



CHAPTER ONE

It is a wide-sky darkness, made pale by a full moon rising, the desert sand reflecting its glow. We follow a dirt road, our headlights devouring the tracks we made just hours ago, when there was still daylight, and hope. In every direction the desert and the night sky are following in each other's footsteps, pushing farther and farther into the empty distance until their edges press together at the horizon.

In my troubled half sleep the rocking of the truck makes me dream that we are a bird and the desert plains are our wings. We are soaring, and we are falling. I jerk myself awake before we hit the ground. Deputy Pesquera, in the driver's seat, glances over at me. Her uniform presses, limp and wrinkled, against her large frame; the carefully ironed creases of the uniform sweat loose in the cramped and airless interview room back in Salvation.

“It takes a lot out of you, doesn’t it, Dylan?” she asks, straightening her back in a stretch that brushes the top of her head against the truck’s roof. Her sheriff department hat lies in the backseat. Mom says Deputy Pesquera is big boned. My friend Frank says she’s the best-looking linebacker he’s ever seen.

I turn around in my seat and look through the back window, beyond the washed-out red of our taillights and down the road disappearing into the darkness behind us. Far in the distance I see the bare-bulbed lights of the low and wind-worn cement buildings that make up Salvation’s town center.

We took the back route off Pine Mountain to get there, slowly winding our way down the little-used road, flanked by slopes of dry dirt and rock, instead of the thick groves of trees that cover the front side of the mountain. Rounding each blind corner, Deputy Pesquera would honk, warning anyone coming the other way to move back to their side of the narrow road. We stopped about halfway down the mountain, in Baker’s Creek, the tiny town that’s built into the only grove of scraggly trees on the back side of the mountain.

There’s no creek. The place is named for an old mountain guy named Baker, who fought with the county to have a water supply put in. I stayed in the truck when the deputy went into Sheboa’s new grocery store. They used to have a store up on our side of the mountain, right in the center of the village, but Mr. Sheboa said he got tired of the new Village Business Association making up rules he didn’t want to follow, rules that only made things better for the flatlanders that clogged up the mountain on weekends. I kept the hood of my black sweatshirt up while I waited in the truck, even though there was no hint of the late

fall chill I'd felt while I waited for the bus this morning. I pulled the strings on either side of the hood and cinched the face opening as small as it would go, until all sound was muffled and only the very edge of daylight could press against my closed eyes.

The thing about visions is, they hurt.

Darkness helps. It keeps the light from slicing behind the whites of my eyes and poking at the sore spot in my brain, the spot where, as I sat sweating outside Sheboa's grocery store, a flicking, pulsing picture showed itself to me again and again and again.

The good thing is, I was already sitting down when the vision first hit. There wasn't a long way to fall. In the vision I was in the desert, and it was dark. There was a hole dug in the sand in front of me, and a blue plastic barrel beside it. I was looking into the barrel. There was a girl inside, maybe ten years old. She looked up at me. There was black dirt caked at the corners of her mouth, and when she reached up for me, I saw her knuckles were bruised and torn. She'd fought.

When I came to, lying on the floor of the girls' bathroom, I saw three pairs of feet standing by the stall door. My friend Pilar, in black Converse high-tops like mine, peeked under the door first, holding her long braid to keep it from touching the floor. "Dude," she said, "did you just fall off the can?" Thea, in the black studded stiletto-heeled boots was next, squatting down and scowling at me. "You drop a tampon?" MayBe's handmade ankle-length flannel skirt mushroomed out around her when she kneeled down to get a look at me. "You're okay, right? You

might want to wash your face, though,” she said as I lifted my head, peeling my cheek away from the tile floor. I lied to them. I lied so well that they laughed when I reenacted losing my balance while I reached for the toilet paper. Pilar still insisted on walking me to the nurse’s office so I could get an aspirin, but I wouldn’t let her wait for me there. I called the deputy from the nurse’s office. “I’ve been expecting your call,” she said.

The back side of the mountain slides right into the desert, the slopes of dirt and rock flattening out into an endless plain that made my head ache when I peeked out of my sweatshirt and tried to see its end.

When we got to Salvation, Deputy Pesquera drove slowly through the town, looking to see which of the small cement buildings was the police station. I stared out the window at the rusted metal screen doors and the faded signs marking the post office, grocery store, and restaurant. The restaurant was called The Devil’s Chow, and we waited there for the local sheriff, who was “out in the flats,” according to the note taped to the door of the police station.

Like the other buildings in town, The Devil’s Chow was long and narrow with no windows. The setup of the restaurant gave anyone standing in the doorway a full view of everyone who was inside. And, I realized as we stood there, it gave anyone inside a good look at who was coming in. There was one row of five small plastic tables running parallel to the bar, a glass soda-bottle vase filled with desert wildflowers on each table. The tables were empty, but four of the five wooden stools at the bar were filled by slumping men in cowboy hats, who glanced at us long enough to look us down, up, and down again, their faces

shadowed by the brims of their hats. One of them smirked at the badge on the deputy's chest and then looked back up with the others at the TV mounted in the corner.

"Can't we just wait in the truck?" I whispered.

"Sit wherever you'd like," the lady behind the bar said, not turning to look at us from where she was wiping down square bottles half-filled with liquids of various browns. I watched her, and noticed that she wiped the same bottles down over and over again.

I followed the deputy to the table closest to the door and sat down across from her. The men at the bar glanced at us again. The lady behind the bar didn't interrupt her cleaning to bring us menus or water, so I watched her wipe down bottle after already clean bottle. I didn't realize how closely I was watching her until she turned around and caught me looking.

"I forgot you were there!" she said, slapping her forehead so hard it made me flinch. She grabbed a water pitcher and two plastic glasses and walked over to our table. She clacked the glasses down in front of us, pulled two laminated menus out of her apron pocket, and slapped them down on the table. There was a name tag hooked crookedly on the apron, reading SARAH.

"You the ones here for Sheriff Len?" Sarah asked the deputy. "You his friend from up Pine Mountain?"

She overfilled our water glasses with a shaky hand, spilling water onto the table. She didn't clean it up. I caught the drip with the sleeve of my sweatshirt before it could spill into my lap.

“Yep,” the deputy said.

“I went up there once, to Pine Mountain. Swam in the lake. Pretty place. Now, what was it I just heard about you all up there?” Sarah drummed her fingers against the water pitcher and looked absently out the door. “Something about . . .” She nodded slightly with a faint grin. “Paradise, right? You all voted and changed the name of the mountain from Pine to Paradise.”

The deputy smiled and nodded her head. I waited for her to say what had really happened, but she didn’t. She just picked up the plastic menu.

“That was a flatlander vote,” I said, blinking against the pulsing fluorescent lights. Sarah looked at me. “They only let the businesses vote, and most of them are owned by flatlander suck-ups. They’re the ones who wanted to change the name. Not us. It’s not really changed till January first.”

“So basically you locals got screwed?” Sarah said.

“Basically,” I answered.

“Well, shit,” she said, shaking her head. “That sucks.” For a long moment it seemed like she was lost in thought about the injustice of our mountain being renamed out from under us. But then she looked down at me like she’d just noticed I was there. “How about a cheeseburger?”

“Sure,” I said. The deputy nodded too. “Cokes and fries, too, please.”

“I’m going to make one up for Sheriff Len, too. He’s out in the flats, looking for my daughter, Tessa.”

I swallowed a gasp and looked at Deputy Pesquera. She ignored me and said, “Is that so?” to Sarah.

“My mom was watching Tess yesterday afternoon.” Sarah kept talking, but I couldn’t look away from Deputy Pesquera. It felt like my insides had all gone brittle, and if I looked away from the deputy, if I looked at Sarah, my whole body would splinter apart in shame. It was her daughter, Tess, I’d seen in my vision that morning. And I knew that it was only a matter of hours before I broke Sarah’s heart. “They live way out, if you can imagine a place more way out than this.” The water pitcher sloshed in her shaking hand. “They looked for her last night. Len went out there. He told me to stay here, in case Tessa comes back. She knows where I work. He told me to stay here.”

“That’s the best thing you can do,” the deputy said.

“I think I might be on . . . what do you call it. Autopilot? I’m going to pour you two your Cokes, tell Billy to make your burgers and fries, but really what I want to do”—she said, looking down at me like she couldn’t believe it—“is scream. Am I screaming?”

I shook my head.

“What are you all doing down here, anyway?” she asked, staring out the door again. “Len said it was some kind of book report you were doing. You should wait though, to interview him, until he finds my . . .”

A truck with a decal reading SALVATION SHERIFF’S DEPARTMENT passed by the restaurant. The tall man in the driver’s seat didn’t turn to look at us. He kept his head tilted down, the sheriff’s hat shading his face. There was no one, no Tessa, in the seat next to him.

“You want, I can bring your order over to you,” Sarah said, still staring at the

now-empty dirt road. "I'll bring it over when it's ready. Len said I should stay here, but I can bring it over."

"We'll just wait and take that to go, if you don't mind. It'll give the sheriff a few minutes to get settled," Deputy Pesquera said.

"Suit yourself," Sarah said, already walking away.

I lean my head back against the seat and close my eyes, faking a sleep that soon enough becomes real.

In the dream I'm standing in the wide, dark desert again, looking down into the hole that is deeper than it is wide. The large blue plastic barrel sits upright next to it, the adhesive from a peeled-off white label shining white in the moon's glow. Far in the distance I can see the murky outlines of downtown Salvation.

In the dream I think, I'm not supposed to be here again. I point to the barrel and say to the empty desert, I told you. She's in there. Behind me there is a sound of desert rocks knocking and crunching together. My whole body goes stiff. I stare at the town lights of Salvation in the distance. There is a sound of heavy footsteps coming closer. I am not alone out here.

In my sleep I think of the self-defense classes I took with my friends Pilar, MayBe, and Thea. Poke the eyes. Punch the throat. Twist and pull the gunnysack. Do NOT be polite. I scream when the arm slaps across my chest, and I wake up swaying hard to the right, the seat belt locking against me, my face smacking against the window and staying pressed there. I see my own eye's reflection in the window, and the sickening sight of the desert spinning

around us. The crunch of the truck tires locked and scraping on the dirt is deafening. The truck finally jerks to a stop, rocking a little until it settles.

We are skewed sideways, half-on and half-off the road, a cloud of dust and small rocks settling around us, loudly peppering the roof, windshield, and hood. Deputy Pesquera is leaning forward and gripping the steering wheel with one arm. Her other arm is still pressed across me. “Mom-Arm,” Pilar and I call this, as in the arm your mom flings in front of you to keep you from flying out the windshield. Deputy Pesquera moves her arm away from me and places it on the steering wheel.

“What did you say?” she asks calmly, still staring straight ahead.

My brain is still stuck in that inky sludge between being awake and being asleep, and it takes me a moment to get my mouth to work. “I was asleep.” I push against the door, slowly righting myself in my seat, and look at the reflection of my cheek in the window, the same one I hit the floor with this afternoon. It’s already starting to bruise. “Did we hit something?”

“We spun out,” the deputy says, and then she laughs uneasily. “You must scare the crap out of your mom, yelling in your sleep like that. You sure scared the crap out of me.”

“I yelled?”

“Screamed like a pissed-off mountain lion is more like it. Sounded like you were about to eat someone’s face off.”

“That’s gross.”

“Well, you know,” she says, absently putting on the voice she uses at school

assemblies. “Those mountain lions are not cute little kitty cats. They will tear your face ...”

“Is the truck okay?” I ask, looking through the windshield to where the headlights are pointed down a slope, casting a shadow against the brush below.

“Are you okay?” she asks, making me squint by turning on the overhead light. She looks hard into my face. “You look all right. Probably get a bruise, though. How many fingers am I holding up?” she asks, holding up her middle finger.

I laugh, and push her hand away.

“I’ll check the truck,” she says.

She leaves the door open, the electric ding, ding, ding, sounding lonely in the silence of the dark desert. Her boots crunch on the sand as she walks around the front of the truck into the light of the headlights, and then around to the back.

“Looks okay,” the deputy says, getting in and closing the door.

“You should sleep, Dylan,” she says as she backs the truck up and sets it right on the road before driving again.

“No, thanks.” I roll down my window, letting the cool wind wake up my skin.

“Bad dream?”

I shake my head. The thing about dreams is, I’m not supposed to have them.

“Do you mind some music?” she asks.

“Whatever keeps you awake,” I answer quickly, anxious for this conversation to end, for the chance to think the thoughts thrumming at the back of my mind.

“Oh, I’m awake, but this will keep me happy.” She switches on the radio and turns the knob until there’s a break in the popping static. “Thank God,” she says,

hearing the guitar-heavy classic rock song humming through the speakers. “I was afraid it’d be country.”

“How far to the mountain?” I ask.

“A few hours. We’ll get in way before sunup, especially taking the front way up.”

I look out the window, letting my eyes lose their focus so that the dark desert streams by in a muddy blur.