

PROLOGUE

The white granite tower rose above her head hundreds of feet. Rebecca fought back the familiar dizziness and queasy sensation that overtook her any time she confronted high places. It didn't matter that she was on the bottom, looking up, and not on top, looking down. It was simply the idea of heights. The knowledge of the danger was enough to send her heart racing. Jonathan would not be afraid. He was never afraid of anything. He loved high places; he would head off at every opportunity to go climbing. If he were here, he would gently chide her, and then encourage her to overcome that voice telling her she couldn't. Jonathan would tell her she could. He would have her back. Literally. How many times did he try to

talk her into going climbing with him? How many times did he try to convince her that he'd be right there with her, hand on her back if necessary, climbing a parallel route on the training wall. But she couldn't do it. She could face just about anything. But not that. If only he was here. If only she had taken him up on his offer. Now it was too late.

Shaking herself to shrug off those thoughts, she steeled herself against what she needed to do. It was up to her now. Jonathan was not here. She could hear his voice inside her head telling her she did not need him to do this. She was capable on her own. But he would be there, even if she couldn't see him, making sure she was alright. Just in case. Rebecca understood her strengths. Most things she had faced in life didn't really scare her that much. This fear of heights, however, had been with her for as long as she could remember. It had prevented her from venturing out with her friends when they all started learning how to climb, first on the nearby training wall, and then in the mountains at the edge of Quadrant 1. It kept her solidly on the ground or on the back of a horse. She was good there. Put a hiking trail in front of her, and she could go all day. As long as she stayed in the forest or far from any edges. She and Cedar could fly, without ever leaving the ground. There was nothing more freeing to Rebecca than to be sitting astride Cedar, hugging close to her neck, as Cedar let loose and raced across an open meadow. Rebecca wasn't afraid of much. As

long as it did not involve heights. Even so, she had always counted on Jonathan. She had always taken for granted that he would look after her, even when she didn't need him to. But, now, he wasn't here, and it was up to her to get to the bottom of what was happening within her city, Montrose.

Tears had somehow slipped down her cheeks without her knowledge. She swiped the back of her hand across her face, gave a little laugh, and reached for that first rock hold above her head. She pulled herself up, her feet, one at a time, leaving the safety of the solid earth below.

It was hard to believe just a few months ago life had been normal. Less than a year ago, Rebecca was preparing to leave middle school behind, and Jonathan was getting ready to enter his final year of high school. They were three years apart and he was her rock. Her sometimes unwelcome protector. He always had been. From the time she was born, her older brother had looked after her, taking it upon himself to watch over her as she grew up. They were to have one year in high school together before he left for university. He had already been spending his spare time researching distant schools in faraway places. Even some as far away as Region 6. Rebecca did not understand why he couldn't stick around in Region 3.

Jonathan had big goals. He wanted to be a member of Council, to go higher up in government than their parents, even though that was a lofty goal, since future options were dictated by birth and what your parents' work assignments were. Only a few ever succeeded in going above their allocated station in the young, but rigid, hierarchy the government established twenty years ago. She was already dreading the day he would make his choice. He told her she was crazy. He told her he would be talking and messaging her so much, she would be telling him to leave her alone. He told her that wherever he landed, she would have a new place to come visit to feed that wanderlust spirit of hers because, with him there, she would be allowed to visit.

That day was never to arrive. In the months that followed her graduation from middle school, and in the midst of her family finalizing their summer camping trip on the fringes of Region 3 where her family lived, a strange illness started striking down people in their community. When they left for their trip in July, they had heard of a few incidents of a deadly virus taking the lives of people who lived among them. When they left for their trip, it had only hit a few people, and they did not know any of those stricken. When they returned, they found a different situation altogether. More and more people were getting hit. And now they knew some of these victims. They were friends of their parents. Grandparents of

kids they went to school with. And even some of their own classmates. The symptoms came on rapidly, and there seemed little chance of survival once it struck.

It always started as something ordinary. A headache or a slight fever. These signs were easy to ignore. Easy to chalk up to a bad day. Within 24 hours, the illness blew up into the unbearable. The headache intensified to something worse than a migraine. The ringing in the ears was sharp and loud and inescapable. The body's heat would climb, the thermometer crawling upwards at a steady pace. And then the vomiting would start. Nothing would stay down. The worst was when stomach contents had been emptied, and yet the victim could not stop the contractions and lurching in his stomach. The dry heaves that brought no relief. It was then that most begged for their lives to end. But the illness would last three more days in the weakest and up to a week in the previously healthy before they were, by this time, mercifully released from the illness. So far, none had survived.

Her brother had been one of the previously healthy ones. One of the ones for whom the illness had lasted a full week. He had fought it, as some did. He had not begged for his life to end. Sometimes, after the delirium set in on day three, he would have moments of clarity. Moments when he would come back to a fully conscious state. It was then that he would tell Rebecca that she needed to find out what was going on.

She needed to find out the truth so that people would stop getting sick. Stop dying. He did not believe it was a virus as was the message being conveyed on the constant stream of news updates inundating the city. The government talking heads that came to the mic to speak all said the same thing. They all stuck to the message that this was a virus, in spite of the fact that this illness, from what they were told, was only striking her city. In spite of the fact that they could not name this virus. The citizens of Montrose had no way of knowing how far the virus really had spread.

Council had ultimate control over what was delivered on the “news.” Each region had its own set of news outlets, with journalists who were restricted, generally, to their own city units or regions, depending on their level in their news organization. There were a select few who were designated as national journalists who were assigned to cover national level events when Council deemed it relevant. Only then would they assign the national journalists to cover a story outside of their region. Travel by ordinary citizens was also already limited. Once the virus hit, the restrictions became even tighter, with only those at the highest ranks in the government allowed to leave Region 3 under any circumstance, and leaving your residential quadrant required special permission. The city’s occupants were told that it was a safety precaution. A quarantine imposed until they “got to the bottom of this.”

The scientists were still, apparently, scratching their heads over the new illness, still trying to figure out its cause and identity, as officials continued to claim they would stop this supposed virus from spreading further. But they had not stopped it. They did not seem to be doing anything besides reassuring the city that they were doing everything in their power. No one mentioned what exactly they were doing. When asked in press conferences about vaccines or anti-virals, Talking Head, in his most reassuring voice, would simply say that the Health and Medicines Division was doing everything it could. That didn't exactly answer the question. But Talking Head would give a quick nod and move on to the next question. Rebecca watched these news casts in disbelief. She got it that the man up there was sent to the mic because he looked official and could think on his feet quickly when questions were thrown at him, when he really had no idea what was going on any more than anyone else. She expected this from the Council at any other time, but this was a crisis, and Rebecca could not understand why no one had any answers. Didn't the scientists work on this stuff all the time?

The city's citizens had grown quickly wary as well, and then moved on to outright panic. When the sickness started, those close to the sick, dying, and dead wanted answers. They were scared and felt hopeless in the face of an illness they could do nothing about. And they feared they were next, though the

virus did not seem to be contagious by any of the normal means. Everyone else was interested. Curious, even, since it hadn't touched their lives yet. They had seen enough to think that the media was likely blowing it out of proportion, just as they did everything. This was something that had never changed. Doubtful it ever would. It served the media. It served Council. And it kept people feeling they had knowledge and even control. Of course, they did not. They didn't have either one. Not really.

After the first couple of weeks, though, as more people were lost and ever more were falling sick, and still no concern from Council, more people turned from an idle curiosity to an increasing anxiety. The panic set in around the end of the first month. Council could no longer stay silent and ignore the growing signs of impatience and desperation. Even they knew when they had to step up to tamp down the restlessness or anger or fear of the people. They did not want an out of control population. They worked too hard at their facade of a perfect society to ignore the signs of a mood that threatened to shatter the image should it grow too strong. Sometimes, individual people even disappeared if they said too much, asked too many questions, tried to rally a call of discontent. You learned to keep your head down and play the game. You learned to keep your thoughts to yourself. Rebecca knew this and had always played along. But this was different. They couldn't make a whole city

disappear. So, they had to say something to get things back to normal. And they said it many times every, single day. It was not even worth the time or the effort to turn on the TV anymore.

Anyone alive more than twenty years ago, before The Reckoning, if asked, would say that the world seemed much the same today on the surface, but it didn't take much digging at all to find out how different life in Anecor really was. Kids still went to school every day. People still went shopping and to the movies—though the number of movies shown were few and far between, as scripts had to be Council approved. Everyone watched TV or stared at their devices, all the time, it seemed. Recreation time still appeared, superficially, much the same, with people in her area of the country spending their time rock climbing, camping, hiking, and riding bikes and horses, as did her family. There were still phones and computers. Natural parks and cities. Farms and malls.

People were not really free, though, no matter that Council's official message stated otherwise. The controls on daily life were strict. The controls on a person's life choices even stricter.

CHAPTER 1

Rebecca knew something was wrong when Jonathan was not at breakfast that morning. She clicked on the monitoring screen in the kitchen, which was rarely used, to find that the display indicated that her brother was still in his bedroom. The home's energy output screen showed that his lights were off. Highly unusual. Jonathan was always the first up in the mornings.

Their parents marveled at his energy. Most teenagers wanted to sleep all day. And stay up all night. With Jonathan, it didn't seem to matter what time he went to bed, he was always up in the morning by 6:00 a.m. ready to greet the day. In other words, the opposite of Rebecca. Mornings were not for her. She could easily stay up all night—reading, watching

videos, doing her homework, messaging friends—but getting up in the mornings was a painful process. Every Monday morning, she longed for the weekend, when she would not have to wake up to her alarm to get ready for school.

Half the time, Jonathan would have to come up and rouse her out of bed because she'd hit her watch's snooze button too many times and was still sound asleep. He usually woke her in the most obnoxious ways. Running into her room and pouncing on her bed, bouncing up and down until she had no choice but to get up, for instance. Or tiptoeing in and taking something soft and brushing it lightly under her nose to tickle her relentlessly, until she gradually went from a dozed and dazed instinctual swatting away at the intrusive object and scratching her nose to a wakened and very alert batting away of Jonathan's hand and grumpily admonishing him to get out of her room NOW. He wouldn't comply, of course, until he saw that she was physically out of bed.

This morning, however, she'd roused herself out of bed. She couldn't believe Jonathan hadn't waken her as late as it was and that he wasn't down for breakfast yet either. She opened the fridge and pulled out a container of leftovers, not caring much what it was, and warmed it up. While she waited, she propped herself against the counter, needing its support to stay upright, opened her mouth in a loud, groaning yawn, and stared out the window above the kitchen sink. It looked like a

perfect fall day. The skies were blue, the birds were doing their dance around the trees and ground in their own hunt for breakfast. They were lively. Awake. And Rebecca just longed to crawl back into her cozy, warm bed.

The timer dinged, startling her back to the task at hand. Rebecca retrieved her meal and a fork and headed to the table to eat her unconventional breakfast. She didn't really care about breakfast, and on weekends, when she could sleep in, she wouldn't even bother eating until lunch. This morning, she ate her food quickly without tasting it, downed a glass of tomato juice, and wondered again why Jonathan wasn't down yet. It was starting to worry her.

There was still no Jonathan after she'd finished her morning chores and was heading up to get dressed for the day. But first, she knew she had to check on her brother. Climbing the stairs, her stomach was already fluttering with the beginning twinges of anxiety. It was not at all like Jonathan to sleep in. Not like him to get sick at all. She couldn't even remember the last time he was sick enough to miss school. He hated missing school. There would be no reason for him to not already be standing by the door waiting for her to finish getting ready, so they could ride the transit to school together.

In normal times, she would be a little bit worried about him if he wasn't up before her, but these were not normal times, and her worry was understandably intensified. As she

reached the top of the stairs and put her hand on the door sitting slightly ajar, she knew that what she would see was not going to be good news. She knew before she pushed the door the rest of the way open what she would find, even though she hoped against hope that she was wrong, that Jonathan was too strong to catch this virus in the first place.

Her inclination, under normal circumstances, if she were ever given the chance to turn the tables, would be to do just that, and rouse Jonathan from sleep in the most obnoxious of ways. Not that she would ever be given that chance. This morning, however, she opened the door into Jonathan's darkened room as quietly and slowly as she could. Not wanting to disturb him if he were sleeping, and not quite wanting to come face-to-face with the virus in her home, taking up residence in her brother.

Jonathan was not asleep. But it was obvious he was not well. He was sitting on the edge of his bed, feet planted on the floor, his shaggy, dark brown hair dangling over the tops of his hands, cradling his head, elbows braced against his knees. He did not lift his head when she first came in, though she knew he knew she was there.

"Jonathan," she whispered in a barely audible and shaky voice, "are you okay?"

He responded after a brief pause, also in a barely audible voice, "I'm fine, Becs. I just need a minute to wake up."

“I don’t believe you. Please look at me, Jonathan. Let me see your face.”

He surprisingly complied, raising his head and looking her in the eyes. She could see it, then, for certain. The thing that she feared most was written in the pain etched around his eyes and furrowed in the lines on his forehead. It showed in the set of his jaw and the look he gave her. The look he could not shield from his gaze. The look that said he knew it, too.

“It’s just a headache, Becs. I’ll take something for it and then I’ll be good to go.”

“You and I both know it isn’t just a headache. You don’t get just headaches. Ever. And we both know that this is how it always starts.”

A drawn-out silence filled the room. The silence had a physical presence. A weight that settled heavily and refused to budge. The heaviness made it suddenly hard for Rebecca to breathe. She had to concentrate on the intake of each breath, focus on the feeling of it entering her nose, making its way to her lungs, and, with great effort, filling up each of the tiny little sacs made for the exchange of air. In. And out. In. And out. If she focused on her breathing, she wouldn’t be thinking about the fact that her brother was going to die. In. And out. In. And out.

Jonathan was the one to break the silence. “I’ll fight this, Becs. Don’t tell Mom and Dad. Not yet. I don’t want them to worry...Not yet. I’m *going* to fight this. It’ll be okay.”

Wanting to believe him, Rebecca responded, “I’ll help you, Jonathan. Just tell me what you need, and I’ll do everything I can. I *won’t* tell Mom and Dad just yet. I’ll wait to see if we can fight this, but if we need their help, I’ll have to say something. And if...”

Her voice trailed off. She was unable to form those final words, but that silence that had filled the room and weighed down the air a few moments before finished her sentence for her.

Their plan to not tell their parents lasted exactly 12 hours. Rebecca had had no choice but to go to school. The trackers were always on and she could not feign illness with Jonathan staying home. In his final year of high school, Jonathan had more leeway. His entrance exams were coming up. It was understood that seniors who were slated to go on to university would take days off to prepare for exams. He could take up to three days without raising any eyebrows. He took one of those days on this day, so that neither his parents or the school would know he was sick. It was Friday. That would give

him the weekend to recover. And, besides, he'd told Rebecca, he really *could* use that time to study. After he slept for a while and after the medicine kicked in to dull the headache.

Phones were not, of course, allowed to be used at school. You could not send messages without being discovered, so Rebecca spent the day with her mind on her brother and not on her teachers or her school work. Her friends commented on how quiet she was and asked if everything was okay. At lunch, she read a book, claiming she had to finish it for homework, and did her best to drown out the daily chatter that these days always, *always* circled around to the virus and rundowns of who in their school or who of their schoolmates' families had gotten hit with it and who had been lost and who might be next. Rebecca kept her nose in her book, but she could feel her best friend Cassidi's steely blue eyes on her, with that intense look she would get whenever she was trying to figure something, or someone, out. Rebecca did not dare look at Cassidi, because Cassidi would know, without a word from Rebecca, that something was wrong.

Rebecca and Cassidi had known each other for as long as they could remember. Their dads worked together in the Citizen's Advisory Division. But they had not become friends, really, until 4th grade when they were partnered for a school project. Through that project, they started getting together outside of school to work and found that they ended up

hanging out long after they had finished. After that, they quickly became inseparable. Now Cassidi knew nearly everything about Rebecca and could read her like a book. And vice versa. They had few secrets, and Rebecca knew she would have to tell her best friend sooner than later, but she opted for as much later as possible. After all, maybe there would be nothing much to tell. Maybe her brother would be fine.

Rebecca raced home after school, avoiding the usual gathering of her friends on the front steps by leaving through a different door. Her phone, now in the back pocket of her school uniform, buzzed with the unique pattern identifying the messenger as Cassidi. Rebecca did not stop to look. She would get to that later. She had to get back to Jonathan first.

She opened the front door to a perfectly still house. Nothing stirring except for curtains that gently billowed in front of the window cracked open to welcome the late fall breeze. Rebecca noticed with her now too keen senses—heightened by the adrenaline coursing through her veins in anticipation of walking up the stairs in front of her—the flutter of the curtains and the long shadows cast across the living room from the deep orange glow of the low sun. She noticed the specs of dust dancing through that light. She noticed the sound of her footsteps on the hardwood floors as she crept stealthily up the stairs, and the creak in the fourth step from the top that sounded louder to her ears than usual. But she

noticed no sounds coming from Jonathan's room at the top of the stairs.

Her heart thudded to the floor of her stomach when she opened the door to find her brother curled up in a ball on top of his covers. Even with the blinds drawn to darken the room she could see his hair matted against his face, framing the strong jawline and clinging to the stubble there. Jonathan was strong. He had a strong personality, he showed a strength of character in the toughest of situations, and he had strong physical features and an athletic build from years of climbing and sports. He looked anything but strong now, with the pain contorting his face even in sleep.

Clearly, the fever had begun. Clearly, she would not be able to keep this from her parents. And, clearly, she was going to lose her brother. Her friend. Her role-model. Her sometimes unwelcome protector. She was not prepared for this. Never did she think this virus would hit her family, and never in a million years would she have thought it would strike Jonathan first.