



## chapter 1

CA-CHUNK, CA-CHUNK, CA-CHUNK.

The sound drifts through my bedroom window. Pokes through my homework haze. It's not loud, but it's impossible to ignore. Because it doesn't belong here.

*Ca-chunk, ca-chunk, ca-chunk.*

Candor sounds the same every night. Hissing sprinklers. Screeching swamp frogs. The drone of the mosquito truck, circling every block.

This doesn't fit.

*Ca-chunk, ca-chunk, ca-chunk.*

It's getting louder now. I roll back my chair and stand up. There's time for a quick expedition outside. Homework can wait for five minutes. Or more, if this is something interesting.

But one of Dad's Messages streams into my brain. *Academics are the key to success.* Makes my knees lock and my feet weigh a hundred pounds. I'm not going anywhere.

There's homework to do.

The Messages stay filed away until you're about to do something interesting. Your brain knows what to feed you: a Message rushes into your head. Covers everything else. No desire. No fear.

No hunger, even. I sit again and open my bio book.

Another one flows in. *Studying is your top priority.*

“Got it,” I say out loud, like my brain is a separate person. “You can shut up now.”

Other people don’t notice when a Message fills their head. But I’ve been here longer than anyone. And I’ve found ways to train myself. I know when my brain is feeding me Messages. I know how to fight them.

When it’s worth it.

But tonight there is homework to do. A lot of homework. I stare at my book. Krebs Citric Acid Cycle. Anyone who memorizes it gets fifteen bonus points on the midterm. That should make my score 115. I excel at bio. Like everything.

*Ca-chunk, ca-chunk, ca-chunk.*

I trace my finger over the cycle diagram. “Isocitrate goes to oxalosuccinate.” The words roll around the surface of my brain.

Now I hear a new sound. *Rattle-rattle-rattle.* It’s familiar. But what is it?

It wouldn’t hurt to take a peek. I flick up one of the wood blind slats above my desk.

I see a row of houses lined up five feet from the sidewalk, each with cozy-lit porches and lush flowerbeds. The broad sidewalk is lined with white picket fences. Plastic fences—they never need painting or termite treatments. Everybody is inside, where they’re supposed to be.

Except the girl on the sidewalk. She’s bent over. Her arms are bare. Long hair spills over her shoulders and shines in the porch lights.

It’s Thursday night. Nobody is supposed to be out. It’s time for flash cards, and extra credit, and college essays if there’s time. No-

body would *want* to be out. The Messages make sure of that.

Maybe she's new. Maybe she's a potential client for me.

It's been boring lately. I haven't had a playmate in months—fewer people are moving in, and the ones who come lack funds. It's hard to fight being perfect 24/7. I need a release, even if it's something small.

Most of my clients come to Candor with goodies. I make sure they share with me. But right now all I've got is Sherman. He's loaded with the green stuff, but tiresome. He didn't even bring a single dirty magazine when his family moved here.

Sure, I have a girlfriend. But she's so buttoned up, I only keep her as a part of my disguise.

I'm the model Candor boy—a son to brag about. Proof that the Messages work. That's what everyone thinks. Even my dad.

He doesn't know it's all an act. That I've built my own business, a business that makes his customers very unhappy. It's strictly boutique, for a select few. Not many can afford me.

Maybe this girl will.

*Never waste our natural resources.* I pull the chain on my desk light. Sometimes it's not worth fighting.

More Messages try to push in. They tell me to stay. Study. Avoid distractions. I close my eyes and imagine a wall in my brain. It's made of steel. No cracks for the Messages to seep in.

It's just one of the ways I fight, and it took years to get good at.

Tonight it works. My head is almost silent. But there are thuds behind the wall. Eventually something will break through.

She's standing up when I get outside. Tall, with plenty of curves to stare at.

"Who are you?" I blurt out.

Stupid. I sound like an idiot. Totally out of control.

A one-sided smile lights up her face, but it's gone fast. "Nobody you should care about."

I stare down at her feet. Scuffed combat boots. Rolled-up camis. And a skateboard under one foot.

*Ca-chunk, ca-chunk.* The sound of a skateboard crossing the sidewalk cracks. Something you never hear in Candor.

Dad hates skateboards—says they're dangerous and destructive. My brother, Winston, used to ride one—before he died being stupid. The Messages make sure everybody else's kids are careful. Kids toss their boards right after they move in.

"You must be new," I say.

"Let's see." She pastes a fake-looking smile on her face. Her voice is overly enthusiastic. "We moved in on Friday. From Boston. No, I don't love it here. No, I don't want to join the debate team or service club or any other little group you're a part of. And I could care less what you got on your SATs."

She's the opposite of nice. But I like hearing someone say what she really thinks.

"You think you're too good for the rest of us?" I say.

She snaps open her mouth and locks her green eyes onto mine. But then she shrugs and looks away. "Never hold yourself above others," she mutters.

That's a Message. Not surprising, if she's been here six days. What's amazing is that she's still mostly *not* Candor.

Not that she'll make it past two weeks. Nobody does.

Not unless I get them out. That's my business. I get new kids out of Candor before they've changed. Back to the real world. It's not cheap, but it's the best deal of their lives.

I wonder if she's got easy access to cash. I also wonder if she's wearing a bra.

“You rich?” I ask. With her, I don’t have to bother with Candor fakeness.

“We’ve got enough.” She looks past me, down the sidewalk. Restless.

“Come inside. We have lemonade,” I say.

“I hate lemonade.”

“We have water. And coffee. Really expensive coffee.” My father’s only vice.

“Not thirsty.” She plants one foot in the middle of her board.

“Whatever. I have to go anyway. I’ve got bio. And French. And, of course, civics.” Stupid mouth. Why won’t you stop talking? I sound like I care if she goes. Which I don’t. Not much. It’s not like I need her money. There’s plenty tucked away.

Then I spot something in her hand. A cylinder, shiny, with an orange cap. “Is that spray paint?”

She gives me big eyes, like she’s never seen it before. “How’d that get there?”

“You stole it, didn’t you?” Thieves are excellent clients. Plenty of cash and toys, and they’re always useful on the outside. My clients owe me for life. And I collect.

“I didn’t steal it. I . . . bought it.”

“Liar. Nobody sells spray paint in Candor.”

“Fine. I found it on a construction site. It’s half gone anyway.” She lifts it and gives it a shake. *Rattle-rattle-rattle.*

The other mystery sound.

“Let me watch.” She seems like the graffiti type—not that I’ve ever seen one before.

Candor is a graffiti-virgin town.

This could be a historic moment.

“Why do you want to watch? Does Daddy need a full report?” She

laughs. Its girly, light sound doesn't fit with the combat goth-teen look.

"Do you even know who my father is?"

Those green eyes sweep over me and away.

"Sure. And I know who *you* are. The famous Oscar Banks." She spreads her arms wide, like an announcer on a stage. "Tall, dark, and handsome. Debate-team captain. Valedictorian. Future savior of the free world."

She thinks I'm handsome. I knew this girl was smart.

"You want an autograph?" I shoot her my best just-kidding smile, but she's not looking. "What's your name, anyway?"

"Like I said, don't waste your time." Her lips twist like she's tasted something sour.

That's fine. I can look her up in Dad's files and get the scoop on whatever she did to land here. Look at her family's credit report.

Right now, I want entertainment. "Let's go paint something." But a Message flows into my brain. *Keep Candor beautiful*. It knows what I want to do and pushes my feet backward, toward the house.

"Not now," I say. Then I shake my head. "Not you," I tell her.

"Get lost, crazy boy."

I fight the Message. Build my wall. I want to be near someone who isn't perfect, doing something she isn't supposed to do.

"If you ditch me, I'll tell my dad," I say. "And he'll tell your parents."

It makes me sound like I'm six, but it'll work on any kid who's lived here a few days.

"So what?" She moves like she's going to roll away, like she doesn't care about getting in trouble. Like she's different from all the other kids here.

But then her leg drops back to the pavement. She sighs. "Always strive to make your parents proud."

Nobody escapes the Messages.

Not that kids understand what's happening. Dad warns their parents never to tell. Children don't understand, he says. They'll get angry. Resistant. It could take longer for the Messages to soak in. It's not like the adults, who can't wait for the Messages to make them—and their less-than-perfect children—new and improved.

I guess he has a point. I found out and I've been fighting them ever since.

She rolls a little closer. "Please don't tell."

"I won't if you let me come."

She snorts. "Like you'd do anything bad. You're just like the rest of them. You're the *king* of the rest of them."

My facade fools her, just like everyone else. That should make me proud. Instead a flush crawls over the back of my neck. I want to prove her wrong.

Our eyes meet. There's something, just for a second. Something that makes her smile. Something that makes my stomach flip.

I reach across her body. Our chests touch for a second. And then I've got the paint can.

I sprint down the sidewalk. I'm not sure where I'm going, except that it's away. Away from my father and the Krebs cycle and being the perfect Oscar Banks.

Just in case someone looks outside, I jam the can under my shirt. Always be ready for just in case.

She's on her board now, rolling next to me. "Give it back," she says.

"No way." I pat the hard metal under my shirt. "It wants to be free."

The Messages are crowding into my brain, trying to correct me before I'm a bad boy. *Vandalism is wrong. Never deface someone else's property.*

Just because I hear them doesn't mean I have to obey. That's what makes me different from the others.

I don't know if I'll win this time. If I'll get to do something I want and the Messages don't. But I'm going to try.

There's a streetlight out on the corner of Persimmon and Longview. Unusual. The street crew will have it fixed before dusk tomorrow—or sooner. A guy with a lightbulb and unquestioning obedience to my father could show up any second.

This will have to be fast. I whip out the paint.

The girl grinds her skateboard to a stop.

“Don't waste it.” Her voice is loud. “I need that.”

“It's mine now.” I uncap the paint and survey my options. The streetlight post? A slick section of fence? The grass?

I press down the button and there's a hissing sound. I'm doing it—making a big orange streak on the post, defacing property. Breaking rules.

My mouth splits into a huge grin. I can taste the tang of the paint.

But the Messages scream in my brain. *Badbadbad.*

I stuff them back. Swing the can wide.

It feels good.