



Spirals

Loose Id.

Beth D. Carter

Spirals

Beth D. Carter



Spirals

Copyright © March 2010 by Beth D. Carter

All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

eISBN 978-1-60737-549-4

Editor: Judith David

Cover Artist: April Martinez

Printed in the United States of America

Loose Id.

Published by

Loose Id LLC

PO Box 425960

San Francisco CA 94142-5960

www.loose-id.com

This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id LLC's e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

* * *

DISCLAIMER: Please do not try any new sexual practice, especially those that might be found in our BDSM/fetish titles without the guidance of an experienced practitioner. Neither Loose Id LLC nor its authors will be responsible for any loss, harm, injury or death resulting from use of the information contained in any of its titles.

Dedication

Thank you to the Loose Id family for helping to bring this story to life. Thank you, Judi, for your guidance. Thanks to April Martinez for an awesome cover; it's scary crazy how you read my mind. Thanks to Treva Harte, the line editors and proofers whom I did not meet, and Allie McKnight. I'm sure there are many others, and I give you all a big shout out. And for my mom, who let me crash at her place for a weekend while I revised like a madwoman. You're the best cheerleader ever. And a special thanks to Brian, the paranoid survivalist in my life. I love you.

Chapter One

I open my eyes to the diluted light filtering through the window, and blink a few times to moisten my vision and break the crusty coating at the corners. Daybreak comes far too early, and with it a scrambling to finish all I need to accomplish today. I want to return to my real home in Malibu; I've stayed far too long in the Valley.

This is not a safe world I live in, but some places are safer than others, and it's time to lie low awhile. I sigh and let my mind wander for just a moment, back to when all I had to be concerned with was finishing homework and making sure my nail polish matched the clothes I was wearing.

For a moment I hear my mother's voice, her crisp tone urging me out of bed to get ready for school.

“*Kaori!*” she would call in her native Japanese. “*It is rude to be late!*”

An automatic smile appears with thoughts of my delicate mom, hands on her hips and her lips pursed as she talked to me in a harsh tone. It hadn't been in a mean tone or done in a critical manner, but rather in a strict way to teach. “*If you make your bed now, you'll be comfortable later*” or “*The stench of perspiration lingers long after you leave.*”

It had been the way her parents raised her, in that brisk, no-nonsense way only the Japanese have, and she applied the same principle to her only child. As I was growing up, I hated that tone she used, what I had thought was a condescending attitude even though my father told me over and over that was how Japanese translated to the American perspective.

My legs need to stretch, so I flip over onto my back, lengthening my muscles and easing the tension of the night. The smile has long since vanished as I remember my mother. She was beautiful, with long, stick-straight black hair. Man, how I had envied her hair. Mine is just as dark but has the looseness of curl that I could never tame.

I miss her. Still.

Finally I start looking about the room as I push old memories back. The bedroom I am in was beige once, I think; it's hard to identify colors anymore under the dirt and grime brought by time. The people who lived here must have thought boarding up the place and putting plastic on everything would keep it all pristine for their return, without realizing they would never have the chance to see it again. But it did preserve the mattress well enough for me to use, and after six years I've a hoard of houses all throughout former Los Angeles where I can be sure I have a good night's sleep.

I am nothing if not meticulous, so after one more stretch I hop off the bed and start putting the room back to how I found it, hiding my tracks. In the world I live in, to survive means to be cautious, to act like you've never been there. I pull the ragged piece of plastic back up on the bed, I gather the thin blanket and few items of clothing into my backpack, and I head out of the room, making sure to tilt the door at the same angle I found it. There is no water in this house, so I walk noiselessly down the stairs, knowing where every loose board is and avoiding it.

The bottom floor of the house is a wreck. All the windows are blown out, even the ones that had been boarded up, leaving the elements free rein to invade. Dirt and leaves rustle as small rodents scurry over the shredded carpet and linoleum floors. I don't bother the vermin, and they don't bother me.

The top hinge of the front door is still together, but the bottom has long since rusted off, and the angle at which the door hangs has created a small space to wriggle in and out of. I crouch down and slither through the opening, careful to avoid the large hole on the front porch.

It's early morning and the safest time to be out and about. I spent the night in what used to be Sherman Oaks, but like the rest of the world is now nothing but forgotten memories. There are no city limits, no boundaries, no jurisdictions; the world has been decimated, and I am but one person in a handful of humanity that survived.

The pockets of humans left come out mostly at night, like vampires, so I feel pretty safe leaving my resting spot in the bright light of day and walking a few houses away to find water. I am at the end of a cul-de-sac nestled against the base of the mountain that had divided the Valley from the rest of LA. The street I turn onto eventually leads to what once was Sepulveda Boulevard.

It is absolutely amazing how certain things survived the Great Incident and how other things didn't. I use the term *Great Incident* because there hadn't been a war. Sometime six years ago, North Korea detonated a biological bomb in the air, and the fallout spread a virus that turned into a pandemic. I only know this term because people bandied it around earlier from a scare of the swine flu. It had turned out to be nothing compared to the new threat. The virus started out as an airborne pathogen then quickly mutated into a disease that had no antidote. Unfortunately when the virus mutated, the pandemic spread fast, creating panic. And with panic came desperation. People left their homes, the cities, thinking running would help.

The United States responded by invading North Korea, of course—and wow! There wasn't even an ultimatum, like the one Bush gave Iraq. We just swooped in and took over. But by the time other countries joined us, the pandemic had started its deadly run, so any type of war was preempted by planetwide deaths. And who the frick knows what North Korea was thinking when they launched their biobomb? From the news seizing control of all the TV networks, it seems North Korea was hit hardest, with the death toll almost 100 percent.

No one really knows why some people didn't contract the virus; it was either you got it or you were one of the lucky ones. I remember that people desperately wanted to hold on to the feeling that everything was going to be okay, that doctors or the CDC were going to announce at any moment that a cure had been found. I remember being immature. I was mad that something ordinary like cheerleading camp in Las Vegas had been canceled, so my friends and I decided we were going to go anyway. A way of giving the finger to the National Cheerleaders Association for believing we weren't going to be okay, that life wasn't going to continue. We really didn't have a plan; we just decided to wing it and see what trouble we could find on the tamed-down Vegas Strip.

I had driven there, without my parents' permission, of course. My father was an entertainment lawyer who had fallen sick, and my mother was a surgeon fighting the pandemic that had already killed half the world's population. I was alone a lot. I figured they wouldn't miss me. So I took my hybrid sweet-sixteen present, the car I had gotten the previous year for my birthday, and drove the five or so hours. That was a Friday.

That Saturday was when a massive earthquake devastated Southern California. *The Big One*.

To this day I still don't know how it measured on the Richter scale, but who really cares? The result was the same no matter what. Biological attack, disease, destruction. LA was a lost civilization.

I remember little from that time, because of shock, I suppose. My friends and I had been getting ready to go to a nightclub, with fake IDs and lots of makeup, when I felt the world shaking. Even as far away as it was, Las Vegas wasn't immune to the quake. When the news came over the television, I knew my life had just spiraled out of control.

The police urged everyone to remain calm and stay where they were. Fuck that; I ran. I ran because I was scared; I ran because, after all my teenage blustering, I needed my parents. I drove my car halfway back to Los Angeles before I stopped to really appraise the red haze covering the city far in the distance. The earthquake had caused everything to burn, or at least most of downtown and the parts near major plants and factories. I drove onto a barely paved road, crying, realizing my mom and my dad had to be dead. That, like them, my world was dead. The earthquake had taken something from me that even the pandemic hadn't, and there was nothing, absolutely nothing, left.

I had slept in my car, and I woke with a horrible headache the next morning. I didn't return to I-15. Instead I drove on the little road that twisted and turned and wound its way through the desert. I peed behind short cactus stumps. Only the clawing of my empty stomach forced me to find food, and I stopped at this deserted mini-gas market to stock up on whatever I could find. Whoever had worked there hadn't returned, so I felt no guilt as I gorged myself on junk food and Red Bull. For two days I stayed there, realizing that by some miracle, I had been in the right place at the right time. I was alive, and there was no way I was going to misuse my miracle.

The convenience store had a television, but after three days there were no more news broadcasts. The world was in such a desperate state that I realized no rescue was coming.

I stopped watching after that. What more did I really need to know? In the beginning all I had wanted was to find my family and be around humans to lament the devastation, but it dawned on me that I was not safe. Flashes of Los Angeles history came to mind, and though the riots had happened way before I was born, I had still heard about them. If I survived, then others must have survived. But I was neither exceptionally strong nor fit, so I had to rely on being calm and rational.

Thank goodness I loved action films. I took a notebook, and I opened a new pack of pens. I started to write out every survival story I could remember seeing, any tidbit where the hero used cleverness to get the jump on the bad guy.

I stayed at the convenience store until the food was gone. I rationed, so it was about two months. I hid my car. I barricaded the doors and did all I could to make the place look deserted and empty.

I only had one scare the whole time I stayed there, and it came at night after I had bedded down in the store's office on the small vinyl couch. The door to the office was locked from the inside, and I had used items from the handyman aisle to reinforce its security. I had heard nothing, but the turning of the doorknob woke me instantly. I lay there in the dark, unable to see anything, but able to hear the turning and slight shaking of the handle. My heart jumped into my throat, and I reached down to the floor and quietly picked up the hunting knife lying there. I had found it after my first search of the gas station. I'd hoped to discover a gun, but I felt okay with finding a really big knife.

The door rattled once, and it was hard to tell which was louder in the dark: the sound of the shaking door or my frantically beating heart. Fear rose up into my throat. My muscles contracted. All I could do was wait, wondering if whoever was on the other side of the door could hear my labored breathing.

I waited for anything to happen, even for the door to be kicked down, but then I heard the doorknob release, and the rattling stopped. I didn't hear retreating footsteps. But night continued and day came, and I was far too frightened to open the door. Perhaps the visitor was out there, waiting, making sure this room was really deserted.

I let four days go by before I ventured out. I had run out of emergency food, and the toilet bucket was getting really rank. I figured if anyone was out there, the smell would alert them before anything else.

But the store was empty, and I walked outside waiting for something to happen. Only nothing ever did.

My inspection showed a set of tire marks on the gritty parking lot surface, ones that weren't mine. I took a deep breath and rubbed my chilled arms in the hot sun. I was alone again, but this time very happy about that fact. With a critical eye, I turned back to my little haven and started

methodically looking at what could have made the visitor check things out. I had removed all the food and hidden it in the back of the store, trying to make it look as if the store had already been looted. But then I realized that if it had been a true looting, the inside would be dirty, perhaps a window or two broken. At minimum, there would be dust everywhere, and I had kept the place looking spotless. Just like someone lived there.

I wrote this information down in my notebook and then got busy messing everything up. I broke two windows, though I made sure to break them away from the areas I usually walked to avoid the glass. And I stopped sweeping. This helped me to relax, but I replenished my food supply in the tiny office and always slept with that hunting knife nearby.

Eventually I continued on to Los Angeles, though I was vigilant on the way to my Brentwood home. Only, Los Angeles was beyond devastated; it was almost completely wiped out. People had been suffering from the pandemic, thousands dying every day. When the earthquake hit, it brought everything to a halt. Like I said before, I was only seventeen at the time, so my understanding was limited. I knew there had been problems before the Great Incident; the economy and lack of health care were catalysts. But of the world events leading up to it, I had only fuzzy recollections.

For six years I have kept as low a profile as I can. My hybrid car is gone, though I remember where I stored it. One, I can't chance driving it and having someone notice, and two, gas is almost nowhere to be found, and the vehicles that use it, pretty much obsolete. I ride a bicycle most everywhere, going from one safe house to another, though I have a dirt bike for emergencies. I scavenge. I store. Everything I find, I meticulously work over to discover a way to use it. I have found the most amazing things, from useful items such as food and water to what I call frivolous necessities—like the chest of sex toys I found some time ago. Yes, a developing girl turning into a young woman does need a vibrator.

I dig out my bike from its hiding place and ride the mile or so to where the Borders bookstore used to sit on Victory Boulevard. I know I've visited this store about a hundred times, but I've managed to keep quite a large number of books in the half-collapsed building. I want to grab a few of them.

It takes me about half an hour to get there, and I hide my bike in the overgrown weeds where the remnants of abandoned apartments litter the streets. I make my way carefully over the

collapsed concrete and steel and duck into the darkened bookstore. I'm not the only person who has ravaged what has remained, but this building no longer attracts scavengers like me, so I feel okay with making my way around. It's been so long, not even scattered papers remain.

My stash is close to the roof, so I walk up the staircase, which is actually kind of hard to do because it has slid sideways, as if it melted. But the foundation beneath is sound. When I get to the second floor, I duck around fallen debris with sharp, pointy metal spikes. A panel I've wedged closed and made to look natural holds my stash. I pry it open and grab a couple of books on top.

One book is a mystery paperback, and the other is about vampires. I spend a few moments reading their jackets, when a troling sound comes from outside. I freeze and listen. The sound comes again, along with diluted laughter. The books fall to my feet, immediately forgotten. Fear dances over me because I know who is out there. I make my way to one of the blown-out windows and peek out, my gaze roving all over until I spot them.

A band of men, decked out from head to toe with weapons, are dragging three bodies entangled in chains. I have no doubt the victims are dead; there's just not enough body left for them to be alive. The men are laughing, probably congratulating each other on a job well done.

After all, three scavengers are a lot.

People like me, people who steal what they can find to survive, are on top of the most hunted list. This city is basically lawless, run by gangs who consider the territory off-limits to strangers. And if I happen to be caught, it will be a very bad day for me.

I stay low and hidden until the men are long gone. And I remain still for another hour after that, just making sure that they are far away. The ground shaking beneath my feet has me moving from this dilapidated building, because the last thing I want is to be in it if it decides to cave to gravity. If you live in LA, earthquakes are a way of life. But lately there's been an increase in all the rockin' and rollin', and it's starting to bother me a bit.

I move my cramped body, forcing myself to back away from the window to grab the two books I dropped earlier. Then I hightail it back down the stairs and out of the broken building, to my bike. The hunters temporarily shook my nerves, but I'm used to seeing them. I'm used to being invisible.

As I start back to Malibu, my backpack strapped on tight, the fear starts to dissipate until I barely remember being scared at all. It's an all too familiar feeling, scared one moment and not the next. Tonight I plan on sleeping in my childhood home; sometimes I visit there, because leaving it completely is just too painful to contemplate. If I were to forget about my old home and my parents and the life I used to live, then I would be no better than that band of roving humans who had killed three people who had only been trying to survive.

It is a beautiful day in Los Angeles as I ride my bike and munch on a stale granola bar. The sun shines, the sky is blue, and a slight breeze wafts over me as I pedal up the incline of Sepulveda Pass. I am sweating, so the cool air feels really nice. Even now, even after so much destruction, this day is almost perfect.

It is a massive ride to leave the Valley and head back to the west side. The bridges over the 405 freeway have collapsed; the concrete and asphalt are impenetrable. There is an area where I am able to maneuver my bike up to the deserted freeway and I use the open road until I hit the exit for what used to be Sunset Boulevard. When I finally make it here, I am officially in Brentwood, my once and long-lost home. The echoes of my parents still linger, and they produce a painful thud in my heart. How can I still miss them so much? And is it ridiculous, even with the world completely in ruins, that I think the worst part of this catastrophe is that they died without ever knowing how much I loved them?

My house, located off San Vicente Boulevard, is a nice two-story white brick with a lovely marble walkway. Only now the white is marred with soot, the mortar is chipping, and the lawn has been reclaimed by wild grasses. I hide my bike in the back and use the basement door to enter, taking a moment to listen and ascertain that I am alone in my house. Within a few moments I grab some stored food and water, and I head upstairs to my old room. I have to smile at the decor of a young, naive girl who used to love Justin Timberlake and Robert Pattinson. My favorite books are still lined up in their shelves, my jewelry and makeup lined up on my vanity. I have stuffed animals and dolls, an unusable MP3 player, burned and bought CDs, and a store of batteries I've collected from many households. I light a candle and then choose a CD before popping it into my CD player. "Beautiful Liar" by Beyoncé and Shakira immediately starts to play.

I open the closet and move the clothes around to uncover my plastic boyfriend, William. Silly, I know, but in school, way back when, I had a major crush on this guy named William, and

when I found this mannequin, I decided to immortalize my feelings. He's been very faithful, very supportive, there when I needed him, and best of all, I wouldn't have to worry about him if something were to happen to me. William will live on, I imagine, until time erodes his hard plastic flesh.

I smile the smile of a Cheshire cat as I prop him up and start taking off his clothes. The music playing is the perfect accompaniment to my striptease. I push the button-down shirt off his shoulders, admiring the pecs that are revealed. My breathing hitches a bit as my heart speeds up. It's been a while since I visited William. I unbuckle the belt and slowly roll down the zipper, reaching around to slide my fingers over his butt as I push the trousers off him. My belly feels the dildo I long ago affixed to William, and the contact starts juices between my thighs. I am getting excited and wonder how long I will last playing with my doll.

When William is naked, I lay him down, the red dildo sticking straight up as if as proud and excited as I am with him. I take a few steps back, and the music changes to another Beyoncé song, "Single Ladies." I start to shimmy as I remember the old video. I don't know the moves, of course, but I dance with freedom, shaking and swishing my hips as I run my hands over them, between my legs to tease myself, and then up to cup my breasts through the sheer top. My nipples are hard already, so I tweak them to bring forth that need deep in my pussy. I've often wondered what it would feel like to have a real man replace my hands with his own, to have that need fed with his lips and tongue while he pinched and rolled my nipples. Would it be just as delicious as it is now? I rub my breasts with one hand while the other travels down between my thighs, my finger finding my clit and rubbing lightly through the rough material. Not enough to actually get my rocks off, but enough to make me wet with anticipation. Masturbation is fine, but since I found the red dildo and attached it to William, my fingers are no longer enough.

The song changes to a Katy Perry tune. I begin to remove my clothing, starting with my top and then moving on to my jeans and taking my panties off with them.

Naked, I sit on the floor facing William and close my eyes. This is the point where my imagination takes over, because as well as William services me, he is still just a dummy with a red dick. I am a woman; I need to feel the magic of romance and foreplay, even if I am the one doing the stimulating.

In my mind I picture the real William, with his blond hair and bright blue eyes. He was the quarterback in my high school, so his body was chiseled with hard muscle. I imagine him taking me in his strong arms to kiss me gently on the lips. He would worship me, trailing his lips down my neck and latching onto my breasts.

Next his hands would skim over my skin, causing chill bumps to appear. Then his fingers would disappear between my legs. I open my knees, letting cool air tease over my moist pussy, feeling exposed in a primitive way. The moisture there is slippery and just a bit sticky, the perfect way to lubricate William.

I slip my middle finger into my slit—only in my mind it is William's finger—and moan at the bliss that pours through me. My pussy walls practically suck my finger inside, so I hold my lips open as I start pumping in and out. My palm hits my clit with each pump, and I squirm at the pleasure. My hips start rocking to my hand, so I slide another finger in, groaning as sweat starts to bead on my face. The pressure is building fast, but I don't want to come on my hand. With much reluctance, I stop my hips and withdraw my fingers. It's time for William.

I crawl over to him, straddle his hips, and take hold of the red dick. I push it up toward me. I start to lower myself, rocking back and forth to wet him with my juice before slowly sliding all the way down. There is a bit of resistance at first, so I push a bit harder, and when my pussy relaxes, the red cock slides in. I sink all the way to William's plastic pelvis.

My head spins with the ecstasy of having my cunt filled. It's been a while since I was here, and my body has missed William. I start thrusting up and down, using my knees and thigh muscles, and each push makes it easier for the next as my juices start to flow down my legs and over William's. The first tentative movements give way to jerkier, harder thrusts, and soon my orgasm builds. It's so good, so unbelievably good. I start to buck and reach down to rub my clit as I grind on William.

The pressure is almost unbearable, but it is so sweet, I don't want this to end. I want to slow down and savor this, but I am out of control. I have no control over the climax that has me screaming in bliss. I come so hard that spasms race over my spine. I continue to ride William, coasting out the rest of the delicious pleasure that pours over me and blankets my mind in numbness.

Eventually I slump over my plastic boyfriend as my breathing starts to calm and my heart slows down. As I dismount, my legs quiver, and so I lie on my side next to him to stare lazily at his profile. His faux smile is forever frozen. He is staring at the ceiling, and I wonder if the real William would have treated me just as callously, had I ever managed to ride him like I just rode this doll. Even though my body is sated, my heart is lonely and cold. I have sex with William because there is no one else, but it doesn't stop me from yearning, from dreaming.

With a sigh, I push up from the floor and stand up. I use some water to wash up, and then I put on some fresh clothes. As I clean William, re-dress him, and then return him to his hiding place, I feel a prickling sensation wash over me. I hurry over to my candle and blow it out. I never take weird sensations as a trick of the imagination, because to do so would be foolish. I've seen too many movies, and they are, after all, what has kept me alive.

My gaze falls upon the window and I freeze as I realize my curtains are open. Ice hits my veins. How on earth I could be so clumsy? Have I so settled into this life, this comfort of how I live, that I've ignored my twin mantras of care and invisibility? How incredibly foolish I have been to jeopardize my survival.

I duck to the side and glance out of the glass. In the night I don't see anything. Nothing moves in the shadows. Yet still, I can feel a gaze touching my skin, and I don't like it. If someone has found me, then I can no longer stay in this house.

I turn away from the window and start to pack. I had planned on sleeping here, but I can't afford to remain when it's a question of safety. I pull on a dark sweatshirt and pack only the stuff I really don't want to lose: a picture of my parents, some CDs, and clean underwear. I reach under my bed and grab the few but powerful weapons I have amassed; the loaded gun I stick inside my backpack, and the hunting knife I snap onto a belt loop. With a small, sad look of longing at where William is hidden, I silently bid him good-bye. I can't afford to take him, and I won't be able to return if hunters have found me in this hideout. To survive I must remain invisible.

I sling my backpack over my shoulders, slip on my running shoes, and quietly run down the stairs to the back kitchen door. In the dark night I unchain the door and slip out, using the shadows to conceal my escape. I move away from my house, my heart pounding in fear.

Each second that ticks by, I feel more certain that I have escaped from whoever was at my house. I start to calm my racing heart, and that is when someone grabs me from behind, covering my mouth to shut off my scream.

Chapter Two

I struggle and I scream; I fight like a lioness.

The memory of the hunters from earlier pours into my brain, playing like a horror movie.

All my fighting is fruitless as my captor wraps his other arm around my waist and hauls me against his body. Even in my panicked state, I can feel the muscles rippling in his chest and thighs. The arms holding me captive are stout and firm; I can't escape.

So I do the next best thing. I stop fighting, making my body limp, and I crash to the ground like a heavy bowling ball. The sudden deadweight in his arms makes my captor swear and fumble forward. It is just the tiniest, most minute shift, but I take advantage and rear up my head to smack into his face. It isn't hard enough to break anything, but I hope it makes him see stars long enough for me to twist from his grasp.

I prepare myself for my next move, a half turn to hit the man's jewels with a fist, but he must have anticipated the familiar move, because he sidesteps, and my fist ends up harmlessly hitting air. Undaunted, I spin and ram my elbow into his stomach and am rewarded with an *oomph*, but I don't rest on my laurels. His hand loosens for a moment, and before he can blink, I jerk away and run.

And I smack right into a second man who has materialized in front of me. Automatically I reach for the knife at my waist and pull it out of its sheath with deft movement. Truthfully I have no practical experience with the knife, only from my own practice and the memories of *Rambo*. But at this juncture, the man in front of me does not know this. He eyes my weapon and hesitates, and a rush of adrenaline makes me feel cocky.

"I'm walking away from here," I tell him. "Don't follow."

I back up one step at a time, my knife never wavering. I am a great poker player. Unfortunately I forgot about the other man, and all of sudden he grabs me from behind in a bear hug. He has enfolded me, trapping not only my arms but my legs as well. He isn't rough, but he's

firm, and he quickly secures me as my feet leave the ground. My knife falls, and in frustration I try to kick out but am hampered by the powerful thighs that are scissored around mine.

He lets me kick and scream until the steam has blown over and I am limp in helpless anger. Stupid, stupid, stupid!

“You okay?” the second man asks.

“Son of a bitch!” the first man hisses. “My nose!”

“Let me go!” I demand in my coldest voice. “Fucking assholes!”

“Calm down,” the second man soothes—or at least says in what he seems to think is a soothing voice. “We're not going to hurt you.”

“Yeah, right,” I growl. “Raping me to become your drug whore isn't my idea of a picnic! I'll kill you both!”

“We won't hurt you,” the first man repeats. “We're with the government.”

“Is that right? The grand old government of Los Angeles? Get your fucking hands off me!”

“Listen to me.” The second man speaks again in that very calm and warm voice. “We're scouts with the newly re-formed US military.”

Now that is something I did not expect to hear. I actually look at the man in front of me and I see items I do not recognize as being from this world: wires in his ears, a gun too futuristic looking to be real, and a posture of pride shining through discipline. The first man lets me go gingerly, and I turn quickly to face them, making sure my back is clear. Both men are tall with identical musculatures, in what I used to call the suave David Beckham look—corded muscles and bulging sinew. One man is white, with close-cropped dark hair and light eyes, though I can't tell the specific color in the darkness. I can see a dimple flashing in his right cheek. The second man is black, though his skin isn't very dark—more like a creamy mocha. He has beautiful chocolate-colored eyes with lashes that make me envious. I realize both men are staring at me with peculiar expressions.

“The US military?” I ask sharply. “Where the fuck have you been for the past six years?”

Even I admit that my voice rose slightly with that last question. At night it is far too dangerous to let sound carry, and I quickly twist around to see if this encounter has been too reckless.

The two men must have been thinking the same thing. “Let's go inside,” the second Man says with a nod toward the house and grabs my arm in a firm hold.

The first man escorts us inside and then checks around the rooms to make sure the curtains are thick and heavy. With the curtains drawn tight and me in tow, the two men go about lighting the candles they see lying around.

They are wearing curve-hugging black leather from top to bottom, with gun belts crisscrossing their hips and armor protecting their shoulders and chests. I can't even begin to guess how many weapons are stashed on their bodies, from pistols to knives to the large automatic rifles they both carry like they're permanently attached to their hands. The white guy's eyes are a light blue, the pupils piercing in contrast to the irises. He is a few inches shorter than his comrade, but his shoulders are broader. He radiates stronger domination.

“Who the fuck are you two?” I demand, shaking off the second man's hold. Both look ready to give chase, as if anticipating my attempt to flee, but what they don't realize is that now I am very curious about them.

“My name is Sergeant Tobias Noble,” the first man says, “and this is my partner, Sergeant Orion West. We're with the scout squad of the Western Division 281 Ground Troops. And you are?”

I ignore him. Instead I look between him and West, trying to see if they are telling the truth or pulling the wool over my eyes. I haven't stayed alive this long by being gullible. Still, I must admit they do kind of look military. But how the hell would I know? “As you've probably guessed,” I say, “Internet's been down, the paper's been stolen, and my TV doesn't work, so why don't you tell me about this so-called government. Is there still a president? A Washington DC?”

I see West visibly relax with my questions. “As a matter of fact there is a president, but the seat of government has been moved for tactical reasons. The new capital is located in Missouri right now.”

“Missouri?”

“When everyone fled to the East, the cities were overwhelmed, and it made stabilizing the country difficult. Missouri was a more central location.” He shrugs. “It seemed like a logical choice at the time.”

Who am I to say any different? I wasn't part of the panicked migration when the virus reached US shores, so I honestly have no opinion on whether moving the capital was a smart idea.

Noble comes to stand next to me. "There are actually two more groups like us, a total of three pairs to scout this area and extract civilians."

"Extract civilians? Like, take them somewhere far, far away?"

He smiles and nods. "You don't think the rest of the world is like this, do you? This lawless? Or that the government has abandoned its citizens?"

Actually I don't know what I think, so I stall by scrunching up my forehead like I'm concentrating really hard. Are they for real? Are they telling me the truth? Part of me is happy I'm finally talking to another human being, but another part is warning me not to be too trusting.

"The only thing I'm thinking is that I don't know if I should trust you or your bullshit story about the US military," I finally tell them.

"It's not a story," Noble replies, running a hand over his buzz cut. This little tic tells me he's the more impatient of the two.

"What you mentioned outside... What exactly did that mean?" West asks, interposing me and his partner. "About raping."

"After the earthquake, this city was in chaos. It quickly became commandeered by gangs, and all of them report to this really nasty man who goes by the name El Toro." I level a dark look toward both of them. "Obviously he's Latino. I once saw his men nab a girl—" I shut my mouth pretty quickly and refuse to say any more. I don't like to think about Amber.

"How long you been on your own?" West asks me in a gentle tone.

"I've always been on my own." I can see the disbelief on their faces. "What? You don't believe me? Fuck you."

Noble takes a deep breath. "Can you at least tell us your name?"

I have this super-strong feeling I am never going to be able to shake the two of them. These men are hunters, and I am their new bone. "I'm Kaori," I finally say. "Kaori Carnelian."

Nobel reaches out his hand after a momentary pause. "Good to meet you, Kaori."

It's a strong hand, the nails cut short and kept surprisingly clean. As I embrace it, I have a sudden flutter in my stomach, a slight sizzle on my skin. And as his fingers close around mine, I become consciously aware of my shallow breathing and sudden drench of juice coating my panties. I find this very annoying and yank my hand away. The corner of his mouth lifts slightly, and this is how I know he knows I felt a little spark at his touch. I so want to smack that smirk off his face, but one look at his gun and I decide to turn away instead.

"This is my home," I tell West, ignoring the other one. "The home I had before the Great Incident. I come back here every once in a while, so it's not like you could track me here—"

"The Great Incident?" Noble interrupts me.

I shoot him a dirty look. "I guess we can call it the Big Shake Day if that's better for you. As I was asking"—I turn back to his partner, catching the tail end of his amused eyebrow lift—"how did you two track me here?"

"We spotted you this morning as you were leaving that old bookstore."

This makes me pause and think back. It makes me uneasy that they have been tailing me and I never saw or felt them behind me. I have always prided myself on my ability to disappear, to blend. Just call me the poster girl for caution. Noble and West could be in El Toro's gang; right this moment I could be on my way to becoming a drugged-up piece of ass whose sole purpose in life was to be passed around from man to man.

Just like Amber.

Involuntarily my body gives a little quiver of fear. I feel West reach up and steady me. His thumbs rub circles on the skin they're touching, and I must admit I like how it soothes me. I look into his dark eyes and return the smile he gives me, feeling slightly off-kilter. This is very odd. One man gives me butterflies and the other man settles my soul.

I don't like this twist of two men barging into my life and upsetting my equilibrium. I don't like that I've become sloppy in my survival skills. And I really don't like that my life as I've known it is over. I knock West's hands away and back away from the both of them. Anger flashes through me.

"I want you both to leave! Go back to collecting people, but leave me the hell alone!"

"We can't leave." West speaks calmly, but I am past hearing.

“I never asked to be rescued, and whether or not this so-called military and government of the States is formed again, I'll take my chances with continuing to live as I've been doing.”

“We can't leave you here, Kaori,” Noble interjects, taking a step closer to me. “You're out of time. All this, everything on the West Coast, is going to be annihilated in about four days.”

This shuts me up. My mouth, my brain, every molecule in my body freezes as those words vibrate throughout the room. I try to swallow, but my mouth is suddenly dry.

“A-annihilate?” I stutter.

Noble rubs his hand over his buzz cut again. I realize now that instead of being an aggravated tic, this gesture gives him a moment to think. “The San Andreas Fault is going to shift again, worse than the earthquake six years ago,” he tells me. “We're here to get everyone out who we can.”

My brain is mush. I stare at him for a moment before blinking hard to try to clear the fuzziness swimming around in my head. “Excuse me?”

Noble looks over my head, and West pulls my arm to help me sit down. “About ten years ago, the US Geological Survey started an experiment to try to predict earthquakes. They dug a deep hole into the San Andreas and planted monitoring equipment that was tracked via global-positioning satellites. They were able to measure shift patterns, core temperatures, rock formations, plate movement, everything. Are you with me so far, Kaori?”

I nod.

“Good.” He gives me a smile and squeezes my hand. “When the world went to shit, the infrastructure of our government, the very foundation the United States was built upon, almost didn't survive. The President wanted to send troops out to California and help survivors, but the military wasn't immune to the virus. We were dropping left and right, and those of us who survived were acting as military law, militia, and police all rolled into one body.”

“And now? How do you know there's an earthquake coming in four days?”

“One good thing that happened was a push for technology,” he continues. “I'm not a geophysicist. I don't know all the technobabble to explain it, but scientists have gone from being able to predict a seventy percent chance of an earthquake within two to four years to a ninety-six percent chance of an earthquake in four to six days with a magnitude greater than a nine point two.”

My breath hitches. I stare at him, and his eyes leave no doubt as to his sincerity. Whatever I think, he seems to believe this futuristic, sci-fi crap. “I don't believe you,” I say, biting my lip.

I hear Noble groan, but West stays with me, holding my hand. “I suppose that's fair.”

I rise and walk away for a moment to myself, trying to comprehend what these two men have brought into my life.

“My mother dragged my father into her hospital because he started showing signs of the virus,” I tell them in a low voice. “She was a surgeon and got her hands on every crap vaccine she could find and injected us with all of them. But he got sick anyway, and they went to her hospital so she could treat him. And that's where they're buried, because it collapsed.” I turn to face them, my hands in fists. “And now you're telling me there's a way they could have been saved.”

West shakes his head. “Not back then. But now we can save lives.”

“Oh yeah? Then how many other people have you found here?”

I see them share a deep look. “So far, just you,” West tells me. “When we saw you, we thought you might be joining up with others, so we detoured this way.”

“And now you're here to save everyone. With six men.” There is more than a trace of disbelief in my voice. “LA was a large area—six million people.”

“Yes”—West nods—“once upon a time.”

“Cutting this four-day time limit kind of close, aren't you?” I'm not about to give them any slack. The shock is wearing off quickly, and with that comes the return of my reasoning and self-preservation.

“That's the disadvantage,” he says. “Not a lot of time to prepare.”

I narrow my eyes and study him. He sits down with his arms loosely propped on his knees, fingers looped together. His dark eyes are direct, focused squarely on me. If he's lying, then he's pretty fucking good at it.

A slight rumble in my stomach reminds me that I took food upstairs to munch on but forgot to eat it because of my tryst with William. And I could use a moment to myself to analyze everything I've just learned.

“I have to run upstairs,” I tell them.

Noble grabs my arm. “Don't run away, Kaori. We're being honest.”

“As honest as I think you can be,” I reply scornfully. “I have food upstairs, and I'm hungry.”

Noble lets go slowly. They watch me as I grab a lit candle and go upstairs; I am very aware of their stares, especially on my ass. I have a difficult time not wiggling it back at them, because I really want to for some inexplicable reason. They are aggravating and annoying, and I am way too attracted to them for my own good. In my bedroom I look around for the granola bar and the can of ravioli I brought up with the can opener. I sit on the floor next to the closet door and start eating, letting my gaze wander around.

In my perusal I see the window and I give a little huff. I am positive Noble and West watched me with William. Embarrassment floods through me. How much did they see? The whole kit and caboodle? More specifically, *my* caboodle?

Suddenly I'm not so hungry anymore. An earthquake killed my parents and now I'm going to face another one? How much is one person supposed to take in life?

I blow out my candle and put it aside. I leave my bedroom and sneak to the top of the stairs to listen to the men talk below.

I hear West say, “She's more beautiful up close than through binoculars.”

“Yeah,” Noble agrees. “I was practically busting a nut holding her. God, watching her fuck that mannequin was playing through my head like a video stream.”

He groans, and for some reason this really turns me on.

And yet how the hell do I face them now?

A high-pitched alarm peals through the house, causing me to jump up and race downstairs. I see them glance at the watches on their wrists and push some buttons. Mercifully, the shrill whistle ends.

“What was that?” I ask breathlessly.

“Perimeter alert,” Noble mutters. He and West grab their guns. “You stay here,” he tells me.

“No fucking way!” I rush over to the couch and snatch the gun I have stashed under a cushion. Then I rush over to the table and pull out another gun from under it. When I turn to them, their eyes are wide. “I’ve had six years to teach myself how to shoot.”

West takes my arm in a firm hold. There are equal parts concern and compassion shining in his eyes. “Have you ever shot a person?”

I hesitate. *No. No, I’ve never shot a person or even an animal.* I lift my chin. “I would kill in a heartbeat if it meant my survival.”

Another shrill *beep* and there is no more time for talk. I stuff one gun in the back of my pants then grab my backpack and sling it over my shoulders, tightening the straps. My other hand is squeezing the pistol so tightly I can feel the word Ruger biting into my palm. I really don't want to acknowledge that I am scared but very glad to have these men in front of me.

Since Noble and West are equally tense, signing to each other as they prepare to face the unknown out there, I have to assume the bad guys are hunters. I have always known that one day I would face this moment when I was discovered, when El Toro and his men would find me. Amber has kept me a secret far longer than I could have ever hoped for, but eventually I knew she would crack. Having West and Noble standing with me, protecting me, my heart gives a little leap of happiness that I am no longer alone.

Chapter Three

Cautiously placing one foot in front of the other, we exit through the basement. Luckily the moon is hidden to make our escape easier. I am sandwiched between Noble and West and am very conscious of my breathing. It's so loud in my ears, I'm afraid it's echoing through the night.

Though I don't hear anything except my breathing, Noble, who is in front of me, pauses and holds up a closed fist. Then he points to the right, and I feel West move to disappear into the shadows.

Usually I am not afraid of the dark. I know what lives in it, and it's not the myth of monsters or a boogeyman. The only creatures who hunt the night are human. They can be scary if you give them power, so I try very hard not to give them that. I breathe deeply, calm my heart and nerves, and ease the grip on the gun butt. I remind myself it's okay to be afraid, but not okay to give in to that fear.

Noble and I walk a few more paces, when he is suddenly hit by a body. I stumble back from the unexpected force of Noble's weight slamming into me, and when I stabilize again, I am unable to get a clear shot at whoever has attacked us. I yank the other gun from the back of my pants and train them to the shadows wrestling together.

They hit the ground with a *thud*, and Noble twists to land half on top of his assailant. I hear grunts as elbows and fists go flying, but in the moonless dark I am unsure who is actually winning.

As I concentrate on the forms in front of me, a man grabs my arms from behind and yanks them so the guns point into the air. The guns don't discharge because I have not yet taken the safeties off; instead I use the back of my head and butt it hard into my captor's nose. The only thing I know for certain is that he's not West. I hear a grunt and smell his putrid breath as it whooshes out. I stomp on his foot, further disorienting him, and he stumbles back enough to give me freedom. I spin to face him, crouching and waiting till he's right on top of me. Then I kick out

and smash his shin. I hear his cry of pain and swing the pistol, catching him across the face with the top of the barrel. I hear a *snap* and feel wetness slide over my fingers, realizing I must have broken his nose, no doubt already bruised from my head butt. He falls back and does not move.

I stand back and assess everything. I'm feeling great about how I handled my bad guy, and I turn to see Noble give one last punch to his. The man falls unconscious. And then, out of nowhere, another man darts in front of me and backhands me across the cheek.

I fly back, more than dazed, and the world goes flying out of focus. The man scoops me up onto his shoulder and I vaguely hear guns discharge and some cursing as the man starts running away. I bounce against his back, my cheek throbbing and wetness running into my eye. I'm assuming it's blood, because it stings and smells faintly coppery. Through the haze, I try to get my bearings, to return from the darkness that edges out my vision.

And then the man swings me from his shoulder to the ground. Another man bends over me and turns my head. I hear them, though I can't quite see them, and they seem really interested in the birthmark behind my ear. A flashlight shines onto the side of my face.

"It's here," he says. I would love to grab that flashlight and shove it up his nose. "Dark red, shaped like a heart."

The man who carried me grunts his agreement. As I lie there, very still, the vertigo starts to dissipate and the blackness leaves my sight. I wait, though. I don't want to alert them that I have regained my senses. Besides, how the hell do they know about my birthmark? Could Amber have told them?

"We have to get out of here," Flashlight Man says.

And then a gun fires, startling the two bad guys, and I use this opportunity to kick Flashlight Man in the gut. He grunts and doubles over at the same moment I rear up and punch my captor in the nose. We plummet to the ground and I scramble quickly to my feet to run. By this time Flashlight Man is returning fire, his aim wavering since he doesn't know where to point. I leave the gunfight behind me as I escape into the darkness.

Thank goodness I am very familiar with this area. I instinctively know which way is west, and I run that way, toward the ocean. There are many places I can hide in Santa Monica—houses I've set up for just such an emergency.

I run, keeping to shadows and the lumbering husks of trees to shield me from anyone looking. As the sounds of the gunfire fade so too does my connection to West and Noble. Now that I am free, I plan to take care of myself. According to them, I have four days to get out of this city.

But first I must get to one of my safe houses. I can wait and regroup in the morning, strategize and figure out what the hell to do with the information I have. It takes me a while to travel from Brentwood to Santa Monica, even though the two cities are neighbors. Any noise I hear sends me scurrying into the brush to hide.

The house I choose isn't far from where the Third Street Promenade used to be. The promenade was a blocked-off street made for tourists to enjoy, with shops, movie theaters, eateries, and coffee shops. Before I turned sixteen, my friends and I hung out there a lot because our parents trusted us to be there without supervision. Only a couple of blocks away the Santa Monica Pier and the bike path had once stretched from Venice almost to Malibu, but the pier had fallen into the ocean and the bike path had long since been reclaimed by the sand.

Without streetlight or people, Santa Monica is a ghost town along the Pacific Ocean, once beautiful but now very desolate. I enter the house from the back. When I close the door, I drop my backpack and head wearily up the stairs, where I enter a bedroom, rip the plastic tarp from the bed, and flop down into the soft comfort of a mattress.

I am asleep in moments.

Chapter Four

It is the shaking of the house that wakes me up. I sit up and wait as the house creaks and moans around me. After a moment the movement stops, and I breathe a sigh of relief. It's way too early in the fucking morning for this shit.

The memories from last night replay sharply in my head.

The sun is high and bright, and a slip of light hits me on the face, making me moan as my head throbs. I place a hand to my injured cheek and get up to look into the dresser mirror. There's dried blood around a small cut on my cheek. When I had been upside down on the bad guy's shoulder the blood had run into my eye and into my hairline.

My mouth feels as if it's stuffed with cotton, so I walk into the bathroom, grab a toothbrush and paste, and crack open a bottle of water stored there to brush my teeth. The rest of the water I use to wash my face, and I must admit this makes me feel human again. I use the commode because, even though it doesn't flush, I never plan on being here again, so does it really matter?

And now for the hard part: thinking. Even though I don't want to, I believe part of what West and Noble have told me. I still think predicting earthquakes is impossible, but if they're here to rescue people, then I think it's prudent I consider getting out of LA. I return to the bed and sit on its edge. I fold my hands together and rest my elbows on my knees. I have a slight headache, and my stomach rumbles, but I ignore this because it's important to come to a decision quickly. I don't have a lot of time left.

I have two choices lying in front of me. Do I believe Noble and West? Or do I disappear again and continue as I have been living for the past six years? LA might be dangerous but it's a world I know. Then again, do I take the chance that Noble and West might possibly be right? They've come up with a pretty fantastical story, but is it so unreasonable to think that they have intelligence and data I know nothing about? Do I take the chance of risking my life?

No. I have survived so much that I can't ignore anything that threatens that survival. The obvious answer is to escape, but how do I run? The only form of emergency transportation I have is a hidden dirt bike with six-year-old gasoline, so not a very reliable source to escape with. There aren't any other resources left to get far enough away in the days remaining. That is the one and only blaring truth of the matter, because as self-sufficient as I am, even I can't fight Mother Nature.

I sigh and run a hand over my tangled hair. So I need West and Noble after all. I hoped last night when I finally got free that distance would provide clarity and a plan. All it proved was that I am a sitting duck without them.

So my next step, I suppose, is to find them. *Crap.*

Resigned, I head into the kitchen and pry loose a floorboard in the corner. In the little cubbyhole are a variety of items, including a small nine millimeter. I grab it and a full cartridge, load it and slide the chamber back to seat the bullet. Then I grab my backpack and sling it around my shoulder, keeping the gun in my hand. I exit the house the way I got in. The day is cool, as it usually is in Santa Monica. The breeze that blows from the ocean makes the temperature at least ten degrees cooler than in the Valley. I guess that makes up for the fact that the beach is dirty and the water awful. Never once did I step a toe into the Pacific on this section of the coast. I always preferred Zuma Beach in Malibu.

I walk toward the area that overlooks what used to be the Pacific Coast Highway, making my way down the empty streets. Only a few houses still stand and those have almost been taken over by the grass and weeds.

The street comes to a dead end at the asphalt remains of Ocean Boulevard. There was once a wonderful little strip of park that stretched for blocks; it had a walking and running path for exercise or just strolls to enjoy the sunset. It outlined the bluffs that overlooked the highway and beach. But the earthquake caused this once-landscaped park to fall away and created a new drop that took some of the street with it. It was no longer safe to walk too close to the edge.

I see a movement in the corner of my eye, and I swivel my head to catch it. At first I see nothing out of the ordinary, but unease settles in my bones. I hunch down and make my way quickly to the side of an apartment building. Daylight is usually pretty safe, but there's no guarantee. I make sure the safety is off the gun and follow the path my instinct leads me to.

I use the broken sidewalk to make my way down the block. I turn my head toward another flash of movement near the alley. I follow in a hurry, wondering why I'm bothering. Usually I would walk away; I neither want nor need the complications other people bring. But last night has made me jumpy, and I have a desire to make sure there is nothing around me that's going to bite me in the ass.

I trail the wisp of movement into the apartment complex I've been circling. The upper section of the complex is gone, but the lower units are still intact. The hallway is dark, and it takes a moment for my eyes to adjust. My gun is in front of me, and I hold it at eye level. I slink around stairs and then stop to listen. I hear the creak of a door, and I jerk my gaze up the stairs to see it close completely at the second level. I pursue, mindful to step lightly in case the stairs are booby-trapped to squeal at pressure, because that's how I would have made them.

I pause outside the door, silently count to three, and then throw it open, letting my gun guide me into the apartment hallway. I see no more movement, but there are a dozen closed doors, and someone could be behind any one of them. My heart is pounding, and my brain is telling me I should get the hell out of here. Why am I even bothering with this? Because I now believe the world is going to shake itself apart? Am I trying to be some type of fucking hero? Even though there is a loud voice in my head screaming at me to leave, something else is urging me to find out for sure what the movement I saw really was, so I move forward.

The hallway turns about halfway down, so I move to that side and walk down the dim path. I move to the first door and try the knob, but it's locked, so I go to the second with the same results. Each of the consecutive doors are also locked, and just as I pass the break, West moves from the shadowed enclave.

Luckily I am able to curb my scream of fright and not shoot him. He holds up a finger to his lips and gestures me to his side, which I quickly rush to. He greets me with a small smile and a finger running down my cheek. I find myself staring into his dark, velvety eyes. He makes some other hand signal of which I have no idea of the meaning, so he points to the hallway. We both peek, and I see Noble line himself up next to a door farther down. He looks at us, gives a nod, and then kicks the door open.

There is an uproar inside the room, shrieks and lots of movement. Noble points his gun, yelling in both English and Spanish, letting the occupants inside understand he is here to help

them. Soon I see several men come out, their hands held out and relief on their faces. They speak Spanish back to Noble, and since I don't understand, I have to read their body language.

I realize I've walked into West and Noble's rescue mission. Noble looks at us and gestures us over. West secures his weapon, I click the safety back on mine before slipping it into my pocket, and we walk over to the smiling, happy people.

Two families live here, including several children, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. They all listen intently as Noble starts talking again.

"He's telling them to pack their belongings," West tells me. "The rescue lift will be here in about an hour, but we have to move to beachside."

"You've saved all these people," I tell him needlessly. I suppose I'm simply shocked.

"We wouldn't have if we hadn't been searching for you," he says.

I look into his dark eyes. "I'm sorry for running," I tell him. "But I needed to think."

"You need to believe in us," he tells me.

I don't answer. Instead I turn back to the families and watch as they jump into action, packing and preparing the belongings they need. Noble keeps talking to them in Spanish, so I have no idea what anyone is saying, but I can't help but smile as one of the grandmothers has him bend over so she can kiss his cheek.

And then Noble and West guide the people out of the apartment complex. The rest of the afternoon hours are about organizing them toward the beach since the pine trees are too wild and too tall for anything to land safely.

There is one bridge left that stretches over the Pacific Coast Highway, the one at the pier. The troop of people, all speaking with a lightness they probably haven't felt in a long time, chatters away. I let it fall into background noise. All I can think about is the fact that I will soon be facing a means of escape, and I'm not sure I'm ready to go.

And then, there it is: a dark spot in the sky. I haven't seen anything flying except birds in quite a long time and my breath catches in wonderment. I can't help but stare as the large rescue lift approaches. It looks like a fat boat with helicopter blades. It flies straight at us and descends rapidly. The deep reverberation of the engine cuts through me and gives me a shiver. It is an odd sound now, a ghost from the past.

The lift lands several yards from us and we wait until Noble and West give us the signal, until several other soldiers jump from the helicopter-type lift, then needlessly but instinctively duck to avoid the slowly spinning blades before we go forward.

I follow everyone, enjoying the wind swishing my hair back from my face. I watch as each person is helped aboard, settled, and strapped in, and their possessions are tucked carefully away. It takes a while to do this, because the soldiers are recording names in ledgers, talking to each person, and I suspect giving them information about where we're going.

I look at the ocean, able to hear the angry waves as they pound against the beach. My father used to tease me and make me listen as the sun slowly set, swearing I could hear the hiss of the sun as it sank into the water. For a time I had been obsessed with trying to hear that sound and would beg my dad to bring me to the beach every sunset. My dad had always been a good sport.

And that's when my feet start backtracking. Noble and West step back and let the other soldiers handle everything. They turn to look at me. They want me to join these people and leave; I see it in their eyes. They want to tell me to get on this lift, to get the hell away from Los Angeles.

And I really thought that I could walk away, but faced with the escape in front of me I can't. Not right now. I'm not ready to leave it all behind.

So I turn away from them and start walking. The lift rises up into the air and goes on its way, taking those people with it to a new life. I keep walking, away from West and Noble, because even though I know I must go with them, I'm not quite ready to follow.

It has gotten late. The sun is waning, ready to start its descent into the ocean. I half listen for the hiss. Instead, I hear a low rumble and recognize the sound of a motor. I twirl around, not sure what to expect, but what I see is a three-wheeled car that looks like it came from the set of *Blade Runner*. It rests so low, it almost hugs the ground. It is the color of gunmetal, all shiny and dark.

It brakes right in front of me, and the door opens vertically. Noble unfolds from the seat and strides toward me, and as we meet, he grabs my hand and yanks me close to him. I am flush with his body. My breasts are pillowed by the hard body armor he wears; my thighs cradle his.

“Don't ever run from us again,” he whispers harshly in my ear, even as his hug is gentle.

“I won't,” I promise, and it's one I really hope I can keep.

Relief pours through me, along with a sinful picture of the two of us naked. Where this image comes from, I have no clue. I shrug it off, however, and let myself be tugged to the waiting craft.

It's a tight fit since the vehicle had been designed for only two people, and though I'm not short, I am thin, so I sit cramped up between them. Noble pulls his door down, and we rumble off through the night, away from Santa Monica.

“I didn't think there was any gas left,” I remark, taking in the glowing dashboard and all the tiny buttons. West focuses on a red windshield that resembles a computer screen, showing him where to go so he doesn't have to physically see the road.

“It doesn't run on gas,” he answers. “This is an XR3 hybrid, turned into a fully solar-powered trike.”

“Did you follow me yesterday in this? How did you follow me in this and me not hear it?”

“Orion followed you on foot,” Noble tells me, “and I followed him. He and I are linked through a neuronet positional transmitter.”

Forget *Blade Runner*. This is more along the lines of *Terminator*.

“Please don't tell me you're biological matter superimposed over a metal skeleton,” I joke, only half-serious. I get blank looks from them and wave my hand to tell them to forget it. “Where are we going?”

“You're more familiar with the area,” West says. “You have another safe house?”

“Yeah, there's a couple more here in Santa Monica. But I have a fortress in Malibu.”

“Then lead us.”

Though I can't see out, West studies the red computer screen intently so I trust he can read the road. We travel down what's left of the Pacific Coast Highway, over debris and encroaching woods. The three of us are quiet. I'm consciously aware of the men I'm sandwiched between, and that awareness is a thread of adrenaline pumping through my system, keeping me tense and awake.

I've only known them a day, and already they're forcing my life to spiral out of control. Half of me is happy about this; I've been alone for far too long. The other half is waging a war with the happy half.

I look at my lap and see Noble's hand resting on his thigh. And two inches up is a bulge that keeps my gaze glued and my mouth dry. Or it keeps my mouth watering; right now I am really confused about this fantasy. I dither back and forth between his replacing William and my riding him and my being fucked by both him and West. I can feel that my pussy is swollen with want, and each subtle shift of my hips rolls the gathering wetness and presses against the need. One or two forceful jerks and I will cream my jeans with a cry of blissful joy, but I hold back, and that alone causes my heart to pound slightly with anticipation.

When I started scavenging upon my return to LA, I came across this sex store on Santa Monica Boulevard and spent hours in there. I rounded up everything that seemed interesting and stashed it. Over the months, as I explored homes forgotten and abandoned, I continued to find bits of erotica, and my collection grew. If you had asked me years ago, when I was a normal teenager, if I would become obsessed with sex, I would have laughed myself silly. I suppose, though, when you've been alone for so long and have fantasized about what you've missed, that part of your nature manifests. Or maybe I'm wrong and I would have been a nympho no matter what; it really is a moot point, I suppose.

I see Noble's fingers tighten on his thigh, and I raise my eyes and capture his look with a look of my own. He knows what I'm feeling, because he's feeling it too. There is a pull drawing us together whether I like it or not. I shift my body ever so slightly and bring my right breast flush against his bicep. I so badly want to rub up and down, like a cat in heat, but there is no room in this little triangle for me to get frisky. I lick my lips, and his nostrils flare; even I can smell my arousal.

The rest of the trip is mostly silent, broken only occasionally by questions from West about where to go. We head north and enter Malibu without incident. I direct them through a series of narrow dirt roads until we reach the home I'm talking about. I stumbled upon this house several years ago when I was thinking of leaving LA. Once Amber was taken it was hard for me to see a reason to keep going on, to keep living, but suicide was something I could never seriously contemplate. Honor and integrity had been ingrained in me too deeply, so I thought a change of

scenery was what I needed. Luckily I stumbled up this trail and found this ginormous house and made it my home base.

Everything to do with survival is stored here. Describing it all would be impossible. Brentwood has a paltry fraction of what I have amassed here. The trike comes to a halt, and the doors swing up, and finally I am released from my delicious encasement.

The night breeze is stiff and cool and blows my hair around. I reach up to hold the long strands. Even in the dark the house is impressive, very imposing and spacious. The front faces the ocean, but we've approached from the back. A garage is attached to the side, and about twenty feet away is a small shed. There was once a vegetable garden, but I let the weeds claim it, because to cultivate it would have brought it to the attention of anyone who saw it.

“You can hide the trike in the garage,” I tell the men. “It's unlocked.”

Their rifles held in front of them at the ready, they are all business as they search in sweeps to make sure we're alone. I take out the key that's on a chain around my neck and open the door to the house with a slight squeak of hinges. Without alarm systems, it's wise to make your own. Had the door been kicked open, I would have known the house had been ransacked; as it is, every window is boarded up, every door nailed shut. I can walk into my home and turn on every light because I've insulated every possible leak.

Noble is the last in, and he shuts and bolts the door behind him. I've already walked through lighting lamps and can see the amazed expressions on their faces. From the patio we just walked through, we enter into the kitchen. Attached off to the side, behind the door, is a little nook I've lined from floor to ceiling and from wall to wall with cans of vegetables, at least eight cans deep. I've also a grand stash of stackable Tupperware holding my sugar-rush breakfast bars and Pop-Tarts and other nonperishables.

The dining area open to the kitchen is made of all white tiles and oak beams, and would look lovely in early-morning light were the window not boarded up. There are two doorways from this area: one leading into the formal dining room and a vaulted sitting room, the other leading to the foyer and front door. A hallway branches from the foyer that houses two bedrooms, a study, and a powder room. At the end of the hallway is a large sunken den dominated by a stone fireplace.

Each room on the bottom floor is host to something I've found. Food is stored in the kitchen and dining areas. In bedroom number one, I've placed bathroom necessities like tampons, soap, shampoo, razors, and so forth. In another bedroom I've stockpiled clothes, shoes, underwear, and all that goes with that. The entire bottom level of the house is nothing but survival items. The top floor houses weapons I've found and knickknacks I don't want to lose. And of course, in my room located at the end of the hallway, I've my collection of sex toys and books. Minus William, of course.

From floor to ceiling this house is stacked with provisions. I could live here for the rest of my life very comfortably; I only leave it out of sheer cabin fever.

“Holy shit,” West mumbles. “You *have* been on your own for six years.”

I smirk and move past the foyer into the living room, lighting more lamps. Some are paraffin lamps, some are generic oil lamps, and I even have a few biodiesel lamps. I try to burn only the ones with cleaner-burning oil because I basically breathe this stuff every night.

As I sit down on the overly large, overly plush brown suede couch, the sexual adrenaline that plagued me all night suddenly deserts me, leaving me beyond tired. I twist my body and lie on my stomach as complete and utter exhaustion overwhelms me.

“I'll take first watch,” I hear Noble tell West. “Rest up and watch her.”

I want to sneer. *What am I, sheep?* But I'm too weary to snap.

Noble disappears, and I turn my half-open gaze to West. He sits down opposite me in the matching suede chair, catching my stare with one of his own. He smiles, and I can't help but notice he has beautiful white teeth. There are lines that fan out from his eyes, deep creases that appear often. He lays his big gun across his lap, one finger absently stroking the metal as if his gun is a lover he craves to touch.

A wayward shiver breaks over my skin. I can't help but picture that finger stroking over me.

Though the adrenaline is gone, there is still a strange, restless energy streaking through me, and it prevents me from falling instantly, deeply asleep. So instead I start talking, hoping the conversation will calm my nerves.

“Where are you from?” I start benignly.

“New Orleans,” he answers promptly, his chocolate stare tracing over my face.

“I don't know much about how other cities are now.”

“The Big Easy is still intact, but the city just had one too many disasters thrown at her, so there aren't many people living there. Like most, the majority of the city's population thought to migrate north or east to avoid the virus.”

“And Noble? He doesn't have the same accent as you.”

“He's from New York. A street punk.”

I smile. Yes, I can see the paranoia shining through his barriers. “How long have you two known each other?” I ask him.

“We ended up in basic together.” West purses his lips as he counts back. “I suppose it's been about fourteen years. He'd been busted a few times for minor infractions and a judge gave him the choice of joining the military or going to jail.”

“And you?”

He shrugs. “I joined on my own. The only way to get an education. But I discovered I liked it. Needless to say, he and I didn't get along at first.”

“But you grew on each other.”

He laughs. “Like a fungus.”

“And are you together?”

He raises one eyebrow, wanting me to elaborate.

“You know,” I say, “together.”

“If you mean do we have sex together, no. But if you mean do we watch each other have sex, then yes.” He winks at me in casual flirting.

I don't tell him I have never mastered the art of amorous banter, and so I take his meaning at face value. The pictures that come to my mind have my heart racing and my thighs clenching with unexpected need.

“That's something I'd like to see,” I whisper to him.

He smiles sinfully. Suddenly I want to suck his lips into my mouth and devour them. “Then that is something we can definitely arrange for you.”

“You saw me, didn't you? With William.” I'm not asking him; I'm letting him know I know.

“William? You named the mannequin?”

I would have thought their knowing about my doll would be mortifying, yet I remain very calm. Perhaps I am just too weary to care at this point.

“I've been all alone growing from a teenager into a woman,” I say softly. All humor disappears from his face. “My mother was Japanese and taught me to honor myself above all others, so I never had a boyfriend. I was a virgin until I made William.”

He looks over my features, like a feather dancing over my skin. “Have you ever been kissed by a man?” he finally asks.

I shake my head no because technically it's the truth.

He takes a deep breath.

I sit up slowly, resting my hands on my knees. “Will you kiss me?” I ask him.

I don't realize I've held my breath until he sets his gun aside, stands, and stretches his hand out to me. I reach out to take it, and the next thing I know, he's jerked me to him, one hand reaching down to wrap around my neck and the other around my waist.

Very gently he lowers his head and uses his tongue to trace my lips, learning their shape and flavor. He rubs the skin under my chin with his thumb, and a slight pressure moves my head up a fraction, giving him enough room to fasten his mouth on mine. He sweeps my lips open with his tongue and plunges inside. We taste each other, the flavors deep and exquisite, his tongue mating with mine, mimicking how he would possess me.

Unlike the torturous ride next to Noble, where lust had burst suddenly over me and almost pushed me into recklessness, what I feel with West is different. There is lust, definitely, but it's deep-seated, a burning that starts as an ember and grows till it's volcanic. I reach up and grab his head, holding on and securing this kiss. I never want to let him go.

His hand around my waist moves lower, and he grabs my calf, bringing it around to encircle his hips. This widens my stance, and I can feel him pulse against me even through the layers of clothing. In my inexperience, I thrust my pelvis hard against his, a way to soothe the ache there and also to make it sharper.

He breaks our kiss, and as I gasp with need, he trails a row of fiery kisses down my neck. He licks and nips his way to my shoulder. And as I start to lose all reason and sense, he suddenly

thrusts me away from him, holding my arms tightly and staring deep into my eyes. We are both panting as if we've run a marathon.

“Go to sleep, Kaori,” he says in a voice rough with arousal.

“What?” I mumble. How can he push me away when I need him so much?

“It's not the right time for this.” He brushes his thumb over my lips. I open my lips and suck it inside, using my tongue to lave it as I want to do with his cock. He closes his eyes for a moment, and a shudder streaks through him. “It's not the right time,” he repeats. “Now go to sleep.”

I release his thumb, and he pushes me farther away from his body. He stands rigid, his muscles tense. I am confused, but the softness in his eyes takes the sting out of his words.

“Are you going to disappear?” I whisper.

“Of course not,” he whispers back. “Tobias and I will see you in the morning.”

With that promise, I turn and flee, heading upstairs to my room.

Chapter Five

I watch them in the shower, soap and water sluicing over their muscles and down their chiseled bodies. They're two gods, my two gods, and I want to lick each inch of them. They turn toward me, eyes lit with fire and promise, and my mouth burns to taste them.

They reach out for me, and I start stripping off my clothes. As each layer falls away, I run my hands over my skin and tweak my nipples, eliciting a moan from each of the men. I run my fingertips down my abdomen to fluff the curls between my legs, letting the tip of my middle finger dip in and swipe over my clit. I shudder in pleasure.

Noble reaches out and grabs my arm, yanking me toward them. As I step under the warm spray, West wraps his arms around me and pulls me into the curve of his body, my ass cradling his steely erection. In front of me Noble sinks to his knees and uses his hands to spread my thighs wide before settling his mouth on my dripping pussy. He runs his tongue up and down my slit, touching my clit and causing my hips to buck. With more force, he sucks my nub into his mouth, and I scream with the pleasure shooting down my spine. I arch my back, and West's hands come up to cup my breasts and pinch my nipples. Oh my God, I almost die with bliss.

Noble shoves one finger up into my tight hole. Round and round he teases me, reaming me with his finger and sucking on my clit. As I writhe in my growing orgasm, West wrenches my head around and kisses me, his tongue dancing with mine. He helps lower me to the floor, letting my backside rest against his front. He grabs my ass cheeks, kneading them as he pulls them apart. He runs his thumb down my crack and circles my anus, then dips the tip inside to send my senses into orbit.

As West prepares my back door, Noble slides his slick body up mine, pushing my thighs wide and settling his full length against my heat. I want to suck him inside and thrust impatiently against him. Noble's cock is thick. My hand cannot span its girth, and I'm eager to get it inside

and feel the difference between it and William. In contrast, West is longer, with thick veins bulging down the sides.

“Fuck me,” I beg. “Please, fuck me now.”

Noble pushes up on his hands and stares down at me as he pushes his hips forward, impaling me on that massive cock. We both groan at the incredible feeling that sweeps over us, and I feel West behind me slipping another finger in my backside to stretch and prepare me for his accommodation. I want it; I want it so much, I begin to beg.

“Please, West, now,” I moan. “I need you.”

He removes his fingers and positions himself at my entrance. Inch by inch he starts to slide in, using the lubrication from my overflowing pussy to ease his way. The fullness is overwhelming, intoxicating, and I pant with need. More, more, I need more. I wriggle my hips in demand, and with a grunt, West slides all the way in. I have both men—my men—inside me, and I feel complete for the first time in my life.

Noble and West take a moment to simply feel, and then they start moving. First one and then the other, as West pulls out Noble pushes in, and I am helpless to do anything except lie there and take them. Over and over, they move as a single unit, in and out. The pressure builds. I want my men to come with me, so I squeeze my cunt walls, milking Noble. I am rewarded with his groan, and he starts to pitch out of control.

“West,” I pant, swiveling my hips. “Come with us.”

A second later I feel his cock jerk in my ass, and his cum pours deep inside. This triggers Noble, and he stiffens in his release, splashing deep inside my pussy.

I scream in pleasure.

With my climax, my eyes pop open. I am panting; sweat drips off my forehead and runs down my temples where my pillow absorbs it. I am in my bedroom, but the wood-covered windows make it dark. The house is quiet, but my pounding heart reminds me that I have two men waiting for me somewhere below.

The ache between my thighs has been temporarily quenched by my erotic dream, but I know at any moment it will flare to life again, probably as soon as I see my guests. This feeling I don't understand, this hunger and need that have become my constant companions since I first laid eyes on Noble and West, makes me feel confused and out of control. I have never thought

about being with anyone before; men have not factored into my life, and I simply do not know how to temper these emotions washing through me each time I lay eyes on them.

With Amber, love was easy. It was safe and controlled and I never had to think or guess what came next. We simply were. And the men working for El Toro have always repulsed me. Noble and West are different. They make me feel different, but I'm not sure if I like this or not.

For now I will accept this situation and let nature take its course. What else can I do?

I sit up and swing my legs off the bed. I stand and stretch, feeling the sticky wetness between my legs. I grab a bottle of water, strip, and use a clean washcloth to wipe myself off. I don't have enough water here for a full bath, but I promise myself I will take one this evening.

I dress in jeans and a long-sleeved cotton shirt and pull my hair back in a ponytail. I put on my black combat boots, the ones with the steel tips, because I am feeling partly like a badass and partly like I need the visual support of being a badass.

I move quietly through the hallway to the stairs and head down. The men are not in the living or dining rooms, so I head to the side kitchen and see West sitting at the table. He's cleaning his rifle. He's dressed in black combat pants and a wifebeater. I admire him from afar before calling attention to my presence. The almost irresistible urge to walk over and start nibbling on his bronze skin hits me hard. I put a knuckle in my mouth to stifle the moan rising, because after my dream I simply can't trust myself not to attack either of them.

The door opens quietly, and Noble walks in from outside. It registers in the back of my mind that they must have oiled the hinges at some point.

"Anything new?" West asks.

Noble sighs. "Yeah. Hyde and Seek got hit, and preliminary reports have one of them shot."

I see West tense, the rifle momentarily forgotten. "Do we know if it was fatal?"

"They went off the grid. No way to tell."

West frowns. "And what about the brothers?"

"Successful so far."

West nods, deep in thought. "We need to resume our sweep today. We're running out of time."

Noble runs his hands over his hair again. “Yeah,” he agrees.

And then he looks up and our eyes clash. A shadow of stubble darkened his jaw overnight, giving him a raw, rugged appeal that pulls me in toward him. They watch me with eyes that promise to devour and pleasure all at the same time. I can't help but think of sex, pure, potent, screaming-my-head-off sex. Every time I'm near these men, all I think about is riding them. My nipples pebble, and I see their eyes home in like beacons. I fold my arms, hoping to hide my attraction, and sit at the table next to West.

“Morning, Kaori,” West murmurs politely, but his eyes never make it to my face. I see a flash of hunger in his eyes.

I swallow and look between the two men. My heart pounds from the memory of my dream and the heat of West's kiss last night. “Hey.”

Noble picks up a glass bottle of creamy coffee and puts it in front of me. I smile a thank-you and loosen my arms to grab it. I drink deeply, and the caffeine hits me and wakes me up.

“Did you sleep all right?” West asks me.

I nod. “Very well.”

The conversation falters, and I fiddle with the bottle cap. It takes me a moment to gather my thoughts. When I look up, they are still staring at me.

“Where am I going to go?” I finally ask.

“What do you mean?” West asks.

“You were helping those people yesterday, but I don't understand Spanish. Where are they going to end up?”

Noble grabs one of the table chairs, turns it backward, and sits, folding his arms across the top. “The relocation process is monitored in several different states. Since the population has been halved, it's become necessary to divide people up. Montana is the state for anyone Orion and I find. After you're entered in the computer system and given a GPS chip, you'll be sent to a city to help with the rebuilding and development.”

That sounds so formal and mechanical. I shiver at the vivid, unappealing picture it paints. Thinking that over, I get up and head to the pantry, then root around until I find one of the Tupperware boxes of Pop-Tarts. I am completely convinced that Pop-Tarts and Twinkies have

been bioengineered to survive even when the cockroach is gone. I open the package and eat the sugary confection with relish. With my taste buds happy, I walk back to the table and sit down, able to continue thinking about what the guys are telling me.

“Is the San Andreas Fault the only one with this monitoring equipment?”

West shakes his head. “There is one at the New Madrid Fault Line in Missouri.”

“There're earthquakes in Missouri?” At their nods, my eyebrows shoot upward. “I never realized how the fault lines affected so much. If this nine point two comes like you say, it'll destroy everything.”

“Everything is already destroyed, Kaori,” Noble chimes in.

“What about the people you don't find? Those people were in hiding—how many more are in hiding?”

West takes my hand. “That's why we're here, to get out as many people as possible.”

“But the people you don't find—”

“We're good at our job, Kaori. Besides, there are others behind the scenes.”

“But how do you know they'll find them all? There are so many hiding spots. Six men in a city that used to be home to millions doesn't allow much of a search. Why not come in with tanks and loudspeakers, or drop pamphlets to let us know you're coming?”

“Six men here in LA County,” West says. “There are other units in other parts. We're not alone.”

“First is satellite surveillance, then recon plans or both at the same time,” Noble continues. “If people are suspected to be present, we have a base camp or a location point for extraction, provide transportation via helos and cargo planes and sometimes buses. There are additional troops on standby for security and organization at the rendezvous point.”

“We're not conducting a stealth rescue operation, Kaori,” West concludes. “We're giving this mission as many people as we've got, but our numbers are stretched thin.”

“You should have dropped pamphlets or something,” I argue.

West shakes his head. “No time. We got a four-day warning.”

I guess it's wrong of me to assume the rest of the country is as devastated as we are in LA; satellite surveillance, air transport, and buses take fuel, and that's something I never thought I'd see again.

I look around this house I've lived in for six years, at everything I've collected and made mine. These men are telling me I will have to give this up, give up the life I've made, everything I've known and created. How can I? Then again, how can I not?

My silence has lent an uneasy pause to the room, and I don't like that. "What happens now?"

"We're going to go back, resume our search," West tells me. As we've been talking, he's been putting his gun back together without looking at it. This action tells me more about his being a soldier than appearance or talk.

"Why didn't you insist I be taken out yesterday with those families?"

I think it's interesting that they both look away from me. "Because," I continue, answering for them, "you saw me with William. You watched me that night and decided to have a bit of fun with me." I stand, the Pop-Tart suddenly heavy in my stomach. I walk up to stand in front of Noble, my hands on my hips. "God, how stupid have I been? How much time have you been without a woman? You want a plaything, so any girl will do?"

"Kaori," West soothes, standing as well and placing his rifle on the table. "It's not like that."

"No?"

West throws a look to Noble, who runs a hand over his hair.

"Actually," Noble says, "it is kind of like that."

"Tobias!" West hisses.

Noble waves him off and stands to face me. "Yes, we watched you get off on that mannequin. We were transfixed, Kaori. We stood there with our dicks in our hands and shot our rocks off when you came on that red dildo." He grabs my hand, and I can see how the memory ignites his lust. "And for the first time, we forgot about our mission, why we were here. We forgot everything. All we saw was you, all we wanted...was you."

I am more than aroused by his passionate words. “We've just met,” I whisper. “This is so crazy.”

He nods at me, acknowledging the same off-kilter emotions I'm feeling, and suddenly I breathe easier. I relax, and that's when Noble yanks me toward him. He lifts me up to rest my pelvis flush with his, and I feel his erection push into me. He has braced his legs to accept my added weight, and the stance grinds me even more onto his cock. His mouth comes down on mine.

The kiss with West was my first with a man. That kiss was rapture; this kiss is raw. There is no seduction this time, just pure lust, and it ignites my blood. His tongue sweeps in to dance with mine, demanding my total compliance, and I am happy to give it. His lips constantly move, and I have never felt more alive, as if every cell in my body is electrically charged. I am spinning out of control; I want more, I *need* more, yet just as I am about to start yanking his clothes off, he breaks our kiss and sets me down.

I blink at the sudden loss.

“We're going out today to search for people,” he states as if he hasn't just made my pussy cream. My heart is speeding like a runaway horse, and the ache between my thighs is almost painful. I feel West behind me, his heat reaching out to surround me, and my dream flashes through my head.

And suddenly I want that dream.

“While we're gone, you maintain a low profile,” Noble continues. I'm so dazed and confused that I don't even snap at the very obvious directions he's giving me. “We'll be back in the evening.”

I can only give them a shaky nod, and then they leave; West pulls the kitchen door closed behind him. I turn away, my mind consumed with racing thoughts shifting between the two men. Instead of following to watch them assemble and leave on their hunt, I turn and retrace my steps to my bedroom, where I close the door on the men and my thoughts. I walk over and scan my bookshelf. My attraction and need for two men have put me too much on edge, so for a time I'm going to ignore everything and read. I've read almost everything I could find, from Hemingway to Rowling, cheap paperback novels and thick classics, mysteries, romance, autobiographies, and thrillers. Just about everything except religious and political books, which are just plain boring.

I suddenly remember the two books I grabbed the other day, so I track down my backpack and grab one. I change into one of my many bikinis and decide to go for as little cloth as possible. The top is nothing more than two triangles and some string, and the bottom is just a thong. There is probably less than a quarter of a yard of material, and the price tag on this thing had been over a hundred bucks. It is white, silky, and complements my darker skin nicely.

I grab sunglasses, a towel from the hall linen closet, and I head downstairs to the backyard for some relaxation in the sun. Last night we all came through the kitchen via the back door enclosed by the garage where we stored and hid the trike during the rest of the night. I leave now by the same way, pushing open the door and stepping into the dark, cool enclosure of the carport. This area, too, has its use for storage, mainly for the furniture I had to move out of the way for my hoarding. I walk across the now-empty spot where the hybrid trike had sat and exit to outside through the side door.

The sun is high and hot, but the soft breeze blowing is cool enough to soothe my heated flesh. I walk over the rough, sandy backyard to a nice area that overlooks the ocean. I flip out the towel and lower my body onto it, settling the glasses on my nose and lying back to soak up the sun. I couldn't do this in the Valley; even in the daylight, which is safer than night, one doesn't linger too long in one place. I know there are other people living in LA; I have no desire to meet them.

Throughout the day I bask in the sun, sometimes changing positions. I lie there lazily, or I read my book. I wish I had thought to bring a bottle of water; sweat beads and rolls off my back as the sun bakes my body. One of the books I have is a romance, and the other is a military intrigue that hits a little too close right now, so I lay that back down and open the romance. I've read them before, of course, have even liked a few, but sometimes the heroines of the story are just too stupid for me. The girl always seems to do ridiculous things to satisfy the hero, and that type of mentality really eludes me. And yet what draws me to romances is the knowledge in them. It is a world I know nothing about, and I suppose I look to them for guidance and an education, fueling a fantasy I've been unable to reach.

But the book is engaging, and I finish it quickly. I notice three things as soon as I'm done. One, I need to use the bathroom immediately! Two, my stomach is rumbling loudly. And three, sunset is almost upon me. I rise from my lounging pad and walk to the outside latrine I built away from the house. Without plumbing, one must do what one must do.

With problem number one taken care of, I start thinking about what I want to eat for dinner. I have no idea when the men will be back, and I refuse to contemplate that they may not return. Even after a day, the thought of losing one or both gives me chills.

The sun sinking into the ocean captures my attention, and I stop to stare at the beauty of it. Ribbons of crimson and gold streak across the sky, and I'm taken with the fanciful notion that finally this time, I can hear the hiss of the sun as it melts into the cool water below.

I really don't know how long I stand and watch the sunset. Without the men, I am suddenly adrift, caught between feeling mopey and restless, and I really don't like how this energy flows through me.

My stomach rumbles again, forcing my attention from dreamland and reminding me that night is falling fast. I need to be inside, with all the doors closed to block off the light that can leak through the darkness like a beacon guiding ships from rocky shores. I turn away and race to the house. And just as the sun completely disappears, I slam the garage door shut.

Chapter Six

Thanks to my lazy day sunbathing, I failed to catch dinner. And I do mean *catch*. Through the years I've learned to do just about everything. I've had to. My survival depended on it—everything from catching and skinning small animals to swinging a hammer. Luckily I have a database of several ways to learn all this. First, of course, have been books. I've found a plethora of survival guides from searching through abandoned bookstores and homes. Second were sheer grit and determination, because no one else was going to do it for me.

Third—and this is a big third—I was lucky to find this house. Whoever had lived here had probably been one of those green, tree-hugging people who must have seen the Great Incident coming, and that has worked out perfectly for me. There were gas masks, remnants of video surveillance and spotlights for intruders, traps, canning jars and preservatives, a water-purification system in the basement with iodine tablets, and a panic room packed with medical supplies. There was even a poster hanging on the wall that read PREPAREDNESS: BECAUSE THOSE DAMN ZOMBIES WON'T KILL THEMSELVES. I'm guessing the people who lived here contracted the virus in spite of their precautions, because the house and its amenities seemed so much untouched when I found it.

So my dinner for this evening consists of a jar of preserved peaches and a can of corn heated over a propane burner. I light all the lamps, go upstairs and change into a leotard, tights, and a silky skirt, and skip down the back stairs to what was once a den but is now my ballet studio. My mother enrolled me in ballet when I was three because she noticed I had very long legs and walked gracefully to be so young. I continued the lessons even when I decided I had no desire to become a dancer, because ballet is a great workout and keeps my legs in shape.

I guess I'm a contradiction if you study and analyze me too closely. I freely admit to having been a spoiled rich kid, but I was never mean or unkind to anyone. And even though I

was a cheerleader who had her clique, I liked to think I treated everyone fairly, from the jocks to the smokers to the nerds.

Yet still, most of my Friday and Saturday nights were spent at home watching the movies I loved, action flicks from Stallone to Schwarzenegger, from Ford to Bale, and from American shoot-'em-ups to Asian sword epics.

I had a strict after-school regimen that included ballet lessons, gymnastics, yoga, spending time with my friends, and cheerleading practice. On Sundays my parents and I usually did something fun as a family, like sailing at the marina or playing tennis. I had every minute of my day managed and accounted for, and I liked it that way.

So when this new reality came upon me, when I realized all my planning and managing had been wiped out, I tried to make this life as neat and tidy as my old one. It was six months before I found this house, but once I saw this den with its hardwood floors and large mirrors hanging around, I turned it into a ballet room. I even managed to install a barre so I could do my practice routine before launching into a dance.

So now I warm up at the barre with demi-pliés, my knees half-bent as I work through all the basic positions to stretch my muscles. I move into a grand plié before heading into an *elevé* and *relevé* to strengthen my ankles and feet. From there, I do a *devant battement tendu* and finally a *rond de jambe* for my flexibility. This takes me a while, but soon I move to a CD player and put on some soft music. I don't dance to any particular piece; I simply let the music sway me. I am unaware of my surroundings, of time, of anything except the grace and passion of dance. When the music finally subsides, I end my dance and keep my pose as the lingering music washes out of my soul. Ballet is a very emotional type of dance, and sometimes it's very hard to cut off those emotions. It's like coming down from being drunk, almost, in that it takes time to wash from your system.

When I finally straighten, there is sweat running down the sides of my face, and I'm breathing heavily. But I feel good; I feel strong. I skip over and extinguish the lamp, then grab the CD player and a new CD as I head out of the room. The house is silent, and usually this is not a problem, but now it leaves me jittery. Reluctantly I have to acknowledge that I am lonely, that I miss the guys.

And that really pisses me off.

My euphoric mood gone, I head to the basement for my promised bath. Next to the purification system is a bathtub that I brought down and ran a pipe from the drain to a special opening leading outside. To do this was tricky. I had to make sure the water drained but didn't reflect any light. I finally ended up burying the pipe outside and running it far enough away from the house to make sure the water dispersed properly. This took about a month of planning, a month of finding and gathering everything I needed, and then a month to execute. Overall this is one of my favorite accomplishments because it gave me a tub to bathe in instead of a sponge and bottled water.

Filling the tub takes about ten minutes. The water is room temperature, and when it is ready, I strip off my clothes and lower myself into the tub, then pick up a washcloth and my favorite rose-scented soap. I do a preliminary wash, getting rid of the sweat and grime, before setting the soap aside and leaning back in the tub. I let the washcloth trail up and down my torso in the water, the edges brushing over my skin and teasing my nipples. They immediately bead, and the need lingering inside, tempered by activity, comes roaring back with a vengeance. It is so acute that my body arches. I bring a knee up and over my other leg to apply pressure to that spot that needs it badly. I wish I had thought to bring a toy into the tub with me. That would feel so much better than the dubious stimulation the washcloth and crossed legs can provide.

So I do the next best thing. I close my eyes and I imagine the men are here to watch me. And for the first time I think of them by their first names. Before, they were military men, two people I did not know and I'm not even sure I would have liked. But now...now they are Tobias and Orion. These men have turned my world upside down, but I can't imagine myself without them. I'm not sure if this feeling comes from being lonely so long that I'm suffering from Stockholm syndrome, but I really don't think so. I wouldn't feel like this with just anyone, and I take comfort in this knowledge.

With my eyes closed, I feel the water lapping at my sensitive places. My nipples are hard little masses; my pussy clenches as a trembling feeling erupts low in my belly. I glide my hand over my skin, starting at my throat, the backs of my fingers trailing down my chest and between my breasts and finally running over my flat stomach. I let my legs fall open, as far as they can in the fiberglass tub. My left hand reaches down to hold my thigh, and I flex my leg up, toes pointed, before it hangs down over the side. This stretches me wide and shifts my hips forward in

the water. My pelvis breaks free of the water and kind of bobs there. I must admit this feels good; the water sloshes gently against my labia and clit.

Gently, almost more of a featherlike touch, the fingers of my right hand brush over my pussy lips, teasing again and again until my hips start to undulate of their own free will. Even with the water around me, I can feel my juices start to flow, and my slit becomes slippery. I am now able to slide my middle finger in to tease.

I moan.

The tease is not enough.

As I slide another finger in, I let my left hand roam until it finds my breasts and starts tweaking the nipples, alternating with sharp tugs and then gentle flicks. I like the pain. The contrast between that and the rapture my fingers are wringing from my vaginal walls makes my head spin, like I'm suffering a lack of oxygen.

I want to come. But just as I'm about to let myself fall, I hear a slight noise to my left, and I open my eyes to find Tobias and Orion staring at me. I still the frantic rhythm of my hands, but I don't remove them from my body. My mouth falls open in soundless shock, and all I can do is stare at them.

I have no idea what to say to them.

But then Orion steps closer, only a step or two from being able to reach out and touch me, and I stare into his dark eyes with a hunger that mirrors his.

“You want this, sweetheart?” he asks me in a very husky voice. “You ready to watch us?”

I nod.

He reaches up and unsnaps his vest. It falls to the side with a slight *thump*. There are a multitude of ties in various places, layers of clothing, and he works with deft fingers to undo everything. I look over to Tobias. He has moved to stand slightly off from Orion and is stripping as well.

I watch them carefully, memorizing each movement and detail. Bit by bit their bodies are revealed in the muted lamplight as they perform their breath-stealing stripteases. Slowly they peel each layer away, until I want to scream at them to hurry. I watch closely as they slip off their shirts, then boots, and finally their pants, my gaze following the zippers' paths over impressive bulges. And then finally I see their cocks, the first time I have ever seen a cock in

person, so to speak. I've looked through magazines, even watched a couple of porn DVDs before the batteries died on the laptops I had. But this is the first time in my life that a cock—that two cocks—stare me in the face.

They are so beautiful.

Tobias's cock is slightly shorter than Orion's, but not by much. His is thicker, though, with a wide, bulbous head that has a drop of clear liquid oozing from the tip's slit. His balls are drawn up tight, as if anxious to spill their load. Orion's dark cock looks like smooth velvet, a chocolate éclair I want to lick the cream out of. It has a graceful curve to it, and it's dominating, full and throbbing, with two heavy balls waiting for attention.

I raise my eyes from their tempting cocks. While Orion just stands there letting my gaze feast on his magnificent body, I see Tobias lick his finger and thumb and then settle them on his nipple and tweak it into a firm nub. He does this over and over until my nipples start to ache with wanting the same treatment.

Since I have one hand on my breasts, I start to mimic his actions. There is something primitive, something elemental to doing this with him, and it makes me more excited than I would have thought possible. As I am doing this, Tobias reaches one hand down to grab his cock. At the same time, Orion does likewise. I feel a jolt deep in my pussy; this is what I have wanted; this is what I have longed to see.

Each tip now leaks juice steadily. They both use that to help their hands glide up and down as they slowly pump. At this, I allow my fingers to resume their exploration from earlier, and I match their rhythm. All three of us take it slowly, watching each other's faces and seeing the raw pleasure we wring from ourselves.

And then there is a little shift, and the men start to pump a little faster, a little harder. I can tell they have done this together before because their timing and motions complement each other perfectly. And as they jerk faster, I rub my clit faster as well.

I fantasize about what those cockheads would feel like in my mouth. Licking them, sucking the precum from the slits, and letting their girth down my throat as far as they will fit. I moan and thrust my pelvis harder against my hand; at this, Tobias emits a low groan and bends over slightly, as if he's leaning into the stroking and fucking his hand. But he never looks away

from me, never looks away from the sight of my thighs spread wide and my fingers pumping inside my pussy.

Orion watches me also, one hand stroking his cock while the other plays with his sac. He rolls his balls, weighing them, letting me see how sensitive they are. I want to be the one bringing him to the edge with my mouth, my fingers. But I push the thought away to focus on the here and now. This scene has been orchestrated by Orion, and I am determined it will be good for him.

I am lost in these two men. My clit burns, and at any moment I am going to fall over the precipice; all I can do is watch as the two cocks in front of me start jerking, the balls drawing up, ready to explode.

And I feel the orgasm swelling inside, building quickly, because it's already been waiting right under the surface. Then suddenly it breaks over me, and my hips buck high. I give a little scream but remain focused on them.

And as soon as they hear me, both release groans of completion as thick ropes of cum spurt out of their cocks. Once, twice. Orion actually bends forward, his hand milking his balls. One more jet of cum manages to land over my breasts, and then he releases his balls and kneels. The hand that's stroking his cock slows a little at a time.

Tobias actually falls to his knees; his orgasm is that intense. "Fuck!" he whispers, and I know exactly what he means.

Chapter Seven

A moment later Orion straightens and reaches out for me. He helps me to stand before taking the washcloth and soap from me. He lathers the cloth and then very tenderly wipes off my body, starting where his cum left a streak of stickiness. My heart thunders in my chest, and I stare into his dark eyes. I feel something akin to endearment shining bright. I can't help it; I know it's too soon. I know they will leave me once their mission is over. And I so very much want to push them away, but there is a deeper pull inside me that clutches helplessly to this unwanted emotion, and I'm afraid I'm not strong enough to outrun it.

Orion washes the soap from the cloth and then proceeds to clean me off. Tobias moves behind me to drape me with a towel, using the ends to dry what he can reach. And then he swings me up into his arms.

With a little squeal, I throw my arms around his neck. He laughs and squeezes me before bounding up the stairs, Orion right behind us.

“Are you hungry?” Tobias asks me.

“No.” I smile. How inane we sound after what we've just done.

“Good,” he says. “Then it's off to bed we go.” He looks at Orion. “Can you get the lamps?”

I barely notice that Orion leaves; my attention has been caught by the word *bed*. Nerves descend in my belly. I have wanted this, but now I'm nervous. “I've never...” *How do I put this?* “I've never had sex with a man before,” I finally whisper. “I don't know if I'm ready for both of you.”

“Shh,” Tobias tells me, still carrying me as if I weigh nothing. “We're not going to do anything you don't want to do. Tonight we'll take it slow.”

And with that said, he nudges open my bedroom door and lays me very gently in the middle of my bed. Kneeling over me, he studies my body with soft, tender eyes, and I have a feeling these emotions are new to him. His hand trembles as he reaches out to run the tips of his

fingers very gently over my skin, starting at my nipples and sweeping over them, back and forth with delicate strokes.

The nipples pucker into hard little nubs of need. He bends over me, his tongue flicking over them like he's worshipping the tiny pebbles. With a moan, I arch my back, offering myself to him, so he latches on, nipping lightly with his teeth. He suckles them, first the right and then the left until I'm going out of my mind. His mouth is so fucking hot, I'm burning alive.

He gives me a moment's reprieve as he leaves my nipples and licks up my neck until his mouth finds mine, and he kisses me with a fierce tenderness. His hands take the place where his mouth just was, and he stretches out, settling his weight evenly on me.

This is the first time I've ever felt a body on top of mine. This is a real man's body; I can feel his chest on mine, his legs rubbing along mine, and I can feel his rapidly filling cock nestling against my slit. I moan low in my throat and squirm to get closer. My legs remain together, and he doesn't try to press them open. Instead it seems he's content to kiss me and drive me slowly out of my mind.

His tongue traces my lips, caresses my tongue, and sinks deeper into me. I reach up with my arms and encircle his neck, hugging him tight to me. This is such a beautiful feeling. The tenderness and closeness he gives me are more than I ever thought I would know. I always want to feel this.

Finally his legs start to move, to shift, and he parts my thighs, settling himself more fully against me. His fingers start to travel, run over my hip bones, and come to rest where he is against me. He shifts a little, raises his hips, and then his fingers are there, in me, and I am stunned by the unexpected entry. My fingers, of course, know my pussy intimately. But his fingers are searching, seeking. They are learning every fold and every nuance that will make me squirm in pleasure.

He moves his fingers in and out. My juices run freely, coating his fingers and my legs. I buck against his probing, wanting more, but he just continues to tease me. My hands grip the sides of his face, and I pull back from his kiss. We look at one another; I memorize and commit to detail every single expression he makes. He doesn't need to speak. I know he's giving me a moment to make sure this is what I want.

Movement catches my eye, and I turn to see Orion watching us, stroking his cock and balls. His cock is straining as it had been downstairs, but he doesn't say anything as he just watches us.

I turn back to look at Tobias. "Are we leaving him out?"

"Do you want him to join us right now?" he asks instead. "You've never done this before. We thought it best if you took one of us at a time instead of trying to accommodate us both."

I take a moment to think about this, and I realize he is right. As much as I want my dream fulfilled, I'm not really ready to jump into such an arrangement. So I reach up with one hand to encircle the back of Tobias's head and bring his lips down on mine. The other hand I curl around his lower back.

"You," I mumble against his lips. "You, tonight."

And then I feel him push forward, the fat head of his cock nudging past my swollen pussy lips to be completely slathered by my juices. He moves his hips, his cock teasing my clit, and he pulls back. A moment later he pushes forward, harder and more insistent, and the head breaks through and enters me.

"Ohhh!" I moan. "Yes, please. Oh my God, please, more."

My heart is thundering. Tobias pulls out once more, but when he returns, he slams home, breaking past all barriers, causing my breasts to jiggle and the breath to temporarily lodge in my throat.

"You're so fucking tight," he growls into my ear. He pauses to let me adjust. He is larger than I'm used to, but that's not what makes me grip his shoulders. Inside me now is the real thing, and I can feel every pulse it sends. I can feel the veins bulging and the tenuous hold that makes it quiver deep inside me.

Then he moves. I reach down to grab his hard ass, and I can feel his muscles clench each time he thrusts inside me. My nails sink into his skin, and this elicits a groan of satisfaction from his chest.

My breathing becomes laborious as he plunges his massive cock in and out of my hungry pussy. An orgasm is so close, and I don't really want to try to suppress it. Tobias must sense this, because he speeds up, slamming into me with forceful thrusts.

I moan.

He reaches between us, his thumb finding and landing hard on my clit. This does it; this sends me over. I scream as I come; I scream like I've never come before. This is amazing. This is heaven. Oh. My. God.

Tobias raises up on his hands and looks down into my face. I am spinning so wildly, I can barely focus on him. His hips shift, his angle changes, and the bed starts squeaking in protest as he slams into my body, over and over again. Sweat beads on his forehead, but he maintains eye contact with me. He is so deep inside me, I can barely tell where he ends and I begin.

“I'm coming,” he grunts. “Get ready. I'm coming.”

He jackhammers me, bouncing the bed and my tits. His pubic bone hits my clit, and this time I come immediately. I convulse around the massive cock invading me, and just as I feel it expand to spurt its juice, he pulls out of me with force and grabs his cock, aiming its spewing head at my chest.

He cries out his pleasure again and again before falling on top of me, utterly depleted.

We lay there panting, our hearts racing. I've forgotten all about Orion watching us, seeking his own pleasure once again, until he crawls into bed with us and pushes a tired Tobias off me.

He wipes me with a wet washcloth, but I'm too tired to thank him. With Orion's help, I turn onto my side and feel him spoon me from behind. And then I fall instantly, deeply asleep.

Chapter Eight

I wake abruptly, and I notice I am one body short of total warmth and relaxation. Beside me, I can hear Tobias breathing heavy. I scoot from under the arm he's thrown across my stomach, and grab the robe that hangs behind the door before heading down the hall. Having memorized the house's layout allows me to navigate through the complete darkness without making much noise.

At the bottom of the stairs, I see a dim light coming from the living room and head toward it. Orion is sitting on the couch, a blanket thrown over his lap and a book in front of his face. I pause and study what I can see of him. The muscles on his arms are defined but not overly developed or distended. He is a man of work and action, not a bodybuilder.

"You're not bothering me," he says in a low voice.

His voice in the quiet room causes me to jump. I smile sheepishly. "Can't sleep?"

He sets the book down—a political thriller, I note—and opens the blanket so I can settle on his naked lap. I snuggle into his chest as he draws the blanket around us.

"I suffer from insomnia," he tells me. "Sometimes it can be frustrating, and sometimes it's a blessing."

"So I have a question, something I've been thinking about."

"Oh?"

"Well, I'm not really knowledgeable about military hierarchy, but I'm pretty sure there usually aren't two sergeants in a platoon."

"You're right," he says. "We're not a platoon actually. More like a reconnaissance squad. When the president assigned us to this mission, all six of us got field promotions to sergeant to make us even in rank. Before the Great Incident"—he gives me a nudge—"we'd all have advanced in rank or been soldiers led by a staff sergeant. But now we're led by our lieutenant, Gideon Marek."

“Who are the other men on this mission with you?”

“Hmm? Oh, the other men of the 281. Doing the sweep downtown are Hyde Galloway and Kristian Seek—”

“Oh, Hyde and Seek,” I say, understanding. “I heard you say they had been hit.”

“Yeah,” he says wearily. “If they don't come back online tomorrow, then Tobias and I have to help find them. We don't leave men behind.”

“Of course,” I reply. I can hear the concern in his voice. Whoever these men are, they are important to Orion and Tobias, and therefore important to me.

“Then there are the brothers, Sariel and Gabe Ranieri,” he continues. “They've been the most successful on this mission. I think they've got lucky horseshoes stuck up their asses.”

“Well, they are named after angels,” I murmur.

“They are?”

“Mmm,” I say. “Sariel is mainly found in the book of Enoch. If I remember correctly, he was an archangel who lusted after human women and fell from God's grace. He became the angel of death. And Gabe, short for Gabriel, I assume, is the angelic messenger of God. Are they Catholic or Jewish?”

“Worse, they're Italian.”

I have to laugh at that.

“How do you know this, about angels?” he asks.

“Reading. I usually don't read anything religious, but I once found this book on angels versus demons. It had pictures and was really fascinating to study.”

“I must say Sar is aptly named, if what you say is true,” he muses. “Fiercest soldier I've ever seen.”

“You're all good friends.” I didn't word it as a question.

“Yeah,” he confirms. “In basic, we paired off,” he explains. “The brothers, even though the military usually try to split up family members. Hyde and Seek, that was a no-brainer because of their names. But Tobias and I, we fought like mad. Everything was contentious between us, and we brawled about the dumbest stuff. But when we were on mission then we were like one: one body, one mind, one objective. And we worked, you know? Together, we clicked.”

Yes, I do know.

“When the virus hit”—he pauses to collect his thoughts—“almost everyone in our company was dead in a matter of months, and I was so scared for the longest time that Tobias would catch it, and I would lose my partner.”

“You love him.”

I felt him shrug. “He’s my family. The 281 were the first ones called out to help deal with the panic and mayhem, and it was horrible watching people implode. This is a fucked-up, crazy world, Kaori, and we’re tired. Marek has promised us placement of our choice once this mission is over, which will be a nice change.”

“So you’re going to stay in the military?”

“Of course. Now, more than ever, America needs us.”

“LA will be built again?”

“I don’t know, Kaori. The coming earthquake is going to be pretty massive, and I don’t know if we have enough people to start rebuilding right away.”

I fall silent, just thinking. Los Angeles will always be the home of my heart, and I hope it will be given a chance to come back one day.

“Orion, you’re not upset about what Tobias and I did, are you? That’s not why you can’t sleep, is it?”

“No.” He shakes his head and then plants a kiss on my forehead. “It was beautiful watching you two together.”

“I was scared that you would think differently of me,” I admit.

“Never.”

“I think I think differently of me,” I confess.

He is silent for a moment. “Because of there being two men or because technically you were a virgin?”

“Because”—I sigh—“every time I’m near you two, I think about sex. Is that normal?”

“When the feelings are pure, then yes, this is normal. I think about sex with you every time I’m near you,” he confesses.

“That’s different. You’re a man.”

“And you know how every man thinks?”

“When it comes to men and their penises...” I trail off with a little shrug and then laugh when Orion pinches my rear end.

“Believe me, Kaori,” he says after my chuckle dies away. “Tobias and I have seen and done and felt many things. What we have here is definitely pure.”

We sit there for a moment, quiet, letting our thoughts flow. I have a warm, fuzzy feeling deep in my belly, and it's nice.

“Orion,” I say quietly, “I gotta know one thing.”

“What's that?”

“How can neither of you be jealous over sharing me?”

He is silent for a moment. I suppose he is gathering his thoughts. I've noticed this about him; of both men, Orion is the deep thinker, the one who always weighs the words he's about to speak. Tobias, however, is the act-now type.

“I can't imagine a future without Tobias in it,” Orion continues. “He's a part of me, just as I know I'm a part of him. And you're the most beautiful thing in this world. You ask me how we can share you with each other? I ask how can we not share something that feels so right?”

And then he tilts my face up to meet his, and kisses me. A sweet, giving kiss—it melts my heart. He nibbles my lower lip, and I tremble a little. He licks my lips and then invades my mouth, his agile tongue dancing with mine and seducing it gently.

Without breaking the kiss, he moves his body, maneuvering until I'm lying flat on my back on the suede couch and he's looming over me. I know my eyes are wide as I wonder what he's about to do.

He breaks the kiss and raises his head to look at me. He grins this crafty little smile, and then I feel his fingers parting my robe. I grab hold of his hands.

“I haven't fully washed,” I remind him.

“I know.”

I hesitate for a moment more before releasing his hands. He proceeds to strip me, removing the garment from my shoulders and arms and making me lift my hips as he pulls it clear and tosses it aside.

He touches me with featherlight strokes, brushing over my still-sensitive nipples and causing my pussy to clench in response. Yet as sharply as I'm breathing, I can't move a muscle.

He runs his fingers down my belly, and then they cradle the juncture of my thighs and tease the curls there. I have read in books where women shave this area, but since I've been alone, I never thought it was important to do so. Now that I'm involved with two men, I wish I had taken the time to make myself smooth.

The thought leaves me quickly, however, as Orion's fingers graze inward, digging through the curls and finding my labia. He brushes once, twice, and then one finger dips past the lips, to run up and down the slit. I am still wet from my encounter with Tobias earlier, so Orion is able to move up and down easily. I watch him; I watch him, fascinated by all the emotions his face is showing as he takes his time and learns me.

I see desire and reverence and a little bit of unbridled lust. And these emotions sharpen my own.

My stomach muscles clench in anticipation because now I know what to expect. I am sore, but far from tired, and I open my legs wider to grant him better access.

"I'm not going to fuck you," he tells me.

"What? Why not?" I ask with a pout.

He chuckles. "Craving us already?"

I feel my cheeks redden but don't answer, because he's hit the nail on the head.

"What I'm going to do to you is eat your sweet pussy and then lap up your cream," he continues boldly.

Oh. My. God. I can't help it; my hips buck at his words as the picture explodes into my mind.

"But you—"

"Oh no." He shakes his head. "You have a chest full of toys in your room that I plan on using soon."

Oh. My. God.

“You have a very beautiful pussy,” he says. “It's not exactly pearly pink, more of a dusty rose.” While his index finger flicks my clit, his others enter me. He explores me, fluttering on my vaginal walls and eliciting a groan from my mouth.

He pulls away, and I reach out to try to drag him back, but it seems Orion has other ideas. He scoots and then lies down on my legs and settles his mouth right where his fingers just were. I buck wildly at the thought of what he's about to do. He just rubs his hand on my belly to settle me.

And then his fingers are once again sifting through my curls to reveal my slit. But this time, his tongue streaks up and down. If I thought his fingers were magic, then his tongue is divine intervention. Absolute heaven. I wail at the pleasure, and he pushes his tongue deeper inside, licking me like a cat licks milk. He finds my throbbing nub and gently tugs on it with his teeth, bringing it between his lips and sucking hard.

“Oh God!” I screech.

He is tormenting me, alternating between sucking my clit and lapping at my vaginal walls. I can feel the torrent rising inside, a wave building higher and higher, and I am helpless to do anything except ride it out. I clutch at Orion's shoulders because I feel if I don't, I'm going to fall apart.

His tongue is ruthless and grants me no pardon. His left hand curls around my thigh and lifts it up and opens me up farther, but this position allows him to run his fingers from my vaginal area down my perineum to brush against my anus. The brush stroke combined with his hungry mouth has me flying apart.

My body bucks and splinters. White heat pours from my cunt and I contract in violent shudders. And all the while, as I moan my ecstasy, Orion licks me just as he said he would, savoring me with little sounds of enjoyment.

And when he is done, when he has captured everything that's just poured out of me, he moves back up and arranges us in a comfortable manner to sleep. He pulls a blanket over us and then leans down to kiss me. I taste myself on his lips, and instead of being grossed out, I feel well loved.

“Good night, my beauty,” he whispers in my ear.

Chapter Nine

The next time I open my eyes, I am alone on the couch. Even though no light is able to filter in to tell me that it is daytime, my internal clock tells me it's time to get up. I grab my robe and don it, padding my way silently upstairs to clean myself up and change. I don't really want to take the time for another bath, so I use some bottled water and a washcloth to cleanse.

I dress comfortably in a midhigh summer dress with leggings. I pull on a pair of ballet slippers and secure my hair with a headband. I make my way back downstairs and head out to find the men.

The sun is still in the east, opposite the ocean, and low enough to hint that it must be early morning. At first I don't see them in the little backyard clearing. I listen and hear something from the north, so I start walking, keeping my ears open. About a hundred yards from the house, I stand at the top of a hill and look down to see them wrestling with each other. They are minus shirts, only wearing their fatigue pants and black combat boots. A large duffel bag is lying nearby with their shirts thrown over it. I move down to get a better view.

The first things I notice are the tattoos on their backs. I guess I've never really seen them from behind, so this discovery is interesting. Each of them has an upside-down triangle on one shoulder blade, but the edges of the triangles aren't angles at all. Instead they loop around and twist. Inside each loop is a number: a 2, an 8, and a 1. This, I remember, is their troop number. The black ink stands out on Tobias's tan flesh but is a little harder to see against Orion's chocolate skin. But one thing I do understand immediately: Each loop of the triangle ends makes the path of infinity for each number. These men are together till the end.

They wrestle with each other, and even though it's practice fighting, I see that neither gives any quarter to the other. Some moves they grapple together; some moves they throw punches. I can see the glistening of sweat on their bodies even in the early-morning light.

I suddenly realize that I don't know much about these men. I've known them less than three days, yet I've shared with them so much of myself, even I can hardly believe it. Even now, as I watch them, my heart sings. And I don't know if part of it is my newly awakened lust or if I'm just human. Maybe it's both. All I know is that when I look at these men, I'm happy.

The next thing I notice is that Tobias is fighting more aggressively than Orion. He's the one charging, the one initiating each move, and I can see the fierceness on his face. Orion is letting Tobias come at him, falling into defense rather than attacking, and I wonder if this is natural or if they take turns being the aggressor.

Their natural progression moves them from ordinary wrestling into a martial arts style, and I can feel the tone of their practice shifting. Suddenly Orion isn't playing anymore. A simple move, Tobias spinning and trying to punch with his elbow, makes Orion drop his lackadaisical air and become a honed killer. He shifts, turning his right side toward his opponent and offering only a narrow area to defend.

There are spins and hits, grappling and breaking free, and all I can do is watch and pray that neither one seriously hurts the other. From their expressions, their power, and the way they charge at each other, I could really believe they hated each other.

But all of a sudden they break apart, panting, sweat dripping off them in buckets. They grin like fools and clasp hands. Then they start to talk about their fight, each measuring how well the other did and offering critique. I puff out my breath and walk toward them.

Stupid boys.

Orion is the first to see me, and his face lights up as our eyes meet. He stands with his arms hanging, one hip cocked, and I must say he looks all silky and sexy. Tobias, however, has his hands on his hips and is staring at me like I'm a piece of candy he just wants to gobble up.

I have to admit I really like that thought.

"Exercising?" I ask when I get close enough.

"Practice. Gotta stay sharp," Orion replies as he grabs me around my hips and whips me into his body.

"Ew." I scrunch up my nose as my hands briefly rest on his shoulders. After feeling the sweat, I yank them away.

Orion laughs and lets me go. I wipe my hands clean on my leggings.

“We're going out soon,” Tobias tells me.

The laughter dies in my throat. I lick my lips and finally ask something that has been in the back of my mind for a while. “Do you have a list of the people you've found?”

“Yes.”

“Could I see it?”

Tobias cocks his head and raises an eyebrow. “You're looking for someone.”

He didn't ask.

“A girl I knew,” I say quietly. “Her name was—is—Amber Waslin.”

They are silent, and then Orion shakes his head no. The air rushes out of my lungs.

“Who was she?” Orion asks.

“When I got back to Brentwood after the Great Incident,” I quietly tell them, “I met this other scavenger. Amber.”

I fall silent because I simply don't know how to explain what Amber was to me. A friend? No, she was more. Family? My feelings for her hadn't been sisterly. She and I had shared a life, because at the time neither one of us wanted to be alone and we thought we would keep each other safe.

But there had been something more, something budding, and perhaps if we'd been in college we would have called it *experimenting*. Amber and I were lovers; we took that next step that only two people who think they are the only people left in the world would naturally take. Of course, we had been young and girlish, and we had discovered how girls could be lovers. It was beautiful.

We had several months of idyllic bliss, a home life we never thought we'd have. And then we got careless. Amber had this idea to raid El Toro's stronghold, because she thought she knew where his stockpile of fuel was kept. She thought if we could get our hands on some of it, we could drive ourselves out of Los Angeles and go somewhere far away from the destruction.

I don't remember what I thought about this plan. Regardless, I followed Amber. We went to the stronghold, near the Staples Center, and we looked for that gas. But whatever knowledge Amber might have had or thought she had, there was nothing—nothing but El Toro's men, so we ran. I found someplace to hide, using a vast area of concrete debris for camouflage and crawling

into a large grated drum. The shadows inside hid me well, but I was able to look out and see everything, and what I saw was Amber as she was found and caught.

Right in front of me, I watched as she was raped, beaten, and dragged off while El Toro's men laughed at their conquest. And I could do nothing because, had I tried to help her, I would have been violated and abused as well. Cowardly, yes, I know, but I was frozen.

I tell Orion and Tobias this, talking quietly of my memories and the lingering shame I live with. After Amber, I refused to look for anyone else because I couldn't risk emotions again.

“Until now,” I say after I finish my story, and I feel tears welling in my eyes. “Until you two.”

Orion pulls me into his arms, one hand around my back and one rubbing my hair. “It wasn't your fault,” he tells me.

Tears mist over my eyes and spill down my cheeks. “I know,” I say. “I miss Amber, and I've been hoping that somehow she found her way out of El Toro's camp.”

Tobias places a hand on my arm, and I look at him. “If we find her, we'll bring her back for you.”

I smile at him, thanking him with my eyes.

I pull away from Orion and turn to compose myself. They let me have my peace, moving away for my privacy. For a long time I've pushed Amber to a far corner of my mind and made a conscious effort to not think of her. I couldn't handle another broken heart back then, and even now the memories threaten to overwhelm me in their intensity. So I take a deep breath and I wrap my arms around my belly to comfort myself as I let the dam crack. The tears continue to fall, and I think about when she and I first met. The spark of our friendship, the shyness of our first words, and the loneliness in our gazes; I let them all gently blow through my mind.

I unfold my arms and turn around, holding out my hands to Orion and Tobias. Though my heart is broken for the loss of Amber, being surrounded by their support helps clear the pain away. I cry until the tears run pure of the helplessness and rage I've felt for almost six years.

When the storm subsides, we start walking, Tobias on my right and Orion on my left. Not toward the house but toward the bluffs that overlook the ocean. I stand five feet ten in my bare feet, but between these two soldiers I feel tiny, almost fragile.

As we stand looking over the mighty Pacific, the roar of the waves dulled by the distance and wind, I feel my heart mend. I don't know if I would have ever been strong enough to face this alone, but these men have given me strength to face the pain I've buried. I don't know when it happened or why it happened, but these men have become my rocks.

I breathe deeply, inhaling the salty wind that blows over me. I will miss the tang of the ocean on my tongue and the wetness in my lungs. The ocean air leaves a sticky residue on the skin after it dries, and turns my slightly wavy hair to kinky curls.

I look first to my right and then to my left, smiling as each man stares over the violent ocean. I'm very happy they're sharing this moment with me. No matter what happens in the future, should I never see them again when we get to Montana, at least I have them now.

Chapter Ten

They each take one of my hands, and we slowly walk along the bluffs. My emotional roller coaster is over, and I'm feeling calm, settled in a way I've never felt before. There is a lightness in my step.

“How much training do you have in self-defense?” Tobias asks me.

“Formal training?”

He nods.

“I'm a ballet dancer, not Xena.”

“Who?”

“Never mind.” I laugh. “The answer is none.” I shake my head. “I spent my days before the Big Shake Day doing girlie things like shopping and talking on the phone. I wasn't quite into karate.”

“You seem very capable,” he muses.

“And they say television rots your brain.”

“No shit?”

I chuckle. “I've done target practice.”

He disentangles his hand from mine, jogs a few feet away, and bends to pick something up. I see him lift the duffel bag and grab something from inside. It's a gun.

“That's a Beretta 92FS,” Orion tells me. “He picked it up about six months ago and is quite proud of that little thing.”

“Little thing? I think you need glasses.”

Orion grins. “It has subsonic bullets.”

“Subsonic bullets? You've got to be kidding.”

“I swear,” he vows, holding up a hand. “Scout's honor.”

“You were a scout?”

“I tried to be, for a time. My neighborhood didn't really support the 'To do the right thing at the right moment' motto.”

I study Orion's profile. “That bad?”

He sighs. “Yeah,” he admits. “That bad.”

“Hey!” Tobias calls to us. “Come over here, and let's practice.”

Orion and I join Tobias, and he loads the magazine with his high-tech bullets.

“So what makes these bullets special?”

“When a gun is fired, the expanding gas from the propellant pushes the bullet out. The heat and sound are by-products,” Tobias tells me in his no-nonsense way. “But a subsonic bullet has less gunpowder, which means it has a slower velocity.” He screws a long, round tube on the end of the barrel.

“Is that a silencer?”

“Well, technically a silencer isn't really silent,” he continues. “The chambers inside trap the expanding gases, making the sound waves more contained. The more accurate term is *suppressor*.”

“Meaning they're not as loud as regular bullets,” I conclude.

“When combined with a suppressor,” he corrects. “Not great for military purposes because they lack expansion even at high velocity, so they don't do the necessary terminal damage. But I like carrying them for just this reason.” He slams the magazine in and loads the chamber. “Quieter target practice.”

“Oh,” I say. “Silly me. What you're telling me is that these subsonic bullets don't expand on impact the way heavier ordnance does, and they don't tear the target up as much as you need them to.”

Tobias looks over my head to Orion and nods. “We're warriors, Kaori. It's what we have to do.” He shrugs away the hard truth that they are killers from time to time, and grins at me. “Ready to show me your stuff?”

“I thought I already did,” I shoot back saucily. “Quite effectively as I recall.”

Orion lets out a chortle. I throw him a wink.

Tobias tries his best not to smile. He's trying to be all business. "This is serious. I want to make sure you know how to shoot."

"Sorry," I say, though I'm not sorry at all. I like this—our interaction with teasing banter.

Tobias turns and finds a target. "See those trees over there? I want to see you hit them. Picture one of them as one of those men who hurt Amber. Shoot him in the forehead."

He lines up his sight and, with an arm extended, squeezes the trigger: one, two, and three. He's right; there isn't the resounding boom of gunfire, but there is a rapid clacking noise. Then he turns to me and beckons.

I take the heavy black gun and check the chamber, seeing a round already loaded. The slide falls back, and I take a look behind me to make sure Orion and Tobias are safe before I line up my sight with the trees. I cup my free hand under the grip and establish my mental picture of a nasty-looking bad guy before firing. The recoil shakes all the way up through my arm and into my head. It hurts, and I can tell immediately that I missed the target.

"I thought you said you know how to shoot," Tobias demands.

"I do. But I've never shot a person, and it's kind of scary picturing a head exploding."

"A head won't explode with a bullet," Orion offers kindly.

"Try again," he orders.

Again I take my stance, line up my sight, steady my arm, and fire. And again the recoil throws me off balance as I miss the tree.

"I'm closing my eyes," I say.

"Don't do that," Tobias instructs.

"Gee, why didn't I think of that?" The sarcastic reply is out of my mouth before I can stop it.

Tobias puts his fists on his hips as he frowns. "Don't be smart."

"Don't be a jackass," I say back.

He sighs deeply and runs a hand through his hair. I decide to try again, and this time I erase my mental picture and see just a tree. I manage to keep my eyes open. I see bark go flying as I hit the tree, and I feel a silly grin spread over my face.

"It's high"—Tobias grunts—"but it'll do. Shoot until the gun is empty."

I do, and each time I manage to hit what I aim for. Target practice is easy when you aim at a nonsentient being. When the gun clicks empty, Tobias takes it back, removes the magazine, and then ejects the bullet out of the chamber. There is a satisfactory air about his actions.

“Don't you want me to practice more?” I ask.

“You don't need to practice more,” he informs me. “Just picture the bad guy as a tree, and you'll do okay.”

“All right,” I reply, wishing I could practice some more. “I just expected you, of all people, to push me to be better.”

“Kaori,” he says, “you've been on your own for six years. God, do you know how difficult that is? Even for someone like me. You have to be adaptive, creative, cunning, and resourceful. There's no reason for me to push you. You already know how to adapt.”

His words fill me with warmth. Honestly, how fucking awesome is it to be praised like that? The guys start to pack up their equipment. At that moment the ground shakes beneath our feet. I spread my arms out to keep my balance, and stare wide-eyed at Tobias and Orion. Their grim expressions don't make me feel any better. A few seconds later all is still again, as if nothing happened at all, only now I understand the sinister nature underlining these small quakes.

“You said you're a ballet dancer?” Orion asks, completely changing the subject.

I nod, making the effort to shift my thinking, and as we all walk back to the house, I tell them of my self-built studio. Of course they want to see a performance, so I run up the stairs and change into a dance leotard. I rummage through my music and select a CD before heading to the back of the house.

Tobias and Orion sit comfortably on chairs and watch me quietly as I prepare myself, going through my warm-up routine and stretching my muscles. Only then do I insert my disc and flip it on.

The first strands of “Time to Say Goodbye” waver through the room, and Andrea Bocelli's haunting voice starts to sing in Italian. I lose myself in dance, the strains of the harps and violins moving through me and my body floating to their magical tune. I am a puppet to the music.

I don't think the men understand Italian, but I've memorized the English translation, and the words about lovers who are not together but yearn to be pour through me. I don't know how

Tobias and Orion feel about me, but I do know how much they have come to mean to me in the short time we've spent together.

And when the music comes to its crescendo at the end, I fall to the floor in a heap of sweaty arms and legs. My emotions are at the surface, ready to break free, so I take a few moments of deep breathing to rein the emotions all back in. I feel Tobias and Orion near me, and I raise my head to look at them.

Orion reaches out and picks me up, his hands and arms tenderly enfolding me. I hug him, pressing my body close to his, and Tobias embraces me from behind. We stand there for a long time, simply locked in each other's arms, and I wish this moment could last forever.

But all good things must end.

"That was amazing," Orion says quietly. "I've never seen anything so beautiful."

"Then you've never seen a proper ballet," I tease.

"You mean girls in tutus and guys in very tight pants?" He actually shudders. "I don't think I could sit through *The Nutcracker*."

"I saw *The Nutcracker* once," Tobias says, shocking both of us. Orion and I gape at him. "I had a sister," he explains. "She was older than me and a dancer. I was five, I think, when my mother took me to go see her perform. She was a fairy."

"A sugarplum fairy," I say.

"Yeah." He nods.

"What happened to her?" I ask softly.

"A week after that, they were coming home from Christmas shopping. They were all shot—killed—in a mugging." Tobias turns his head. I suppose he must be collecting his thoughts, because a moment later the gloom melts away and he smiles at me. "Yeah, so I liked it—the dancing."

Part of me wants to probe more, but I don't. I can draw the obvious conclusion of how Tobias went from being in a family to being a street punk who needed the military to keep him out of prison.

"Are you guys hungry?" I ask, heading past them toward the kitchen. "Would you like some peanut-butter crackers? I have some left over—"

“Kaori, we're leaving for one more search, but Orion and I are not coming back here,” Tobias informs me.

Slightly dumbfounded, I sit down at the table. I don't say a word, but I guess my expression more than gives away what I'm thinking.

Orion takes my hand and gives it a squeeze. “Kaori, we have a job to do.”

I nod, somehow feeling stupid. “I know,” I say. “But why aren't you coming back?”

“Hyde and Seek,” Tobias explains. “They've not come back online.”

“You're going to search for them,” I reply. “Okay, you told me that, but don't you have some type of plan for this? Call for backup, get all the troops for an invasion or something?”

Orion shakes his head as Tobias answers. “It's just us, Kaori. There is no invasion. Sar and Gabe are going to meet up with us downtown, and we're going to find them.”

After hearing this, I realize how clueless they are about the absolute lawlessness of Los Angeles.

“And how long do you have to look for him?”

“Until dawn,” Orion answers. “We've received an update from the USGS, and that's all the time we're allowed.”

“Allowed?”

“The earthquakes we've been feeling,” Orion reminds me. “The big one is soon, Kaori.”

“What if you don't find them?”

They exchange a glance, and a sliver of cold dread slides over my skin.

“We don't leave men behind,” Tobias tells me, reiterating Orion's words from earlier, which tells me more than anything else they could say.

“Then I'm going with you,” I declare.

Immediately, denial flashes on their faces.

“Absolutely not.” Orion is adamant.

“No fucking way,” Tobias agrees. “You're getting out of here.”

“But you don't know what Los Angeles has become,” I shoot back. “I know what downtown is like, and I know the area where they probably are.”

Through my argument, they've continued shaking their heads. The pleas that sound logical to me are not getting through.

"I've asked Marek to pick you up not too far from here," Tobias says. "In the clearing just north of us." He whips his chin in that direction. "You're to meet the lift at midnight."

"No," I say stubbornly. "You need me."

"You're right, we do need you," Orion clarifies, surprising me. I look at him questioningly. "You mean a lot to us, but we can't do our jobs if we're worried about you."

I set my jaw, ready to argue. But Orion sweeps in, bending over the table to kiss me on the lips. Immediately my body betrays my mind, and the words of argument flee. But this only makes me madder, and I yank away from him. I am breathing as if I just ran a race.

"You play dirty," I accuse.

"We play to win," he counters, reaching for me again.

But I'm too upset with them to respond to their libidos. I rise and march stiffly away, heading back to my studio with my posture straight and head held high. My fists are clenched, but I refuse to stomp my feet as I make a hasty exit.

Damn them for dismissing me! I'm not a stupid little girl. I know this land, and I know that city. I can't believe they don't realize they'll need my help locating their friends and getting out of there in enough time to meet the lifts. The way they talk, it sounds like if they don't find Hyde and Seek, they'll all go down together.

I storm into my studio and start to pick up items I've left around. I don't really need to clean, but I'm shaking hard from fear and anger. I just can't believe that now that I've found them, I'm going to lose them. And not from them walking away, but to death. And I've no doubt that's what that look they shared was about.

I could live with them leaving me—just knowing they were alive somewhere in this messed-up world is okay with me—but not this way, not like this.

I'm so angry I could cry, but I have no more patience with tears.

Behind me, I hear the door open, and Tobias and Orion move in, standing close enough for me to feel their body heat. I take a deep breath and turn to face them.

“Kaori.” Tobias cradles my face in his hands and stares at me with a troubled look. “You go meet the lift at midnight. Do you understand me? You get the hell out of here, and we’ll meet you in Montana.”

They are sending me away to protect me. For an instant the romance book I finished reading yesterday flashes through my head, mocking me. Some little part of me wants to obey because I’m scared. But my heart aches because *I* know what they’re walking into. *I* know the bad guys out there. These two are so strong and brave. But they don’t know what I know. And how can I simply walk away from them and hope they return?

“Why?” I stare into Tobias’s eyes. “What difference does it make if I die with you here, helping, or if I go without you both and die slowly every day?”

This is the first time I’ve admitted any part of how deeply my feelings for them run. I’m rather surprised at the words leaking from my mouth, but even as I utter them, the absolute rightness rings solidly through me.

“I think I’d rather go quickly,” I whisper.

Orion grabs my arms and shakes me. “Do you hear what you’re saying?” he demands. “This is life-and-death!”

“I know that!” I cry. “But I don’t want a world where you’re not in it!”

His hands fall away. We are all staring at each other, breathing heavily from the emotions hanging in the air. I hold their gaze unblinkingly.

Tobias groans and grabs me, enfolding me into his body. I sag into his strength.

“Do you think you’re alone in what you’re feeling?” His chest rumbles with his words. “The thought of something happening to you rips me up inside. How can we function with visions like that?”

I hear the truth ringing in his voice. I look over at Orion, and I see the love I feel reflected there. My heart soars in elation knowing these two men return my feelings.

“Kaori.” Orion says my name in a deep, hypnotic tone. “Get on the lift; let us go into this knowing that you are safe.”

“You’re asking me to go to protect me,” I say to him, “but who will protect you?”

He grins at me. “Tobias and I will protect each other. We've taken care of each other for fourteen years. We'll come for you. I promise you, we'll both come for you.”

I take a deep breath and agree. “I'll go to the clearing,” I tell them, because it's the only thing I can promise. And after I have said this, I feel their sighs of relief.

These are our last moments together, and I'll be damned if I spend them arguing. I reach up from Tobias's embrace and kiss him with everything I have. He responds enthusiastically, our tongues wrapping around each other. He runs his hands up and down my back, and I pour as much of my love into the kiss as I can. We break apart, gasping for breath, and I turn to kiss Orion with equal abandon. My heart feels like it's breaking.

After I pull back from Orion, I give each man a measured look, memorizing them before turning to make my way to my room. I close my door softly and lie on my bed, letting the tears fall silently. I hear them moving around, but they don't come to my room. And eventually my crying lulls me to sleep.

* * *

When I wake, I'm alone, and I know that the men are gone. I mean truly gone. They will not return to this house or to me, because they expect me to keep my word and meet the lift. For a moment I just lie in bed and think. I have never been overly optimistic, but I've always believed that whatever deity is watching over me—he or she or them—gave me a second chance for a reason, and that belief overrides everything else. Suddenly I know what I have to do.

I rise from the bed with intention. I sit at my vanity and stare at myself, seeing some new lines around my mouth that I've never noticed before. I brush my hair and braid it back; the tail hangs almost to my waist. I dress with care, all in black, and pull on my steel-toed boots. Then I head to the bedroom across from mine and choose the weapons I'll need. I grab my two pistols and a couple of extra loaded magazines. I grab some small knives, a couple of smoke bombs, and my large hunting knife. I place them in my backpack and in pockets and holsters I have buttoned on.

I'm leaving my home. I'm leaving everything behind. The Brentwood house held only my childhood memories, but this place is everything I've become. I've been a hermit; this is the place I've built up by myself and for myself, and now I have to give it up. It's going to be gone, destroyed, and that's something I've not really faced or realized till now.

I wander through the house, this testament to my ability to survive. I walk into my dance studio and see the rough wood I laboriously sanded with my bare hands for my ballet practice. The little CD player I lug around everywhere is sitting on the floor, as if patiently waiting for me to push Start.

I wander to the next room, my knickknack room, and peek in. There is a matching set of lamps that I thought were adorable with their Tiffany-esque shades that I found in a Santa Monica home. I turn away from them.

I head upstairs to my room. I have photos everywhere, books, diaries of useless days gone by, and all the things that make up my comfort zone. My things. Mine.

And all of it I must leave behind.

I walk over and pick up the photo of my parents; I fold it and tuck into a pocket. This photo I will never lose or leave behind, because it's all I will have left of them.

The world is gone—at least my world—and I must make a new one. But on the tail of this decision is the knowledge that I will not be alone in my new life. As I leave this one behind me, so too do I leave the emptiness and solitude. A door closes, and a window opens.

And with that thought ringing through my head, I turn my back on my bedroom and close the door with a decisive *click*.

Chapter Eleven

I wait in the clearing, a shadow blending in with the darkness. A few minutes later a low vibration hits the air and makes my skin pulse in rhythm.

The lift lands in the clearing, and I stand very still because I know they must be wearing night-vision goggles. The side opens, the door unfolding like an attic staircase, and a man walks out. He is tall, taller than Orion, and big. He has wide shoulders and a narrow waist and walks like a panther.

This must be Lieutenant Marek. It looks as though an artist carved his face from marble and that Aphrodite herself came down and blessed him with blazing handsomeness. But as gorgeous as he is, I feel nothing toward him. My mind and heart are filled with two men now parted from me.

But I have no intention of meeting with Marek. I have kept my promise to Tobias and Orion; I have come to the clearing, but there is no way I'm getting on that lift and flying out of here. I hid once to save my neck; I won't do that again. Something is pulling at me, some indescribable gut feeling that I am needed, that I am instrumental, so no matter what precautions I may be feeling or hesitating over, that invisible string linking me to Tobias and Orion draws me forward.

I stay hidden in the tree line and watch from my cover. I have to give Marek credit. He stays for a good half hour to wait for me, growing more impatient with each minute. I can see his lips moving and suspect he is cursing a blue streak. Finally he motions to the pilot, and the side opens up again to allow him to climb aboard.

He turns to get on it, but then he stops, his spine straight and stiff as he turns back and scans the tree line where I'm hiding. He reaches to his side, inside the lift, and grabs a megaphone that he brings to his mouth.

“I know you're out there!” he shouts over the whirling of the blades. “Stupidity and bravery can be mistaken for each other, Kaori Carnelian!” He pauses and looks into the darkness, searching for me. “The rendezvous is at MacArthur Park! Be there by sunrise!”

He tosses the megaphone behind him, gives one last glare in my general direction, and then disappears within the lift. Within seconds, it's airborne.

Once it has cleared my sight, I look down at the dirt bike I am astride. I turn the key, and it whines to life. I had been half-afraid the gasoline in the bike was too old, the hoses too fragile to use, but after a few tries it sputters on. It had been stored in the small shed for the past six years; I only rode a couple of times to learn how it worked, because I rationalized it would be prudent to know in case I needed a fast getaway.

I made sure to disable the headlight's glare so as to not be seen. I head out of the clearing and get on a street that will take me toward the city. It's dark, but I know the way.

I am not a warrior; I am not a soldier or a fighter. I have never killed a person. And I have neither sheer physical strength nor years of training. But what I do have is stealth. I have learned how to become a ghost, and this alone I am relying on to save not only myself but the lives of the two people most important to me in this world.

But like I said before, I am nothing if not meticulous, so as my bike races down the streets, my mind races too, plotting the best way to get to where I need to go. The earthquake six years ago leveled any building taller than two floors, so going down streets like Santa Monica Boulevard or Wilshire will be tricky. Then again, all the overpasses have fallen onto the road below, so that also makes driving intricate. The 405 is going to be a bitch no matter how I slice it; the only good thing is the dirt bike can maneuver around obstacles fairly easily.

Think, Kaori, think.

One area that might not be so blocked is Westwood. There is one street that is heavily fortified to go under and over the 405, called Ohio, next to the park. That area would have been built stronger because of the Veterans Affairs Building adjacent to it. And once I pass the 405, I should have no trouble navigating the streets.

I take comfort in feeling my weapons are strapped against my body. I even have one grenade, though that makes me extremely nervous, so I'm extra careful of that little incendiary.

Tonight there is a sliver of moon. The darkness will be easy to penetrate. I try to concentrate on my driving, but in the back of my mind is the knowledge that I might fail. That I might be wrong and that while Tobias and Orion are getting their team and civilians out, I'll be stuck in LA while the earth shakes itself apart.

As I pass street after street, I can't help but think about the photos from the Civil War depicting cities after General Sherman did his march to the sea. Burned-out, hollow husks of buildings, ruins of half-collapsed structures, and smashed cars. Everything is eerily quiet as my dirt bike races through the night, its high-pitched squeal echoing loudly in my ears. I kind of feel like I should be seeing zombies walking around searching for brains to eat.

I press the accelerator to hurry through this desolate section.

Once I reach the area I pictured, I'm happy to see that while the overpass did collapse, a big hunk of slab left a large enough wedge for a dirt bike to fit through.

As I make my way east, crisscrossing over and around debris, I happen to see a person standing on a corner. He just stands there, unmoving, with his arms hanging at his sides, watching me as I ride. I can imagine his surprise and disbelief, because seeing a moving vehicle is definitely an oddity in Los Angeles.

I slow down, easing up on the gas and throttling down to a lower gear. Our gazes lock for an instant, and I see his eyes widen in fear before he turns tail and takes off down the broken sidewalk. One person in LA means a whole lot more are hiding, those who haven't been found by Noble and West's group.

I gun the bike, notching it up and giving chase. Though he is fast, he's no match for me, and I tear past him, only to brake hard in front of him as I whip the bike around. I turn the headlight on, and it shines in his eyes, and he skids to a halt, throwing an arm up to protect his sight. He is dressed in overlarge clothes that are dirty and ragged, and wears a backward LA Lakers cap on his head.

"I'm not here to hurt you!" I call out to him. He wants to run, but he hesitates, perhaps from the pleading in my voice. "There's another earthquake coming! Tell everyone you know! Get to MacArthur Park an hour before sunrise to get the hell out of here!"

And then I don't wait around to see if he acknowledges me or even believes me. If I can save one more person, then this is the reason I turned away from Marek. But it's taking me a long

time to get downtown, so I fishtail away from the man and continue on, this time a little more daring in my travels.

I have made my way to where Wilshire Boulevard crosses through MacArthur Park, because I want to mentally map the rest of the way from here. I am currently in the Westlake neighborhood of Los Angeles, a formerly bad section of town. People like me, people who grew up in more privileged sections tended to avoid Westlake because of the problems that used to go on here. Shootings, drug dealings, and drownings gave the area a bad rep. But before the virus and the earthquake had struck, the city and police tried to turn it around and make it safe again, as it had once been. Now all that's left of the ambitious plans to revitalize it are overgrown fields. It's dreary and desolate, and I hate it just as much now as I did before.

I leave the park, making mental notes of open and blocked streets along the way. Once I approach where the 110 freeway is collapsed, I park the bike. It's too loud to take it any farther. I hide it in an alley behind fallen scaffolding, so if someone happens by with a casual glance, it will go unnoticed. I walk in the shadows, quickly yet carefully. It's easy to scramble over the collapsed freeway, and I cut a direct path toward the Staples Center.

It's here that I become very cautious, because El Toro has used the prestigious sports arena as his personal domain for the past six years. I guess he was either a huge Lakers or Clippers fan, or maybe even a Kings fan. Who really cares? The Staples Center is one of those buildings that miraculously survived the earthquake. Except for a couple of broken glass panes, the structure is in near-mint condition. In fact it's the newer, unique structures that survived.

About the time I make it to the outskirts, near the Convention Center, I am sweating, partly from the climbing and hiking and partly from nerves. On the other side of Figueroa Street and several blocks north, near New Downtown, is where I lost Amber. I don't want to look in that direction, yet I can't help myself. I think it's good that I allow myself a moment to grieve; otherwise I think I would be too overcome to push on. I have to; I'm running out of time. It's taken me much longer than I thought it would to get this far.

But as I move out of the dark shadows of the Convention Center, two pairs of hands reach out for me, one grabbing me around the back, and the other covering my mouth from the front. These men are not Tobias and Orion and yet there is something about them that is familiar. Perhaps I recognize their stench, or maybe the way they handle me as if they are familiar with

my body. Terror washes over me. I struggle; I do everything I did to escape from the first time I met them, only these large assailants do not fall for my tricks, because they don't care that they might hurt me. I squirm and struggle, I kick and I claw, but these men don't budge. And then my eyes go wide as my gaze falls upon...her.

Amber!

Chapter Twelve

“I knew it was just a matter of time until I found you again,” she says to me, ignoring how I gape at her. “Since my men reported their altercation at your home, I've been waiting.”

“*Amber!* You're alive!” This is about all I can gasp past frozen lips. I'm shaking like I'm cold, and somewhere in my mind is the thought that it must be shock. So many times I have thought of her with helplessness and sadness, but she's here in front of me! Whole and alive! I feel elation, wild happiness, and I stiffly raise my arms as if I am going to hug her. The disjointed motion makes me feel like a marionette. But she jerks back from me, and her hand comes up to point a gun straight at my face.

I blink in shock, and drop my arms like they weigh a thousand pounds. I try to stumble away from her, but the guards flanking me grab my upper arms and prevent my running from this nightmare. The happiness I feel at seeing her quickly dissolves into confusion and horror. There's something dark and chilling in her gaze; this woman in front of me might have Amber's face and body, but her eyes belong to someone totally different.

“I've had Ringo and Thor hunting for you for a while now,” she continues, her voice flat. “And when they finally find you, you have two bodyguards. Where did you find them, Kaori? Crawling out of another house?”

My gaze has fallen to the barrel of the gun, but at her questions, I jerk up and stare at her. Of course. I remember wondering how my attackers knew about the birthmark behind my ear.

“Amber?” I finally manage to squeak out. “What happened to you?”

At first she says nothing and leaves me to believe she won't answer. Her once-lively, once-beautiful dark eyes are lifeless and flinty. When she finally talks, it isn't to answer me. Instead she says, “I think you'll be wonderful in the arena.”

And I haven't a moment to digest that as she turns away and walks toward the Staples Center, with the two men dragging me forward.

Of course I resist, but my feeble strength against these two brutish men is laughable. They pick me up by my arms and carry me as they follow after Amber. She walks differently, I notice. With her arms hanging stiffly at her sides, she walks with a purpose. Her fists are tight, out of anger, I imagine. Maybe she's picturing them wrapped around my throat.

“Amber.”

She doesn't acknowledge me.

“Amber!”

She stops, and we stop behind her. She rolls her head and shrugs her shoulders, as if easing tension.

“Don't talk to me,” she finally says. “I caught you for one reason: to go into the arena and fight like I fought.”

“I don't know what that means,” I say. “Please talk to me.”

But she doesn't. She simply continues on, and we follow the rest of the way. I see the Staples Center; the front has large flaming torches outside the main doors to light the way. There are guards on each side with fierce machine guns in their hands. They look at me through narrowed, mistrustful eyes, watching my every move. They are tall, hefty thugs, bald-headed, with tattoos up and down their arms, necks, and faces.

We pass by them, and I am enveloped once again in darkness and fire, torches blazing every few feet, turning the inside of the center into a dungeon. There are many people around, and they all stop and turn to stare as I am dragged through the once-friendly halls to the stairs, down to a set of corridors and into what can only be described as cells. Holding cells with masses of people behind the bars watching as I'm brought in and dumped unceremoniously.

I rub the spots on my arms where the blood rushes back, giving them a tingly sensation, and try to ignore the many eyes on me. My backpack is ripped from me, and I'm flipped around as one of the men, either Ringo or Thor, frisks me. One by one, my carefully packed weapons are tossed aside. And to add insult to my injured pride and emotions, he decides to cop a couple of feels. He laughs in a sour-breath grunt and then flips me back around to face Amber.

Her empty gaze roves over my face, and I expect her to laugh and tease me about this joke she's playing. But she brings her hand up and slaps me hard, and down I go. Tears involuntarily

jump into my eyes as I cover my burning cheek. One of the men grabs my arms and yanks me back up to face her again.

She raises her hand, and I cringe away, but instead of hitting me again, she reaches around to grab my hair, and before I can even blink in shock, her lips are on mine.

It isn't the kiss I remember. This mash of her mouth on mine is hard, hurtful, and full of ugliness. I rear back, breaking contact, and Amber laughs. It's guttural, as if she's forgotten how. It hurts my ears.

"Take her, Thor." She nods toward the cells. Thor drags me away from her, and as soon as I start shuffling behind him, the people in the cells erupt in noise. They yell. They beg. They shout expletives at me. Some give me the finger and some even spit. I cringe, scared half to death that I royally fucked up when I made the choice to ignore the lift.

We twist and turn through the cells until we reach one that has a lone woman in it. She is young and Hispanic, her hair cropped short and slicked back from her face. She wears a sleeveless T-shirt, jeans, and lumberjack boots. Despite the beautiful butterfly tattoo peeking from her breast, she looks badass and angry, and my heart palpitates.

Ringo opens the cell, and Thor throws me in. The door bangs shut behind me, and I huddle against it hoping it will magically disappear and I can leave.

"So you're the one who pissed her off."

I blink at the woman's tone. She is sitting on a stool, her knees open and her elbows resting on them. Her hands are clasped loosely together between her knees.

"Are you talking about Amber?"

She snorts. "Is that her name? I always thought it was just 'Bitch.'"

"She hates me," I say needlessly, but I have nothing else to offer.

"Ya think?" she taunts.

"I don't know why. I didn't do anything to her," I whisper. But then I stop, because I suddenly remember that isn't exactly true. The only thing I did to her was not save her.

"Well, whatever that 'nothing' was, it sure made a ripe motherfucker out of her. She's the best *luchador* there is."

"The best what?"

“Luchador. Fighter.”

I am completely lost in translation.

“Fuck,” the woman says under her breath. “You have no idea what these cells are for, do you?”

I shake my head.

“Upstairs is the arena,” she tells me. “The boss man likes fighting as entertainment, so he created the fights in the Staples Center for his amusement. Think *Gladiator*, but instead of tigers we get to use a full arsenal of available weapons.”

“You sound like you know this arena well.”

“I should; my brother built it.”

“Your brother?” I ask, horrified. “He put you here?”

“I put myself here,” she says in a tired voice and rises to grab hold of the bars as if testing their strength. “Punishment for my lack of loyalty.”

“So are you going to fight?”

“I’ve already fought. But you? Definitely.”

“But I don’t know how to fight!”

“Well, you better pull some moves out of your ass, then.”

Even in my panicked state of mind, I’m mindful of the time left. I can’t trust this woman at all, but I have no choice. “Listen,” I say and lower my voice as I look around to make sure we can’t be overheard. “We don’t have time. Very soon there’s going to be a devastating earthquake—”

In a flash the woman is on top of me, pressing one hand against my mouth, her almond-shaped eyes wide. “How do you know this?” she whispers. “How do you know about the quake?”

I rip her hand away from my mouth and whisper back, “How do *you* know about the quake?”

The answer hits us at the same time. Our eyes widen, and she looks me up and down as I do the same to her. “Which ones are yours?” I ask her.

“Sar and Gabe,” she answers, eyes narrowed. “And yours?”

“Tobias and Orion.”

She nods and relaxes, and I do too, because there's only one way she'd know their names.

“My name is Mari,” she says. “Actually it's Mariposa, but call me that and die. Have you heard from any of them?”

I shake my head. “I just got into the city when Amber found me. And the guys don't realize I came after them.”

“Really?” Dark amusement highlights her eyes. “They sent you to meet the lift?”

“Yeah.”

She snorts. “Mine tried doing the same, but there's no fucking way I'm leaving this city without them.”

“That's how I feel.”

Once again Mari eyes me up and down, and when I see approval radiating back, I realize I've just passed some type of test with her. We are now on a mission together, partners almost, with a common goal.

“How do we get out of here?” I ask her.

“We can't while we're in these cells,” she says. “But once we get out of here, there are lots of places to escape, places that should be guarded but are usually monitored by people too drunk or high to really pay attention. The best place is a service entrance on the subbasement level. Empties out to a docking ramp.”

“You know El Toro?”

She nods grimly. “My brother is his right-hand guy. I've stayed as long as I can to help the people they find and drag here to fight.” She shakes her head. “He's a sick bastard.”

“And your brother?”

Her mouth hardens into a thin line. “Eddie made his bed.”

I lay a comforting hand on her shoulder. I'm actually surprised when she covers it with her own, accepting the offer of quiet understanding instead of thrusting it away. Mari is a tough woman, but human enough to still need solace.

The clamor of the women around us rises again, alerting us to the fact that someone has just entered the holding area. Mari and I spring apart, standing rigidly, waiting. I think instinctively we both know this visitor is for either one or both of us.

We watch as Ringo and Thor come back and flank the cage door. Ringo opens it, and Thor reaches in to haul Mari out, encircling her in his thick arms to prevent her from doing too much damage as she kicks and curses. The other grabs me, and I go without too much protest, because one of us tiring herself out is enough. I'll rest to fight harder at the right moment.

Back through the rows of jeering people and the dark, torch-lit corridors, but this time we turn left and head out through a side opening that leads to a court. It used to be the players' entrance, but no longer. Now the basketball court is a stage of a different type. The JumboTron screen that used to hang above the court rests on the ground. It has been stabilized, because on top of it is a large octagonal cage made of chain-link fence with high sides. Large tiki torches surround each angle give off enough light to see. Some of the purple seats are still there. Elsewhere it's evident that regular spectators have moved in their personal seats and couches. Many people are watching the fight going on in the center of the caged ring.

There are two men inside, facing off, circling each other. I don't recognize them, but I do recognize the tattoos they each sport: the infinity triangle. Mari and I glance at each other to see if these two are either of our guys, but since we both don't react to them, I hazard a guess that it must be Hyde and Seek paired against each other.

White gauze surrounds the slightly smaller man's head, though he seems to move normally. I recognize that they aren't really fighting each other, more like they're acting out the practice routine Orion and Tobias did earlier this morning. The crowd boos at them for not going in to kill each other, and I have to wonder whose lame idea it was to pit friends against each other.

The man with the gauze is dark haired in comparison with the other's red-gold high and tight. But when I say *smaller*, it's like comparing a Hummer to a Chevy Suburban. The red-haired man easily outlumbers Orion and Tobias. His are the kind of muscles that bulge and make one think of trees for biceps. His partner is built of smooth sinew and sturdy brawn.

They keep glancing over their shoulders, and I follow their gazes to see a muscular Hispanic guy holding court, watching over the fight, a gun aimed loosely at a very pretty blonde

girl seated next to him. Her wide, frightened gaze is glued to the two men in the ring, and it dawns on me that she is with them and is their reason to give at least a half-decent show.

Ringo and Thor set Mari and me down side by side but keep hands on our shoulders to hold us still. And really, we're too glued to what's in the arena to think about escape. I realize now that if Hyde and Seek are here, captured, then the others will be showing up soon.

"That's El Toro," Mari whispers to me. "His real name is Hector Basilio. I've always thought he looks a little like Tito Ortiz."

"Who?"

"The old MMA fighter."

I have no idea who she's talking about, so I just shrug. El Toro has a shaved head and sits bare chested with large muscles ripped and popping. His head is kind of egg shaped, with dark eyes and eyebrows contrasting sharply with pale skin usually acquired by only the truly nocturnal.

It's odd putting a name to someone I've always thought of with fear. But this is just one man, not a legend or a monster. Just someone who was in the right place at the right time and grabbed a chance to be something more than he ever would have been in a regular life.

And then there is Amber, leaning down to talk to him, and his gaze jerks from the two men in the ring to where Mari and I stand. My heart leaps into my throat when I see the vicious satisfaction shining brightly in Amber's eyes.

Chapter Thirteen

Everything becomes vague as I'm separated from Mari and led through the stands toward the arena. People stop what they're doing to look at me as I'm led forward, but I don't look back at them. I'm also slightly aware that Seek and Hyde stop sparring, but I keep my focus on the one person who has me trapped like an animal.

Watching me like I'm some tasty treat for her sharpened teeth to gnaw, Amber puts her hands on her hips as I'm escorted forward. My feet start to slow, because I know this is going to become a duel, and one of us won't be walking away. Thor, who holds my arm, jerks me, and I stumble the rest of the way, falling to my knees right at El Toro's feet.

I raise my face and lock eyes with him. His lips are twisted in an unflattering smile; his eyes are cold and hard. I actually shiver from their flinty inspection. Fear washes over me, and I wonder if he plans on raping me right in front of everyone.

"So you're the one who pissed her off," he says, unknowingly repeating the very words Mari spoke to me earlier. "She is our fiercest fighter, unbeatable in the arena, and she wants to fight you."

He laughs, but I don't find anything very funny.

"She has earned certain privileges," he continues. "Fighting and surviving in the octagon, and I find I'm very curious to see her fight her demon."

I risk a glance over his shoulder to look at Amber. She smirks at me.

At that moment the ground shakes a bit, throwing all of us off balance slightly. Not enough for me to actually escape, but enough for apprehension to register with everyone. El Toro laughs lightly to ease the sudden tension, but even I can tell it's forced.

Then El Toro raises a finger, and I hear Hyde and Seek being moved out of the arena. The blonde jerks her head, straining to follow the two retreating figures with her eyes. I want so badly to reassure her, to tell her who I am and that Mari is with us too, but I have to be careful

not to reveal anything too important. The three of us together can surely find a way out of this situation. Orion and Tobias and the brothers are also out there. And from what I can conclude of how much time it took me to get here, we have maybe three hours to get the hell out of here and to MacArthur Park.

But nothing will happen if the blonde doesn't start thinking of ways to escape and if Mari doesn't start planning. I can't hold my silence anymore. As I turn to Amber and lash out at her, I hope like hell the blonde knows who my guys are.

"So this is your big revenge plan?" I retort. "You wait for six years so you can kick my ass?" I see her jerk in surprise at my tone, but I don't let her interrupt my tirade. "So I'm assuming you blame me for something, possibly for not coming after you. But let me tell you, Amber, you'd have done the same to me! Don't think you wouldn't have."

"Fuck you, Kaori!"

"Oh, what a quick-witted response!" I hiss. "So angry, yet it took you all this time to find me!"

In a flash she is on me, digging her fingers into my cheeks. "You're very good at hiding! But you found some boy toys and became careless."

"Leave Noble and West out of this," I say deliberately and feel a grain of satisfaction when the blonde's gaze jerks toward me. "You want to fight me, Amber? Let's do it."

She reaches up and grabs my hair—*ouch!*—and starts to drag me toward the arena. I stumble behind her, my body bent since she has my hair wrapped around her fist. It's painful, and tears leak out of my eyes, but this display stings my pride more than anything.

There are steps leading up to reach the top of the JumboTron and the cage, and I follow along blindly. I hear the *swish* of the gate as it opens and closes, and I trip slightly as I step onto the springy mat floor. At this point Amber lets go of my hair and pushes me; I spread my arms wide to catch my fall as I go flying forward. Quickly I regain my footing and spin to face her as I rub the tender spot on my scalp.

Amber has her back to me, and I see that she is grabbing a whip off the fence. That's when I realize there is an arsenal attached to the chain-link fence, just like Mari said. I see knives, whips, swords, hammers, screwdrivers, *sais*, throwing stars—if it has a blade or a point, it's

there. Everything. Except guns. I suppose those would have been too easy: just point and shoot and end of entertainment.

Amber turns and cracks her whip next to her. The biting sound echoes loudly through the arena.

“I’m pretty good with this,” she tells me. “My first fight I nailed the bitch across the cheek and took out her eye.”

“Yeah, that’s something to brag about,” I retort as we circle each other.

Amber slices the whip at me, but I’m fast; years of training in ballet have taught me to take sudden leaps. She does this several more times, and each time I’m able to jump away safely. I can tell this frustrates her. I watch her get ready to crack the whip, watch as she brings her arm back so the leather rope slithers back like a snake, and that’s when I leap forward to push her so hard, she stumbles back, loses her footing, and falls. The whip goes flying. I run to it and pick it up, but instead of using it, I toss it over the top of the fence. It’s out of both of our hands now.

Amber steadies herself and turns back to grab another weapon. It’s a sword, so I rush over to grab the sais. Yes, I’ve watched enough Japanese flicks to know the basic idea of these two truncheons that look like miniature pitchforks. As I guessed, Amber may have used a sword before, but she has no real technique with it, so as she swings the blade down toward my head, I am able to grasp it with the prongs of the sai.

Before she can even blink, I hook the other sai, lock them, and yank the sword out of her hands. It goes flying, and I’m left standing there, holding a sai in each hand and looking like I know exactly how to use them. Really I’ve been damn lucky, but I know luck only holds for so long.

Amber backs away from me, her eyes narrowing as she grins. “And I thought you were going to be a pushover.”

“I thought you were going to be sensible,” I snap back. “So stupid, Amber! You were always so stupid! This is all your fault, you know! You just had to come look for the gas, didn’t you?”

I can see my tirade has taken her by surprise, because she jerks a little, the savage intent on her face fading into an uncertain frown.

I press on. “You're so angry at me, but the real truth is that it's really your fault! How can you hate me for something you caused?”

As I talk, I keep moving toward her a little at a time. I hope to take her by surprise and subdue her with the sais.

“I don't hate you for what happened,” she finally says to me very quietly. “But you watched,” she says. “I saw you watching as those men raped me, and I wanted so badly for it to be you. *Why wasn't it you?*”

The mournful tone in her voice catches me off guard, surprising me enough that I lower my weapons. And that's when she strikes. Her fist flies out of nowhere and catches me across the face. Pain explodes in my skull as I fall back. I let go of the sais, and it's all I can do not to fall into dark oblivion.

My cheek is throbbing, and I feel something wet running into my hairline. I reach up to wipe it, and when I look, my hand is covered in blood. My stomach heaves in protest, but I swallow down the bile rushing up.

She steps over me, sneering. “It's you here now. And now I'm the head luchador, the one who's killed everyone to get here. To get to you.”

My vision clears, but the pain brings unwanted tears to my eyes. I push myself up on one elbow to look at Amber. She stands there, hands on her hips, and smirks down at me.

“I knew I'd find you one day, and El Toro promised this very moment. The arena is ours.”

Then she kicks me. Her foot catches me in my stomach, and I cry out as I curl into a ball, my arms going around my middle to protect myself. She laughs, and I really cry this time.

Oh my God! I hurt so much. Like a car has slammed into me head-on. A moan escapes from my mouth, a pitiful little cry that chokes in my throat. I know Amber is happy for my pain. And I realize this is making her happy, because it must be the same type of pain she felt all those years ago as those fucking men raped her. But all the sorrow and pity I felt for her evaporate instantly; now she's just a bitch I have to fight.

And if I don't fight to win, then I'm going to die.

So I bite down the pain that still shoots lightning bolts through me, and I kick her kneecap. I put everything I have behind the kick, and it must have been something, because I hear a snap and a howl as she falls down. I raise my head to look at her.

“Fuck!” she screams, her face a twisted heap of agony.

I get to my hands and knees and work my way as fast as I can to the fence to grab some type of weapon. I need something, because I'm rapidly losing strength and focus, and if those go, then I really am finished.

And what goes through my head is not the finality of death, but the realization that I might never again see Tobias and Orion. That I will die and they will know I disobeyed their wishes. That I'm not safe and sound and waiting for them in Montana, but lying cold and lifeless on this arena mat. Never to know their kisses or touches again, never to laugh with them, hold their hands, or grow old with them.

I've never thought about growing old, having a family. But it flashes in my mind, this unbelievable desire and need, and I start to cry at the desperate craving that fills my soul.

So I move as fast as I can, eyeing a large knife hanging on the fence, knowing if I can reach that, I stand a good chance of defeating Amber. And as I reach for it, I'm hit over the back. I collapse, falling onto my injured stomach, all the wind knocked out of me. Amber limps over and kicks me over. I see a bamboo *shinai* kendo stick in her hand, and while it's not heavy enough to break my bones, the blow from it has winded me enough to immobilize me.

She tosses the stick aside and limps past me, reaching out to grab the same knife I eyed a moment before. And I know it's now or never. I have to get away from her. Get away or get a weapon. So I roll over and force myself to my hands and knees.

I crawl too slowly, but I try as much as my battered lungs and bruised body will allow. She's behind me, standing as the triumphant victor. She is so happy, so thrilled she's about to kill me, about to end my life. I don't even realize I'm crying until I taste the tears that have hit my mouth, the hopelessness starting to enfold me, to crush me. I am about to die.

And just as she takes one last step to reach me, just as I see the shadow of her arms reaching overhead and the sharp point of her blade, there is a clatter directly in front of me. I look down and see the wonderful shape of Tobias's Beretta spin next to my hand. Without thought, without even considering the consequences, I scoop up the gun, flick the safety off, roll, and fire.

The roar of the gun is loud, louder than the cheers and rants of the people watching, and at the high echo of the gun blast they all stop their yelling. Silence.

I ignore it all as I watch Amber. The bullet has hit her in the chest, lodging right in the middle of her sternum. Blood runs like a river out of the wound, each pump of her heart squirting out more and more. Her eyes widen, surprised. Scared.

And then she's gone. That quickly. She falls down into a heap and never moves again. The door swings open, and I jerk the gun in that direction. I've just killed someone, someone who used to be my lover and friend, to save my own life. I won't hesitate to use the gun again.

But I focus on Orion as he holds up a hand toward me. I lower the barrel and sag in relief.

Chapter Fourteen

I halfway collapse into his arms as I reach him, and Orion swings me up and holds me tight to his chest. He takes the gun, but I haven't a clue where it disappears to. I ignore everything around me, all the madness of the past few minutes, the incredible pain still jolting through me, and just luxuriate in Orion's smell and the strength of his embrace. I wrap my arms around his neck, and we stand there for an all too brief moment and hug.

In seconds the spectators have shaken off their confusion. A bullet whizzes by our heads, reminding us we're hugging in a very vulnerable position. We need to find cover and get the hell out of here. It's almost painful for me to move out of his arms and follow as he climbs down the steps.

Orion flattens himself against the JumboTron, and I follow. We're trying to minimize the potential of getting hit, but we're still not safe.

Where do you hide on a former basketball court?

"We're going to make a run for the entrance over there," Orion tells me, nodding his head to the players' walkway through which I'd come not that long ago. "Tobias will give us cover."

Just as he says this, shots ring out from high on the other side of us, all aimed at where El Toro sits. There's cursing, shouts, and hollering, and a dozen people fire back at where Tobias is situated. My heart gives a little thud of dread, and all I can do is hope he's hidden well. Orion grabs my hand, and we make a dash just as another round of gunfire erupts from a different area. And before that spatter dies down another barrage erupts from opposite that. Orion and I reach the darkness of the walkway, and he picks up the torches and throws them away, blanketing the entire corridor in darkness. I can barely see him in light still cast from the arena.

"How did he manage that?" I gasp.

"We found Sar and Gabe," Orion answers me, distracted, pulling me into a dark corner. "Shh."

At first I hear nothing except the commotion raging out in the arena, but then I blink, and several men go running past us toward the fray. I notice Ringo and Thor are among those who rush by. Once they're gone, Orion grabs my hand and leads me away from the way they came, away from where I know the cells are.

I pull back. Orion swears under his breath.

"No, Kaori, we're getting out of here," he rasps. "I'm getting you to safety."

I drag my heels again. "There are cells, Orion," I tell him. "Mari might be back there."

"Who?"

"Mari. She's with Sar and Gabe."

"Sar and Gabe have a handle on their own," he tells me.

I yank my hand hard and manage to jerk him to a halt. This time he looks at me, listening. "We don't leave men behind," I remind him. "All of us get out or none of us."

He sighs, but he waits.

"Hyde and Seek were fighting in the arena before me. They were taken out by guards, I assume back to the cells."

I can feel his attention riveted on the two names I said, and I know he'd never leave his comrades behind. He raises a finger and taps my nose. "You follow every direction I give you," he says. I nod in agreement.

He turns, and we head back the way we came, going through the dark corridor and following the new clanging noise. It leads us to the holding area where the cells are located. I limp behind him as fast as I can.

As we turn the corners, we hear the calls and shouts of a vast compartment of people ahead of us. Orion picks up his pace, and I keep up with him. He holds my hand tightly.

We round the last bend, to where the cages are. I can't even imagine what it used to be in older days. But instead of what I expect to see, there stand Hyde Galloway and Kristian Seek.

They're warriors, blood dripping off their hands and arms, their chests heaving, and their fists clenching and unclenching. They look as if they've fought a war. And maybe they have. Unconscious guards lie in heaps at their feet.

Orion lets go of my hand and rushes over to greet them. They smack fists and pound each other on the backs. Their smiles stretch from ear to ear. And after the few moments of reconnecting, Orion turns to me and introduces me to his family.

“This is Kaori Carnelian,” he says. “Tobias and I found her, and she's been invaluable to us.”

“I saw you in the arena,” I say to them, smiling just a bit. Suddenly I'm very nervous for some reason. “You guys know the blonde, right? The one who El Toro had.”

The two men snap to attention, and just like that, the lighthearted moment is gone. “Have you seen her?” Hyde asks.

I nod. “When I was being...introduced,” I say with a grimace, “I managed to let her know I was with Tobias and Orion.”

Seek lays a hand on Hyde's shoulder and squeezes it. Hyde reaches up and grabs the hand in what I would label as a tender moment had I not known these men were fierce soldiers.

“How much time is left?” Seek asks.

“About two hours to get to the rendezvous point,” Orion tells him darkly. “Let's get these people and get the hell out of here.”

The men move quickly, placing a small sticker on each lock. Orion tugs me out of the way.

“We're going to let you out,” he states in a loud, strong voice. “But you have until sunrise to get to MacArthur Park. An earthquake is coming, and you need to find your families and get to the rendezvous point. Do you understand?”

“Stand back from the doors!” Hyde calls, and hunkers down, motioning for everyone to follow his lead. He pulls out a little box with a button on it. There is a small *pop*, far from the massive explosion I was expecting, and all the doors swing open.

I watch as person after person runs from us into the darkened doorway and corridor beyond. Most are half-starved who probably had been caught recently, having lived as much in the shadows underground as possible. It makes me sick that these people have been brought to these cells for one purpose: the pure entertainment value of their death.

I feel sorry for them because they haven't lived like I have. For whatever reason, they never thought of leaving the city. Maybe they thought El Toro's reach is everywhere. Maybe they just don't have any hope for a better life.

Am I any different?

The thought of leaving my comfort zone terrifies me. To some, living as I have is horrible. To me, it's the best life I could have built on a crumbling future.

“Come on,” Hyde urges as he tosses the keys away. “We have to find Evie.”

The four of us exit and retrace our steps back through the corridor, this time turning right instead of left, the way we came.

I assume Evie is the blonde. When Amber grabbed my hair, everything around me kind of went bye-bye, so I don't know what happened to Evie after that point. I try to remember if I saw her when the bullets started to fly.

So I trust that the three big men leading me know where they're going. There are torches farther up, relighting the path. The sounds of gunfire have faded away, but the yells of those looking for us continue.

There is another entrance ahead, and several other men standing guard. Even I, untrained, realize the only reason guards stand at their post amid chaos is to protect someone.

Hyde waves us to the side. “Orion and I will tackle the guards. Kris, you get it there and get Evie.”

“He's got a gun on her!” I whisper urgently.

Hyde gives me a look that speaks volumes. I flush and am very glad for the darkness hiding my blush; *of course* they remember the gun trained on Evie. It's why they went through the motions of fighting.

“Stay here,” Orion whispers to me.

I happily comply. My brief moment in the arena, trying to stay alive, was more than enough to satisfy my thrill seeking. I stand with my back pressed against the corridor wall, enveloped in the darkness save for a faint glimmer of torchlight dancing across my shoulders and probably my face. I watch as Orion and Hyde engage the guards, their fight taking them back

into the arena and out of my sight. I wait, my heart pounding in my ears, which leaves me unable to hear someone creeping up until a knife is placed at the side of my neck.

“Don't say a word,” a man whispers into my ear.

Not a problem; I'm barely able to breathe, let alone cry out for help.

He nudges me with his other hand, grabs my arm, and pulls my back flush with his chest. The knife presses harder into my neck.

“You were talking with her,” he says. “What did she say about me?”

I rack my brain trying to determine who he's talking about.

He shakes me. “What did she say?”

“W-who?” I stutter in my fright.

He is quiet and then, “Mariposa. My sister.”

The conversation rushes back to me. “Are you Eddie?”

“So she did talk about me!” he gushes, sounding almost happy. About as happy as whispering while holding someone hostage would allow.

“She said you're El Toro's right hand,” I tell him.

“Is that all?”

I don't want to answer this question because I don't think he'll like the next thing she said. But he shakes me again, and this time the tip of the blade nicks my skin. I feel the sting of the air as it touches the small exposed wound.

“What else did she say?” he asks urgently.

“Only that you made your bed!”

I feel him jerk as if I slapped him. The knife leaves my skin, but he has a firm grip on my arm, so I'm unable to slip away. But at that moment I hear the loud report of a gun and a hoarse cry, and Eddie lets me loose.

“Mari?” he cries, and I take advantage of his distraction to run.

I don't look back as I move down the corridor. My plan is to get to the next arena walkway and double back to where I know Orion, Hyde, and Seek are. But as I come up to the doorway, another man steps into the shining torchlight and points a pistol at me. I skid to a halt.

He is tall, dark, and handsome, but fear dances over my skin as I look into his cold gaze. His mouth is little more than a slash of fury. He wears a black shirt with a high collar, and scars reach from under it to encircle his throat.

“No!” someone yells, and I see a hand come out of the darkness to push the gun toward the ceiling. Tobias steps into the light. “It's Kaori.”

A smile breaks over my face, and I launch myself at him. He scoops me up in his arms, and I finally feel safe again. He cups the sides of my face, and he brings me up to meet his lips. Our kiss is hard and deep and way too short.

He pulls back, his thumb flicking over the dried blood on my cheek, and looks over his shoulder. I follow his gaze, gasping a little as I see a mirror image of the tall, dark, and handsome man. Only this one has no scars and doesn't look half as fierce.

“These are the brothers,” Tobias tells me. “Sariel is the shoot-'em-now-ask-questions-later dude, and the uglier one is Gabe. Sariel, Gabe, this is Kaori.”

Gabe breaks into a wide smile and pats me on the shoulder. “Nice to finally meet you,” he tells me. “Tobias hasn't shut up about you.”

Sar doesn't say anything to me, but he nods, and I assume this means two things: *Sorry for pointing the gun at you and Nice to meet you.*

“Where's Orion?” Tobias asks me.

The question jolts me back to reality. “We found Hyde and Seek; they went to find Evie, which means they went after El Toro.”

Tobias nods. “Where were you going?”

“I was getting away from Mari's brother—” I don't even get a chance to finish my sentence before Sar's gravelly voice cuts in.

“Where is he?”

I point over my shoulder. “At the other walkway.”

And then we all head back that way, me behind Tobias as he holds my hand, Sar in the lead, and Gabe in the middle. Guns are up, safeties off, and ready to fire.

We don't make it all the way when we see Seek step into the corridor. He's holding someone in his arms, and at first I can't tell who because of the three giants in front of me. But as they rush forward, I see the long blonde hair swinging, and my breath hitches.

"We have to get to the lift!" Seek tells us harshly. His face is flushed, and fear shines brightly from his eyes.

Hyde and Orion are right on his heels. I notice that Sar and Gabe disappear into the arena.

"Is she alive?" Tobias asks quietly.

Hyde grabs him by the shirt, but Tobias doesn't respond or fight him off. There is a rawness about his expression, turning his complexion ashen. I step forward and ease his hold off Tobias's shirt, and then I walk over to Seek and move the blonde hair off Evie's face. I see the shallow rise and fall of her chest, feel the slight breath from her nose.

"She's alive," I say. And then I notice her blood-smeared clothing. "But we need to get her medical attention."

"What about the rest of the people?" Orion asks.

"Fuck these people," Seek yells.

I suppose when the heart is involved, the lines of a mission become blurry. Had it been either Tobias or Orion lying unconscious with a bleeding wound, I would have said *fuck them* too.

"Hyde," Orion says gently. "You and Kris get to MacArthur Park. Sar, Gabe, Tobias, and I will take care of things here."

More looks pass among them, ones I can't even begin to interpret. A wealth of years and experience makes words unnecessary, and after another moment a quiet decision is reached. No one will hold this against Hyde and Seek; each man understands the importance of finding help for Evie, and so the two men turn and head toward the exit, then disappear into the darkness.

"You should go with them," Orion tells me.

I look at him with a sad smile. "Probably."

And nothing more is said.

Tobias holds my hand, and we move through the walkway back into the arena. The first things I notice are the dozens of dead bodies. There is blood everywhere.

Orion turns me into his shoulder and presses my face there, trying to hide everything from my sight, but the memories are burned forever into my brain. The death I've seen has always been from a distance, away from the immediate impact of seeing fresh blood and gore. Movies never tell you how death smells, how the metallic stench of spilled blood stings your taste buds, makes your teeth ache, and invades your nostrils like a foul odor. These people were supposed to have been the lucky ones, surviving the horror of the virus, but tonight their luck ran out.

There is not a soul left alive to rescue, and in perverse relief I'm glad we don't have to worry about getting them to the lift. And of course, guilt comes heavily on the heels of that admission, and I blanch at the thought of being narrow-minded and petty.

My attention is caught by the way Sar is pacing like a lion in a cage. I look about but do not see Mari anywhere among the bodies. Nor do I see her brother Eddie or even El Toro.

"Go on," Gabe tells Tobias. "Get out of here. We'll meet you at the lift."

"Not gonna happen, man," Tobias replies with a shake of his head. "We won't leave you behind."

"We're getting Mari; then we're getting the hell out," Gabe calmly explains, though I can see his restlessness bubbling just under the surface. "She's not here, which means either that bastard Basilio has her or her brother does."

"Eddie," I pipe up.

Gabe turns his dark eyes on me, one brow raised in question.

"He came up to me in the corridor," I reply. "He was asking me what she had said about him. He kinda flew off the handle."

"Eddie Medina is bad news," Gabe tells me. "We've dealt with him a few times over the past few days. Did he say anything that might tell us where he took her?"

I shake my head. "No." But then something she said comes to me. "Wait. I met Mari in the cells, and she mentioned being able to slip past the guards. The best spot, she said, was in the subbasement, a service entrance."

Sar emits a low grunting sound. I guess this is his way of saying either *Good job, Kaori* or *Thank you*.

"We'll meet you at MacArthur Park," Gabe tells Orion and Tobias.

“Fuck no!” Tobias hisses.

Orion grabs his arm, urging him to hold his tongue. I see Tobias wants to argue more, but Orion's calm steadies him.

“You get your girl, and you get your asses to the lift,” Orion tells the brothers. Tobias frowns at him but doesn't say anything more. “We've got a little more than an hour before daybreak.”

Chapter Fifteen

Tobias grabs my hand, and we leave the arena. We reenter the dark corridor and retrace our steps, hurrying past the break that leads to the cells. My hand is encased tightly, and they all but drag me after them. I stumble along, trying to ignore my bruises and aches, which spasm with each new step.

We pass only a couple of people in our grand exit, but they aren't really paying us any attention as they run out of the Staples Center and into the night.

And once we're outside, I have no time to relax and breathe in the cool night air; Tobias and Orion start running in earnest. It takes me a few minutes to realize we're heading southeast, the opposite direction from MacArthur Park. I tug on Tobias's hand and pull him up short. He turns and frowns at me.

“What?” he demands. “We don't have much time!”

“We're going the wrong way,” I say.

“The trike is this way. It'll get us to the park faster than simply running on foot.”

I have to wonder whose bright idea it was to park so far away. Another couple of minutes and I finally see the HR3 up ahead, much to my relief. We waste no time climbing in and taking off, and once we're in motion, I finally start to feel as if we might make it.

In the quiet of the cockpit, I watch as the screens give directions for getting to the park, my help coming by pointing out the places to avoid. We reach MacArthur Park in about fifteen minutes. The large pond used to have a fountain in the center spraying water into the air. There were once ducks, geese, and pigeons splashing and living around it. Now the water is black and still in the darkness.

We are not able to use the streets on the west side of the park. Two collapsed buildings fill the street with rubble; one of the buildings was the Park Place Hotel, with tall angel statues looking out from the second floor. They're all that's left, and their empty gazes still stare

unflinchingly on the world around them. So we travel around the east side and come to the sloping banks that lead down to the field. Orion descends the embankment and comes to a stop. As the door opens and I climb out with Tobias, I get my glimpse of the lift waiting for us and the many people waiting to get onto it. Swarms of people are jostling and patiently waiting their turn, and as I look, I see a familiar figure.

The guy from earlier, with the cap on backward, the one I warned when I stopped my bike on the street. He's young, I notice now, and is taking the responsibility of asking people's names and getting them organized. He looks around, catches my eye, and gives me a thumbs-up. I smile in return.

“How many people can fit on a lift?” I ask.

“These aren't like helos,” Tobias responds. “Probably about thirty people.”

“Is there going to be enough time to get all these people out?”

He nods and points up. “More are on the way.”

I hear the sounds of another lift, and one by one heads turn up to watch another descend and land next to the first. Orion takes the trike and maneuvers around people until he's behind the second craft. A large ramp extends down, and he drives the machine into the cargo hold.

The side door opens, and Lieutenant Marek comes out, bellowing orders for people to get in. Tobias, still holding my hand, directs us through the masses of people until he's next to his commander.

Marek, hands on his hips, eyes me narrowly. I smile benignly at him.

“Finally,” he says gruffly, “Miss Kaori Carnelian.”

“Did Kris and Hyde make it?” Tobias asks, breaking in and all but pushing past what could have been an awkward moment for me.

Marek nods, turning back to business. “The third lift took them out.”

“Is Evie okay?” I ask quietly.

“She was alive the last I saw her,” he replies.

And that's all the conversation we're allowed. The clock is ticking, and we have people to get to safety. The first lift takes off with about half the people who've been waiting. I watch it

rise into the air. Orion grabs my arm as we duck away from the spinning blades and watch it until it disappears into the rapidly lightening sky.

Marek continues directing people into his lift; my young friend from the street is one of them. It takes about fifteen minutes to load everyone.

The ground shakes violently, more so than previously. Most people fall down. I actually see the ground roll like a wave, and the lift makes a horrible screeching sound, as if protesting the unsteady terrain.

There is a lot of screaming, and it takes a few minutes after the quake has passed for everyone to settle. But I hear sniffing and crying, and I wonder if this is how the people on the *Titanic* felt.

“Come on, people!” Marek calls out on his megaphone. “We don't have much time left!”

Tobias grabs my arm and tries to pull me toward the next lift. I'm not quite sure what he's thinking, but I have an inkling, and I pull away as I dig in my heels.

“Why did you lie to us?” Tobias demands as we near the lift.

“Lie about what?”

“Don't play dumb.”

“I didn't lie,” I argue. “I went to the clearing as I promised. I just didn't get on the lift.”

“Why the hell not?”

“If it were reversed, if it had been me daring a rescue and you told to leave, would you have left?” With this question, I'm finally able to pull my arm from his grip, though I suspect I'm going to have bruises tomorrow.

He stares at me in frustration and rakes his hand over the short bristles of his hair. “That's not what this is about.”

“Yes, it is,” I say quietly. “I get it, you know. I understand that you don't leave teammates behind. You're trying to get me on that lift, to make me leave you, while you wait for Sar and Gabe.” I look over and see Marek watching us. I can feel the power and authority Marek commands, yet he holds respect for his men. For me, this is a good thing. “But I've made my decision, and it's being right here by your sides.”

I see the frustration burning brightly in Tobias's eyes. He wants so badly to put me on that lift, and I wouldn't be surprised if he marches me over and straps me in the belly of that helicopter, tight and bound. But after a moment he turns and looks at Orion, and I see the pleading in his eyes. Yes, he wants me to leave, to be safe, but he also wants Orion to force me and take the decision from his hands.

“We have to go!” Marek calls out, and the blades start to spin a little faster.

Tobias rakes a hand over his head again, the fingers digging into the short stubble, and then he marches over to his lieutenant. They talk, Marek nods and looks in my direction, and then Tobias turns to come back to us as Marek goes into the lift and the door folds up. In seconds the lift is in the air and on its way.

Tobias comes to me and yanks me to him, one hand going into my hair and securing me, while the other locks fingers on my hip. His mouth comes crashing down on mine. It's almost brutal as he releases his frustration on my lips. He's angry—I can sense that—but he understands, and that's what's driving him crazy. Because I *am* right; had our positions been reversed, he would never have left to save his own neck.

When the kiss breaks, he leans his forehead against mine. He rests a hand around my neck, and we simply lean against each other until Orion comes up and strokes my hair.

“What's the ETA on the last lift?” he asks.

Tobias pulls back. “It should reach us in fifteen minutes.”

Orion nods. “Any news from the USGS?”

“They didn't like that last jolt.”

My heart skips a beat.

I guess Orion catches my panicked expression, because he gives me a patient, calm smile. “The brothers will get here. Don't worry.”

“Never leave a man behind,” I say, more to myself than anyone else.

So we wait patiently, or at least *I* wait patiently while Tobias paces back and forth and Orion stands to the southeast looking into the dark night with hands on his hips. I have to wonder what will happen if Sar and Gabe do not show. Will Tobias and Orion leave or will they keep to their code no matter what? And if they insist on staying, what will I do?

I picture the last six years. I have never felt as alive as I feel surrounded by Tobias and Orion. I can never go back to that lonely place in which I existed before I knew them, even if it means my death. My heart is too heavily invested.

The earth grumbles again, shaking boldly and violently. A building far in the distance falls, the large concrete pieces echoing loudly.

I take a deep breath to steady my nerves and almost groan at the way my ribs protest. My adrenaline is wearing out, and as it flows away, so does my tolerance to the pain. Little by little it's flooding through my system, and I can only hope it doesn't pull me under. We still have to get out of here, and I still need to be able to move quickly.

"The lift is coming," Orion calls out.

I raise my eyes to the dark sky, seeing nothing, but hearing, very faintly, the whirl of the copter blades. Panic starts to rear its little ugly head, and I swing around, straining my eyes in the darkness. Silently and desperately I urge the brothers to appear. But the only sound I hear is the lift as it slowly approaches and lowers itself to the ground.

After a minute or two, the belly opens for us. Tobias raises his hand and holds up five fingers. I see the pilot shake his head.

Tobias does it again, five fingers, and this time it isn't a request. He turns his back on the angrily motioning pilot and stares with grim eyes to the southeast. I can feel the seconds ticking away. The sun starts to shine brightly from the east.

And then the unmistakable whirl of the lift blades as they start to spin faster as it gets ready to take off. The pilot has given us the five minutes, but now it's time to go. He isn't going to stay behind against orders, so we have a choice to make.

Orion comes to stand beside me and takes my hand in his. Tears blur my vision slightly, but I can see he's looking resolutely at the lift.

"Goddammit!" Tobias shouts at the pilot. "A few more minutes! They'll be here!"

The pilot does another hand signal I don't know how to translate, but it makes Tobias swear again. "Fucker!"

The door starts to fold up.

And then comes the sweetest sound I think I've ever heard.

“What the fuck?” Gabe shouts. “You assholes leaving us?”

Tobias gives a whoop, Orion laughs, and I let loose a deep sigh of relief.

Sar is first, holding Mari's hand. Gabe follows them, and to my surprise, her brother Eddie brings up the rear. But there isn't time for questions or pats on the back; we have to get the hell out of LA.

Right fucking now.

We race back to the lift, and the pilot graciously lowers the door again. A few minutes later, strapped in tight, I feel the helicopter lift off the ground. I close my eyes and turn my face away from the others, content to hide in the darkness. The last of my adrenaline fades away, and I become boneless. Exhaustion enters my soul. It has been a horrible night, and I'm afraid it's one that will haunt me to the grave. I can only hope Amber's ghost has found peace, because I know her face will always be there when I close my eyes.

Chapter Sixteen

We fly to an outpost far from the city, one that has an airstrip and planes waiting. I find out now that the deadline of four days was because of this base camp flying people out. Tobias and Orion were right; there were more than six men who were sent for search and recovery. I see soldiers everywhere, as well as lifts coming and going as more people are recovered.

I stumble as I disembark, and Orion catches my arm.

“Why don't you rest over there?” he says and points to a clear space away from hustling people.

“I want to check on Evie,” I say, though I'm really tempted to take his advice and collapse somewhere so I can close my eyes.

Orion points to a large tent at the far end of the camp. “She's probably there. I can take you if you wait until we check in.”

“You go ahead,” I mumble. Once I see her, then I'll go rest.

They hesitate, so I muster some energy and give a big smile, praying they don't see through the facade. I suppose it worked, because they nod and then hurry away. I know Marek will want to talk with them, and truth be known, I'd really like having a moment to myself.

I'm all but ignored as I make my way slowly to the medic tent. I'm largely ignored, just another body dressed in battered clothing with an air of desolation. I duck into the tent and stand to one side, my gaze sweeping over everyone until I see Hyde and Seek hovering anxiously over a supine body. I approach and touch Seek's shoulder.

“How is she?” I ask in a subdued tone. I'm no doctor, but my mother was, and I often went with her to her clinic when I was small. I know bad news when I see it.

“We're going to be flying out of here in a few minutes,” he tells me. “She's stable, but the doctors don't like her coloring.”

“Why did she do it?” Hyde asks harshly, speaking to no one in particular. His worry comes shining through in his tone.

“What did she do?”

Seek takes a deep breath. “She took the bullet meant for Hyde.”

I'm speechless at this, but I understand. I would have done nothing less to save one of my men. Seek places his hands on Hyde's shoulder, and Hyde tilts his head to rest a cheek on one of them.

Suddenly there's a flurry of activity as doctors come in and announce they will evacuate now. I move to the side, getting out of everyone's way, and stay silent as the injured are helped and moved out the door. Other teams of medics rush around packing up equipment and supplies. Hyde and Seek forget me as they help with Evie, taking extra care not to jostle or disturb her. I notice she is the only one badly hurt. Everyone else is able to move under their own power. I slowly make my way out of the tent and plant myself nearby on a fallen log. I see Orion and Tobias occasionally as they work to deconstruct their base camp. But Mari, Sar, and Gabe are nowhere around.

My exhaustion finally catches up with me. I'm so damned tired all I want to do is lay my head down and sleep. With some trepidation I catch sight of Marek making his way toward me. In his hand are two mugs, and I see steam rising from them. My stomach rumbles a bit, reminding me it's been hours since I last had food or liquid.

He sits beside me and hands me one of the drinks, then sips his own. We stay like that for a bit, and once again I'm lulled into relaxation.

“You held your own tonight,” he says, and I'm not quite sure if this is a compliment or not.

I only nod.

“There might be a place for you in the military,” he continues. “It takes years for soldiers to develop the sense of survival and stealth skills you have, so I would like for you to consider joining.”

At first I'm at a loss for words. I take a deep gulp of the tea and then gasp as the hot liquid slides down my throat. My eyes water at the pain, which gives me a moment to compose myself and bring my scattered thoughts into focus.

“With all due respect, Lieutenant, my stealth skills have sucked recently,” I finally admit. “Ever since I've met your men, in fact. I was caught as soon as I reached the Convention Center.”

He nods thoughtfully. “True,” he says, “but you've survived six years in basically a war zone. That's an impressive record.”

I blow on my tea and then take another small sip. This one goes down easier.

“Can I ask you something, Lieutenant?”

“Anything.”

“Why did you leave your men behind?”

Marek's eyebrows draw together, and I expect a blistering reply. But I'm surprised when he calmly answers me. “My men know their orders. I trust them to protect their asses.”

I grin. “So if I join, would I work for you, or do I go through basic training or something?”

“I would see that you work under my command,” he states. “The military is thin so assigning you wouldn't be hard. Much needs to be accomplished.”

A wide yawn hits me, and suddenly my head feels light. I look around, and my vision drags as if I've drunk so much, my eyeballs are floating. I look down at the drink, then at Marek. He is staring at me with an apologetic smile.

“I do mean what I say, Kaori Carnelian,” he tells me, and there is something funny about his voice. He sounds very similar to Elmer Fudd. “But right now you are a distraction to two members of my team.”

I feel myself start to slide sideways, and Marek plucks the cup from my hand.

“Don't worry,” he says to me. “They'll find you.”

These are the last words I hear.

Chapter Seventeen

One month later

I had always wondered why Montana is called the Big Sky Country, and now I know. The blue above me stretches on endlessly in every direction, providing a backdrop to the wheat dancing in the wind. I feel as if I can step off the road onto the blue and disappear forever in its brilliance.

I shift the backpack around, moving each strap to a different part of my shoulder because they're biting deep. This is a new backpack, loaded with whatever I've managed to steal to keep my strength up as I walk my way along Highway 12. I have no destination, but living in a city like Helena, Montana, has become impossible.

When I woke from my spiked tea, I was already in Helena, lost in the bureaucracy of being found. I was recorded, fingerprinted, and GPSed. Even my DNA was taken for some identifying purpose. I hated all of it. This world is foreign to me in a way that I've never experienced. I mean, when I found myself alone in that long-forgotten gas station, that was never as odd or as nerve-racking as my past few weeks in Montana have been. Suddenly I've gone from rescued to rehabilitated, and I feel like I've just converted to a religion I know nothing about.

I was assigned to a job, assigned to a home and life that weren't mine. The monetary system has all but collapsed, so work is mandatory. We don't work for money; rather we work for the privilege of living. We earn credits we can trade for food, rent, and other necessities. Money is for luxuries like gas or books, and you can trade credits for money. It's complicated, and the new system hurts my head just thinking about it. The people among whom I was placed seem to live by rote and self-denial.

But I gave it a fair shot. I lived this life for a while just to say I'd been there, done that, and got the T-shirt. But the weight of what was expected slowly crushed me until I couldn't breathe.

That's when I got the hell out of there and ended up pondering how big and blue the sky could be.

As for Tobias and Orion... Well, they must have been figments of my imagination. I went to the local military outpost to find out information on them, begging the authorities to track their GPS units and find out where they were, but I was refused. Booted off the base. Told that civilians aren't allowed confidential information. As the weeks pass, it almost feels as if my two lovers must have been a fantasy.

I walk on, feeling free for the first time in weeks, glad to finally be rid of the confinements society demanded I live in again. Part of me is very sad that I can never again be this person who yearns for normalcy, a home and a job, and a husband and kids. I am not that type of girl anymore. All my princess fantasies were washed away by Mother-fucking-Nature. My backpack more than proves I have no qualms about stealing to survive. I am not the one who made the rules, but I am the one who breaks them.

Where I'm headed, I have no idea, but I whistle a little tune as I travel onward. I can honestly say I feel a sense of freedom I've never felt before; I don't have to worry about finding shelter before nightfall or fear the cruelty of wandering gangs. In Big Sky Country, expanding to infinity before me, I am the spirit of independence.

The day wanders on, as does my mind, and when the sun starts to set, I realize my stomach has been empty for far too long. I grab a protein bar from my backpack, peel the wrapper down, and start to munch. I've picked a chewy one, and before long my jaw aches at having to masticate the hell out of it. The night is breezy and my feet hurt, so when I see a house in the distance, I head toward it.

Almost immediately I realize this house has been abandoned. The windows aren't boarded up or the door nailed shut, but there's an abandoned air to the place, a woebegone feeling of lost hope and happiness. Some of that woe reaches out and enfolds me, because this nice little house reminds me of the home *I* lost. The yard is overgrown. The weeds have overtaken the flowers in front. It is a red-brick rancher with a railed porch that holds a swing in desperate need of some waterproof stain. Three steps lead to the porch, and I notice mortar chipping away from the base.

Off to the left I see a large garage, and behind that another large building. I'm guessing this home was a farm of some kind, but after so many years, the crop is long gone.

I love it. Of all the homes I had in Los Angeles, none of them ever spoke to me like this house does. I move up the steps and take a tentative step on the porch. It gives a little groan, but otherwise is sturdy under my feet. The door has swelled slightly from disuse and dampness over time, but with a little push, I manage to open it. Inside has a slight musty scent, but warmth spreads through me as I survey what has lain hidden for perhaps five to ten years.

I am standing in the living room. There is some furniture. An old recliner, a table with a chair, and a television stand without the TV. The walls are a faded burgundy color, and I can envision the bold color trimmed with a shell white or a muted tan. The window seat in the side wall is missing the tufted cushion to sit on, but I can see myself resting there, reading by the warm sunlight that trickles in.

Through the living room is a large kitchen, complete with a built-in charcoal grill in one corner. It's made of brick, with an electric rotisserie for roasting meat. I peek out the back door and see that the brick goes upward like a chimney, with the flue extending slightly over the roof. I suspect during the winter months—I can't even imagine how much snow falls here—this grill will come in handy. There is also an island in the kitchen with a vegetable sink. It would be a wonderful place to put some bar stools and use as a breakfast table. On impulse I turn it on, but as I suspect, no water gushes forth.

There's another opening that leads to a nice dining room. The only thing here is the shadow on the wall that outlines a cabinet.

A hallway leads from the kitchen and dining area to three bedrooms: one in the front of the house, one at the back, and the master suite at the end. I peek into each, but there's nothing except dust. There's also a bathroom next to the back bedroom and one off the largest bedroom. The largest bedroom, the master, has a set of French doors that open to a private porch. How wonderful to watch from this porch, sitting and sipping wine as evening descends.

And just like that, my wandering is over. I set out from Helena because I am a loner. There is no possible way I will ever fit in with society again. I feel no compulsion to return to that way of life. But this house I have found in the middle of nowhere—this is *my* house now.

I take off my backpack and sit down in the empty room, resting against the far wall. I feel a smile break over my face. Who'd have thought I'd find a home?

I spend the next few days cleaning the house. After a few airings, the musty smell is gone. The dust bunnies have hopped away. I've found other things left behind in closets and in the storm cellar upon further inspection. It was kind of like a shed, only it was built into the ground. And as in the old houses I used to haunt, I find shelves of pickled food.

Much to my delight, the building behind the garage is large and empty, and I can totally picture a ballet studio for myself.

I am a long day's walk from Helena, and I start planning a trip to my former home to start stocking my new one. It will take me a while to outfit this place, but it's a task I know I will enjoy.

On the fourth day at my new residence, I leave early and make my way back to Helena. First and foremost I need supplies. Also I want to see how hard it's going to be to get certain comfort items, like a bed. The day is bright but very pleasant as I retrace the trek I made a few days earlier. It's not a difficult a journey so I know living in my new house will be doable.

I enter the city limits and make my way toward the registration center I was taken to when I first woke up. I have questions about how I'm going to pay for things. I have very few credits left. I would hate to work again, but if it's the only way to afford my new home, then it's something I must consider. But as I walk up the steps to the processing building, my wrist is grabbed, and I'm spun around.

"Where the hell have you been?" Tobias demands. His hands come up and frame my face.

I try to pry his fingers off, but his hold is firm. Orion comes up next to us and takes my hands, holding them still.

"Kaori," he says in a tone that is borderline pissed. "You told us you'd never run again."

I yank hard, and this time I dislodge their holds on me. The anger I've been holding at bay pours through me. I clench my fists and jam them on my hips.

"You can tell your lieutenant he can take his job offer and shove it up his ass," I snap.

Orion looks around, takes one of my arms, and leads me from the busy steps of the processing center. I allow him to cart me off, because I've been spoiling for a fight. All three of us march to a nearby park, and out among the deserted swings and slides, I turn on them and start my tirade.

“You know, when I awoke in this town”—I gesture vaguely around—“I decided to follow the protocol and register myself, because I knew you two would be arriving very soon after you learned what Marek had done. And for four weeks I kept on making excuses about why you never showed up. I lived in this tiny apartment assigned to me, worked this stupid job assigned to me, all in the name of trying to fit into a society I want nothing to do with! And you know what I finally figured out? Hmm?” I point. “You knew what Marek had put in my tea. You allowed him to take me away from you and move me here.” I put a little sneer into the last word.

“Kaori—” Orion says, his tone placating.

I hold up my hand to him. “Shush,” I snap. Then I pace back and forth. “I understand you were scared for me. Hell, *I* was scared for me. But dammit! That was underhanded.”

My tirade over, the anger suddenly drains out of me like I've just pulled the plug on a full sink. My arms fall bonelessly to my sides, and my shoulders slump. I feel like a wilted flower. Tobias and Orion stare at me, I guess to make sure I have no other volcanic eruptions in store. Then they reach for me. Orion hugs me, putting his arms around mine and pulling me in tight. Tobias moves in behind me, places his hands on my shoulders, and rests his forehead on the top of my head. There is that spark again. Neither time nor distance has diluted it; not even our brush with death has crushed it. I sink into that blissful tug of desire as I slump into their embraces.

“You came for me,” I whisper to them, and I am unable to keep a broken tremor from my voice. They both pull back to stare at me, and I note the looks of disbelief on their faces.

“Why would you think we wouldn't?” Orion asks.

“I was so afraid,” I answer, finally revealing the weakness that's plagued me this past month. “I hated thinking that I was nothing more than a duty. That I was someone to play with conveniently and then forget conveniently.”

“You thought you were just a fuck for us?” Tobias asks in a harsh voice heavy with disbelief.

I give him a small nod.

“Oh, love,” Orion groans. “We had a mission to finish, people to move.”

“But why didn't you have me moved to where you live?”

“But we do live here,” Tobias tells me. “Marek told us you would be cared for.”

“Oh, with his fantabulous job? Puh-leaze!” I roll my eyes.

“You'll be with us.” Orion waggles his eyebrows.

“All the time,” Tobias states.

“Is that right?” I hedge. “Sharing a large bedroll? I'm sure the other men will like that.” I continue, all teasing gone. “I heard about the quake. Is it all gone?”

“Everything is leveled,” Orion answers. “New fissures have been created, releasing steam and toxic gases. The USGS has advised against moving in to find possible survivors.”

“What about rebuilding?”

“We don't know.”

“I see. So is the mission over?”

The men share a glance, and my heart thuds.

“We're soldiers, Kaori,” Tobias finally answers me in a roundabout sort of way. He runs his hand over his hair, which is a bit longer than the last time I saw him. “Our mission is never over. But we've asked to be assigned to Helena's base. Each settlement is a community, and the president wants the military to be the police for each settlement. So it would mean no more flying away on missions. We'd be permanently stationed here.”

“Well, only if you've decided to stay in Helena,” Orion adds.

I look between them. “Why would that matter?”

“Because we want to be near you,” Orion tells me with a tentative smile. “We want to share a life with you if you'll have us.”

My eyes widen, and I am speechless.

“We realize what we have isn't a normal, traditional relationship,” Tobias continues in a rush, as if he's afraid of what I'm going to say. “Even with how everything is right now, a partnership with three people isn't easy to deal with, but we're willing to keep a low profile, let you have some space—”

“We just want to be in your life,” Orion interrupts. “We love you. I love you.”

“Yeah,” Tobias replies gruffly. “I love you.”

I leap to embrace them. I feel tears of happiness brimming to the surface, falling as I laugh and kiss their beautiful faces.

“Oh my God.” I laugh and cry at the same time. “I love you too. So very much. I thought you didn't want me anymore, and oh my God, I was so angry at you both. I love you, I love you!”

We all hug there in the deserted park. Tobias picks me up and swings me around as he hugs me tight to his body. And then I am in Orion's arms, and pretty soon we all decide it might be best if we find a more private location for our reunion.

Chapter Eighteen

Our only option is the apartment I was assigned. The elevator doors open, and I walk out. Tobias and Orion are close behind me as I lead them to my door. I pull out a key card and slide it through the keypad, and the door clicks open.

The apartment is a small one-bedroom for a single person, but it's airy and has a huge bay window that lets in lots of light. And it's furnished, which means a bed.

We make it inside, and I barely shut the door before Tobias pounces on me, pushing me against the wall and devouring my mouth as if he's a man dying of thirst and I'm the oasis. But I really don't care about anything else, because I'm kissing him back with equal fervor.

His tongue cracks apart my lips and sweeps inside my mouth, meeting and mating with mine as he sweeps in over and over. His hands start to manipulate my clothing, first working on my pants and then my panties. Two fingers slide under the scrap of material to stroke my labia. He eases the lips aside and he finds the hard nub of nerves; he sweeps over that again and again until I'm squirming against the wall and my juices cover his hand. His other hand works on my top, pushing it up and out of his way. He makes short work of my bra, and then he cups one breast in his palm, massaging it while working the nipple between his fingers.

I'm lost in a pleasure so intense, I climax immediately. I clamp my thighs together, and I ride the wave as I hump his hand. It's been so long since I've had this, and my heart is soaring with having my men with me.

As I start to glide down from the pleasure, Tobias pushes my pants all the way off my legs, cursing a bit as he struggles briefly with my boots. But after a moment he has me back against the wall, and lowers the zipper on his pants. There is a slight pause as he pulls back long enough to put on a condom, and my eyes widen slightly at seeing one.

But then he raises one of my legs and brings it around his hip. His look is heated; his blue eyes are dark with undisguised lust and power. I can tell from his expression that he likes me like this, pushed against a wall like a helpless victim.

“You're mine.” His tone is guttural. “You're ours.”

And then he thrusts into me with a surge so powerful, it takes my breath away. He holds still, allowing us both to adjust to this feeling of being the possessor and the possessed. But when the stars clear from my eyes, he pounds into me, forcing me to thump against the wall.

I love this wildness he's not shown me until now. I love the untamed man he is, the kid from the street who grew from a punk into this disciplined soldier. Under the civilized training, he exudes this rawness that forces him to rut like an animal, and I'm more than willing to be his.

“Kaori,” he gasps, his fingers biting into my hips. I can tell he's close. “Are you ready for me? I'm going to come. I'm going to come so hard...”

His voice gurgles as I feel him swell inside. Seconds later he falls over that precipice with a shout. He mashes his pelvis into mine even as he still pumps into me, and it's so primitive, so fucking hot, that it pushes my button, and I scream as I fall with him into bliss.

His hips buck three more times; then he stills, and I can feel his heart beating like a jackhammer in his chest. Sweat glistens on our skin as he sinks his forehead onto my shoulder, and we stay like that for a long time, until our skin cools and his cock softens. He pulls back and reaches down to strip the condom off and ties it. On the way to the bedroom, Tobias tosses the used condom into a trash can. Orion lies on the bed, already naked, hands linked behind his head as he watches us walk in, a big grin on his face.

“Before we continue, we need to talk,” he says.

“Okay,” I reply cautiously.

“Don't look so nervous; I'm not going to pounce just yet.”

I smile at that.

He crooks a finger and motions for me to come to him. “We need to talk about a few things,” he starts out, “to iron out some details that have been going through my mind.”

I march across the bed on hands and knees, mindful of the heated stare from Tobias as he studies me in this position. When I reach Orion, he pulls my leg across his body so I straddle him. His hard cock rubs my clit in just the right delicious way.

“You once asked me how two men can share one woman,” he continues. “Do you remember that?”

I nod.

“I want you to ask Tobias that same question.” I must look very confused, because he chuckles. “You heard it from me, but you need to hear it from him.”

And so I take a deep breath and turn to look at the other part of this triangle.

His eyes are full of something deep, troubling, and I can see he wants so much to turn away. Tobias is a man of few words; he relies on action and reaction to affirm his place in life. He shoots a brooding look at Orion, and I can tell there is a very strong connection between the two, one Tobias respects.

“Orion and I are...bonded,” he finally says, his gaze still fixed on his partner. “More than brothers, more than best friends, our lives have forced us to trust each other implicitly. We've been in situations you can't even imagine, life-and-death moments that can scare you shitless,” he murmurs, finally fixing his light gaze on me. “I have never, ever thought of living without him.”

I feel Orion take my left nipple and roll it between his fingers.

“When you're with Orion,” he continues, “I'm, you know, happy. And when you're with me, Orion is, you know, happy. It's really that simple.”

“Then we have only one last thing to talk about,” Orion teases.

I arch an eyebrow. “And what would that be?”

“Your punishment for disobeying us.”

“What?” I cry in mock horror. “When?”

“How about not getting on the lift the first time?” Tobias draws.

“Technically I didn't lie about that. I only promised to be in the clearing,” I defend myself.

“Hm,” he replies noncommittally.

“And then you decided to leave us,” Orion states. “You think we played some bad hand against you and didn't wait for us!”

“Well, I had cause,” I argue back good-naturedly.

Orion tugs on my nipple at the same time he flexes his hips. I arch in pleasure because I'm still sensitive from my last orgasm. I always felt Orion got the shaft during our lovemaking. Tobias has always been the dominant one, so I enter this experience with a certain amount of nervous expectation.

His other fingers travel down, brush against me softly, slowly, dragging over my slit with the slightest of touches that sends a shiver over my body. It's not exactly arousing, but more like it's giving me a hint of what's to come. And from the intense pleasure I feel just from this small flutter of his skin on mine, I can only imagine my ride with him.

My tender sex blossoms under his caress, and I feel my lips swell with anticipation; the dew inside gathering to slicken the folds. Each time his fingers slide over, one digit pushes partly in, teasing my internal muscles to tense and constrict in need. He barely slides inside, but my hips rock anyway in desperate search of a fat cock to fill my pussy.

I place my hands on Orion's shoulders to steady myself, but I also need his support to keep me from dropping to the floor in a puddle of gyrating want. By this time he's finger fucking me, and I have no shame as I hump his hand. I moan and try to urge him to go faster, but he's not playing that game with me. Having finally obtained me, he's determined to take his time.

He inserts another finger, picking up his speed only by a tiny fraction, and now I reach up with my right hand and grab a nipple, pinching it tight in my ever-growing arousal. My God, the man can work magic with his fingers! I pinch my nipple harder, urging the climax that is hovering just out of reach to fall, but Orion must sense my desperation, because he abruptly pulls back. I am left hanging, gawping like a fish out of water.

“Please,” I beg in a breathless voice. Frustration hits me hard.

He ignores my cry, instead running his hands upward, pressing his hands over my breasts, and kneading them. My nipples pebble from his soft ministrations. I look down in a daze to see the contrasting color of his skin on mine, heightening my flush of pleasure. He's so fucking hot, I can hardly believe he's mine.

He eases me down off him until I'm lying on my back. I'm captivated by the rich love I see shining brightly. If I had any doubts before, they are now blown away.

Orion is beautiful. He's hard muscle on the inside and soft velvet on the outside. As he slides his body over mine, my fingers glide up the incredible softness of his flesh, his angles and planes meeting mine in all the right ways.

He starts kissing me, entwining his body over mine while he nibbles and teases my lips open. His tongue snakes inside to dance with mine, and I can't help but moan because his kisses are sinfully exquisite. They're as sweet as honey yet as potent as whiskey, and they take my breath away.

"Uhn." I moan.

He shifts his shoulders and dips his head to tweak one of my nipples. The sharp bite of pain arouses me.

"Ow!" I moan again.

His grin is devilish. "Don't like the pain?"

"More," I gasp.

He rubs over me in a deep sweep of hips to chest, pressing into me and hitting all the tender spots. My nipples pucker in delight from the stimulation. My belly quivers in expectation. I part my legs and cradle him between my thighs and then lift my hips to grind my pelvis into his hard cock as he continues his rubbing thrusts.

Though we are in a very generic missionary position, it is anything but ordinary. Orion runs his hands over me, up and down my sides as he thrusts against me, not penetrating but coming close, teasing me. He does this over and over, and I'm soon panting in frustration, wanting to feel that hardness slide into me as I seek release. The big, fat head slides along my swollen pussy lips, and each time I try to impale myself on his cock, he holds me back. It's a delicious game.

He pulls back and grabs a condom that was waiting on the nightstand. He returns to me quickly, resuming his taunting. And just as I think he's going to pull back, he suddenly shifts his hips forward. I give a grunt of pleasure as he sinks in me until his balls slap against my taint. His dark eyes roll closed as he starts to fuck me with long, deep strokes, pulling almost all the way out before plunging again. Over and over he rams me, until I'm begging him to let me come.

“Please,” I gasp.

Orion halts his pumping. “Not yet,” he tells me.

And then he pulls out of me and rises. I moan and try to pull him back, but he only laughs and moves off me, trailing his finger tips down my limbs until they find my trembling pussy and start to lightly tease my clit. Once again the caress is too light for me to find satisfaction, so he teases me over and over until I'm almost thrashing in desperation.

“Fuck me, Orion,” I beg. My hips start to buck, trying to grind on his gentle touch.

“Do you really want to come?” he asks me. “You want my dick inside you, making you scream?”

“Goddammit!” I groan. “Stop torturing me!”

With one last flick of his fingers, he leaves me. Orion lies back on the bed before grabbing my legs to swing me over to straddle him. I sink down on his cock in one smooth slide, gasping at the tight fit. He pulls me down chest to chest and holds my hips tightly as he melds our mouths together. Lost in the pleasure, I am unaware of Tobias, who walks over to us, watching us, until his hand comes down firmly across my ass.

I arch and gasp as the unexpected pain shoots over me. I try to move away, but Orion does not release me. Instead he starts moving my hips, making me ride him. *Slap*. Again Tobias's hand comes down, spanking me. The fire in my ass brings a smattering of tears into my eyes, but as Orion pushes in once more, a different tingling emerges deep inside and I'm not sure if I like the feeling until Tobias spans me again. Orion surges, and then pleasure like I've never known bursts over me. I let the tears fall as I grind, almost desperately, onto Orion's cock and arch my ass up as far as I can to beg for another slap.

Tobias continues the assault on my ass, and each smack pushes me forward, where Orion's hands keep me firmly on his cock. My ass cheeks are burning, but the pleasure the spanking is giving me transcends everything I've ever imagined.

“Do you want to come?” Tobias whispers in my ear.

I whimper. It's all I'm capable of doing.

He spans me again and then runs his fingers around until they find where Orion and I are joined. He crams his thumb onto my clit just as Orion slams upward.

“Come now, Kaori!” Orion cries. “Fucking come now!”

And then I'm lost. I scream as my climax hits me so hard that there is a roaring in my ears and lights dance under my eyelids. I might have passed out; I'm not sure, because the next thing I know I'm lying over Orion, panting, feeling as if the world has just shifted on its axis.

And then I notice that Orion is still hard inside me. He rubs his hands over my head, easing back the wisps of sweaty hair curling around my face.

I raise my head and look at him, sending him a question with my eyes, since my heart still races too much for speech.

“You're so beautiful,” he whispers. He glances behind me, and then I feel the bed shift as Tobias moves onto it.

I look over and see Tobias, naked in all his hard deliciousness, primed and ready for action. He gently brushes fingers against my puckered hole, and I shiver with a blend of fear and anticipation. I've read about this, of course, how it is with two lovers. One takes me from the front while the other slips into my ass channel. I have mixed feelings about doing this, because on one hand I'm greatly intrigued, and on the other hand I'm grossed out. I mean, this is an exit hole, not an entrance. Yet based on that logic, so is my cunt, and I find that a very pleasurable area.

He wets a finger in his mouth and then spreads my ass cheeks, inserting his slippery digit into my back hole to stretch me. I jump a little at the invasion.

“It's okay, Kaori,” Tobias says in a calm tone. “I have to stretch you, or it'll hurt.”

I nod. I know this, but still, it's hard not to react.

He prepares me for his penetration, and even though I've just experienced one of the most orgasmic moments of my life, my body surges at the imminent promise Tobias is dishing out. His little finger presses against me, and I do my best to relax my sphincter. And then it slips in just a little, and I'm astounded that there isn't really any pain. He pushes his finger in farther, retreats, and again pushes back in. Tobias does this several more times before he removes his little finger and replaces it with his first two. This time there is a slight burning sensation as my virgin hole is stretched farther than it has ever been.

I rear my head up, gasping, and Tobias is there again to soothe me.

“Shh,” he whispers in my ear. “It's okay. You're almost ready for me, love.”

Tobias starts his ministrations, mimicking his previous actions, in and out, over and over. The burning eases a bit, and I am able to relax a little more. Orion grabs an ass cheek in each of his hands and hooks my legs wider apart. Tobias leans over me, his finger pulling out of my hole to help guide his cock in.

“Are you ready, Kaori?” he grunts in my ear.

“Yes,” I gasp and cave my back in order to give him as much access as possible.

And then, quick as lightning, Tobias pushes into me. I feel too full, too overwhelmed, as if I'm going to be torn apart. The burning has returned, and this time I don't know if I like it. I wriggle to try to escape the hot sensation, but there is nowhere to run. He pauses immediately. “Kaori?”

“Don't stop,” I pant. “Please.”

Yes, there is pain. The burn is almost ungodly. But underlining the pain is the beginning of something else, something more, something I can only describe as exquisite torture. As the burn starts to even out, a new tingle replaces it.

Tentatively Tobias withdraws, then pumps in, and pulls me back so I rest against his chest. As he does this, Orion is able to slide deeper. And then I am full, filled to the brim with cock.

Oh. My. God.

“Bloody hell!” Tobias groans, as he must feel Orion through the thin, membranous wall separating them.

After a moment of adjustment, they begin to move. At first together, so every second I am pushed to fulfillment. And just when I feel like I'm going to explode, they alternate. As one goes in, the other pulls out, not all the way, but enough to create a delicious friction. Like before, they work in perfect unison, driving me higher and higher.

Tears leak from my eyes, but they are not tears of pain. I am simply so overcome with this feeling that I can't seem to hold my emotions in, so I have two options: shrieking or crying, so I opt for the lesser of the two.

“Look at me, love,” Orion urges.

I obey. I can do nothing right now but obey.

“You like this, love? You like having me in your cunt and Tobias riding your ass?”

I bounce between them, my tits moving in time with their thrusts. “Yes,” I pant. “God yes!”

And it's true. I love the fullness I feel with two cocks in me, one stuffing my pussy and one cramming my ass. The slight pain recedes quickly as I relax my muscles, allowing deeper penetration to go along with the overwhelming pleasure.

My two men start to move in perfect sync; as one goes in, the other pulls out. They move like a well-oiled machine, and I guess I'm providing the lubrication for these two massive pistons. In and out they hammer me, and I revel in absolute lust. I moan and undulate in abandon with my two lovers. There is nothing more glorious than this, these two men of mine sharing their hearts and bodies with me.

Sweat rolls off our bodies and pools in interesting places. The slickness of our skin makes it easier for us to move together, faster and faster, until we approach that plateau of carnal bliss.

“You gonna come for us?” Orion demands.

“Uhhh,” is all I am able to say.

“You ready, love? You ready to come?”

“Yes!” I finally scream out. “Yes! Make me come!”

He reaches out with his thumb and grinds it onto my clit. My pussy quivers and then explodes. My body tightens up as I feel the juice pour.

“Orion,” Tobias says in a guttural tone. “I'm going to come.”

“Go,” Orion huffs back. “Go, go, go!”

I feel Tobias explode, and with a cry, Orion follows him. Gasping for breath, we collapse in a sweaty, heated pile of arms and legs.

Epilogue

One year later

I sigh as I wait for the lift to arrive. How I let myself be talked into this, I'll never know, but here I am, on my way back to Los Angeles. There is a swarm of butterflies in my stomach, and I'm not sure if I want to vomit or laugh myself silly. Tobias is with me, escorting me as we make our way to rendezvous with Orion, who is waiting for us.

In the year since we've cemented our commitment to each other, life has been amazing. We've managed to fix up our house, making it into a home. A haven. With their paychecks, I haven't had to go back to work. We've bought furniture, dishes, and cookware and had the water and electricity installed with back-up generators in case of power failures, which are still very common. We've even painted the walls and installed new carpet. The men leave for base every morning and make it home every evening. I play the dutiful "wife" and provide dinner for them. But it's not a typical role I've been delegated, and I don't really mind my life. I've turned the third building into my ballet studio, and I've even planted a garden.

And though I am as happy as can be, if I'm completely honest with myself, I have to admit I find living a solitary existence slightly depressing. There are days I am really restless and all I have to content myself with is jogging to Helena and back since I've hung up my scavenging habit. I have to confess this trip came when I was desperate to do something more.

And yet, as I watch the lift approach and aim for a landing, I almost want to run away. I don't know why. I mean, it's my home. Or at least, it was my home.

Lieutenant Marek steps out from the now-grounded lift. I fold my arms over my chest and wait. I haven't seen him in a year, not since he slipped me a Mickey and I woke up stranded in Helena.

He spots me and gives a wry smile before heading in my direction. He wears a long military wool trench coat that I find slightly ridiculous since it's August. I've forgotten how good-looking he is, his dark hair short and slicked to stand up, his eyes an arresting blue. A devilish smile lights their depths.

He reaches out and takes my hand in a formal way, half bending over it as he kisses the back. I have to admit, this does impress me. I hide my smile, though, because I wouldn't want him to think it's that easy to turn my head.

"It breaks my heart, Kaori Carnelian," he murmurs, "that you don't want to work for me."

"It would be so hard to bring my food and drink taster along on missions," I blandly reply.

"Ah, what's a little knockout potion between friends?"

"Hm." I pretend to think. "In that case, why don't you come over for dinner sometime? I have a lovely little recipe to try out on you."

He chuckles. "Touché."

He hugs me, and despite still trying to be mad at him, I hug him back.

We pile into the lift and soon we are airborne. Tobias sits to my left and Marek to my right, but I look at neither. I have too many thoughts and feelings rushing through me to play entertainer. The flight is only a few hours.

The journey is made in silence. I appreciate Marek and Tobias for giving me space. The minutes tick by, and before I know it, the pilot informs us we'll be landing shortly.

That's when the butterflies disappear and anticipation takes over. Suddenly I can't wait to see my home city again. I can finally say good-bye properly.

We land at base camp and pile into ATVs that take us over the dirt roads. All the freeways have been wiped out. At first all I see are rubble and great cranes working diligently to shuffle it around into manageable piles. I don't know what I expected. Dust, maybe. That certainly seemed more appropriate to my emotional needs. Instead I get to see big chunks of concrete, metal, and plaster being pushed around.

It makes me more depressed. Los Angeles and the surrounding cities were lovely, everything from Chinatown and the two dragons watching over the entrance, to the Santa

Monica Pier. Even the bad parts had a certain charm to them. I suppose the only remembrance of it all will be from history books.

Now I see areas of tents and hastily constructed buildings. I see people with hard hats. Everyone is working. There are no civilians yet since this is still considered a government construction site. I've been brought here as a special favor to Tobias and Orion, though I never asked them for this. I guess they thought I was too homesick.

We travel the dirt paths to where downtown used to be, and I'm reminded of the pictures of Los Angeles at the turn of last century, with Model A cars next to horses. I wonder if the new city plans will have the same freeway layout as before, and make a mental note to give them my two cents on what should be fixed. The on-ramp at Sunset and the 405, for example. Horrendous.

I have no bearing where I am since nothing is left as identifying markers. I notice one large structure about four stories high made with real materials like concrete and steel. As we pull up in front of it, I am shocked to see the sign in front declaring it the local police and magistrate center. I squint around but, for the life of me, am completely clueless to where I am.

"Downtown." Marek answers my unvoiced question. He points to a painted sign stuck into the dirt a few feet down.

"This is North Los Angeles Street?"

"Yes," he says. "The new Parker Center."

Parker Center used to house the headquarters of the LA Police Department. I just remember it from watching episodes of *The Closer* and a hundred other shows that used to be on television.

As soon as we climb out of the vehicle, I see Orion, wearing his military uniform and dark sunglasses, leaning casually against the new police station. With a squeal, I run to greet him, since I haven't seen him in a week. He and Tobias have been taking turns coming here as military liaisons, so I've been without both of them together for a while.

He lifts me up, and I wrap my legs around his waist and kiss him deeply on the mouth. With my tongue, I make sweet promises on the delights of tonight. When we pull apart, we are both breathing hard.

"Miss me?" he teases.

"Not one little bit," I reply, deadpan.

We grin like fools as Tobias and Orion slap each other on the back. We are together again, a family.

Marek stomps up to us. His trench coat is even more absurd here in Southern California than in Montana, since this is still basically a desert. The sun didn't change just because the scenery did.

“Ready?” he asks us.

I glance between all of them. “Ready for what?”

I see Tobias give a nod to Orion, so I fix my attention on him.

“There is a magistrate here,” he explains, “who has the authority to marry us.”

I blink. “Excuse me?”

“Will you marry us, Kaori Carnelian? Me and Tobias?”

Not much can make me speechless, but this does. I just stand there, blinking, my mind completely blank.

“The president has pushed certain restrictions aside on marriage,” Marek says, filling in the dead silence. I could kiss him for giving me a few moments to compose myself. “The world's population has been cut in half, as you know. And while LA was facing its own problems, the rest of world almost went into total anarchy. In the midst of all the chaos, certain prejudices had to be put aside. Now the president reads all the reports from last year. And I have personally talked to him about how heroic you were in light of your stupidity.”

He winks at me.

“So polygamy is legal now?” I ask, still not able to comprehend all this.

“Polygamy, same-sex marriage. Basically if all participants are of legal age and willing, then who's the government to deny any chance at happiness?”

I have to laugh. For so long, especially in California, this had been a heated subject, and now I'm being told all those old reservations have been thrown out the window. A world disaster opened eyes. How ironic is that?

I take the hands of Tobias and Orion. “When I met you both, my world spiraled out of control. Now you're asking me to embrace that spiral.”

“I guess we are,” Tobias replies in a gruff tone. I can tell he's nervous.

“Too bad I don't have a dress,” I muse. “I wouldn't have worn camouflage to my wedding.”

With a whoop, Orion swings me up in a bone-crushing hug. Tobias accepts Marek's congratulations with a hearty handshake.

“Do you want to move back to LA?” Orion asks me softly, his lips close to my ear.

“Move back?”

“If you want to leave Helena, I think Tobias and I can be transferred here to oversee the rebuilding of the city.”

Once upon a time, I wouldn't have thought I could leave Los Angeles. It broke my heart to leave it the first time. And I will always love her, this birthplace of mine.

“Helena is my home. It's our home,” I tell him. “We have a good life there.”

“Yes, we do.”

And then I take Tobias's arm, and the three of us march into the building.

 THE END 

Beth D. Carter

By day I work as a surgery scrub tech. By evening I am Super Mom to my three-year-old son, Hadrian. By night I try to get in as much writing as possible before I collapse in exhaustion.

The one thing I have always wanted to do with my life is write stories. I picked up my first romance novel, a Harlequin Presents, in fifth grade and have been hooked ever since. Since writers are readers, one of my favorite pastimes is going to bookstores and hanging out. Luckily, Hadrian has inherited the same love of bookstores, so we spend many afternoons between them and Chuck E. Cheese.

I have been very fortunate in my life to have traveled extensively, and have visited fifteen countries. Many of my stories are set in cities I have lived or visited, and sometimes even my characters get their names from city streets! Currently I live in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, having moved recently from Los Angeles, and I love hearing from people.

Visit [http:// www.bethdcarter.com](http://www.bethdcarter.com) to find out what Beth is up to.