

# CHAPTER ONE

I am stronger than I was before.

Six weeks ago, I was a sixteen-year-old girl from Montana whose brother was dying. Nine months before that, I was shopping with my best friend in Boston, picking out the perfect shade of coral lip gloss. I was the girl who loved a chilled Greek salad, hold the onions, who texted my girlfriends every time there was a sale at Express, who had a closet full of glitter — and so what, a girl has a right to glitter.

Before, I figured that when my family was struck with illness, when my brother, Cody, first passed on a second helping of meat loaf with red gravy and started losing weight, that this was the *thing*. This was the tragedy I'd have to deal with in my life — watching my big brother crumble and my family with him.

I tried to be brave, to smile when there was nothing to smile about. To offer a polished joke in the doctor's office so that Cody could cast off the fear in his belly and laugh instead.

*Good-bye, fear. Nice knowing you! I won't be needing you since my sister's here.*

Now I'm competing in the Brimstone Bleed to try and save his life. I thought the bad hand we were dealt was Cody's being sick. But sometimes a hand worse than illness is the one offering a slippery morsel of hope. That's the thing about life: When you're dealt a crappy situation, you think to yourself, *At least it can't get any worse than this.*

And then life slaps you upside the head for being naïve.

I wasn't cut out for a race across the jungle or to trek across the desert with the sun scalding my cheeks.

But like I said —

I am stronger than I was before.

# CHAPTER TWO

Guy Chambers looks worried. And when he worries, I worry right along with him. Of course, sometimes Guy makes it difficult to be anything at all besides lustful. Even in the heart of the desert — the fresh pink scar on my stomach itching like crazy — I could still shove him on a Popsicle stick and slurp him up. *Nom-nom-nom.*

“Tella,” he says. His voice is sharp, even urgent.

Though, in my mind, he says my name more like *Te-lilla*.

Guy tilts his head as if he’s not sure I’m listening, which I’m not. We’ve been at this desert base camp for over a week for “rest and recovery.” But it’s hard to do either when we’re counting down the days until the Brimstone Bleed continues.

The Brimstone Bleed covers four ecosystems: jungle, desert, ocean, mountain. Or mountain, then ocean. Two we’ve completed; two remain. We’re halfway. Hoorah! Victory dance.

Except it’s hard to feel positive about how far we’ve come when we’re battling one another for the Cure — something that will save our loved ones back home from croaking — and because we’ve already lost friends along the way. Even worse, the people behind this race are the ones who *made* our loved ones sick, though they pretend to be the heroes. And for the grand finale? The second ecosystem we overcame was harder than the first, which doesn’t make me real optimistic about what lies ahead.

Guy’s lion, his Pandora, gives a small growl deep in his throat. It’s as if he’s frustrated that I’m not paying attention to his Contender. My own Pandora growls in return, though it’s amusing, considering the sound emanates from a black fox one-tenth the size. I scoop my Pandora, Madox, into my arms and attempt to focus on what Guy is saying.

“What’s up?” I ask, hoping if I sound casual, the concern will leave his face.

“I think they’re getting ready to move us.”

“Move us,” I repeat, my brow furrowing. “Like we’re cattle or something.” My blood burns as I remember that these monsters ordered us to kill other Contenders’ Pandoras to qualify for the rest of the race. Sometimes, I can’t shake the memory of sliding a blade into Levi’s dying Pandora, even if his brother did ask me to do it.

Guy shifts as if he’s going to brush away the hair from my face like men do in romance novels. Not that I’d know or anything. Not as if I used to dig those suckers out of my mom’s nightstand and devour them while plunging an arm into the graham crackers box.

Before Guy can morph into Fabio, his hand drops to his side. Maybe it’s because I hacked my hair off and all that remains to caress is the blue-and-green feather Mom gave me, the same feather my grandmother once wore in her own hair. Or maybe he’s being distant again. I thought we were past that, but lately I’m not so sure.

Guy runs his hand along his clean-shaven jaw. It won’t be that way for much longer. “I can just sense something’s happening. We’ve been here long enough. It’s time.” He pauses, bites the inside of his cheek. “Look, Tella . . .”

*Te-llla.*

“You should forget about what I said,” he continues, voice lowered. Guy musses his dark hair that, after hiking through the jungle and desert, still manages to look *GQ*. “I’m not going to let you —”

“We’ve been over this,” I interrupt. “I have to try and win, for my brother. After that, I’m going to help you destroy . . .” I glance around at the other Contenders, at their exhausted faces and slumped shoulders. I study the Pandoras by their sides, beaten

and bruised from helping their Contenders survive. “I’m going to help you destroy the race so no one has to go through this again.”

The Green Beret of a dude nods his head, though I can tell he’s not convinced. And that in the end, if I’m one of the final five and receive an invitation to become a Brimstone Bleed employee, he might accuse me of cheating so I can’t continue. Assuming cheating is even a thing, which it probably isn’t.

“Hey-o! Are we packing up? Are the Rambos moving out?” This comes from Jaxon, my friend. He’s wearing a blue flag, the kind that helps us navigate to base camps, around his forehead. His blond curls spring up and over the top. Seeing me eyeing the flag, he says, “See, like Rambo.” Jaxon holds his arms up as if he’s got a machine gun and proceeds to put a round of bullets into Guy.

Guy isn’t amused.

Clinging to Jaxon’s leg is Olivia, a ten-year-old girl with exactly nine fingers. She’ll show everyone who asks those fingers, and anyone else who doesn’t. A blue-gray trunk wraps around Olivia’s waist.

“Cut it out,” Olivia tells her elephant. Though I can tell she secretly adores her Pandora’s nuzzling. Jaxon looks at her elephant, EV-0, with longing. He lost his Pandora in the desert when one of our Contender allies turned out to *be* a Pandora and ate his animal companion.

And the people running this race think we can “rest and recover” at base camp.

Please.

“So are we?” Jaxon repeats. “Moving out?”

Guy nods as if he’s sure, but I don’t know how he can be. Then again, if Guy said our next leg of the race would be on the moon, I’d start looking for the shuttle. He stares into the desert as if the answer is there. “There’s been talk.”

“Scandalous.” Jaxon’s head bobs, a huge smile plastered on his face.

Guy sighs, and I lock eyes with him. Blue eyes. Not blue like the ocean at high tide or the sky on a summer afternoon. More like the blue of a dead body. A kind of blue that makes you hold your breath and count your blessings and beg for one more. I like when Guy sets his gaze on me. That shade of blue could make the world tremble on bended knees, but I’d happily drown in it.

An enormous hand with polished nails comes down on Jaxon’s shoulder. “He’s going to kill you one of these days,” a surprisingly soft voice says. Surprising because its owner is the size of a planet.

Braun orbits into view, his pig Pandora grunting at his side. “Do we know where we’re going next?”

Guy’s eyes widen. He’s looking over Braun’s shoulder, and I turn to see what nabbed his attention. The two men who work for the Brimstone Bleed stand outside the perimeter of the base camp, an orange flag in each of their hands. They hold the flags by their sides and drag the toes of their boots in the sand, creating a large circle.

I hear it before I see it — the unmistakable *thwump-thwump-thwump* of a helicopter approaching.