

ONLY A BREATH APART

Katie McGarry



A Tom Doherty Associates Book
New York

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JESSE

Six Years Old

You need to pack your bag.” Jesse’s mom crouched in front of him and grabbed hold of his shoulders. From the glow of the nightlight, he could see a red mark on her face. Sort of like how his skin would look when he had fallen from a tree and landed hard on the ground.

His mom smelled weird, a strange combination of salt and sweat, and the foul stench made him want to vomit. If fear had a smell, this was it, and it rolled off of her in waves.

Before she had shaken him awake, he had been sleeping in Mom’s big bed. The one she shared with the guy she kissed. This guy wasn’t the same one from last year. She said this man was different, but Jesse didn’t think so. Like the last man, he never smiled.

Jesse hugged the blanket his gran had crocheted for him to his chest. The bedroom had a strange, dreamlike quality to it, too many shadows, and it made him think of his older cousin Glory. She was in her twenties and talked too much about ghosts. “Why am I leaving?”

Mom had promised him he could visit longer than his normal few days, and his head hurt as he tried to understand what he did wrong to be sent away so soon.

She smiled even though her eyes were filled with tears. “Don’t you miss Gran?”

Jesse swayed on his feet from exhaustion. He’d only been here a few days, but he did miss Gran and home. He missed how there

was breakfast in the morning, dinner at night and how she would laugh with him as they made oatmeal cookies together. He missed his swing in the backyard, walking the land with Glory and catching fireflies with his best friend, Scarlett. He missed a full stomach, sheets that didn't smell and people who didn't yell.

Mom hugged him, and he felt her tremble. She pulled away, grabbed a duffle bag and threw clothes into it from the open drawer. "Hurry, Jesse. Gran wants to see you."

In his Spiderman PJs and no socks, he stumbled across the room. His feet were cold against the wooden floor of the second-floor apartment. It was an old house, and it had too many people in it. Most of them angry, staggering as if their feet didn't work, or they were passed out on the stairway.

Jesse knelt on the floor and felt for his shoes under the bed. As his hand came in contact with a shoelace, there was a shout and a door slammed. "Ophelia!"

"Let's go." Mom snatched Jesse's hand, yanked him to his feet, and he ran to keep up.

The man who his mother said was going to take care of her, maybe both of them someday, came roaring toward them from the kitchen. "Where are you going?"

"Home."

"No, you're not." The man grew louder as he got closer. Jesse's heart convulsed, and he clung tighter to his blanket and his mother's hand. Then pain shot down Jesse's arm, his blanket fell from his grasp and he yelped as the man attempted to tear him away from his mom.

His mother released him, and fear ripped through Jesse. She was going to leave him. Nausea clawed at his stomach, but his mother didn't bolt for the door. She turned, and the sound of her slapping the man reverberated across the room. "Don't touch my son. No one ever touches my son!"

The man drew back and threw his fist into her face, blood squirted from her nose, and Jesse screamed. His mom stumbled forward, into the man, and then the man fell, his hands covering his privates. In seconds, Jesse was in the air, his mom tossing him onto her hip.

Jesse looped his arms around her neck and squeezed. Tears streamed along his cheeks and onto her skin. She sprinted down the stairs, and once outside, yanked her car door open. She shoved him across the seat to the passenger side, but he didn't let go. She pried his fingers from her neck, secured him with the seatbelt, then started the car.

His fingers closed into a fist, and he felt nothing. Jesse's sob cut past the roaring engine. "My blanket! We forgot my blanket!"

The house grew farther away, and Jesse cried louder, yet they went faster until his mom slammed on the brakes. Tires squealing, the car lurched.

"Stop it!" Mom shouted. "We aren't going back. We're never going back. Never!"

Jesse's chest split open, and his entire body writhed as he cried harder. That was his blanket. The one Gran had made for him. The one she said he could take anywhere and would mean he was never alone. Now, he would be alone, and he hated alone more than anything.

His mom slammed her hands against the steering wheel, and the slapping sound made him jump. "Stupid! I'm so stupid!"

Her voice broke, and her lower lip quivered. One tear fell, then another. An emotional cold slap in the face, and he shook. He'd made his mom cry, and she already cried too much.

Slipping through the seatbelt, he wrapped his arms around her. "It's okay, Mommy. I don't need my blanket. I don't. I'm sorry. Don't cry."

She sobbed harder, spit coming from her mouth as it opened. She leaned her head against the steering wheel, and Jesse held her, shushed her, then she stopped holding the steering wheel and held on to him. His mom smelled of flowers, sweat and smoke. This time, the smell didn't bother him nearly as much.

He closed his eyes and wished they were at Gran's. Gran could make it better. She always did.

With a shuddering breath, Mom encouraged him to sit on her lap. The darkness of the parking lot didn't seem so bad then, and the rain pattering against the roof didn't seem so loud.

Jesse placed his head against her chest, listened to her heartbeat

and focused on her inhaled and exhaled. Why couldn't he be enough to make her happy?

"Can I tell you something?" she asked, and he nodded. His heart hurt with how much he loved his mom, and he wondered why love had to be so painful. "Our family is cursed."

Late at night, after Gran had tucked him in, he had overheard Mom talk about this with Glory and Gran.

"A long time ago, our family was rich. The richest family in the county, but we hurt people to make that money. We stole land by force, beat them. We even killed. Your grandpa said the money was cursed so we became cursed. A real-life southern gothic tragedy."

She gave a hollow laugh, but Jesse didn't think it was funny. He snuggled closer to her as the shadows thrown by the streetlight moved, drawing nearer, as if they were ready to reach out and grab him.

"We're cursed, baby. There's no way to deny it, but I think I figured out how to break it." Mom gently eased him back so she could look him in the eye. She combed her fingers through his hair, and he wished for the millionth time she would stop trying to make them a "family" with some weird guy, and instead let their family be her, him, Glory and Gran.

"People say our curse is that when we fall in love with someone, something horrible will happen to them, and we're left to grieve forever."

He nodded again, because that's what the people in town said.

"But we aren't cursed because we love or because of something somebody did a long time ago, we're cursed if we leave the farm. The land is what protects us, gives us our strength. As long as we stay on it, as long as we let it nourish us, as long as we respect that the land is alive and is a part of us, we'll be safe. Do you understand?"

He did, and he didn't.

"As long as you never leave the land, you'll be safe, and you'll be happy. If we leave, the land will reject us and we lose the protection. That's when our life falls apart. That's when we hurt the people we love. Once we leave, the curse sets in and there's no

cure. Returning doesn't help. To stay protected, you can never leave. You have to live there, forever."

Jesse shook. This had to be wrong. He loved the rolling hills, the rows of corn, the cattle in the fields and the trees he and Scarlett climbed. His land could never hurt him or his mom. "You're wrong."

"I'm not. My life fell apart after I left, and now the people I love are in pain over me." His mother winced as if saying the words hurt her. "You're in pain over me, and every time I return home, I hurt you more and more. You're better off on the farm with your gran and without me."

"I'm okay." He just needed her to be okay. Jesse patted her arm, but she didn't seem to notice his touch. "I'm better with you."

"Don't be me, Jesse. Don't go chasing after shiny paths. Stay on the land." She tilted her head and tried for a smile that quickly failed. "After me and Gran, you're the last living Lachlin and the land will be yours."

"I don't want it." *Not if it hurts people.* "Glory can have it."

"She's a third cousin. She can't own the land. But the land isn't cursed, *we* are. The land will keep you safe. That's what I need you to understand."

He frowned, and she cupped his face. "When you get old enough, the land will belong to you so promise me that when you're older you'll never leave the farm. Do you understand? Never, ever leave. Promise me, Jesse. Promise to never leave the land."

Jesse looked into his mother's sad, green eyes and gave her his most solemn promise he'd ever given anyone. Even to Scarlett. Even to his gran. "I promise I'll never leave the land."

SCARLETT

Seven Years Old

Daddy left late last night, and Grandma arrived this morning. Those two things never happened, and while Jesse had promised to show her the new calf born on his land, Scarlett was hesitant to leave. Daddy yelled last night, and Mom had cried. Scarlett had done what she was told and stayed tucked in bed, not daring to dip a toe from beneath the covers. Not even when Jesse had thrown rocks at her window at midnight in an attempt to lure her to come out and play.

Mom sat at the kitchen table while Grandma poured hot water into two teacups. One for her, one for Mom. In the dining room, Scarlett was crouched into a ball in the corner. In a spot where they couldn't see her, but she could see them.

"I don't know what to do," Mom said. "It's not getting easier. It's getting harder."

"Men are complicated." Grandma sat in the chair beside Mom and placed her hand over hers. "But you have to think of all the things that Bryant provides for you and Scarlett. As long as you stay with him, you and Scarlett will never want for anything."

"I don't know—"

"Do you want Scarlett to grow up like you? Always struggling to make ends meet? Wondering where your next meal will come from? Do you want to end up alone like me? Do you want Scarlett to end up alone?"

Scarlett shivered at the idea of being alone. She didn't want to end up that way—she didn't like the idea of no one loving her.

“Figure out what upsets Bryant and avoid those things. He works extremely hard, and it's your job to make sure he returns to a happy, stress-free home.”

Scarlett's nose tickled and though she tried squishing it to stop the sneeze, it happened anyway. Mom's and Grandma's heads snapped in her direction, and Mom started toward her. “Scarlett, I told you to stay in your playroom.”

Yes, she had, but she had wanted to make sure Mom was okay.

“Go play outside. I'll even let you play with Jesse, but remember the rules.”

Rule number one: Don't upset Daddy.

Rule number two: Be home by four, plenty of time before her father returned home from work. Daddy worried and needed to know where they were, at all times.

Rule number three: Don't tell Daddy she played with Jesse. Since she started school, whenever he heard that she had been playing with Jesse, there was a pinched disappointment in his face that made Scarlett apologize to him immediately. She hated letting her daddy down.

Yet, she couldn't stay away from Jesse, not even for her dad, so instead of playing together as much during the day, they snuck out to be together at night. She couldn't explain this pull she had toward Jesse. It was a lot like needing to breathe.

“And don't tell anyone that Daddy was angry. He'd be sad if we did.” With a gentle pat, her mom sent Scarlett out the door. Scarlett flew across the street and onto Jesse's land. She bypassed his trailer and sprinted toward the barn in the west field. If a calf was born, that was where Jesse would be.

Over the first hill, a gust of wind blew through the trees. Scarlett heard a whisper; a voice in the breeze. It was a comforting voice, a lot like that of Jesse's grandmother when she'd give Scarlett a hug. She slowed and glanced around. Besides the sun, the grass and the birds, she saw nothing. Not even when she spun to be sure.

Scarlett, the breeze whispered again, and she squinted as she tried to listen. No, the voice wasn't on the breeze, it was coming from below her—from the land.

"Scarlett," said a solid voice. From the tree line, Jesse's older cousin Glory emerged from the shadows. "You need to go home."

As always happened when Scarlett tried to talk, there was a great pause. She did her best to remember what her speech therapist had told her. How to take a deep breath before speaking and focus on forcing her tongue to form the words correctly. "Mom . . . Mom said I could play with Jesse."

Not all the words came out right, but she was proud she didn't fully stutter. She said the first word in a sentence twice, but her therapist told her it was okay. They would work on that next . . . right after she had a good handle on the "th" sound.

Lots of kids made fun of her for how she talked, but Jesse didn't and that was all that mattered.

Glory walked toward her in her long shimmering skirt. "I know Jesse would love to see you, but you know how I've told you that I have angels who talk to me?"

"Yes." Glory's stories equal parts terrified and fascinated her.

"My angels have a message for you and then you need to head home."

"W . . . Why?"

Glory lowered herself to Scarlett's level and tucked her black hair behind her ear. She had a gentle smile that made Scarlett feel safe. "I don't know why, but they came to me and told me that this is very important."

Scarlett squished her mouth in disappointment, but she wasn't going to disobey an adult.

"The angels told me that the land likes you, and if you let it, it'll keep you safe when you're scared. I'm curious, though—can you tell me what it is that scares you?"

Scarlett fiddled with the ends of her shirt because Mommy said she wasn't allowed to talk about Daddy being mad. Glory reached to the ground and when she brought her palm back up, she held a fat multicolored caterpillar that crawled along her skin. "Do you know what caterpillars become?"

“But . . . butter-fies.” *L*'s were still difficult for her.

Glory offered Scarlett the caterpillar, and she happily took it in her hand. Girls at school squealed at bugs. She and Jesse actively searched them out.

“When you see this caterpillar again, it means that the land is waking up for you. It will be a dangerous time for you, but a time of much-needed change. When you see this caterpillar again, you need to find me if I haven't found you already. There will be things I need to teach you. Do you understand?”

Before Scarlett could answer, Glory's eyes widened. “Run home, Scarlett. Now.”

Scarlett turned and sprinted, her lungs burning as she didn't slow, not even for the hills. Fear pumped into her veins at the sight of her father's car in the driveway where her Grandma's car had once been. He was home early. He never came home early.

She ran up the driveway, swung around back just as her father opened the back door and yelled out her name. She did her best to control her breathing as she said, “I'm . . . I'm here.”

The surprise on his face was better than anger. Was he surprised to see her or surprised her sentence was close to clear? Her mother came up behind him, placed a hand on her father's shoulder and mumbled to him that she had told him that Scarlett had been playing around the house. Her father turned to her mother then, gathered her close and they hugged as her father whispered to her mother over and over again that he was sorry.

Her mom held him tight, and the look of pure relief on her mom's face settled the uneasiness in Scarlett's stomach. Everything was okay. Now they would never be alone.