



CHRISSIE'S
RUN

S.A. MAHAN

Chapter One

In the rare moments when the drugs seem to be wearing off, I question everything. What I thought were dreams become memories for me. Faces with names materialize, and I know that they are the faces of people who died. People who fought for me. People I loved.

In these moments, I rise from my cold prison bunk and seek out the dim sunlight that filters in through the heavy steel bars of my window. It is difficult to stand; my body is weak from the constant onslaught of drugs that the ugly giant injects me with on a daily basis. I let the faint warmth of light wash across my face; then I look down at my outstretched arms and gasp at the ugly blue-black needle tracks that march across my skin.

In my dreams, my arms are healthy, solid, and strong. My legs ripple with muscles, and I know that I have the ability to run all day long if I want to. But in my dreams, I don't run. I stand and fight my pursuers. I fight with an incredible skill that comes from...where?

In prison, one day fades into a week, which fades into a month. I have long since lost track of time. I am not even sure how old I might be. I only know that twice a day, the hideous giant will open the door, pin me to my bunk, inject me with drugs, and then wheel me down on a hospital gurney to the bright white room. There, the lady doctor with the big green eyes will shine the blinding strobe light in my eyes, and the loudspeaker in the ceiling will scream over and over again.

“What is your name?”

And then, when I don't utter a word, it will answer for me:

“My name is Christina Wright.”

“What do you want, Christina?”

“I want to be a productive, law-abiding citizen of the New Republic.”

Hour after hour, it will blare. There is no escaping from it. And all the while the lady doctor with the green eyes sits next to me and stares at me and takes notes on her electronic clipboard.

“What is your name!” the speaker screams.

“My name is Christina Wright,” it answers when I don't.

“What do you want, Christina?”

“I want to be a productive, law-abiding citizen of the New Republic.”

The loudspeaker, the strobe light, the drugs absorb me. And all the while, the lady doctor stares at me with those huge green eyes, like she is studying a giant bug. Even in my sleep, in my nightmare dreams, she stares at me.

Back in my prison cell, I hear noises. A phantom toddler seems to have free run of the hallways outside of my heavy steel door. Sometimes, I peek through the slot where the giant shoves trays of food to me and catch a quick glimpse of him as he rolls by on a four-wheeled scooter. I feel like I should know him, but I just don't know. Is he real or is he just part of my dreams?

How long have I been here? Weeks? Months? Years?

Sometimes the warden pays me a visit. He is a strong young man with sandy blond hair. He seems to be strikingly handsome, but I can't tell for sure because of the big mirrored sunglasses he always wears, even when he sits in the darkness of my prison cell.

He asks me a lot of questions, which I never remember because of the drugs, and sometimes I get really mad at him. But he seems to be trying to help me. I should trust him, but I don't because he also shows up in my dreams.

In my dreams, he is a monster and I hate him.

Today, I must have done something right because when the giant opened my cell door, he did not drug me. He handed me a bundle and told me to get dressed. I wait until he leaves and then I open the bundle to find that I am holding a beautiful red evening gown, polished red high heels, a hair clasp, and a necklace.

I shrug out of my one-piece orange prison jumpsuit and try the dress on. It fits perfectly. Then I shakily sit down. The residual effects of the drugs have weakened me and a strong spell of dizziness washes through my head. My body shakes uncontrollably for a few minutes. Outside my cell door, I hear the toddler scooting by and laughing. I stand up in spite of my dizziness and peek through the door slot, but he is gone. Was he real?

Then much later, I am sitting in that dress at a big banquet table. The table in front of me is filled with an enormous amount of food, and directly across the table, the warden sits and watches me.

“Christina,” he says and I snap fully alert. “I have forgotten my manners! We have started eating, and I haven’t even introduced everyone to you.”

He sweeps his hand around the table, and I glance at the faces staring back at me.

“This is my assistant warden, Mr. Sasaki.” He gestures to the man to his left. The Asian man smiles and bows politely.

“And farther down my side of the table, you have the lovely Doctor Mendenhall.”

The doctor lady with the huge green eyes smiles and nods at me.

“I credit her with curing you,” the warden continues. He continues down the table, naming different prison guards.

Then the warden stands and raises his wineglass.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he says, “a toast to Jason and Christina, our guests of honor. I received the confirmation just this afternoon. The president plans to grant them both a full pardon. He is personally flying down tomorrow to escort them home.”

The dinner guests rise and raise their glasses.

“Hear, hear.” They toast us. “To Jason and Christina!”

Jason is a handsome teenage boy who sits next to me. He seems vaguely familiar, and I know that I should know him.

The food and wine is beyond belief, and I have no qualms enjoying it. Then over a dessert of cake that melts in my mouth, the Asian man makes conversation for the first time. First, he looks at me, and maybe I imagine it. An image of a jackrabbit flashes across my mind, but it is only there for an instant before it fades. Then he turns to Jason.

“What is your name?” he asks Jason in Spanish, and I detect a hint of an additional exotic accent.

Jason looks up from his plate and smiles at the Asian man.

“My name is Jason Morson.”

“What do you want, Jason?”

“I want to be a productive, law-abiding citizen of the New Republic.”

“Very good, very good!” the warden cuts in, beaming at Jason. He ignores Mr. Sasaki and turns to me.

“What is your name, dear?” he asks me, and I can see my own gaunt face reflected in his mirrored sunglasses.

Take off those damn sunglasses and I'll tell you, Stingray! my mind shouts out.

Where did this thought come from? This reaction surprises and alarms me, but I muster up a smile and answer aloud.

“My name is Christina Wright.”

“What do you want, Christina?” he asks.

I want my baby! my mind screams out. I try to control my thoughts, but my mind continues to scream in my head. *And I want to kill you, you murderer! I really want to kill you! For Moses, for Samson, for Angel, for the villages you bombed, for all of the villagers of San Hidalgo you killed!*

I try to calm myself, and answer aloud, sweetly, “I want to be a productive, law-abiding citizen of the New Republic.”

The warden cocks his head to the side and grins at me with a strange, crooked grin.

He leans over to Mr. Sasaki.

“Tomorrow is going to be quite a day,” he says to him.

“Yes, indeed,” the Asian man quietly agrees. “Quite a day!”

As I finish my last bite of dessert, I become aware that Mr. Sasaki is watching me, studying me intently.

Chapter Two

Two years earlier.

His name is Daniel. Daniel in the lion's den. That is what the voice calls him, the voice that whispers to me in my mind late at night, when I am drifting away into sleep. I try to picture what a lion's den might look like. If it is as bad as what I picture, Daniel is definitely in it.

I know for sure he is a boy. That is the first thing they tell you at the Parlor. Right before they give you the other news.

They even tell that news to somebody like me, sixteen and unwed. My young age does not bother them; other things bother them. The fact that Daniel is not normal bothers them, even if it does not bother me.

"It is deformed, dear," the redheaded woman with green eyes tells me, as if she is giving me the time of day. "It is missing its right foot, part of its right hand, and it probably has a mental deficiency."

I hold in my emotions. I stare back at her with a blank face. I know all about the people at the Parlor. Later I cry, a week later, as I pack my things in a backpack. Tomorrow is abortion day for me. The law is the law. After the abortion, the nice people at the Parlor will sterilize me. They will also sterilize Jason, my boyfriend. You cannot be too careful, after all.

Jason is relieved. He told me so last night. I throw an extra shirt into my backpack, right on top of the dried fruit and wheat bars I took from the pantry. Maximus purrs, stretches on my pil-

low, and curls up again. He watches me through his half-closed, blue-gray Siamese eyes. He loves me more than Jason does.

Jason is going places. For him, sterilization is a small price to pay. He told me so last night before I screamed at him and stormed into my house. He is a genius at math and science, and the university headhunters are already out after him. I am not so lucky. I stink at math and science. I love to read though.

I toss a small book into my backpack. It is not a novel, or a fairy tale that would transport me to another, happier world. It is a mini atlas full of ancient names and ancient places, something more practical. I like the feel of its strange, antique paper pages when I thumb through it. It has a vastly different feel from the plastic viewers everybody uses. Real books like the atlas are hard to come by, terribly expensive and, for the most part, usually illegal; but I did not feel bad when I swiped it from the illegal stash of ancient books hidden in my father's desk. My father collects and studies them; but he is so high up in the government nobody cares.

I throw two one-liter bottles of water on top of everything else. Put the heaviest things on top, I know. I backpacked with Jason outside of the city once or twice. Back when I was still in love.

Maximus meows softly and looks up at me with inquiring eyes. He glances at the backpack.

"No, kitty," I tell him. "I have to do this alone."

It is long after midnight, way past city curfew, and I will have to sit and wait for a couple of hours until curfew is lifted for early morning commuters. The night police are too good. They would catch me for sure at this hour.

I sit still in the heavy quietness of early, early morning and think about my parents. I was hoping that my stepmother would at least betray some emotion when she found out I was pregnant, but she only gave me a puzzled look. No talk, no advice, not even a hint of disappointment. Father, coming in late from his govern-

ment job, sat in his easy chair and looked at nothing. It was that way for the next three months, until my stepmother insisted on taking me to the Parlor. She said I was beginning to show and we had to avoid legal action. This, at least, she was emotional about. She threw such a tantrum, I finally gave in.

So she was relieved last week when they told us the news. An uncomfortable problem solved for everybody involved. Except Daniel.

I look around my bedroom, still the bedroom of a little girl. I still have my stuffed animals, my *One Star* photos that automatically change when each new winner is announced. It all reminds me of a book I read on my viewer when I was really little, about a little worm in its cocoon. My bedroom is a cocoon.

There is not one thing in my bedroom, not even in the house, for that matter, that I can use to protect myself. My stepmother uses an autocooker, no need for knives. You have to try to get a government permit to purchase a real knife anyway. No sense in risking hurting yourself if you don't have to.

The hours slowly slide by, and at 3:30 a.m., I catch myself dozing off. I resort to slapping myself to stay awake. Maximus has snuggled close to me and is snoring lightly.

At 4:00 a.m., I pick him up, hug him and give him a kiss.

“Good luck, kitty,” I whisper to him. With me gone, there is no telling what my stepmother will do with him. But it is impossible to take him along.

I wipe the tears from my face as I work my arm through a strap of my backpack. *No crying, Chrissie*, I tell myself. *This is for Daniel*. I open my bedroom window as quietly as I can and slip out into the damp, early morning Frisco air.

Chapter Three

It is going to rain today. With fall approaching, it is going to be an uncomfortable, chilly rain. A light mist is already growing, dampening my hair and face. There is a small park at the far end of my street where the road dead ends into a larger road that leads through the guard gate out of the government neighborhood. I stick to the shadows of bushes as I make my way, house to house, toward the park. I scoot past Madison's house, my best friend growing up. She has known about my pregnancy, and I know I should at least leave her a note. But I can no longer trust her or anybody else. Two police cruisers float by as I cross the street and enter the park. They are so quiet and dark when they are roving, you cannot see them until they are next to you. It does not help that they cloak up, camouflage to their surroundings like chameleons. It is only their motion that catches your eye.

"You need some company, sweetheart?" a metallic voice asks from the nearest one. They are the special government police who guard my neighborhood, and I figure they are probably approaching the end of their shift. I shake my head no and keep walking. Curfew is over and I know I am safe for now; they will not arrest me even if it is still early.

"Maybe later," the other policeman chimes in.

"It's a little early, school's not for another four hours." The voice in the first cruiser grows serious. "What are you doing out this time of morning, kid?"

Trouble. I have to think quickly.

“I had a fight with my boyfriend!” I cry out, truthfully. There is obvious anger in my voice.

“Lucky guy,” the other policeman chuckles. “Okay, be careful, sweetheart. Checking. Just a moment, please. Christina Wright. Okay, you’re clear.”

I get a pass. Later on, I know I will not be so lucky. I walk away from the cruisers, into the park, and sit at a table that I have sat at playing since I was a little kid. The gravity of my situation starts to seep into my mind like the cold, damp mist that hangs in the air, and I know that I have to think clearly about what to do next. As hard as I try to avoid it, I can’t help but think about Jason. Okay, he is a royal jerk. But I did love him, and my feelings are all mixed up. *Get over him, Chrissie*, I tell myself. You’re never going to see him again. Still, I feel the loss.

I wiggle my toes in my hiking boots. The dampness has not penetrated, and my feet are warm and dry. This is good, I decide, the boots work. I open my backpack and dig for my light jacket. I pull it out and put it on over my sweatshirt. It is waterproof and, more importantly, it has a hood. Later, I know, I will need that hood for more than just the rain.

I have to get to a store as soon as one opens while my credits are still good. I’ve made out a list of things I’ll need on the inside back page of the atlas. I could have used my viewer for this, but I left it behind. It can be tracked. I’m hungry, and I am feeling slightly nauseous from the onset of morning sickness. I decide to save my food and wait until I can buy more at the store. I hold my upset stomach and think about Daniel.

At 5:30 a.m., dawn is breaking through the mist as a dull, gray glow on the horizon. It is time to move, late enough to walk anywhere without raising too much suspicion. I take one last sweep- ing look at my childhood park and a flurry of memories rushes through my mind. I’m sad again, and I sigh as I walk out to the street and leave the last sanctuary from my childhood behind.

An hour later, I'm on the sidewalk entering old downtown Frisco and the shopping district. Boards are everywhere, of course, bright with colorful moving images, advertising the latest of everything. They have other, darker purposes too. I ignore them and their relentless commercial onslaught as I head for the only store that I know opens at seven. It is mainly a convenience store with really very little to offer, but it will have to do.

I am amazed and dismayed at how long it actually takes to get anywhere on foot. What takes me an hour to walk can be covered in a few minutes in our car. I am in what I consider fair shape for my condition, but I realize that in the days ahead, I am going to have to toughen up. My feet are already sore.

The store scans me as its front glass door slides open.

"Good morning, Chrissie!" It greets in a friendly young male voice. It always uses a young female voice for my father. "Out early this morning?"

"I have the day off," I answer truthfully. "Display medicals, please."

The blank white walls of the store come to life and display all types of medical products in categories. I am obviously the first customer of the day; otherwise, the store would already be displaying in general customer default.

"Getting a little exercise?" the store asks conversationally as I browse. It has already noticed that I have no car outside.

"I like to walk," I lie. I find the analgesics.

"This, this, and this." I touch the balms, aspirin, and a tube of Blister-Rid. "Hardware, please."

"Eighty-five credits, dear."

The walls change. Not much hardware to be had here, but it will have to do. *Keep it small*, I tell myself. I seriously wish that I had saved more money.

"How many do I still have?" I ask.

"Two hundred and twenty one."

I select three small spools of nylon twine. It was useful on camping trips, and you can burn through this variety, unlike the stronger stuff. I have no way of cutting it yet. Then I pick a small roll of duct tape, a small poly screwdriver and a pair of poly pliers.

“Snacks, please.”

“Fifty-eight credits, Chrissie. You have one hundred sixty-three left. What a shopping spree!”

I try to act like I’m ignoring it.

“Snacks, please!” The walls change again.

I pick out a packet of beef jerky. Synthetic, of course, but it is tasty and guarantees its food value. Hard candy. More food bars, high protein. Now, to the hard stuff.

“Vitamins.” The wall switches to display hundreds of brands. I select a general-use multivitamin, three hundred tabs in a small bottle.

“Eighty credits left, dear. Looks like you’ll be walking home?”

I have to play this one just right.

“Any camping gear?” I ask nonchalantly.

A small section of one wall lights up. *Get it right, Chrissie*, I say to myself. I wish more than ever I had saved more money. I casually glance over the items, all but ignoring the two things I want more than anything else in the store.

“I’ll take that little flashlight,” I finally point out. The smallest one, but bright and guaranteed to stay lit for the rest of your life.

“Forty-five credits left, Chrissie.”

Good, no probing questions on that one. Here goes nothing.

“And how about, uh, okay...how about that Perma Lighter?”

“One minute,” the store answers. “One minute.”

I know it is going into its full background check mode, sweeping through my history, checking my family, my clearances, and possible violations.

“Chrissie, are you planning to go camping this late in the year?”

It is a human voice, an older man. I've been patched through to the central police station. Be cool, I tell myself and try to answer calmly.

"Yes, and it's a present for my boyfriend."

"Celebrating?"

I bite my lip. He means about the Parlor.

"Of course!" I blurt out. Wonderful!

"Let's see here," the voice is searching. "That's Jason Morson, right?"

"Yes."

"One minute, please..." They are checking Jason out. I try to look as if I'm slightly perturbed. After all, they know who my father is. If they only knew how I really feel. I try to suppress my emotions; they might be scanning my bios. An eternity passes.

"Okay, honey, you're clear," he finally answers, now in a slightly bored voice. The store voice pipes right back up.

"Two credits left, Chrissie," it says cheerfully. "Anything else?"

"No, thank you." I answer quietly. A hatch in the front wall slides open, and my bag slides out across the store countertop, sealed neatly, with plastic grips at the top. I grab it and head for the door.

"Thank you for your patronage, have a wonderful day and come back soon," the young male voice drones as I head outside. "Have a great time at the Parlor, Chrissie. Reminder, your appointment is at ten o'clock, sharp!"

"Get lost!" I mutter under my breath as I head down the sidewalk, turning back in the direction I came from. At 10:01 a.m., I will be officially declared a runner, an enemy of the state. I will be a fugitive hiding in the middle of the capital of the New Republic. I will have to get out of sight from this store before I can double back and go where I need to go.

Chapter Four

The rain is coming down harder now. The falling drops give me a small sense of security; rain helps reduce the effectiveness of the invisible cameras that are hidden everywhere. I know that I don't have much time before I am reported missing and they start to look for me. When I don't show up for my appointment at the Parlor, all hell is going to break loose.

I find a green metal bench that has been placed in a nook between two old red brick buildings partially sheltered from the rain. It is a good place to stop for a minute and rearrange my backpack. I am on the outskirts of central downtown, far uphill from the bay where a heavy fog is starting to roll in. It has taken me a full hour to circle back away from the store and reach this point. I know that I am running into the heart of danger instead of away from the city, but right now, I don't have much choice. There are things that I have to find out, and find out quickly.

I open my backpack and hunch over it to keep the raindrops out. There is plenty of room for my new items, so I pull my water bottles out and start packing the food and medicines in. I take the poly screwdriver and a handful of the hard candy and stuff them into my left jacket pocket. My pockets are deep. The Perma Lighter will fit nicely into my right pocket. I hold it up in front of me and dial it to its "full torch" setting with my thumb. I can't risk even testing it out here; that would bring a police cruiser for sure. I sigh and stuff it into my right pocket. I tear open a snack bar and quickly wolf it down. My stomach still feels queasy.

Then I close my backpack, stand up, and swing it back up on to my shoulders.

The old inner city is always dark. Even on the sunniest days, it is always blanketed in deep shadows cast from the tall ancient buildings, like the narrow canyons up in the mountains far to the east. I pass a few early pedestrians as I follow the sidewalk that leads toward the center of the city. That is where I will start my search.

Every schoolchild has heard the myths by the time they are ten years old. For me, it was even earlier. I remember hiding on the stairs when I was seven, listening to my parents talk in hushed whispers about my aunt. She was a runner. She ran with her unborn baby ten years before I was even born.

“Rachel is dead by now,” my father whispers. “There is no way she could have even made it halfway to Haven. Stupid, stupid girl!”

My mother is crying.

I have never been able to picture Rachel, my mother’s older sister. We have no pictures of her in the house. Runners are never mentioned, never remembered as having even lived. But my mother sometimes talked to me about her when we were alone, with father off at his government job. This was when I was still very young. This is when my mother still told me secrets about places like Haven. Where you could go to be safe and have your baby if you wanted to. Where there were no Parlors.

She told me these things, a lot of which I don’t even remember now, and she would always finish by doing something strange. She would look deep into my eyes, touch my forehead lightly, and make a sign by tracing her finger up and down then side to side. Then she would sigh and kiss me goodnight. This was all before...

There is another rumor fresh in every schoolkid’s mind about a fabled underground. According to this rumor, an even older city exists underneath the streets of Frisco.

The boys love this rumor. Every boy wants to find the underground and wants to go there to be an “outlaw.” The teachers insist that nothing exists beneath the streets of the city but rotten sewage tunnels and electrical lines, but for some reason I have a strong sense that the rumor might be true. And I have to find out if I am right. It’s my only hope for finding the information I need.

I pull up the left sleeve of my jacket as I walk and take one last, long look at the silver bracelet dangling on my wrist. It is the bracelet that Jason gave me on my sixteenth birthday. Even in the rain, it shines like new. *Don’t get sentimental*, I tell myself. *Don’t even go there, it’s just a bracelet.*

I enter an alleyway deep in the heart of the city where the sidewalks are filling up fast with people now. It is nine thirty in the morning, and I know that the types of people who hang out in the dark, back alleys are the types who can’t get regular jobs. Three scruffy-looking types are loitering in this particular alley, leaning against the rain-soaked brick walls of the tall, old buildings that disappear into the mist far above my head. Two of the men are leaning against one wall, well apart from each other, while the other one idles on the other side of the alley farther down. They don’t appear to be friends with each other.

I approach the closest one who is wearing tattered gray slacks and a dark hooded jacket. They all wear hoods that hide their faces in shadow, and this one is reading from an ancient plastic viewer that he holds just beneath his long, graying beard. He probably pulled it out of a waste bin. He doesn’t even look up at me.

I turn and scan the area behind me, and then I whisper to him.

“Underground?”

“Beat it, kid” he mutters and keeps reading.

Fine. I approach the second guy, and he flinches and quickly turns away from me. I walk down the alleyway to my third and last chance here. This guy is a real prize. He appears to be older than the other two and awfully thin, hands shoved deep into his

pockets. He turns slightly away from me as I approach, and while I am still at least ten feet away from him, I nearly faint from his bad smell.

“Underground?” I whisper when I am close enough to him.

“What’ve you got, missy?” he rasps in a half growl. He turns and leers at me with dark, shiny, beady eyes.

I slip my bracelet off my wrist and hold it up for him to see.

“I have this,” I say.

He yanks his right hand out of his pocket and opens it to reveal a jeweler’s lens. Unbelievable.

“Real McCoy,” he whispers as he examines my bracelet. “Rich little girl, eh?”

“No.”

He grabs my bracelet and quickly shoves it in his pocket. I realize that I am too trusting, that he could just walk away with my jewelry and then where would I be? But he doesn’t.

“Follow me,” he whispers in his raspy voice.

The rain is easing up as he leads me out of the alleyway, downhill on a city sidewalk for five blocks and makes a right turn into an even darker alleyway. As we walk, he constantly shifts his eyes back and forth, scanning the streets. He has scored big time, I realize, the bracelet probably represents a months’ worth of food to him and he doesn’t want to have to give it up.

Halfway down the alley, I spot where he is headed. Ahead of us stand a pair of heavy, rusted metal doors that lead into the side of a huge, crumbling old brick building. He quickly swings one door open and leads me down a dark set of stairs. I instantly regret packing my flashlight away. The stairs descend forever, and after a little while, my eyes start adjusting to what was utter darkness. We have to be a hundred feet below the surface of the alley when we reach a giant metal door on a landing at the bottom of the steps. My guide stops and bangs loudly with his fist on it. A giant hulk of a man opens the door from the inside. I slow a little and try to make out what he looks like, but it is too dark.

“Hounddog,” my guy grunts. Fitting.

“Pass!” the figure growls back. He swings open the heavy door.

I studied mythology in school, and I know that we have descended into Hades. The underground is a stark contrast of darkness and brightness to my adjusting eyes. Dark, because deep shadows stretch everywhere into pockets of sheer blackness. Bright, because dozens of little campfires burn along the tiny streets with dirty, skinny figures huddled around them. The whole place stinks of human waste and stale smoke. The streets are lined with ancient, black-stained, moldy buildings; some, I can see with candles burning from interior rooms, lighting windows from the inside. Overhead, I can hear the faint, dull roar of city traffic on the streets above us.

“Keep moving, missy!” my guide orders as he starts down a street. After hesitating, I follow him. But I am wary and terribly claustrophobic from the inescapable feeling that I am trapped in a giant, foul cave. The rumors were true, the underground exists. I doubt that the police would even bother coming down here. I sigh heavily. In my civics courses in school, I was taught that you either contribute to the common good of society or you die. Down here, stretching away from me into the darkness, I see a third option.

We head down an impossibly narrow street. What kind of vehicles could have used these passages to travel by, I wonder, as we turn two corners until we are entering the remnants of a neighborhood filled with collapsed houses and dirty old storefronts. Broken old bricks and any trash that cannot be burned litter the street. Filthy, wretched men and women look up at me from their fires like I am a newly arrived fresh piece of meat. I ease my hands into my pockets as I stare back at them.

“This way!” my charming tour guide growls and leads me into an uncomfortably dark back alley. I hesitate, staying close to the better-lit street we have just left. Two figures emerge from the darkness and join my guide, who has turned back toward me.

I take in a deep breath as they slowly creep up together. They are hideous.

“My, my, Smithy,” one of them hisses, “what have you brought me?”

“A present,” my guide answers and gestures grandly in my direction.

“Don’t try to run, honey,” his friend says. I can see him in the firelight now. He is a little younger than my guide but incredibly ugly with crusty dark eyes and the hollow look of a starving man.

His partner laughs. At least I think he is laughing. It is more like a cackling, like the black crows that have just found a fresh, smelly feast in the garbage bin at my neighborhood park.

“There ain’t nowhere to run to!” the first man assures me. They continue toward me, and I really start backing up.

“How much?” the first one asks.

“Oh, she’s not cheap,” Smithy chuckles. They pick up their pace, and Smithy reaches out to grab me with his grimy hand. I pull my right hand out of my jacket pocket, and an intense, white-blue flame lights up the alley.

The Perma Lighter’s flame extends out almost a foot from its tip, and I easily burn Smithy’s hand with it. He howls in pain and yanks his blistered hand back. I wave the lighter at the other two, who are quickly backing up.

“That’s right,” I growl. “I’m not cheap! Anybody else?”

The Perma Lighter is doing its job. They don’t want any part of me now. I glare at Smithy who is groaning and sucking on his hand.

“I gave you the bracelet,” I tell him, letting my anger radiate. “We had a deal!”

I turn and run out of the black alley, letting the Perma Lighter’s flame die down as I go. I can hear the voice of Smithy’s pal as I run, but it isn’t directed at me.

“Bracelet?” he asks Smithy. “What bracelet?”

I wipe the tears from my face as I run.

Chapter Five

Who am I trying to fool? Sure, I backed them off; but still, I am really just a scared little girl with a Perma Lighter. I want to be anywhere but in this horrid, stinking garbage dump, and I know that my time is running out. Somebody down here is going to get me.

But for now, there is nowhere else to go; and if Haven exists, somebody down here is probably enough of a criminal to know about it. I have to find that person. I have to know if Daniel and I even have a chance. I have to keep moving.

I check my watch and see that it is 10:30 a.m. By now, all the machines are in motion, and there is probably a citywide alert out about me. I can just imagine my picture flashing across the public boards with public enemy number one plastered beneath it. I wonder how my parents are handling the situation. Most likely, they are freaking out. Runners are always big newsmakers, and I imagine that it will be up to my father to handle the spotlight. My stepmother will be too mortified. There have not been very many reports of runners this year, only three or four that I can recall. The government is really cracking down on them and captured runners face abortion, sterilization, mandatory prison, and even death sometimes when they are caught and dragged back—if they are brought back alive. If they are brought back dead, you get to see their bodies displayed on the public boards for weeks. If a live one is executed, you get to see that too.

But some of them are not brought back at all. Do they make it to Haven? Is Haven real?

I walk along the main street, and it is a relief to be back in a relatively brighter place. There is no sign that Smithy and the boys are pursuing me; they probably don't carry any weapon that can trump a Perma Lighter. I have to stay on guard though. They might go and get something better, and then lay a trap for me. They don't strike me as the types who will just give up.

I really start to observe the people who huddle around the street fires, trying to ward off the cold and damp, smoky air. It smells like a pigsty down here, and I wonder how so many of them came to be here. Were they enemies of the government? They look like starving skeletons when they glare up at me or cringe away like feral, beaten animals. I know that I must look like an alien from another world to them. At least half of them look insane.

As if to confirm my suspicions, a little old lady wearing a dirty little girl's dress, her face smeared with old, crusty makeup, dances in front of me and sings to me in a high-pitched little girl voice, a song that is completely unintelligible. I quicken my pace to get around her, but she is persistent and stays right in front of me, invading my space. I begin to sense danger again; there is something sickly sinister about her, and I feel her herding me toward something. Where ever it is, I definitely don't want to go there. The Perma Lighter comes out again, but I don't ignite it. I just wave it in front of her grotesque face, and her shiny eyes finally light up with fear. As she turns and runs off screaming, the people huddled around the nearest fire howl with laughter.

What if this place is Haven? I wonder to myself. The very thought makes me sick to my stomach.

I keep walking. I feel like I am broadcasting information to these people like a walking public board. "Look, a rich little girl with a backpack full of food, carrying a very valuable Perma

Lighter.” It would probably fetch a pretty price down here, and I know for sure that I would.

I continue down the street until a well-lit, slightly run-down storefront catches my eye. Through yellowed white lace curtains in the windows, I can see shelves of books. Old, ancient books with hardcovers and real paper. This is what I have been searching for, hoping to find. Old books are illegal for a reason; they contain illegal information. Tentatively, I walk up the steps and knock on the door.

“A minute, please!” a high-pitched male voice calls out from somewhere inside the house. The front porch starts to shake, and I hear him rustling the front door open. He is a huge, fat man, completely different from anyone out on the street, wearing a slightly yellowed, daintily laced shirt and black trousers, probably leftovers from an old tuxedo. His graying brown hair is long and curly complete with greasy bangs that nearly hide his small, dark eyes. There is a glint in his eyes, even tucked away as they are in his flabby face.

“An angel!” He appraises me. “Come into my wonderful store, dear angel.”

He motions inside with a sweep of his hand, and I tentatively enter, keeping my eye on him as I do. I hold the straps of my backpack tightly with my hands. The place reeks of stale perfume, and I almost sneeze.

“Oh, don’t mind that!” he exclaims as he ushers me in, sensing my distress. “My perfume vanquishes the musty smell of old paper!”

He leads me between overstuffed bookshelves packed with volumes of wonderful old books. It is an amazing sight, to see such obvious wealth. But it is wealth with a price. On the city streets above, this man would spend the rest of his life in prison. If they let him live.

“The angel looks like she has enough money to buy one of my books!” The fat man happily announces to no one that I can see. “Does the angel have a name?”

“Chrissie,” I answer. I run my right hand along the spines of the books, feeling the textures of old leather and cloth. “My name is Chrissie.”

“What a wonderful name!” he exclaims as we enter an office-like area nestled behind the bookshelves, cluttered to high heaven with stacks of books and old papers. “I have always loved the name Chrissie! Please, call me Perryman. Merriwether Perryman at your service!”

He bows slightly and then motions to a crumbling leather chair that sits in front of a broad, wooden desk. At least I think it’s a desk. It is buried in old books. I recognize the lamp nestled in the middle of the desktop as a Tiffany-style lamp from pictures that I’ve seen on my reader. If it is authentic, it has to be priceless.

I carefully take my seat, leaving my backpack on, and Perryman throws himself into a giant leather chair behind his desk. With practiced frenzy, he shoves books and papers aside so that he can see me. I see that he has a mid-sized viewer sitting to one side on his desk.

“Now then, beautiful little Chrissie,” he says and smiles broadly at me, “relax, relax! Now tell Perryman what brings you to his fine bookstore?”

As he talks, his fingers dance across the screen of his viewer like a musician’s hand, with his eyes riveted on its display instead of on me. I take a deep breath.

“Maybe you have the answer here,” I say, unwilling to commit further.

As he continues to study his screen, a slight frown crosses his face.

“The answer, the answer, the answer,” he says. “Oh, little dear, you’ll have to tell Perryman more than that!”

I sigh and squirm out of my backpack. Perryman turns and watches me as I unzip the top, reach in, and pull out my father's atlas. Perryman gasps out loud as he sees it.

"Oh, that's a find, dear! A genuine atlas from the twenty-first century, it looks like. May I see it?"

"It's just an old atlas," I say, sensing how much he wants it. "It belongs to my father."

"A lucky man," Perryman gulps. "A very, very lucky man."

"He's a policeman," I lie. "He is just down the street, working undercover. He brought me down here to do my research."

"Research, yes, yes," Perryman says quickly. "For school, I bet, little girl, can I see it, please?"

He reaches out with his fat hand. I hesitate for a moment and then hand the atlas to him. He nearly yanks it away and then rapidly thumbs through it before returning to his viewer.

"Very nice," Perryman says, "very nice, indeed. How much, Chrissie? How much do you want for it?"

"I'll ask my dad," I promise him. "He does want to sell it, and it looks like you're the expert. But I need for you to show me something first."

"Oh yes, yes," Perryman answers. "Fine. I have plenty of customers up above who would pay through the nose for this. Tell your dad we could split the profits. Why, the president himself might want this!"

"Okay, Perryman," I answer. "I'll go out and ask him in a minute. But first, can you show me where Haven is located on it? That's what my report is about. I want to solve the mystery about Haven."

"You'd get an A, that's for certain," Perryman exclaims as he studies his viewer. I watch his eyes. They pause on the screen and he freezes, transfixed on what he sees. Whatever it is, his eyes betray him. I see the flash of fear cross his puffy face.

"Dear, dear," he says, and looks directly at me. "Haven is not a real place, Chrissie. But we can pretend that it is, if you want to. You can certainly embellish your report. Who would know?"

My heart drops at his words, but I freeze into my best poker face. Something else is going on here, I sense.

Perryman jumps up.

“Where are my manners, dear girl?” he exclaims. “I haven’t even offered you tea! A moment, please!”

He rumbles off like an elephant into the dark recesses at the back of his house, and I hear dishes clanking. Quietly, I move around his desk to see his viewer. The screen is black; he has blanked it out. If it is like my viewer, I can pull up a recall. I work the screen.

“The water is boiling, dear!” Perryman calls out. “Patience, patience!”

There it is! The screen wakes up to show me a full-blown picture of myself with an alert printed below it. Assigned “possible runner status” at 10:30 a.m., it says. Fifty thousand credits for her safe return, it also says. I grab my atlas.

“Coming, Chrissie,” Perryman calls out, and I can feel the wooden floor shake beneath my feet. Frantically, I yank my backpack out my chair and sprint through the rows of bookshelves.

“Where did you go?” I hear Perryman call out behind me. *No way can he catch me*, I reassure myself. He’s too fat. The whole house starts to shake.

“Chrissie, come back!” Perryman pleads. His voice is definitely fading behind as I reach the front door. *Please, I pray, don’t let him have autolocks on his door.* Sure enough, I hear the tell-tale snapping noise in the doorframe. I ball up my shoulders and slam into the door with all my might, hoping that the locks haven’t fully engaged yet. It hurts and I grit my teeth, but the door gives way, and I run across the front porch and back out on to the street. I look back to see Perryman leaning out of the broken doorway.

“Come back here, you girl!” he screams, his voice deep and ugly now. Then he turns to the people out on the street.

“She’s a runner, get her!” he screams.

A dozen of the skeletal figures spring into action, and I feel hands grabbing at me. They pull at my arms, and someone yanks

away my watch. I scream and run faster. They outnumber me, but they are weak. As I run, I pull out the Perma Lighter and light it up. The skeletons start to fall back.

“A thousand credits!” Perryman screams. “Get her!”

There are so many of them. The hands are hanging on tightly now, and I know that they can overpower me. I wheel around and burn them with the Perma Lighter, hearing them howl in pain. The Perma Lighter scares them, and they start to give up.

Three blocks later, I’m sure that I have left them behind. I have to get out of here. The street looks familiar to me, and I think that I might be able to find my way back to the big entry door. I stop to catch my breath. The people on this street stare at me and cringe away from my Perma Lighter. I extinguish it and shove it back into my jacket pocket.

Another street up and around the corner, I am sure, is where Smithy brought me in. I start walking slowly toward it, glaring at anybody who dares to look at me.

“Password!” the guard at the entry growls at me as I approach him. He is a huge dark man and looms at the door like an immovable mountain. Why can’t I get a break? I rack my brain. The password to get in was “Hounddog,” I remember that. I take a chance.

“Kittycat,” I whisper to him.

“Go back!” he growls, frowning at me.

I have to go back. For hours, I creep along the dark streets, keeping to the black shadows and hunting for any face that looks even half sane. *Good luck*, I finally tell myself. I can feel hundreds of eyes leering at me from the huddled groups around the street fires. In my mind, I picture myself in a deep cave, surrounded by hundreds of hungry, feral wolves.