

## CHAPTER 2

A scorching sun beats down from the turquoise sky, gleaming off the distant buildings of downtown Denver. Yet no leaves grow on the skeletal trees, no flowers bloom in pots on front porches, no grass grows in dead front yards. Even the Rocky Mountains looming on the western horizon look brown and brittle. The only green in this world comes from brown-tinted pine trees—those that aren't as dead as everything else. I am in a world of winter being burned beneath a summer sun.

I stumble through a silent neighborhood. The houses' windows are shattered. Rusted cars sit atop flat tires in driveways. My shadow stretches long over the cracked, litter-strewn pavement. I skirt around a faded, tipped garbage can and walk faster, because deep down I can sense that this is a bad place to be when the sun sets.

My feet slow as I walk toward a telephone pole. The wires lie spaghetti-twisted on the ground below it, and tacked to the front is a piece of paper at odds with this trashed, forgotten neighborhood. The paper is daffodil yellow—not sun bleached or water warped or wind frayed. I take a closer look.

### REWARD

**1–4 marks = 1 oz honey**

**5–7 marks = 2 oz honey**

**8–9 marks = 3 oz honey**

**10 marks = 8 oz honey**

**To claim reward, marked one must be alive.**

**Payments made Sundays @ Southgate or Northgate.**

**No payment for dead body.**

**Sincerely, Governor Jacoby Soneschen**

I walk past the daffodil-yellow paper and round a corner in the deserted street, and a dog barks—the first sound that I haven't made myself since leaving my house. More dogs join in, and my heart speeds up, a weak, dehydrated fluttering against my ribs. Four houses ahead, a window reflects evening sunlight . . . and the window is whole. Several dogs stand in the front yard below that window, teeth bared, saliva strings dangling from their barking mouths, yanking against the chains that keep them from charging me. My steps slow and I glance at my right hand. The flesh-colored makeup still hides the tattoo. When I look back up, four men stand in the yard with the dogs, and each man holds a gun pointed at me.

slides against my throat. I swallow a spitless swallow, and my throat bobs against sharp roughness. I hardly dare breathe.

Above, the hollow smack of feet echoes. The child and I stay frozen in a tense embrace, my mouth still covered by a grimy hand, the sharpness warming against my neck.

The footsteps pass, but the child doesn't move a muscle. Yet the child's heart thunders against my back. We stand frozen together for a long time—until the child's heart slows—and then, without a sound, I'm released. I stumble forward, arms flailing in pitch-blackness. A hand grabs my elbow before I fall, and the child starts guiding me through the darkness, over the squelching floor. The child's feet don't squelch. Just mine.

I hold my hands forward like I'm sleepwalking, but the child obviously knows where to go. In spite of the blackness, we walk at a steady pace. The child counts under its breath, and when it gets to a certain number, it pauses and we turn . . . left or right, always different. Every once in a while starlight, slatted by the bars of a storm drain, filters down to where we creep. And every time we pass beneath a storm drain, the child clasps a grimy hand against my chapped lips.

We walk a long time, silent, until the child asks, "Why are you so clean?" The whisper, out of place in the dark tunnels, startles me.

"What?" I say.

"You're *clean*. Your clothes, your skin. And you smell like . . ." It sniffs. "Plants and iodine. Are you from the right side of the wall?"

"What wall?" I whisper.

"Shut up!" The hand is over my mouth again. We turn a corner, and blue starlight glows down from a storm drain. I walk on my toes, and the squelching becomes a muted wet squish. We pass the glow and walk for a few minutes in silence before the child speaks again.

"Are you from inside the wall?"

"What wall?" I ask a second time, my voice a whisper. Even if I wanted to speak louder, I don't know if I could. "I'm thirsty," I say, panting.

We stop walking and the child releases my arm.

"Look here, *girl*," the child growls. "I just saved your life. You're the one who should be giving *me* water. You owe me. And you're gonna pay me back, or I'm gonna leave you here. In the dark. Right now. To shrivel up and die like everything else." The child's voice is high. Feminine.

"Pay you back?" My hand goes to my throat, tracing the dip of my collarbone, searching for a necklace. But there's nothing there. I lower my empty hand. "How can I pay you back?" I ask. "I don't have any money or jewelry."

"*Money? Jewelry?* I can't eat those, or trade them. Do you have any food or honey?"

Honey. I remember honey. Gold. Sweet. Melted with butter on wheat toast at breakfast. Drizzled in tea. Made by bees. Bees are on the endangered species list. And now I can hear my sister's voice like she's standing beside me.

*"Since the bees are endangered, we have to plant these special flowers to help feed them." Lis dug a shallow hole in the dirt and dropped a seed inside*

for Jonah and me to see. “Bees love lavender—the color, the smell,” she explained. “And so do I. Here, you guys plant some.”

*She put three small pale-purple seeds into my hand and three into Jonah’s.*

*Using my fingers, I dug a shallow hole in the damp soil.*

“What will happen if the bees go extinct?” Jonah asked, burying his first seed.

“First of all, there would be no more honey. It would become the world’s most rare, most precious food—even more precious than gold,” Lis said. “But that’s just the beginning. Bees pollinate a huge percentage of the world’s crops. If bees die out, things like apples and peaches and vegetables will die. Lots of plants will die without the bees’ pollinating them. And if the plants start dying, then the things that eat plants will start to die, like cows and chickens, which means no more meat for us to eat. If we have no fruits or vegetables to eat, and no meat, our world will experience a major famine. People will start starving to death worldwide.”

*I looked at the tiny seeds in my hand and wondered how something so small could make a difference if the bees were already going extinct.*

“Don’t look so scared,” Lis said, patting the top of my head. “My biology teacher says that the government has their top scientists and biologists working on a solution.”

“Hello! Can you pay me back now or what?”

I shake the memory from my head. “No. I don’t have anything to give to you.”

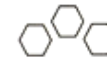
“Whatever. You can pay me back with a favor. And when you complete it, then I’ll give you all the water you can drink,” it says.

“No. I need water now.”

The child sighs and mutters under its breath. The sound of water swishes, and my dry throat clamps tight with desire. A narrow container is pushed against my hands. I grab it, open the lid, and chug it down, but before my thirst is slaked the water is gone, leaving sand in my teeth and the taste of copper on my tongue.

The empty bottle is yanked from my hand. “I just saved your life twice now, idiot. You owe me double.” Fingers find my elbow and, clutching it a little too hard, guide me forward again.

My feet squelch against the floor, and my mouth is deliciously damp. I sigh, content. “I’ll repay you double,” I say, willing to do anything for more water. Not a smart thing to do when you haven’t been told the price.



When we finally stop walking, fatigue drags at my body. A *scritch* disturbs the silence, and a match sparks to life. I squint against the tiny flame and look around. I stand at the end of a tunnel surrounded on three sides by concrete. Above, pipes slowly drip water into waiting, dented pots. And above them, darkness.

The child lights a candle and grabs my right hand, big, hungry eyes examining the back of it. “So much for paying me back double,” it grumbles, shoving my hand away.

The child, slight and bony, wears baggy clothes a grimy shade of gray, the same color as its sickly skin. Its dark hair is short everywhere but in the front, where long greasy bangs cover most of its face, except for a pointy nose sticking out. I lean toward the child, trying to peer beneath the thick hank of hair. It sounds



Sorry, Fotard.” Mischief gleams in his eyes, and I have the feeling he’s trying hard not to smile.

I roll my eyes, and his mouth flickers into a quick smile. Electricity hums and my cuffs unmeld, freeing my arms.

I tug Arrin’s pants from my legs and, while Bowen stares, pull the jeans on over a pair of plain white granny underwear that goes up to my belly button. I don’t remember ever owning granny underwear. As my fingers loop the button through the buttonhole, Bowen hands me a brown leather belt. I take it and stare at it.

“You got a problem with the belt?” he asks.

“When I was in the tunnels, I asked Arrin for something to eat. She gave me a leather belt,” I say with a shudder.

“Fecs don’t have much food. Lots of them starve to death before they have a chance to turn.”

“Turn? Turn how?” I ask as I loop the belt through my new pants and cinch it into place. The moment it’s latched, electricity hums and my forearms meld back together.

“I’ll tell you while we pollinate,” he says. He slings one strap of the black backpack over his shoulder. Next, he gets a rifle and slings it over the other shoulder, making an X across his chest with the straps. He eases out of the tent, and I follow.

We walk past the camp—everyone stares at me—and then go to the base of the wall. And I see the first living plant I have seen since I saw Jacqui’s mom painting corn. Many plants, actually, in an assortment of mismatched pots—terracotta, plastic, clay, a few even grow in dirt piled in the interior of old car tires, or in paint cans.

I step up to a plant and trail my fingers over the pulpy green leaves. Tears sting my eyes and my throat constricts. “It’s beautiful,” I whisper. “What kind of plant is it?”

“A tomato,” Bowen says, looking at me like I’m nuts. “Are you crying?”

I sniffle and shrug. “It reminds me of . . . the world I used to know.” The world I belong to, where I am thirteen and Jonah is normal and plants grow. And I have never seen a pair of electromagnetic cuffs, not to mention been forced to wear them.

“Here.” Bowen holds out a fine-bristled paintbrush, and I take it. “We need to pollinate them or they won’t produce any fruit.”

Like Jacqui’s mom painting the corn.

“What you do is stick the paintbrush into the little yellow flowers, like this.” Instead of watching his little demonstration, I stare at his profile, wondering if he misses the old world as much as I do, wondering if he misses his family. “And then move to another flower. Until we’ve done it to all of the flowers. Got it?” He looks up and I nod.

I stick the fine bristles of my paintbrush into the flower. Tiny, pale grains of dust cling to it—pollen. I move to the next flower and do the same, brushing the dust from the first flower into the second, while taking dust from the second to place in the third.

“You asked me what it means to turn,” Bowen says, his voice warm and deep and grown-up. I pause and watch him move his paintbrush from flower to flower, his strong, callused hands gentle and precise. “Your tattoo. Do you remember getting it?”

I look at my hand and can remember the needle darting in and out of my skin faster than I could see. I remember the sound,

a grinding buzz—like getting a tooth drilled. I remember crying. “A little,” I say.

“Well, that tattoo was given to the kids who were lucky enough to get the bee flu vaccine,” he says, looking at me. “Only problem was, they didn’t know about the vaccine’s long-term effect. So everyone who got it, even one dose, is infected. If they haven’t turned into a beast, like the Fec you came here with, they will before long. But the Fec was a Level Three. You are a Ten.”

I stare at the tattoo. “So what does Level Ten mean?”

“It means you were one of the special kids, one of the very first to get the vaccine. *Our nation’s hope for the future.*” He says this last part with bitter sarcasm. “Probably because of your father’s military connections and your musical talent, you qualified for the earliest possible dose. And because of that, you got ten months of the vaccine. The highest dose given.” Bowen points to my tattoo. “Each of those marks,” he says, motioning to the legs coming out of the circle, “represents a dose of vaccine. Ten months was the longest anyone took it. Because after ten months, every kid who’d been *lucky* enough to qualify for the shots started showing signs of insanity.”

My brother’s animal-crazed face flashes into my mind. “What do you mean, insanity?” I whisper.

He takes a small step away from me, hand on the remote, eyes wary. “You know the thing that attacked you last night?”

I nod. My body still hurts.

“That was a Level Eight. Totally insane.”

Anger flares in my chest. My brother can’t be insane.

“He didn’t look *insane* to me. He looked like a wild animal,” I snap.

“Yeah. Insane wild animals that massacred their own families and neighbors and friends. And then ate them if they couldn’t find anything else to eat!” Bowen glares at me, and his jaw muscles pulse.

I think of my brother trying to catch me as I slid through the bathroom window. Did he catch the rest of my family? My stomach starts to hurt, and I can hardly hold the paintbrush in my trembling fingers. “Dreyden—”

“Don’t call me that,” he growls, glancing over his shoulder to make sure no one’s around.

I look at my feet. “Sorry. Bowen. What happened to my family?” Did my brother eat them or kill them? That is what I’m really asking. I stare at the scuffed toes of his brown army boots. When he doesn’t answer, I look at him.

He studies me for a long minute, searching my face with his wary, uncertain eyes—eyes that know more than a seventeen-year-old’s should. “Lissa lives inside the wall. I saw her a couple of years ago. She looked good. Your mom . . .”

I hold my breath, my entire body tingling with hope. “Is she alive?”

He frowns and looks away. “I saw her once inside the wall. At least I think it was her. She was old, right? She had you and your brother when she was, what, forty?”

She couldn’t get pregnant after she had Lis. After trying to have a baby for seven years, Jonah and I were her in vitro miracles. “She was thirty-nine.”