

Chapter One

Grandfather wasn't dead.

I wish I was wrong, because everything's been destroyed.

So many people have died, and I think some of it was my fault.

I'm sitting here, writing this all down, hoping to gather my thoughts and really think about what happened . . . what has changed.

I've changed the most. At least I think so. I don't know if anybody is actually reading this because I'm not writing to anybody in particular. This is just for me. I don't want to forget. But if somebody is reading, I think you'll agree that I have changed the most.

I want to write every single detail. Every single memory. Maybe that will help me figure out if I did, in fact, make things worse.

I'm going back to the very beginning and, unfortunately, that means returning to the orphanage.

Let me tell you, this place was loud. Kids screaming, kids crying, kids fighting . . . I get a headache just thinking about it. Good thing nobody paid much attention to us. That meant I could easily sneak out to escape the brats. Honestly, things weren't much better outside.

I passed beggars. And I mean a LOT. They were constantly asking for bitcoin so they could buy food. Of course I didn't have any to give. I'd feel so bad for them that I'd sometimes sneak some of the orphanage food for them. They appreciated it, but then they always expected me to have something every time they saw me. That would've been fine if I was able to help them. But there were days when I simply couldn't sneak any food out because the orphanage wouldn't have extras. All I could do was frown and shake my head. They may have understood, but that didn't mean they weren't disappointed.

Then there were the protests and rallies on the streets. They were everywhere and just as noisy as the orphanage. Most of these protestors usually complained about how we were being ignored while the rich had everything. A lot of times, they complained about food and supply shortages and how people were wasting resources. Sometimes, the protests were about religion and how we were in our last days. Those speakers really got into their speeches. All the rallies were pretty pointless if you ask me. I ignored them.

Except for one.

I saw the protestor in the distance, standing on a platform in the middle of the road. I didn't want to accidentally lead on the homeless by making eye contact, so I kept my eyes on the grass growing from the cracks in the faded blacktop. But the moment the protestor screamed the word 'Grandfather,' I stopped, jerking my head back up. People didn't mention that word anymore. Grandfather was dead. I was curious, so I just had to get a closer look. Painfully ignoring the beggars around me, I rushed to join the small crowd gathered around the platform where the protestor stood. There weren't many people. Maybe twenty.

“They’ve been hiding in secret, recruiting!” the tall, young man shouted. He didn’t look any different from us with his murky clothing, his ruffled, dirty hair, and gray bags sagging below the eyes. I glanced at the people in the crowd. They didn’t seem at all excited about the protest. I supposed they were listening because there wasn’t much else to do around there.

The protestor noticed this and tried his best to pump his audience up. “Grandfather is back. They’re infiltrating New Dawn, and when they take it – our capitol, they will have control over the entire United Regions. We have to work together to not let this happen! If th–”

“Conspiracy!” a woman from the crowd cried, pushing people aside to get closer to him. Everyone swung around to see who’d actually gotten worked up over the protestor’s speech. She had on a clean black skirt and a wrinkle-free red turtleneck sweater. Her heels were shiny black. She had a huge pearl necklace dangling over her top along with a pair of matching earrings. Her skin was flawless. And I swear, not even kidding, everybody’s eyes and mouth flew open. Including mine. Even the protestor had the same reaction. It wasn’t every day we saw a woman like her on our streets.

The protestor got himself together again. “Conspiracy?” he asked. “Do you –”

She wouldn’t even give him a chance. “Grandfather was caught and stopped a long time ago,” she said, her chin high in the air.

“Then how do you explain this?” he asked, shoving a newspaper at her. I joined the crowd to get an even better look.

“What is it?” a gray-bearded man asked.

My curiosity grew with his.

“What is it?” the protestor asked, amused. “Proof!”

“This proves nothing,” the woman said, crumbling the newspaper up and throwing it back at him. He flinched as the wad hit his cheek before falling to the platform. “I don’t know who writes your paper, but they’re foolish, just like the writers of every other underground paper.”

Ignoring her, the protestor picked up the newspaper page and unraveled it. “The president was just saying last month how he would never sign the tracking law. And now,” he held up the wrinkled article for everyone to see. The headline read: *WILL TRACKING LAW PASS?* “They’re making it to where we can’t travel across borders without paying a price! Grandfather is behind this.”

“Tracking law,” the rich-looking woman said with a slight chuckle. “So that’s what you people call it?”

“Well,” the protestor said. “That *is* what it is.”

There’s a reason for the *Bill of Border Control*,” the woman said. “It’ll help prevent crime.” She spread out her arms. “Simple.”

“Is that what you people inside think?” he asked, pointing a finger toward the direction of what was most likely her home. “It’s not fair that I have to pay just to go and see my family.” The rest of the crowd stayed quiet, eyes skipping between the two. “We don’t have spare bitcoin here. None of us can afford additional fees.”

“If we don’t have proper regulations, then there won’t be any regions left to go to,” the woman said, her arms falling to her side. “This regulation would help keep crime under control.”

“Excuses!” another man from the crowd yelled out. Everyone turned to look at him. “This law isn’t right.”

The protestor stood straight up, smiling. He had finally gotten somebody on his side.

To me, the protest had grown a bit boring, so I crossed the street, ignoring their arguing. I hadn’t heard about this tracking law, as the protestor called it. But it didn’t matter to me. I mean, the orphanage

was all I knew. Unfortunately, those boys were the only people I knew. I had no reason to go to another region.

I soon found a place free from people arguing and free from beggars. That didn't happen very often. I took advantage of the quiet. But my mind wouldn't relax. I wondered why the rich woman was away from home. Was she just bored or curious? Or was she a spy from another country, secretly working for some agency that . . . yeah, my imagination got ridiculous at times, but hey, nothing exciting was going to happen in reality. I had to make up my own stuff.

The weird thing was that just as I was thinking about the lack of excitement, something *did* happen. I guess it wasn't exactly exciting . . . just different from the usual routine. Actually, it was a bit creepy. The grunting came first, aimed directly into my ear, too. I looked straight ahead, gazing at the enormous gray wall barely peeking through a gap in the trees. The grunter grew louder and louder. I picked up the pace. The grunter did the same. Was this person thinking about robbing me when I had nothing? Up ahead was an alleyway. I contemplated using it as an escape route, but who knew what would be there waiting for me. I was about to just break off into a full sprint when the grunter walked up beside me and spoke in a raspy voice.

"He's right ya know."

I looked over to see a chubby man, probably a few inches taller than me. I knew for a fact that he hadn't washed his long, greasy black hair in weeks. It looked like he was wearing a mop on his head. His skin was covered in scars and there was a gap where a front tooth used to be. "That protestor," he said.

"Oh," I said, looking forward again. "I don't really care. It doesn't have anything to do with me."

I guess I said too much, because out of nowhere, he pushed me into the alley. "Hey!" I yelled when I slammed onto the concrete, scraping my elbow.

"Ya don't understand," he growled, moving closer.

Ignoring the blood running down my elbow, I sat up and scooted back until I was against a brick wall. There was nothing I could do. I quickly scanned the area, hoping somebody would see what was going on and help. Some glanced as they passed by the alley, but they hurried off. The only thing going through my mind was that this maniac was going to kill me right then and there.

"Please," I said.

"Ya don't understand how big a deal this is," he continued, pointing down at me. It affects everyone, including you. Hell, especially you."

"Okay, okay," I said, standing up slowly, keeping my back against the wall. "It's important, I get it. Just . . . just let me go."

The man snickered, shaking his head. "They told me you'd be this way. Careless."

Man, this guy was crazy. "Just let me go," I said again, this time taking a sterner approach.

It didn't affect him. "You're Carsyn," he said casually.

Whoa, whoa, whoa.

I tried to remember if I had ever seen him at the orphanage. I didn't. And trust me, if I had even so much as caught a glimpse of this ugly guy, I would've remembered. Maybe he'd been stalking me?

"I don't know who you are or how you know me," I started, "but let me go. Or I will get the police."

Spit flew from his mouth as he laughed.

Disgusting.

"How ya gonna do that?"

Yeah, he had a point. I couldn't get away.

“Ya don’t even know what’s going on. Nobody does.”

I searched once more for an escape. There was nothing. He would catch me within seconds if I tried to run. He had me blocked. I even looked for something I could use to hit him with, maybe knock out another tooth. There was nothing. Just my luck.

“Somethin’s about to go down,” he said. “Nobody is safe, especially you.”

“Why are you acting like you know me?” I finally yelled at him. “Somebody! Hel –”

Before I could finish calling for help, he pressed his dirty, cut-up hands against my mouth. I wanted to gag as dirt rubbed against my lips. “Grandfather controls much more than ya know,” he whispered with his nose nearly touching mine.

I held my breath to keep from smelling his. It didn’t work.

“They been planning their next big move for years. Tonight’s the night.”

I tried yelling at him again.

Stupid move.

Dirt squeezed between my lips and into my mouth as he forced more pressure against it.

“We don’t know what they’re planning, but it’s sure as hell gonna change everything. You’re in trouble, Carsyn.”

I didn’t care about what he was saying. I needed to get away. I did the only thing I could think of. Through difficulty, I forced my mouth open and bit his hand. I could taste the dirt and salty sweat. It was absolutely disgusting, but hey, it worked.

He grasped his hand and screamed in pain. I didn’t hesitate. I sprinted out of that alley, not even daring to look back.

“You’ll see tonight,” he screamed. “We’ll find ya!”

I didn’t stop until I reached the orphanage. It was the first time I was happy to see that place again. Breathing heavily, I burst through the doors only to get suspicious looks from the women who called themselves housemoms. Maybe I didn’t have a mom while growing up, but I knew the women at the orphanage didn’t act the way moms were supposed to. I usually just called them houseladies.

“What’s up with you?” one of them said in her usual hoarse voice. “Sneak out again?”

They wouldn’t care about my story. But on the off chance they did, they may have kept an eye on me, making sure I couldn’t sneak out again. I really doubt it. Still, it wasn’t worth the risk. I liked getting away.

Like always, I ignored the houseladies and passed them without making eye contact. I went straight to the room where all the guys slept ... 5th row, 3rd bed.

I ignored three boys ganging up on a smaller one in the back corner and lied down to catch my breath. It was cold, so I tried covering my entire body up with the thin blanket. Of course it didn’t work; I had outgrown that a few years back.

That night, I sat in the dining room, away from the other annoying bullies. For some reason, they thought they had it made. I always wondered if they actually knew the truth. They were close to being homeless. I was closer than most of them. Ten months and twenty three days. That’s how long it was until my 17th birthday. This is the day they forced orphans out in order to make room for others. I tried to not think about it much. I’d worry about that when the time came.

I stayed to myself, about to go over my math homework. I couldn’t believe they actually tried to teach us. First of all, the houseladies had no idea what they were talking about in any subject. Anytime we asked a question, they would spend several minutes looking up the answer in the old books we used, only

to respond with an 'I don't know' in the end. Second of all, well, we would never use any of it in our lives. Maybe they used it inside the wall. Not outside.

I did the homework anyways, just so I had something to do. It was hard with other boys screaming and the housewives yelling at them to shut up to no avail. But I managed to get through some of the problems. And the good thing was that the problems took my mind off the lunatic from earlier that day. Just as I thought I was going to be able to forget about him altogether, I heard the housewives in the other room. "Oh my God!" one of them cried. "I can't believe it," another said.

I usually didn't care what happened in the orphanage. But once again, as earlier in the day, curiosity got the best of me. I had to know what was going on because they actually sounded concerned. They were never concerned. I walked into the next room to see several people, including some of the boys, staring at an old radio. I moved to hear better.

"Just hours ago," the woman reporter was saying in a sobering voice. "The president was . . ." she paused. I could hear her swallow. "The president was shot and killed." There was a long pause of silence before the reporter continued. "As of now, all we know is that they are still searching for the killer and . . ."

Everything seemed to stop. The creepy lunatic from the alleyway was the first thing to cross my mind. He warned me that something big was going to happen that night. Was it just a coincident? Something told me it wasn't. He somehow knew my name. I had been telling myself that he had just been stalking me . . . that he was crazy. But there was more to it. There had to be. Or maybe *I* was crazy.

I knew one thing for sure. If it wasn't a coincident, then maybe he was right about the other stuff.

Grandfather.

Were we all in trouble? *Especially you*, the lunatic had said. There was something that I was sure of. He was probably going to find me again, just as he had said. And I wasn't looking forward to it.

The next day, everything seemed to move slower than usual. The news of the assassination had struck everyone, even though nobody around there had really cared too much for the president to begin with. I think people were just shocked. The killer hadn't been found, so everybody had the same question. Who did it and why?

I was constantly glancing around, just looking for that hideous face. Sure, I could've stayed in the orphanage so that I didn't risk seeing him again. But I didn't want to stay there. I preferred taking the risk. And a part of me wanted to see him again. I wanted to know what he was talking about. No, I *needed* to know.

I was shocked when I went hours without seeing him. Soon, I quit expecting him and thought about what he said. Grandfather. I kind of wanted to know more. I thought of the protestor.

Later in the day, I found myself standing in the back of a crowd surrounding a familiar platform. The crowd had tripled since the previous day. I looked to see if the same woman from the previous day was there. She wasn't.

"This is their doing!" the same protestor screamed. "The president has been taken away from us in order for Grandfather to rise."

"Do you think this was an inside job?" someone asked.

"Inside job?" the protestor asked, snickering. "Probably. Who do you think will take the spot as president?" He asked. Nobody answered, so he asked again, louder.

"Ferr Cornelius," an older woman yelled out.

"Exactly!" the protestor screamed. "Vice President Cornelius will assume the powerful position as president." He glanced around at different people in the crowd. More people joined. "He knew he'd be

the one to take the job if something ever happened to the president. He is involved with Grandfather! He's involved in the assassination so that he can be in control." Whispering rippled through the crowd. "So that Grandfather can be in control! He may even be the leader, and I –"

"You are under arrest!" a deep voice shouted from behind. I spun around to see six armed officers in their usual black uniforms. "Move out of the way," the same officer growled as he pushed his way through the crowd. The other officers followed him.

"And on what charges?" the protestor asked. "For spreading my opinion?"

"For treason," the officer calmly said once he reached the platform. Everybody stood in silence while the officers kept their weapons pointed at the protestor.

"Treason?!" he shouted.

"You have spoken against our vice president, a friend of the president's!"

"So now Grandfather is arresting those who speak against them?"

"We can make this as easy as possible," the officer said through his teeth. "Get off the platform, and come with us."

The protestor didn't budge. "This is the work of Grandfather!" he screamed. "This is the work of Cornelius."

"Quiet!" the officer ordered.

"And you're probably with them too! Why else would you be arresting me?"

"Arrest him," the officer in authority said to two others. They stepped up to the platform. I was actually surprised that the protestor didn't resist. But he did keep protesting. I didn't know anything about what the protestor was saying, but he believed strongly in it.

"They're using the tracking law to keep us where we can be controlled!" He was led off of the platform. "There's more to come, everybody. There's more coming!"

"Go back to your homes," the officer ordered the crowd. "This nonsense is over." The crowd didn't hesitate due to fear. They didn't even whisper to each other or look the officers in the eye. The protestor was just about to scream something else out when one of the officers banged him in the head with his gun, knocking him out.

"Still think I'm crazy?" a familiar voice asked from behind me. I didn't need to turn around. I knew exactly who it was.

"Who are you?" I asked firmly, watching the people scatter from the platform.

He moved beside me. "Just come with me."

"Sure, whatever you say. Since you don't look creepy at all, I'll go wherever you want me to go." He definitely sensed the sarcasm, and he wasn't amused.

"Why should I go with you?" I asked. "I have no idea who you are. And no offense, but look at you."

He snickered. "Like I said. You're in danger."

"And why should I believe you?" Man, I don't think I had ever been so curious.

He grabbed my shoulder hard and jerked me around to where I was facing him. "I knew your name, and I knew Grandfather was making a huge move last night. You know about the assassination. You saw the police take away that protestor. Do you really want to question me right now?"

I looked him in the eyes. His breath still smelled bad.

"Well," I started, but was unable to finish.

"Do you think it's worth the risk?" he asked.

I honestly didn't know what to say or do. He had been right so far, and he somehow knew my name.

“Why am I in more danger than anybody else?” I asked. “Nobody knows me. I know nobody. I have no family or anything . . .”

“Come with me, and you will find out.” His eyes narrowed while he waited for an answer. He looked as if he would kill me if I were to decline.

“Tell me your name first.”

The man hit his forehead with a hand, shaking his head. “Edgar. Ya happy now?”

Perhaps it was curiosity again. I really wanted to know how this guy knew my name. Perhaps it was fear because, like I said, he looked as if he would kill me if I didn’t do as he said. Or perhaps it was a reason to get away from the orphanage: an adventure. Either way, I ended up going with him, which was by far the dumbest risk I had ever taken. I mean, I didn’t know the man. He could’ve been a killer, luring me far away from the people. I’d find out soon enough.