling her that there was something coming, something that Ellie needed to store her hope for. This gut feeling settled in her stomach like a red-hot rock. Deciding she would focus on the present; she tossed this thought away and willed herself to stay positive and enjoy the day

Spring in Dresden, Germany was Ellie’s ideal weather. During the days, she could be content in her dress without sweating, and the nights allowed her to open her windows slightly and snuggle under her blankets. It was during these spring days when she enjoyed sitting in her family’s garden the most. The plants seemed revived after a long winter snow, and the birds came out to serenade her; subjects ready to be studied.

As she was enjoying this perfect day, her thoughts started wandering again, this time to Daniel. She wished that he was here with her, soaking up the sun and enjoying the breeze. She had these thoughts a lot, and she tried to suppress them...mostly. She always noticed the smallest details about him, like sometimes, when the sun hit his hair just right, you could see the smallest streaks of auburn, even though he had a full head of dark brown, almost black hair. Or when he focused on something, his lips drew together a little bit and he squinted his eyes, wrinkling them around the edges. She knew she had loved him, but she had always thought that it was the kind of love that two strong friends shared. It was only until recently that she started to suspect that it was another kind of love. She had thought about it a lot, and she didn’t totally reject the idea of herself being in love with him. After all, if she were to fall in love with anybody, Daniel would be her first choice.

She finally finished her drawing, and as she held it an arms-length, she examined it. She thought it looked good, not great, but definitely good enough for her. She wanted it to be a gift for her mother, who loved birds, and who she knew had been struggling to keep her relentlessly happy composure in light of whispers spreading around the streets.

Ever since the rumors about Hitler and his Nazis started, Ellie’s mom had taken it upon herself to worry on behalf of the whole neighborhood and its Jewish occupants. Ellie’s mom had been checking up with everyone, making sure that they were okay, even though no truth had been put to the rumors yet. Nevertheless, she made it her duty to keep everyone calm, and it had taken a lot out of her.

Ellie knew her mom deserved her own little treat after making sure that everyone else’s needs were met. She walked into the house where her mom had laid out ingredients to start their dinner and hid the paper behind her back until she was in her mom’s view. Ellie noticed that her mom seemed tired, and her normally strong-postured figure was bent over at the sink, head in hands. She did not think much of this though, and she pulled the paper out from her back. Her mom looked up and gasped in surprise and she pulled Ellie into a warm embrace.

She whispered softly into Ellie’s ear. “Thank you so much, I needed this.” She pulled Ellie back to examine her and beamed, “I’m so proud of you Ellie, I hope you know that. You have become an amazing young woman. I love you so much.”

Hearing this, Ellie couldn’t help but smile. She was so happy and proud that her mom liked the gift that she had made especially for her. She tightened her grip around her mother and savored this moment. She wanted to bottle it up and live in it forever.

“I love you too, Mom,” Ellie said back, still smiling, and still fully aware of the stone sitting in her stomach, weighing her down.

Chapter Two

*Daniel*

Daniel strolled along the sidewalk, taking in the peculiarly beautiful day. It wasn’t too hot or too cold, and a breeze blew through the alleys. These were his favorite kind of days.

He had a lot on his mind lately, with the whole Nazi situation escalating. He had heard the rumors that had been floating around the city, the ones about how Hitler and the Nazis were marching around the country and singling out people and families who were Jews. He had known, for a couple of years now, that Hitler had made many anti-Jewish decrees saying things like Jewish people couldn’t eat at some restaurants, they couldn’t vote, they weren’t German citizens anymore, and the list went on.

As he walked, he passed by men talking in hushed voices, “I heard that they were going to be grouped together in their own part of the city.”

“Well, I heard that they are building these ‘establishments’ way out on the outskirts of the city where they can put all of the Jews.”

Daniel had heard people gossiping in the city like this a lot, and he had a bad feeling about the whole situation, especially because he knew that things would only escalate. He did his best to keep a calm demeanor even though he knew that if things escalated too much, he would inevitably be pulled into whatever mess Germany was making. This thought terrified him, not because he did not want to serve his country, but because he did not agree with the powers that currently controlled the country.

Daniel did not have much in life; not much family, not many friends, and not many possessions. *This wasn’t always the case though,* he remembered solemnly. He adored his parents and they loved him. They had been a picturesque family, his father a veteran of the first world war, his mother a beautiful German dame, and Daniel, a strong, tall German boy, the preferred result of any pregnancy at the time. After a holiday in Austria when Daniel was twelve, he and his parents were driving down a winding road on a snowy night when their car slid over the edge of a small cliff. Remarkably, and to Daniel’s dismay, he survived. He woke up and frantically searched for his parents. He found his mother in the passenger seat with a gash on her head and eyes closed, a thick, dark liquid pouring from her hairline. His father, who was behind the wheel, looked at Daniel through watery blue eyes that were highlighted by his bloody face. Daniel, heartbroken, knew that he would be leaving the car alone.

“Daniel, look at me,” his father stated breathlessly. “Do not let anyone hold you down in this life, you are destined for great things son. Germany will not let you down if you do not let her down…make me proud.” His body slumped and his eyes glazed over, still locked on Daniel. With that, Daniel’s picturesque life was nothing but a smoky, bloody memory.

Daniel was taken to stay with his aunt in Dresden who had an impressive disdain for children, leading to her essentially ignoring Daniel for almost seven years. Out of necessity, Daniel learned to provide for himself and did not keep many friends, aside from Ellie Kramar, preferring to be a “lone wolf” as she called him. The Kramar’s took pity on him and treated him as one of their own, and knowing that he would not be here without them, he was eternally thankful for their consistent warmth and hospitality.

Daniel’s love for the great country of Germany was one thing from his parents that he could call his own. Despite his fears he knew that, if called upon, there would be no question as to whether or not he would serve, no matter who was in charge…it was his duty; he needed to live up to his father’s words. Thoughts like this overcame him, often holding his mind hostage from positive sentiments, and today was no different. Nevertheless, he was determined to enjoy the day in spite of his rising anxiety.

 Kicking small pebbles as his feet moved on a pendulum along the sidewalk, Daniel’s thoughts drifted again towards Ellie, as if she had her own gravitational pull. He made his way toward her house, praying that she was free.

He loved hearing her thoughts about current events, her opinions on the people of the neighborhood, her inspirations for her sketches, and just about anything else. He could listen to Ellie talk for hours on end and never get tired of her voice. In fact, Ellie’s voice was one of Daniel’s favorite sounds in the world. Ellie was very shy and didn’t talk much to people that she wasn't close to, so Daniel felt privileged to be one of the people that she could spill her innermost thoughts to.

He thought about her a lot; she was constantly living in his thoughts as if she had made her home there. He didn't know what had brought it on but he had thought about her more and more recently. He didn’t mind it either. He pictured her, the way the rosy pink of her lips and cheeks complimented her baby blue eyes. The way that she walked just a bit pigeon-toed, and how she would fiddle with her hands when she was nervous or in deep thought. He loved the way that her eyebrows furrowed when she was focusing or when she was drawing. He loved watching her draw. He loved how excited she got when she could get her hands on a piece of paper and a writing utensil. Any chance he could get, he would watch her. He loved watching her face light up when she was happy. He loved when she was happy, and he would always do everything in his power to keep her that way.

As he thought about her, he recognized that he loved her. Actually, he knew that he did for quite some time now, but he was just realizing it again. Unbothered by this revelation, he recounted that this was the second time today, and the fifth time this week...and it was only Tuesday.

He was afraid that at some point, all of his deepest feelings were going to gush out in front of her and he was afraid that she may not feel the same way. Maybe she thought of him simply as her best friend, or even worse, as a brother. He dreaded thinking about what she felt for him, so he focused on what he felt for her. He told himself that he was going to go on like normal, acting as if she was just his friend, and nothing else.

He looked up and realized that while contemplating these thoughts, his feet had somehow unconsciously led him to the front of Ellie’s house, just outside of the garden gate.

Daniel walked into the Kramar’s garden, stepping on each stone of the walkway carefully, and knocked on the thick, wooden door. After a few moments that felt like hours, Ellie answered, smiling, and his heart skipped like a schoolgirl. He didn't know how long he was going to be able to keep up the “just friends” act.