

WOUNDED BEACON



EVEN THE
FAINTEST LIGHT
STILL SHINES

LESLIE LEE SANDERS

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

WOUNDED BEACON

By Leslie Lee Sanders

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

Two silhouetted men embrace in a passionate kiss laced with a bit of sweetness and sadness, inside a dimly-lit room near a closed window where the branches of a tree are visible. One man seems to be determined, near desperate, and the other seems to be coming to terms with or accepting a situation.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

It seems to me that there's something both sweet and sad about this embrace, like there's an underlying sense of desperation on the part of the man on the left and acceptance on the part of the man on the right. What's the real story here? Has the man on the right just passed on bad news that his partner can't handle? Are they saying good-bye before leaving for different parts of the country, the world, or maybe the universe? Or is this the reunion after a long time apart, with neither half of this couple quite sure yet how they fit back together?

What I'm looking for, author, is an exploration of the emotions in this scene. What brought it about? Where do they go from here? Any genre is acceptable, from contemporary to paranormal to sci-fi, if that's your choice. I'd like an HEA or HFN, but what I'd really like to feel at the end of your story is a sense of hope for these two men.

Thank you so much, and I can't wait to read what you come up with.

Sincerely,

Cari

Story Info

Genre: science fiction

Tags: dystopian, post-apocalyptic, sweet/no sex, dark, prison/captivity, debilitating injury, hurt/comfort, fighting

Word Count: 16,524

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to those who helped polish this story; my beta readers Debbie and Linda, and my editors Rhonda and Anna. I appreciate every second of your time. Thanks to the M/M Romance group for allowing me to participate in such an amazing event, and to all of the volunteers.

WOUNDED BEACON

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Chapter 1

Instinct warned me not to open my eyes. Musk entered my nostrils, and a low hum of static electricity made the hairs on my arms react. He was there, just on the other side of my opened door. Watching me, sizing me up, debating if and when to strike. I suppressed a shudder and lay motionless on the corn husk cot, reminding myself to breathe normally. Still, adrenaline surged through my veins, preparing my mind and body to fight.

A chill crept down my spine and goose pimples pricked the exposed flesh on my arms as the dampness on my forehead evaporated. My eyes moved rapidly behind the lids and my fingers twitched. Would I be forced to use my blade? A vivid image of my hand swiping underneath my side and gripping the handle of the sharpened steel entered my mind. I could have my weapon in hand before he'd step foot past the threshold and entered my room.

A small scoff emanated from the doorway and my ears perked, attention averted back to him.

A low and husky voice called from the courtyard a short distance away. It was my onlooker's buddy, calling his name. "Santos?" Seconds later, footsteps on gravel faded as Santos retreated.

My eyes snapped open.

In my periphery, I managed to make out no immediate threat. Even though my eyes had been closed, there was no mistaking Santos had been there just seconds ago. Instinct assured me, as well as the evidence he left behind.

Just outside my doorway, in the loose gravel, my dull, steel blade glinted in the moonlight.

My hand snaked under me to be sure it was mine and not a similar knife, and nothing but dried husks were beneath me.

Groans and whimpers came from the center grounds where the prisoners were housed. Their only crime was speaking out or attempting to prevent Santos and his friend from terrorizing the community. Now their nights were spent sleeping on rugged gravel without the warmth of shelter, blankets, or a respectable meal. And for a couple of them, they'd been there for over a week.

The thought of their cruel suffering caused fire to rumble in the pit of my gut. I got up and swiped the blade from the ground, aware of the threat it signified.

Do I wait for his return or screw it all and leave now?

Minutes passed and I had two choices. I could sleep with one eye open, night after night, or leave the camp now, alive. Pain shot through my jaw, and I realized I was grinding my teeth.

Anger decided for me.

Stepping foot over the threshold, blade at my side, I crept by each darkened room. I inhaled rank air that smelled of body odor and held it in. SnORES echoed throughout some of the cramped open chambers, silence throughout the others. My lungs ached, reminding me to exhale. I did so consciously and as quietly as possible. Moonlight hit the structure in a way that cast shadows which concealed me from view. I slipped behind a wooden column, one that supported the complex I had helped build with my bare hands, and I waited in the shadows to listen.

The whimpering and chattering teeth of men came from the courtyard prison. These tough men had lived through hell, but exposure to freezing temperatures in the camp had them believing they would die, and eventually, when the torment had taken its toll, they wished for death's peace. The prison was in the center of camp mere yards away from the column where I stood. The prison housed three men who were huddled together, arms tucked inside their soiled shirts. Wasn't it enough that they were caged and kept away from their families and their freedom? Leaving them to starve and freeze was beyond cruel.

And yet, their poor handling was partially my fault.

Santos was nowhere in sight, but his burly buddy paced near the bolted lock of the prison gate. The metal blade of his makeshift knife was as long as a thighbone and could intimidate any brave warrior.

Quickly and carefully, I moved to the side of the rounded prison, and rested against the thick eight-foot tall wooden stakes that served as a barricade, keeping the prisoners inside and keeping me out. One of the men inside shifted and our gazes met. A loud gasp fell from his parted lips. Under the moonlit sky, it was hard to make out any detailed features, but a sense of familiarity hit me. I remembered his face, but there was something else about him I couldn't recall. His body language triggered faint memories that ran a bit deeper than the brief acquaintances I had with the other villagers. My forefinger went up to my lips and the man nodded. His sign was slight but clear.

The countdown in my mind started at five, and when zero hit, I swooped behind the large man guarding the lock and covered his mouth with my hand. I brought my blade up and pressed the sharpened tip to his throat.

“Drop it,” I said through clenched teeth, and his weapon fell to the floor. He mumbled beneath my hand, but I squeezed tighter and pressed the blade firmer against his bearded flesh. “Shut up and open the cage.” With my lips near his earlobe, I kept my voice low. I managed to twist around, turning him to the lock.

He dug in his pants pocket. The jingle of keys caught the prisoners' attention, and the familiar one stood. Not sure of his intention, I shook my head as a warning. He ignored me and moved forward, glancing over his shoulder a few times as he came.

“Let me help,” he whispered and reached through the thick wooden bars. It took a second for me to comprehend what he was trying to do until he grabbed the keys.

I glanced around the darkened lot as my mind tried to throw a quick plan together. What would I do with this guy once the door was open and I no longer needed him? Let him go? Knock him out? Killing was not on my list, never had been, and, hopefully, never would be.

I looked to the abundant trees that lined the camp. The growth surrounded our home and, at times, acted as an obstacle from whatever lay far beyond, like a prison wall.

The jingling of the keys would arouse the suspicion of Santos and anyone else wanting to stop me.

“You gotta move,” I urged, making eye contact with the prisoner. He nodded, but continued to fumble with the keys.

“Fucking Luke.” The calm voice came from my left, near the room where I had been. My sights set on the silhouette of the man, but there was no mistaking the rasp. “What'd you think you're doing, man?” Santos's hands were casually tucked inside his pants pockets and he nudged a pile of loose gravel with his foot. The silvery, jagged scar on his cheek reflected the light of the full moon.

“Don't,” I warned. “Don't move, Santos, or I'll cut him.” Why couldn't I have been this gritty at the first sign that he and his friend were taking over? If I had, maybe things wouldn't have resorted to this.

He took a couple of steps, narrowing the space between us.

“You’re not gonna kill nobody, Luke,” Santos mocked. “You don’t got it in you. If you did, you would’ve killed those fuckers that killed that little lassie.” His sneer sent heated rage rising from my chest and into my throat. I imagined the stocky, wild-haired man in my arms and my blade slicing into his leathery neck.

“I’m leaving, and they’re getting the hell out of this goddamned cage before I go.” I glanced to my helper and his busy hands. The threat to my life and the struggling man in my arms upped my impatience. “Open the goddamned lock.”

He paused and the jingling stopped. He cocked his head as a pained look flashed across his face. Did my irritated tone surprise him? He continued to twist the key in the lock until it popped. As soon as the door swung open, the other two prisoners rushed out. Santos leapt toward me, but my helper stopped him in his tracks by lifting the large blade from the ground and pointing the corroded tip toward Santos.

“We’re leaving.” My helper’s voice was confident and nonthreatening, but the way he handled the hefty blade got the message across.

“Adios,” Santos said, the thick vein in his neck pulsed. “Just don’t let me find you. I’ll chop your feet off the next time I see you.”

My helper looked back and forth as if debating, then took the blade and ran toward the dense forest, following the others. I pushed the man in my arms toward Santos, hard enough that he tumbled at Santos’ feet.

Slowly, I backed away, surprised that they didn’t move. Santos calmly scratched his thick beard while his friend sat near his feet, their eyes on me as I disappeared into the shadows of the forest.

Chapter 2

The dense forest acted as cover as I pushed through. It had been a few years since the environmental catastrophe shook up the world. Since then, life seemed to flourish abundantly. The chirps of frogs and crickets filled the damp air, and trees and plants seemed to take on a healthier appearance. There had been a time I believed I'd never live to see the day Earth restored itself.

Rustling in the foliage ahead brought my attention to two prisoners as they stumbled along the uneven path. Only the light of the moon weaving through the tops of the trees helped guide our way through branches and brush.

"Don't come back, Luke!" Santos warned from far behind. His voice shook with anger. "You or your new friends." I gripped the handle of my blade tighter as I glanced over my shoulder to ensure no one was following. "I might not come after you now," he continued, as if reading my mind. "Remember, I hunt. Not chase." Laughter followed. I sped up, wanting nothing more than adequate space between the camp and me.

Up ahead, my helper paused and pivoted, crunching the leaves under his shoes. The heavy, rusty blade drooped from his fingertips. "Hey, let's get out of these woods and head to the coast." His voice hushed. I pushed past him, climbing a short distance over fallen branches. "Luke," he called.

Glancing over my shoulder at the man, it finally dawned on me why he was so familiar. He was a newer member of the community, a month maybe. I often spotted him around camp, kneeling near the trees with a handful of scraps, feeding portions of his scarce rations to the wildlife. I continued, moving ahead. Stopping would defeat the purpose of my escape.

He cleared his throat. "Luke, we can try the coast—"

"Let's just keep moving," I said. We didn't have to stop to talk. And talking was doing the opposite of settling my nerves. Less talking, more doing.

I locked my eyes with his. I could make out the almond shape, but not the color. I remembered them being a sea ocean blue, unlike my ordinary brown. His short dark hair and lightly-tanned complexion resembled mine. But it wasn't his physical features that had once drawn me to him. Watching him feed hungry woodland creatures was what first fascinated me. What man, after an ecological disaster, thought about anything other than himself or his loved ones, let alone the survival of a pestering raccoon or pigeon?

“Luke?” he called. Too bad I couldn’t remember his name. He scratched the stubble under his chin. “Um—well.” Tossing his hand up, he said, “Where are we going?”

Was he serious? “I’m getting the hell out of here. That’s all I know. You can go wherever you want.”

“Wha—I can’t make it out here alone. I’ve tried.” His eyes widened into large round orbs. “You let us out just to leave us to die out here?”

I glared. “I was doing you a favor.”

“Thanks,” he said dryly.

“You could’ve stayed if you thought that was best for you,” I pointed out, pushing my way past thick leafy branches and following the footsteps ahead of me. What was he expecting, a map and a detailed plan for all of them? Hell, I didn’t have a plan for myself. The results of spontaneity. All I knew, if I’d stayed another night, Santos would have had a field day with me and my knife, or his favorite hunting tool, his bow and arrow. And what was the point in leaving those poor guys caged and freezing all night?

“Well, now I think we would’ve been better off staying,” the man said.

In front of me, one of the three prisoners, the one with a raggedy soiled shirt and a distinct odor, stepped closer. “What’d ya mean, man?”

“Name’s Aiden.” My helper moved forward, closing the gap between us and the shabby man. “I mean, what the hell are we gonna do out here? No food, no place to rest or hide. No nothing.”

“You didn’t have those things locked in that cage,” I reminded him.

“We would’ve,” the man with the soiled shirt said. “They weren’t gonna leave us in there forever. They’d have mercy on us.”

I nodded toward the camp. “You’re welcome to go back.”

We stared at each other as the chirping of crickets sliced through the tension.

The man looked back and forth between Aiden and me. “Too late to go back now,” he said.

I guess he didn’t understand sarcasm.

Aiden leaned back against the trunk of a nearby tree. “Well, you heard him.

Come daybreak they're gonna go hunting... for us. We need to figure out something."

"We?" I grunted. Forcing open a lock and setting them free of misery had now made them my responsibility?

"Yeah, *we*," Aiden nodded, the silhouette of his head bobbed in the shadows. He pointed to the soiled man. "He's right. We can't go back now."

There's two for the sarcasm.

I held back a snort. "Santos wants me, not you. And I don't know about you two, or the other guy, wherever he went, but I'm going this way until I clear these woods. Then I'll figure out what I'm going to do after." I turned.

"You used to care," Aiden said to the back of my head. "Things must have gotten real bad with Santos for you to pick up and leave camp. I can see that you still have a caring side, or else I wouldn't be here now. I'd be back in that hell hole, or worse, dead."

My feet continued moving, pushing me forward on unsteady terrain. Instead of thinking about Santos, the camp, or anybody else, my sole focus was to ensure I wasn't going in circles.

After a few minutes of walking, the crunch of footsteps following closely behind, I was hit with thirst. Tucked away in my pants pocket was a small canister of water, not enough to stretch for more than a day and definitely not enough to share, so I kept it hidden. I knelt and searched the ground for a small pebble to suck on instead, a trick I discovered right after the event.

With no control, my mind jumped to images of her. Her flowing, deep brown locks that framed her heart shaped face. The natural smell of hazelnut on her baby-smooth skin—

Rushed footsteps pulled me from my reverie and I swung on my heels to meet the man in the tattered clothes as he rushed toward me, arms outstretched in front of him.

"We have to go back and I'm taking you as a bargain," he said. He was so bug-eyed the whites of his eyes were visible even in the darkness.

"What the f—?" I pushed and he pressed back, locked at the forearms like the horns of a couple of raging bulls.

Aiden dropped the large blade and was there in no time, pulling the man back by the waist. "Hey, hey! This is ridiculous."

“No,” the man said as Aiden threw him to the ground. His body hit the scattered branches with a thud, and he tumbled a couple feet down the uneven terrain.

The regret in Aiden's sorrowful eyes was prominent. “Goddamnit.” Towering over the disgruntled man, Aiden put out a hand. “Here, let me help.”

“I'm going back.” The man sat forward, teetering like a drunk, and ignoring Aiden's gesture. “Only way they'll let me back is if I bring him with me.” His narrowed eyes locked on mine. “A bargain.”

Aiden shook his head and continued up the gentle hill. I wanted to do the same, but the anger in the man's eyes gave me goose bumps. “There's no way in hell I'm going back there with you.”

Aiden called from up ahead. “Why'd you leave anyway, Luke? That was your home and you let them run you off.” His voice carried a tinge of something in it. Anger? Frustration? Confusion? A combination of all three?

“Does it matter?” I shrugged, tempted to take a long swig of my concealed water as if it was hard liquor. “Why wouldn't you try to get the hell outta there? You really want to go back? There's no one there for you.”

Aiden nodded. “True. There's no one there for me. And I don't want to go back, but that was my home. You know? That was the only place I knew. So, is that why you left? 'Cause there's no longer anyone there depending on you?”

So, he did understand sarcasm.

I sneered at the jab. However, there was someone. A couple special people other than the community. But I refused to go there—not now. I took a step forward, preparing to continue without explanation, when the other man called from the ground where he sat.

“Hey.” His whisper made me turn. “Screw you.” His hand came forward. The small, crystallized particles of dried sand hit my face. I tasted the dirt as it entered my mouth, coating my taste buds. I groaned in pain as grit scratched my eyes and coughed from the cloud of dust that had entered my lungs.

“What the hell was that?” Aiden yelled. “What'd you do?”

“Screw you both,” the man growled. “I'm going back.”

With every blink, the grit further irritated my eyes. I couldn't open them long enough to see, but from the sound, the man ran back the way we'd come, leaving me and Aiden alone. Tears trickled down my cheeks but, still, my lids

failed me. My first instinct was to irrigate my eyes. I pulled the small canister out of my pocket and forced one eyelid open, allowing a steady stream of water to pour in one eye then the other.

A pair of hands gripped my forearms and I jerked. "Stay back."

"Here, let me help you," Aiden said. His voice was warm, gentle, and filled with concern.

"I got it," I lied. My eyes burned like hell, and no matter how much fluid I poured into them, the sand wouldn't budge.

"Why won't you let me help?"

I couldn't answer, but I saved what little water was left and tried desperately to blink the dirt from under my lids. My eyes produced moisture but not enough to dislodge the irritants. "Damn it," I murmured as soft fingers caressed my cheekbone.

"Here, let me take a look." Aiden whispered. Surprisingly, his voice soothed my nerves. Odd. The urge to refuse his help vanished. Even though I was aware he wouldn't be able to see without adequate lighting, I allowed him to examine me anyway. Maybe he had the magic touch that would relieve my pain.

His fingers gently pulled my eye open, my blurred vision could only make out different shades of darkness and the wispy figures I assumed were trees and shrubbery.

"Well, I can't tell much, but—" Aiden moved closer. The heat from his body crept over me, causing me to shudder away the cold chill.

"I got it," I said, and gently pushed him back. Gentle hands, soothing words, warmth and safety? Not happening. I didn't deserve those things. Aggravation, at the thought of how my lack of vision would slow me down, replaced all of those thoughts and feelings. I kicked the ground. Rustling of dead twigs and leaves filled the air around us. "Fuck!"

"It's alright, Luke. I'll lead. Okay?" Aiden's fingers brushed my hand. "Let's keep moving."

There it was again. The *let's, us, we*. I guess I was in no place to complain. I inhaled the cool air and let it out with some of my anger. Keeping my eyes closed, I reached out. My fingertips traveled up the swells of muscle over the length of his arm and up toward his shoulder. I rested my palm near the slope of his neck.

“Alright,” I said, listening for directions.

“Alright,” he mimicked. “We’re going to the coast.”

“You know how to get there in the dark?” Skepticism made me plant my feet on the ground stubbornly.

“Just keep straight for a few hours and we’re bound to get there.”

“You know you’re going straight how?”

“I walk toward the tree in front of me, once there I aim for another in front of that one, then another, mapping out a straight line.” He patted my hand on his shoulder. “I got you. Trust me.” He moved forward.

At that moment, I wished I had a plan *and* a plan B. I took a step.

Chapter 3

One foot dragged after the other. Although hours passed, marked by the position of the full moon, time seemed to move at a snail's pace since becoming a liability. Moments like these made me wonder what kind of man I would be if I was the one who took on the responsibility of assisting another. Why was Aiden helping me? The thought nagged at me, but I never questioned it aloud, afraid that if I mentioned it, he'd come to his senses and move on without me. Not that I wouldn't crawl the forest floor alone to claw my way out, but there was something about his company I didn't want to part with. Not yet.

"Thank you." My voice was just above the sound of Aiden's large blade chopping at low twisted branches in our path.

"Thank *you*." Aiden patted my hand on his shoulder with his fingertips. "I was prepared to make my bed in that cage and lie in it. You know?" His voice dragged and caught. A hint of sadness?

"Why? You guys didn't deserve that." It was true. "Santos and his lap dog are just power hungry, locking you up because nobody's got the—the balls to stop them." That had been my job, to prevent unnecessary cruel treatment of people, to watch over the innocent young men and women and their mothers, to provide food, shelter, and hope to those who'd come in search of it. Still, that wasn't the first time I had failed.

I've done many things throughout my life that ended in disaster. I pulled from every fiber of my existence to stop vivid visions of my first camp from replaying in my mind. The camp, similar to the one Santos had now overtaken, was home to the only people I'd ever cared about. Sure, some were strangers, but all were family.

Incomplete structures, little food, cold nights—never a worry when there was Christie and Samuel. Because of them, my confidence soared and no matter the obstacle, I had faith we'd overcome it. Christie and the contagious giggle she possessed entered my thoughts. The thought of Samuel, too, made me mimic his grin despite the surrounding devastation.

My breath caught on the lump in my throat, and I pressed my knuckles against my aching chest.

“You hear that? Smell the salt?” A trace of enthusiasm blended in Aiden’s hushed tone. “It’s the ocean. We’re close.”

“Being on the coast doesn’t mean we’re out of danger,” I pointed out, thankful for the distraction away from my crippling thoughts.

“It does.”

The sureness in his tone perked my curiosity. “How so?”

“It means we’re farther from camp. Farther from Santos. That’s our goal, right?”

I attempted to open my eyes again, and decided against it when tiny bits of debris scratched under the lids. “We need to rest soon.”

“Now’s good as ever.” Aiden paused. “There’s a big rock to your left you can sit on.”

I kneeled, arm outstretched, until I found the smooth surface beside me. Exhaustion seized me as soon as I sat. Lack of food, water, and sleep was starting to take its toll.

“You didn’t have to let us go, you know,” Aiden started.

“What, you wanted me to leave you in that hell hole?” I scoffed. “For Santos to do god knows what to you?”

“No, I’m glad you did, but…” The scratching, dragging sound of his shoe scraping the dirt gave away his unease. “Why did you?”

“Is it strange to hate human suffering?” I asked. “Do we need a legitimate reason to keep people from unnecessary pain?” Was that kind of thinking a sign of the times?

“Yes. Nowadays people are fucking cruel just because. One day they’re your saviors, the next they’re—” His fidgeting stopped. “I wasn’t suffering.”

“Oh, yeah?” I shrugged. “Well, what do you call it then?”

“Adapting.” There was that self-assurance again.

“Adapting, right.” I held back my chuckle as he went on.

“Suffering is what my sister went through,” he said. “If you only saw what people put her through then you’d understand that freezing and starving was the least horrible thing to go through. What those assholes did—” His voice cracked as he spoke and I visualized the sadness in his eyes. What strength it

took to relive a devastating moment by retelling it, keeping it alive and fresh. “No, what I experienced being caged wasn’t suffering. But I thank you anyway.” He cleared his throat.

I swallowed, gulping. “Sorry.”

Minutes passed and the only noise was the chirping of crickets and other insects.

“You lost your family, didn’t you?” Aiden asked, finally breaking the silence.

There was once a time when the standard questions were, *where’s your family? Do you have anyone you care about? Are you in love?* Now, asking if you’ve lost someone wasn’t weird at all.

“No.” That was all I could manage.

“Good.” A gentle, soothing pat touched my shoulder. “You were spared from being forced to watch their deaths. You’re lucky.”

Lucky? Far from it.

My tongue slid across my dry lips. The salt in the air, the long trek, the fact I hadn’t had a drink in hours, caused a strong craving for hydration. I fetched the canister of water from my pocket and took a drink, then handed the rest to Aiden. It disappeared from my hand, and a loud gulp followed.

The thought of Santos aiming his accurate bow and arrow at the back of my head came to mind. “You know, Santos is gonna come looking for me,” I warned. “Every morning at daybreak, he and his buddy go hunting for food in these woods. I’m sure I’m now on his list of game.”

“You mean *us*.” The water swished in the nearly empty canister. “He’ll be looking for us.”

“No, me,” I corrected. “He’ll be looking for *me*.”

“What does he want with you so bad, anyway?”

“He wants to take my place as leader. He’s been giving off hints and threats for a while.”

“But you left.” The cold canister grazed my fingertips. “He’s got what he wants. Makes no sense to hunt you down now.”

I shooed away the offer of water with a swipe of my hand. “He’ll feel threatened until he kills me or locks me up. But the only way he would be able

to lay a hand on me is if I'm dead." I waited for Aiden's response. He was silent. "Once we get to the coast, we'll split up. You go your own way from there. You might have a better chance."

"Yeah? And you will have a better chance if I'm with you."

This man has done so much already. Putting his life in further danger wasn't an option. I didn't have the strength to carry it on my conscience if he got hurt. "I can't ask you to help me." My voice cracked as I forced the words out.

"You don't have to ask. I already offered."

"Don't feel obligated—"

"You expect me to sit back and watch a man suffer and not do what I can to stop it?" An unexpected nudge on my shoulder took me off guard and I braced myself. "Just like you, Luke, I'm not that kind of man."

"Being that kind of man is what got you locked up in the first place," I reminded him. "Don't risk your life for me."

"You could've left when I couldn't get that door open in the cage." He raised his voice. "You could've dropped everything right there and ran, but you didn't. And now I'm faced with the same decision you had, and I made the same choice."

"You don't owe me anything." The thought of an innocent person dying for *my* sake? Unforgivable.

"I've already decided," he said with that familiar sureness.

"Suit yourself." I stood. There was no convincing him. "We have to get out of these woods by first light."

He stirred, the heat of his nearby presence apparent. Gentle, narrow fingers touched mine, lifting my hand to his broad shoulder. "We'll make it."

I took a step, allowing him to lead, but rustling came from far behind. I stopped and pulled my blade from my pocket, holding it at my side. "Someone's here."

We paused. After a few seconds of immobility and silence, Aiden concluded, "It's just an animal. Probably a squirrel, raccoon, or something."

He was more familiar with the animals of the forest; however, the crunch of twigs suggested that whatever it was had to be much larger than an average woodland creature. "Let's keep moving," I whispered. Keeping my ears honed

in to any other sound than our footsteps, I increasingly became more cautious and paranoid.

A chill crept down my spine as I realized my only warning against impending threats were my hearing skills and Aiden acting as my eyes. He was right. Getting out of the forest would have been next to impossible without his help. Still, the stirring in the foliage was only animals?

Not so. The stench of an unfamiliar body odor permeated the air.

“Hey,” I said in a hushed voice. “Someone’s following.”

Before the last word left my mouth, quickened footsteps in the brush startled me. Aiden jumped and gasped. Blade before me, preparing for a confrontation, I staggered backward.

“Come on, asshole,” I called out. “I’m ready for you.”

Aiden palmed my shoulder. “Sshh,” he whispered. His footsteps crept past me and toward the crackling of twigs snapping on the ground from the pressure of weight. My imagination soared and I envisioned him—tall, slim-framed and wide-eyed—huffing as he hoisted the corroded blade up near his shoulder, ready to swing like a batter on the home plate.

Another snap and I stepped back, anticipating Aiden’s swing and strike. All of a sudden, a panicked yowl emerged from the brush ahead of me, growing louder and more urgent as it neared me. Heavy stomps threw off my concentration as I tried to gauge my threat and proper defense. Before I knew it, rough fingers gripped my wrists, pushing me down.

A ridged rock the size of my fist lodged into my ribs as the man straddled me, forcing my back into the ground while struggling to take the blade from my hand. His guttural growl rumbled my eardrum as his beard and lips grazed my chin.

“Get off!” Aiden’s voice was close above me and powerful, deeper than my attacker’s growl and sterner than a bull. “Not gonna say it again. You want this big edge lodged into your skull, asshole?”

With all my strength, I pushed my handheld blade forward, aiming it toward the man on top of me. Which part would I pierce? I didn’t know, his neck, his back, his side? It didn’t matter, as long as it got him off of me.

A metallic clanking on the ground beside me took me out of my thoughts. Aiden’s grunt followed the weight of my attacker lifting. With the man no longer crushing my diaphragm, my breathing became less labored.

"I need him," the man said through shallow breaths. "My fucking family's back there. I can't go back without him."

"Who are you?" I asked, getting up on my feet. I opened my eyes but the pain wouldn't allow me to keep them open for long. Moisture pooled around my lids, and I suppressed the urge to rub them, not wanting to cause further damage.

"What the hell are you talking about?" The impatience in his voice was evident, so was the desperation.

The sweat from my palm soaked the twined handle of my blade, but I gripped it tighter, readying myself for another attack. "You with that other guy?" Although he didn't sound like the man whose vision I'd love to take, he had to be the third prisoner that had escaped the cage and had the same idea as the other escapee.

"If we give you to Santos, then maybe he'll have mercy on us," he said, confirming my suspicions.

"If you didn't want to leave then why did you?" Aiden asked, stealing the words right out of my mouth.

The man huffed as if the answer was obvious. "I'm cold and hungry and—"

"And you weren't cold and hungry at the camp?" I pointed out. The craving to look the man in the face, to judge my threat, nagged me. I opened my eyes, but the sting worsened.

"If I go back—" the man started. "If—if I go back—"

"He'll kill you," I finished. "That guy is hopped up on power. He wants to run things his way, he wants fear. Screw respect, he wants to terrorize you, and he will force it on you and everyone there without a second thought."

The people at camp kept their distance from Santos and his friend after hearing of the sadistic and inhumane way he enjoyed preparing his half-dead game for feasting. He'd then offer the meat to the camp, which was enough to psychologically traumatize anyone. Knowing their hunger prevented them from refusing a meal was similar to forcing their hand in the cruel treatment of the animal they were eating. With every bite, they were reminded of the torture the animal had suffered. Just one of many signs of Santos' insane psychological manipulation. Memories of the community's somber, scared, diverted eyes came to mind. Thankfully, Santos' murderous threats had been on me only and not on those innocent folk.

"Of course he feeds off our fear," Aiden said.

"I don't know, maybe he needs something consistent, control. Maybe that's what makes him feel alive, other people's fear." I shrugged. A man without a family to love and return love was a man without a purpose to live, a selfish, undetermined, waste of space. Nothing more than a beast with its conscience eaten away and living off the misery of others to feel important.

"You know all this and still you won't help?" the man asked.

"I've done all I could do. I let you guys go. That's all I have in me." The truth put a sour taste in my mouth that was hard to swallow but necessary to state.

"You used to do more than that," the man said. "You welcomed us in now you're gonna turn your back on us." It wasn't a question, but came out more as a sickening observation.

"Look, I may hold some responsibility for opening that cage—"

"Damn right," the man said through clenched teeth.

"But I didn't force you to leave," I said. "And I'm not going back."

"All those people you left back there, my family too, depended on you. 'Luke will save the day. Luke will turn everything around. Luke will put things back the way they used to be.' And all you did was run away. Well, fuck you, Luke." His anger was obvious. But so was his pain, the way he gulped, swallowing his agony, told it all.

"I'm sorry. There's nothing I can do." I lowered my blade, relaxed my grip, and sighed at my misfortune. As much as I wanted to distance myself from the situation, I had no way of identifying the right way to go. Dread crept upon me at the thought of having to trust a stranger, especially when two of them had tried to kill me soon after freeing them.

So much for rewarding the kind people and punishing the cruel. Where was karma and justice when needed?

Maybe Aiden sensed my need. The sound of metal scratching against the gravel and sand made me think of his blade dragging as he retrieved it from the ground. Aiden cleared his throat. "I suggest you figure out another way to get Santos' mercy." The crunch of his footsteps approached. I calculated each step to gauge his distance. Soon his palm slid down my spine to rest on my lower back. "Let's keep moving." His voice was a mere millimeter from my ear, just above a whisper, and comforting.

His shoulder radiated heat onto my palm and with his assistance, I took a few steps.

“You know what?” the man said from behind. “Just—just walk away. Just keep walking.”

And we did.

However, the realization of possibly being led right back to the very place I was running from just about paralyzed me. I had placed a lot of trust in Aiden, and no matter how good a person was they still had to have a reason for risking it all for another, especially in times like these.

As we walked, I tried to piece together what pushed Aiden to take another step, and beside me nonetheless.

Chapter 4

The crash of the waves against the shore, the tinge of bitter salt in the air, and the crunch of broken seashells in the sand under foot brought an instant sense of relief. It was faint, but the warm sun on my skin excited me as well. We made it. What thrilled me the most was that Aiden was true to his word. He simply could've done like the others wanted to do and led me back to camp with me none the wiser, unaware until too late.

But he didn't.

I dropped to my knees and raked my fingers through the warm, soft grains. Again, I attempted to open my eyes. The brightness from the rising sun alone blurred my vision, but my sight was sharper as I made out a flock of birds soaring beneath the clear blue sky ahead. I learned if I didn't blink so much or move my eyeball around under the lid, the pain was bearable. It took intense concentration to use my other senses to perceive my surrounding, walk a jagged terrain, and remember not to blink or move my eyes, but I enjoyed the diversion.

"Look," Aiden said. "There's an old lighthouse way up there. We can make it in, I don't know, thirty or forty minutes if we keep the pace." His voice had risen an octave, and his words came out rushed and nearly slurred. He sure was excited about an old lighthouse. "It's beautiful," Aiden went on as I stood to grab his shoulder. "The tower's tall, off-white color like a pearl or something. Have you seen this lighthouse before?" Something in his gentle voice made the corners of my mouth twitch until I smiled. There was a childlike awe and wonder in his tone. It transferred to me. The sense of strolling the beach on a great summer day, reminiscing good times with loved ones, came over me.

"No," I said. I'd never been to this beach. But some of the people from the camp had because they used to bring back what shellfish and fish they could catch, which wasn't much. Blaming Mother Nature and her disaster and seeing it as a sign of the water's health, they eventually stopped trying.

At camp, everyone had jobs; some were responsible for hunting, like Santos and his friend. They were naturals. Others gathered vegetation for consumption and medicinal purposes. Then there were those responsible for washing clothes, helping look after and teach the children, or making things that would come to use like dishes, clothes, and my blade.

I always felt safer near camp, keeping an eye out, setting guidelines, organizing and the like. People respected me. They trusted me. They had no reason not to. I saw it in the way they came to me with questions, suggestions, and concerns. They rarely questioned my motives, always sure that whatever I did was for the betterment of the camp. But now? Now I just gave them a reason to never rely on me again. My throat ached.

“Damn, it’s fucking beautiful,” Aiden went on, yanking me from my guilt. “It’s tube-shaped but like an upside down cone. The balcony’s small compared to the rest because the tower’s huge!”

My imagination took me there. The inverted cone tower perched high on the tallest rock cliff, like a guard protecting the shores with its presence. The lens filthy and unkempt but intact. Without the presence of a bright beacon of light, it screamed abandoned, used and wounded in my mind.

“I really wish you could see this.” Aiden’s paced slowed with each step until we finally stopped.

I stood, listening, assessing, and waiting for something to happen. The sun’s light behind my lids was eclipsed and the light touch of his palm on my chest brought my attention back to him.

“Wha—what’s going on?” I asked.

“I’m just gonna take a look at your eyes.” His voice was low, soft, and close. Then gentle fingertips grazed my cheekbone, his palm rested against the side of my face, and my breath hitched. “I’ll be gentle,” he whispered.

The heat in the pit of my stomach rose to nestle in my ribcage. Feelings stirred that I had believed I would never experience, ones that I had wanted too bad for so long that in time I had learned to forget.

Standing still, eyes closed, my breathing became erratic, so I forced myself to take breaths as I normally would, becoming more conscious of my exhales and inhaled. The pad of his thumb swept over my bottom lid, and I flinched, less from pain and more from the warmth it sent to my chest.

“Sorry,” he whispered, the light wind from his breath brushed my ear. Beyond his voice, my heartbeat throbbed hard enough for me to hear the thump, thump, thump. What part of him would touch me next? Would I be able to suppress the electric shudder his touch sent through me?

“Open,” he ordered, and I blinked. “You can do it.” He chuckled.

I snorted, suppressing a smile. He shouldn't know how much he amused me, or how his touch made my stomach ache from want. How good it felt to be on the receiving end of a caring hand. Especially since my walls had been up for so long.

I opened one eye, fighting the urge to snap it shut again. Looking past the excessive moisture and to the hazy image of my helper, I made out his intense stare as he examined my eye.

"This one seems to have a jagged little scratch on the clear part above the iris."

"My cornea?"

"Yeah." His hand pressed against the other side of my face, and he gently opened my lid. "This one doesn't look that bad, but I see some gunk in it."

"Maybe a good flushing will clear it," I said, dropping my head from his cradling hands. "Or eventually it'll clean itself."

"So the scratch, it's not permanent, right?"

"It should heal in due time," I said. Hopefully, the healing would be sooner than later. "Let's keep moving." I reached out, and his fingertips held mine while he guided my hand on his shoulder.

We continued walking but closer to the shore. I knew because the crashing water roared louder as we approached and the moist sand kicked up in clumps from wetness. Clomps of wet sand stuck to my shoes, requiring more effort to walk.

"We're leaving a trail," Aiden said, as if reading my mind. "We walk near the waterline so it erases our footprints."

"If anyone wanted to track us, the first place they'll look is the lighthouse," I pointed out.

"Well, let's not just lay down for them or anything."

The roar of the crashing waves against the rocks hypnotized me. There was so much splendor left in the world, so much to celebrate still. I let my thoughts gather images of the rushing white waves colliding with the large black rocks, creating a mesmerizing contrast of colorless beauty. The reflection of the sky shimmered off the surface of the water. In the distance, where the sky met the fiery horizon, I appreciated how they created an ideal existence.

“Things sure did turn to hell after, huh?” Aiden said, breaking the silence.

“It sure did, but—”

“Things are looking up,” he went on, stealing my words. “The sun’s still shining, ocean is clearer, people aren’t as sick, plants and animals are thriving. Not much to complain about anymore.”

“Hmm. You’re a glass half-full kind of man.”

“You’re not?” he asked, a hint of surprise and curiosity in his tone.

I sighed. “I used to be.”

“I know.”

“How so?”

“Instead of giving up, you started a camp, invited in others, built a community. You helped bring some hope to many.”

“Giving up?” I snorted. “I left both of the camps I started, that’s pretty much the definition of giving up.”

“You’re smart enough to know when to move on. Don’t beat yourself up for that. It’s not a good look.”

I sneered, but allowed a smile when his laughter filled the air. He definitely knew how to work that glass half-full angle. My life had been threatened many times in the last few hours, and probably wasn’t the last, and here I was laughing. Who would’ve thought?

“Worrying gives you wrinkles,” he went on. “If you have ever worried in your life I see no sign on that baby face of yours.”

Baby face? Days old stubble, a rugged scar on my chin, dirt-caked skin and probably plenty of bruises to turn me completely black and blue. But he sees a baby face?

“It’s a compliment. Lighten up,” he said and patted the back of my hand.

“You do know that we have no food or water, and a handful of crazed men want me dead? Now you want me to lighten up?” Maybe it was the casual stroll on the beach that had us temporarily mixed up and upbeat.

“You’re alive, aren’t you?” Aiden said. “If it wasn’t for all the really fucked up shit happening to you, you wouldn’t appreciate the really good shit. And you

escaping that asshole, walking down the beach with the sun on your face, and a handsome man at your side is really good shit. Might as well smile.”

I couldn't help it. I did.

Chapter 5

When entering the keeper's house next to the tower, I opened one eye and took in the scene. It occurred to me that the lighthouse was an old historic landmark, because the keeper's house held the resemblance of an old nineteenth century system. However, most of the furnishings had been vandalized, or naturally damaged. Even some of the woodwork had been removed. Fixtures and flooring were missing or misplaced.

If someone had been living in the house, they did a poor job of keeping it up. I assumed the tower was in no better condition. Maybe the lens to the light wasn't intact like I had imagined after all. Most of the glass in the windows of the living area was broken, cracked, or absent.

The light and shadow play crept across the sandy wooden floors as sunlight shone through the uncovered windows. A decent-sized kitchen to the right and the bunkroom to the left across the large living area accommodated one or two people comfortably.

At a fast but careful pace, I made my way to the kitchen sink alone. A pathetic stream of cold clear water drizzled out of the faucet. I collected it in my cupped palms and rinsed my face and eyes as well as I could, feeling instant relief. I allowed water to coat my tongue. Indeed, it was fresh. The longer the water ran, the water pressure became worse, until it was just a drizzle. Still, it would do.

"Where's the canister?" I asked.

In no time, Aiden was beside me, placing the empty container in my hand, then he was gone. The wooden cabinets squeaked on their hinges as he searched each one, probably for food. He huffed. No such luck.

Aiden let out a long sigh. "Now we rest and figure out what to do from here."

Rest sounded good. But he was still talking that *we* business.

"Thanks and all, but you've done enough for me." When he didn't respond, I made my way around the small house, blinking open one eye long enough to scan my surroundings. Each room held some sign of destruction. But the last room resembled an old laundry room, with a deep washbasin and shelves. I turned the faucet on to the same pathetic drizzle of water as the kitchen sink. In

the washroom, a lone comfy-looking chair sat in the corner. Odd. I couldn't make out any other details but that it was thick and plush, probably dusty, torn and stained too. I sat in it anyway, letting out a long, "Ahhh." The arms rested high as if they were welcoming me into the chair's calm embrace.

Directly across from me, near the wall heater stood a single window. On the other side were trees with thick twisted branches and deep green leaves that obscured most of the view. The window was undamaged, a good sign.

The sound of Aiden's tattered shoes sliding against the planks gave away his approach at the doorway. I turned my head to take in the image of his svelte figure as he rested at a slight angle against the doorjamb.

"How are your fishing skills?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Lousy."

"I can't fish or hunt for shit, but we need food. And wood for a fire tonight."

"Just rest for now. We'll fish in a few hours." I sighed as my body sank deeper into the cushion.

"You know, Santos has been out to get me for some time now." It was true. "Ever since I confronted him for harassing some of the people at camp. His threats about getting rid of me and sending me to my final resting place were taken seriously. I may not be high on his to-kill list, but he will take any chance to get at me. Your life is in danger too."

"My life was in danger as soon as I entered that prison," he said. "My life was at risk as soon as hell crawled all over our globe. Since I was born. Nothing's changed. My life will be in danger until the day I die. I realize that." He moved closer. "And the last time I checked I was a big boy, so stop worrying about me and why I'm still here."

"Why are you here?" I had left behind everyone and everything that I once cared about and yet he refused to leave. "You feel sorry for me? My eyes will heal. I can see better already."

"You—you don't remember." Aiden lengthened his spine.

"What are you talking about?" I dipped my eyebrows, my ears perked as well as my attention.

"When I first came to camp, all worn and withered, you welcomed me." He cocked his head. "Remember?"

I thought back, seeing the frail man carried into our camp by some of the hunters. I remembered looking into his sea-blue eyes, placing my hand on his shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze, and receiving him into the home I had built. No one was ever turned away. Ever. No matter what condition they were in.

“Then the one day when I was feeding pigeons the last of my corn biscuit.” Aiden went on. “Remember what you told me?”

I nodded. Never again would I forget. In all the years after the event, I had never seen a person feed a wild animal when they themselves had so little. At first, I thought he was trying to lure the animal in to capture, but the gentle way he worked and the soothing words he spoke changed my mind. This man felt something for these wounded creatures. I made up my mind that day. “I said you were a good man.”

“So if you ask me why I won't leave you, why I would risk my life for you, or why I didn't betray you, you've already got your answer.” He squeezed my shoulder—reminiscent of the day I had first greeted him—and turned to leave the room.

I had to convince Aiden that building a fire was a bad idea. In the dark of night, the light could be detected a mile away and the smell of burning wood could be traced. Overall, it would give away our position if someone was out looking for us.

We sat in the small washroom, and I listened. As much as I anticipated footsteps or whispers, only the sound of waves crashing against the rocks and wind rattling the glass were heard.

Keeping my eyes closed, I found relief. As the hours ticked by, my vision became better. My eye naturally flushed the gook out. The damaged cornea might take much longer to heal, but I prepared for that by leaving it be and keeping it closed. I visualized the shadows that hid in the corners and the darkened rooms. The image brought with it a somber mood. The silence cloaked me like a wool blanket, but the dropping temperature cooled my skin. The stillness, the increase in nature's noise, all contributed to my gloom.

One thing continually played through my head at the thought of my misfortune.

At least I was alive.

I never would have appreciated being alive if it wasn't for the more difficult things I have lived through. Aiden was right about that.

Another sound took my attention. Clacking of teeth as Aiden shivered followed by his shallow breaths as the cold licked away any heat his body tried to contain. He was huddled in the corner of the room, sitting on a pile of leaves from the nearby trees he had gathered for cushioning.

I pushed myself up from the chair and carefully made my way through the darkness to his side. Sliding my back down the wall, I lowered myself to sit beside him on the loose pile. Although I trembled too, maybe what little body heat I generated would transfer and give him some relief. The thought of him violently quivering in the prison cage played through my mind. I slid closer.

"You know, I don't even know why I was thrown in that cage," he said, probably remembering nearly freezing to death too. "I had asked, but eventually stopped when it wasn't getting me anywhere. I think it had something to do with me not being afraid of Santos. He had tried to intimidate me earlier that day, and I never let it bother me. Then hours later I was locked in there."

"Sorry," I offered.

He hugged his knees closer to his chest and his outer thigh brushed mine. A warmth grew between us. Or was that my imagination? He moved closer. It didn't catch me off guard as it might have in any other situation. Still, be it for warmth or affection, I found myself wishing for more of his touch. Something stirred inside me, longing for more than his thigh on mine, or the heat that transferred from my body to his and from his to mine. In the back of my mind, I hoped he would have the courage to snake his arm around me or lay his head on my shoulder and guarantee a comfortable night. Thoughts of his hands on my most sensitive areas, his hot breath in the crook of my neck, his lips caressing the stubble on my chin sent a deep shudder along the length of my spine, and I trembled.

"A fire would be nice, huh?" he said, misinterpreting my quiver. I peeked at his black silhouette and his head turned to mine. "But, safety first," he added.

It still surprised me, his ability to amuse me at a time like this. A way of distracting me, or us?

"Things shouldn't have to be this way," Aiden went on. "Trying to survive like this. We'll figure something out in the morning. I'm sure of it."

I nodded, not certain of a better plan, but thankful that, to him, there was a future. Even if it was only a few hours ahead.

The future wasn't promised. That was evident. The future held no significance without the events of one's past to give it its value. It's so easy to fall into the depths of despair in the days like these. Even easier to allow it to swallow you up unless you had a purpose, something or someone somewhere along time's linear line to keep you going, to motivate and push you.

I shifted, plunging my hand into my pants pocket and pulling out a folded three by five picture. I cradled it in my palm, running the pad of my thumb along the center fold and its tattered edges. The darkness obscured my vision, but I didn't need my eyes to see the image. I never looked at it anyway, only using the feel of the creased paper to trigger the inspiring memory.

I could make out the golden dress she wore with layer after layer of white ruffles along the bottom. The white dress shoes with the flat heels reflected the flash of the camera. Behind her stood the most handsome man ever created. The tall, dark, and handsome man of every romantic's dream. He possessed strong broad shoulders, an infectious smile, and exuded confidence no suit and tie could fake.

"You got something there?" Aiden's knee nudged mine.

"No," I said. "Nothing but paper."

Chapter 6

I blinked to a sliver of morning sunlight in my eyes. Rising from the pile of leaves, I peered around the small room with one eye. Light weaved its way past the tangled branches and through the window like a divine pillar, bringing on the new day.

Aiden was nowhere in sight, but worry was the last thing on my mind. For all I knew, he was out basking in the warm sunshine, appreciating every golden ray. Better yet, feeding the fish we should have captured for a meal. I smiled to myself and made my way to the window, surprised how at ease I felt despite being parched and near starving. My stomach was used to not having meals for long periods of time, but the thought of being hunted like a wild animal was what took me out of my brief sense of peace.

If it wasn't for a threat on my life lingering in the air and the downward spiral Earth had plummeted into, the morning would have been like bliss.

I would wake up next to Samuel who would have little Christie snug in his arms. She would get frightened of the dark and come into our room, and we would never complain. Her long chestnut colored locks would veil his handsome face, preventing the morning sunshine from waking him.

Samuel would comment on our baby's hazelnut scent and her beaming smile. Even though her baby teeth were missing to make room for her adult teeth, her smile would bring a grin to my lips.

Then chaos and destruction, and her cries pierced my heart like a hot iron. Whenever it entered my mind, that thought always had a way of stinging. An innocent whimpering from being frightened of the unknown that hid in the darkened corners of rooms, or the howling sobs from the agony of starvation and dehydration. Her pains hurt me ten times worse than my own. But it worked for me every time. Allowing myself to travel to that dark, sorrowful place encouraged me beyond reason.

I cleared my throat and swatted away the tickle on my cheek just as Aiden's footsteps grew closer.

"Rise and shine," he said. Enthusiasm rang in his voice. "You're gonna thank me for this."

I glanced over my shoulder, peeking with my good eye at the smirk on his face and both palms filled with small dark berries.

Saliva moistened my mouth. "Food?"

He nodded. "Huckleberries. My sister taught me how to make muffins with these, but since we only have one ingredient, we're just gonna have to make do." He stood beside me and lifted his palms, offering up the petite fruit. I took a few and popped them into my mouth. The tiny, dark purple orbs gave off a tart and sweet tang on my tongue.

I nodded, approving the flavor, and grabbed some more.

"These took forever to pick," he said, tossing his head back and dropping a few of the berries into his mouth. "Not all of them were ripe, so..."

I wouldn't know where to look for berries, and couldn't determine the edible ones at that. So showing my appreciation for his skill was second nature. "Thank you, Aiden." I nodded, lifting my handful.

"You said my name." He paused. Our eyes locked and he narrowed his.

I shrugged. "Yeah?"

He mimicked me and shrugged too, dropping his gaze. "How's the eye?"

"Better." I turned toward the window as an awkward vibe flowed between us. I watched him pick at the berries in his palm in my periphery. Was concern the reason behind his fidgeting?

"I must've done something wrong," he said, breaking the ice.

"No, you've done plenty to help." It was the truth, but no matter what, I couldn't bring myself to look him in the eye.

"Berries aren't my favorite either," he said. "They give me gas. Maybe next time I'll go ahead and hunt the pigeons instead of feeding them. You like chicken?"

His chuckle followed my snort.

"Okay," I said. "I know I'm being a bit—"

"Solemn?" he finished for me. "It's understandable." His palm ran over my lower back. A sign of comfort? "What I used to do was give myself a certain amount of time to wallow in whatever was bothering me. Then once time's up, I had to let it go. No more."

"Hmm." I never wanted to wallow in sadness. Contrary to what most believed, instead of sucking the motivation out of me, it did the opposite. It kept me alive, it allowed me to care for more than myself, and it made me who

I am. No matter the goal, dragging along heartache and pain always seemed to give me purpose. It reminded me of how far I'd come and what to look forward to in the future.

"Go ahead," Aiden offered. His warm hand caressed my shoulder blade. "I'll be your ear for five minutes. Only five minutes."

I huffed. It had always been so difficult to voice my thoughts. I gulped and let it out. "I shouldn't have run."

"From Santos?"

"From everything." Before Samuel and Christie, there was Paul and Sarah, survivors at the first camp. Paul had left Sarah alone at camp while he went to gather food. He returned and she was gone. He had no explanation on when or where she'd gone; she left no clues as to why. His worries were triggered when he'd found the tattered white dress she'd been wearing and later how odd the fellow villagers acted. In the heat of the moment, Paul accused them, fearing for his daughter's life. Although suspicious, I did as Paul had done and left the camp. There had been far too many incidences, signs telling me I should get the hell away from there. I should've bashed the heads in of those who seemed to know the truth but were hiding it. Instead, I ran. Every second felt like running from Death.

Aiden dipped his head, trying to make eye contact. "You shouldn't have run from everything, like what?"

I shouldn't have run from Santos either. I had tried again, built a new community I could trust, with people who had each other's backs, and didn't do sickening things to little kids. But in time Santos appeared, and yet again, I let him run me off, leaving behind more people who depended on me, trusted me, and believed in me.

"I let a lot of people down," I managed to get past the lump in my throat. "I keep running away." I looked out the window, through the twisted branches, and toward the tall tower of the lighthouse. "And worse, if I don't live in my pain it'll take me, it'll be the end of me one way or another. I'll either give up fighting to live or turn into the exact thing I'm running from—a selfish, sadistic, empty shell like Santos."

Aiden's gentle fingers slid up and down my spine, and then toward my shoulder. His gaze fixed on my target too as it stood high on the rock base cliff. "You've placed a huge burden on your shoulders for the benefit of those around you. I can see that. But that burden is tearing you down. Like a fire or a light set

high in a prominent position to warn and guide others.” He pointed toward the lighthouse tower. “But now you’re broken, wounded, and until you’re fixed and healed you can’t perform your job.”

“I’ll never be fixed,” I said, eyes on the lighthouse. “Don’t want to be fixed.”

“People like you don’t have time to feel sorry for themselves.”

“I don’t feel sorry for myself.” I flashed a glare at him, at his insult.

“You do,” he said. “You’re beating yourself up, you’re punishing yourself, but there’s a way to fix it. To fix *you*.”

His palm gently gripped the back of my neck, urging me closer, to search his eyes. I cleared my throat. “I’ll never be—”

“Build again,” he said. “There will always be people crawling into a camp for help. All you have to do is make sure that it’s a good camp, your camp, they crawl into. You have what it takes to give people hope, to show them a future, and to look at surviving as regular old living. That’s what you’ve done for me.” His hand slid forward to cradle the side of my face, and his thumb swept over my cheekbone. “Welcome in more wounded and we can heal together.”

Heal? That’s what I needed? “But—”

“Time’s up,” he whispered and pulled me forward. Our lips met, gliding over one another’s.

Berries plummeted from his palm, bouncing off my shoes.

He brought that hand to my face, cupping it, gently cradling. His mouth cracked open and the sweet smell of huckleberries filled my nostrils.

Suppressing a shudder, I brought my arms around his narrow waist and pulled him into me. Relief rushed me like the waves of the roaring sea, and I stumbled back, pulling him with me until my rear met the wall. The tips of our tongues glided together, and I sank, allowing myself to act as anchor.

His smooth palms caressed my neck, inching over the slope near my shoulders and back up again. I mimicked the desperate moan that escaped his lips, and in no time, the small room was humming with our erotic tune.

Then there it was, the bulge at the front of his pants met mine. Our stiffness poked and prodded one another until we mingled into a comfortable rhythm, an instinctual grind. Warmth tingled from my loins to my extremities, my tongue dove deeper, our moans grew louder, and my fingers tangled into the tail of his

shirt, pulling, snagging, and clutching at the fabric with every phenomenal sensation that surged throughout my body.

My worries, fears, and cares no longer existed. Our chests pressed together like the paddles of a defibrillator, and for a second I thought the heat we were generating would stop my heart. And as we kissed like there was no tomorrow, it occurred to me. This was what I needed, what I'd been longing for. A man like Aiden to revive my motivation and serve as a purpose for continuing.

I needed to feel it, form it, and make it real. "Aiden," I whispered against his moist lips. And then it was.

Chapter 7

That night resembled the previous night, filled with deafening sounds of waves, speeding winds, and the urge to start a fire to keep warm. This time, we got creative. With my blade, we cut the dingy material from the plush chair to use for warmth. The material combined with our body heat was enough to get us through most of the night.

“Well, I think we should continue down the coast until we run into others willing to help us rebuild,” Aiden said. His thigh relaxed against mine as we sat huddled in the corner of our favorite room.

“What if they already have an established camp?” I asked, allowing his shoulder to tuck beneath mine.

“Even better,” he said, giving my elbow a gentle squeeze. “We can help improve it. You’re a great leader and organizer, and I’m known for finding some serious berry bushes.” He laughed.

I grinned. “We’ll find something to carry water and berries in, and we’ll head out at daybreak.”

He nodded, causing our huddled bodies to rock a bit. “Decent plan, considering—”

“Considering you’ve come up with it on your own.” My attempt at a joke.

As bad as it was, he nudged my arm with his elbow and snickered. At least we were trying to liven the mood and take our minds off the cold. Still, it didn’t take long for the shivers to come on.

Aiden stood. “We should go and explore the tower,” he said, looking toward the window.

“Right now?” I tried to make out the sincerity on his face but the lack of light didn’t allow it. “It’s too dark to see anything.”

“It’s exercise. It’ll keep us warm.” He put out a hand and I took it, allowing him to pull me to my feet. “And we don’t have to go all the way up or anything, but there might be something useful in there. You know?”

Convinced, I nodded and followed him out of the room.

The floorboards creaked as we carefully made our way through the keeper’s

house and out toward the massive tower. I imagined what it must've looked like when it functioned. The light must've been big and bright and seen for miles.

The closer we got to it, the taller it seemed. It towered over us by fifty feet or more. And being perched on the rock base helped it illuminate the coast and be seen by ships far away in the saltwater sea. A spray of the ocean water misted against my thirsty skin, and the tang of salt hit my tongue. Underfoot, the damp sand mushed as we neared the tower door.

A broken padlock hung from the handle of the arched door. Aiden kicked it open, and we entered into a dark room. Moonlight lit up sections of the steps that coiled up into a spiral staircase. Although difficult to make out in the dark, at least two hundred stairs ascended toward the balcony, and a few more beyond that to the lens room.

My imagination played out a scene of a beautiful handcrafted wooden handrail with some kind of intricate design, and smooth and polished concrete steps with a ceramic finish. Moonlight illuminated through one of the arched windows above, showcasing its astonishing beauty.

I followed Aiden as he climbed each step toward the nearest window. An ice-cold breeze blew in through the opening, filling the space with the briny scent of the sea. He peered out; the expression on his handsome face was that of contentment.

"Can't help but think about how this place was before." He turned to me. "You know?"

I nodded and looked out the window toward the lively shore. No matter the situation, people had a way of believing everything before must've been better, nicer, happier, more beautiful. And the people—more righteous.

In many cases, they were wrong, except when it came to Aiden. He was the exception. I took note of the way his jaw tightened and relaxed, and how his tongue moistened his lips when he looked at me. How he stared unblinking, while his fingers subconsciously glided along the windowsill as a way to keep them busy. Was he worried about touching me? Was he keeping himself from doing so?

"What's the matter?" I asked, breaking the silence.

He sighed. "There's not a lot of people who I like to be around. I'd rather surround myself with animals than people these days."

“I see.” Feeding the animals instead of capturing them for food now made perfect sense.

“You,” he started. “I really like being around you.” He came forward, closing the space between us. In a low, aroused voice, he murmured, “There’s another way we can get warm.”

This time I made the first move by pulling his body to mine by the rim of his pants. The past, the present, and the future meant nothing; it no longer existed. Now it was all about me and him. He dipped his head to nibble the flesh beneath my chin, and I let my head drop back, allowing him access. My palm skimmed over the hardened bulge in the front of his pants, and we moaned in unison.

“I needed you,” I whispered.

“I need you too,” he said against my Adam’s apple.

What a relief. Still, he didn’t quite understand. I lifted his head and he looked at me. “You were what I needed the whole time.”

He nodded, breathing heavily as he thrust his hips forward. “I know.”

“You know?” I couldn’t help but grind back against him.

“The picture.” He ducked his head to the crook of my neck, his hot breath against my sensitive skin. “You’re hurting. I can help you.”

He was right. I was hurting. “I needed a purpose.”

That picture—he had no idea.

A loud crash came from the keeper’s house, and Aiden gasped. We paused, frozen in an embrace. “That didn’t sound like a random accident,” he said.

We separated and looked to each other, debating our next move.

Without another thought, I descended the stairs, half blinded by the darkness and my injured eye. I emerged from the lighthouse, and with Aiden on my heels, we approached the keeper’s house. We crept near one of the broken windows and paused to peek through. My worst fear was realized when a blackened humanoid silhouette crept from one room to another, and from the other side of the living area another figure appeared.

“I left the hacker inside.” Aiden’s voice was hushed near my ear.

The hacker? He must’ve been referring to the large rusted blade. Damn. The

intruders now had a weapon, or an extra one if they came with their own. Would I soon be staring at the end of a blade, or a bow and arrow?

“I’ll go in first,” Aiden said, giving my shoulder a squeeze. “You catch them off guard. Take one and I’ll take the other. Okay?”

I nodded. It wasn’t like we could run and hide. Where would we go? Besides, look how far running and hiding had gotten me.

Aiden tiptoed toward the door, the moist sand crunching beneath his feet.

I continued to peer through the window as a throaty voice echoed throughout the room. “Someone was definitely here. I stepped on some kind of berries on the floor and a fresh pile of leaves back there.”

Seconds later, Aiden entered the room just as the silhouettes of the two men came nearer. “Hey.” Aiden lifted his arms at the opposition. The two men encircled him, and once their full attention was on Aiden I moved near the door, flattening myself against the wall, listening for my cue.

“Where is he?” one of the men asked. I recognized the voice as the man who had attacked me and thrown sand in my eyes. “We just want him, alright? We have no issue with you, man.”

Aiden’s voice showed no signs of nervousness. “He left up the coast. Took off running when he saw you guys.”

“Wha—Fuck!” Quickened footsteps marched toward the door. I waited until he walked out and tackled him like a linebacker, ramming my shoulder into his gut and sending him to the ground.

Aiden’s grunts echoed throughout the house as he struggled with the other man. I looked down at the man who had a steady stream of sand pouring from his enclosed fist. Before he had the chance to throw it, I pounced. Landing on top of him, I threw a blow connecting it with his ribs. He huffed and I drew my fist back again.

Suddenly, a thump on the back of my head blurred my vision. I tumbled to the ground beside my attacker and stared up into the eyes of the second man, the other prison escapee.

“I have a message for Santos,” I said, finally voicing what I had to do if I wanted to live. Running wouldn’t get me anywhere but get innocent people killed because of me. I had to face the problem once and for all. “And I’m gonna deliver the message myself.”

Chapter 8

My eyes opened to the sight of an angry snarl and twisted lips on Santos' face. Instinct told me to swing my fist and defend myself, but my wrists were bound together behind my back. Sitting on my aching knees, I jerked against the wooden pole running lengthwise along the center of my spine, keeping me in. The sun beat down on me, pulling me further from unconsciousness. And that's when I felt an ache radiating up the side of my body, and I flinched.

"Welcome back!" Santos' raspy voice rang in my ear as he emerged from behind me. He definitely understood sarcasm as he clapped his hands in faux joy. "Good to see you awake, comrade."

Bearing the pain of my bad eye, I scanned my surroundings, trying to remember how I got into such a predicament. The wooden village that housed two dozen or so folk, the prison, and the loose gravel that dug its way into the flesh of my knees all meant I was back at camp, in the middle of the courtyard. And it hit me. I had willingly returned in a few hours' trek with the two attackers, who I had previously helped escape from their imprisonment, and Aiden.

Upon returning, Santos and his friend had beaten me unconscious.

What had they done to Aiden? Where was Santos's friend now?

"Had a nice little vacation?" Santos grinned, folding his burly arms over his bloodstained shirt.

"Where's Aiden?" I didn't recognize my own voice as my dry tongue and busted lip distorted it. Many familiar faces surrounded me—some frightened with wide eyes and quivering lips—but none of them were Aiden. The dried reddish-brown blood smeared on his shirt sent me to the worst conclusion. "You hurt him?"

"Who? Me?" Santos gasped, taking the sarcasm too far. "I would never." He walked toward the crowd and they backed away, keeping decent space between them and him.

So many questions cluttered my mind. How long had I been tied up and on display with the sun scorching my skin and blood seeping from the wounds I knew were there but couldn't see? What happened to me while I was out? What had the crowd witnessed that frightened them so much? What would Santos do with me now? Where was Aiden, was he okay, would I see him again?

My neck muscles strained to balance my heavy head, but it fell forward regardless. The muscles in my thighs ached and I squirmed. "I need water."

"He needs some water." The voice was familiar. I looked up to see the guy who had caused my eye injury, had invaded the keeper's house, and escorted me back to camp as a bargain. "Just give him a sip, please." The lines above his brows dug into his forehead. Was he really worried?

"You wanted this," I managed to say.

"My family," the man said. "I couldn't leave my family. They need me." He pointed into the crowd, zeroing in on a frightened woman embracing two young girls.

"Back away, Jack." Santos warned as he puffed his chest out in an attempt to intimidate the man, which seemed to work because he took a few steps backward.

"Gonna torture me?" I growled, not hiding my rage. "In front of them?"

"I'm being the leader you've failed to be," Santos said. His crazy hair swayed atop his head. "Doing this is part of the job. Someone acts out and lets all the prisoners go, well, I have to punish them. They need someone who steps up and takes care of business. They respect me because of how I run things."

"They fear you." I glared, bearing the intense pain in my eye.

"Ah, same difference." Santos moved forward, so close the foul stench of his body odor acted as pungent smelling salt and accelerated my alertness. He kneeled a mere foot away. "You're gonna be the example."

"What's wrong with you?" Images of Samuel and Christie popped into my mind to be erased by images of Aiden.

"I'm a bit cranky that I didn't get to hunt you down like I planned, but hey, Jack here was kind enough to guide your ass back here for me." I sensed the cynicism again, but it became apparent to everyone when he kicked a pile of gravel toward Jack's wife and girls. "Fucking family. Family, family, family." His fists tightened and the muscles in his arms bulged. "Everybody's reason for doing what they do is their fucking family. You know all about that, huh, Luke?"

I shook my head, not wanting to speak the truth about the only thing that kept me going. "You're the way you are because of family too," I said. "Because you don't have anyone to care for or someone to care for you. Now

you're a monster, and I'll never be like you. I'll go crazy, I'll die before I turn into something like you."

"My family crumbled along with this shit world and here you are, moping around because you have no family either. Family, family, family." He laughed maniacally. "You're already crazy, running around this goddamned place, building camps, inviting people in, all to replace your family that you don't have. You're too sweet, too nice, too fucking friendly." He came close, his nose grazed mine. "I saw that folded paper you carry around with you. The one you stare at when you think no one's watching."

I lunged forward, imagining my teeth burrowing into the flesh of his nose, but the pole at my back prevented me from fulfilling my wish. He laughed, body heaving.

"Where's Aiden?" I yelled, throat raw and nearly hoarse from lack of moisture.

"On my shirt."

The sight of Santos' tarnished crooked smile boiled my blood. But as his words registered, my rage poured out like a wild beast. "Asshole," I growled.

Then before I could blink, his hands were around my neck, squeezing off my airway. Panic rang out in the crowd. Women screamed, the scurry of retreating footsteps crunched and churned the gravel. Soon all sound ceased and a rapid growing black fog that swallowed up my vision eclipsed the sunlight.

There wasn't much I could do in defense, but tightened my neck muscles and hoped he didn't crush my windpipe. Not only was air trapped in my lungs, but my blood was unable to flow. My body set off alarms, and panic made me struggle. I twisted and jerked. Instinct told me to stand, but my feet never gained traction, resulting in me kicking and flailing like Santos' dying prey. Time seemed to decelerate. Sound entered my ears like a slowed down version of a sad song. I was sure all beyond my auditory senses had too, if only I could open my eyes to witness it, but sleep was taking me under.

Out of nowhere, Santos' grip disappeared. I coughed, struggling for air as my vision returned. Someone struggled to keep Santos in an awkward headlock as they thrashed and wrestled over the loose gravel. My vision returned fully, and I made out my helper's features. The strong shoulders, the tall, svelte figure.

Aiden. He was alive.

I wanted to yell at Santos and return the favor with my fingers around his Adam's apple, but all I managed to do was cough and dry heave.

"Now!" Aiden's voice rose over the chaos. My world became a blur as Santos' burly friend staggered into the courtyard, blood seeping from a wound near his hairline, only to be caught off-guard by a handful of the camp's men. The men carried boards, bricks, stones, and anything else they could use as weapons against my assailants. Soon the courtyard was immersed in a cloud of dust as the men battled it out. The roaring of voices as they shouted, blows as they landed, scuffling, shoving, gripping, tackling.

A pair of hands on my wrists took my attention. I looked over my shoulder at Jack as he untied me. I fell forward on the loose rocks, putting my hands out just in time to catch my fall. I turned to meet Jack but he had already moved on to help some of the other men with Santos and his friend.

More exhausted than disoriented, the vision of Aiden struggling with Santos was enough to get me to my feet. But when Santos got free of Aiden's hold, and threw a swift punch at the side of Aiden's neck, my adrenaline kicked in. In no time, I was there, punch after punch landing in Santos' ribs until he balled up on the ground. My hands went to his neck, fingers enclosed the muscles, and I squeezed in retaliation. My grip tightened and I bit my bottom lip until I tasted the familiar metallic tang. The sound that spewed from my lips, laced with rage but unfamiliar, was just as surprising as the pathetic noises coming from Santos. Then Aiden's palm on my shoulder and his voice in my ear lessened my anger.

"They look up to you," Aiden said through labored breaths. "Think about it, Luke."

Seeing Santos struggle for air, eyes wide, tongue hanging out of his mouth didn't give me the satisfaction I had thought it would. Besides, if I continued I would be no better than he was. I let him go and allowed Aiden to pull me to my feet.

"Out," I breathed. "Don't come back."

"I'll leave," Santos said through coughs. "I'll leave but—but I promise you, Luke, I will be back." He staggered to his feet and backed away, our eyes locked. I studied his scowl; his angry eyes transmitted his warning. Ignoring every pain in my body, I lifted my head high and lengthened my spine. No longer the broken, the pained, the wounded. I'd be ready for him. Every day,

I'd be waiting. My stance and his glare was an unspoken promise between us. Finally, he turned and walked toward the tree line.

His friend followed, battered with cuts, scrapes, and bruises. As soon as they disappeared in the trees, I turned to see Jack embrace his wife and girls, proud and relieved smiles on their faces.

"Let me get you cleaned up." Aiden wrapped an arm around my lower back and led me to one of the small rooms, my former hole in the wall. I lay back on the corn husk cot and allowed Aiden to pour a steady stream of fresh water into my mouth. "Where were you?" I asked, looking up at the bruised and battered man whose wonderful sea-blue eyes caught the light and my attention.

"Old Brutus had me in one of the rooms," he said, and wiped a cool cloth over my forehead. "I smashed him on the head with a rock and got away. Then convinced some of the guys to help me help you."

Stirring at the door snagged my attention, and I turned my head to see a few of the camp members peeking in on me from the entrance. "They forgive me for leaving?" I looked to Aiden for the answer.

"If they didn't before they sure do now." He swept his thumb over my chin below my busted lip. "Get some rest. I'll get you something warm to eat."

"What about you?" I asked.

"I'm fine." He nodded, assuring. "I'll be just fine."

"Thank you, Aiden." I closed my eyes.

"You said it again." His smile was apparent in his tone. His hand rubbed my chest and I sighed, instant relief. "You'll be okay, Luke."

I nodded. "You know they'll be back."

"I know, but we'll be ready. We'll all be ready and waiting."

Fingertips on my chin again and then they were gone. His footsteps receded as he left the room, urging the people who gathered around to let me rest in privacy. As soon as I was alone, I reached into my pants pocket and pulled out the small picture I had held so close to my heart for so long. I swiped my finger down the familiar crease and over the worn edges, remembering the traumatizing heartache the picture had caused and how that heartache, deep pain, and sorrow got me through some of the most dreadful times in my life. Without the picture I would have given up, or worse, become a monster. The

folded paper was the cause of everything that was broken inside, what I suffered to become the very person I became.

Now that Aiden was at my side, I no longer needed a reminder, a trigger, a defense mechanism of sorts. I gripped the picture at its corners and ripped it down the middle, overlapped the pieces and tore it again.

“What’s wrong?” Aiden appeared in the doorway with a cob of steaming corn from the camp’s pitiful crop. “You need rest. You need to get better.”

I nodded and dropped the papers to the floor beside me. “Everything’s better now.”

Aiden was at my side almost instantly, picking up the pieces as he had done throughout our time together. “What is this?” he asked, examining the bits of paper.

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

“Yeah?” He flipped each piece over, scrutinizing them one at a time. “There’s nothing on these. They’re blank. So why are you ripping them up like its incriminating evidence or something?”

“Because I don’t need it anymore,” I said, staring at his infectious grin. It reminded me of the smile I always longed for in a tall, handsome man like Aiden. Or my figment, Samuel. How likely was it to someday have a daughter who’d be afraid of the dark and wake up tangled in Aiden’s arms as we lay in bed?

Samuel and Christie had given me a purpose, helped me understand what others were going through, their commitment to family. They gave me my motivation, the hope that there was something to look forward to. Now Aiden was all I needed.

I never thought I would go full circle and return to the place I had foolishly abandoned. Thankfully, the people of the camp welcomed me back. And the way they greeted me was better than any greeting I had ever given. With everything in me, I’d show them they made the right choice.

Aiden’s method of dealing with wallowing urged me to start a countdown. Thirty seconds. That was all I’d need to put the past behind me and work on our future, Aiden and I, us and the camp.

I never thought I would learn to trust and appreciate someone as much as I had grown to trust Aiden. There was still a lot to learn about my helper, and I

looked forward to it. I owed him more than any man could give. More than my life. And I was glad for our adventure while it lasted. Aiden was wounded too, and that made him a good man. That made us perfect.

From now on, no more looking back. No more regrets, self-pitying or excuses. No more—

Time's up.

The End

Author Bio

The author of several books of fiction with spice, Leslie Lee Sanders resides in Queen Creek, Arizona, with her husband, three daughters, and a wild beast she calls her imagination. She's known for writing erotic romance, mostly in the MM and MMF categories, and recently plunged into writing deep, dark romantic sci-fi with her post-apocalyptic and dystopian series, Refuge Inc. She's published with Breathless Press and Xcite Books.

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