**Soaring**

I was only 8 years old. It was just after midnight. I woke up to the shrill beeping of the smoke detector. The sound was almost deafening in my sleepy stupor. There was so much smoke, I couldn’t breathe. Confused and scared, I got out of bed and stumbled towards the door, my arms reaching, searching, for anything solid. The smoke was getting to my eyes and I could barely see. I tripped over the Barbies that were scattered on the floor and hit my head on the wall. *I guess that’s one way to find where I’m going,* I thought. I didn’t know which way the door was but I put my hands against the wall and followed it around the room until I found the window. I knew the window was directly across from the door on the opposite wall. The moonlight tried to shine in but the smoke was so thick that it didn’t make a difference. My head was beginning to hurt and I felt something wet dripping down my face. I slowly reached up and touched the bleeding cut on my forehead. I wiped the blood away and went back to focusing on finding the door. My heart was racing as I struggled to breathe. I could hear my parents hollering my name, “Annabelle!” I tried to scream but smoke filled my lungs. I could see the red and blue lights of the fire truck finally pull up outside my window. I was frantic to get out, my eyes were burning. My head started to throb and my legs didn’t want to move. I fell to the ground, hopeless, beginning to think I would never get out. I knew I had to stand and move towards the door but I couldn’t get my legs to work. Suddenly, my door was flung open, the sound made me jump. The smoke made it difficult to see who it was but I started to stand in an attempt to get to them.

“Annabelle?!” I quickly realized that it was my older brother, Andrew. I couldn’t answer. I knew he was there, but I couldn’t see him. I heard him moving my blankets around on the bed, but that’s not where I was.

*Andrew! Please. Just look over here. I’m over here.* I stood directly in front of the window, hoping he would be able to see me and started hitting the wall. Before I knew it, I felt his arms wrap around me and lift me off the ground. He started for the door again but Sadie was still there. Sadie was our 8 month old Beagle. She was sleeping in my bed that night but when I got up she was cowering underneath it. I tried to fight Andrew and tell him to save Sadie but all that came out were painful coughs. Finally, Sadie barked and I knew Andrew heard her. We were running down the stairs and finally made it to the bottom. Everything around us was crumbling in the flames. Andrew set me down and told me to run outside while he went back for Sadie. I didn’t know where to go. There were flames everywhere. He disappeared into the smoke and I was alone again. I stood there, trying to figure out which way to go.

 “Annabelle! Move!” I turned around just in time to see Andrew running towards me again with Sadie in his arms. Behind him, the stairs disappeared in the flames. He tried to push me out of the way but it was too late. Part of the railing landed on my right leg. While the rest of the stairs crumbled on top of that. I panicked and tried to get out but every movement caused sharp pains to run through my entire body. Andrew was trying to push the railing off but debris kept falling down. Sadie was whining and licking my face. She wanted to help but she was just too little.

“Andrew, help. My leg hurts. Please make it better” I cried and I tried to grab his arm. He leaned down and kissed my cheek and said “I’m going to get help. It’s going be okay. I’ll be right back.” Andrew ran through the flames, towards the front door while Sadie stayed with me.

I wanted to cry but the smoke was making my eyes burn. I could feel the flames getting hotter as they got closer. It seemed like forever before the firemen finally came. Sadie had started barking as soon as she heard them; I think she was trying to let them know where I was. They immediately began trying to pull debris off of me but the ceiling was beginning to cave in. They tried pulling on my leg to get me out but the weight of the stairs was too heavy and it was crushing my leg. Every time they moved me a hot searing pain shot through my leg. I though of the time if fell off my bike and sprained my wrist. The pain was nothing compared to that. More firemen were in the background, trying to put out the flames but there were so many. I watched as the flames demolished everything in my kitchen. I had just painted a picture for my mom and she had it hung on the fridge. I couldn’t help but wish I could save it. I could hear voices around me; they were panicked, trying to get me out.

“We need to get her out before the entire house comes down on all of us”

“We have to save ourselves. Remember? Number one rule is we come first. We’re no help to anyone if we’re dead.”

“Shut up, candidate. She’s a little girl and she needs our help. Now quit being a baby and help us out here. “

I heard them say “amputate” but at the time, I didn’t know what it meant. At this point, my vision was becoming blurry and I was so tired. I just wanted to close my eyes for a little bit.

“Stay with me Annabelle. Just keep your eyes open, okay? Keep looking at me” a woman was talking to me, and then she turned to the firemen “She’s losing a lot of blood. We need to get her out now.” She turned back to me and was stroking my head. It was comforting. “My name is Katie. We’re gonna try to get you out of here okay? I need you to just keep your eyes open. What’s your name, sweetie?”

“Annabell. But sometimes mommy just calls me Anna” I answered.

“Hi Anna. We’re here to help. Can you tell me your puppy’s name?” she asked. Sadie was standing right beside me as she watched the firemen, every once in a while she would whine and lay her head on my chest. Katie kept asking me more and more questions as the firemen were talking amongst themselves.

“If we amputate now, her body will go into shock. She won’t make it” I heard the firemen in the distance and began listening to their conversation.

“We don’t have any other choice”

All I see now is black. The voices around me are getting quieter, everything seems to be slowing down.

“Annabelle!” Her voice was urgent. “Come on sweetie. Stay with me. Open your eyes….” That’s the last thing I remember.

I wake up and there are bright lights everywhere. The intensity is almost blinding. Once my eyes have finally adjusted, I look around. Mom, Dad, and Andrew are all there. They all look exhausted; Andrew is sleeping in a chair. Mom sees that my eyes are open and reaches for my hand.

“Annabelle?”’ she taps dad on the shoulder, “she’s awake, John”.

I look around some more and see the machines that appear to all be hooked to me. I realize now that I’m in a hospital. Dad leaves and comes back with a doctor.

“Hi Annabelle, I’m Dr. Phillips. How are you feeling?” A tall brown haired man comes in. he’s wearing a white coat like daddy wore for Halloween last year. His voice is calm.

“My leg really hurts” I weakly mumble.

“Can you rate the pain on a scale of 1-10. One being hardly any pain and 10 being the worst pain?” he asked me.

“It’s probably a 7” I answer. Daddy always said that if I wasn’t dying I shouldn’t cry. I was trying so hard to be a big girl. I didn’t want to disappoint him.

Dr. Phillips turned to my mom and dad. “We have you on a morphine drip to help control the pain. I’ll page the nurse so she can give you a little bit more. Do you remember what happened, Anna?””

“There was a fire.” Mom started crying and she squeezed my hand. Andrew had woken up and was sitting on the foot of the bed.

“Good. You remember the fire. Anything else?”

“There was a nice lady there. Katie. She was very pretty. And she tried to help me. My leg was stuck under something and I couldn’t get out. It hurt really bad. Sadie was there too. Katie told me to keep my eyes open but I couldn’t. I was too sleepy.”

“Okay. You remember most of it. That’s a good sign. Annabell, the stairs fell and the railing went through your leg. Your leg was badly hurt and you were losing a lot of blood. We managed to get you out but the railing was still in your leg when they brought you to me. There was too much nerve damage to save it. I’m sorry but we had to amputate your right leg.”

I looked at my mom, “What does amputate mean? Will I still be able to go to my dance recital? It’s in a few weeks. Will I be better by then?” My mom just turned away and started crying even more. My dad wrapped her in his arms and Andrew came and held me. I had my ballet recital in a week and I couldn’t miss it. I had worked so hard.

Andrew’s voice was soft as he spoke “Annabell. When I came back down the stairs with Sadie, the stairs fell behind me. I tried to push you out of the way. But the railing fell through your leg, like the doctor said. He couldn’t pull the railing out because it had hurt a lot of things inside your leg. You have nerves in your leg. These nerves are like little streets to your brain. The make it possible for your brain to tell your leg what to do so you can walk and dance. But the railing hurt the streets, so your brain can’t talk to your leg anymore. The other things that fell on your leg broke the other bones. The doctor couldn’t heal your leg. So he did what he could to make it not hurt anymore. Anna, he had to take away the part that was hurt.”

I was confused. “Took away? What do you mean? Can I have it back? Can I still dance?” I was starting to panic. I pulled back the blankets and looked at my legs. The left one seemed just fine, except for some bandages but my right leg just stopped right above where my knee should have been. It was just gone.

“Annabell, sweetheart.” It was mom who spoke this time. “I’m afraid there was nothing more the doctor could do. We can still go see the recital if you want but you won’t be able to dance.”

My little heart dropped. I had worked so hard to get ready for the dance. I had begged my mom for a year to let me start ballet because all my friends were in it. She always said that we didn’t have the money or the time for it. But this year she finally agreed. I went to those dance classes religiously. It was the one thing I looked forward to during the week. My friends were going to be so disappointed. The show just isn’t the same if one person is missing. I started crying and Andrew wrapped his arms tighter around me. I sobbed into his chest, getting my tears all over his t-shirt, but he didn’t mind. He just held me and stroked my head. The nurse came in and gave me some more pain medicine. The medication made me sleepy and I fell asleep shortly after.

The next few days were very uneventful. I woke up. Took some medicine and tried to eat breakfast. All the medicine made my tummy hurt so I wasn’t very hungry, but I knew I had to eat. The doctor would come in and check my leg and put clean bandages on it. He talked with mom and dad about options like wheelchairs and crutches. He mentioned a prosthetic procedure and I asked Andrew what that meant.

 “It’s like a robot leg. They would attach it where your leg was. It would work like a real leg, mostly. Except it would be metal, and you would be able to take it off.” He explained.

 “A robot leg? That I could take off? I could just take off my leg when I wanted to?” The though of it made me giggle.

Nobody came to visit me except mom, dad, and Andrew. The nurses said it what was best if I didn’t have visitors because I needed my rest. I was still really upset about the recital. I knew my friends would be busy rehearsing and I should have been there too. I wonder if they even knew what happened. I didn’t want to think about it so I usually just rolled over and took a nap.

Two weeks after the incident, I woke up and saw my mom had a very odd smile on her face.

“Stay right here Annabell. I’ll be right back” As if I was just going to get up and walk away. She came back into my room and all my friends from dance followed behind her. I couldn’t believe it! They had all come to visit me. They came and sat on my bed and gave me hugs. Most of them brought me chocolate or teddy bears. I was already feeling much better. After all the hugs and smiles, I remembered the recital. It was in two days and there was no way I could dance. My heart sank.

“I’m really glad you guys all came to see me! But I have bad news” I started to explain.

“It’s okay Anna, we already know. And we’re not mad or anything. Just glad you’re okay. Plus we have a surprise for you.” Maddie, my best friend, got really excited about something and everyone started whispering. I was beginning to get confused.

Andrew came in next, with his best friend Jake. They had been friends for as long as I can remember and Jake was kind of like a second brother to me. Andrew had a bag with him and I looked at it, curious of what could be inside. He turned around and took out the contents of the bag so I couldn’t see them. He then turned back, facing me, holding my dance costume. It was a pink sparkly leotard with a big tutu on it.

“I don’t want to see it Andrew. It only reminds me that I’ll never get to wear it and dance in our recital.” I was upset. Tears were building in my eyes but I didn’t want to cry in front of my friends. Andrew just smiled and handed it to my mom and everyone left the room when a nurse came in. My mom and the nurse helped me into my dance costume. I didn’t see how it would make me feel better but they insisted that I should be able to wear it at least once. It was a struggle to put it on but after about half an hour, we finally got it. It did feel good to wear, but it still just made me want to dance in it.

All of my friends returned to the room, all wearing their costumes.

“What’s going on?” I asked but they all just giggled and smiled. Andrew picked me up carefully from the bed and we followed my friends into the hallway. I looked around and there was a small stage set up with chairs out front. They had lights and flowers all around. I still had no idea what was happening. Maybe they were having a concert or something. But I didn’t know they had concerts in hospitals.

Andrew and Jake carried me onto stage and my friends followed. They all stood in formation like we had rehearsed so many times before. The chairs quickly filled with parents and the nursing staff. The music began playing and all the girls began doing the dance we had learned. They must have taught Jake and Andrew because as they danced, Jake and Andrew held me so that I could do my part along with them. It was the most incredible thing I’ve ever done. The music kept going and I did as much as I could while Andrew and Jake would help me with leaps and turns. They carried me all over stage, allowing me my one dance recital. I felt like soaring. I felt invincible, like I could fly anywhere in the world, do anything I wanted. The leaps and turns gave me butterflies as I went through the air. It was the best I had ever felt. When the song finally finished, we all took a bow and they threw roses at us.

“I’m sorry I haven’t been around the last week or so. I was going to your rehearsals to learn the dance for you. I know how much you loved to dance.” Andrew whispered to me as everyone was cheering. Many were wiping tears from their faces. I hugged Andrew around the neck. I knew I had an amazing brother but I never expected this.

“It’s okay. This was perfect. Thank you” I replied, tears beginning to roll down my face as well. But this time they were tears of joy. We had a big group hug and I thanked all the girls for doing this for me.

 That night, I lay in my hospital bed, and it was the first time I didn’t cry myself to sleep in the last few weeks. I couldn’t get the feeling of being on stage out of my head. It wasn’t the same as a recital but it was so much better. I realized that if I could still dance in a recital, I could do anything, despite my condition. It wasn’t perfect but I did it, and it was perfect to me. They all came together just for me. My brother had learned ballet just so he could help me dance my part in a silly recital. It might have been the last time I ever got to dance but it was something I would never forget.