

CHAPTER ONE

My brother was arrested on my eleventh birthday.

Sheriff Ernestine Cobbs showed up at our door, just as we were sitting down to cut into my tutti-frutti three-layer cake, the kind my mother made me every year. She always hid gummy bears in each layer, and back when we were little kids, Willis and I fought over the biggest slice.

Now Willis is grown, almost seventeen. He's tall and skinny—"Just real fit, not skinny, sis," he'd insist whenever I teased him about his bony frame. My brother is straight-up handsome, unlike the friends who slouched alongside him, their faces dotted with gross pimples, their eyes half-closed, thin mouths clamped into sneers. Willis stood above the rest, his shoulders squared, head held high, his tanned face smooth as the lagoon water down the road from our house, and his eyes that same bluish-green lagoon color too. He was usually smiling or laughing, but not in a wannabe way. Willis wore his face like someone who knew what was up and was happy about it.

So when Sheriff Cobbs knocked and the three of us noticed her broad hat and small frame through the battered screen door, I saw Willis's eyes narrow. My brother stood up quickly. His fork clattered to the floor.

“Ernestine, please,” my mother said slowly. “Now’s not the time. It’s Bean’s birthday.”

Three green cans of Mountain Dew trembled on the kitchen counter. The pile of dirty dishes in the sink shifted. A rubber band in my mother’s hand snapped.

The vinegar scent of sweat filled the air.

I don’t remember how long it took for the sheriff to clip Willis’s wrists into handcuffs or if anyone said anything more. The afternoon slowly turned a weepy green, right inside my birthday kitchen, a yellowish, pukish green just like the rain clouds outside.

I might have gotten kinda dizzy then, kinda wobbly on my feet as the sheriff led Willis slowly out the door. Reaching for the back of a kitchen chair to steady myself, I stumbled, then sat down quickly. My mother looked at me blankly, then poured a glass of water from the sink into an old jelly jar.

“Doing okay, Bean? You don’t look so great.”

“Feels like the room’s moving all around,” I whispered. “Feels like I’m getting sick.”

“Coming down with something? Maybe a cold?”

I shook my head, which didn’t help matters one bit. My mother seemed so cool and collected, as if Willis’s arrest had never happened. Of course I wasn’t feeling okay and it wasn’t because of a stupid cold. “Kind of like everything’s spinning.”

“Feeling dizzy?”

I nodded. The room heaved and then dipped like a boat.

“Vertigo,” my mother said softly, handing me the water.

“You look pale as all get out. I used to get it myself from time to time after your father left.”

“What’s vertigo?” My voice sounded hollow, as if coming from a deep tunnel, from far away.

“It means losing your balance,” my mother said. “It’s the sense that your world has turned upside down. Like everything around you is moving and just won’t stop. Put your head down for a second, Bean, and drink up. That should do the trick.”

So I laid my head down on the square oak table in front of me and closed my eyes. Our house was so small that the living room and kitchen were really just one room, and we used the old table for most everything—eating, cooking, folding clothes, studying, painting projects, and more. The scratched-up wood surface felt rough against my cheek, so I sat up slowly again, then drank the cold water in two large gulps. Blurry plywood walls and squat windows came back into focus, and the floor steadied. But when I turned to tell my mother that I felt better, I saw that she was washing dishes left from breakfast, the rush of water from the faucet so loud that I knew she wouldn’t be able to hear me.