

Chapter One

Will didn't love the big city. It wasn't home. Then again, he didn't love home either. He stared out the window of the tiny tenth-floor apartment he'd been crashing in. He thought it was like looking at an alien landscape. Home for Will was back in Hope, the armpit town he'd escaped from a couple years earlier. Hope was all mountains and landslides. It was the sulfur mill and the railyard.

When he thought of Hope, he thought of Eve. But she was always on his mind.

Where was she? Was she still afraid of the dark?

He looked at his watch. It was 5:47 in the morning. Dawn lit up the sky—an early-autumn sunrise that had no soul. Nothing but buildings, row on row, all exactly the same. Sharp edges and glinting skyscrapers. Nothing green or growing. All was clean and square and shiny.

Will drank his coffee. He hadn't slept well—but that had been true for a couple of years now. These days he had permanent dark circles under his eyes. He was the oldest eighteen-year-old on earth, and he'd only just celebrated his birthday. Here, alone, in this crappy studio apartment that didn't even belong to him. It had been two years since he'd run away, and there was hardly anything in the place to make it feel like home. A small folding table near the tiny kitchen. A phone, a newspaper, a spoon. There was no couch. No TV.

As he stared at it, the phone rang, and he jumped, sloshing hot coffee on his wrist. "Shit," he said.

He picked up the phone and paused for a moment. The caller ID said *Bro*.

He grinned as he answered it. "Hey, man, why are you calling me so early, did you have a wild night—" He fell silent and listened. Will closed his eyes as he placed his mug down on the table. It rested on the edge, close to falling off.

"What are you telling me?" he asked. He listened some more, his eyes still closed. "Yeah. I'll check it now." Will opened his eyes and then ended the call.

He opened his phone's browser and typed in *Beatty's Beat*. A flashy tabloid-style news website loaded. The top headline featured a video. Will clicked on it.

A young man with dark, curly hair appeared on-screen. "Welcome back to *Beatty's Beat*. I'm Nigel Beatty. There's been a major development. Early this morning local security guard and former

cop William Homer turned up dead in a pile of sulfur at the SulCorp sulfur mill. Homer's own son left town after the mysterious death of SulCorp's chairman, Aaron Sullivan Senior. Could there be a connection? And could it have something to do with the lost Sullivan gold? So far, no one knows how Homer ended up in the sulfur. Now, in a *Beatty's Beat* exclusive, we have some visuals sent to us by an anonymous source. A warning to our viewers—this is graphic.”

The broadcast cut to dark and grainy video footage of a large sulfur pile. A winch lifted a body by the feet from deep within the pile. The yellow powder slid from the corpse like fine sand.

“No!” Will cried, shutting the browser window. He braced himself against the table. The coffee cup crashed to the floor, but he made no move to clean it up. “Oh, Dad,” he whispered. “I’m sorry.”

Another call came through. The caller ID this time said *Aunt Justine*.

Will sighed and picked up. “Yeah,” he said. “I saw the video too. My good friend let me know. Now that my dad is...I’ll have to go back sooner.” Will listened for a moment. “I’ll call you when I get there.”

He hung up and then typed a short text.

I’ll be there. Wait for me.

He walked over to the single bed. His duffel bag was already packed. He pulled open the drawers of a small dresser and added some more clothes to the bag. He caught sight of himself in the mirror. “You wanted me to come back,” he said softly. “You got it.” He looked away.

His past had come looking for him. He’d thought he had more time. He’d thought wrong.

Chapter Two

The bus depot was all but abandoned. Will sat alone and waited until a bus labeled *Rural Route* pulled up. It was more rust than metal, and when he climbed on board a stale smell hit him full force.

The bus made its way out of the city and began a long, winding journey along a

forest-edged highway. He was going home after two years away, and he didn't know what would be there when he arrived. Hell, he didn't know who *he* would be when he arrived.

Hours later the bus passed the rockslide memorial. A long time ago, several people had lost their lives under the crush of the fallen mountainside. People loved to visit to get a taste of tragedy. They loved the strange mystery of the accident. During the day, clusters of them would take pictures on the graffiti-covered rocks. But at night, when darkness fell and the moon came out, the roadside attraction lost its appeal. There were no more families picnicking on the boulders. It became what it was always meant to be—a monument to the dead.

Will loved the memorial most at night. That's when it belonged to him again and to the other locals. They were the night-walking youth.

The street kids. The hopeless ones. The rockslide was all shadow, as dark as their own thoughts and as dim as their own futures.

He imagined Eve there, sitting on the rocks, waiting for him. As the bus continued to roll along, he drifted off to sleep, her face in his mind.

Eve sat on a large boulder. The cliff face above was scooped out, as if sliced into by a giant ax.

All Will could do was stare at Eve. She was so pretty it hurt.

"You're so beautiful," he said.

She got up and hopped to a different boulder. She stood, arms crossed, like an ancient, sad statue.

"What, you don't want me to say you're beautiful?" he asked.

"If you knew me, you'd know how wrong that is," she said.

"I know you better than anyone," he said.

"No," she said. "I'm a good liar. Like all the other girls who walk the highway. I can make you believe anything."

"Not me," he said.

"Yes. You won't see until it's too late."

"Too late for what?" he asked.

"The landslide," she said. "It comes down and crushes everything. Everyone."

She was crying. He hated it when she cried.

"It won't crush me," he whispered.

"How do you know?" she asked.

"Because I love you."

"Then you better get out of the way," she said.

There was a loud crack, and then the mountain split in half behind her. The whole world came rushing at them.

The bus hit a pothole. Will woke with a start. He squinted against the harsh lighting of the bus interior. He'd fallen asleep with his face pressed against the grimy window.

He had arrived. Across the street was the welcome sign to the town of Hope. It used to read *WELCOME TO HOPE*, but someone had spray-painted the sign in blue paint. Now it read *WELCOME HOPELESS*.

The bus traveled into the heart of the town and down the main strip. There were a few people on the streets. Some huddled in the plywood-covered doorways of closed-up shops. The strip looked like it always had. Will had the strange thought that this was how the place would always be—frozen in time. Maybe he'd always been here. His heart hadn't left. It was still here, with Eve.

The town was dark, save for the light from the neon of bar signs and pawnshop displays.

The bus stopped to pick up a few more passengers. There were two sulfur-mill employees on their way to do the graveyard shift. Will noted their coveralls, once white but now tinted a sickly yellow from years of sulfur dust.

A woman boarded and sat in front of Will. She wore a sleeveless dress despite the chilly fall temperature. There was dark brown makeup on her arms, though Will couldn't imagine why. A small red dot—it looked like a bug—floated out from under her dress. It circled around on her upper arm before disappearing.

He leaned back in his seat.

It was midnight by the time the bus pulled up across the street from the sulfur mill. The graveyard-shift workers shuffled off. They took their time passing through the large SulCorp archway.