

## Toxic Freefall

Chloe Parikh had never been to Las Vegas. She'd never been skydiving. Hell, she'd never been outdoors, surrounded by the Tox75 poison with only a thin layer of plastic between her and near-instant death. Today was a lot of firsts.

Her heart rate picked up as the clock counted down to the moment the door would open and she'd launch into the sky. Adrenaline made her blood pump and her head rush with a thrill like she'd never experienced in staid Oklahoma City. She was going to like living in Vegas.

No. She was going to *love* it.

Her tandem master slapped her on the butt as he headed for the closed door of the airplane. "You'll be fine, sweet-cheeks."

She stiffened, ready to snap at him. He'd never lay a hand on one of the eight rich kids paying top dollar for this jump. Yeah, she was an entertainer and this trip was paid for by her new employer, but she wasn't *that* kind of entertainer.

One look at his amused grin and she bit back the words. Jeremiah, her favorite "brother" and fellow military orphan at the city home she'd grown up in had always said, "Better than fear, anger is." He might've missed Yoda's point, but pissing her off had been his remedy whenever she got scared, and damn if it hadn't worked every time. The memory softened her ire.

Maybe Butt Slap the Tandem Man was trying to calm her nerves. Since she was about to have a near-death experience with his genitals strapped to her ass, she decided to go with that theory. No snappy retort then, just an exaggerated eye roll and the pointy finger of warning.

He laughed, friendly-like, before securing his face shield. "Suit up. Time to fly."

Fear made her palms sweat as she secured her helmet to her vac suit. Once again, she checked the seals running down her front and at her collar. Less than a second of exposure and the only one who could save her was Jesus. With her history she wasn't too sure he'd bother.

She checked the seals a third time.

The crew chief unlocked the cabin door, and her tension ratcheted up, fear competing with exhilaration. Here was another almost-first, one that felt more fundamental than the others, more primal and significant, even if few Americans ever did experience it. She hadn't been outside in twenty years, since she was three and the air was clean—or at least clean-ish. She barely remembered the feeling.

"Everyone secure?" the crew chief called. Tandem Man rechecked her helmet and suit, gave a thumbs up, and hooked the first line of his harness to hers.

The crew chief released the pressure gauge, counted to three, and opened the door to the blazing sunrise over Las Vegas. The engine's hum became a storm of noise. Although the wind didn't whip into the cabin like Chloe had expected, the toxic air was still present, mingling with theirs, testing each vac suit for entry. But nobody keeled over, and her shoulders relaxed.

A whistling whine put her back on alert. It was probably normal, nothing to worry about. But Tandem Man motioned forward—hastily? Was he nervous, too? He shouldn't be nervous—and Chloe ambled towards the hatch, each step a clumsy misfire with the man at her back.

The whistling got louder. The closest jumper to the door yanked the straps of his partner's harness, tightening them in careless hurry then flung himself out backward in a fashion not approved by the morning's flying class. A lone jumper launched next, head first.

There *was* something to worry about.

"Move!" TandemMan yelled as he practically scooped Chloe up.

The whistling stopped.

Light burst outside the door. The cabin shook, and a deafening boom reverberated. She and TandemMan pitched forward, slamming headfirst into the hull and bouncing to the deck. The impact knocked the wind out of her, and she gasped for air, thanking the heavens the helmet had saved her brains.

She tried to stand, but TandemMan wasn't making it easy. "Are you all right?" She shouted over the chaos. "What should I do?"

He scrambled drunkenly—he must've rammed his head a good one—and together they lurched to standing.

"Count to twenty and pull." He grabbed her hand and clasped it at his back. "Here."

"Why are you telling me this?" she yelled, praying it was highly unnecessary information but keeping a death grip on the parachute's ripcord anyway.

He stumbled them toward the hatch, and she craned her neck around to see him.

The blood drained from her face and her skin went cold. "Oh my God. Your mask..." *is cracked*. If poisoned air wasn't seeping in now, it would be any moment. He needed a seal immediately, or he was a dead man. If he wasn't already.

He pitched them out the door.

Another missile exploded behind the plane, and she screamed in fear and frustration. A shower of sparks sizzled around them as they dove head first away from the dying aircraft.

She started counting.

Wind attacked her with more freezing force than she'd expected as they plummeted toward the bonanza of color and texture that was her new home. "Eighteen, seventeen..."

The flopping weight of her tandem master drifted them horizontally. He wasn't moving, at least not under his own control. "Thirteen, twelve..."

The plane, away to her left now, barreled toward the mountains as more jumpers flung themselves out in a colorful trail of human confetti. Panic dug at her insides as she fell with a possibly dead man on her back and explosives in the air. "Seven, six..."

War was all she had ever known—her parents had died in it and Jeremiah had enlisted to join it—but there had to be a better way to live than lethal air and sporadic bombings. Maybe she'd ditch performing and marry Eli, her rich ex, if he promised to take her to the Montana Rockies where there were still clean, cold villages high in the mountains.

No, Eli was a non-negotiable. She could steal a boat and smuggle herself to South America, land of clear skies and infinite beauty. Land of plenty and promise. Her grandparents were from India; she could pass for Latino. Or she could in the movies, anyway.

"One." She pulled the ripcord and the parachute blasted open, yanking their free-fall to a lazy ride. But now she had to do something more complicated than count. They were supposed to end up on The Strip where suited camera crews were waiting to film her arrival. That sort of precision landing might be fine for an expert, but Chloe had a bad feeling her parachute was about to impale itself on the Vegas version of the Eiffel Tower. Sure, she'd paid attention in class but had assumed TandemMan would be doing the tricky parts.

She sucked in a cold breath, steeling herself for the next few minutes. She'd assumed wrong. Alive or dead—God, somehow may he be alive—TandemMan was out for the landing. Whatever happened next was up to her.

A jerk on the toggles turned them away from Paris and toward the Bellagio. A minute later her feet barely crested a railing. TandemMan's hooked then released. They skimmed the water in front of the erupting fountain to the bombastic notes of Wagner's "Flight of the Valkyries."

She yanked again on the toggles, trying to do the flaring thing the instructors had talked about. They slowed, and for a moment Chloe walked on water as the fountain cascaded and sang.

The parachute deflated, and they sank. Hoping she correctly remembered which side had the release and which had the spare chute, she pulled on the right of TandemMan's harness. To her relief, the parachute floated away.

Stretching down, the balls of her feet touched the sloped fountain floor. Half sliding, half-dog-paddling, she strained to keep her partner's head above water not that it would do any good, but she wasn't ready to accept that yet—as she made a grueling path toward the bridge and the horde of cameras and HazMat suits swarming the street.

*Welcome to Las Vegas.*

## Genetic Jackpot

The next half hour passed in a blur of wash-jets and air circulators, doctor's questions and prodding fingers. At the end of it all, Chloe was dry, sipping the best coffee she'd ever had, and sitting alone in a surprisingly zen office in the depths of Caesar's Palace. The pings and vocal hubbub of the casino barely sounded over the hum of the corner fan.

A perky blonde in pearls and a baby blue sweater set entered and placed Chloe's skydiving helmet on the desk. The sight of the plastic that had almost been her shroud made Chloe want to retch. Had she craved danger? Yeah, maybe she had. Maybe she still did. But while she'd known a lot of death, she'd never free fallen with it strapped to her back.

Poor guy. He'd saved her life.

The blonde, however, was smiling, her tired eyes bright with a contained excitement Chloe didn't understand. A name tag clipped to her cardigan read:

*Welcome to GenFriends!*

*I'm Sara Sorensen.*

*Case Worker*

"How's your head?" Sara asked, mustering sympathy into her expression.

Chloe felt above her ear where a nasty bruise had formed. "A little tender, but nothing that'll stop me from reporting tomorrow." No way she'd miss work and give Vegas any excuse to revoke her visa and send her back to OKC before her probationary year was up. She'd worked her ass off to get her application, interviews, and sponsorship together; visas to work in entertainment were harder to acquire than most. She would not lose that precious card over a bump on her head. One year of success and she could make the move permanent.

"May I ask how you injured it?"

It was possible Sara was just being friendly, but the over-eagerness in her tone gave Chloe goose bumps. "Uh...when the first missile went off, while I was still on the plane, we pitched into the hull. That's when..." She couldn't remember her tandem master's name, and that made her sad. She cleared her throat to stop the moisture in her eyes from forming tears. *Be tough. Stay in Vegas.* "That's when my partner's helmet cracked. He pitched us out right after. I didn't mean to let him..." She couldn't form her lips around the word, "die."

Sara waved a hand dismissively, setting Chloe's teeth on edge. "That's not what I'm concerned about. You never hit your head again? You never hit it once you got past HazMat?"

"Why is that important?"

"Just try to remember, please."

*Fine.* Chloe thought back to the confusion of the line, the chaos of so many people injured and trying to get through detox before they could get the medical help they needed. She'd left TandemMan with rescue workers and found a quiet place to wait. Her injuries hadn't been bad. She hadn't needed to rush inside. "There was some jostling but not enough to bruise me through a helmet."

Sara nodded, her out-of-place smile growing. "I just wanted to make that clear in your head. Sometimes people create fictional memories in the face of new information. So keep what you told me in mind. You didn't hit your head after you entered the safety zone. Which means you jumped from the plane with this." She turned the helmet around.

A hairline crack at the top became a small crevice that spanned from above the ear to the locking mechanism at the throat.

Chloe stared at it. Blinked. Stared again as her throat tightened in fear. "That's my helmet that I went outside in? With the big hole in it?"

"Welcome to the genetic jackpot, Miss Parikh."

Her throat went from tight to closing up. "That's not...that's not..."

Sara's hands went up in a gesture she probably thought was comforting. "You're probably aware that a very small percentage of the population is immune to Tox75."

"Oh my God. I should be dead." *Big breaths. Biiiiig breaths.*

"But you're not! Which is a wonderful thing." Sara grabbed Chloe's hands and pulled her forward, forcing her to look into manic blue eyes. "You are the future, Miss Parikh. The solution. The more people we have who are immune, the faster we can rebuild a real society."

"What does that mean?" Were they going to send her outside as a builder or something? Hell no. Good of the community be damned; she was an artist, not a toxic construction worker. Was that even a real job? Probably. "I'm not an engineer."

"No, but you're a woman of child-bearing age. And, should you partner with another immune, your superior genetics will be passed on to your offspring."

The flailing panic squeezed to a still, cold lump in her stomach. "Excuse me?"

"Las Vegas is prepared to offer you a permanent visa as soon as you sign up to be an employee of GenFriends." Sara slid a paper across the desk.

That got Chloe's attention. "A permanent visa?" She'd never go back to OKC and Eli's increasingly deranged attempts at proposing. She could live in the entertainment capital of North America, with its abundant space and interesting people for the rest of her life.

Wait, *GenFriends*. That stood for *Genetics*? Head spinning, she flipped the paper around and scanned it. "I already have a job."

"Yes, you're a performer. The wonderful thing about working for GenFriends is even though we'll technically be your employer, we won't stop you from performing—or whatever else you love to do—or even take up much of your time. Plus, in addition to the permanent visa we'll get you an elevated room class and extra food stamps. Our program is quite well funded."

Chloe read the page again, trying to make sense of it. "My job would be to have babies. Seriously?" The children would be raised in care, unless she wanted to do it herself for which she'd receive generous food, lodging, education, and supply credits.

As a military orphan, Chloe'd grown up in city dorms, which was a relatively cushy existence. She'd read state care hadn't been so great before Tox Day, but there was nothing like a population wipe to make people care about the next generation. GenFriends, though, would grant children in their care even better resource allocation than Chloe'd had—certainly better

opportunities than she could ever provide when she decided to have a family. But still...“This is a breeding program. You want me to be breeding stock.”

“Carrying children is an inconvenience, but one your body is designed to do. And unlike most people, you’ll be well compensated for it. After four children you can leave with a modest severance package or stay and continue the good life. It’s a nice deal.” Her voice turned wry. “I’d take it.”

*Inconvenience?* From what Chloe had seen, pregnancy was more like life-disrupting torture. “Couldn’t I, I don’t know, donate eggs or something?”

Sara’s bland smile turned amused. “The resources and skills needed—from surgical egg extraction to culturing the zygote to storage to implantation in a surrogate—are practically unattainable. But in Vegas we have room to spare. With the extravagance of the old casinos, we have some of the best indoor gardens and livestock in the country. Providing you with a higher quality of life is a simple thing compared to farming out your eggs.” She shrugged. “Also, we’ve tried, and it doesn’t work, not with the same success rate. If you partner with another immune and carry the child to term with at least some exposure to the toxin during pregnancy, there is a one hundred percent success rate for immune-born children. Take away one of those factors, and the chances decrease. Take away multiple factors, and they decrease significantly. The risk isn’t worth the expense when we can simply pay you to do what comes naturally.”

Chloe nodded, her face warming in embarrassment. “But the men. I’d have to...”

Sara’s expression turned mystified, and Chloe squirmed in her seat, feeling more ridiculous with every word she couldn’t seem to get out.

Finally Sara’s jaw popped open. “Are you worried about sex?”

“With strangers? Yes. Isn’t everybody?”

The crazy woman waved her hand again, like this, too, was nothing. “Oh, the men have all passed psych evals and are verified disease free. We run them through a grooming and social skills program, as well as a thorough curriculum on sexual conduct designed by one of the top psychologists in Vegas. You’ll wish every man had it. We even organize dates beforehand if that helps ease you into it. And, of course, you get to select which man from our roster gets the,” she gave a little cough, “honor. Women run this program. Your needs come first for us.”

She sounded so dismissive Chloe felt like a prude for thinking of sex as more than a biological function. But she wasn’t a prude. This woman’s attitude was not normal. Was it? “But I might never have met him before that night. It would be like a one night stand.”

Sara pursed her lips and shuffled through the papers in front of her. “Oh.” The word sounded like a condemnation. “You’re from Oklahoma City. Fornication is illegal there, isn’t it?”

“Population control. We’re not like Vegas with all the casinos to build from. We’re crammed into a small area while they re-fit skyscrapers for livestock and crops or research centers. We’re one of the country’s top toxicology research hubs, and that takes precedence over dorm space.” There were also entire skyscraper levels reserved for the wealthy, like her ex Eli. But the inequities of class wouldn’t be any different here in Vegas.

“Mmhm. Goodness, are you a virgin?” She looked horrified.

Chloe’s skin went from warm to flaming. “No. I’ve, uh, fornicated. Everybody ignores that law. But I had a relationship with both men beforehand.”

“Is it a religious thing? A certain number of dates before—”

“No. Not that. What religion has a number of dates rule?” Damn, she’d known Vegas culture would be different; she’d been looking forward to it. Before this, anyway.

“Well, if you’re *really* uncomfortable, we can try insemination.” Sarah smiled. “All that requires is dirty magazines and a clean syringe.”

“Nobody else opts for that?”

Sara shook her head, still looking bemused. “Immunes are a small group. In Vegas there are twenty-one women—twenty-two with you—and thirteen men. Before the year’s over you’ll likely know everyone in it. Dining out and falling into bed is, for everyone else anyway, more appealing than heading to the clinic for a sterilized cup and a speculum.”

Chloe dropped her head into her hand. In OKC she’d been a wild girl. Apparently here she was a goody-two-shoes. She was an artist. She was supposed to be a free spirit, not a stick in the mud.

Sara’s professional smile dropped into friendly understanding as she leaned back in her seat, took a deep breath, and shifted tactics. “I don’t mean to be insensitive. You’ve had a rough morning, and I can come on a little strong sometimes. But that’s because I really believe in this program.” With a self-deprecating chuckle, she pointed to the file again. “I noticed you were not quite four on Tox Day. Do you know how you survived?”

Okay, subject change. Chloe rattled off her answer to society’s most common question. “It was hot outside, so my mom decided to take the OKC underground to get back to our car.” Yet another time when she should’ve died. A fluke, a random decision based on humidity, of all things, and she’d been in the lucky eleven percent who’d survived the attacks.

No, wait. She was immune. She would’ve watched as her mother and everyone around her collapsed, the reengineered anthrax spores invading their lungs and producing a toxin that collapsed their chests and infected their lymphatic nodes until every person died in choking agony around her. Three-year-old Chloe would’ve smelled the blood they coughed up and heard the underground doors slam and seal, leaving her trapped outside with the bodies.

A chill ran up her neck, and she shivered.

“Twenty years ago, I was eleven,” Sara said. “I’m alive because my mother married a drug dealer in Vegas.”

The morbid vision of what might’ve been on that hot Oklahoma afternoon was replaced by the image of little Sara in her blue twinset, loose curls falling from her imperfect bun as she clamped her hands around calla lilies and stood between a redneck couple covered in uninspired tattoos. *One of these things is not like the other...*

“I was so mad because I hated him, her boyfriend. But while New York, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles and, for whatever reason, Austin were hit, I was watching Elvis bind my mom to her meth cook in wedded bliss. The casinos sealed off—just as a precaution—and we waited for the threat to pass. But it only took four hours for Tox75 to reach Vegas. Everything outside the seals—human, animal, plant, *everything*—crumpled, shriveled, bled, wept, died. I watched a silent massacre through the windows of the cheapest room in the Flamingo.”

Sara reached out, her calm morphing to a vibrating intensity as she took Chloe’s hands. “But I remember what it was like before. As a species, we can’t continue to function on life-support indefinitely, Miss Parikh. And maybe we can learn to clean it up, but they can just tox us again. It’s a new world. We need people that can thrive in the new air and rebuild. Human beings are meant to be outside. A lot of companies are trying to build stronger drugs, stronger doors, stronger weapons to enact revenge. We’re building stronger people.”

It sounded so noble when Sara put it that way with passion in her eyes and conviction in her voice. But they were still asking her to *breed*. To be a mother to children—at least four of them. Four children who could play in the sunshine.

Chloe had a vague memory of the feel of heat and light on her skin. The wind blowing. The touch of a raindrop. It dawned on her, beautiful and scary and amazing all at the same time. “I can go outside.”

Sara’s expression turned sad. “Yes. You can. We have hatches you can use. I’ll show you where they are. It’s not like before when there were, you know, plants, but I’d still give anything to go out there.” She frowned. “Then again, not much of anything grew in Vegas even before. I guess here it’s not that different at all.”

Chloe wiped a hand across her face. “This is all too much.”

“I understand it must be. Sign the job transfer then take the afternoon off. Get your room. Explore the hotel. Vegas is still the most gaudy city in America. We’ll need you to report to GenFriends tomorrow—unless you want to keep the job at the theater, at which point you can check in with us this afternoon so you can make your call time tomorrow. We’ll need several hours for the physical and to go over the program and paperwork. After that, it’s a cake job.” She grinned. “And we do have cake in the office. It’s chocolate. You can have a slice.”

Chocolate? Melty, sweet, bitter and perfect. How long had it been since she’d had that rare treat? Three birthdays. Jeremiah had managed to acquire a bar, and they’d split it, savoring every dark and gooey bite. Her mouth watered at the memory.

Chloe stared at the paper and weighed her options. Babies for science? It seemed wrong, and she so wasn’t ready to be a mother. On the other hand, she needed that permanent visa—it was what she’d been working so hard to earn. GenFriends seemed on the up and up, and the human race would be better off with more people immune to Tox75. Hell, America would be better off with more people in general. Vegas wasn’t the only city with a birth incentive program.

So should she sign?

\*Whether or not she signs is up to you!\*