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Moments of Connection

Kimberly Knaust, B.F.A.

An Abstract presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Lindenwood
University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Masters of
Fine Arts in Writing

Abstract

Moments of Connection explores author Kimberly Knaust's relationship with literature, her sense of the world's beauty and strangeness, and her certainty that identity is an ever changing thing, never stagnant or limited but something which sheds the unnecessary and blossoms with every moment of choice.

Anti-Nostalgic is a novella in which the amnesiac protagonist Ariel struggles against both her own martial impulses and the ruined world in which she awakens. In a dystopian future, one in which the environment has collapsed and there is a shortage of potable water, Ariel chooses sides in the battle for control of the world's remaining resources and, at the same time, creates a new identity for herself. The piece focuses on the idea that identity is dynamic and malleable, that one creates one's identity through choice and through action.

Moments of Connection

Kimberly Knaust, B.F.A.

A Culminating Project presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Lindenwood University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree
of Masters of Fine Arts in Writing
2011

Committee in Charge of Candidacy

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Instructor Mark George, M.F.A.

Acknowledgements

My mother, for reading me the same children's books over and over again, because "Mary, Mary, quite contrary" fit perfectly into my thesis.

Leonardo DiCaprio and Baz Luhrmann for *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet*, without which, I never would have become a writer.

Kotani Kinya for bringing the phrase "anti-nostalgic" into my life.

Lewis Carroll, and the current popularity of his character Alice, for giving me the line of dialogue, "Curiouser and curiouser."

All of the creative people working in the mobile suit genre of illustration and animation.

Bon Jovi for the phrase "steel horse" which set my imagination off and running.

Edith Hamilton for her memorable book *Mythology*.

John Rzeznik for inspiring Gabe's dialogue and for giving me a soundtrack to write to.

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Introduction

Imperfect Heart: How I Got Here, and What Leonardo DiCaprio, Gundams, and Shakespeare Have to Do With It

I write to share the way in which I see the world. Maybe it's ego, which isn't always a bad thing in a writer, but I've always felt as if I experience the world in a unique sensory-packed way. I remember, vividly, the colors and smells and textures that detail my life. When I concentrate on an event or an emotion, all of those details flood my senses. I can still remember the rough texture of a wooden Popsicle stick, gummy with drying vanilla ice cream and caked with crumbs of chocolate, mingled with the sweet scent of sunscreen and the tart dryness of chlorine from a childhood trip to the pool.

And because of my sensitivity to all those details, I naturally think in stories. The details have to go somewhere, have to mean something to the world. Otherwise, why should I keep them? I replay the events, the words, the quality of the light in my memories, and the memories take on a different feeling, a different structure in my mind. They aren't flashes of detail in a long story, but small, complete stories which connect to the longer thread of my life. I'm always looking for a reason, for meaning, within my memories, which means I live largely in my imagination.

My everyday encounters become detailed little vignettes to share over dinner. Extraordinary events become personal myths, stories retold and shared, sometimes out of a kind of bragging pride, but more often because I want people

to see the world as I see it, to understand and feel things the way I do. Not because I believe that I am right or that my view should supersede someone else's, but because my world is full of beauty and drama and that delicious resonance of coincidence and chance. I want to share it. No moment is without connection to me, thanks to my vivid memory. A song on the radio or a reference to a book or a movie can alter my mood and immediately tie two separate times together in my mind. And those moments, when life fits together and something from my past or something to do with one of my obsessions slips seamlessly into the present, must be shared.

My sense that the world is strange and funny and beautiful, a feeling like a cool breeze across my skin on a velvet soft, warm night, might be the only worthwhile thing I have to share with the world. And I want to give that moment of connection, that moment of, "yes, that is exactly how the world is," and the magic of that realization to other people. So I write. And in every piece, I search myself for the details, for the precise senses that will give my worldview to the reader. I hope that at least one person reads something of mine and stops, fingertips cool at the warm flesh over her collarbone, takes a deep breath, and thinks, "it's perfect, she gets it, it's not just me." Because I've had that moment myself, when the words were a gift from the writer to me, and I left that moment somehow changed, the world somehow more beautiful.

The first time it happened, I was nine. I was home sick from school, a fairly usual occurrence because my mother worried for my imperfect heart. I was

under a pink blanket on the L-shaped couch in the front room. It was spring, the sun filling the room with warmth and casting rainbows in the dampness of my eyelashes. All I could smell was the uriney sweetness of pear blossoms.

Mom came home from the grocery store with a movie. It was Shakespeare. I was not pleased. I sipped on a flattened Coke, rolled over on the couch, and made some grumbling noises. Mom put the movie in anyway. I turned so that I could see the T.V. and still appear to be sleeping.

Leonardo DiCaprio changed everything.

Caught in a sunrise, a disheveled prince in a black suit and white socks, his shirt cuffs turned and undone, Leo was the melancholy of youth that I was just beginning to feel. He was passion, love sickness, impulsiveness, and despair. Truthfully, the credit should go to director Baz Luhrmann, but in my mind, Leo/Romeo understood. And that moment of connection, that cool whisper over fevered skin, became an addiction.

I blame Leo completely for what I would choose to do with my life, for the choice I made 15 years ago. I wanted to understand that words of *Romeo and Juliet*, so I would have to study English.

I bought a copy of the play at the book fair. It's a pocket sized copy, black cover, with a red rose under the title. I read it, the first time on a car trip. And read it again. And again. Until I understood. It wasn't Leo who got it, who got me. It was Will. Shakespeare saw that world in the way I wanted to see it – beautiful, bursting with potential, complicated, dramatic, and hinging on moments of choice and more than a little chance. I still didn't understand all the words, but someday I

would. And without realizing it, I had learned that strength of words, a power great enough to reach a young girl centuries after they were written. More importantly, I learned to feel through and in language, to experience emotion through literature.

I began writing myself, about three years after that fateful sick day. I started out writing fan fiction, stories with characters borrowed from television shows or other pieces of popular culture. I wrote about an anime called *Gundam Wing*. The show, a war epic starring teenaged mobile suit pilots, was targeted at boys, but it made a connection with a surprisingly large group of girls, many of whom would go on to write. While I can't speak for everyone, I connected to the sense of struggle and isolation of the characters. The adult world, the world of wars and careers and politics, left me bewildered. I too was a young soldier, trying to find a place to fit in, trying to hold on to my beliefs. And I found my place in writing. I could write about anything, could reign over a tiny world of my own creation.

On my own, I could write, I could string together a sentence and rudely maneuver a plot, but I needed technique. The will was there, but I lacked the craftsmanship to sustain a world of my own creation, to give it the detail that makes a work breathe. I tried to grasp what made for a good story and to identify when language had that special rhythm by reading voraciously.

In truth, I read my way through high school, spending nearly every cent I earned at the bookstore. I fell in love with the gothic beauty of Anne Rice's works and began reading every vampire text I could get my hands on. Eventually, I found Laurell K. Hamilton, a fellow St. Louisan, who writes strong female heroines into her supernatural tales. I found that even in works of gore and violence, the characters could still forge that connection with the reader. In works of action, that connection became more vital if the works were to mean anything. And that connection was born when the writer gave a unique worldview to her protagonist. With that central connection, a writer could create anything.

I enrolled in a women's college, Stephens, determined to focus on my studies, on my craft. I tried everything. I wrote screenplays, stage plays, fiction, and personal essays. I took British Literature and spent a semester with my old friend Will. I learned to appreciate his rhythm, and more importantly, his generous, warm sense of humor.

And I learned what Baz had tried to tell me at nine. Shakespeare was never meant to be taken so seriously. Shakespeare's plays are a mixture of bawdy low-brow and poetic high-brow, sprinkled with action, passion, magic, music, and dance. Shakespeare wasn't afraid of romance, of violence, of the occult. He worked without limitations, all to achieve that moment of connection with as much of his audience as possible.

It was as if the walls had fallen down around me. To be a writer, I needed to loosen up, to write from myself and not for the expectations of others. Writing

truly was the one place where I was free to do anything, go anywhere, push as far as I could. As strange as it sounds, Shakespeare is the reason I write about rock bands, vampires, and mobile suits. He taught me that the connection is in the craft, in the language, in the details, and that done well, any moment can have resonance. If I learned to write with skill, with beauty and precision, my story would resonate with readers.

And I wrote like crazy – notebooks of ideas, thousands of typed pages, scraps of paper with single scenes and snippets of dialogue. At Stephens, I had tiny workshops to read and act out my works. I helped other emerging talents prune away the excess and polish the gems in their works. And I had patient, generous professors who encouraged me to write for myself as much as I wrote for the world. They knew that I had to love what I was going to write about if I was ever going to give myself over to the work.

When I graduated from Stephens, I enrolled as a graduate student in Lindenwood's writing program. I had come a long way from the borrowed characters and scenarios of my fan fiction days, but I still needed the support and feedback of other writers. I needed to see in the highlights and wrinkled pages of workshop copies when a reader was struck by a line, or when I could tell from the dog-eared corner that a scene had been reread numerous times before the copy was returned to me. Every time I knew I had reached a reader, when the proof was on the page before me, it was because I had nailed the details. The best moments

in my works came out of me opening up and sharing the specifics of my worldview.

And it was at Lindenwood that I first learned to look at myself and examine myself in my writing. I had written about myself before but at a surface level. I had hidden the ugliness and the embarrassing parts of myself. At Lindenwood, I finally got it. It was the ugly parts, the strange parts, coupled with the strengths and the talents that made me interesting. I gave in. I admitted my obsessions, my delusions, and my pride in my writing for the very first time. And it changed my writing. I liked my more honest voice. Writing felt so much more natural. I was no longer putting my best face forward, my most proper language out there. I was writing what fit. And that new voice, she reached people. The moments of beauty she showed to a reader were more valuable because of her imperfections, because the world is imperfect.

It changed the way I approached my characters as well. My characters became more complicated, less perfect. Perfect doesn't resonate. Flawed characters do. It was something that I had always known, Romeo's tenderness is powerful in contrast to his violent temper, but it took me a long time to realize it.

I was finally ready to start the novel I had kept alive in notes and scraps since my time at Stephens. I decided to write my commercial fiction, female protagonist, mobile suit, war story. And I prayed that my theme and my worldview would come through. I believed that my heroine's search for her identity and her discovery that identity is fluid, something forged by will and

choice and action, would reach readers and would make my story more than just an action yarn.

The idea for the story came from a stormy night at Stephens. I was coming back from the mall, walking back from the parking lot across the street from my dorm, when the intersection flooded. In a matter of seconds, the water was up to my hips. A stream of water fountained from the manhole cover in the middle of the intersection. I lost my new pink flip flops in the surge.

I waded across, just as a cop car swung to the edge of the water and blocked the road. Safe on the other side, I started to cry, shocked by the ferocity of nature. I sat in my room that night and daydreamed about whether I could survive if such a flood swept further. I had food, supplies, and a store of clean water. And I started to think of all the things that I would have to do without, how the world would change if the waters never receded.

Anti-Nostalgic was born that night and survived in scribbled ideas for nearly four years before I began to write it in clusters at Lindenwood.

I created Ariel, my martially skilled female protagonist, because of my time at Stephens. I learned how strong women can be and how little presence strong female protagonists have in popular culture. I gave her a mobile suit as homage to my fan fiction roots. And I gave her details from my own memories and emotions. I made her imperfect, night blind, and suspicious. I also made her observant, brave, and generous.

Anti-Nostalgic reflects my past, my growth as a writer, and my concerns for the world. What is the worst that global warming could do? What happens if

we run out of clean water? If the worst happens, would we take care of each other? It also demonstrates my complicated love of popular culture. Ariel's world is littered with the music, technologies, and literature of her world's recent past, our present. I believe that you can learn a lot about a person from the little details, like the books and the record albums he or she owns and way in which they are organized. So I created a space, in the flooded apartment, that is a blank slate, where those decisions are waiting to be made, because I know that each reader instinctively knows what his or her own system and solution would be.

And I hope that, through my language and choices of description, the reader recognizes my affection for this world, as imperfect and complicated and beautiful as it is. I gave Ariel pieces of my own childhood memories as flashbacks in the hope that the joy I felt in those moments would resonate throughout a piece filled with violence and destruction and mistrust and thereby show the potential that life holds for the characters.

Ariel is my hope for the world. The hope that whoever we may be at the moment, we can choose our identities, we can grow and change into the kind of people we want to be no matter the circumstances of our world. No matter what changes, no matter the struggles we face, I believe that we can always make that essential connection to another person, that someone out there will understand. And by sharing my worldview as a writer, I will touch and change someone.

In the fifteen years since I first brushed up against that artistic connection, I have changed a great deal. I fell in love, had my heart broken, lived away from

my family, worked, and dreamed. I grew up, learned to be a little harsher on myself and a little more generous with other people, and gave license to the blunt, endlessly amused voice inside of me.

But some things haven't changed. I still feel as though everything in my life is lush and rich. Every moment still feels charged, as if it hangs in a kind of balance with the universe. I have seen *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* nearly two hundred times. I've read from the canon of classical literature and from the turnstile display of romance novels at the grocery store. I never stop learning from the things I read. Sometimes, I find something impressive, some way of thinking or describing that inspires me. Sometimes, I find grammatical errors and plot holes that show me what to watch out for in my own works. Sometimes, I find the connection I crave. But that moment never gets old, never lessens for me.

The choice to be a writer, while not an easy path to give one's life to, is the choice I've made. Writing is challenging, frustrating, and rewarding. It strains my nerves and stretches my mind. But I know that it's important. It is important for me to express myself and to leave a record of my world. And it is important that I keep trying to nail those details, so that someone else might feel that magic spark, that cool breeze from my work and decide that they too should write.

And writing comes with the responsibility of reading. I would not be the person that I am today if I hadn't read. To this day, if someone puts a piece of paper in front of me, I have to read it. I will read it upside down. If the paper is

thin enough, I won't even flip it over. But I won't wait. I itch to read it. I want to know. I want to share.

I got here because I love to read, because other writers wanted to share their moments with me. I owe a great deal to other writers and to the people who bring their works to life. I wouldn't have loved Shakespeare if Baz hadn't taken the time to give that moment with Romeo to the world. I wouldn't speak with the same rhythm without the songs on the radio. And I wouldn't think in the same patterns without all the stories that I've encountered whatever the media.

After I found out what story, what language, what literature could do, I gave myself permission to try it. From there, I worked to learn the mechanics and then to hone the skills, to master the craft. I couldn't have done it without talented professors and a community of other writers.

Now, I'm on my own. But I carry a great deal with me going forward. And if I ever need a reminder of why I am doing this, of why I am writing, of what it all means, all I have to do is put in the D.V.D. of *Romeo and Juliet* and let my nine year old self explain, "someone else got it, and shared it with you, and that is worth everything."

Anti-Nostalgic

Chapter 1

A breeze brushes my skin and ruffles my bangs. My skin's growing warm, and I imagine myself laid out on a chaise lounge, bug-like sunglasses obscuring my face, in a yard filled with azaleas. I can feel the straps of the chair supporting my weight, sticking to my bare skin.

In reality, I'm on my back, on a hardwood floor. I can feel a seam beneath my fingertips, one pressing into the soft flesh of my thighs. But with my eyes still closed, I can't conjure up an image of where I am. Not a good sign. A little voice inside my head is screeching – bad, dangerous, wrong.

“Always listen to your little voice,” a woman says in my memory. I can remember a pair of green eyes and skin that felt cool and powdery. Was she my mother? I roll the word around with the feelings in my memory – safety and softness, an embrace, and a tinge of indebtedness, like a rubber band pulled taut within my mind. Yes, that feels like a mother. Who is she? Who am I? Where did I come from that I ended up here, on my back below a strange ceiling?

I can remember lying in a small bed with its wrought iron frame pushed up against a wall the color of a cloudless June sky. I can see it in my mind, but I can't place it. I wonder how long I've been here. Did I faint? Or get knocked out?

I wiggle my toes. I can feel them. Point for me. I open my eyes and roll onto my side. Bright sunlight blinds me. There are no curtains on the window above me, and one pane of glass is shattered. My stomach lurches. I close my eyes, and I ease back into a corpse pose – feet splayed, palms up, shoulder blades

tucked. My breaths come shallow. I slowly inhale, breathe in deep through my nose, and a ripple of pain spreads from my stomach to my chest.

I got knocked out. I don't know where the certainty comes from, but I've felt this before, a bruise the size of a softball just above my belly button. Something or someone nailed me. I roll onto my stomach and wait for the floor to settle.

I need to stand up. Maybe once I get off the floor, things will look familiar. Since I can't seem to remember my own name, but I'm certain I wear a size ten shoe, familiar seems unlikely. I push up, and my elbows sway, but I get to my knees. Almost there.

My white t-shirt is soaked with sweat. I can see a black bra through the thin fabric. I don't think I was wearing this shirt to begin with. But then again, maybe I was, or am, that kind of girl. I roll the damp cotton of the shirt up over my stomach. The bruise I was expecting, a purple and garnet number blossoming on snow, isn't there. My stomach is mottled a margarine yellow and sickly green. The bruise is at least three days old.

I can't imagine that I've lain on the bare floor in an open room for three days. I run my fingers through my hair – only my bangs feel greasy. So either I've had a shower in the last day or so, or someone cleaned me up. The latter would explain the black bra, white shirt situation. But why bother? Why clean me up and leave me here?

I manage to plant my feet beneath me. The room is rocking slightly. It's almost soothing. The room itself looks trashed. The glass from the broken

window litters the floor. The wallpaper is peeling. There are brown water spots on the ceiling and the walls. In places, the floor is warped and discolored.

One whole wall is taken up by bookshelves. The spines have been arranged, not by author or by title, but by color.

“Roy-gee-biv,” I say.

The acronym slips out from somewhere. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet. But whoever organized these shelves went in reverse and started with black, then violet all the way down to white. Mildew speckles the spines.

On the other wall, there is an old Victor phonograph, a turntable with hand crank and everything. Spider webs crisscross the horn.

“Curiouser and curiouser.” I know I’ve just quoted something, a children’s book, I think. Do I have children? I’m certainly old enough to. I wonder if there is someone waiting for me to come home, someone who knows that I’m missing. I don’t feel like there is.

Beside the phonograph lies a stack of record albums. I thumb through – Paganini, The Beatles, Def Leppard, Bon Jovi, Sinatra. Classics and one-hit wonders, opera and jazz, rock and country, all piled together. No hint of the owner’s taste left behind. Like the books, the records leave no clues, as if their owner purposefully tried to blot out his or her touch. No favorites, no dominant genre, artist, or era, no personality. Every item left, like my fragmented memories, equally important, equally worthless.

On top of a chest of drawers, there’s a decanter of foggy, brown liquid and two squat glasses. There’s a shimmering lip imprint on one glass. I smear the

print, sticky and pink. Lip-gloss. My own lips feel dry, but that doesn't mean that the print isn't from me. But then who used the other glass? Perhaps I had a drink with someone, a civilized drink from a lead crystal highball, and then, that person left me here to die? Or did two people drop me here and celebrate?

I yank open the drawers in the chest on which the glasses rest. The top drawer is crammed with batteries, scissors, screw drivers, tape, and notepads – a typical junk drawer. The other two drawers are filled with bottles of water. The top drawer seems too natural, too real, a jumbled mess, compared to the false order of the books and the albums. I dump the junk drawer onto the floor and paw through the contents. I pull out a heavy linen bag, pale pink with a drawstring. It's the kind of little bag you'd slip delicate fabric into to wash. Inside the bag, I find a handgun and a small silver key. I fish out the key and stuff it into my back pocket. I wrap my right hand around the butt of the gun, and the weight feels natural, comfortable. I must have some experience with firearms. But was I a good guy or a bad guy? I hope I won't need to fire it, but just in case, I tie the linen bag to my belt loop.

I make my way to the window. Mindful of the broken glass, I peer outside, hoping to recognize something in the landscape. I don't remember much about myself, but I still seem to know the world – the names of items, their significance.

The world outside the window is flooded. Water laps against the building almost at the sill. I can see at least two more floors of windows below me before the water becomes too dark, too cloudy. I must be near a river, in a floodplain somewhere. I wonder if the water rose, a flash flood, while I lay in this room.

Light poles peek out of the water. Branches still full of buds and new green leaves stretch forth from the abyss. The water must be recent, as I can see leaves on some of the branches in the water. The water is an azure gel encapsulating the world, freezing it in time.

Little sparks of hope gather in my mind, and I imagine how I got here. I might have been injured in a natural disaster and abandoned, not by choice, but because the water left me cut off from aid. Perhaps the other glass belongs to a savior. I imagine an older man, broad shouldered with gray whiskers, in fishing waders, snatching me from my car as water whisked it down a gravel road. I imagine him carrying me here, swapping my ripped up shirt for one of his, and offering me a spot of whiskey to dull the pain of smashing into my steering wheel. Perhaps the other person here was not an attacker, and that person has gone to find help now that the storm has passed.

I want to believe in the man in fishing waders. I want to believe that someone is coming back for me. I want to, but I don't.

My little voice again, warning me to be alert, to be critical of the situation. It's strange, but I don't feel fear. Instead, I feel a calm, a readiness, envelop me. Like static shocks along my skin, the feeling starts at my bare toes and climbs my legs, steadies my knees, straightens my spine, pushes out my chest, pulls my shoulders under, and lifts my chin.

I am standing at attention, waiting for a cue that isn't coming. Was I a dancer? An actor? A soldier?

I welcome the calm. It shuts off the questions and the hesitations clouding my thoughts. My mind retreats, and my body takes over. I know what I need to do. Muscle memory urges me forward, compels my body to action. I need to keep moving. First, I need shoes.

I slide open the white door to a built-in closet. The tiny space is filled with cardboard boxes. I pick up each box, set it on the floor behind me, and open it. I find men's clothing – wrinkled oxford shirts, paisley ties, and trouser socks. The very last box contains a pair of over the shoe galoshes. They're black and come up to my knees. I slip on a pair of tan trouser socks and step into the galoshes. They are sizes too large. I feel like a child wearing her father's boots, silly and slightly off balance. But they're waterproof. I slide them off and put on several pairs of socks at once.

An image floats through my mind. I see myself as a child in a puffy pink parka. I have on short blue snow booties. And above the booties, peek out the tops of several different pairs of woolen socks.

My feet properly shod, I slip on a white oxford shirt. I leave the sleeves long, hanging over my fingers. I don't know how far I'll have to go before I find other people, and I don't know how long the water has been so high. But I imagine that there are still mosquitoes wherever I am, and my body remembers the sting of sunburn from the reflection off of water.

I feel something in the shirt pocket. A folded up slip of paper and a pack of matches. The paper has only a name, Aria, and a string of numbers. A phone number? The handwriting is, small, delicate, and even. I snag a pen from the junk

drawer and write out the name. My handwriting is large, slanted, and full of loops. It would have been too easy to learn my name so quickly. Though writing the A felt quick and natural. Alexandra? Alice? Anne? Nothing feels quite right. I fold up the paper and put it back into the pocket of my borrowed shirt along with the matches.

I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror by the closet. My skin is pale, with a bridge of freckles across my nose. My eyes are the same green as the woman with the cool, powdery skin. She must be my mother. And my lips are large, crooked. One arch of my top lip extends higher than the other. It makes me look displeased, caught in a critical sneer, even with my muscles slack. I pout my lower lip, let my lips rest parted. I look lost. I think I prefer the critical sneer.

My forehead has some creases. I imagine myself to be in my late twenties or early thirties, but the wrinkles around my eyes and on my forehead are a little too deep. I must have been very expressive or very emotional. My ears are pierced, one empty hole in each. And my hair is long, straight, and a rich gold color. I have such long, care intensive hair, but I don't wear jewelry every day. What do I do for a living?

I feel like a historian, trying to extract the past from the surface of an object. But I'm not an object. There is no manufacturer's stamp, no unique glaze, to tell me what I am, where I've come from, or even my age. I feel like a forgery of a self, a cheap copy that looks the same on the outside, but lacks that special craftsmanship, the work behind the object, its past. I don't know who I am, how I've lived, or what I've done.

My old self is lost to me. My habits, my tastes, my weaknesses left to be relearned. This new self, I am creating from fragments – however flawed. I suppose that I am not alone in this. No one is the self that he or she was even a moment ago. That self is lost, overcome by the new. Identity renews itself like a phoenix. It burns away and leaves a shining new self behind. Identity is the story we tell about ourselves, the narrator we keep in mind.

I will craft my story. First, I need a name. I go to the bookshelves and read my way across the spines.

“Danielle, Natsuo, Elizabeth, Lolita, Kate, Laurell, Charlaine.”

None of these resonate. I’ll know my name the minute I say it. It will spring from my lips like a beast alive and saunter across the room. I kneel down in the yellow section, and a tattered book catches my eye. It’s a hardback without a dust jacket. Only the author’s name is printed on the spine. I slip the book from the shelf.

“Sylvia,” I read the author’s name. “No.”

I open the cover, and the spine creaks. The title rumbles in my mind, like a thunderstorm behind my eyes.

“Ariel.”

I hear a creaking outside the door to the room.

Chapter 2

I snap the book closed and shove it back into place. The creaking grows louder, closer. I can make out heavy, uneven footsteps – one sure, thick-soled thud, then a slither.

I slip into the closet beside the door. I pull the door closed and peer from a slit just wide enough to fit my thumb through. I know that the approaching party has a slight limp, probably the left leg. The first step sounds natural, and most people lead with the right foot.

I can't explain why I know these things, why I recognized that sound. The knowledge is just there, inside of me, like the lines to a poem memorized in childhood, something rote, thoughtless. Did I do this often? Did I crouch in darkened spaces and strain to hear the footfalls of enemies over the frantic rush of my own pulse? What did I do when the footsteps reached me? What do I do now?

If the person is unarmed, I just need to get out of the room. When he or she enters the room, the left leg will be closest to me. I'll spring out and pull the person toward me; the left leg will give, and I can use the momentum to slam the person into the wall at the back of the closet. The blow should leave the person either unconscious or with unsteady footing, giving me time to run.

But an armed opponent, I can't outrun. I reach for the linen bag hanging from my belt loop. Kneeling here, inside the closet, I'd only need the person to take one step into the room, and I'd have a clear shot at the back of the head.

A memory, the bitter, cold silver smell of blood, fills my nostrils, and my throat tightens so that I can barely swallow. That voice inside me pleads – don't, I don't want to.

I hear the thump and drag halt outside the door. I hold my breath and let go of the gun. It rests heavy against my hip. I slide the door to the closet open, just far enough that I can rush out.

I hear the screech of metal against metal, a key against the door handle. Then a sound like beads rolling, the key sliding home.

The door opens, and a young man steps into the room. His left leg is stiff, left foot dragging the brown rubber sole of a fishing wader. Fishing waders? A pair of green, neoprene waders cut like overalls. Did this kid save me? Or did the old man, whom I thought I imagined, send him here to retrieve me? I notice another set of black leather straps beneath those of the waders. A gun holster.

The young man is tall and wiry. His dark brown hair is growing out unevenly, like hedges left un-pruned. His posture is strong, upper arms neatly roped with muscle. I can guess that he's just out of the military, injured in combat. I'd say two months out at most by the state of his buzz cut. Even unarmed, he would be much stronger than I am.

The young man notices the shattered window. His brow furrows. He turns sharply, back toward the door, ignoring his weakened left leg.

Our eyes meet, and I launch forward, dig my nails into his shoulders, and pull.

We stumble backward. Momentum, and the weight of my body hanging from his chest, pulls his head toward the wall. I close my eyes and wait for the sickening, wet pop of his neck bending too far.

There is a shudder of flesh against drywall, and we come to a stop. The force of the stop settles in my stomach. Either he's unconscious or I'm done for.

I open my eyes. My plan failed.

With one arm against the back wall of the closet, he's holding himself up. The drywall is cracked around his hand. His other arm is pinning me to his chest, the metal band of his watch digging into my back. I'm still gripping his shoulders. He smells of aftershave and motor oil.

This man is strong. He's got me pinned. I can't reach my gun. I don't like where this is going.

My pulse races, my thoughts deafen me, and then something slips into place inside of me. Suddenly my mind is still, not the calculating readiness I felt while hiding, but a clarity without emotion, without plan or thought.

My feet touch the ground as his grip on my back loosens. I slice my nails across his cheek, tear at the strap to the waders. My knee connects with his lower abdomen, and the breath whooshes out of him. I can feel myself doing these things, but it is as though my body acts alone. Muscle memory.

I grab the gun from his shoulder holster, and my elbow connects with his breastbone. He's still standing, but I'm armed. I march us slowly out of the closet. He's breathing in little gasps. His legs give out, and he kneels down. My body is

humming with warmth and the pleasurable pain of my muscles throbbing in strength and readiness.

Looking at his crumpled form and the gun in my hand, the clarity recedes. Who am I? What kind of monstrous life did I live?

The voice inside me, with its cautious, practical thoughts, returns. The voice is whispering now, fighting to get past a feedback of shock and self-loathing – ask questions, use your advantage.

I back up until I feel the door handle press against me. The gun is drooping forward in my hand. The weight makes my fingers tingle and twitch. I ease my grip.

The man reaches out, his tan fingers dappled with a white dust of drywall.

“Who are you?” I ask.

He swallows and rubs his chest. “You’re good.”

I don’t think I want to be good at this.

“Mary said you were, but...”

He scans me up and down, takes in the oversized shirt and galoshes, the long hair. The look doesn’t cross the line from curious to sexual, and so I let the barrel of the gun brush against my thigh.

“Mary said I was what?” I ask.

Keep talking, tell me who I was.

My words hit him like a slap across the face. He looks down. His long lashes cast shadows on his cheeks. I notice how thin his neck is, the prominent bones in his wrist. He looks younger now, his body harboring his ego, not the

other way around. We've crossed a line that I can't see. But I know, somehow, I outrank him.

"Answer me," I say.

He looks up, meets my eyes.

"Ma'am. Strong... and reckless."

Definitely a soldier, this one, but what does that make me? Who is this Mary? How does she know me? I can't ask about things that I think I should know, things that the person I was before this morning would have known. I'll just keep playing along.

"Where is Mary?" I ask.

"The garden," he says. "She has your horse."

I don't understand, but if this woman has something of mine, then she must know who I am.

"And you?"

"Your escort, Ma'am. Mary sends her apologies for my tardiness."

Tardiness? Was I waiting here for him, and someone else found me first? I may regret this, but I'd rather leave this room with him than try and find my way alone.

"Your name?" I ask.

He struggles to his feet. I offer a hand. He doesn't take it.

"Gabe," he says.

"Take me to the garden," I say.

Gabe nods, and the change in his attitude is startling. His shoulders snap back, his chin pulls up, and his eyes shift from the warm brown of rich earth to a cooler, darker color, like a rock beneath a stream. I've flipped a switch, and the younger man is absorbed by the soldier self. I wonder if I changed when I went to that still place inside myself, that place of instinct, of surrender to the body.

Gabe gets to his feet. He stands, facing me, waiting for an order, a sign. I'm still holding his gun, but he makes no motion to approach me, nor does he ask for its return.

I offer it back, holding on to the barrel. Gabe doesn't move. Again, there is something unspoken, something tingling in the air, lines I don't know how to navigate by.

I walk forward until the hilt of the gun is an inch from his chest, and I stop. Gabe takes hold of the gun and catches my gaze. What does it mean? I don't see any hint of challenge, or of gratitude, in his features.

I stare back, and he slips the gun into the holster with a whisper of metal against leather. He takes a step back from me. I have been weighed, in some fashion, weighed and found wanting, but the presence of who I was, of who I am supposed to be, has allowed for some kind of generosity.

Gabe gathers a stack of water bottles from the chest of drawers.

"Liquid gold," he says.

The water looks ordinary enough to me. The bottles are plastic, unlabeled, and filled so that not even air bubbles remain.

An image of a tin cup hanging on a spigot flashes across my mind. The cup is shiny, not much larger than my hand. And the spigot has a rusting orange knob, shaped like a spoke wheel. A spider web runs through the spokes. Small, pale hands reach out to turn the knob, avoiding the web, and fill the cup. At first, I can taste the bitter tang of metal and the sweet richness of dirt. It's the coldest water in the world.

"Hmm." The sound is nasal, part agreement, part longing exhale.

I take as many bottles as I can hold, and we step out into the hallway. There are no lights, no windows, stretching out in either direction from the beacon of the open doorway.

Gabe shifts the water bottles into one arm and fishes a key from his pocket. He closes the door, extinguishing the light, and engages the lock.

For just a moment, in the darkness, I feel a primal kind of fear, not the yellow flash of panic, but the slowly encroaching navy of coldness, of isolation. It is the fear that lives in the hush that follows the snuffing of a candle – fear of the potential of the darkness, of what lurks on the edges of the light.

Gabe's footsteps set off to my right, and I fall into step behind him. I brush up against the wall, feel a door handle jut up against my hip. Now, I understand why I could gather so much from the sounds I heard as I hid in the room. I must have spent a lot of time listening in the dark, because I have extremely poor night vision.

"Close your eyes," Gabe says.

I comply, though I notice no change between the darkness inside my eyelids and the darkness of my vision. We continue the march, my elbows grazing the walls. For the first time, I feel a kind of tenderness for my other self, so strong and calculating, beset with such an ordinary weakness.

“Now, open them.”

The darkness is a painting of a deep gray with swirls of navy and violet, still flat, but I can pick out the curve of a door handle, the harsh angle of Gabe’s jaw line.

We reach the end of the hallway. I can just make out a metal bar across what must be a door. Gabe presses against the bar with his forearms, the plastic of the bottles squeaking at the effort. Nothing moves.

I step forward, put my back to the door, and press my feet into the ground as hard as I can. I strain to step backward. The door groans. Gabe joins me, but still we make no progress.

“Together, on three,” I say. “One.” Deep breath, feet evenly apart.

“Two.”

“Three.” Metal and wood scrape, and a crack of light leaks in. Shoulders firm against the door, we press on. Slowly, it opens.

We step out onto a landing, a wrought iron platform above the water. Stairs spiral down into the murky darkness. The glare from the water is blinding.

I notice a rope tied to one of the posts of the banister leading into the water. At the end of the rope is a slender canoe made of golden wood.

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Gabe, still balancing the water bottles with a curl of one arm, drags in the canoe. He dumps the bottles in and steps inside. I bite my lip, watch his footing. Gabe doesn't waver, moves surely and slowly. He sits down and extends his hand to me.

Chapter 3

I tip my armload of bottles into the canoe and stare as the golden side before me dips and rises in the water. Gabe's hands circle my waist, pull me towards the little craft. My first instinct is to stiffen my back and plant myself on the dock. I think that the other me would have resisted out of habit. But I force down the tingling along my spine, soften the tension in my knees. Would she find me weak? I chose to go with this man. I can accept his help.

I brace myself on his shoulders, my fingers finding purchase on the nubs of his shoulder holster, and ease the rubber sole of my left boot to the bottom of the canoe. Gabe pushes down on my waist. I bend my left knee and tuck my right leg beneath me, my right foot trailing steadily over the water and into the canoe. I sit, cross-legged, and grip the smooth sides of the narrow craft. Was I afraid of water? Can I even swim?

Gabe's hands ghost from my waist, his fingertips brush my knees. The warmth of his hands lingers on the stiff fabric of my oxford shirt. Gabe turns and slips two oars into the water. He begins to row, and I watch the muscles of his shoulders press together. I strain to see anything past the water. The building, with its wrought iron landing, shrinks behind us.

I notice a green street sign peeking out from beneath the water. Further to the right of us, a gas station's sign stands. Only the miniature nine-tenths remains in the uppermost row. I wonder if I ever drove this street. Did I ever fill up my car at that gas station?

Sunlight bleaches out the face of Gabe's watch. The only sound is the rhythmic plunk and splash of Gabe's rowing. My cheeks feel flushed, eyelashes damp. I can feel my head listing forward, my shoulders rounding as my chin meets my chest. I shake my head. I need to stay awake. I might need to find my way back.

I dip my hand into the cool water, dribble some down my neck. I look around and only see water, still and the color of slate, in every direction. High in my stomach, I feel the tightness of panic. I can't tell where we've come from or in which direction we are heading.

"Where are we?" I ask.

"Ninth and Cherry," he says.

Gabe points to a half submerged neon sign to my left. I can only make out the letter T. I can't even guess at the distance to the sign, but I imagine that the letters, which appear to me to be smaller than the width of a finger, are, in actuality, higher than I am tall. I want to ask how Gabe knows where we are, why the grid of this city is ingrained in his memory, but I don't.

I can feel my pulse picking up, feel my muscles tightening, preparing. I consciously take a deep breath. Whatever I would have done in the past, I can't keep relying on my body to decide. The person I used to be, she was reckless, suspicious, always on guard, and she ended up knocked out on the floor in the middle of a trashed apartment. She would have exhausted her body, forced herself to stay awake, in order to glean whatever advantage she could from this situation.

I'm not her. I stretch out in the canoe. I know I cannot compete with his sense of this place, which, it occurs to me, may be a home field advantage. With only the last two hours to inform my spatial memory, I would be unable to find my way alone. Better to prepare for the immediate future. I may be in danger wherever we are going, and Gabe may not truly be on my side when we get there. I know he's stronger than I am. My only advantage is my speed. I'd be best to face our destination rested.

I lay back, rest my head on top of the stack of water bottles and let my bent legs hover behind Gabe's back. I feel his weight shift and the ghostly tingle of static that gathers in that tense gap between strangers. Already, I have crossed blindly over whatever lines he had expected would dictate my behavior. So I relax my legs, let my knees and shins press against him. Gabe's posture softens, and I feel the pressure of his back, his warmth through my jeans. I hope that Gabe is not my enemy.

I feel a shudder and open my eyes. I sit up in the canoe. The sun is setting, slipping under the smooth expanse of water behind us. The canoe is beached on a rise of pavement. The white dashes, of a traffic lane, stretch into the darkness before me. Gabe stands beside the canoe. He slips two bottles of water from the stack and walks up the ridge to meet a tall man in loose fitting blue jeans and worn in cowboy boots. The man's hair is a mess of tangled waves, his jaw shaded by stubble.

Gabe stands before the tall man. He holds both bottles in the air. A woman in a green tank top pats Gabe down. She takes the gun from his shoulder holster, slips it into the waistband of her pants, and disappears behind the ridge.

The man holds up one of the bottles, examines the dying rose glow of the sunset through it. He twists off the lid and takes a sip. His eyes close when he swallows. He nods to Gabe, caps the bottle, and slides the second under his arm. He brays a command that I do not understand, and three more men join him. Gabe turns toward me, and the man catches his elbow, wrenches him around. The man gestures to Gabe, then to me, and to something over the ridge of road.

Gabe shrugs him off and rushes down the incline, his limp less noticeable. Adrenaline lends him a hurried grace. If he feels fear at the presence of these men, what does it mean for me? How should I react?

Gabe grabs my wrist. I meet his gaze, and the tension in his jaw stops my questions. His grip on my wrist is painful as he yanks me to my feet. We collide. My free hand is pinned between our chests, my other wrist wrenched outward, as if I am resisting a dance lead.

Gabe whispers in my ear, "Traffickers."

I meet the gaze of the lead man over Gabe's shoulder. His eyes are hard, his mouth twisted in a cruel smile. He winks at me and pulls a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. He lights one and takes a slow drag, the orange tip giving an eerie light to his eyes. I stare at the empty space in the holster where Gabe's gun should be.

Gabe guides me forward, his arm around my waist, his right hand resting on the linen bag hanging from my belt loop. The butt of the gun inside the bag digs into my thigh. The other three men swarm our canoe and carry it away. We approach a bonfire surrounded by rusting Jeeps and scraped up motorcycles. Small tents and piles of blankets are nearest to the fire.

The lead man slings a pair of keys to Gabe. Gabe wrenches open the passenger side door of a once red Jeep and urges me into it. He slams the door with a clang.

“Gonna take your chances, huh?” the lead man asks.

Gabe revs the engine, backs out of the circle, and speeds on to the road leaving a cloud of dust behind. He drives with the headlights off, static hissing and popping from the radio.

“What the hell was that?” I ask.

Gabe yanks on the rearview mirror. He gives me a look that says “you should know.” Emptiness, broken only by the occasional bonfire surrounded by rusted out vehicles, rushes around us.

I fiddle with the tuner. Only one station, a woman with a breathy voice announcing the names of cities, comes in. I turn the radio off entirely. With its blue glow gone, I gaze blindly into the dark. I close my eyes and wait. When I open them, I find another muted gray world, sketched out in the harsh indigo shadows of trees and in the occasional silver glinting of the edges of a sign.

Minutes pass in silence. I turn to Gabe. I can see the muscles in his neck bulge as he grits his teeth. His knuckles are white against the steering wheel, the

tense muscles of his arms a harsh relief against his smooth tan skin. I stare at the thinness of his wrist, compare it with my own pale flesh, ghostly in the near perfect dark.

“He wanted...” Gabe says.

Even though I cannot remember anything before this morning, I knew what the look that man gave me meant. Maybe it was instinct, but I saw the red glow of lust, like lava, bubbling behind his eyes.

I put my left hand over Gabe’s right wrist. He loosens his grip on the steering wheel. I don’t know what to say to him. I wasn’t afraid back there. Part of me knows that I should feel afraid, should feel angry, but I only felt calm, from the second I met that man’s eyes.

It didn’t feel like another instance of the old me taking over. I was ready to kill him if I had to, but I didn’t have to go to that calm static place inside of me where I went when I fought Gabe. I didn’t feel my body preparing to take over and carry me through a fight. I just felt a singular strength, a resonance inside me, as if I was chord being struck, and I knew that I would do whatever was necessary to survive.

“It’s okay,” I say. And for the first time, it feels like the truth.

The pure warm black of night gives way to a chalky gray morning. We leave the steady forward progress of what I assume was a highway and veer on to an unmarked gravel path that cuts through a thick of trees. We dip into a cool

valley. Sunlight filters through the canopy of trees above us. The patches of light swirl with pollen.

On the ridge above the path, houses with swing sets and pools are conquered by ivy and moss. Tall grasses obscure mailboxes and porch railings. Brilliant bursts of dandelions spill down from the ridge. And Queen Anne's lace flutters in the ruts outside our path as we speed by.

We dart to the left, the tires of the Jeep splash through a shallow creek, and we pull onto a narrow concrete path. I notice a horseshoe of pale sand amongst the weeds, then a petite banner waving in the distance. A golf course?

We curve around a shallow lake. One great silver fish snatches a bug from the air and plunks back into the greenish murk. Other than bugs, the fish is the first animal I've seen since I woke.

Gabe stops the Jeep in front of a narrow wooden bridge. The bridge is a dark wood arch over a pinched section of the lake.

"From here we hoof it," Gabe says.

We cross the bridge and enter what was once the backyard of a private residence, a three story brick home with a garden overlooking the lake and the golf course. The glass atrium of the house is shattered. The white finish on the deck and railings is peeling and greened by mold. Tree branches rest against the roof. The house has no immediate neighbors; the path of its circular driveway is lost amongst grasses and trees in both directions.

Across from the house's sloping front lawn, a field is surrounded by a barbed wire fence. Red and white signs on the fence indicate an electric current.

Gabe reaches for the top line of the wire. I open my mouth, but emit no sound, and Gabe's hand closes around the wire. His tan fingers push down a flat expanse, and he steps over. There is no electricity out here either.

In my mind, I see myself sliding under just such a fence. A young boy in dirty jeans lifts up the bottom wire from his place on the other side. He urges me to slide under. I see a field dotted with pink and purple wildflowers behind him, hear the gurgle and pop of shallow running water. Did I grow up in a place like this?

Gabe holds the wire down. I press my left boot into the expanse between the barbs and take a long, unsteady step up and over the fence, to land with a wobbling force on the other side.

Gabe sets off into the field, and in the distance, a silver silo looms large on the horizon. We approach a neatly ordered vegetable garden beside two small structures. So the garden is a literal garden. Am I really here for a horse?

A plump woman, whose curly brown hair frizzes out from underneath a straw hat, kneels beside a fledgling tomato plant protected by a chicken wire cage. She wears dirty gardening gloves, the fingers of which were once a uniform turquoise latex, now cracked and worn from use. I step on a twig, and she turns at the soft crunch.

Her blue eyes are narrowed, and her left hand lifts a rifle from the grass beside her. She levels the gun at me.

Chapter 4

“Mary, Mary, quite contrary,” Gabe whispers to me.

“You have something of mine,” I say.

“That right?”

Mary rises, the gun steady in her hand. I notice the sunburned streaks on her cheeks, the crepe-like texture of the freckled skin above the collar of her t-shirt, and the outward bend of her knees as she moves from crouching to standing. For all appearances, she is a horsewoman. But I don't see a stable anywhere.

“My horse.”

Mary looks at Gabe, who stares forward, stock straight. Mary looks at me. I meet her gaze, and I can feel that resonance inside my brain. I will do whatever is necessary.

Mary doesn't smile, but her eyes change from a harsh crinkled stare to an open, almost clinical examination of me. She cracks the rifle stock from the barrel and slings it over her shoulder. She extends one gloved hand to me.

“Prove to me that it's yours,” she says.

I take her hand, never breaking her eye contact. I press my tongue against the back of my teeth to keep my breathing even, to stop my upper lip from twitching. Again, I am being weighed, measured against what I once was, what I am expected to be.

Mary laughs and claps her arm around my shoulders. Her laugh sends a chill to the back of my neck. I hope that I never have to fight this woman.

“You’ll have to excuse me,” she says, shrugging the rifle cradled in her left arm.

She passes the rifle to Gabe, who disappears with it into a tin-roofed shed. Mary peels off her gloves and tosses them next to a silver watering can on the porch of a squat stone structure. I follow Mary inside.

Four cots are grouped near one wall. A workbench, now stacked with books and papers and a crank radio, hints at the building’s past as a workshop.

The far side has a table and chairs with four chipped plates and mismatched mugs. A collection of blackened cast iron pots and pans hangs from pegs on the wall, and a jar of sun tea sits in the window. Cabinets crowd the back wall. The floor is an unfinished, graying wood. The walls are the same stone on the inside as on the outside.

“You can stay here between runs,” Mary says indicating the cots. “But you work like the rest of us when you’re here.”

On one of the cots is a pair of gardening gloves and a waxy looking bar of soap. The gardening gloves are like Mary’s, but the fingers are pink latex.

“You were expecting me?”

“You’ll do,” Mary says.

I pick up the bar of soap. It leaves a film on my fingers that smells like rust.

“Show her the ropes, will ya?” Mary’s voice carries from across the garden.

Gabe, in frayed blue jeans and orange high-tops, comes into the workshop. Through the shredded knees of his jeans, I can make out swirls of color, ornate tattoos, on his legs. He rubs his kneecap. I hadn't realized that I was staring.

"Didn't hurt," he says.

"What are they?" I ask.

"My life story," he says.

I wish I had even one small mark, one telling scar or tan line to give me a part of my past.

"How long have you had them?"

"I got the first one about five years ago."

"And the newest?"

"A work in progress," he says. "You want something done?"

I shake my head. Someday I might choose to keep a record in my flesh, when it actually feels like mine. I don't want to mar this borrowed vessel, should the old me ever return to claim it. Would she be angry, or perhaps relieved, if I left my footprints on her body? Would she wonder what I was like? Where would I go if she came back? Would I just disappear?

Mary tosses a pair of canvas tennis shoes on my cot.

"Less talk, more work," she says.

I slip off my galoshes, set them under the cot, and slide the tennis shoes on. They're just the right size. I pull the laces tight.

"Good?" Gabe asks.

I pick up the gardening gloves and follow him out of the workshop cabin.

He leads me around back to a wooden barrel filled with cloudy water.

“Rainwater?” I ask.

“Drinking water,” he says. “We boil it first.”

“And for the plants?”

“We hike down to the lake.”

“No running water in any of those houses?”

“Contaminated,” he says. “If you go down for a bath in the lake, only use the soap Mary gave you.”

“Why? What is it?”

“Lye. Won’t hurt the fish.”

“The fish?”

“He’s about the only one left.”

“In that pond?”

“Anywhere.”

Gabe walks away. I stare into the murky liquid in the wooden barrel. How are we alive? What happened to all the fish? To the electricity? To running water?

“You coming?” Gabe asks.

“What happened out here?” I ask.

“Same as everywhere else,” he says, “clean water ran out, and most people didn’t know how to survive.”

How did we run out of water? Is it just this area? One country? Or the whole world? What about the floodwaters, are they contaminated too?

“Are you and Mary the only people out here?”

“Most people around here fled to the city, higher ground. There’s a camp there.”

“Why didn’t you go with them?”

“Just surviving and waiting isn’t enough.”

Isn’t this just surviving? Growing a garden, collecting rainwater? Or does this have something to do with the runs I’m supposed to make?

“So you do runs?” I ask.

“You say it like you aren’t sure they’re worth it.”

“I don’t know,” I say.

This may be the first honest thing I’ve said since I met Gabe.

“You’d better make up your mind fast. Doubt’ll get you killed.”

I’m starting to feel as if every path balances precariously above death.

And yet, I feel disconnected from the choice. I should be terrified, but I’m not. I feel ready, for what I’m not sure, but I want to understand all of this, and being afraid won’t get me any answers.

Gabe shows me how to tend the vegetables. Tending them appears to mean talking to them and ruffling their leaves. He hums and picks caterpillars off of the tomatoes. He sticks his finger into the soil.

“They’re thirsty,” he says.

He turns to look at me.

“The lake, right.”

I snag the watering can off of the porch and wind my way back to the lake. A bee buzzes by my ear. His fuzzy body is backlit by the sun as he zigs out of my sight. Everything seems too quiet without the thrum of his tiny wings. Is he, like the fish, the only bee?

I kneel down at the edge of the lake and dip the watering can in. I wait for the bubbles to stop flowing from the spout and pull it back out. The fish cuts a quick turn near the side of the lake.

I start back. The handle of the metal watering can digs into my hand even with the glove. I try to switch to my left, and the water sloshes, dribbling a little onto my shoe, darkening the canvas. I mustn't waste something so precious. I set the can down and pick it up again, cradled in both arms.

I can't sleep. Moonlight filters in from the window and peeks through the walls in places where the mortar has crumbled. I'm curled up on my cot watching Gabe and Mary sleep. Gabe sleeps without a blanket, with his shoes on. Mary sleeps on her side, facing the door. Her right hand is pinned under her pillow. I'm fully dressed, my gun still dangling at my hip. I can't keep laying here.

I slip my legs out of bed, ease my weight onto my feet. I take slow steps across the floor, rolling the weight from my heels to my toes, testing for a creak in the floorboards. At the door, I turn back to Gabe and Mary, both unchanged. I carefully open the door, step over the threshold, and push the door into place behind me. I take a deep breath of the cool night air.

In the distance, I can see the curve of the silo's roof glinting. The silo strikes me as being out of place here. The workshop and tool shed are weathered, small structures. Would a farm of this size have had a silo as tall as a water tower?

I walk past Mary's garden, brush my hand over the sticky leaves of a zucchini plant. The smell of the soil, the overripe sweetness of bursting tomatoes, and the thickness of the air here feel familiar. I expected to see three small silos on the ridge of that hill. When I close my eyes, I see a curve of road guarded by yellow chevrons and three squat silos nestled together. But I can't say if that image is a memory of this place or of something in my past.

I set off across the fields. My boot slips on the spiny leaves of a thistle. The farther I get from the garden, the higher the grasses become. But I can see where the grasses part, as if the stiff, dried blades are broken. I follow the path of bent reeds and broken off seed heads. The thicker grasses scrape at my arms.

I reach a section of emptiness, a four by four blank in the middle of the field. In the ground is a locked wooden door, as if from an old fashioned root cellar. I tug on the lock. The door doesn't even lift slightly from the ground. I try the key that I found with the gun. My key has a shiny finish and is long and slender. Only the tip of the key fits into the lock. I examine the lock. It's rusted, though it appears to have been gold to begin with. The key for this lock should be short.

I resume my march through the field, turning the warm silver key over in my palm. The silo is a good deal further away from the garden than I imagined. I cannot see the squat stone workshop from here.

When I reach the silo, I notice that the only opening at the bottom is a metal sliding door the same size that one would have in a house. There is a key pad and scanner at hand height beside the door. I crane my neck to see the top of the silo. There is no platform up above me, no connection to the elevator, and no door or opening through which one could empty a grain into the silo.

I hear a rustle in the grasses behind me. I fumble for my gun, tearing the belt loop from my jeans in the process, and drop my key into the dirt. I turn, gun steady before me. The pink linen bag lifts in a breeze and snags on a cattail. I stare into the darkness.

Chapter 5

“Easy does it,” comes a woman’s voice, low and gravelly.

Mary steps from the grasses.

“You followed me?”

“You have no business being out here,” she says.

Only one buckle of her faded overalls is hooked, and the laces of her boots drag in the dirt. Curls of Mary’s hair are slicked against her forehead. Her eyes are wide, cheeks flushed. Mary appears to be unarmed.

I lower the gun.

“What’s in there?” I ask.

Mary shakes her head.

“You’re not ready,” she says. “Not for this.”

“And who gets to decide when I’m ready?”

“She does,” Mary says, pointing to the silo.

There is something missing from this conversation, a piece of information that I should possess. I slip the gun into my waistband and drop to my knees. I drag my fingers through the short scrub of grass, feeling for my key.

I want to cry, but I’m afraid to. If I admit that I don’t know what’s happening, that I’m not the person who they think I am, will they kill me? Should I just keep pretending and getting in deeper? Since the moment I opened my eyes, I haven’t known which path to choose.

I pull out a handful of grass and with it a clod of dirt. I hear the thunk of metal landing. I feel around in the divot. My fingers slide across smooth plastic running underneath the dirt.

Mary's hand hovers in my field of vision. She reaches down into the divot. She holds out my key.

"This it?" she asks.

I reach out, and the key, still warm from Mary's hand, drops into my palm. I clamber from my knees, slip the key into my pocket.

"Mary? Who am I to you?" I ask.

"What?"

"I want to know who you think I am."

"I know who you are," she says, "that's why I brought you here."

"I don't remember you."

The statement hangs in the air, like the mist of breath on a cold morning, between us.

"I'd been gone years before you started your training," she says.

Training? Such a vague, innocuous word for the ghastly ballet my body moves through so effortlessly.

"My training..."

"I had connections... No one ever really leaves that place, after all."

"Why me?"

"You were the best. Agile, focused, inventive."

"Reckless?" I ask.

Mary laughs. The sound is softer, lighter than I expected.

“Still are, far as I can tell.”

“I know nothing about you,” I say.

“For now, you’ll just have to trust me.”

“You don’t trust me.”

“I have to be careful,” she says.

“So do I.”

Mary knocks dried mud off of the legs of her overalls. Her hands thump against the folds of denim.

“I’ll let you see her, but she ain’t yours yet.”

“My horse?”

Mary nods. She holds her hand out, palm up. I study the dark creases in her palm.

She wants my gun. Throughout all of my journey thus far, I have been armed. I study the creases around Mary’s eyes, the softness of her jaw line, and the slack fingers of her other hand.

I take the gun from my waistband, slide the clip from the chamber. I hand Mary the gun and put the clip in my pocket.

She steps up to the silo door and punches in a long string of digits. Each tap meets with an electronic blip. The door emits a short melody which I recognize but can’t name. The small side door drops into the floor with a pneumatic hush. The inside of the silo is dark.

I step closer to Mary, peer into the doorway. The moonlight catches something metal inside. I can just make out two tall metal pillars that disappear under a tarp. Whatever is under the tarp nearly reaches the roof of the silo.

The floor between the pillars has a seam as if it can be opened like a hatch. A ring of computers and gauges and tool chests circle the bottom of the pillars. One monitor is hooked up to a machine that trails thin cords with disks hanging from the ends. Another has paddles with metal plates.

I step past Mary and into the silo. The pillars have wide, joint laden feet, as if they could be rotated and stopped at different angles. I lift up the edge of the tarp. Further up, the pillars each have another joint, a ball joint. And the space between the feet and the ball joint has a door covering some sort of massive compartment.

I study the ball joint more closely. It truly is a large metal ball, bigger than a basketball, encased in two cusps, like a knee or an elbow. Perhaps the pillars are more of a scaffold and can be folded down.

“Impressive isn’t she?” Mary asks.

I don’t see any “she”. There must be something on a platform above me.

Greenish lights flicker to life. I step under the tarp. I can see all the way up. The pillars are not pillars or scaffolds. There is no platform. And she is not a horse at all.

She is a giant robot.

I cover my mouth with my hand. Mary takes this as approval and claps me on the shoulder.

“She’s lighter and faster than what you trained with. But she’ll take a pretty good knock without a dent,” Mary says.

I trained with a robot? Doing what? I am in over my head. I don’t remember anything like this.

“She’s faster,” I repeat.

That means it moves. It’s not just some massive avant garde sculpture. It moves on those jointed metal legs. And I’m the one who moves it. But how? With the computers, like some kind of remote controlled toy? Am I an engineer, then?

I reach out and touch the robot’s shin. Swirls of scrapes and nicks cover the metal. I knock on the shin, and the echoing warble of the metal conjures up the image of a different metal foot.

I’m surrounded by concrete staircases. There is water up to my ankles. The metal foot in front of me reaches up into the sky and wavers forward. It’s an arch made of metal panels.

So I was awake when the flooding began. But I can’t even guess how much time has passed that the ankle deep water under a metal arch became the stories deep water around an apartment complex.

“I told you, not yet,” Mary’s voice breaks my thoughts.

I step back out from under the tarp. I join Mary at the door. She hits the lights. We step outside, and the door whooshes silently back into place.

I follow Mary back through the maze of grasses to the garden. Outside the door to the workshop, where Gabe still sleeps, Mary stops me, her hand on my shoulder.

“Don’t think about it too much,” she says.

I don’t know how I can think about anything else. In a silo in the middle of an abandoned town, a robot waits for my command. There is no water, no electricity, no animals in this world, but I know what they are, I know how things should be, and in the part of my memory that’s missing, everything changed. In that missing piece, the world I knew fell to ruin, and I don’t know why.

I wake up to the sweet, heavy smell of cornbread and coffee. Mary sits at the table alone. I slick my bangs back from my face and rub my eyes on my sleeve. Mary pours a cup of coffee and sets it in front of the chair beside her. The cot squeaks as I slide out of it.

I join Mary at the table and singe my tongue on the bitter, burnt coffee.

“Where’s Gabe?” I ask.

“Left about four this morning on a run,” she says.

“By himself?”

“He took Deucalion,” she says.

Deucalion. A name I know from a myth I don’t remember reading. Husband of Pandora’s daughter Pyrrha, with whom he survived the Great Flood.

The name Pyrrha purrs in my mind, the whirring of gears. I know that name is important. I just can’t remember why.

“You’re in charge of the gardening today,” she says.

She gets up, drops her mug into a bucket under the window. Mary slips into a shoulder holster and pulls a starched, blue long sleeved shirt over it. She leaves the shirt unbuttoned and rolls the sleeves up to her elbows.

“Where are you going?”

She shakes her head, forces a baseball cap over her curls, and leaves me in the makeshift kitchen alone. I swallow the coffee without tasting it. With Gabe and Mary gone, I’m going to make the most of my time. I slip on my jeans and t-shirt, borrow a belt and hip-holster, and pull on my galoshes.

I take the empty bucket that Mary uses to rinse the dishes. I wait five minutes and set off toward the lake.

I start with the house overlooking the lake. I walk up the stairs to the second floor deck. White paint peels off the banisters and sticks to my fingers. The patio door to the deck is busted, but the shards of glass are gone. I walk into a dining room with a formal table, dark wood, six chairs. The matching china hutch is empty of everything save a stuffed animal holding a little heart embroidered with “Happy Anniversary.”

The kitchen looks untouched, all the appliances still in place. The stainless steel refrigerator and cabinets are empty. The junk drawer holds a flashlight and a pack of batteries. I toss them into the bucket. Out of habit, I pull up the handle on the faucet of the kitchen sink. It makes a hissing noise, then nothing. There are two empty dishes, decorated with fish patterns, on the floor.

The living room, with its shining wood floors and vaulted ceiling, looks similarly, eerily normal. There is dust on the sofas and the large television. A framed photo on the mantle above the fireplace shows a young couple getting married on a beach. The bride carries a bouquet of shocking pink daisies tied with a green ribbon. Other than the broken windows, I can imagine the couple coming home at any moment, their cat winding his way around their ankles.

On the coffee table, there is a stack of yellowed newspapers and wrinkled magazines. I carefully fold and roll them up and place them in the bucket.

I follow a dim hallway to the master bedroom. A bottle of perfume shaped like a dress form sits on the vanity. I spritz it into the air. The perfume smells slightly chemical, like plastic and hairspray, but blooms into something warm and less sweet. I place it in the bucket as well. I take clean t-shirts, socks, and pajamas.

From the medicine cabinet in the adjoining bathroom, I gain a tube of sun block and dental floss. I notice a cardboard box, fallen from the overfilled trashcan, a home pregnancy test. Even amid disaster, life keeps on. I take two washcloths and two fluffy turquoise towels from the linen closet. The towels won't fit into the bucket. Unable to carry anything more, I head back to the patio door.

I pause on the threshold. Sunlight casts ghosts in the dust floating in the silent house.

“Thank you,” I say.

I'm not entirely comfortable with the feeling that I have trampled on the sacred space of this young family. It feels as if I have left a residue, my fingerprints, smudges in the dust, on their lives. I don't imagine that the couple will ever return to this house, but perhaps my gratitude will reach them somehow. I hope, somewhere, they're still alive.

Back at our makeshift cabin, I find Gabe asleep in his cot. A cut runs from his temple to the apple of his cheek. The dried blood is smudged and caked with dirt. Quietly, I set down my haul. I take a washcloth and dip the corner into the mason jar of clean water waiting to become dishwater. I dab the cut clean and hang the washcloth over the back of Gabe's chair.

I take out my newspapers and magazines. The first section is the funny pages. There is a warm tingle in my stomach at the knowledge that a sense of humor was still of value amidst some kind of chaos. There is no sports section, no classifieds. The obituaries seem unusually large. Many of the deceased are quite young, mid twenties to early thirties. Did some kind of plague take out the middle generation? I read through the names, but nothing sounds familiar.

The front page shows a map. I don't recognize the silhouette as a state or a country. It's an area shaped something like a pentagon, surrounded by ocean on three sides, with another area to the north separated by a dotted line. The print is a little fuzzy, but the title on the map is "United States 2025."

It's the U.S. but smaller, as if the edges of the country have broken off. There are new boundaries between states, blurry edges where rivers once ran. The pieces aren't missing. They're underwater.

On the next page, there is a photo of a man in a military uniform. His hair is short, probably blonde or light brown. He has a long, thin nose, and his eyes seem to droop at the edges. Somehow, I know that his eyes are a pale blue. I blink to clear the illusion of color on the black and white photo. His eyebrows are strong, his cheekbones high, skin tight.

Gabe stirs. I slip the papers under the mattress of my cot, grab the watering can off of the porch, and sprint back to the lake. Already, the path feels familiar. My feet find the flat patches of grass, skip over the slippery weeds and bumps of tree roots.

I have a headache right between the eyes, a tightness that has more to do with the shifts in the atmosphere than with my body. And I can feel a tingle in my left wrist. I must have broken that bone. Did I break my arm in training, learning a violent art? Or did I slip in play as a child and snap the tender limb? My middle finger and thumb encircle the throbbing wrist. The strange buzzing pressure in my arm is a comfort to me. Even though I can't see it, my body does carry a mark of who I was.

The leaves on the trees flip, their silver undersides visible. The air smells ripe and rotting, of ozone, rain. I need to at least moisten the soil before the rain starts. If the soil's too dry, the water will just run off. Or the water, not being absorbed into the soil, will pool around the young plants and lead to rot. I wonder

if the person who taught me about plants ever imagined that I would live like this. I cannot remember the face or the voice, but the details are clear.

Someone knew what would happen to me, to the world, and that person prepared me to survive. Was this a part of my training? Or something earlier? Even more troubling, if one person knew, many people must have known, and yet, the destruction came to pass. Was it simply a natural disaster too great for us to have imagined? Did we underestimate the damage? Or did we know and do nothing?

I hope that all of this was an accident, an act of higher power, but my very existence stands as evidence to the contrary. I can't shake the feeling that I've been set up somehow. Everything that I can do fits so neatly to the role I need to play. I was given the skills, put in the right place at the right time, and then wiped clean of self. Why? I don't know if it's the weather, but my head feels as if it could burst, as if I'm on the verge of remembering something important, of grasping a piece of flesh that was torn from me.

Clean water ran out. Gabe told me as much. The ground water was tainted when the water table was hit. Arsenic. People died. The weather became violent, unpredictable. There were floods. People fled to the cities, set up camps in the highest floors of the tallest buildings. People starved, got sick, died. Roving bands trafficked in food, clean water, people. I know these things, but they don't feel like memories. Did I read about them or watch them on the news? Where was I when it all happened?

I focus on the ache at the bridge of my nose. Force my brain to concentrate on the pain, and other things start to surface. I was on a base of some kind. Everything was green and khaki. Lots of tents, small planes, Jeeps. Robots everywhere. Smaller than my horse, stockier. We still had power, water, and supplies. I can see myself in a uniform, tall boots, black jacket, patches on my sleeves.

Why did I go to the apartment where Gabe found me? Who was there with me? I remember walking down the hallway. I went alone. I had on those tall black boots. There was already someone there, waiting in the room, when I arrived. I didn't have a key. Someone let me in. It was a woman. We'd never met before. Who was she? Did she attack me? Or did a third party attack us both? I woke up there alone, in a different outfit. Where did she go? What happened after I got there?

Everything goes black.

Chapter 6

I wake up on a metal table. Slender cords trail from stickers on my forehead and chest. I flex my left hand and feel the icy shock of an I.V. under the skin. Everything around me is tinged with a murky green. I smell like salt and alcohol. A slowly repeating beep grows faster.

“You awake?” Gabe asks.

I open my mouth to speak, but all that escapes is a raspy breath. Gabe presses on my shoulders, helps me to sit up.

“You passed out by the lake,” he says. “You were out in the rain for hours.”

He hands me a mug of water. Every swallow feels like broken glass.

“Mary found you,” he says. “Do you remember what happened? Did you fall and hit your head?”

I shake my head no. I didn’t fall.

I was going to get water. It was going to rain. I wanted the plants to soak up the rain, so I needed to get the soil wet. And I remembered something. Something about the flooding. I remembered where I was before the apartment. There were other robots there. Different from mine. And the apartment. Someone else was there.

Then nothing. I woke up here.

I blacked out, but at least I woke up as me. I’m beginning to wonder if, maybe, the old me wanted to forget, wanted to be lost and reborn. Is that why I can remember everything about the world but nothing about myself?

I look up and see a pair of familiar metal knees. I'm in the silo with my horse. One shin compartment is open. I can see boxes marked with red crosses, medical supplies.

I hear footsteps shuffling toward me. Mary turns off the machine beside me. She pulls the sticky electrode on my forehead free with a squelch.

"Yer damn lucky," she says.

She tugs off the other electrodes. They feel like little stings as the adhesive separates from my skin. The electrodes that were attached to my chest slither out the sleeves of my shirt, some tickle my stomach. She winds up the cords.

Gabe carefully, slowly rolls back the tape holding in the I.V. I feel only a slight pinch as he pulls the needle from my skin.

Mary's grumpy attitude and Gabe's overly careful handling of me strike me as being two sides of the same emotion: worry. I can't help but smile to know that someone actually worries about me. Whatever was missing from the life I led before, maybe I'm finding it in this one.

"You must not be too sick if you're smilin'," Mary says.

I reach up to rake my fingers through my greasy hair. I want a hot shower. Such a trivial thing to want given the state of the world, but I can't help it. I want to breathe in the steam, feel the water beat down on my neck, and see the healthy flush of warm blood under the thin skin of my cheeks and chest.

"I want a shower," I say.

"You and everyone else," Mary says.

Gabe slips one arm underneath my knees, the other against my shoulder blades. With surprisingly little effort, he carries me out of the silo and into the high grasses. I hear the door shut behind us. Every other step, Gabe bounces me a little to keep his stiff left leg from giving out. I want to say, "Put me down," but I don't honestly think that I could walk back to my cot at the garden. And for all her toughness, I don't think that Mary could lift me. Instead, I try to be perfectly still, to hold my body in a coiled pose, as if by not squirming I may be lighter.

Gabe carries me, not to the little workshop where we sleep, but to a storage barn. He lets me down gradually, tipping my legs down until my feet are steady on the ground. He grips my shoulders once, as if to make sure I'm not going to topple over, and disappears into the storage barn.

I hear a scraping, metal against dirt, and Gabe emerges with a shallow, round metal trough. He sets it down next to the vegetable patch.

"It's not a shower..." he says.

"It's perfect," I say.

Gabe helps me over the edge of the trough. The metal is cool and buckles and clangs as we move across it. I sit down in the middle. Gabe carries a bucket and starts off on the path toward the lake.

"Ariel."

I open my eyes, blind in the darkness. Gabe's white t-shirt appears an eerie violet in the early morning hours, allows me to focus. He holds out a piece

of clothing, black, heavy material. It's not quite leather, something synthetic, slick and flexible but without the sheen.

"Get dressed," he says.

Gabe, less than shy, slips off his jeans and steps into a jumpsuit made of the same strange material. The tattoo on his right leg is a sacred heart. The heart disappears under the fabric with a whisper. Then, the white of the t-shirt is swallowed, and I hear the rolling beads of a zipper. Gabe has disappeared into the darkness.

I pull my hair back into a tight braid, slip out of the stolen pajamas, and slide into the jumpsuit. From ankle to neck, I've been swallowed by a shadow. I notice a tiny pinprick of skin, a hole smaller than a coin, in the chest, just to the left of the zipper. I touch the hole and find perfectly finished stitching around it. I run my hands down the body of the suit. There are three more tiny holes, one just off to the right of my spine and one on either side at the bottom of my ribcage.

Quick access to vital organs.

I wonder what kind of force my body is going to undergo inside the robot? Is it very likely that my heart will stop? Is that why there are holes in my suit? So someone can shock me or stick me if something goes wrong?

Gabe laces up sturdy, thick soled boots. With every movement, he becomes more the soldier I met back in the apartment, less the easy-going farmer who whistles and talks to plants.

I wonder what his life would be like if the water hadn't run out, if the cities hadn't flooded, if he didn't have to make these runs. Would he have seen

combat? Would he be a student, cramming for a test in the small hours of morning? Would he be married, working a blue collar job? Who would I have been?

I slip on my boots, a calf high pair with flexible soles and tight ankles. Where did these outfits come from? Has Mary had them since she left whatever base or school she trained on? Gabe stretches his shoulders into his holster. I belt one around my waist.

Gabe hands me a scratched metal Thermos, slings a backpack over his shoulder, and tosses an identical one to me. He waits at the door for me. I look to Mary's cot. Empty. The sheets are pulled taught, hospital corners and all. Gabe opens the door to the gray before dawn.

The air is thick and clean, the grass beaded with moisture. Everything feels ready, poised on the edge of waking, as if a current hums under the ground and in the trees, ready to spark to life. In the distance, I see the body of the silo. The roof is gone.

I break into a run, leaving Gabe behind me. I follow the path through the grasses. The same path I've walked in every dream and idle thought since that first night. I place my hand against the scanner on the silo door, the door drops into the ground, and I step inside to find my horse.

Mary, dwarfed by the robot's massive frame, is waiting for me. She has on the same jeans and oxford shirt that she normally wears.

"Am I ready now?" I ask.

"She'll decide," Mary says.

I reach out to the machine's shin, and this time, something ignites. There is a sound, quieter than a typical engine and more electronic, like the static scatter and low hum when a television first turns on. I know that sound, I can feel it in my spine. That sound means mobile suit, not robot, and somewhere in my mind, I can feel the difference, the sense of wearing this machine, not simply piloting it.

A hatch in the center of the suit opens, and a cord, with a metal foothold drops down to me. I step into the foothold, wrap my hands around the cord. Instantly, the cord retracts and carries me upward. Just as I can see inside the hatch, the cord stops.

There is a seat with a high back and molded saddle. In essence, it's more like straddling a motorcycle seat than sitting in a chair. There are great padded straps that form a harness and some sort of plastic gloves suspended near the seat. There is no keyboard, no joystick, no button inside. Every surface is a video monitor.

I grip the floor of the hatch, push off from the cord and spring into the space. The movement feels eerily familiar. I land in a neat crouch inside the tight cockpit. I settle into the seat, the hatch closes, and for a moment, everything is dark.

I could get out right now. I could run. Or I could take this suit and leave them. Would the old me have taken the advantage and tried to make it on her own? No. I can't. We're in this together.

Mary appears on the large screen in front of me. I can see that in the upper right corner of the screen, a section of the monitor is devoted to a rear camera.

Mary has on a tiny headset.

“You ready?” she asks.

I can hear her voice through the collar of my suit.

“Okay, there should be four white electrodes hanging off of the seat,” she says.

I reach down between my oddly suspended knees and feel a thin cord. I snake the electrode up to me, peel off the sticker backing, and press it to the tiny show of flesh above my heart. I do the same with the other three electrodes.

“Nervous?” Mary asks.

I can hear the galloping rhythm of my pulse on her monitor. I breathe in deep, through my nose, the warm air filling my lungs, then let it out slowly, pulling my diaphragm tight to squeeze out every particle of air.

I slip my arms into the plastic sleeves. They snap free of their restraints. The material covers up to my knuckles, with a slit for my thumb. In each palm there is a button. There is a thicker band of plastic around my wrist, above and below my elbow, and where my shoulder joins my torso. I turn my wrist. The suit responds, and I see the arm skirt the edge of the front monitor.

The floor drops out, and my legs slip through loose rings of plastic. They tighten at my ankles, knees, and thighs. I force myself to relax, to stay focused. My body is tingling and warm, it knows what to do. I know how this machine will respond. But I don't want the old me to do this run. I fight down that empty quiet

in my mind, that place of instinct and reaction. We can do this together, she and I. Our body holds the practice, the sense of balance and weight of a suit, but this space is new. She never sat in this space, I'm certain of it. Something in me is hesitant, cautious, an icy spot just behind the ribcage that I can hold on to, that I won't surrender to that pleasant ache of ruthless violence.

"Deuce is ready," Gabe says.

"Pyrrha is go," Mary says.

I feel us lift up, the platform floor of the silo twisting and rising out. I close both fists, press the delicate buttons suspended in my palms, and my suit, Pyrrha, survivor of the flood, lifts up.

Chapter 7

I hover over the tall grasses. The workshop and the vegetable patch are soft smears of color in the distance. The world inside the suit is still, so quiet that my thoughts feel tangible, as if I am rearranging a space behind my eyes where every piece has but one place. I can taste the crisp, sweet new plastic of the suit's cockpit in the air. My stomach feels high up in my body, floating under my heart, and my limbs feel warm and weightless, almost contrary to gravity. I didn't imagine that it would feel pleasant here.

Gabe's suit, a darker metal with a boxier feel to it, lifts up out of the silo. The suit seems to float, an image incongruous with its bulk and material. Gabe laughs, and it echoes from the tiny speakers in my collar. In the suit, his body is perfect, uninhibited by his injury.

"So whaddya think?" he asks.

I don't have words for it. In this suit, everything about me feels right for the first time. I had all the right movements, all the instincts and will, but I'm not physically imposing. I never did any of those things, those violent perfect motions, with my own body. I feel the warmth of relief splash through me. I always fought inside a suit. I'm sure of it. My violence wasn't against another human being directly. The fluidity, the quiet inside of me, the warmth in my muscles, the weightless sense of certainty – all those things were memories from inside of a suit. This is where I belong.

"I know, pretty amazing, right?" he says. "Why don't you give her a little push?"

I squeeze the buttons in my palms, tighten my knees against the seat, and lean forward. With the pressure of my thighs and calves against the platform beneath my seat, I urge Pyrrha like a horse. The trees in the distance rush closer in the monitors. Deucalion zigs into my right side monitor, overtakes me, and speeds forward. Pressure from its feet ripples the air.

“We’re on a little scavenger hunt today,” Gabe says.

“Scavenger hunt?”

“We’re taking a base.”

“A base?”

“Aria,” he says.

The name shudders in my mind. The card in the shirt pocket at the apartment said Aria and a string of numbers. What were the numbers?

Gabe presses forward, disappears into the horizon. The sun is rising, pink and orange slashes peeking out from behind dark shapes in the distance. Part of me wants to race him, to prove my prowess with this incredible machine. The other part doesn’t want to go forward.

The waking world seems so perfect, so crisp and sharp, in spite of all that’s been destroyed. I don’t want to shatter that perfection, don’t want to answer the part of me that knows that this moment, this suit is the reason for everything about me. I was brought to the garden because of it, woke up in that apartment because of it, was trained to fight because of it. It didn’t have to be me.

I flex Pyrrha’s grand arm, stretch it up and over my head. She is a machine, an unthinking thing. And I pilot her, I wear her and she does as I do. But

she was not made for me. I was made, molded into the self that I lost somewhere in the flood, for her. How much is my life worth, if I am nothing but the host for her to use, to give of my body so that she can unleash her great strength? Do all soldiers feel this way about their weapons?

Gabe's voice crackles through my jaw bone. The sound is muffled, as if he were speaking from inside of me.

"You're going to miss all the fun."

Maybe for Gabe, Deucalion isn't a terrifying master or a parasite sapping his strength. Deucalion is Gabe's mobility, his grace and balance. But what is Pyrrha for me?

For hours we've flown over water. The world is a field of gray, broken by the occasional roof or rise of pavement, like the back of an alligator peeking from a swamp. We're heading for a newly made island, what once was a part of the continent, a bastion for the military elite. On that small patch of ground, the government has secured the best, the brightest, and the strongest. They have supplies, water, power. Everyone else has been left to fend for his self.

It's as if the world has gone back in time. Bandits prowl the territory and terrorize the tiny makeshift communities struggling in the wilderness. And vigilantes, cowboys on steel horses, defend them. Mary and Gabe are both the cowboy type, rough and certain. But am I?

My suit shudders, and one monitor goes dark. I've been hit. I hear Gabe growl, and Deucalion rams into a shorter stockier suit. Gabe wrenches the right

arm of the suit free in a shower of sparks and warped metal. The back of the opposing suit springs free, and a person in a green flight suit tumbles to the ground. An escape hatch. I don't imagine Pyrrha or Deucalion have such measures. Gabe flings the abandoned suit into the water.

"They know we're here," he says. "You might want to kick it in the ass."

Deucalion charges forward. I press all my weight into Pyrrha, my knees digging into the padded seat between them. We cross a rocky shoreline and into the airspace of a massive encampment. Men and women scramble into lithe aircraft and those same small mobile suits.

"Get inside," Gabe says.

For a moment, I don't move. I watch Gabe fight, his movements so different from the urgings of my muscles. He tears up the machines, mechanical limbs and wings busted and battered, ripped free and heaved into the surrounding waters. Gabe doesn't pursue the fleeing pilots. He maneuvers Deucalion's massive frame around the tents.

It is better that he fight. He is precise and merciful. I do not think I could be so careful. In order to be powerful, I would have to give in to the old me, and I do not doubt that she was ruthless.

I fly in close to the one permanent structure on the island, a brick building with bars over every window and door. I slap at the building with Pyrrha's hand. A wall opens for me.

I need to get out of my suit, get into the building, take whatever I can, and get back out before the troops overrun Gabe. I don't even know how to get out of

the cockpit. Pyrrha came to life the minute I touched her. No. That's not entirely true. She didn't function until I plugged myself in.

I yank the electrodes from my torso, and Pyrrha's monitors go dim. The hatch to the cockpit opens. I spring out, no neat rope to help me, and I land in a crouch. The landing is an ache I feel up both shins, but the pain is temporary. Adrenaline kicks in, and I run. The din of Gabe's battle is deafening, a series of percussive impacts, shrieks of metal being wrenched out of shape, and hisses of electricity being violently disconnected.

I reach the hole I opened for myself and run into a darkened building. Of all the things that could have made this run more difficult, why did it have to be darkness? I press against the wall, draw my gun, and close my eyes. I don't hear the echoes of movement. Everyone must be outside.

I open my eyes. The red exit signs still illuminate the corridor. The air smells of bleach and starch and the roiling sweetness of decay. I'm in a medical wing. I step forward slowly, gun pointed at the floor. Gabe said water and medical supplies were the priority. I make my way down the long line of empty rooms. At the cross section of two hallways, I stick close to the wall, peek out. There is a desk and a machine dispensing crushed ice. Crushed ice. Most people don't even have potable water.

I venture further into the hallway, looking for a supply closet. I notice the glint of red light on glass, two large metal doors with reinforced windows. Beside the doors is a hand scanner. I kneel down below the scanner and look for the

hairsbreadth space where the wires feed into the wall. If I can get at the wires, I can open the doors. I slip off my backpack and pull out a flat head screwdriver.

Fingertips press down on either side of the back of my neck. I knew things were going too smoothly.

“Keep your hands right where they are,” a man’s voice whispers in my ear.

I don’t say anything. Gabe can hear him through the suit’s collar.

The fingertips guide me to stand. I keep my back straight, but allow for a little bend in my knees. Just in case. If I can get a good kick off of the wall, I can knock him over.

I see the man’s reflection in the glass of the doors. Short dirty blonde hair, blue eyes, thin nose, high cheekbones – the man from the newspaper. He meets my gaze in the glass. Something passes behind his eyes, an argument I don’t understand, and he releases me.

“They wouldn’t tell me where you’d gone,” he says.

I don’t know who “they” refers to, but the tone of his voice is distinctly un-militaristic. His cheeks have a tinge of red, and his posture has gone soft, shoulders slouched. I mimic the pose. Rounded shoulders in a woman always indicate safety to a man.

He brushes his fingertips over my cheek, catches hold of the collar of my suit. It’s all I can do to keep my breathing steady. He feels the capsule of the microphone. His eyes narrow, their pale blue darkened by emotion. He pinches,

hard, and the microphone in the collar emits a pop and squeak. I close my eyes, tighten the muscles of my stomach for the blow I know is coming.

He releases my collar. I hear a blip and then a series of tones, the same tune as the door to the silo at the garden. I open my eyes.

The man picks up my backpack. He opens the glass doors of the supply closet and clears a shelf straight into the bag.

“What else do you need?” he asks.

I don't have an answer for him. All I have are questions. Is he one of us? Deep undercover here? Or do I know him from before all of this?

A radio at his waist crackles.

“Ryan, confirm hospital sweep,” a woman's voice comes softly through the static.

The man presses a button, banishing the rolling pops and buzz. In the silence, he stares at me.

Then, he answers, “Clear, they've escaped.”

He clears two more shelves, zips the bag, and hands it back to me. I sling the bag over my shoulder. I don't know how to react.

“Thank you,” I say.

He grips my shoulder, pushes me off. I run back towards the daylight streaming through the hole in the bricks.

“Don't blow your cover,” he calls.

His footsteps, booming thuds in the empty hallway, muffle and vanish into the dark. I pull my gun, take a deep breath, and jump out of the hole. I sprint to Pyrrha. Her metal body remains unscathed.

I touch her shin, the hatch opens, and I'm inside, taping electrodes to my body. I hear the comforting electronic exhale of her life. The hatch shuts, monitors flip on, and Gabe's voice booms through the suit.

"The fuck have you been?"

The words "Emergency Connection Activated" flash across the top of the main monitor.

"I'm fine," I say.

"Fine? You're not fine. You could've been dead."

"But I'm not."

Gabe goes quiet. His soldier takes over, acknowledges that we can fight back at the garden. The emergency message recedes. Deucalion roars into the horizon. The force of his takeoff flips a Jeep. I lean into Pyrrha, push her the way from which we came. We fly in silence.

My encounter with the soldier, the man with the harsh, pale eyes, repeats in my mind. He knew me. He knew the old me, anyway, and not just as a comrade in arms. There was none of the respect for my authority that colors Gabe's posture and normal speech. He was very familiar. Perhaps he was my lover. But his hold on me, when he caught me, was weak. Surely I outranked him.

But just which side is he on? He had on the uniform, but he helped me. He let me go. So he must be with us. Why else would he let me go? Would personal feelings have such pull if I were his enemy? Something isn't right.

He said that I shouldn't blow my cover. If I was working undercover before I woke up at the apartment, then who am I really? Whose side am I on?

Chapter 8

At the garden, Gabe drops Deucalion in the midst of the grasses. From the monitors inside of Pyrrha, I can see him tumble, clutching his right shoulder, out of the hatch and disappear into the cover of vegetation. Mary's face breaks the picture. She has on the same small headset, but the blue rings under her eyes have lessened.

"Set her down here. I'll get everyone stowed away," she says.

I pull the electrodes free of my skin, shimmy out of the plastic sleeves and pant legs that coordinate our movements. My breathing feels shallow, as if every inhalation gathers less air. The hatch opens, and Mary, her foot resting in the hold on Pyrrha's retractable cord ladder, peers inside.

"She looks good, just a few scratches to buff out," Mary says.

My eyes feel heavy as the adrenaline ebbs. I don't want to talk about today, don't want to think about anything at all. I just want to get out of this sweat soaked flight suit.

I hold the backpack out to Mary. She unzips it, peeks inside.

"Quite a haul," she says. "Any trouble?"

Do I tell her about the man? While I imagine that Mary would know who he is, assuming that he is of any importance to the government at all, I don't want her to know what he said to me. My past, whatever it is, didn't interfere with the run.

"Things went smoothly," I say.

Mary returns the pack and offers me the foothold to get down. She pops open panels and yanks the used cords free. My legs feel boneless on the slow trip to the ground.

Gabe, in jeans and sneakers, is waiting in front of the workshop. His jaw is set tight. But is it in anger or in pain? He tosses me the keys to the Jeep.

“Get changed,” he says. “We’re not done yet.”

I feel myself sag. I clench my fist around the keys, and I can feel the muscles in my back pull into alignment. With his arm hurt, Gabe can’t finish this alone. Whatever needs to be done, if he can keep going, then so can I.

I slip past Gabe and into the workshop, drop the backpack and the keys on my cot, and peel off the flight suit. I brush my hair, dip a washcloth into the rinse water for the dishes, and wipe off my face. The cool is a comfort to my burning cheeks. I slip the wet washcloth around the back of my neck and focus on the water droplets running down my spine. The world feels colder as the slick trails evaporate. I spray my stolen perfume into my hair, and twist it into a messy bun. The blossom of warmth and sweetness in the air hangs around me, and I feel more human for its presence.

I slip on jeans, a well worn t-shirt from a vacation spot I have never been to, and the canvas tennis shoes. Just as I tie the laces to my right shoe, there is a knock at the door.

“Almost ready,” I say.

The door opens. Gabe leans in the doorframe. His expression is new to me, neither tightly controlled soldier nor awkward young man. His face is very still, jaw muscles taught, making his cheekbones more prominent. His eyes are bright, more clearly focused on me than usual.

“Is your arm all right?” I ask.

He nods, and his gaze never rises back up from his feet.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

I want to say, “You were scared when I didn’t answer, weren’t you?”

Instead, I press the backpack full of supplies into his vision. He slings the pack over his uninjured shoulder, turns, and walks out. Apparently, I don’t remember how to talk to people either.

I put my gun holster back on, grab the keys, and join Gabe.

I drive us out through the golf course and onto a two lane gravel road.

Gabe speaks solely in directions. The noon sunlight is warm. The sky only hints at blue. I follow the gravel road to a fork with a Catholic church and a drugstore on opposite corners. The stained glass windows of the church are all broken except for a baptismal scene. Weeds pop up through the sidewalk cracks.

Making a left at the fork takes us onto a service road. The storefronts are boarded up, neon signs dangling or busted. The patio tables at a café are upside down, the umbrellas splintered. The road leads to onramp. A stretch of highway remains above water.

I follow the highway east, passing car lots littered with parts and broken glass, abandoned shopping malls, and vandalized signs. The emptiness is jarring. No other cars join us or pass us in the oncoming lanes. I open up the Jeep, press the gas pedal all the way to the floor, and watch her devour the pavement.

Gabe leans back in his seat, closes his eyes. I don't know if he doesn't want to see the way I drive or if he trusts me.

Skyscrapers bloom on the horizon. I slow down. There may be people here.

"Turn off at the next exit," Gabe says.

The exit takes us underneath a bridge and circles us around so that we are going west in the city. Boarded up windows and graffiti aren't as surprising here. Bold sprays of color decorate the sturdy red bricks of old factories and the greening metal of walkways.

Gabe opens his eyes, sits up, and guides me through the grid work of the city. We pass a domed courthouse and parks, with fountains and stone benches, in between office buildings. Gabe instructs me to stop at a fast food restaurant. I park the Jeep across three spaces.

Backpack in hand, Gabe goes inside. I follow behind him. Inside, people sleep in booths. Families huddle around tables. Some lay on the floor. The sharp, almost sweet, yeasty smell of humanity chokes the air. There are blankets, clothes, and flashlights at every table.

This is what Gabe meant by the camps in the city. People holed up in every business with a generator. And in a restaurant, the processed, frozen foods might hold out for a while. This is just surviving.

Gabe gives out bandages, pain killers, vitamins, and anti-bacterial soaps and gels and salves. He empties the pack. The way he favors his left arm makes clear the pain in his right, but he keeps nothing for himself.

I stand with my back against the glass door. How many other groups are in this city? How many families sleeping on floors? Why isn't anyone else helping? Has the government forgotten these people? Or are they insignificant? Just more draw on thin supplies?

I'm going to do everything I can. I can't remember what happened in that apartment. I don't know where I learned to fight, to fly, to think instead of panic, and for it all to come as natural as breathing. I may have once belonged to the military of this land. I may have been prepared to betray these people. But that's not who I am now. No more wavering, I'm with these people, with Gabe, with Mary. Whoever that makes my enemy, it doesn't matter.

My hesitations, my fears, and my suffering are insignificant. There is no use in feeling sorry for myself for what I can't remember. No point to worrying about who I was or what I was supposed to do. The old me, whatever kind of woman she may have been, whatever her motivations, she is gone. I don't want to be the kind of person who questions her choices or who has to wonder what her actions say about her. And I don't want to look back on this moment with regret, or worse, with shame.

Pyrrha is mine now, and this is who I am. It's not enough to just survive, to look out only for myself. I will do whatever is necessary. I guess that makes me a cowboy too. Not a soldier, not a spy. A vigilante.