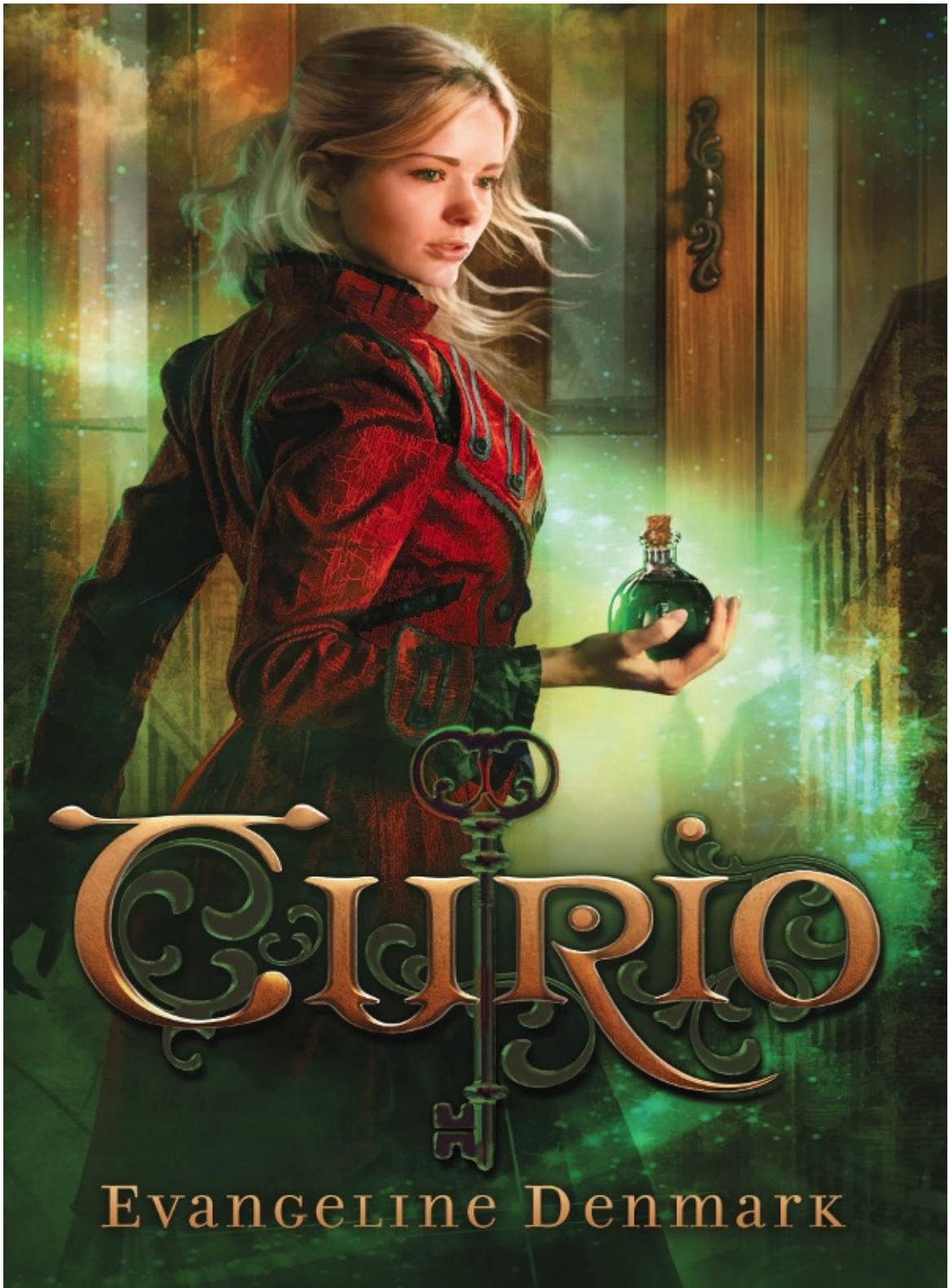




Currio

Evangeline Denmark



Curio

Also by Evangeline Denmark

Mark of Blood and Alchemy: The Prequel to Curio

Curio

EVANGELINE DENMARK



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Curio

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ePub Edition © January 2016: ISBN 978-0-310-72936-5

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Cover design and photography: Kirk DouPonce

Interior design: Denise Froehlich

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DEDICATION

For Kory. Thank you for joining my worlds.

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CHAPTER

1



The Chemist came just before closing. Granddad shot Grey a warning look as he hurried to the front of the store. Time to make herself unnoticeable. As if that were possible.

She returned to her work, swiping a cloth over the filmy glass of a curio cabinet shoved against the back wall. A layer of grime coated the inside, but Granddad never opened it for a thorough washing out, and neither did Grey. As she rubbed the surface, she squinted to make out the shapes within. Movement flickered inside the case. She bent closer. *It must've been a shadow.*

An odd quiet stretched through Haward's Mercantile. Heat shot through the fabric of Grey's blouse and her skin prickled. The newcomer had spotted her. Surely she didn't stand out so much this close to Four Points. All manner of people walked the streets of downtown Mercury City, and more new and exotic folks stepped off the train every morning.

"Your granddaughter, Olan?" The Chemist's voice wrapped around Grey, compelling her to face the man. Late afternoon shadows cloaked his features—all but the pale green flash of his teeth. The face beneath the top hat fixed on her.

"Grey, best to get on home." Granddad moved to stand between her and the black-garbed man.

Maybe the man simply had business with Granddad. After all, Chemist Council equipment in various stages of repair lined one entire wall of the store. Some of the devices ticked, chimed, or emitted occasional puffs of smoke, though she was most anxious to be rid of the instruments that glowed green. But the stranger near the door ignored the machinery and stepped closer to Granddad.

The air zinged with currents that set Grey's teeth on edge. *Chemia*. And something more than the green magic—animosity. She stiffened, her lower spine pressing into the waist-high cabinet behind her. Grey reached back and grasped the cold metal edge with both hands. Her feet wouldn't budge.

"Go on now." Granddad glanced over his burly shoulder, the crease between his eyebrows the only mark of concern on his unlined face. "Curfew's coming."

Grey pried her fingers from the curio case and ducked into the back room. Haimon hovered like a ghost a few steps from the cutout doorway. She stifled a squeak and shifted her gaze away from Haimon's scars. "Is he here for an order—the Chemist?"

Granddad's assistant shuffled to the doorway, moved the curtain, and peered into the front of the shop. "No, not Adante."

“But Granddad’s done nothing wrong. At least nothing *they* know of, right?” She searched the small room. The table and rug concealing the trapdoor were perfectly in place, though Haimon had no doubt crept up from the laboratory moments ago.

An instant too slowly, Haimon hid a wary expression. “All’s well. You’d best get on home before the last boom.”

Grey peeked through the door one more time. Granddad stood in his shirtsleeves and leather apron, a giant amongst the rows of shelves and tables loaded with knick-knacks, foodstuffs, appliances, and mining equipment. He didn’t need protection from a sixteen-year-old girl no matter how her instincts screamed *stay*.

“Grey.”

She started and twisted to face Haimon.

He tilted his steely head toward the Chemist. “Adante’s nothing your granddad and I can’t handle. Now go.”

A blast echoed down the hills and carried through the city, rattling windows and displacing dust. End of the day shift. She had just over twenty minutes to get home before the deputies swept the streets for curfew breakers.

Grey grabbed her coat from the hook on the wall and struggled into the tight garment. As if the crimson wool didn’t call enough attention to her statuesque frame, the fitted bodice emphasized the reason for the color requirement. Female. Untouchable. She fumbled the frog closures over her full chest and dashed out the back door.

Another blast sounded from the hills above Mercury City as Grey darted up the alley, slipped down a gravel path between storefronts, and emerged onto the Colfax Street walkway.

When her boots hit pavement she slowed her stride and checked her surroundings.

Two men five paces ahead on the sidewalk. A group of miners a ways behind. A draulie clanking up the middle of the street. The light from the hydraulic miner’s headlamp glinted off his metal suit and the water cannon attached to one arm. Horses shied away from the draulie’s heavy tread, and coach drivers and a lone motorist maneuvered out of his path.

Grey shivered as a bitter wind accompanied the next echo down from the mountains. With her arms clamped against her sides, she sped up and called in warning, “Excuse me.”

The men in front of her looked around then stepped away, cramming their hands into their coat pockets. Neither met her eyes or gave any indication that her height and frame were unusual. She sighed her relief and rushed by. Outsiders. From the slums of New York maybe. Or Chicago. Crowded cities where immigrants and tenement dwellers believed the propaganda about the gleaming town in the West. Mercury City, Colorado, where property, provisions, medicine, even education for your children could be had in exchange for honest labor in a Chemist mine. They stepped off the train wanting to work and willing to keep Mercury’s strange laws if it meant a chance for a different life. And that’s what they got, all right.

By the time Grey reached the corner of Colfax Street and Reinbar Avenue, her breath puffed in quick clouds. She stopped and drew in a mouthful of air that burned as it reached her lungs. White steam shrouded the Foothills Quarter Station a few

blocks to the north. A mass of dark figures emerged from the vapor, jostling each other in their hurry to get home. One by one they slowed until each miner became a distinct shape. And each one turned his head from side to side, checking alleys and side streets for deputies.

Grey turned south on Reinbar and walked quickly, the long hem of her coat flapping against her stocking-covered calves. Her knee pants didn't keep her legs warm, but at least they allowed for unencumbered movement. From the back she must look like a red column bobbing along the business district.

Another boom jarred her bones just as a miner passed on her right, giving her a wide berth. She snagged her pocket watch and pressed the catch. The fist-shaped cover sprang open, revealing ten minutes until curfew. She could cut five minutes off if she took the alley behind the ration dispensary, but that meant crossing the street ahead of a crowd of weary workers.

The train whistle made up her mind for her. The deputies would start their rounds only minutes after the last car pulled away from the station. She stepped off the curb, one eye on the returning miners and one on her destination across the street.

"Whoa." The miner nearest her flung his arm to the side as if he could hold back the procession. Heads jerked up and murmurs traveled through the crowd.

"I'm sorry." Grey met the marbled blue eyes set deep in a grime-covered face. Blue eyes? Nobody in Foothills Quarter had blue eyes, besides her family and her neighbor. "Whit?"

He frowned and flicked a glance the way she'd come. "Where's your granddad?"

A shout of "Oy! Let's move!" carried from the rear of the company.

"Held up at the shop," Grey muttered. "Chemist."

"So late?" Whit grimaced. With dirt lining the creases of his face, he looked much older than his eighteen years. He smoothed his expression. "Don't worry. Olan's more mountain than man. He'll be fine."

Grey nodded and darted for the other side of the street amidst the grumbling of the shift workers. As soon as she reached the sidewalk, the throng moved on, their measured steps growing faster as dusk and the threat of deputies stalked behind them.

The sound of boots followed her toward the brick-lined alley connecting Reinbar to the Pewter Street hill and the outskirts of town. She folded her arms, shrinking as much as her stature would allow.

"I'll see you home, Grey." Whit's voice rose above the clamor of curfew hour.

She turned and caught him standing in the gutter, scrubbing at his face with his sleeve. He crammed his tweed cap lower on his clump of coal-black hair. He'd only traded his school uniform for miner's clothes a few months ago, but already he'd changed. His limbs looked harder beneath his coat, and muscle thickened the slope of his neck where it met his shoulder. He straightened, and she could make out the arrow shape of his almost-filled-out chest and lean torso. An ache lodged in her chest and she shook her head. "I'll slow you down. You've seen your Stripe and passed it."

His frank gaze skimmed her. "And you're not far from it."

Her cheeks warmed. "I'm not yet seventeen, as you well know, Whitland Bryacre. If I get caught, they'll just turn me over to my parents for discipline. But you . . ."

Beneath the remaining dirt, the color drained from Whit's face. "Best we hurry, then."

He slipped by her into the alley papered with adverts and Chemist flyers. He turned to stroll backward, his smile gleaming in the swift dusk. "It's not against the law to take a shortcut."

Grey's gut twisted. She shouldn't let him do this. They weren't walking home from school, safe in their Council School uniforms. Whit was an adult now. And she was practically a walking sandwich board bearing the slogan Keep Away. But he'd offered to escort her and he wouldn't back out now. The best she could do was hurry and hope they both reached their homes before six o'clock.

"All right, but if you didn't live next door, I'd be refusing the offer." With a glance over her shoulder, Grey followed him into the alley. He shoved his hands into his pockets, and she picked her way over the uneven ground, staying a careful three paces behind.

The thrum of an engine began low and quiet, but it lodged in Grey's chest, sending ice through her veins. Whit melted into the shadows ahead, and she shrank into the space between the wall and a large rubbish bin.

The drone of the chug boat grew louder. *Deputies.*

She ducked and wedged farther into the corner, covering the beacon of her blonde hair with her arms. A protruding metal seam on the bin dug into her shoulder, but she didn't dare shift position.

Sharp wind lifted the hem of Grey's coat and bit through her stockings. The muscles in her thighs stiffened.

The quick scuffle of his shoes and a muffled wheeze gave away Whit's presence. He'd taken a spot on the other side of the rubbish bin. "Grey?" The worry in his voice coaxed a spark in her belly.

"I'm here," she answered. "You should go. I'll stay out of sight till they pass."

No answer came. Neither did the sound of his retreat. The hum of the chug boat vibrated through Grey's bones and sent spasms up her neck.

"Sounds like they're a block away," Whit whispered. "What can you see?"

She inched her head up. The slice of street behind them was clear. She eased her way toward the mouth of the alley, keeping her back to the brick wall behind her. A beam of light cut through the dusk, illuminating a group of deputies in long dusters with wisps of green vapor trailing up from their face masks. They stalked from Colfax onto Reinbar, their clatters drawn and crackling with energy. Behind the men a dark craft floated low on an emerald cloud of steam. Black pennants with the spiky Chemist Council emblem fluttered from a mast on the boxy wheelhouse, and more deputies clung to pipes and handrails sprouting from the deck, their attention fixed on something out of sight.

Relief mixed with a sick feeling. "They're tracking someone." She and Whit could get away, but some poor soul was bound for a punishment facility tonight.

"Can you see who they're after?"

Snarls and frenzied barking answered his question. The men in the street scrambled into a half circle that tightened with each cautious step. So they weren't

hunting a curfew breaker but a pack of animals. Probably coywolves, hungry and desperate this time of year.

Grey crept back to her hiding spot. On the other side of the bin, Whit drew in a ragged breath. She pictured his chest rising and falling. Her pulse quickened and she squelched the image. Shortcuts weren't against the law, but her thoughts about the boy next door might be. "Fraternization between unmarried males and females," the Council called it, or "indecent contact."

Whit's face appeared around the bin, his blue eyes searching for her in the shadows. When he spied her, his shoulders dropped and he released a pent-up sigh. She straightened from her crouch, and gestured toward the section of street visible from the alley. "I think they have the pack cornered."

Whit stole a foot closer to the building's edge. He kept his knees bent and his body poised to run. His jaw clenched, erasing all traces of his easy smile. The shadow of stubble on his chin was thicker than it had been two months ago. What would it be like to slide a finger along his cheek?

She buried her dangerous curiosity as frantic yelps filled the air, underscored by the deputies' shouts. The rumble of the chug boat engine deepened. Whit's eyes snapped to hers.

"A second patrol," he whispered.

She lurched toward him. "You've got to run for it. Get home."

He stared at her, motionless.

"Go. I'll be right behind you."

Whit scanned her face again then his mouth tightened and he nodded once. "I'll watch for you."

He darted down the alley, but Grey hovered between a squat and a spring, her muscles tight. If Whit was caught out after curfew, they'd stripe him for sure. She had to give him a head start. She imagined him already safe in his home, watching from the window as she dashed to her front door, coywolves and deputies on her heels. The image gave her courage—Whit's angular face, his black hair falling in his eyes, ropey arms crossed over his chest. And a wall between him and the Council's deputies.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. She scooted around the bin. Whit was nowhere in sight.

A shout and a growl sent cold iron through her limbs. Running footsteps, snarls, and a human cry of pain followed.

Grey took a step, but a silhouette in her periphery set her nerves skittering. One glance over her shoulder and the hope of escape evaporated. She whirled to face the threat creeping into the alley.

The coywolf wasn't huge. But his yellow eyes tracked her every move. Matted fur clung to the outline of his ribs, and saliva dripped from his mouth as he advanced. Starving and rabid.

Grey stumbled backward. Where was the patrol now? With Whit safely away, she'd welcome the sight of armed men.

More growls and yelps sounded from Reinbar Avenue along with the clipped tones of deputies fighting off the pack. The coywolf slunk toward Grey, separating her from

the mouth of the alley and her only hope of safety.

She took another step backward into the shadow of the buildings. Pain sliced the back of her calf. Her flailing hand met a jagged surface, and she crashed into a stack of pallets behind the ration dispensary.

She braced a bloody palm on the brick wall and pushed to her feet. Eyes locked on the nearing teeth, she scrambled around the pallets. Warm blood seeped down her leg and glued her stockings to her skin.

The animal lunged, teeth snapping an inch from her leg. He charged again, but something hit Grey from behind.

She struggled as her body was swept into jostling motion. Her limbs bounced to the rhythm of panicked steps. *Whit*. She clenched the fabric of his shirt. The muscles in his shoulders bunched beneath her arms as he ran, carrying her.

“What are you doing? Put me down.”

He spoke between gasps. “You’re bleeding.”

“It’s not bad. Put me down, *Whit*, they’ll take you.”

“That wolf . . . will take . . . you.”

Grey peered back into the alley. The coywolf gained on them. *Whit* faltered. She was equal to him in height and almost in weight thanks to her father’s genes. Lugging her, he’d never outrun the animal. Grey thrashed against his chest, her wounded hands sliding over his sweat-slicked neck.

“Put me down, *Whit*. Please.”

A heavy whirring sound preceded the blinding green light by a millisecond. Grey’s heart seized.

“Drop me,” she breathed in *Whit*’s ear.

He halted but kept his grip on her.

It was too late. The thrum of the patrol craft drowned out her pleas for *Whit* to let go. He blinked in the light, mouth agape in a frozen gasp. His chest heaved beneath her. Figures in flapping dusters cut through the spotlight, marching toward Grey and *Whit*. Behind them in the alley, another deputy stood over the limp form of the coywolf.

“Please, *Whit*.” Grey’s voice shook.

Finally her words registered. He lowered her legs to the ground as two deputies reached them. Both men were massive. Dusters stretched over Chemia-enhanced muscles, and the masks covering their noses and mouths glowed green from potion-laced filters. One aimed a two-pronged clatter at them, and the other had a slender wooden case strapped to his arm. He flipped the lid to reveal a gauntlet writer with a green-tinted glass platen.

The first deputy’s heavy-lidded eyes trained on *Whit*. “Name?”

Whit mumbled it and the second deputy typed it into the device.

“And you?”

“Grey Haward.” She suppressed a flinch with each click of the keys as her name entered the Council device.

The deputy with the gauntlet writer looked up from the glowing platen. “*Whitland Bryacre*, you are guilty of breaking curfew and indecent contact. The laws of Mercury

City forbid any physical contact between males and females without the permission of the Chemist Council.”

Grey stifled a gasp. Though they were no longer touching, she sensed each ragged breath Whit drew. Tremors shook his hands, but he didn't try to run.

Guilty of indecent contact? Whit was trying to save her, not reproduce with her. Any potion head could see that. Rage sucked at her rib cage, but the fury morphed into a foreign sensation. Strength spread through her limbs as though cement poured through her body. She couldn't stay silent. Both deputies paused as Grey stepped in front of Whit, shielding him.

“He didn't mean to break the law. He was trying to help me. You can't take him.”

The man with the clatter pointed the weapon at her. “Watch yerself, Miss Haward. Maybe you ain't reached your Stripe, but this'un here is guilty of indecent contact—”

Rock-hard resolve pushed all the way to Grey's fingertips and toes, locking her muscles in inflexible knots. “No, he isn't.”

“Hush, Grey.” Whit's voice broke through her defenses.

“Enough.” The first deputy returned to reading Whit's sentence. “Having attained the Age of the Stripe and having put our populace at risk, you are subject to the full punishment of the Council and will be detained until its completion.”

“No.” The word exploded from Grey's mouth. She held out her wrists, her actions springing from the unfamiliar strength. “Take me instead.”

The armed deputy shifted as she edged forward and stared into his masked face. She opened her mouth, but a strangled noise stopped the words on her tongue. Grey spun to see the deputy who'd killed the coywolf push Whit into the brick wall. In a matter of seconds, the agent bound her friend's hands and hauled him away from the wall. Whit sought her as the deputy prodded him toward the floating craft.

Grey's fingers curled in like claws. She lunged toward the deputy shoving Whit, but the man whipped his clatter from its holster. Arcs of green energy crackled between the two prongs of the weapon, and Grey froze as if the device's current already hardened her blood.

Her new bravery cracked when Whit reached the three-rung ladder thrown over the side of the craft. He looked back at her as the deputy disengaged the current binding the manacles around his wrists. Amid the green vapor curling from beneath the bow of the vessel, Whit's face hovered, a mask of pale stone and dark terror.

He wasn't her friend or the boy next door anymore. He wasn't the kid who'd spent Saturday afternoons at Granddad's shop playing cards and swapping stories with her. He was a name and an age on a Chemist Council record.

The deputy shoved Whit's shoulder, and Whit turned and put his hand on the rung. The last she saw of him was his back as he climbed over the railing and disappeared into the craft.

CHAPTER

2



Grey faced her front door with chin high, but her eyes strayed in the direction of the quiet bungalow next door—Whit’s house. Mrs. Bryacre must be in hysterics by now. No doubt she watched the chug boat floating in the street—a bulky black silhouette shrouded in steam—hoping for Whit to climb out. Knowing that he wouldn’t.

Another deputy—a dim, potion-headed chump—stood beside Grey. He rapped on the door then rubbed his bandaged hand. He deserved to get rabies from that coywolf bite. She clamped her lips to keep the thought inside. She was underage and safe, but her family didn’t have the same protections. What if they took her defiance out on her father? Or her mother. Dread anchored her to the porch as footsteps pounded inside the house.

Mother yanked the door open, and flickering gaslight spilled into the night. Dark eyes flitted from Grey’s face and blood-stained hands to the deputy beside her, and then to the black craft stationed at the end of the walkway.

“Grey—”

“What’s the charge?” Father’s voice boomed over the sound of the engine. A moment later he filled the doorway, harsh lines dragging at his face.

Grey’s throat stung, but she kept her shoulders rigid.

“Curfew violation.” The deputy recited the usual order for parents. “The Chemist Council holds parents responsible for the administering of discipline until a citizen achieves the Age of the Stripe. Do not show leniency to your child, for leniency will not be given to citizens upon reaching the Age of the Stripe. If the Council is made aware of leniency on the part of a parent, that parent shall be punished under the law.”

As he droned on, listing suggested discipline, Grey uncurled her fingers and loosed a shaky sigh.

This deputy, part of the second patrol, hadn’t witnessed her defiance. He wrapped up his speech with no mention of her challenge to the Chemist agents who took Whit. After Father vowed to punish Grey, the brute turned and stalked toward the waiting craft. When he’d boarded, the flying boat glided down the narrow street and around the corner, leaving green mist swirling in the frigid air.

Grey tugged out of her mother’s grasp and whirled back to the yard. “Whit. They took Whit. I have to go tell his mother.”

Halfway across the lawn, she stumbled in the dead grass and flung her hands out. Father’s thick arm circled her before she hit the ground. He pulled her to her feet and held her tight against his chest until the beat of his heart thudded against her shoulder

blade. The warmth of his embrace thawed her cold skin.

Grey thrashed until shudders overtook her. Father relaxed his hold, and she turned into his chest, inhaling the piney scent of healing ointment lingering on his clothes. He'd already seen one of the Chemists' victims today. Probably more than one.

His voice rumbled in her ear. "Come inside." He led her back to the house.

Mother waited on the porch. She snatched Grey's sleeve and pulled her closer, but the whole family froze as the banging of a door echoed through the silent neighborhood.

"Josephine." Mother almost moaned the name.

Mrs. Bryacre slipped into view and hurried to join Grey and her parents. The light from the Hawards' open door made pits of Josephine's dark eyes and painted bruises on her sunken cheeks.

The frantic throb in Grey's heart quieted. She stepped out of the protection of Father's arms and faced Mrs. Bryacre. "It was my fault. I should have been the one they took."



Josephine Bryacre looked like a child sitting in Granddad's wingback chair. Whit must have gotten his height—and his stubborn streak—from his father. How could the woman stand it? First her husband disappeared. Now her son.

Grey bowed her head and focused on the wet washcloth Mother had pressed to her injured hand. Her stomach heaved at the brownish-pink color of diluted blood. She held back a wince when the woven fabric of the sofa upholstery snagged her crusted stocking. She hadn't mentioned the gash on the back of her leg yet. What did it matter when the Chemists would carve Whit's back for touching her?

"This is a first offense," Father said. "Whit will be home tomorrow. With any luck the stripes will be few, and he'll heal in a week's time." His wooden chair creaked as he leaned toward Josephine. "You know we'll do everything we can."

At her father's words, Grey counted the potion bottles lined up on a low table near the entryway. Only four. One for her grandfather. One for her father. One for her mother. And one for Grey. She still had to stop herself from automatically counting to five.

She forced down the growing ache and let boldness fill the cavern it left. "Let me give Whit my ration."

Mother stiffened beside her and gripped the arm of the sofa. Father and Josephine jerked to scan her face.

Josephine broke the silence first. "It's true then. You're ration dealers?"

"Not dealers." Her father leaned back in his chair, his broad shoulders sloping.

How much of her family's secret would he reveal? Grey swallowed hard at the image of the Chemist bearing down on Granddad. Where was he now? Maybe it was too late for caution.

"We don't dilute the Chemist's potion with harmful chemicals," Father said. "And we don't accept payment."

“Stein.” Mother stretched out her hand. Her next words were clipped. “The less Jo knows, the better.”

Josephine’s eyes lingered on the four ration bottles waiting for the morning trip to the dispensary. “I’ll take the risk. For Whit. Tell me.”

Father exchanged a steady look with Mother then turned to Josephine. “An extra dose of potion will help Whit heal faster. I’ll reserve a portion of mine for him tomorrow.”

“He can have mine.” Grey scooted forward, her fingers clenched so tightly around the rag that drops of rust-tinted water landed on the faded area rug. “He can have it all. I told you what he did for me.”

“Leave this to me, Grey,” Father said.

“Let me help. Please! It’s time I joined you and Grandda—”

“Grey, we’ve discussed this.” Mother’s fingers dug into Grey’s arm. “You will obey the law—”

“Father doesn’t. Neither does Granddad.”

“But you’d die.” Josephine’s voice cut through. She leaned toward Grey, hunching her shoulders. The fabric of her crimson blouse gaped over her pronounced collarbone. “You can’t give him all of your ration, honey. You’d die.”

Realization flickered like a candle burning at the edge of Grey’s sight. The shadows under Josephine’s eyes. Her skeletal wrists. Whit wasn’t strong because he took after his father or because the mine built his muscles. How long had Josephine been pouring her own ration into Whit’s bottle and swallowing just enough to keep herself alive?

“We don’t know that Grey can go without it like you.” Mother’s words, meant for Father, drew everyone’s focus.

“Of course she’s like her father.” Granddad stood in the arch between the kitchen and living room, shrugging out of his coat. His yellow hair brushed the low ceiling.

The tight laces around Grey’s heart loosened a smidge. Granddad was here. Safe.

He winked at Grey before turning to his daughter-in-law. “Look at her, Maire.” His gruff tone reverberated from his barrel chest. “More than a head taller than you. As blonde as her Viking ancestors and built for war.”

Grey’s cheeks burned and she dropped her gaze. The arms resting in her lap were thick compared to Josephine’s. A coil of streaked blonde hair had escaped her chignon and clung to the strained fabric over her chest. Next to the brunette waifs in the Foothills Quarter, she looked like a doughy giant.

“What do you mean ‘like her father’?” Josephine’s eyes shifted between Grey and Father.

Granddad bellowed into the cramped space. “My son and I are not dependent on Chemist potion to stay alive. Our bodies are different. We still digest food normally.”

Josephine turned her attention from Granddad to Grey. “And you?”

“They’ve never let me go without. Underage or not, the penalty for giving away your ration is—” Her voice faded. Again her eyes found the corked bottles near the door. One. Two. Three. Four.

Only four now.

CHAPTER

3



Grey lay in bed and wished the tears would come again. This—this staring at the ceiling only to picture Whit's back, only to imagine the number of stripes they would cut into his skin—it was like stuffing her beating heart into a thimble.

The bandaged gash on her calf itched. She wanted to tear at the wound, make the stupid thing bleed again, make it really hurt. Or cut matching lines up her leg. One for each of Whit's stripes.

Foolish thought. Pain stalked as close as the nearest patrol. No sense borrowing it early.

The same rationale behind why she took her daily potion and kept her head down, just like everyone else. Everyone except Father and Granddad. But they wouldn't let her help. Father refused every time she offered to send some of her ration to the refugees in the mountains.

And Granddad only humored her schemes of donating her potion toward his efforts to reproduce the mixture. When he left for his lab hidden beneath the shop on Colfax, he never took the ration she offered.

Grey flopped to her side. The springs beneath the thin mattress creaked with every movement. She wrapped her arms and legs around a pillow, squeezing as hard as she could. It didn't help. Nothing blocked out Whit's face.

He hadn't touched her after she turned ten, as Mercury City law dictated. His smoky blue eyes had been wide on that birthday. His mouth a serious line as he set a bracelet made of buttons on the table and retreated before she reached for the gift. The withdrawal pricked her young heart. Why was the boy who raced her down the street and shared biscuits, marbles, and jokes suddenly afraid of her?

She and Whit hadn't understood the law at the time, but it wasn't long before her classes at the Council Girls' School covered Gregor Mendel's theory of inheritance and the science of disease according to Pasteur, Koch, and Lister. With the lesson came an explanation of the Chemist Council's regulations and dedication to monitoring the starvation trait passed down from the region's settlers. If Mercury City, Colorado, were to be an example of health, industry, and morality to other cities, then nothing could interfere with the Chemists' work.

And Grey had no intention to. Until one afternoon almost a year ago, when Whit had sauntered around the corner onto Reinbar and headed toward their usual meeting spot. The blue of his Council School uniform deepened his eyes, and a smile tugged his lips the moment he caught sight of her. Her stomach fluttered and heat trailed over

her skin. By the time he reached her, she could do nothing but stare at the ground, mentally measuring the gap between them. They walked home together as they always had, but this time Grey never moved an inch into the three feet of space separating them. Her body told her what no one had ever fully explained.

And now he'd touched her.

She closed her eyes and felt his arms behind her back and beneath her knees once again. Her skin tingled with the memory of being pressed against him. Despite the blood and the panic, something deep inside her responded to Whit's touch. She deserved to be in the Council jail tonight. Not him.

Determination quieted the heat building in her veins, replacing the fury with a numb shell. Tomorrow the deputies would return Whit to his home. And she would be waiting with her ration.



The first blast woke Grey and rattled the framed sketch on her wall. End of the night shift. Her pocket watch read quarter to six. Father would be preparing to leave for his daily trip to the ration dispensary.

She untangled herself from the sheets and scrambled to dress in the cold. First came thick stockings rolled up over her calves, then oxblood knee pants tugged on beneath her nightgown. With shirtwaist and chemise laid out and ready, she yanked the gown up over her head and let it drop to the floor. But before she could retrieve her undergarment, her hand froze and her breath fled. A strange mark bloomed on her belly, spreading out in all directions from her navel like a veiny blue flower. On instinct she cupped a hand over the symbol. She hadn't been struck. Maybe the cause was internal. Some kind of poison? But she wasn't sick or in pain. With a deep breath she steeled herself for a closer inspection. The thread-like design forked into branches and twigs like winter tree limbs. She traced one line with her fingertip. What could cause such a reaction?

The sound of muffled conversation from her parents' room sent her into a flurry. She wasn't going to stay behind today. After buttoning the shirtwaist over her chemise, she double checked that the layers of material concealed the mark. Satisfied, she laced on boots.

When she stepped outside her room, Granddad was closing the door to his chamber down the hall. He raised bushy eyebrows when he saw Grey.

"I'm going with you and Father to get the ration. I can't just wait here."

He strode toward her, not one floorboard creaking beneath his boots. How could such a massive man move so quietly? Nothing about Granddad made sense. He swore he'd forgotten his own age, but only crow's feet marked his smooth face. He wore his hair long, stood head and shoulders above everyone else, and told stories of trapping and hunting in the Rocky Mountains when Mercury was a tent city on the banks of the Rio de Sangre—one hundred and fifty years ago.

Now, as he towered over her, she caught a whiff of chemicals and dust instead of sage and wood smoke.