





## CHAPTER 1

# Fragile as a Falling Star

The first thing I remember about that fateful morning is Uncle Dash swerving my family’s van into the parking lot of New River Church.

That’s our weekly tradition, mine and his. We get breakfast together, then ride to church and catch up on life. The tires screeched when Dash parked.

Late, as usual.

Dolly Parton was howling about “Jolene” on the cassette player, while I sang harmony. (Dolly Parton is my favorite person I’ve never met. Well, my second favorite. My first favorite is my future BFF!)

Everything felt the Sunday-same until Dash cut the engine. And went still as a statue.

“Oh shoot,” he said. His eyes went wide as quarters. “Oh Lord. We got a problem, Olive.”

“What’s up?” I asked, even though I had a theory as soon as I saw his pale face. “Listen to me,” I said gently. “Breakfast tacos from Big John’s are a bad idea before church. I tell you every week.”

“It ain’t the tacos,” Uncle Dash said. His mouth barely moved around the words. He stared out into the crowded parking lot, steering wheel clutched in his tattooed fingers.

I looked straight ahead, too. But it looked the same as always to me: just a gravel-gray lot with an old stone church rising up ahead of us.

Blackbirds perched, shoulder to shoulder, in a long, inky line along the rooftop. Fluffy maples stood guard all around the lot. The trees were leafy-green again, blooms bursting out of twisty limbs. April had barely started, but summer was already close enough to send love notes across the mountain with its warm winds and scatters of wildflowers. Above it all was a sky the same color blue as my favorite skirt. The one I wore last year, on the first day of school. (I’m homeschooled, but I still believe in the power of a first-day outfit.)

That’s back when everything was normal.

Back before I knew Hatch Malone existed.

(Aka the good old days. But I’m getting ahead of myself.)

All in all, it seemed like an ordinary day. But it wasn’t. Beginnings are sneaky like this.

“I got the flutters, Olive,” Uncle Dash said. His voice sounded all drifty and dreamy. “I think change is on the wind.”

He’d barely spoken that last word when Luther Frye hobbled past the car wearing his best white shirt and overalls. Luther’s pet ferret, Gustav, sat perched on his shoulder, tail fluffed around Luther’s neck like a fine scarf. (That’s nothing new or change-worthy. Gustav and Luther go everywhere together.)

“Do you want to talk about it?” I asked. I pushed the heart-shaped sunglasses up into my hair. I always wear a heart somewhere on my person. It’s my signature symbol.

Uncle Dash used the edge of his necktie to wipe sweat off his forehead. “I thought it was acid reflux at first. But it’s been getting worse all morning. Now it’s like . . .” His cheeks inflated like a puffer fish. “Like my heart’s too full. Something’s up today. I’m plumb sick over it. I don’t even know if we should go inside.”

“Be honest with me, Uncle Dash.” I tried to make my voice as gentle as my mama’s. “Are you nervous because we’re going to church?”

“Partly,” he admitted. “You know I only go to church because the Goad wants me there.”

To be clear, he said *the Goad*. Not *God*.

Uncle Dash doesn’t think God cares if he goes to church or not. But my grandpa Merlin Goad, the most famous birder in the state of Tennessee, is a different story. Back

when I was a baby, Dash left town and entered a season my family refers to as “the prodigal years.” He came home tattooed, broke, and brokenhearted. Also, he lost his RV in a poker game. So he had nowhere to live.

Grandpa gave him his old room right back, on one condition: that he go to church. It’d help him ease back into the community, Grandpa said. Plus, it’d help Uncle Dash find some peace. Dash agreed to go even though he says church isn’t a peaceful place for him. We all see church very differently in my family.

Grandpa likes church because he feels like it’s a refuge place—it’s the space where his heart finds rest and where it’s safe to ask questions. Mama goes, too. But if you ask her why, she’ll only say that she’s searching. (Which sounds like a beautiful way to live, honestly. As if life is one big treasure hunt.) Mama’s new husband, Coach Malone, goes with her because he loves her. And because he leads the choir. As for my dad, Jupiter, his only holy place is the great outdoors. He hikes on trails on Sundays. He says he doesn’t like stained glass between him and the sky. And as for me, I attend church for three primary reasons:

1. Because I’m eleven and I don’t have much of a choice.
2. Because there’s not much else to do in Wildwood, Tennessee.

3. And most of all, because I've been asking God for the deepest dream and desire of my heart for months now. And if God's going to answer my prayer anywhere, I figure it's here in his holy house.

My prayer and wish and wildest hope is this: I want to attend Macklemore Middle School.

This dream may not make sense to you. But to be a student there is the deepest desire of my weary soul. Mama says I'm being very dramatic. But I know my heart better than anybody does. My heart aches to be a Macklemore Penguin.

Currently, I attend the School of Mom (aka homeschool). And it's great. Really! I get to help make my schedule and pick the books I want to read. Also, I get to hang out with Mama most days, and she's entirely swanky. But there are a couple of reasons it's time for me to go to Macklemore. I have a feeling that my future BFF is waiting for me there, for one.

Then there's the deep-down heart reason that matters heaps to me. Even if it's a little bit embarrassing to say aloud.

I've told God all about it, though—many, many times. Which is why I got a little excited about Uncle Dash's anxious flutters. He really does have a special sense about him, a way of knowing when change is on

the way. And not all change is bad. Sometimes, change is wonderful.

“What if something changes for the good today?” I asked. “Maybe Mrs. Faye made jalapeño lemonade instead of plain. Maybe Gustav takes a running spell and the choir freaks out ’cause they think he’s a rat.”

“You think that’d be good?” he asked.

“It would be lively!”

*Maybe I get to go to the school of my dreams,* I thought.

Dash shook his head sadly. “Nah, I’m pretty sure it’s something terrible. We might as well get it over with, though.” He burst out of the van, both cowboy boots clonking down at the same time in the parking lot. Then he ambled around back so he could unload my wheelchair.

In case you’re curious, I have two wheelchairs. They both have names: Dolly and Reba. Dolly’s my sparkly, custom-fitted, go-to set of wheels. I hot-glued my name in rhinestones on the back. I maneuver Dolly’s wheels myself, and gosh, I love the way she glides. Reba is motorized, with a maroon seat and shiny red rims that sparkle in the sun.

Contrary to popular belief, I don’t hate my wheelchairs. They help me do whatever I want. I consider them my fine chariots. So don’t feel sorry for me on account of the wheels.

(Feel sorry for me because of my annoyingly perfect stepbrother, Hatch Malone.)

My door swung open and Uncle Dash held the wheelchair steady. “Thanks!” I said as I scooted into my seat.

I’ll be able to roll myself once we get inside the church, which is full of wide aisles and faded hardwood floors. But the parking lot is a gravelly catastrophe. It’s impossible to navigate solo. So Uncle Dash took Dolly’s reins (aka the handles) and we headed off toward Grandpa’s favorite holy place.

“Wait here,” I said to Dash when he paused inside the foyer. “This is my favorite part. I must prepare.”

I pulled my heart glasses back over my eyes. (I think that’s the best way to see people, through pink hearts. Try it if you don’t believe me!)

Uncle Dash, despite his flutters, smiled just an inch as he flung open the double doors to the sanctuary.

The air whooshed out of the room, cooling my face and stealing my breath for one glory-hallelujah of a second. Even better, tangled in that burst of cool air was a wave of loud, wondrous music.

Music surrounded me like wind. I gave my wheels a solid push down the aisle, stretched my arms out long and pretended I was one of the sandhill cranes down by Cove Lake. Something about church music makes me feel like I can fly. I can’t explain it better than that. The music is one



reason I'd get up early and come here even if it wasn't a little bit required. Even if I didn't have this one big, urgent request to petition the Lord about.

I stilled the wheels and swerved up beside the pew. Mama stood singing. My stepdad, Coach Malone, stood onstage leading the choir. (In case you're wondering, my stepbrother, Hatch, was still in bed at home. His view of church is that he doesn't want to go. So nobody makes him.)

Dash slumped into the pew beside me. Mama offered him an open hymnbook, but Dash waved it away. So she passed it to me. I barely mumbled over the words, though; I was too busy looking around, waiting for the winds of change to sweep through the room.

"Good morning, friends!" said Pastor Mitra. I knew I'd like that lady the first time I met her last summer. She always wears kindness in her eyes and high-top sneakers under her holy robes. "We got plenty to be excited about today, don't we? The May Day Festival is only a few weeks away! Summer's coming, and the sun is shining! I'm thankful we all get to be here together. Before we begin this morning, would you take some time to greet your neighbor? Shake their hand. Give them a hug. And let them know why you're glad they're here. Miss Melba, would you come play us a fellowship tune while we mingle?"