



## Eric

He hadn't smiled since mom died. I wasn't allowed to smile either. In fact, our whole community didn't smile. At six years old, I didn't understand, because I couldn't understand, but I would later. I knew that much.

It was Independence Day, and I stood with my family on Willow Tree Mountain. They called it Willow Tree Mountain, but, in reality, it was Willow Tree Hill, and the town denied that reality. I didn't care that a famous Civil War battle took place on it. It was a hill, and the only exciting part was the tree.

I wrapped my arm around a loop in the trunk and peered over the valley. Beneath the fireworks, the entire town was celebrating, dancing, drinking and, even odder, smiling. I wanted to smile.

"They're just bursts of useless fire, Eric." My father folded his arms and glared at the scene. "Nothing more."

I kicked my tennis shoes against the torn up dirt and dried grass. I couldn't look at my father like a son should've been able to. The fire didn't look useless. Fireworks, all

red and blue, illuminated the darkening sky, and deafening bangs echoed through the valley. The fire seemed powerful—something that hissed from the ground and exploded into the air, defying gravity. They were magnificent.

“You have more important things to worry about than blasts of colored sparks,” he said as shadows crawled over his legs. The darkness whirled around his body, and his glare dissipated with his body. He was gone, back in our shelter, and I was alone. Kind of.

“Eric.” A girl three years older than me grasped my hand. Her white hair glittered beneath the light, and she spread her fingers into the dark. “We have to go.”

I moved my foot closer to the edge of the hill. I wanted to ride the wind down to the crowd. I wanted to dance and smile. I wanted to throw my arms in the air and listen to the exploding fireworks. I wanted to run around in endless circles until I fell down from exhaustion. I wanted to enjoy everything.

But that couldn't happen. It was impossible.

Instead, I turned to Camille and nodded. She was my guard. My guard for life, and I had to listen to her, even if I wasn't listening to my father. “Let's go,” I said, and she knelt down to meet my eyes.

“Are you alright?”

No.

“I'm fine,” I lied, and her eyes searched mine before she stood up. Without another word, her powers flowed through me, and the dark engulfed us, leaving the fireworks and the happiness behind us.