

Chapter 1

I followed Dad toward the Fourth of July festival, carrying a portfolio full of drawings and a folding table. Hundreds of people wandered through downtown. The aroma of kettle corn moved with the breeze, carnies ran neon-pink and green rides, alongside game booths piled high with oversized stuffed animals. I stopped on the sidewalk and wiped the sweat off my face, unsure if the perspiration was from the stifling Tennessee sun or the possibility of hearing negative opinions about my artwork.

Calm down, I told myself. No one would be cruel to a seventeen-year-old.

Dad was setting up the pop-up tent in our rented vendor space and waved at me to hurry. Ten minutes later, we set out the pastel and charcoal drawings I'd prepared. We stepped back to examine our work.

"Relax. Enjoy the day." Dad wrapped his arm around my shoulder. "You got this, Elsie."

The security of his embrace stilled my jitters.

"Have you sent your application to Memphis yet?" he asked.

I had my heart set on Memphis College of Art. "I'll mail it tomorrow."

"You'd better. Don't miss your chance." He squeezed me tight. "I'm gonna get a lemon shake-up. Want one?"

"Please. I'm dying of thirst."

When he walked away, I noticed him dragging his left foot as if it was weighed down with a cinderblock. He took a staggered step to readjust then moved on with a more confident stride.

I started to follow but changed my mind. He'd be fine. Then, the thought of him falling down made my heart skip. What if he loses his sense of direction and couldn't find his way back? He'd been acting weird lately – starting a sentence but never finishing, and sometimes slurring his words. A twitch here or there, and the other day when we were walking the pepper field, he almost collapsed from the heat.

I had to call Mom and tell her how odd he was acting. The doctor said the brain tumor was in remission, but the threat of it returning loomed over us like the smog from the paper mill. *Maybe he was only dehydrated*, I assured myself. The lemon shake-up would help.

My best friend, Emma, hurried down the sidewalk wearing a Nirvana T-shirt and dark skinny jeans. She held out her arms with a big smile.

Yes. She promised me she'd make it. We gave each other a quick hug.

"I was afraid you left for Florida already," I said.

"No. Dad's coming to get me tomorrow." She glanced around the booth. "Everything looks great, but where's your momma?"

"Working."

"On the Fourth of July?"

"Mrs. Vaughn's going to Houston. The old woman wanted Mom to pack her suitcase."

"When you've got that kind of money, I reckon you can have someone else do it."

"I suppose."

She looked down the street. "Y'all need something to bring people in."

"Like what?"

"Sketch me." She grinned, propping her hand on her hip. "People will totally notice, then they'd want you to draw them too. For a fee, of course."

"Works for me."

I grabbed a folding chair for her, set up my flimsy, three-legged easel, and began drawing her likeness on a 12x16 sketchpad. Charcoal worked perfectly for her choppy, black hair which contrasted with her pale skin. I'd been in the sun all summer, helping Dad with his crops. Long days walking the fields had bleached my hair almost white. Emma and I were like yin and yang, from our looks to our thoughts. She was a math guru, me an artist. She was outspoken and bold. I was quiet and preferred to be at home. I was tall and tan, she was petite and goth. But just as the symbol represented, we were in perfect balance.

After a few minutes, several people stopped to watch, and then a few more gathered around. *Where was Dad?* I needed him to help buffer the attention. I looked over my shoulder. *He should've been back already.*

"Elsie," Emma whispered. "There is this hot guy standing outside the booth."

"I'm busy." I rubbed the paper, shadowing in her prominent cheekbones.

“You gotta look.”

I took a quick glance. A heavysset man whose hairy belly hung out from underneath his T-shirt stood on the sidewalk, eating popcorn. *Yuck*. I went back to my sketch. After a few more strokes and Emma’s incessant expressions, I had to look again. Several yards up the sidewalk, a guy with light brown hair, wearing a navy Polo and dark jeans, stared my way. I hadn’t seen him before, and with a face like his, I’d have remembered.

I turned back to the drawing. “The guy in the Polo?”

She giggled. “Did you see him?”

A plump lady in a garish floral blouse stepped beside me. “Miss, I love the portrait you’re drawin’. I’d like one of my son. How much do y’all charge?”

“Ten dollars,” I said. “I’ll be done with her in just a minute.”

“Sounds good.”

I grinned at Emma. She smiled back, then looked over my shoulder.

“Oh my gosh, Elsie. He’s coming this way.”

“Would you stop? I have to focus.”

I waved for the lady to bring her son over. Just as I flipped to a clean page, someone touched my shoulder. I jumped. *Dad. Thank God, he made it back.*

Dad handed me a Styrofoam cup. I took a sip of the tart lemon drink and started a sketch of the blond-haired, blue-eyed boy with round cheeks.

“How are you, Emma?” Dad asked. “We haven’t seen you much this summer.”

“I’m good, Mr. Richardson. How’ve you been?”

“Better than I deserve. Ready for your senior year?”

“Sure am.”

“Will you graduate early with El... El... Elsie?”

“Yes,” Emma drawled, eyeing him with concern.

I stopped sketching. Dad’s words slurred and stuttered like he’d been at the bar all day. He scrunched his forehead and rubbed his right eye.

“So, where y’all from?” the lady asked him. “Ya don’t sound Southern.”

Dad and I chuckled. The question followed us everywhere in Hardin County. We’d moved to Tennessee five years earlier from Central Illinois, and the locals were always baffled at why we polluted the air with our Northern accent.

“Illinois,” Dad said as he swayed to the right. “Whew, it’s hot out.”

“Are you feeling okay?” I asked.

He nodded. I didn’t buy it.

Trying to shake off my worry, I gave the lady her drawing.

“I love it.” She handed me a twenty-dollar bill. “Thanks so much.”

“I’ll get your change.”

“No, you keep that, darling. You earned it.” She smiled and walked away with her son.

As I flipped the page back to Emma’s portrait, a musky, cedar-laced scent moved through the air. The guy in the Polo had stepped inside the booth. I moved closer to Dad. He noticed the guy and held out his right hand.

“Brandon Richardson.”

The guy tilted his head, as if our name triggered a thought, and then he returned the handshake.

“Nice to meet you, sir. This is some mighty fine work.”

“She’s quite talented. Would you like your portrait drawn?”

I nudged Dad with my elbow.

“No, thank you, sir—”

Dad’s arms had started to shake, and a massive tremor rolled through him. Then, he collapsed like he’d been hit with a bolt of lightning. The guy grabbed Dad under the arms, following him to the ground, helping break the fall. Terrified, I plunged to my knees beside them.

“Dad!” I grabbed his trembling arm. “Oh God, someone call 911!”

The guy pulled out his iPhone and pushed the numbers. “What’s wrong with him?”

“It’s a seizure.”

Emma rushed to my side. “Elsie, what can I do?”

“Find Woodrow. He’s at the barbecue stand.”

Emma jumped up and sprinted out of the tent. The guy spoke into the phone, telling emergency where we were. I grabbed Dad by the shoulders and tried to roll him over. He wouldn’t budge. Tense and balled up from the convulsions, his weight pressed against the concrete, scraping his skin.

No, no, no... not again. I yanked on his shoulder and he finally flopped on his back.

I gasped.

He looked like a man being executed in an electric chair. His eyes rolled in the back of his head, exposing only the whites.

“The ambulance is on the way,” the guy said.

“I need my mom!”

“Where is she?”

“Working at Vaughn’s.”

“Um... okay. I got that, too.”

“Who are you?” I asked, more annoyed than I intended.

“Tyler.”

He stood up and pressed the phone to his ear. Emma ran back to my side.

“I found Woodrow,” her voice quivering. “He’s on his way.”

Woodrow was Dad’s closest friend, but at seventy years old, it would take him more than a few minutes to get through the crowd.

Tyler turned around. “Your mom will meet you at the hospital.”

I recoiled. How did he get hold of her? Whatever. I didn’t have the time or patience to care. Everyone knew the Vaughns.

I turned back to Dad. Blood was now trickling out of the corner of his mouth. More tears clouded my sight.

“Why is he bleeding?” I cried out.

Tyler dropped to his knees and gently tilted Dad’s chin upward. Calm and collected, he then reached in his back pocket and slipped his wallet between Dad’s teeth. He did it so fast I barely had time to comprehend what he was doing. Dad clenched his teeth down on the leather. Chills ran up my arms.

“He bit his tongue,” Tyler said. “He needed something to bite down on.”

“This is awful.”

“The ambulance is almost here.”

Bells from the carnival games echoed off the buildings. People chattered outside the booth as they watched the spectacle of my father convulsing on the ground. Music blared in the distance, and then the ambulance sirens overpowered all the noise.

How could this happen in front of all these people? Ashamed, my cheeks burned underneath my tears. I wasn't embarrassed by Dad, but the horror of a grand mal seizure was better experienced in the privacy of home.

Emma wrapped her arm around me and pulled me close. I buried my face in her shoulder. *Why? Why wouldn't the damn brain tumor go away?*

Paramedics rushed at us, offering their aid with precision. Emma and I moved out of the way, and Tyler stepped back into the crowd. I wanted to thank him, but I didn't have time.

A female paramedic led me toward the ambulance, saying words I completely tuned out. I looked back over my shoulder and saw a medic handing Tyler his wallet.

Our eyes met. I hoped he understood how much I appreciated his help. He slowly inclined his head, concern written all over his face. I took another long look at the compassion in his eyes, and then I climbed inside the back of the ambulance.