



CHAPTER ONE

At dawn, I crouched on the iron ridge of Castello's burnt-out church dome and watched the night patrol come in. Around me, the ruins of the cathedral stretched for miles, jagged claws of stone and metal pushing towards the watery grey sky. When the fire had raged through the church, half the dome had cracked open and fallen sideways, crash-landed like an alien spaceship in the centre of the town square. The other half was like a carcass at my back, a blight on the horizon, all those mangled beams and nested cables hanging down like entrails, stained black with ash – and yet I had become strangely fond of it over the last month.

I liked the view from up here, the way I could see all of Castello spread below me. The way the city looked peaceful from this height, rimmed in by ancient medieval walls, crooked tile rooftops glittering under a blanket of snow. A harmless town, same as any other. In miniature, Castello didn't look like it was trying to kill you.

You just couldn't squint.

It was nearing 5 a.m., the morning air bitter with December chill. I could feel ice on my lashes, see my breath like a cloud whenever I exhaled. Sense the creeping press of frostbite in my fingers, even below my ratty wool gloves. Winter had descended on Castello as hard and fast as a trapdoor slamming, and for ages now all I'd been was cold.

From my perch on the dome, I had a clear view of the Marconi military compound, lying like a coiled snake just off the town square. It was a palatial structure of interlocking courtyards and covered passages, sealed away from the rest of the city by a high monastery wall. When the General had ruled Castello, the compound had been abandoned, just another ruin I'd passed on my way to school.

But ever since the church fire, the place had begun to come alive. Barbed wire had sprung up on the rooftops, red-rose Marconi flags had unfurled from sooty window frames, motion-censor floodlights had been rigged to the iron front gates. A back-up generator had been installed in the main courtyard and there was constant movement in the buildings now, soldiers in black leather uniforms carting guns and rations and medical supplies back and forth.

And, each day at dawn like clockwork: the hooded figures of the night patrol, returning from their rounds of the boundary wall.

I had watched this happen a dozen times before, but I still couldn't shake the pulse of expectation that gripped me whenever I saw them coming. The spike in my heartbeat, the familiar knot of *ragehateterror* that tangled

in my chest. Because I knew the moment the patrol entered the compound, the woman who had ruined my life would finally show herself.

She emerged from the grandest building in a crimson cloak, descended the marble stairs and crossed the courtyard with crisp, unhurried steps. The patrol came to a stop before her: three men with rifles on their shoulders, a fourth strung limp between them, injured or worse. One of the soldiers stepped up to give the woman a report, and I could hear snatches of their conversation, drifting towards me over the frozen landscape.

Another breach, the soldier was saying. They disabled the alarm, broke through the northern boundary.

The woman's eyes were cool like the dawn, icy like the ground below her feet. *How many did we lose this time?*

I couldn't hear the soldier's answer, but it made the woman's face harden, a mask of quiet fury. *Bring me the survivors, she said. And tell your men to be ready. Tonight, we end this once and for all.*

The soldier saluted, and a moment later the patrol was gone, dragging the injured man down a passageway into the heart of the compound. In the courtyard, the woman stood alone. That was my cue.

Slowly, I raised my hands. Flexed my fingers, gone stiff and numb in the cold. Took a shuddering breath and narrowed my eyes, reaching down into the hole in my chest where the bright flame of my power had lived, once upon a time. Dug my nails into that empty space and *pulled* as hard as I could.

And then I waited.

For the knife-sharp icicles on the compound rooftop to snap off and impale themselves in the woman's throat. For the snow to rise up and bury her; for her crimson cloak to press against her windpipe until her breathing stopped.

For my dead power to spark to life again and obey the command I was repeating over and over inside my mind: *Punish her. Hurt her. Make her pay for what she's done.*

The force of wanting pulsed black in my forehead, my heart in overdrive, my fingers trembling in the empty air. Blood running wet from my nose, coating my lips with tangy metal. Every nerve and muscle in my body straining for just the tiniest thing – a flicker of heat, a pulse of electricity. Anything to prove I hadn't been broken all the way.

But nothing came.

The compound stayed quite still below me, the icicles untouched. My body remained as frigid and fallow as the winter. The woman stood a moment longer in the courtyard and then turned to walk back the way she'd come. Just like always. Because no matter what I did, no matter how desperately I willed it – not one single shred of power rose to answer my call.

And to think, said Liza Mezzi, a savage voice in my mind. *I died for this.*

I slammed my hands down on the iron lip of the church dome, fury rising like a sickness inside me. I should've been used to this by now, and yet it seemed to hit me like new every single morning. It was as if my brain had a glitch, like some part of me still refused to believe I had lost

everything the night the church burned down. I couldn't seem to accept that it was over for me; that I'd never be able to take revenge for a single thing I loved.

That every last drop of power had been burned out of my blood.

Far below, in the icy courtyard of the Marconi compound, the woman in the crimson cloak paused. Raised her head and scanned the horizon, like any good commander, knowing she was most vulnerable from on high.

I froze in place, hunched over on the dome, telling myself that there was no way she'd notice me this far off. And yet, for a split second, I swore Veronica Marconi's eyes came to rest directly on my face.

And I swore she smiled.

