



FOR NOW

BRANDY WOODS SNOW

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Publisher's Note: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are a product of the author's imagination. Locales and public names are sometimes used for atmospheric purposes. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, or to businesses, companies, events, institutions, or locales is completely coincidental.

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For Now | Brandy Woods Snow

When a girl with a perfect plan and a boy surviving his father's war wounds are thrown together researching combat PTSD, their growing connection forces them both to confront the generational damage they've been quietly carrying.

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For the warriors who carry the battle long after it's over—and the families who help carry them.

CONTENT WARNINGS

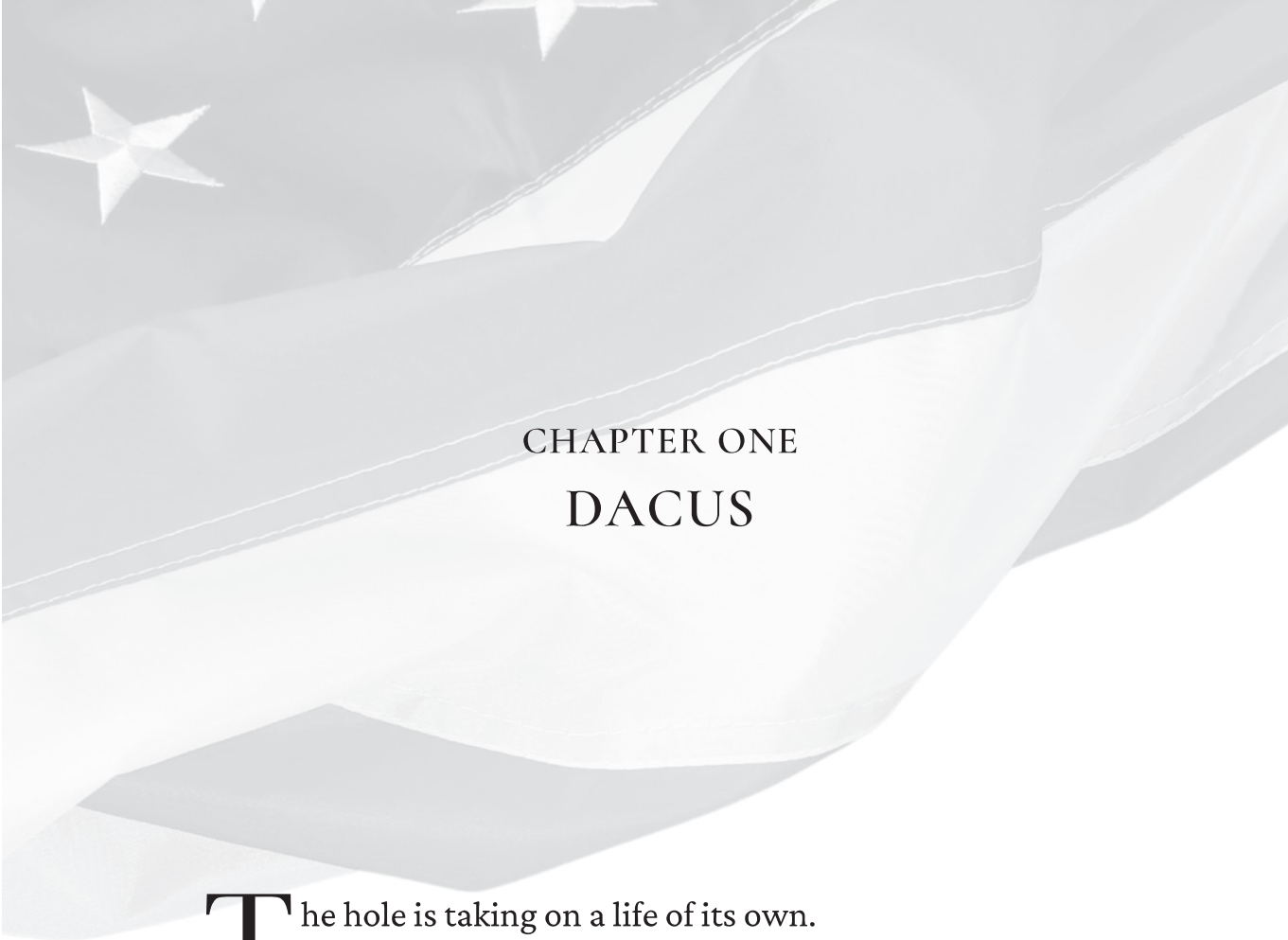
This book was written with love and honesty from a vulnerable place. It examines the combat PTSD-affected life in all of its intricate corners. This is not an easy subject to discuss and can be even more uncomfortable at times to witness. However, it is a true and honest reflection of the subject matter.

There is a heavy amount of potentially triggering content in these pages. Please take care to understand what unfolds in the story and whether you are comfortable and able to proceed. This is an extremely important subject but also a heavy one. While the book does embrace the hope through the heaviness, it is strongly encouraged that all readers take heed of the content warnings and self-evaluate.

Here's what you should know before reading it.

- Language (*including two uses of "F," but only as it logically makes sense in dialogue*)
- Combat PTSD (*depicted in detail, including flashback/dissociative episodes*)

- Veteran suicide (*including a scene depicting the aftermath of a suicide attempt by carbon monoxide*)
- Suicidal ideation
- Suicide of a secondary character (*off-page but explicitly described*)
- PTSD flashback episodes (*including physical altercations during dissociative states*)
- Parental emotional abuse / verbal abuse
- Parental alcohol abuse
- Domestic tension and an unsafe home environment
- Anxiety and depression
- Generational trauma
- Child/teen witnessing a parent's mental health crisis
- Mild injury during a PTSD episode
- Grief and loss (*death of an elderly character*)
- Emotionally absent / neglectful parenting
- A parent using a child as emotional caretaker
- Mild violence (*physical altercation that leads to Dacus's community service charge*)
- Discussion of war casualties and combat death



CHAPTER ONE

DACUS

The hole is taking on a life of its own.

Mom crouches in front of it, biting her bottom lip, as she brushes her fingers over the crumbling sheetrock in the foyer.

It started as a hairline fracture, one she tried covering with a little spackle and a brush stroke of paint. But instead of fading into obscurity, the crack rejected her quick fix, resurfacing a few weeks later, a little bigger than before and more ragged around the edges. More spackle, more paint. Same result. Only worse this go-round, with an oblong-shaped divot that curls around the bottom half.

Mom's patchwork isn't holding up. In fact, it's making things worse.

We need a professional, but she won't call one. Instead, she'll repeat this pattern until either she or the wall falls down completely.

I walk behind her and try to grab the putty knife from her hand. "Let me help."

She hangs on as if the tool is some sort of life preserver and

she's afloat in the waves. "Nonsense, Dacus. You're already dressed for your..." Her eyes rove over my red polo shirt and khaki jeans, the standard uniform for Southern Acres eldercare, before she offers a proper title for my current situation. "New job?"

New job. Question mark.

"You mean court-ordered community service?" I ask.

She frowns and sets the putty knife down on the pint-sized can. Maybe I should've just agreed with her, but someone in this house has to be the voice of reality. As if on cue, a chalky nugget falls off the drying smear on the wall and lands on the decorative table. Right in front of our framed family portrait.

It was taken two years ago, a sentimental send-off before Dad's third deployment. Every time he received orders, Mom insisted we endure a lengthy family photo session. I used to think it was sort of morbid, like she was planning "just in case" he didn't come back. Now looking at the smiling faces, I think maybe she was just trying to freeze that moment in time.

In case the man who came back wasn't the same one who got on the plane.

I pick up the glob of putty and smoosh it between my fingers. "I think it's hopeless. Maybe we should just embrace the hole and leave it in full view."

"What would people think if that's the first thing they see when coming into our home?" She stares at me as if I've grown two additional heads, grabbing my hand and swiping the putty ball from my grip before mashing it back into the fissure. Her thumb turns red with the pressure as she attempts to bend the patch to her will. "No, I can fix this. It just needs some TLC."

I smirk—spoken like a true human Band-Aid—but then the thought occurs to me that even after nearly a year living

here, we know no one, and the only person who stops by is the mail carrier when delivering a package too big for the mailbox.

Oh, and the cops that one time, but I definitely should *not* bring that up again. Since Mom insists on calling my pre-trial intervention gig a “job,” I guess I’ll call that cop-incident my “interview.”

My eyes travel back to Mom, still pushing the meat of her thumb into the hole, her top teeth clamped down over her bottom lip. Like the overbite somehow gives her the edge. I don’t have the heart to tell her that no matter how hard she tries, no matter her determination, some things can never be restored. At least not to the original.

I swallow back the words and grab the putty knife from the can, leaning in over her shoulder. “Really, let me help.” But before she can protest or I can press the flat edge against the chalky clump, my sister rounds the corner from the kitchen, earbuds in and phone in hand, and plows into my elbow. The momentum pushes me forward and the knife slips from my fingers, spiraling through the air in some sort of fated descent until it comes to an abrupt stop, pointed edge down in Sophie’s foot. She screams—the horror movie sort—and her voice echoes across the living room’s exposed wooden beams. Blood oozes from the puncture, the metal edge sliding off her skin in the red slick and clanking against the hardwood floor.

Shhhh! Mom and I hiss in unison. Sophie’s eyes saucer as she slaps her hand over her mouth, and Mom rushes to her, nabbing a roll of paper towels from the table in her sprint, and drops to her knees, fisting a wad of them against the wound.

For a quick beat, we freeze, eyes locked, the silence descending on us.

No footsteps upstairs. No doors squeaking on their hinges.

We all blow out a slow breath as Sophie’s tears streak her cheeks.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to. I know better.” Her voice trembles. Mom shushes her again—a much softer, more empathetic one this time—and my stomach sinks to my toes.

She’s apologizing for getting hurt but our first instinct wasn’t to ease her pain. It was to keep her quiet. Because we knew she was breaking two of the three Michaelson house rules.

1. No screaming
2. No bleeding

We’ve stopped ourselves from doing what’s natural because there is nothing natural about the way we live anymore.

Mom leans forward and brushes a few wisps of Sophie’s hair behind her ear. “It’s okay, baby. You’re okay.” She darts her eyes in my direction and ticks her head toward the bloody towel crushed in her fist. “Come over here and put pressure on it until I can get a bandage and some ointment.”

I kneel and slip my hand in place of hers, then give Mom my shoulder to use as a prop as she gets back to her feet.

“I’ll be right back, and then you need to leave,” she says, glancing at her watch. “You don’t want to be late. Makes a bad impression.”

Considering I’m doing time to expunge an assault charge from my record, I think we’re a little past first impressions here. That legal paperwork delivered to the nursing home only reports my crime—not the actual circumstances leading up to it.

When Mom disappears up the stairs to the bathroom, Sophie narrows her eyes at me. “Late for what?”

“My... uh... new job.”

“Oh, your ‘job.’” She frames her words with air quotes. “I’m ten. I’m not a dummy.”

“Good to know because I need you to be really smart while I’m gone.” I level my gaze at her, hoping the hard stare will somehow reaffirm in her brain how important this conversation is.

“Like straight A’s in homeschool.”

“I know you’re *that* kind of smart. I’m talking about the other kind. Be cautious. Remember the rules.”

The playfulness in Sophie’s eyes evaporates. “I remember. No loud noises, no blood...” She shifts her focus to the towels again and sighs. “Yeah...”

“It was an accident. Just try not to have them.” Which pretty much negates the entire definition of accident but still. “And you forgot number three.”

“Never sneak up on Dad.”

“Never ever.”

Indoctrination of my sister. I’m making her recite these new Michaelson Rules the same way the Army made Dad spit back all those soldier creeds during his enlistment.

All enemies domestic indeed.

Mom pads down the stairs, a tube of antibacterial gel and a large square bandage in her hand. I lift the wad of bloodied towels and dab away a few smears. The cut has quit gushing, leaving now only a raw pinkish sliver with a few dots of blood still seeping to the surface. Mom pulls the towels from my grip and nods her head toward the door. “Have a good day, Dacus. And don’t worry about us, we’ll be okay.”

I scramble to my feet as she takes my place on the floor and rips open the bandage’s wrapper. Sophie waves at me and I wave back, then grab my coat from the hook by the door. A rush of frigid air stings my cheeks as I walk out onto the porch,

easing the door shut behind me all while Mom's words run through my head.

We'll be okay. Sophie's okay. Mom's okay. I'm okay. And Dad? He's *really* okay.

We heard that same word a million times after he got off the plane, every clueless well-wisher patting our backs and claiming, "You're so lucky he made it home okay." Yeah, if okay means "not dead." He's not that; there's still a heartbeat. There's just no light anymore. It's all turned to darkness.

And we all swim in it. We're drowning in it.