



God of War (Wastelanders MC #3)

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Category: Dark Erotica

Description: ARES

She was too young once. Now she's all grown up.

Too bad she's the Sheriff's daughter — totally off-limits.

But this girl hides a dark secret. She thinks she's broken. Ruined.

She doesn't know what it means to be broken.

She says I can save her.

Maybe I can, but that doesn't mean it won't hurt.

DELANEY

I once thought he was my only friend —

a good man hidden behind tattoos and leather.

Now I'm eighteen and I know better: Ares isn't a hero, he's a monster.

But that's just what I need.

Ares will never want me, not after what I'm asking him to do.

"I want you to kill my father."

Total Pages (Source): 29

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:23 am

1

Delaney

Eleven Years Old

In my street, there's an old lady that lives in a yellow house. I watch her sometimes from my front stoop while I'm waiting for Mama to come home from work. Daddy doesn't like me being alone in the house; says I'll 'get into things'. I hear them fighting about it sometimes, because Mama thinks it's safer for me to be alone indoors than outside on the front stoop where 'anything can happen,' but I don't mind. I get to watch the old lady.

She does a lot of gardening. Pulling out weeds and planting flowers. Bright yellow flowers — just like the paint on her house. She seems nice, the old lady. She waves to me sometimes, when she catches me watching, but I don't wave back. Daddy says I shouldn't talk to strangers and I guess waving is pretty much the same as talking in a way.

Mama loses her job at the salon when summer starts, so instead of waiting for her after school, she drives me around to people's houses with her. She does hair for ladies in their living rooms and it's fun to see the way she wraps their hair up in big curlers.

She's real pregnant now — says my little sister is almost as big as a watermelon — so I have to help her work. I lay out sheets of plastic on the carpet to catch the hair she cuts off. She says I'm the best assistant she's ever had.

It's not until the end of summer when I realize I haven't seen the old lady in a while. I start middle school and even though I have a key to the house now, I sit out on the stoop and eat the other half of my PB&J sandwich from lunch. The weeds in the old lady's yard are taller and the flowers have started to get all brown and crunchy.

That night, I ask Mama where the old lady is and she says she doesn't know, but that old people sometimes go away like that.

"Probably dead," my Daddy says from in front of the TV. Mama hushes him, but he just grumbles and takes another swig from his can. "Probably the trash that did it, too."

I frown. Trash? How can trash kill you?

Then I remember something my friend Nancy told me. Nancy had a neighbor that disappeared, just like the old lady, and when someone finally knocked on his door to check on him, they found the entire house filled with bags of trash — old newspapers and broken baby toys and things picked up from the street. A big pile of it had fallen and crushed Nancy's neighbor to death.

A scared feeling twists around in my stomach. What if something like that happened to the old lady?

I can't sleep. I just keep thinking about the old lady lying on the floor, buried beneath a pile of stuff. What if she's still alive, but she can't call out for help?

I wriggle out of bed and slip on my purple Ugg boots. It's not cold out yet, but my regular slippers don't have the hard bottoms like these ones do and I don't want to cut my feet outside.

My bedroom window slides open easily and I climb out and drop onto the soft grass

without making a single sound. It feels wrong to be outside so late, all by myself. Mama's words echo in my head — anything could happen .

The streetlights have turned the night a muddy orange. Fear prickles down my spine. It feels like a warm finger beneath my shirt, skimming along my skin, and I shudder.

But I'm here. I've made it to the old lady's yard. The windows are dark, but if she were lying there, under all those piles of trash, she wouldn't be able to get up and flip the lights on anyway.

"I can do this," I tell myself out loud. My hands curl into fists at my sides and then I'm off, darting across her yard and around the side of the house. I don't want to knock, just in case she's okay. If the old lady answers the door all alive and normal, she might tell Mama that I snuck out of the house. Daddy might find out.

I have to jump to see into the first window as my eyes barely make it past the sill. I jump a few more times and each time my brain captures a little bit more of the room. It's dark and still. There are no piles of newspapers or bulging bags of garbage like Nancy said was in her neighbor's house.

But there's also no old lady.

I have to get inside.

I shuffle around one of the dying flower beds and head for the backyard. There's more light here, dim and hard to see by, and as I round the corner of the house, I see that there's a single bulb hanging over the back door.

The back door is painted black. So weird, considering the rest of the house is so bright and cheery.

I blink.

No, the door isn't black.

It's open.

The blackness is just the yawning emptiness where the closed door should be.

Something heavy slams down on my shoulder and clamps down hard. I'm spun around like a top and my Ugg boots skid in the dead grass.

“The fuck you think you're doing?”

My scream freezes in my throat. My heart is squeezed so tight I think it might pop out of my chest if I even try to move.

A man. A man has his hand on my shoulder. I can't see his face, not really. But that's because I'm trying to figure out his shirt — it has pictures on it, blobs of dark color that don't make sense, that seem to shift with his every breath.

Oh.

It's his skin. He has tattoos, like Nancy's dad. And Nancy's dad is mean .

What if this man is as mean as Nancy's dad? What if he's worse?

The terrible thought loosens the scream in my throat and I let it out. Only it comes out more like a strangled squeak. I force my feet to move and my whole body lurches back. For a second, I don't think he's going to let me go, but then he does and I stumble back, landing on my butt in a pool of light.

The man doesn't move, lurking in the shadow of the house. And then he steps toward me.

"Don't," I whimper.

He freezes. Like he just got paralyzed too.

Whatever happened, whatever I did to make him stop, I take it. I scramble to my feet, dirt catching under my nails, and then I'm off and running — not past him, but through the backyard and around the other side of the house.

I burst into the front yard and sprint across the street, not looking back until I make it to my house. Once I'm there, I dare a glance over my shoulder, just to make sure he's not following me.

He's not.

But he is watching.

In the old lady's front yard, the man stands beneath the streetlight. He's barefoot, wearing only a pair of jeans. I see his face now, without the gloom of the shadow, and my steps falter.

He's younger than I thought. Not like Nancy's dad at all. But that's all I give myself time to notice before I skid around the corner of my house and haul myself back through my bedroom window.

My heart doesn't slow down until my window is locked and I've dragged my comforter into my closet, closing the door behind me.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:23 am

2

Delaney

Eleven Years Old

The bus drops me off at the end of the street. Nancy waves to me out the window and I wave back before I shrug on my backpack and turn to walk home. The old lady's house is about halfway down the block and I could avoid it, walk back down the bus route and take the long way home.

But even though my gut twists at the thought of passing that house, I know I have to do it. I have to see if he's real, or if I was just imagining him. Dreaming him. Like a nightmare.

My shoulder twinges.

That's stupid. I know the difference between real and imagined, and the hand-shaped mark on my shoulder is definitely real. It still feels hot to the touch, more like a burn than a bruise.

He's dangerous, I tell myself as my feet start towards home. He probably did something to the old lady. He was probably going to do the same thing to me.

I keep my eyes down, focusing on my sneakers as they slap against the pavement. I hear something up ahead — the loud clanking noise of metal on metal — and I already know it's coming from the old lady's house.

Don't look. Don't look. Don't look.

The noise stops.

“Hey.”

I keep walking.

“Hey, kid!”

I stop. My palms are sweaty against the straps of my backpack. My eyes stay glued to my shoes.

“Fine. Whatever.”

That metal noise starts up again. I clench my eyes shut for a long moment, then take a deep breath. When I look up and across the street, I'm surprised. I don't know what I expected to see exactly. Something scarier than... this.

The angry man sits cross-legged in his driveway beside a big, black motorbike. He has tools spread out all around him, and his brow is furrowed in concentration as he twists something on the bike with a wrench-kinda-thing.

He doesn't look angry now. He doesn't even really look like a man. He's not as old as Daddy, or Nancy's dad, or even my cousin Tyler, who just had a baby and is always complaining that he doesn't have time for video games anymore.

There's a tug in my belly, like a little thread coiling up, and it pulls me off the pavement and across the street. I stop at the end of the driveway.

The man's eyes flick to me, then back to the bike. He puts down the wrench and

wipes a hand over his face, leaving a grease mark on his forehead. His hair, a messy sort of dirty blond, falls back into place, covering the dark smudge.

He grabs another tool, but before he touches the bike, he stretches out one long leg and hisses. He's wearing jeans and a t-shirt this time, both black, and the tattoos on his arms shine with sweat. The tattoos are of weird things — words and symbols, a boat anchor, a bird with a knife in its beak.

“I hate that,” I say suddenly.

The guy's eyes flick up to me. I'm too far away to tell what color they are. For some reason, I really want to know. I edge a little closer.

“What?” he replies, still frowning. I think he's annoyed. But he talked to me first. He yelled at me from across the street.

“When my leg or arm or whatever falls asleep,” I say. “And then you get pins and needles.”

He grunts, which is a pretty rude reply. He drops the tool and starts thumping at his leg with a closed fist, like he's trying to wake it up.

“Got a fix for me, kid?”

I shrug. “Cut it off.”

The harsh slash of his mouth cracks, widening into a grin. “Yeah. Sure.”

The guy props his leg up, then heaves himself to standing. He bounces a couple of times on the balls of his feet, jiggling around the blood. He's tall. Even taller than in the dark.

He doesn't come any closer. Instead, he walks to the front porch and picks up a bottle of something. Soda.

For some reason, I'm glad it's not beer.

"Did I hurt you?"

My eyes snap from the bottle hovering at his lips.

"Huh?"

He walks back to me and for a second I think he's going to keep coming until he's right in front of me — looming over me like he did in the shadows — but he doesn't. He stops at the bike and takes another drink.

"Last night," he says. He wipes his mouth with the back of his tattooed hand. "You just surprised me. I thought you were trying to break in or some shit."

I shake my head and scuff the toe of my sneaker on the ground. "It's fine. It doesn't hurt anymore."

Lie. It still burns.

"So I did hurt you?" His eyebrows shoot up. "Fuck."

I've never heard an adult swear so much not on accident and he's cursed twice. My cheeks heat like I'm going to get in trouble, just for being within earshot.

"Where's the old lady?" I ask, desperate to change the subject.

"You were looking for her, huh?"

He angles his body away from me and tosses the empty soda bottle into the air. Right before I think it's going to smash on the pavement, he kicks out with his boot and rockets the thing into the street. The bottle is plastic; I hear it ping off the curb and it skitters into the gutter.

“You shouldn't litter.”

“You shouldn't sneak around people's houses.”

Part of me wants to shrink away. I hear the angry edge to his voice and usually that's followed by other stuff — stuff that hurts and leaves bruises. But today I'm surprisingly brave. Maybe it's because he's already marked me. He could have done a lot worse to me last night, but he didn't.

I survived.

I purse my lips and prop my hands on my hips.

“This isn't your house. It's hers.”

“S'mine, now,” he says with a shrug. “She gave it to me.”

“No, she didn't.”

He huffs and arcs one of his sandy eyebrows. “I'm not playing this game with you, kid. Get outta here. Go home before someone calls the cops.”

My stomach lurches. He wouldn't call the cops on me. Would he? I stumble back and I think my face must go pale or something, because he frowns like he's worried about me.

I go back across the street. My front door is so close. Just one more house down. I can see the driveway from here and it's empty — both Mama and Daddy are gone, even though Mama still doesn't have a day job yet.

I feel that tug again, the one deep in my belly, and it forces me to turn back to the guy at the old lady's house.

He's still watching me, hands planted on his hips.

I have to know. I don't know why... I just have to.

“Is she dead?”

A few seconds pass. The guy looks around, up and down the street, and then he jogs over to me. I stumble back, onto Mrs. Ullmer's front grass (even though she yells at everyone who walks on it).

“Shit,” the guy mumbles, almost to himself, and he takes a big step back. He bends down on one knee. His frown is even deeper. Why the heck is he so worried?

“She's not dead, kid,” he says. “She moved to a retirement home down south. She's my grandma.”

“Oh.”

Retirement home. Yeah. That makes sense. More sense than her lying dead under a stack of old newspapers.

“What's your name? She never said she had a little friend.”

“She doesn't,” I reply sharply, a bit offended at being called little. “I don't talk to

strangers.”

“We’re not strangers?” He looks like he’s trying not to laugh.

“I... This is different,” I say with a sigh. “I had to make sure.”

“That she wasn’t dead.”

“Right.”

I’ve been out here too long. Someone should be home soon. I want to get inside. Away from the old lady’s house. Away from him.

He cocks his head to the side. “What’s your name?”

I clamp my lips shut.

“S’cool. You don’t have to tell me,” he says, shaking his head. His hair flops in front of his eyes and he pushes it back.

If he didn’t have all those tattoos, he could be in magazines. Nancy has a poster in her locker of a bunch of guys with surfboards at the beach. I can only glance at it before I feel my cheeks get too hot. It’s so embarrassing . Why would she want to see a bunch of shirtless guys every time she opens her locker? And why am I even thinking about that right now?

“I was just going to tell my grandma about you when I call her. Tell her someone misses her.”

“Oh.” I kick at the pavement. It feels rude now, not to tell him my name. And I kinda wouldn’t mind finding out how his grandma is doing. If she’s planted another garden

at her retirement home. It probably wouldn't be as nice as this one was.

"Delaney," I say finally.

"Hi, Delaney. My name's Airy."

I scrunch up my nose. That's a name?

"Airy?" I ask, trying not to laugh. "Like... the air?"

He laughs. It's the kind of laugh that's bright and warm. Not mean and sharp, like the way Daddy laughs. Or some of the kids at school.

The guy — Airy, I guess? — digs in his back pocket. He pulls out a marker and motions with his fingers. I don't know why, but I hold out my arm to him.

Strong fingers wrap around my wrist and hold my arm steady. He bites off the cap of the marker and writes in heavy block letters on my arm: A R E S .

"Oh," I say, surprised. I pull my arm back and run my fingers alongside the letters, careful not to smudge them. He puts the cap back on the pen. "I've never heard that name before."

"Google it," he says as he stands. "It's interesting stuff."

He waves with two fingers, like he's saluting or something, and smiles.

"See ya round, Delaney."

He's back on his side of the street before I think to speak.

“Bye, Ares.”

I go home, feeling weirdly lighter. I tell myself that I feel happy that the old lady isn't dead, but I also kind of think I feel like this because of him.

Ares.

The first thing I do when I get home is change into a long sleeved shirt so Mama won't see the marker on my arm and make me wash it off. I lie on my bed and stare at his name on my arm for a long time, running my fingers over the now-dry ink.

My skin hums.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:23 am

3

Ares

Twenty Years Old

The tequila hits me a few blocks from home. I pull my bike into Gran's drive — my drive — and it takes me a couple tries to get the kickstand down without falling on my ass. Gran's voice is in my head, reading me the riot act, as I stumble onto the porch and let myself in.

I've never driven drunk in my life (and have no plans to again), but when I left the party at the Wastelander compound, I honestly thought I was fine. The buzz had long worn off from the weed and the shots I'd had earlier in the night. That swig of tequila as I walked out, however?

Yeah, I've never been one to say no to a bad idea.

I flip on the lights in the kitchen and chug a few glasses of water until the pounding in my head eases a little.

Should've stayed , I think to myself.

Not all Wastelanders have permanent rooms at the compound, mostly just the officers, but there are plenty available for guys who just need to crash... or who want a little space for their own private party. As a prospect, club pussy isn't the easiest to come by. They make you work for it.

Rev, one of the other guys around my age who got patched in with me, told me that they use it as an incentive: stay loyal to the club, do what they ask of you, and all this warm, wet, delicious pussy could be yours.

Hey, it fucking worked on me.

So why am I here? At home, palming my hard-as-fuck dick, instead of nailing Lulu or Jody or Nadine to the fucking wall back at the compound?

My eye catches the scrap of paper by the phone and my booze-clouded brain reminds me why I decided to be an idiot and leave my own initiation party.

The kid.

I want to be home, to be awake and sober to hopefully catch her on her way somewhere in the morning. She rides her little purple bike up and down the street most Sundays, her mom poking her head out the front door to check on her every so often. It's sweet, and I never thought I would be a guy who cared about sweet.

I fold the scrap of paper over in my fingers, then stick it in my pocket for safekeeping. It's the number and address of Gran's retirement home — along with Gran's name, because I don't think Delaney actually knows it.

When I called Gran to tell her about Delaney, she just gave this sad little sigh.

"That girl," she mused. "A sad little thing. I feel so badly for her — stuck in that house, with that man and her poor mouse of a mother."

Gran told me Delaney's father was with the pigs, a deputy with his sights set on Sheriff, and was kind of an asshole. Not that it surprised me. I'd had my own share of asshole father figures in my life.

After all that, I'm standing in my kitchen, wobbling on my feet with tequila burning through my veins, because I need to be up bright and early to give a little girl my grandmother's fucking phone number.

Maybe it'll re-balance the scales. One good thing to make up for the shit I've done for my new brothers — deliver drugs and tail people and put my fist through some poor fuck's face.

I flip off the kitchen light, shuck off my boots and pull off my shirt, dropping it in the hallway as I stumble to my bedroom.

Bed. Bed sounds good right about now.

I'm halfway there when I hear it.

Tap tap tap.

I freeze. My ears strain against the quiet, wondering if I'd just imagined it.

Tap tap tap .

My nerves suddenly on edge, I stalk to the front door and whip it open, ready to fight whatever dumb fuck thought it was a good idea to play ding-dong-ditch on a member of the Wastelanders.

Instead, Delaney screams and stumbles back so far she tips off the porch and lands on her scrawny little ass.

“What the— What the fuck, Delaney?” I say, forcing my voice into a low hiss.

“Oww... S-sorry.”

I sigh. Shaking my head, it only takes me a couple steps before I'm towering over her. I grab her outstretched hand and pull her to her feet.

"Don't be sorry," I grumble, feeling bad for yelling at her. "The hell are you doing here?"

I cast a quick glance around the darkened street. The last thing I need is for somebody to look out their window and see me, a shirtless, tattooed biker, looming over a little girl in the middle of the night.

"I need to... to talk to you."

When I look down at her, I notice that she's not meeting my eyes. In fact, her shoulders are curled in, and her face is hidden by long, tangled brown hair. She looks fucking creepy. Hunched over in the dark, haunting me like one of those Japanese horror movie ghosts.

"It's important," she whispers.

I shake my head. I'm too drunk for this right now. I turn around, stomp back up the porch and grab the door. I'm about to tell her to get lost when I feel something brush by beneath my arm. Next thing I know, she's inside my house, clutching a worn little book to her chest and looking around the front hall with big eyes.

"Fuck, Delaney," I growl. "You need to leave."

"Please, Airy," she says, using the mispronunciation of my club name that made me laugh. Now it just makes me grit my teeth. "Just... give me a couple minutes. I swear, I'll leave straight after."

I know I should kick her out. I'm tempted to throw her over my shoulder and toss her

out that way, if I could do it without her screaming up a storm.

But I swing the door closed, like a fucking idiot.

This is not good. Not. Good.

Delaney nods once, then seems to notice that she's actually inside my house. I realize we're standing in the dark, so I quickly flick on the lights, illuminating the narrow hallway and the small living room, still dressed up with knitted blankets and cat figurines like Gran still lives here.

Delaney slips further into the living room and trails her fingers along the little porcelain cats on the table beside the sofa.

"I didn't expect it to be like this."

"Like what?"

She shrugs, then giggles. "It's like my Grandma's house."

When she turns to me, she's smiling. I think it might be the first time I've seen her smile — her big buck teeth taking up most of her little mouth, like she hasn't grown to fit them yet. But that's all of her — knobbly knees and bony elbows.

I take a deep breath and fold my arms across my chest. "You need to leave, kid. I mean it."

"But I need to talk to you."

"We can talk tomorrow, in the day time and not inside my house."

Her mouth twists into a frown. She looks down, her fingers digging into the cover of the ragged little book she's got. As I watch, I see her fingernails dig in so hard they leave little indents in the thick cardboard.

Plop.

One little tear hits the book cover. She hastily wipes her face, as if she's surprised by the tear as well, and hides behind her curtain of hair once again.

"Okay. I... I'm sorry," she says finally. "I'll go."

Fuck.

She moves past me, toward the front door, and I almost let her go. I know I should let her go.

"You want some hot cocoa or something?"

Delaney stops, her back to me, but she lifts her head.

"Do you have marshmallows?" she asks.

I scoop my shirt off the floor and slip it on as the milk simmers. Delaney sits at the kitchen table, swinging her bare feet. As I fix up the mugs with cocoa and sugar, I think about my mom, back before the drugs used her up and spit her out and I came to live with Gran.

"My mom used to do this," I say suddenly. Delaney stops swinging her legs and cocks her head at me. "Make me hot cocoa when I couldn't sleep."

“Why couldn’t you sleep?”

I pour in the milk, give it a stir and then place Delaney’s mug in front of her. Taking my own, I stay standing, leaning against the counter across the kitchen.

I shrug. “Nightmares, I guess. Kid stuff.”

All I know is that it made me feel better. Maybe that’s why I’m doing this right now, because I made her cry and now I need to make Delaney feel better. Because Gran feels bad for her too.

She stares into her mug. Studies it.

“No marshmallows, sorry,” I say, cracking a smile. She smiles back, small and sad.

“That’s okay.”

I should’ve had coffee instead. After the adrenaline spike of finding Delaney on my doorstep, the warm pull of tequila is back, making me feel queasy and not-quite-right. Like I’m watching myself from behind a hazy pane of glass.

“Okay, well... Drink up and then you gotta go. I can’t... It’s not good that you’re here, Delaney.”

“Why not?”

She takes a sip, then wipes off her milk moustache with the back of her hand. Fuck, she’s just a kid and I don’t want to mess that up. I don’t want to get into all the reasons why the world is twisted and dark and a little girl should not be in a strange man’s house in the middle of the night.

“Doesn’t matter,” I snap. “Tell me what you need to say, then you gotta go.”

She frowns again, but this time she looks annoyed, her brow folded in the middle with an angry crease.

“I got this out from the library.”

The book. She pushes it across the formica tabletop and I have to step closer to see it.

I study the cover. “Gods of Ancient Greece.”

“Mm-hmm,” she nods enthusiastically. Grabbing the book back, she opens to a page she’s marked with a pink bookmark. “It says here that Ares is the God of War. He’s super strong and fierce. He went into battle all the time and has this spear, and a helmet, see?”

I shake my head. “Delaney, that’s interesting and all, but is this really why you knocked on my door in the middle of the night? To tell me you looked up my name? You know I’m not really an ancient Greek god, right?”

She rolls her eyes like I’m the idiot. “Of course not. But it made me think.”

“Think about what?”

She doesn’t say anything for a long time. I put my mug in the sink and sit down at the table across from her. My hands itch to reach out, to touch her, and bring her back from wherever it is she went.

“If you’re named after him, the God of War,” she says finally, her voice not more than a whisper, “Maybe that means you are like him.”

“Delaney... I don’t... I don’t understand, kid.”

She meets my eyes. Hers are green, sparkling bright with tears.

“Maybe you can kill like him too.”

It feels like she’s slapped me in the face.

“You... You want me to kill somebody.”

She nods, like I’ve asked her a question and not just stated it outright. I don’t know why I feel like this... ashamed, disappointed, angry. Maybe it’s because, just for a few moments, I had thought of Delaney like I think of Gran — somebody who can see beyond the tattoos and the club shit and all my screw-ups.

But no. Delaney sees me like the rest of the world sees me. A monster. Or a guy who’s capable of being one, anyway.

I suck in a breath.

“Sheriff’s Department! Open up!”

My heart jolts and I leap up, my chair clattering down behind me. Delaney gasps. She’s gone totally white and her eyes are huge and round in shock.

A heavy fist pounds on the door.

“I know you’re in there, Warner! Get out here or I break the door down!”

“Fuck! Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

This isn't happening. I shouldn't have let her in. I shouldn't have let her stay .

Equal parts terrified and enraged, I stalk around the table and grab her arm, hauling her little body to her feet.

“Go out the back,” I say, shoving her in the right direction. “Don't ever come back.”

“B-but—”

“ Now .” Delaney flinches back like I've hit her, but does as I say, scurrying down the hall and to the back door. Once I hear the screen door squeal closed, I move.

Deputy Jackson, Delaney's father, is on the front porch and there's a patrol car on my fucking lawn. Jackson's not in uniform, just wearing jeans and a t-shirt, but he's got his badge clipped to his belt and his gun in his hand like he's ready to use it.

“Where's my fucking kid?” he growls when I step outside.

I let my face go blank. “What kid?”

There are two uniformed deputies by the car, eyeing the scene, but I stay focused on Jackson.

“Someone called in,” he says. “Heard a scream, looked out their window and saw my fucking kid going into your house, you piece of shit.”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” I reply. I step back, ready to swing the door closed. “Unless you've got a warrant—”

Deputy Jackson lurches forward. He grabs my throat and shoves me hard, propelling me into the house. I hit the wall, my head cracking hard against the plaster.

“I’ve got probable cause, you sick fuck,” he spits in my face. He looks past me.
“Delaney? You in here?”

“She’s not here. Told you.”

God, I want to hit him. Badly. My hands curl into fists at my sides, but I force them to relax.

The other two deputies walk in and Deputy Jackson jerks his head at them.

“Check the house.”

They follow orders and stride past me. I’m sure Jackson can feel my pulse pounding under his hand as he tightens his grip around my throat. His eyes narrow on mine.

“I knew you were scum. But I was willing to let it slide, some biker trash living so close to me and my family. Live and let live, they say.” He leans in close. I can smell his sour breath. “But now you’ve touched what’s mine, Warner, and I don’t take kindly to another man touching what’s mine.”

A chill ripples down my spine.

This isn’t right. None of this is right.

“She’s. Not. Here,” I grind out.

“Jackson?”

One of the deputies leans into the hallway. Deputy Jackson looks over and I see his eyes darken. His fingers flex against my throat.

“You’re under arrest, you piece of shit,” he says as he turns me face first against the wall. My hands are dragged roughly behind my back and I feel the painful bite of the cuffs as he ratchets them closed.

With my cheek pressed against the wall, I’m facing the other deputy. The one leaning in from the kitchen.

There’s something bright in the deputy’s hand. Pink.

It’s Delaney’s bookmark, her fucking initials bright as day in sparkly bubble letters.

Fuck.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:23 am

4

Delaney

Eighteen Years Old

There's a kink in my back. I groan, muscles spasming up my spine, as I sit up in bed. Eighteen years old and I've already ruined my body with manual labor.

Ruined.

The thought makes me snort ruefully. Del Jackson's plenty ruined already, like I needed another reason for the list.

I lift my arms and gently twist from side-to-side, stretching out that sore spot that's been bothering me. The culprit could be one of two things: those super-sized bags of fertilizer I was lugging the other day, or that night I spent trying to sleep on a park bench. That was fucking uncomfortable, to say the least.

The alarm on my phone trills and I reach over to silence it, wrenching my back in the process. I hiss in pain and collapse back onto my thin mattress. I can't afford to take a day off work, not even for this.

Lilly comes home in two weeks. That's fourteen days of cash I can still add to my hidden stash. I can only hope it will be enough to get us the hell out of here.

Suddenly, my bedroom door slams open. Fear clenches my heart. I hadn't bothered to

flip the deadbolt last night. He wasn't going to be home, so why would I?

But it's not him.

"Get the fuck out, Aaron," I grunt. I yank my blankets up to my chest, knowing he's already searching for the outline of my tits through my t-shirt.

Aaron Flores leans against the doorframe and smirks, his hands going to his thick utility belt. He always seems to be wearing his deputy uniform, like he thinks it gives him superpowers or something. I think it just makes him an even bigger asshole than he usually is.

"Mornin', Del," he drawls. "Heard your alarm and thought you might have slept through it. Wouldn't want you to be late for work."

"How kind of you. Now get the fuck out."

Aaron takes a step into my room and looks around. He taps one of the wind chimes hanging by my closed window. I usually find the noise comforting, but right now it grates on my nerves.

Deputy Aaron Flores is undeniably good looking. Smooth warm-brown skin, thick biceps and a charming too-white smile. But his heart is black as coal. Probably the reason Dad took such a shine to him when he joined the Sheriff's Department.

"Your old man thought you might need a ride to work," he says. "I'd love to give it to you."

He puts slimy emphasis on give it to you and I force myself not to shudder. My only comfort is that Aaron has always been a pest, but he's never actually tried anything.

He's never come in my room before either...

Taking a deep breath to steel myself against the twinge in my back, I swing off the mattress and stand. Aaron's glassy eyes immediately drop to my bare legs.

"When did you turn eighteen again, Del?"

"When did you break up with Isabelle, Aaron?"

Those dark eyes lift, locking with mine, and his lips curl in contempt, a snarling rage bubbling under the surface. He steps closer — so close that I can smell eggs on his breath, eggs his girlfriend probably cooked for him before he drove here.

"One of these days, your old man is going to get tired of you, Del, and when he does..."

His tongue snakes out to wet his lips. My insides shudder, shrivel, and die.

"Get. The Fuck. Out."

Thankfully, he does. At the door, he eyes my deadbolt and taps it knowingly with one finger.

"Cute," he says, that ugly, superior smirk making another appearance.

As soon as he steps into the hall, I dart forward and slam the door shut. Sliding the deadbolt home, I allow myself a deep breath.

"Two weeks," I mutter to myself. "Just two more weeks."

“What do you mean there’s nothing you can do? This is your store!”

Rodney’s mouth is twisted in sympathy. I know it’s not his fault, he’s always been decent to me, but still...

“I’m so sorry, Del,” he says, shaking his head. I watch his long silver braid waggle back and forth like the tail on a dog. “I wish there was something I could do.”

“There is. Don’t fire me.”

I’ve been working at the gas station for over a year. It had been my last resort. Nobody in town wanted to hire me and even though polite excuses had been thrown my way — no high school diploma, no job experience, no positions available — I knew Dad had something to do with it.

You’d think being the daughter of the town Sheriff would have been a plus on my resume, but it turns out that when your own father is more than happy to tell everyone what a screw up you are, it kind of tanks your reputation in the job market.

Mrs. O’Neill, who had been browsing the short aisles but really eavesdropping on our conversation, approaches the counter. She eyes me with not an ounce of sympathy. The old bat has heard the rumors — Hell, she probably helped Dad out by spreading a few of her own.

Delaney Jackson is a troublemaker, a shoplifter, a slut. Just like her mother, God Rest Her Soul.

“Fifteen on pump two please, Rod,” she says as she fishes her coin purse from the oversized sack she calls a handbag. “And a paper.”

The front page of the paper is the same story that’s been floating around town for a

week or so: Town hero, Sheriff Jackson, busts biker-run drug operation.

In reality, two just-turned-eighteen-year-old prospects from the local biker gang, the Wastelanders, were driving a car with expired registration. They were pulled over and the deputies found a couple bricks of cocaine in the car. Now they're both facing some huge prison sentence for trafficking. Technically, I guess they were trafficking the drugs, but it seems like overkill, going after two kids just trying to get by.

“Horrible, what’s happening in our town, isn’t it?” tuts Mrs. O’Neill. “Those bikers, they’re just scum. Sheriff Jackson should take out every single one of them.”

Rodney humphs in mild agreement, though I know he doesn’t mind the Wastelanders so much. They’re what keeps his business running — choosing to use his little gas station instead of the newer, more impressive one a few miles away.

Mrs. O’Neill takes her change and heads out, leaving the store empty. Rodney sighs and pops open the cash register again. He starts counting out bills into an envelope.

“You’re a hard worker, always have been, Del. But times are tough and we can’t afford to keep you on.”

“What if I do all the night shifts? That way, you never have to do them. You can be at home, with the kids, and with Stella. Wouldn’t that be great?”

The lines around Rodney’s mouth deepen. “I ain’t putting an eighteen year old girl on the night shift and you know it. It’s not safe.”

“Did my father have anything to do with this?”

“Sheriff Jackson? No, Del. It’s just about money.”

My shoulders sag. “Money. It’s always about money.”

Rodney slides the envelope across the front counter. “Your pay for the last two weeks. I’ve put a little extra in there. That’s all I can do.”

He offers me a small smile. I hesitate, then sigh and take the envelope, sliding it into my backpack. With nothing else to say, I give him a nod and turn to go. It only takes a few steps and I’m at the front door of the tiny little gas station store. This shitty place had been my only livelihood. My only way out.

“Maybe think about using some of that money to get out of town,” says Rodney. “Start fresh.”

I turn around and he’s watching me with this look on his face... Like he maybe knows more than he should. It twists my gut and I have to swallow hard before I answer.

“Good idea,” I reply, pasting on a fake smile. “I’ll think about it.”

I push outside, the buzzer above the door making my head rattle. It’s hot out and my skin warms with the summer sun as I make my way around the corner to where my bike is chained up.

Getting away. Escaping. It’s all I think about.

But I can’t. Not yet. Not until I know Lilly will be safe.

It doesn’t take me long to ride home. Dad’s at work, so his car is gone, and he sold Mama’s before we even put her in the ground. Aaron’s squad car is also absent —

thank God. What was he doing at the house, anyway? Dad must have let him in, or given him a key, but the why of it all is what makes me uneasy.

After pulling my bike around the side of the house, I return to the front and fumble for my keys in the side pocket of my backpack. My eyes drift to the front yard across the street and a few houses down.

The old lady's house.

That's still the way I think of it, even though I know it's not hers anymore. There's a dark oil stain in the driveway from where he parks, but that — and the way my bedroom windows rattle when he tears up the street on his bike — are the only signs he even still lives there.

I eye the garden beds in the front yard. The yellow blossoms are drooping a bit in the midday heat and I wonder if I should slip over there to water them, rather than wait until night like I usually do. It's Saturday, so he'll be at the Wastelander clubhouse tonight — I can take my time, with no fear of getting caught.

Satisfied with my decision, I go inside and hurry to my bedroom. The envelope of cash from Rodney is already in my hand, ready to be tucked away with the rest of it. How much is there now? Four thousand? Five? I don't know exactly how much I'll need, but I figure the more the better.

Then, something crunches under my sneakered feet, just inside my bedroom door.

I look down.

My heart drops.

Glass. Broken shards of colorful glass.

I start to shake, my whole body trembling in fear, as I inch forward, over the shattered pieces of my wind chimes. My room is completely, utterly, destroyed.

Clothes spill out of the broken dresser drawers, my mattress is half off the bed frame — stuffing popping out of the deep slash through it.

And then my eyes land on a flash of torn pink cardboard.

“No, no, no, no...”

I drop my backpack and dash forward, skidding on my knees as I claw for the box in the back of my closet. The old cardboard box of sanitary pads falls apart in my hands. All that’s left are the empty pink wrappers — the ones I used to wrap up my wads of cash. Dad’s a snoop and would happily search my room, but I knew he’d never look in there.

Aaron, on the other hand...

My money is gone. Everything I’ve saved, the only hope I had for me and Lilly getting away... It’s all gone.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:23 am

5

Delaney

By the time I make it to the station, I'm drenched in sweat. I'm too pissed off to lock up my bike, I just throw it down beside the front steps and storm inside. Cindy, the receptionist, looks up, but her smile drops as soon as she recognizes me.

"Your father is too busy for your antics today, Del," she says primly.

One of Dad's pastimes is moaning to his co-workers about what an awful kid I am: that I'm so dramatic, that I lie all the time, just like his damn ex-wife. Which is, disgustingly, what he calls Mama, as if she were off living it up on his alimony payments somewhere and not just plain old dead.

"Don't care," I snap at Cindy as I stride past her desk. "I need to see him."

She makes an annoying squeaking noise and gets up to chase after me, but I'm already breezing into Dad's office like I own the place.

It may seem brave, but I know that's not it. It's terrified, animal desperation, that's all. Like when a coyote is caught in a trap and gnaws its own leg off.

Two weeks. Two weeks until Lilly comes home and I have nothing.

"Sheriff, your daughter—"

“That’s fine, Cindy, you did your best,” grunts Dad, sending her off with a wave of his hand. She throws me a sharp look, then closes his office door behind her.

There are two windows in Dad’s office. One with a view of the parking lot, and the other beside the door, overlooking the desks of the deputies. Right now, the blinds on the internal window are drawn, leaving me completely cut off from help.

As if any of these assholes would help me, anyway.

“What’chu want, Del?”

Dad leans back in his chair, stretching out his taut, muscular torso. Despite the years of booze, Dad’s never let himself go — not like a lot of other men his age. He’s still objectively handsome, with tanned skin, salt-and-pepper hair and those wrinkles around his eyes that deepen when he smiles, as if he really means it. He’s the kind of guy women like Cindy or Mrs. O’Neill would drop their panties for in a heartbeat.

I fucking hate him.

“Where is it?”

“You’re going to have to be a bit more specific, kiddo. There’s a lot going on at work right now, what with getting those Wastelander boys off to lock-up. I’m a little preoccupied.”

I furiously unzip my backpack and pull out the raggedy old box of pads — now empty. I throw it down onto his desk. Dad raises one of his dark eyebrows.

“Ah, I see. That time of the month,” he says, unable to hold back his grin this time. “I’m glad you’re so comfortable sharing these things with me, Del. It only serves to make me a better father.”

“You son of a bitch—”

Dad’s office chair squeals as he surges to his feet. Before I can blink, think, or even breathe, he has a fistful of my hair. He yanks me down until I’m bent over his desk, my cheek squished into a stack of old post-it notes.

“You wanna re-think how you speak to me, Del,” he says coldly.

Anger radiates off him, making my body tremble in terror. This is the father I’ve known all my life; not the handsome, wholesome Sheriff Jackson, beloved by our town. My Trevor Jackson is a cruel, psychopathic bastard.

While she was alive, Mama kept the worst of him away from me. Sure, I got beat, but it wasn’t anything like what started after Mama passed away. I don’t blame her; she tried — God, I know she tried — but she just wasn’t strong enough to survive the complications from Lilly’s birth.

Then, with her gone, the upstanding Sheriff Jackson came for his eldest daughter.

“Now,” he continues, hissing through gritted teeth, “I asked Aaron to poke around for me. I’ve suspected you were up to something for awhile. But knowing you were squirrelling away your money? That hurts, baby girl.”

“What else was I supposed to do?” I manage to grit out. Dad chuckles as he grinds my head against the desk. Pain thrums in my skull, my vision blurring. It feels like my head is about to pop like a grape.

“Open a bank account like a normal person,” he says. “Or, Hell, you could always accept an allowance from me. That way, this pretty little head of yours wouldn’t be put to work at some shitty gas station.”

The awkward angle makes my back twinge like a motherfucker, the nerves screaming for relief. An allowance is something he's pushed for years, but I always knew what it really meant. It meant acceptance, approval, of what he does. I refuse. I've always refused.

“You were going to run from me.”

“N-no, I—”

“Shut up.”

Light glints off his shiny belt buckle. It's his favorite — a brass oval stamped with a running horse, mane streaming out behind it like it can't get away fast enough. It used to seem like that stupid buckle was as big as my face. Sometimes, like right now, it still does.

One of his big, meaty hands eases the buckle loose and my stomach clenches. I think I'm going to be sick.

“You don't run, baby girl. Without your mother, you and Lilly are all I have left of my family.”

There's a dull pop as he opens the button fly on his jeans.

“And a man needs his family.”

I see the dark tuft of his pubic hair and my stomach lurches again, bile rising.

This is happening. This is really fucking happening. He's never been so bold, not in his office, in the middle of the day. I'm going to puke on him. All over his desk and all over that fucking belt buckle.

“Sheriff?”

The sugary call is followed by a soft tap on the door. In a flash, I’m free and I jerk upright and stumble back from the desk. Dad sits casually down in his chair.

“Come in, Cindy.”

Cindy opens the door and leans against the doorframe, one hip popped like she’s a femme fatale and Dad’s the hero in some black-and-white detective movie.

“What’s up?”

Only a trained eye could see the subtle working of his hand beneath the desk, rearranging his disgusting hard-on and doing up his belt again.

“They need you up front. Prosecutor will be here soon for the evidence in the Wastelander bust.”

“Right, right. Thanks, Cin.”

He gives her a wink and she giggles, cheeks going red. She doesn’t even acknowledge me as she leaves. To her, I’m nothing.

Ruined.

Cindy leaves the door gaping open — thank God. Dad stands and eyes me carefully as he rounds his desk. I back up to the far wall, ready to make my escape.

“Why don’t you go home, Del? You’re looking a little flushed. I’ll be home later. We can finish up our conversation.”

Before I can flinch away, Dad gives my shoulder a squeeze and then he's gone.

I can breathe again.

I sag back against the wall and suck in a deep lungful of stale office air. My money is gone — everything except my last payment from Rodney, and there's no way in hell that's going to be enough to get me and Lilly away from him.

Desperation claws at my insides.

I look around Dad's office, my eyes falling on his desk. He's too smart to have left the money here. But I spot something else and a tiny kernel of an idea pops into my head.

A very bad idea.

A very, very bad idea... that just might work.

Before I can second guess myself, I dart to the desk and snatch up the ring of keys that Dad left behind. I know exactly which one I need so I slip it off the loop and tuck it into my pocket.

I hear distant voices but there's nobody around to see me as I slip out of his office and hurry down the hallway.

No need to check for cameras (I already know they're all for show), I stop at the right door and hesitate, my hand poised to turn the key in the lock.

This is a bad idea.

But it has to fucking work. It just has to.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:23 am

6

Ares

The regular Saturday night party is raging in the clubhouse bar. I can hear the noise from upstairs where I'm tucked away in my cramped little room.

“You okay, baby?”

The girl blinks up at me from between my knees. Her hand keeps working my cock and it feels good — really fucking good — but I'm still on edge. Distracted.

“Did I tell you to stop?”

She rolls her eyes and ducks her head again, taking my dick deep in her warm, wet mouth. I grope for the bottle of tequila and a growl rises in me when I realize it's empty. The girl whose name I can't remember (Addie? Annie?) thinks my groan over my empty bottle is for her and she eagerly sucks me harder, her cheeks hollowing out.

Fuck, I'm gonna have to go downstairs now, something I don't want to do. Wastelander parties are a good time, but Griff is pissed about our two prospects in lock-up, along with the simmering pot of shit brewing between the Wastelanders and our rivals, the Rolling Jackals, and I don't want to deal with him.

Or anyone, for that matter.

Tingling pressure builds inside me and I close my eyes, focusing on the feeling. This chick isn't getting me there on her own, so I tangle my fist in her hair and buck my hips until my cock jams down the back of her throat. She coughs around me, choking, and the feeling hums up my shaft and into my balls. It's the degradation, using her, that really gets me off, and luckily she's on board.

"Fuck... Gonna come," I grunt. "You're gonna swallow, right?"

She blinks away mascara-tears and nods.

My climax is sharp and unsatisfying, but the chick does as she's told and keeps sucking until I pull her off. She grins and wipes her mouth with the back of her hand.

"Can I use your bathroom?"

"Whatever. Don't touch my fucking toothbrush."

She stands and adjusts her mini skirt. A moment later, the bathroom door clicks shut.

As I tuck my softening dick away and zip up my jeans, I catch sight of my knuckles. Jagged white scars criss-cross the skin, a reminder of every punch thrown, every jaw shattered under my fists. I stretch out my hands and feel my joints pop.

Booze. That's what I need.

The brothers make space for me as I stride towards the long wooden bar that runs the length of the room. Even if they didn't know me by reputation, the officer patch on my cut tells them that I'm higher up the food chain than them, so they'd better stay the fuck out of my way.

“Hey, Ares. What can I getcha?”

Sadie’s a sweetheart. Nobody will ever hear me say that, but she is. Bright and bubbly, with a wicked smile, and an ass that looks amazing in those little cut-off shorts she always wears. If she wasn’t already claimed by Reaper, I would’ve considered making her mine.

Reaper, the guy who had the enforcer title before me, stepped back from the club for awhile to raise his kid niece, but now that she’s not so much a kid anymore (and dating one of the other brothers, I’ve heard), Griff took him back. Made us ‘co-enforcers’, like this is some after-school debate team instead of a fucking biker gang.

I’m... fine with it.

I think.

There’s a part of me that just wishes Reaper would take it all; the bullets, the blood, the pain. I think maybe I’ve had my fill. But I can’t walk away. I owe this club too much.

“Tequila,” I tell her. Sadie reaches for a shot glass and I shake my head. “The bottle’s fine.”

She just nods, but I see the little tic that sends her eyebrow arching up.

“You got something to say, Sadie?”

“Me? No,” she replies as she thunks the bottle onto the bar. I pop the top and take a swig, suddenly feeling calmer as the liquid burns a line of fire down my throat.

“Just that Bear’s had to put in a special order ‘cause of you.”

“I’m flattered.”

“You shouldn’t be.”

She props her elbows on the bar and leans forward. She probably doesn’t mean to give me an eyeful of her tits, but she does anyway.

“You okay, Ares?”

“I don’t need you to be my therapist. I only want two things from you, Sadie, and you already served me a fucking drink, so…”

I lift my eyebrows and she lurches back, her cheeks burning pink. I can tell I’ve flustered her. Made her uncomfortable.

“You’re lucky I know you’re not this much of an asshole when you’re sober, Ares, otherwise I’d get Reaper to kick your ass.”

“I’d like to see him try.”

I grin, but it’s forced. The neck of the bottle gripped in my hand, I turn away and lean against the bar top.

The guys are rowdy tonight, but there’s an undercurrent of something else that’s seeping in from all sides. It feels like a brewing storm. Like something’s coming.

Even being not-quite-sober, I scan the room for trouble. For brothers who might take their disagreements a little too far. Who might grab one of the girls a little too hard.

“Fuck Sheriff Jackson,” Razor shouts suddenly. The big bearded dude takes a long drag of his joint and passes it across the table. “Pulled over for expired registration?”

Fuck that. He knew those boys were Wastelanders — that's why he went after 'em."

His buddies grumble and nod in agreement.

"It's 'cause of the shit that went down with the Rolling Jackals," Razor continues. "Giving up our territory and our contacts. Jackson wants payback."

I set my bottle back on the bar with a thunk. The club is still dealing with the fallout from what went down a few months back — the kidnapping of Reaper's niece by our rivals, the Rolling Jackals. To get her back, Griff gave them some of our territory and our list of dirty cops. Sheriff Jackson may not have been on the list, but he should've been right at the top. Bastard is as dirty as they come, only instead of accepting Wastelander pay-offs, he tries every little trick in the book to take us down.

"You know how far Jackson will go for a little payback, don't you, Ares?"

I meet Razor's slimy grin with a snarl. In a flash, I pick up his friend's glass and slam it against Razor's head, shattering it and sending bloody chunks of glass spraying.

The room goes quiet. Everyone's watching me. Watching the carnage I cause without even trying. Razor wipes blood from his face. He wants to take a swing, I can see it in his dark eyes as he glares at me through the pain.

And then he looks away.

"Who wants a shot?" Bear yells into the quiet. The grizzled old bartender holds up a bottle of whiskey. The room explodes with cheers and then everything returns to normal.

I can't do this. I can't be here.

I turn to go, to head back to my room and shut all of this out.

But then I see her.

She's here .

I blink. Hard. Am I that drunk that even the mention of what Sheriff Jackson did to me can conjure her out of thin air? I wait for her to turn to vapor, to disappear like a ghost or a figment of my boozed-up brain — but she remains.

Real. She's real.

Delaney Jackson is here, and I wish to God she wasn't.

She stands just inside the front door, an old backpack slung over one shoulder. Her jeans are baggy, almost falling off her hips, and she's wearing a dark hoodie despite the heat.

It's not like I haven't seen her around town. She's always working at Rodney's gas station, or furiously pedalling her bike like she's got somewhere to be. I think she's the reason the yard at Gran's place isn't just a patch of weeds and dirt.

But none of that answers the question: what is she doing here ?

Like she's made up her mind about something, Delaney charges forward. She weaves through the crowd of leather-clad bikers, most of which don't pay her much attention. I don't think she sees me, or maybe she doesn't recognize me, because she brushes right by and approaches Rev. The lanky, black-haired biker blinks up at her, a bottle of beer in his hand. His tattooed throat bobs as he takes a long swallow, never taking his eyes off her.

“Who’s in charge around here?”

Rev wasn’t expecting that. He sputters his gulp of beer in surprise. Wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

“You wanna speak to a manager, honey? Ask us to keep the noise down?”

The guys around him laugh. Delaney’s eyes turn to steel. I’ve seen that look on her before, but she’s perfected it over the years.

She swings off her backpack and unzips it. “No,” she says casually. “I want to return something that belongs to you guys.”

Two hard blocks of plastic-wrapped white powder hit the table top.

Rev’s laughter dies. As does that of the guys around him. The chilled silence spreads until the entire bar is, once again, completely quiet. Only this time, it’s not because of me and my fucking temper. It’s because the Sheriff’s daughter just dumped our seized cocaine shipment right into our laps.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:23 am

7

Delaney

My heart feels like a sledgehammer against my ribs. Sweat beads on my forehead. I'm terrified, but the absolute last thing I can do is give that away. I'm pretty sure Wastelanders won't just kill an eighteen-year-old girl for kicks, but for breaking into their clubhouse? For dumping stolen police evidence in front of them?

Yeah, maybe they'd kill me for that.

Someone yells at the other bikers, all silently watching, to mind their own business and the bar jumps to life again, the noise slamming over me like a tidal wave. The biker I was talking to — Rev, it says on his vest — stands up and looks over my head.

I don't have to check to know who he's looking at. I spotted him as soon as I stepped inside.

Ares.

“Get her in the back, don't let her out of your sight,” says Rev.

A heavy hand lands on my shoulder. Instinctively, I jerk away.

“Don't touch me,” I snap.

Heavy boots stomp around me and then he's there — tall and muscular, new ink from the past seven years painting the exposed parts of his skin. His blond hair is sun-bleached, shorter than it used to be, and pushed back off his face so that I can see his eyes.

After all this time, I still feel the burn of them, like hot poker digging under my skin. Searing judgement and anger into me. His eyes are gray. I never knew it was possible for somebody to have gray eyes, as if the blue had been siphoned right out of them.

“Two options,” he growls. “You come quietly, or I drag you by the fucking hair.”

My knees quake. He wouldn't... Would he? Honestly, I can't be sure. At one point in my life, I thought Ares might be a safe harbor, somebody I could trust, but that was something concocted in the mind of a stupid kid.

I huff in resignation and Ares wraps his hand around my upper arm. He yanks me hard and I stumble alongside him. The sea of dangerous-looking men part for us, all avoiding eye contact, as Ares drags me deeper into the Wastelander compound.

Ares practically shoves me through a set of big double doors. This room feels important, despite not being very big. Bare bulbs hang from the ceiling, making the corners of the dark, wooden walls even darker. There's a long table that looks like it's carved from one thick piece of wood, and several chairs are placed around it. A flag hangs on the wall at the head of the table. It's the emblem for the Wastelanders, the same image I saw patched on every vest out there in the bar — a decaying skull and the criss-crossed lines of the symbol for toxic waste.

What have I gotten myself into?

Ares kicks the door closed with his boot, then rounds on me. Somehow he seems bigger and broader than he did the last time we were this close. How that's possible,

considering he was already huge to my puny little frame back then, I have no fucking idea.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” He spits the words from between clenched teeth.

“Returning your property. I thought you guys would be grateful.”

Ares’ eyes flash. His body eats up the floor between us with a single step. My hip hits the edge of the table and the sudden pain makes me yelp. Ares falters. Something strange flickers across his face, just for a second, and then that anger is back, vibrating the air around him.

God of War.

A memory flashes into my head. That stupid book I took out of the library. I stared at those pages for hours, re-reading every word long after the book was due back. There was an artist’s rendering too — Ares, Greek God of War, standing tall and proud, a spear in his massive hand, his face carved from fury as he looked down on the bodies of his enemies. The name is perfect for him.

“They’ll kill you,” he says finally. His voice is low and his warm breath ghosts over my face. Tequila. He’s been drinking tequila. He doesn’t seem drunk, but I know some men can hide it well.

A shiver rolls down my spine and I start to feel clammy in the hoodie I wore in the hopes that the extra layer would keep from me from being oogled by skeevy bikers.

Maybe I’ve misjudged everything. Maybe these men are the same as Dad. Worse, even.

I force myself to swallow past the lump in my throat. “I... I’m hoping they’ll be interested in what I have to say.”

“Then you’re dumber than I remember.”

Anger fizzes in my chest, pushing past the fear. Bitter words are about to fall off my tongue — And you’re a bigger asshole than I remember — But then the door crashes open and a troop of men file in. The little bubble we’ve been standing in bursts.

Ares steps away from me and takes a place against the wall, silently watchful. The other men take seats around the table, each moving to a particular chair as if it were assigned to them. I realize that they’re all wearing officer patches.

My eyes land on the man that takes the seat at the head of the table. He’s bald and barrel-chested, with a thick gray beard and a gold tooth that glints when he smiles.

And he’s smiling right at me.

“Well, little lady, seems we have ourselves a problem.”

I open my mouth to speak, but there’s a low cough from the corner. I turn my head. It’s Ares. Something in his blank stare tells me to keep my mouth shut. My eyes flutter into a split-second glare, and then I look back to the man at the head of the table. I know all about him already, thanks to Dad and his anti-Wastelander rhetoric that makes up most of his drunken rants.

Griff is the President of the Wastelanders. A little part of me is pleased that my stunt got them scrambling to pull out the big guns, but the other part of me? The sane, rational, doesn’t-want-to-die part? Yeah, that part is shitting itself.

Rev, the biker with tattoos curled around his neck, places the bricks of coke on the

table, along with my backpack. With a little panic, I realize at some point it was snatched away from me and I didn't even notice.

"Where'd you get this, sweetheart?" Griff asks.

"Made it in home-ec. Our final assignment was a brick of coke or a bunt cake."

There's a moment of shocked silence, then Griff's grin widens. His laugh booms across the room and that sets off the other guys until most of them are howling with laughter.

I risk a peek over my shoulder. Ares isn't laughing. He hasn't even moved — still standing statue-still in the corner, his muscular arms folded over his chest.

"Alright, alright," says Griff, waving everyone to quiet. He wipes a tear from the corner of his eye. "Girl's got a sense of humor, I'll give her that."

He settles his dark gaze on me. "But that doesn't explain what you're doing walking into my place of rest and relaxation, flashing something that could very well get you thrown in jail."

"Maybe she can flash something else while she's at it," chuckles one of the bikers.

"Wouldn't hate that," smirks Rev.

I ignore them, staring straight ahead at Griff.

"Question is," he continues, "Where'd you get it from?"

His eyes are sharp. He knows exactly where I got it from, knows exactly who I am, but he wants me to admit it.

“I stole it from the evidence room at the Sheriff’s station,” I say.

“And why would a nice girl do something like that?”

“Maybe her daddy took away her cell phone. Wants a little revenge,” another biker pipes up. There’s a ripple of chuckles.

Of course they know who I am. That’s probably why I’ve made it as far as I have. Can’t disappear the Sheriff’s daughter without retaliation.

“Look,” I say with a huff. “The way I see it, I’ve just done you a favor. They’ll have to drop the trafficking charges against your two prospects if they don’t have any drugs being trafficked. Any half-decent lawyer will get it thrown out.”

“And I take it you want a little something in return?” replies Griff. “You want a job, honey? Could put you behind the bar. Or are you more the ‘shake your ass on stage’ kind of girl?”

A hand slithers across the back of my jeans. “Doesn’t look like much of an ass to me.”

I whip around, but the hand is gone and the biker just leers. Ares does nothing, just stares.

Always with the fucking staring. It makes me feel... I don’t know... sick, almost. Like my stomach churns and tightens and I feel like I might throw up out of anxiety alone.

“Consider this pre-payment,” I manage to grit out. “For a job well done.”

“And what job is that, Delaney Jackson?” Griff asks, leaning forward. He puts his

elbows on the table, peaking his fingers and resting his chin on them. Hearing him say my name — my full name — sends shivers down my spine. It's like they've got my number, got me all figured out, and I'm in way over my head.

But it's too late to back out now. I need to do this. For Lilly.

“I want you to kill my father.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:23 am

8

Ares

I want you to kill my father.

Her words rattle around inside my head. There's no way she just said that, right? There's no way she just asked the Prez of the Wastelanders to kill the goddamned Sheriff. The rest of the guys can't quite believe it, either. Reaper — who had been settled back in his chair — slowly sits up straight.

“Griff...” he rumbles warningly, but Griff waves him off.

“Everybody out.”

He's not actually fucking considering this?

Delaney just stands there. Her palms are pressed against her thighs to stop herself from trembling. I see it, though. A tiny quake knocking her knees together. The girl is in way over her head and, for some reason, it makes me furious. I want to wrap my hands around her neck and squeeze. What the fuck was she thinking?

“Out!”

Chairs scrape, boots stomp. Rev is out the door first, shaking his head and chuckling to himself.

“Girl’s fucked,” I hear him mutter to another officer.

He’s probably right — and there’s nothing I can do to stop it. I sigh heavily and push off the wall.

“Not you, Ares. Or you, Reaper.”

Shit.

I turn back. Reaper throws me a glance. To anybody else, it would look casual, but I know Reaper. Worked alongside him. He’s worried too. As the two club enforcers, if Griff wanted to give in to Delaney’s request, we’d be the ones tasked with taking Sheriff Jackson out. Not that he’d agree. There’s too much risk to the club. But maybe...

A dark thought hits me.

What if Griff wants us to get rid of Delaney instead?

The door groans closed and the latch clicks home, leaving just the four of us. Three wolves and a lost little lamb.

“W-well,” Delaney starts, her voice shaking. She’s losing bravado by the second. “Do we have a deal?”

“Take off your shirt.”

Delaney lurches back, her hand flying to the hem of her hoodie. She grips it tight.

“What?”

Griff sneers. “I know all about you, girly. Always on the outs with daddy dearest. This wouldn’t be your way of trying to get on his good side, would it? Coming into my club, my home, strapped with a wire and a plan to take us Wastelanders down? I’m sure daddy would love you for that.”

Delaney looks like she’s going to be sick. After a moment, her features harden.

“I would never do that prick a favor,” she spits. “I’m coming to you because—”

“Ares!” Griff barks.

I lunge forward. Delaney squeals as I grab her arms and spin her to face me. She struggles, but it’s like a butterfly flapping its wings, trying to fight me off. Not gonna happen.

I lean down to get close to her ear. “Calm down,” I grunt, as she tries to twist her knee up into my groin. “I’m not gonna hurt you.”

She stills. Or at least goes as still as her trembling body will allow. Her eyes are big and shining, glassy with fear. I drag the hoodie over her head. A thin tank top peels off with it and she’s left in a thread-bare bra. For a few seconds, she stays pressed up against me like that — chest heaving, clammy skin radiating warmth through my own shirt. Her green eyes are accusing. Like she’s cursing me, like she thinks I’m enjoying this.

But I am. Maybe. My heart has picked up, my blood is pumping, and my cock... Is definitely harder than it should be right now. I clench my jaw, steeling myself, and spin her around to face Griff. I yank Delaney tight to my front, bracing my arm over her chest. Right below the swell of her tits.

Delaney has grown up a lot since I last saw her up close. Over the years, I’ve caught

brief glimpses of the kid I knew better than to interact with again, but she's not a kid anymore. The gangly, buck-toothed thing with eyes too big for her head is now eighteen with hips, tits, and an ass.

"Get off me," she says after a moment, and bucks back into me. Only it just pushes her ass against my crotch. I suppress a groan. I think she can feel me, big and hard, and her breath catches in her throat. I feel sick. The last thing I ever wanted was to be attracted to Delaney Jackson.

"Well, no wire," mutters Griff, not caring one little bit about the show in front of him. "But that doesn't mean you're on the level."

"I... I am," Delaney says, her voice fluttering. "I... I need you to do this. It's important."

"Griff."

Reaper speaks, finally, and he jerks his head to the main doors. He wants a word, probably to convince Griff to just kick her out. She's a nuisance, I imagine him saying. A dumb kid. Kick her out and forget all about this.

Reaper's got a kid of his own, a niece about Delaney's age. She's a spit-fire, too. He can probably see a bit of Jane in the girl standing in front of him. Griff sighs deeply, then stands, scraping the chair back.

"Don't let her out of your fucking sight," he says, the annoyance at the whole situation coming through clear. Moments later, Griff and Reaper are gone and it's just me... and her.

A shudder runs through Delaney's body, vibrating through my own and I realize I'm still holding her. Still pressing her against me, feeling the heat of her leech through

my clothes and right down to my bones. I drop my arm from across her chest and step back. Immediately, Delaney darts away, grabs her shirt and hoodie and tugs them back on.

“You’re an ass,” she mutters under her breath. When she turns to me, her cheeks are burning red and her eyes... Her eyes are wild. Angry.

“And you’re a fucking idiot,” I reply with a scoff. “What the hell are you doing here, kid?”

“First of all, not a kid. Second, I already told you. I want you to—”

“Kill Sheriff Jackson, yeah, yeah.”

Fuck, I need a smoke. And another shot of tequila. Possibly two. I take a deep breath and pull my hand through my hair.

“You know not every MC is full of assassins for hire, right? We got our own shit to worry about without taking murder requests from little girls with daddy issues.”

Delaney presses her lips into a tight line and she takes a defiant step closer. She’s taller now, obviously, and the top of her head comes just past my chin. She tilts her head just so, the perfect angle for me to duck down and capture her lips with mine. Disgust churns through me, though I keep my face still as stone. It must be the drink making me feel like this. The leftover buzz of tequila making my blood hot for a good fuck and not her, specifically. The little girl who snuck into my yard, who barged into my house all those years ago and turned my life into a living hell.

“What happened to you, Ares?” she asks.

I blink, surprised. That’s not what I was expecting her to say.

Suddenly, there's a clamoring from outside. I whip around, tucking Delaney behind me. My hand goes instinctively to the gun in the back of my jeans. The door to the meeting room flies open and Rev is there.

"What's—" But I don't get a chance to finish. He strides through the room, swipes the bricks of coke off the table and shoves them into Delaney's backpack, then throws the backpack at me.

"Some prick deputy's here, looking for her," he says.

Delaney goes pale. "What? No, but— How did they—"

"Doesn't fucking matter," I snap at her. I look back to Rev. "What's the play?"

"Griff's keeping him busy," he says. "But you gotta get her outta here. Take her to the safe house. Wait for orders."

I nod, but my head is swirling. A deputy just rolled up on our compound like it was nothing, all while we've got stolen drugs and the Sheriff's daughter. Images flash back to me, of deputies searching my house for the very same little girl, of the night my whole life turned to shit.

"Well? Fucking go!" yells Rev, halfway to the door. I snap out of it and grab Delaney's arm. She tries to jerk away.

"I'm not going anywhere with—"

"Look, you little shit," I say, turning on her with a snarl. "I'm not doing this again. You come with me now, or I knock you the fuck out and carry you, got it?"

She glares. A dagger-like, defying glare that pierces something deep inside me. But I

know she's listening.

“Good. Let's go,” I mutter. I shove her backpack into her arms, then yank her out of the meeting room and down the hall.

I never should have left my room tonight, that's for sure.

9

Delaney

My body feels stretched and taut, like my veins are made of elastic and they're being pulled, pulled, pulled, so tight that one slip will send me snapping back, crumpling to the floor with emotional whiplash.

Some prick deputy, the Wastelander had said. That could be anybody from the department, many of them just as corrupt and awful as my father. But I suspect it's Aaron Flores. If Dad's not here himself, he'd only send his most loyal henchman for something like this.

For something like me.

Ares' grip on my arm is bruising. I wonder if he knows he's holding me that tight. That he's hurting me. He probably does. He just doesn't care. Ares never cared. He's just like the rest of them — Wastelanders, police, social services. Nobody ever fucking cares.

“Keep up,” he grunts. He yanks me around a corner, leading me deeper and deeper into the rabbit warren of a building. My thoughts struggle to keep up with our pace. Everything is slipping away faster than I could have imagined. Lilly's sweet little face flashes into my mind and I stumble.

“Wait,” I blurt out, tugging back on Ares' hold. My chest is tight. I feel the walls closing in. “Wait, just...”

“What? Fucking what?” Ares snaps. He lets me go, rounding on me in a flash. My resistance, that tightly stretched elastic, goes slack and I slam into his hard chest. For a moment, my vision goes blurry and I forget how to breathe.

“I...” Everything goes still as I stare up into those unfeeling gray eyes. Something runs through me. A jolt of electricity, a static shock fizzing along my nerve endings. I want to slap myself — remind myself that Ares is not the same man I felt that little spark of a burgeoning pre-teen crush for.

“I just...” I can’t get the words out. How can I convince him to help me? That my father has to die?

For a second, I think I see his eyes soften, like he’s somehow read my mind, glimpsed into my past and seen every horrible, soul-shattering thing my father has done to me, but then his hand finds my arm again. His grip is just as hard as before.

“I don’t have time for this shit,” he grumbles under his breath.

He drags me further down the twisting hall and through a storage room. Ares wrenches back a steel door and it groans with disuse. All of a sudden, we’re outside, sharp afternoon sun glaring down on us. I blink, trying to clear the fuzzy spots in my vision.

We’re behind the main clubhouse. There’s a dumpster to one side with broken lawn chairs and old wooden pallets stacked up beside it. A sagging chainlink fence separates the gravelled area from the woods and I’m surprised when Ares drags me straight toward what looks like a dead-end.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Somewhere safe,” he replies gruffly.

He pulls open a part of the fence that I thought had been secured in place, only now there's a gap big enough for us both to squeeze through. He pushes me ahead of him.

"I've had enough of being fucking manhandled," I say, and jerk my arm away. "God, do you all treat women this way?"

"You're not a woman, you're a pain in my ass."

He plants his hand in the center of my back and shoves. I stumble into the tall grass on the other side of the fence. Ares ducks through behind me and folds the wire fencing back into place.

Ahead of me is a narrow track of dried, flattened grass leading into the woods. I follow it, a beast of a man looming at my back. Something cracks underfoot, a twig, and I jolt, my heart wrenching.

"Keep going," Ares rumbles over my shoulder. "Into the woods."

Does he know how freaked out I am? That I feel Aaron Flores lurking just out of sight?

"What about the compound? Will Deputy Flores search it?"

"Who said Flores was here," Ares says, more like a statement than a question.

I shrug one shoulder, the weight of my backpack heavy on the other one. "I just know."

A few more yards and we pass the tree line. It's cooler here, the harsh sun hidden behind a canopy of green. The path opens up and Ares' long strides brings him ahead of me. He doesn't look at me, seemingly confident that I'm still there, trudging along

behind him.

“He won’t get in. No way the fucker got a warrant. Besides, there’s no proof you were even there.”

“Except for my bike out front,” I reply.

Ares stops short. This time I’m able to avoid a full on collision, but I can’t avoid the look on his face as he turns to look at me. Disbelief. Anger. Something else that looks an awful lot like the way a parent looks at a kid who just told them they crashed the car their first time out.

“It’s not like I knew they were coming after me,” I protest weakly. “Nobody saw me take the drugs, okay? No cameras, no witnesses.”

Ares’ jaw tics. “That you know of.”

He’s right. But I’m not going to admit that he’s right because he’s also an ass. I just shrug and motion ahead to the path. “Well, then I guess we’d better get a move on.”

Once Flores realizes I’m not at the Wastelander compound, he’ll leave. Look for me somewhere else. They don’t have proof that I have the drugs at all, Dad just probably wants to make sure.

That’s what I keep repeating in my head, anyway. My little chant as Ares and I trek through the woods. Sweat starts to run down my spine and more gathers under my boobs. I’m cooking in my thick hoodie.

“Are we there yet?”

“You gotta be fucking kidding me,” Ares sighs, before ignoring me entirely.

A few minutes later, we enter a dirt clearing. There are three cars parked in a semi-circle, all of them covered by tarps. Ares seems to pick one at random, yanks the tarp off and sends fallen leaves and twigs and dried bird crap swirling to the ground. The car is a plain looking tan sedan — a little dusty, but otherwise it looks like any normal car you'd see and forget about a second later.

“In.” He jabs a finger to the passenger side.

I puff out my cheeks. The last thing I want to do right now is be stuck in a car with Ares, going God-knows-where. I look back the way we came, the dirt track twisting through the woods. I can't even see the compound from here, can't hear voices or cars or the roar of motorcycles.

“Delaney!” Ares' bark snaps me back to him. He arcs a dark blonde eyebrow. “Get. In.”

“Fine. Fuck.”

Swinging my backpack off my shoulder, I toss it into the footwell and climb in. The inside of the car is like a sauna. Ares gets behind the wheel.

“Do you have the—“

He flips down the visor and a set of car keys falls neatly into his palm. “Oh,” I say. “Guess you guys are prepared for this, huh?”

He looks at me. A quick glance, really, and then he starts the engine. It sputters at first, then roars to life.

“No,” he replies, his body tense. “Not prepared for this.”

As Ares pulls out of the clearing and turns down a wider, drivable track, I wonder if he means that he wasn't prepared for me.

We're climbing. It's easy to figure out where we're headed, at least at first. The forested mountain ranges are east of town and the only thing that breaches the flat fields of nothing. You can see them easily from the bottom of Main Street and the last few years there's even been a little smattering of snow in winter, right at the peaks. Climate change making itself known.

Now, in the depths of summer, everything is green and lush and hot — so, so hot. The air streaming through my open window smells like earth and pine. The breeze cools my sweat-damp skin, at least the parts of me not hidden beneath my hoodie.

Ares doesn't seem bothered by the heat. About fifteen minutes into our drive, he shrugged off his Wastelander cut and draped it in the backseat, so now he's just in a white t-shirt that hugs his biceps way tighter than seems appropriate. I'm tempted to suggest he try a size up next time, but then he'd notice me noticing. And I do not want to notice Ares. Not even a little bit.

"How much longer?" I ask as we take a winding turn. Ares squints against the glare of the lowering sun and says nothing. I pull out the bottom of my hoodie and fan in air.

"Can you at least tell me where we're going?"

Another turn. This one Ares takes a little sharper. My stomach rebels and my mouth floods with saliva. I swallow and wonder if I can risk a search of my bag. I think I had some water in there. A few mouthfuls, anyway. But then I'd have to take my eyes off the road and that will no doubt lead to me puking all over the dashboard.

“Ares?”

“Jesus Christ, can you shut up for two seconds?”

He yanks the wheel. We screech around another bend and my guts feel like they’re flipping inside out. I haven’t eaten much today — hardly anything at all — yet it feels like everything I’ve ever eaten is about to come back up in spectacular fashion.

“Pull over,” I say sharply.

“We don’t have time.”

It’s coming. Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit.

I throw a hand over my mouth and Ares finally — fucking finally — looks at me. His eyes go wide.

“Goddamnit,” he says, like I’m doing this on purpose just to inconvenience him. A second later, the car lurches off the road.

I’m up and out of the car before the dust even has a chance to settle, the contents of my near-empty stomach splashing into the dirt.

Once the wave of nausea passes, I notice the silence. The car ticks softly, the engine cooling, and all I hear is the whistling of the wind through the tops of the pines and the distant trilling of birds. We’re at a look-out point, just off the mountain road. A waist-high wooden fence runs along the edge of a cliff that drops down into the valley. It’s beautiful. The dying rays of the sun stream out like fingers of gold, tracing the green, reflecting off the glass and chrome of my little town in the distance. I even see the stark white of the sandstone quarry nestled deep in the woods.

“Don’t tell me you’re fucking pregnant.”

The words hit me like a punch to the chest. I turn, my mouth gaping. Ares is out of the car, and he’s watching me from the other side of it, his tattooed hands propped on his hips. He misreads the horror on my face and his eyes narrow into slits.

“Are you kidding me? That is what this is about? You got knocked up and your daddy don’t like it, so you want him dead?” He chuckles, mean and dark. “You’re a real piece of work, kid.”

My stomach clenches like it wants to throw up even more. My throat stings with acidic bile.

“I’m not pregnant,” I manage to grit out. Even the word makes me feel sick.

I snatch my backpack from the footwell and dig around for my bottle of water. It’s lukewarm and tastes like plastic but I swirl some in my mouth anyway, then spit into the dirt.

Ares considers me for a long moment.

“Then why—”

“Dude, ever hear of motion sickness? You were taking those turns like someone was chasing us.”

“The cops are chasing us, Delaney. The cops you brought to my fucking doorstep. Again.”

As soon as the word is loose, he snaps his mouth shut hard enough for me to hear the click of his teeth. Does he feel bad for saying it? For bringing up That Night? There

was a part of me that hoped he'd forget it. Move on. That he wouldn't blame me.

But it's clear that he still does.

"Where are we going?" I ask, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. "Like... What happens now?"

Ares takes a breath. For the first time, he looks away from me and I feel some relief not being under his heartless stare. "Safe house."

"For how long?"

"Until I get the all clear from the brothers."

"And then what?" I hate the way I sound so needy.

Ares sighs, annoyed, and his head shakes slightly. "Griff will figure out a plan."

I gnaw at my chapped lips. "What about... what I asked about?"

Ares barks a sharp laugh. "What, kill the Sheriff? That's not happening."

I hoist my backpack up so he can see. "But I got your drugs back."

"Fucking hell. Listen here..." He strides around the hood of the car. I take a stumbling step back, rocks skittering underfoot, and then he's only a foot or two away. I look up, squinting against the glare of the sun to meet his shadowed eyes.

"You got our shit back, great, but now it's ours and you have nothing."

Ares snatches the backpack from my grip and tosses it back into the car. "You have

no power here, Delaney. So shut up and get your ass back in the car.”

His eyes flick down my front and his lips pull back in a sneer. “And take that thing off. You look like shit.”

I glance down. The front of the hoodie is speckled with vomit.

Gross.

As Ares makes his way back to the driver’s seat, I turn around and peel off the hoodie, struggling to do it without wiping bits of sick into my hair. My cheeks burn with humiliation as I settle back into my seat and pull the door closed.

One thing is for sure, my plan is a spectacular failure. I just hope there’s a way I can still salvage it.

10

Ares

“A trailer park? Seriously?”

“You expected a beachside villa?”

Delaney doesn't say anything else. She rises up in her seat and frowns out the window. I get where she's coming from — an abandoned trailer park that's barely outside of the town's borders doesn't exactly scream 'safe house'.

I steer around a collapsed trailer awning that's fallen into the road and continue on to the end of the row.

“Where is everybody?” Delaney's question is quiet — thinking out loud, rather than asking me directly.

“They all must've moved on,” I say, navigating around a couple cracked lawn chairs. “We had a few people living here — homeless, guys just out of prison with nowhere else to go.”

“The Wastelanders owned social housing?” Delaney asks in disbelief.

“No. We're not a fucking charity. We controlled the territory. We just made sure nobody was out here cooking meth or whatever. There was a thing a few months ago, we had to give up the mountain pass to the Rolling Jackals.”

“Why?”

Because they held Reaper’s niece for ransom. Because unlike the Wastelanders, the Jackals don’t care about pulling innocent civilians into club business.

If the situation were different, if Delaney had walked into the Rolling Jackals HQ with a bag full of drugs, asking them for help, they wouldn’t have hesitated in putting a bullet between her eyes. That, or she’d be trussed up in the back of some van right now, drugs pumping through her veins, ready to be sold off like cattle.

My chest goes tight and my hands flex on the wheel, the leather squeaking.

“Doesn’t matter,” I answer. “Point is, this place belongs to them now. Not on paper, exactly, but it might as well.”

I pull up in front of the last trailer in the lot. “I guess nobody here felt safe anymore, so they left.”

“The devil you know...” Delaney murmurs. “So we’re going to hide out in a rival club’s territory. Sounds like a great plan.”

I let the car idle for a long moment, trying to pick out any dangers in the flood of the headlights. There’s no movement. No sign of life.

Delaney huffs quietly. “That was me being sarcastic, by the way.”

Turning off the car, I thrust open the door. “Get your shit,” I tell her, nodding to the backpack at her feet. “Let’s go.”

The Wastelander ‘safe house’ is the last trailer in the row. It’s still standing, though the windows are caked with dirt and the porch sags under my weight. I dig the spare key out of a hidden notch in the porch awning. The lock turns smoothly, almost like new, and I freeze uncertainly with my hand on the knob.

Unlike the rest of the trailers, this one is intact — at least from the outside. Either the folks who abandoned this place respected the Wastelanders enough to not trash it on the way out or... or the Jackals found this place after all and rigged some sort of trap.

The wooden porch creaks as Delaney steps up behind me. She waits a moment, then sighs. “Are we waiting for an invitation?”

I can’t stop her. She’s too quick. Or I’m just too big and dumb and slow. Delaney slips around me, lays a palm on the door and pushes it open. She swans into the gloom of the trailer and all I can picture is her getting her face blown off by a shotgun that someone’s rigged up just inside the door.

I spring into action, slamming into Delaney and pitching us both to the floor. I land on top of her, and there’s a noise that I think could be a gun going off.

Only it’s not.

There is no gun. There’s just me, flattened against the length of Delaney’s back on the living room floor, and a broken TV that I’ve knocked over in the chaos.

Delaney groans beneath me. “What the fuck... Ow...”

She wiggles, her ass practically grinding into my crotch, and I push up off the floor, my hands on either side of her tiny frame. She rolls over, face flushed and chest rising and falling in quick little breaths.

“What the fuck is your problem?” she grumbles as she sits up. She rubs her chin, glaring at me. She must have banged it on the floor when I knocked her down.

My embarrassment at my mistake is overtaken by a rush of anger.

“I was trying to save your life.”

“From what? Dust mites?” She groans as she heaves herself to her feet. She brushes off her shirt and my eyes track her hand as it swishes over her tits.

Fuck, those tits.

When she peeled off that disgusting hoodie and sat back down in the car beside me, I wanted to gouge my eyes out, only because they wouldn’t stop flicking over and raking over her curves.

“Fuck,” I growl, and turn away, running a hand through my hair. “Just... just let me go first, okay? You wait until I say it’s all clear.”

There’s a beat of silence behind me. “Okay. Sorry.”

Goddamnit, why do I feel bad now? She’s the one who— Never mind. I clench my eyes shut and pull a long breath, hoping that it’ll calm the pounding of my pulse in my ears.

When I open them, Delaney has moved away from me and is picking her way through the rest of the trailer.

So much for letting me go first.

“Looks pretty clean,” she says over her shoulder. Her backpack is still clutched in her

hand and she sets it down carefully on the small kitchenette. She turns the tap in the sink. It gurgles and a spurt of brown water rushes out before turning clear.

“There’s running water.”

She comes back in my direction. Stopping by the open door, she reaches for the light switch and flicks it. One bulb sparks, pops, and dies, but the second, over the living room, is enough to cut through the shadows.

“Nice,” she says. I can’t tell if she’s being sarcastic or not. I reach over her and flick the light off.

“No lights.”

“Are you a bat, Ares? Do you have some special eco-location skills I don’t know about? Because us regular humans tend to need the lights on so we can see.”

Growling, I shove past her and squeeze into the tiny kitchenette. I rifle under the sink and find what I’m looking for. I slam the two battery operated lanterns on the counter and turn them on. White, glaring light spills from them.

“No overhead lights,” I tell her, as I come back. I shove one of the lanterns in her hand. “I’m going to make sure the rest of the trailer is secure. Stay here.”

I slide my gun from the back of my jeans and Delaney’s green eyes catch on it, flashing wide for half a second. When I head for the rear of the trailer, Delaney mutters something under her breath, but I can’t hear it. Probably calling me an asshole or something.

I check the rooms. Of which there’s only two — a small bathroom with a toilet and shower, and a bedroom with a dusty but mostly clean-looking double bed. Everything

clear, I glance back down the hall. I can't see Delaney but can hear her moving around the living room.

There's no immediate danger, and yet adrenaline won't stop pumping through my blood. I feel wired up, angry, and fucking stupid for throwing her to the ground like that. Tucking my gun back into my jeans, I pull a deep breath and sag against the flimsy trailer wall.

My pocket buzzes and I snap to attention. There's a text from Griff. A single word.

Status?

I reply quickly.

Safe. Package secure. No tail.

I wait for his response.

"Delaney?" I call, over my shoulder.

"Yeah?"

"Just checking," I reply. This time I do hear her call me an asshole.

Another buzz.

Both packages?

He means the drugs and Delaney. The back of my neck prickles, like I've got eyes on me, and I scrub at the skin with my blunt nails.

Yes , I type back. I hesitate before adding: Orders?

Griff would never give a direct order to do something illegal via text. He's too smart for that. But part of me is on edge, waiting for the bomb to drop.

How would he say it, if he did text it? Something vague, like telling me to 'Take care of it,' or this time would he cut the bullshit and just write, 'Kill her'.

The phone buzzes again.

Stay put. Will update soon.

Okay. Okay, I can work with that.

My muscles relax. The sharp knife of fear dulls to something manageable.

“Ares?”

I sigh and stride back out to the living area, only to find Delaney bent over and digging in a lower cabinet. My tongue is heavy in my mouth. Delaney Jackson is not allowed to have an ass like that. She's a scrawny little foal, just a dumb kid, and I do not find scrawny little nosy-ass kids attractive.

She straightens up and turns to me. Her mouth stretches into a beaming grin, like she's forgotten for a minute what kind of situation she's in.

“I found beans!” she exclaims proudly.

Something creaks open in my chest — a rusty door latch — and I see that kid again. Sweet and feisty and just needing a friend.

“Cool beans,” I reply.

She frowns, confused, and turns one of the cans over to read the label. “Well, I was thinking we could heat them up somehow.”

“No, it’s like... Y’know... Cool beans. People say that.”

“People like who?”

“It’s a thing,” I growl, feeling my face heating “Or it was. It means just... cool.”

“Cool beans?” she says, eyebrows raised questioningly. Her lip twitches. It takes me a second to realize the little bitch is making fun of me.

“Whatever, just fucking... Here.”

I yank open a drawer, find the can-opener, and slide it across the counter to her. She takes it, eyebrows still raised, and I stalk past her to the door. I flip the lock and while I’m peering out through the flimsy blinds, I hear her crack into the can. Then I hear her soft laugh.

“Cool beans,” she murmurs to herself.

11

Delaney

The beans are lukewarm at best. And they have little chunks of sausage in them. The orange fleshiness makes my stomach churn, so I push them around my bowl, digging for more beans.

“Are you going to eat that or are you just going to play with it?”

Ares watches me from across the room. I served up dinner, heated on a little camping stove, and Ares took the only seat at the table, leaving me with the choice of the floor or the lumpy couch. I fold my legs under me on the couch cushion and hold out my bowl.

Like a cautious Rottweiler, Ares considers me for a moment, then gets up from his seat. He takes the bowl and tips it back into his mouth, slurping up my leftover sausages.

“That’s disgusting,” I mutter as he lowers the bowl. He keeps his eyes on me and, like he’s trying to prove something, chews, swallows, and swipes his tongue over his lips to collect the last of the sauce.

It shouldn’t make my lower belly clench like it does.

It’s late. I can’t be sure of the exact time, and I can’t check my phone because it’s in my backpack, all the way over by the door. Over by Ares. My fingers itch to have it

in my hand. To see if Aunt Judith has let Lilly call today. We don't have a set schedule for calls, but it's usually just before her bedtime, when Aunt Judith gets sick of Lilly begging to talk to me.

Ares tosses the plastic bowl in the sink and sits back down in his chair. He kicks back and thunks his feet on the table. Dried mud crumbles off the soles of his boots.

"How long are we going to stay here?" I ask.

"Until we're told not to."

"Do you always do what you're told?"

"When it's Griff doing the telling, yeah."

I have so many questions that they're bubbling up in my throat. I had been so curious as a kid, about Ares, his life, the big world beyond my own little front yard.

"What's it like?" I ask. "Being a Wastelander."

"Why do you want to know?"

I shrug. I shift my leg, unfolding it from underneath my butt, and lean against the back of the couch. "I just don't see why anybody would want to be in a biker gang."

"Motorcycle club."

I snort. "Sure. You came together because of your shared interest in Harley Davidsons."

"I don't ride a Harley."

The way he's looking at me feels heated. Not in a bad way, just like he's studying me. Trying to figure me out. Warmth creeps up my neck and I force my eyes down to the hole in the knee of my jeans. I pick at the loose threads.

"They were there for me when I needed them," he says finally. "When I needed... I don't know... something. It's not that complicated."

"What's an enforcer?"

Ares goes tense and I motion to the vest he retrieved from the car, now hanging from a hook on the wall.

"The patch on your vest."

"It's called a cut."

"Okay," I say, rolling my eyes. "The patch on your super adorable leather cut —" He makes an annoying growling noise that I ignore. "It says that you're an enforcer. I googled it."

"Google, huh? You've come a long way from your library days."

Memories flood back — knocking on his door in the middle of the night, my hands clutching my dog-eared book about ancient gods. Me, terrified but hopeful.

I clear my throat, push the past down and lock it away, where it belongs. "You're like a cop, right? You solve the club's problems?"

Ares looks horrified. He sits up fast, slamming his feet to the floor. "Not like a fucking cop. Holy shit, is that what it says online?"

“But that’s why you’re here. With me. Instead of one of the other guys. Because I’m a problem.”

He says nothing and I get nervous again. I know I’m right. I keep picking at the hole in my jeans. Wispy threads float to the floor.

“If the Wastelanders told you to kill someone, would you do it? Have you done it before?”

Ares shifts in his chair, the flimsy thing creaking. “What the fuck, Delaney.”

“It’s a simple question,” I say with a shrug.

“And the answer is none of your business.”

“What about what I asked?”

He looks at me like I’m crazy. “What, kill your daddy? That’s not fucking happening.”

“Why not? He’s a problem.”

“No, right now, the problem is you. The problem has always been you.”

His words are a gunshot. Loud and painful.

“And, yeah, if Griff told me to kill someone, I would,” Ares continues. “Want to know why? Because he’s my family. He was there for me when I got thrown in lock-up for molesting the Sheriff’s eleven-year-old daughter.”

There it is. The can is open and those wriggling worms are spilling out. I feel myself

shrinking, curling in on myself, wishing I could be a worm instead of the living, breathing fuck-up that I am.

“You weren’t charged. I told Dad... I told everyone that it wasn’t like that, that you never—”

“Do you think any of those assholes care about the truth?” he replies, sharp as a knife. “Seven years, Delaney, that’s how long this town has looked at me like a child molesting piece of shit. All because your father won’t let them forget it.”

I get it. I do. I know what it’s like to have him twist his tongue around a lie so it all comes out tasting like the truth. Oh, don’t listen to Delaney, she’s always been trouble, always making things up.

What am I supposed to say? As much as I should, I can’t make the words ‘I’m sorry’ come out of my mouth. Ares doesn’t get it. Doesn’t understand how dangerous my father is. While he might not be as blind as the rest of the people in town, he still thinks I’m just a rebellious brat with daddy issues. So I take a breath and say the closest thing to an apology I can muster.

“I never meant for that to happen.”

Ares scrubs a hand over his face, his palm scraping against his stubble.

“Yeah, well...Until the heat dies down and Griff gives me the all clear, we’re stuck here. Like it or not, I’m the only thing stopping Jackson from getting his hands on you.”

It’s like he’s slamming me into the ground and knocking the air from my lungs all over again. Ares doesn’t see it, the way my shoulders fold inward, my eyes hollow out.

If only Ares had listened to me the first time, that night in his kitchen, a cup of warm cocoa between us. Would he have been able to stop those hands from making the last seven years of my life a living hell?

“Go on. Get some sleep.” He jerks his head to the back bedroom.

I start to shake my head. “You should take the—”

“The couch is closer to the door, so it’s mine. You take the bed.”

“But—”

“For fuck’s sake, Delaney. For once in your life, can you just do what you’re told?”

I grit my teeth and stand up. As I walk past, I snatch up my backpack.

When I settle down on the bed, I check my phone. I’m almost out of charge and, of course, I forgot my charger at home. There are a few missed calls from Dad. No texts. He wouldn’t want written proof of the things he wants to say to me.

Lilly hasn’t called, and it’s probably for the best, because I don’t think I could hear her voice tonight without breaking down in tears. Instead, I clutch my backpack to my chest and pretend it’s her, that I’m hugging her close, and I rock myself to sleep.

I can’t breathe. There’s pressure over my mouth, half blocking my nose. My eyes fly open and two pale eyes stare back, unblinking in the murky darkness. Ares’ breath is warm over my face. Fear roars at me, turning my body to stone.

He’s no different, the fear says. He creeps and claws and takes what he wants.

Something inside me dies. A light snuffing out.

The bed creaks, his knee finding the edge of the mattress, and Ares leans further over me. I am frozen, waiting for him to pull back the thin sheet, to rake his eyes over my body — God, why didn't I sleep in my jeans? Maybe that would have sent more of a signal. But this, me in just my t-shirt and underwear, it's like I invited him. Gave him permission.

My pulse hammers in my ears as I wait for him to make his move. He lifts a single finger to his lips.

And that's when I hear it. The purr of an engine. The crunch of tires on gravel.

We're not alone.

I can't parse out the relief from the new terror, so I just nod against Ares' hand and he lets me go. As he turns, he fishes the gun from the back of his jeans. It's a smooth and practiced motion, like he's done this countless times before.

"Stay here," he murmurs. Even though his voice is low, it booms in my ears.

As he leaves the bedroom, I throw off the sheet and scramble into my jeans. My sneakers are so well-worn that I never untie them anymore, just slide my feet right in.

I make it into the dark living room to find Ares flattening himself beside the window, his gun tight to his thigh. He glares at me as I hover in the doorway.

"What did I just say?"

"Is it Flores?" I ask.

Ares parts the blinds with one finger and peers outside. “Too dark. I can’t tell.”

“A Wastelander?”

He levels me with a tight look. Stupid question. Nobody would have come out here without contacting Ares first.

The car stops and the engine goes quiet. There’s the grating squeak of a car door opening and pin-pricks of fear creep up my spine. It’s funny, how one sound can imprint on your brain, like a finger drawing in wet cement. Unable to be erased. It’s a sound I would lay awake waiting for. A sound that meant I had about three minutes to grab a bag and climb out my window before he came looking for me.

I suck in a gasp and Ares’ eyes dart to me.

Outside, the car door slams.

“I know you’re in there, kiddo! Why don’t you come on out and stop all this nonsense!”

Ares’ lips pull back into a snarl. “Fuck,” he growls.

My knees give out and I sink to the floor, my back pressed flat against the wall. It bows against the pressure of me. Like a house made of cards, it’s all about to come tumbling down — my plan, my life — and I’m going to take Ares down with me. I’m going to ruin his life all over again.

“Del, you hear me, sweetie? I just want to know that you’re okay.” Dad’s sugary voice floats through the night air. My chest constricts. Tightens painfully.

It’s over. Over. Over. Over.

“Delaney? Baby girl, it’s time to end this. You come on out, bring what you took, and all will be forgiven. No harm, no foul.”

I try to swallow, my tongue dry as sandpaper. Ares looks at me, his mouth pressed into a grim line.

“It’s over, Ares. I have to go.”

Ares shifts his weight, moving back from the window. “Son of a bitch,” he mutters. “How’d he even find us?”

“My bag is in the bedroom. I’ll get it.”

I press my shaky palms to the floor, about to lift myself up, when footsteps crunch outside. Dad coming closer. Ares points the gun at the window.

“Don’t take another step, Jackson!”

The footsteps stop. Dad chuckles. “That you, Warner? Well, whaddayaknow, it’s Cameron Warner.”

Ares’ head drops, his shoulders sagging. He mutters a curse under his breath, then rallies. Pulls himself up. “Nothing here for you, Sheriff.”

“Beg to fucking differ, Warner,” Dad replies. “How’d my girl convince you to come along on this little jaunt, anyway? She offer you another taste, huh?”

Ares’ spine goes rigid. I curl in on myself more, my stomach aching, bile rising.

“Yeah, I bet she’s awful tempting in there. Alone. Afraid. Ripe.”

I want to press my hands over my ears, but I can't move.

"How about this," Dad continues smugly. I can picture the look on his face, the one he wears when nobody else is around. It's a look that says no matter what comes next, he knows he's already won. "How about you toss out those bricks Del stole from my station, and I let you have a little one-on-one time with her. That's what you want, isn't it?"

I bury my face in my knees.

"She can be real good girl when she wants to be." Dad's voice is venom, slipping through my veins and turning my blood to mush.

I feel pale gray eyes on me.

Silence.

"Delaney."

I can't look. I don't want to see what's on Ares face. The disgust.

"Delaney, get up."

I force myself up, my legs shaking. This is it. Ares knows. Knows I'm damaged goods, that I'm fucked up beyond repair. There's no other choice for him except to hand me over.

"Look at me."

I feel my head shake, wagging side-to-side. Then, firm fingers on my chin. Gripping me hard, wrenching my head up so that I see him. See the disgust.

Only there is none.

There is only rage.

“In the bedroom,” he says, his voice low and rough. “The window. You open it, you climb out, you run. Got it?”

“W-what? But I—”

“You take your bag and you run. You find some place in the woods and you hide.”

The dull throb of fear shifts, making way for confusion. “But what about you?”

“I’ll find you, Delaney.”

“But—”

“I promise. Now go.”

He shoves me. Hard. I stumble into the hallway, pausing only once to see Ares return to his position at the window. He looks back at me and something passes between us. I nod once, turn, and race for the bedroom.

Ares will find me , I tell myself as I hoist my backpack over my shoulder.

Ares will find me , I tell myself as I wrench open the window and drop down to the spindly weeds on the other side.

Ares will find me , I tell myself as I stay low and dart for the dark tree line.

And that’s when I hear the gunshots.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:23 am

12

Ares

I am fury.

I am rage.

I am war.

There's a powerful creature in my body that's roaring for blood. I want to shoot Sheriff Jackson dead. Send his brains splattering all over his fucking windshield.

It's what Delaney wants and, now that I know the truth about what he's done to her — probably for years, probably ever since she sat herself down at my kitchen table — I want it too.

But I can't. I can't betray Griff or the brothers. If I kill the Sheriff, there will be no end to the repercussions for the Wastelanders. The logical, rational part of me fights for control as I send Delaney away. I manage to hold myself back until I hear the bedroom window squeak, until I hear the soft thump of Delaney landing on the other side of the trailer.

Then I count to three.

I kick open the trailer door and start shooting. It's dumb, it's fucking reckless. It's so dark out I can't see anything beyond the glaring headlights of the Sheriff's patrol car.

Still, I fire, my finger squeezing the trigger again and again.

Luckily I catch the Sheriff off guard. He shouts something and scrambles for his door, flinging it open and ducking down behind it as bullets whizz through the air.

Any second now and he'll return fire. I'm out in the open, bathed in light. I'm dead for sure.

I stop running. Steady my hand. Aim.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

One front tire on the patrol car explodes. One headlight, then the next.

"You're fucking dead, Warner!" Sheriff Jackson screams into the darkness. "You and the slut!"

Hopefully his ears are ringing just like mine. Hopefully he can't hear what direction I take off in, can't hear my feet sliding on the gravel.

I run to the other side of the trailer and sprint to the woods, running blind, my feet stumbling over branches and thick undergrowth. I just shot at Sheriff Jackson, and even without killing him, I know I just threw the Wastelanders headfirst into the shit.

Still, with that bouncing around in my head, the only thing I care about is Delaney.

I make it several yards beyond the treeline before I stop to see if he's following. He's not.

Breathing hard, I look around. It's impossible to see much of anything this deep in the woods.

“Delaney? He’s gone, kid.”

“Ares?” Her voice is muffled, but close.

“Yeah.”

There’s movement to my left and I spot a fallen tree, the sides rotting and coming apart. After a moment, Delaney rises from the inside, a ghost of the forest prying her way out of the dead tree. There’s a crown of twigs and leaves caught in her hair and even though her face is shadowed, I can already tell she’s glaring at me.

“Not a kid,” she spits angrily. She clambers out of the tree trunk and wipes her hands on her jeans. “Why the fuck aren’t you dead? I heard shooting.”

“That was me.” I look down at the gun in my hand, then tuck it into the back of my jeans.

“Oh,” she says. I feel her brain whirring.

“He’s alive,” I tell her. “Didn’t even graze him.”

“Did you try?”

I ignore that. I have to. Did she cling to that hope, hiding out here? The hope that I would put a bullet between her father’s eyes? Is she disappointed in me?

I don’t like that feeling. It twists in my gut, like I’m ashamed of myself for letting her down.

“You got your bag?” I ask. But really I’m asking if she has the coke. It’s possibly the only leverage we have left.

“Yeah,” she replies after a moment, like she’s annoyed I didn’t answer her question and was thinking about pushing it. She turns and fishes something out of the tree stump. It’s the backpack. She brushes off the canvas and slings it over her shoulder. “What do we do now?” she asks.

“Now? We walk.”

It’s slow going. I don’t want to take out my phone and use the flashlight until I’m sure Jackson isn’t following. I don’t think he is. Guy like that wouldn’t stomp through the woods in the middle of the night if he can get someone else to do it for him. Finally I take out my phone and light our way.

Delaney is pale and her dark hair swings into her face with every step, her eyes cast firmly on the ground ahead of her.

“How did you know that would work?” she asks, like she knows I’m watching her. “Like... I’m assuming you weren’t trying to kill him.”

“Just figured I’d give you enough time to get away.”

“He could’ve shot you.”

I shrug and grunt. Not much else to say. It’s true. He could’ve. And then Delaney would have been out here alone. Probably would’ve served her right for starting this whole thing.

A dull rush of panic goes through me. Not at the thought of me dying — I’m resigned to the fact that a life with the Wastelanders isn’t always a long one — but at the thought of Delaney out here, lost in the woods, with her sack-of-shit father on her tail.

“He’s not used to people fighting back,” she says, interrupting my thoughts. “Or challenging him. I think he expected me to just walk out the door. You took him by surprise.”

“Yeah, maybe. What I can’t figure out is how he found us in the first place.”

Delaney makes a little non-committal sound. A hmm that sets my teeth grinding. I swing an arm around and block her, pivoting so that I’m in front of her and she’s blinking up at me. The flashlight on my phone illuminates our feet, but it bounces up to carve eerie shadows across her face.

“Delaney?”

Her fingers fidget with the straps of her backpack.

“Do you know how he found us?”

“It’s dealt with.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean? What, the sick fuck put a tracking device in your arm or something?”

“Something like that,” she replies, her chin tilting down, hiding her face.

“I’m not fucking around.”

She sneers. “What, you want to search me? Pat me down? You already did that at your little clubhouse, remember?”

“Enough with the brat shit. How did he find us, Delaney?”

Her fingers twitch. Her hand makes a minuscule movement to the pocket of her jeans. I lunge and her eyes flash wide.

“No!”

She tries to spin away, but I’m too fast, my fingers already digging in her pocket. My phone tumbles into the dirt and the light goes out. In the dark, I grab her with my other hand and hold her as she thrashes against me. She twists her hips and bucks, swearing at me the whole time.

As I pry her phone from her pocket, she lands a sharp slap to my face and I shove her back. It’s more forceful than I mean to and she hits the ground ass-first. There’s a long beat of quiet.

“You’re an asshole,” she hisses in the dark.

“Yeah, I am.”

I tap her phone to life and use the light to find my own on the ground.

“What’s your passcode?” I demand. She glares up at me, cheeks red.

“There was a tracking app. It was hidden. I found it already, deleted it.”

I don’t say anything, waiting for her to give me the code. I need to check for myself.

“It’s gone,” she insists. “Trust me.”

I scoff. “Fine. I’ll just smash the whole thing.”

I drop her phone unceremoniously to the ground, raise my boot to stomp.

“No!” Delaney screeches. She dashes for the phone, scrabbling in the dirt like an animal. She snatches it up and rocks back on her heels. She clutches the phone to her chest like something precious.

“No,” she says again. It’s quieter. Pleading. “Ares, I... You can’t. Just... please.”

“Why? What’s so important on there that you’d risk Jackson finding us again?”

She swallows hard. She bites her bottom lip. I lunge down—

“Time’s up. Give me the—”

“My sister!”

I pause. It’s something so unexpected, it cracks open my memory like a long-forgotten safe. Sheriff Jackson never charged me with anything that night, even after finding Delaney’s little bookmark in my house. She was safe at home and denied ever coming over. Still, I spent a night in jail and that was enough to get the rumor mill churning. Jackson made it everyone’s business what happened that night. Said that I liked little girls, that little Delaney Jackson never had a chance around me.

The only thing that diverted public attention away from me was the death of Delaney’s mom. In childbirth, I think. All the accusing whispers about me turned into soft concern for Sheriff Jackson, the poor widower who now had an infant and a damaged tween to look after. I’d been so focused on keeping away from Delaney, keeping my head down, that I never even noticed her sister seemed to have disappeared.

“Lilly. Her name’s Lilly,” Delaney continues. She thinks my silence is me waiting for an explanation and not an uncomfortable trip down memory lane.

“She’s seven. She lives with my aunt in Omaha. This is the only way she can get in contact with me. Ares, please .”

This isn’t like her. The begging.

“Goddamnit,” I mutter. I close my eyes for a second. “Fine.”

I flick my fingers at her, motioning to give me the phone. She shakes her head.

“I need the number. I’m going to put it in here.”

I hold up my phone. Delaney softens, her lips parting slightly. She taps in her passcode. Her thumb flicks over the screen, scrolling her contacts. She pulls up the number and holds the phone out. I take it, and add it to my contacts list.

I can’t help but notice the name: Lil, followed by a little purple heart. I can’t imagine a seven-year-old has their own phone, so it must be the aunt’s number. I transfer it over. I don’t add the heart, though, because emojis are fucking stupid. I show it to her. Proof. And she nods again.

“Thank you,” she says. I offer my hand and help her up, then place her phone on a log and look around for a big enough rock.

“Don’t thank me yet, I didn’t say you could call any time soon. For all we know, the Sheriff’s putting a trace on your aunt’s line.”

Delaney nods solemnly, then hands me a hunk of rock. Seconds later, her phone is scattered in bits on the forest floor.

“Let’s go,” I say, turning my back on her. “We’ve got a long walk until we hit civilization.”

13

Delaney

“You need to eat something.”

I blink. My head feels fuzzy, my limbs heavy. I don't know if I can stay awake long enough to eat anything, let alone lift my arms to hold a knife and fork. Ares sighs, annoyed at my lack of response, and pushes my full plate across the shiny diner table.

“Eat,” he commands. The smell of bacon, eggs, and syrupy pancakes swirl to my nose. It makes me want to gag, the grease and the sweetness of it all, but I reluctantly grab my fork and force down a bite.

Five minutes later, I'm swiping the last piece of bacon through the puddle of sticky syrup. I close my eyes and pop it in my mouth, humming in satisfaction. I feel so much better, but if Ares expects me to admit it, he's in for a long wait.

An awkward cough and the squeak of vinyl pull me back. Across from me, Ares shifts in his seat, his gaze flicking away quickly.

Wait, was he watching me eat ?

My cheeks burn and I grab for my coffee, topped up by somebody when I was too distracted by the food in front of me. I down half the cup before I find the nerve to look at Ares again.

He doesn't look tired, not even a little bit. As he looks down at his phone, the angles of his face and the blond scruff along his jaw are washed in soft morning light. He glows gold and warm, the only coolness of him being the gray of his eyes as he scans his phone screen. My chest tightens, my heart speeding up a little.

I don't think I've ever had a proper crush before. Boys in school were always so... childish. They were loud and goofy and believed that driving around in their shitty cars and blaring rap music was the way into a girl's panties.

I think about little eleven-year-old me, unsure as to what this strange, bubbly feeling inside was. All I knew was that I wanted to talk to Ares again, have him smile at me again. I remember trailing my fingers over his name on my forearm, the ink of his block-letters feeling so perfectly permanent.

Until they washed away. Until I got him thrown in lock-up. Until I screwed everything up.

Guilt surges through me, icy like a frozen wave. I might have a crush on the asshole-known-as-Ares, but there's no way he would ever feel the same about me. A fuck-up. A broken thing.

"So," I say with false brightness. I put my cup on the table, nestling it between my palms, play-acting like it's actually hot. "You think we'll be safe here?"

Ares looks out the window. It's still early. The day is just starting for most folks, so the streets of Bowen aren't busy.

We'd come out of the woods by the highway just after dawn, and Ares had led me here. We walked deep into town, Bowen being three times the size of our own little home. I was almost dead on my feet by the time he pulled open the door to Linda's, a cheery, yellow-checkered diner with window boxes of real flowers.

“Safe for now,” Ares replies.

“Any word?” I ask as he pockets his phone. He looks up at me again, his eyes carefully scrutinizing my face for weakness.

“You can tell me the truth,” I say. “If we’re screwed, I’d rather hear it from you.”

I’d rather hear it from you.

I want to yank the words back, but Ares’ lip twitches for a moment. A little non-smile to let me know he caught it.

I shake my head, push my cup to the side and fiddle uselessly with a spoon. “I mean, you might be an asshole but at least you’re honest.”

“Thanks for the compliment,” he replies sarcastically. He takes a breath and raises his arms, his elbows bent and his hands behind his head. He groans his words through his stretch.

“Griff says to keep laying low.”

My eyes trail over his muscles, chiselled hardness shifting under swaths of tattooed skin. It’s annoyingly mouthwatering and I wish he’d just go back to being a jerk, instead of the hot guy sitting across from me, like we were on some breakfast date.

“He knows about your dad.”

The spoon slips from my fingers. Clatters onto the table. It seems so loud, like dynamite going off, that I’m surprised everyone in the diner isn’t ducking for cover.

“What?”

Ares stills, panicked. “Not about— Fuck, Delaney, I didn’t mean— I told Griff that Sheriff Jackson found us, but not about any of that other shit, okay? I wouldn’t...”

I can’t move. Can’t speak. Humiliation burns under my skin. I stare down at my hands on the table. Ares puts his hand over mine. It’s heavy, calloused and warm. There are letters inked across his knuckles, so fuzzy and faded I can’t make them out. He squeezes my fingers, my hand disappearing in his.

“I wouldn’t,” he says again. “Okay?”

I look at him. At his earnest face, naked pain drawn across it, and it makes something inside me snap. Anger flares up and I slide my hand back and bury it in my lap.

“Right,” I sneer. “As if the Wastelanders wouldn’t love more dirt on Sheriff Jackson. Hey, maybe this is the bargaining chip you need for him to leave you guys alone.”

Ares blinks. “Delaney...”

“I don’t need your pity, okay? I don’t need anything from you.”

Ares retracts his hand and settles back in his seat, his face going cold.

“Except to kill your father, right?”

I say nothing and we let the icy silence frost the space between us. I know I was being too defensive, snapping back at him when he was just trying to help. Ares was just trying to comfort me, reassure me, and isn’t that why I went to him, all those years ago? Because I felt safe?

Tears prick in my eyes.

“More coffee, kids?”

A rail-thin old man offers a full pot of coffee in his trembling hand. His smile is bright and his blue eyes shine behind half-moon glasses. At first I think he’s just an overly friendly customer, but he has a name tag pinned to his button-down shirt.

“Yes, please, Lou,” I say, smiling tightly, and pushing my cup over. His coffee pour is surprisingly steady, despite his shakes. I murmur thanks as I slide my cup, now steaming, towards me.

Lou swivels to fill Ares’ cup, but he covers it with his hand.

“I’m good,” he grunts.

Lou pauses, like a glitching program, then smiles. “Anything else for you kids today?”

I notice his watery eyes move from Ares, to me, and back again. This move, the careful smile, reminds me of Rodney back at the gas station; the way he’d size up a customer, assess whether they were going to give him any trouble.

I suddenly realize what we must look like: both of us sweaty and grimy; me in a dirty tank top and torn jeans; Ares with a perpetual frown, covered head-to-toe in tattoos. At least he doesn’t have his biker cut anymore, having left it back at the trailer (which I can tell he’s not happy about).

“Just the check,” Ares says.

He digs out his phone again, like if he ignores Lou he’ll disappear. But what if Lou stays suspicious? What if, when we leave, he calls the cops just to report that something ‘didn’t feel quite right with those two early-bird customers’?

I plaster on a big, innocent-looking smile and lean over to Lou. “And breakfast was great. The perfect ending to a long sunrise hike.”

Ares looks up at me in surprise. There’s a pause, then Lou chuckles.

“Hike, huh? Was wondering where you two came from.”

“Oh, yeah, we’re big into all that nature stuff.”

Lou scratches his chin with his free hand. “Have you tried the Owl’s Nest Trail? Goes right along Cattlehead River, beautiful little stretch that one.”

For the next fifteen minutes, Lou, who turns out to be quite the outdoorsman, happily details his top ten hikes around Bowen, giving an honorable mention to the trail where he saw a family of particularly fat raccoons.

“I’ll be right back with your check,” Lou says finally.

As he leaves, Ares’ brow furrows. “Hike?”

I wave to him, back to me, silently saying ‘What does it look like we’ve been doing?’

“Oh.” Ares replies. “Fuck, okay.”

He stands and digs a wad of flattened cash from his pocket. Without waiting for Lou and the check, he peels off a fifty and tosses it on the table.

“Come on,” he says. He hauls my backpack off the seat and slings it over his shoulder.

“Where are we going?” I ask, following him up.

Ares sighs, then as he turns around and heads for the front door, he mutters something that sounds an awful lot like 'Shopping'.

14

Ares

Delaney browses the aisles of thrift store clothes, mindlessly scraping hangers along the wobbly racks.

I eye her still empty hands and sigh. “We’re not going to a fashion show. Just pick something.”

She slides a bright red blouse along the rack. “I’m going as fast as I can. It’s not like there’s a section for what to wear when you’re on the run from your psychopathic parent.”

“That’s two aisles over.”

Delaney snorts a laugh. “You know, you can be kind of funny when you want to be.”

“You should see my stand-up act.”

My phone buzzes in my pocket and when I pull it out, I recognize the number right away.

“Gotta take this,” I mutter. I sling the pair of jeans and the two t-shirts I had grabbed for myself off my shoulder and into Delaney’s arms. A line forms between her eyebrows and her mouth opens in surprise.

“Pick something and hurry up,” I say, cutting off her protest.

“How am I supposed to pay for—”

I shove the wad of cash into her palm, then stride out of the store, the phone already to my ear.

“Yeah, I’m here,” I say, answering. I settle my back against the brick exterior of the thrift store.

“How’s the girl?”

That’s Reaper for you. No nonsense.

“A pain in my ass,” I reply. Then, because I’m not a total monster, “She’s fine.”

Except that she’s not. She’s being hunted by her sick fuck of a father and I can’t see this ending well for her. And then, because it feels wrong to not say it, “She’s tough.”

Reaper makes a sound of acknowledgement. “I have news. Rigby and Jay are out of lock-up. Charges dropped.”

I blink, surprised. “That’s... good?”

“Yeah,” Reaper replies. Like me, he doesn’t sound convinced that this is, in fact, good news.

“What?”

“Could be nothing.”

“Reaper, come on, man.”

“I don’t know. Just doesn’t feel right. Rev saw them towing the Sheriff’s patrol car in this morning, tires all shot out. That was you?”

“Lucky shot.”

Reaper chuckles. “Anyway, you’d think after that, we’d have cops swarming the compound. Only it’s dead fucking quiet.”

“And?”

“And it’s like something’s changed.”

Dread sinks into my gut. “Like what?”

Reaper goes quiet, then: “Like Sheriff Jackson’s moved on to something that’s more important to him than taking us down.”

More important means Delaney. And because it’s me with her, that’ll rile him up even more. I felt it last night, the hatred in his voice.

He’s not going to stop until he finds us.

“What’s the plan?”

But I know what the plan is. What Griff will tell me to do. What he’s ordered Reaper to tell me over the phone. There’s nothing that the Wastelanders will protect more than each other. We’re a family — blood brothers — and nothing will stand in the way of that.

“Griff says to ditch the girl.”

No.

The feeling is so strong. So visceral. Before Reaper is even finished saying the words, I know I’m not going to follow that order.

“Lay low,” Reaper continues. “We’ll contact you when we know the heat is off.”

“And what’s Delaney supposed to do?”

Reaper pauses. I think he’s surprised I would ask that. If I knew me like he does, I’d be surprised too.

“She’s not our problem anymore, Ares.”

The swoosh of the thrift store door lets me know I’m not alone. I sense her, feel her in my chest, before I lay eyes on her.

“Ares?”

Reaper’s voice is a buzzing gnat in my ear.

“Copy,” I say. “I get it. I’ll wait for your call.”

I hang up before he can say anything more, and then I turn to Delaney.

My heart stops.

This isn’t the girl I know: scrawny and sharp and angry. The Delaney before me is a woman. Her sundress hits mid-thigh, the fabric light and covered in tiny yellow

flowers. It hugs her curves, dipping in the chest to show a hint of cleavage. My eyes follow the gentle sweep of her collar bones, rising up to her pale neck. Her throat bobs with a nervous swallow. Her hair is down, probably combed through with her fingers so it falls in dark, messy waves around her shoulders. Her lips, plump and naturally rosy, are tilted down at the corners. Her eyes narrow at me accusingly.

“What?”

It takes me a minute to recover. I thrust my phone into my pocket and my fingers brush the growing hardness of my cock.

“What the fuck is this?” I say finally, coughing to shift the lump in my throat.

“This is a dress,” she replies, all that sharpness and venom back in her voice with full force.

“You look ridiculous. We’re on the run, not going to a county fair.”

Delaney rolls her eyes. She swings a large plastic bag to me, full of clothes, then props her hands on her hips. “I got you some more stuff too. You can thank me later.”

I groan and screw my eyes shut, partly regretting my decision not to abandon her.

“Where’s the rest of my cash?”

There’s a rustling noise. When I open my eyes, Delaney is fishing the folded bills out from the front of her dress and my breath catches in my throat. She hands me the cash. It’s still warm from her skin.

I know it now, more than ever: Delaney Jackson is going to be the death of me.

I want to kill the guy at the front desk. I'd also consider dislocating his jaw, just for the way that he's smirking at Delaney and sucking the meat of his cheek between his teeth. Beside me, Delaney looks uncomfortable. Her shoulders curl in and she tugs at the fabric of her new dress like she's regretting buying it in the first place — and that makes me go right back to wanting this fucker dead.

“Anything?” I ask, shifting my body so I block Delaney from his line of sight. He taps at the keyboard a few times.

“Just for the night?”

“Undecided.”

The guy leans sideways and leers at Delaney some more. “We also have an hourly rate. If that takes your interest.”

I side-step, once again putting myself between him and Delaney. “The night's fine,” I reply tersely.

The guy sucks on his teeth, clearly annoyed with me and not intimidated in the slightest. I'm mentally kicking myself for picking such a shithole motel. This guy is obviously used to dealing with lowlifes. He locks eyes with me and seems to realize that he's not going to get any more chances to perv, because he sighs, slides a plastic keycard through a card reader and slaps it on the desk.

“Twelve. Around the corner. Pool closes at ten. No parties.”

I take the keycard, replacing it with a few extra bills than the room is worth — unspoken payment for both the stay and for not asking for ID. The guy stuffs it all in

his pocket anyway.

“Enjoy your stay!”

I motion for Delaney to head outside and she pushes out the door into the parking lot. There’s more cars parked than there are rooms at the one-floor motel, but a glance around sees a pool hall slash dive bar combo across the street with its doors open.

Delaney finishes saying something. I snap to her. “What?”

“I said—” She starts walking down the breezeway, passing motel room doors — the paint on each of them in different stages of flaking off. “I wonder where that guy keeps his mother’s mummified corpse. Hopefully not next to our room.”

I grunt. “I think he’s more of a ‘drill a hole in the wall to watch you shower’ type”.

“Norman Bates did that too,” Delaney replies.

We round the corner and stop, the door to room twelve right there. She hesitates, nibbling on her bottom lip as she looks warily at the door.

“You don’t think...”

I slide the keycard into the lock. It whirs and clunks, un-locking.

“I’ll check for holes,” I sigh.

I shove the backpack and the bag of thrift store clothes at her, along with the second bag of necessities we picked up at the drugstore. Delaney waits outside, the sun throwing her long shadow on the thread-bare green and purple carpet.

I make quick work of the small and stuffy room, checking air vents, light fixtures, and even the shower head for anything even slightly suspicious. When I emerge from the bathroom, she's inside, clicking the door closed behind her.

"All clear on hole patrol."

I regret it as soon as I say it. Delaney's nervous expression cracks into a wide, delighted grin.

"I meant there's no cameras or anything fucked up," I say quickly. I fold my arms across my chest, silently daring her to say something.

Delaney clears her throat, her cheeky smile softening.

"Okay, so what do we do now?"

"How much cash have you got?"

Slowly, like she's not sure she can trust me, she puts her backpack on the table and fishes out an envelope from inside. She hesitates, then hands it over. There's not much. I do a quick calculation in my head and hand the envelope back. Surprise at being handed back her money flashes across Delaney's face, then she squirrels the envelope deep in her bag.

"I had more," she says. "A lot more. But Aaron— Deputy Flores went through my room."

"He go into your room a lot?"

Delaney stiffens. She whirls away from her backpack, eyes shooting daggers at me.

"Are you calling me a whore?"

“No, of course not—”

“Because I’m not, despite what everyone in town thinks about me.” She fixes her shoulders and crosses her arms firmly under her tits. “And if I were a whore, I wouldn’t fuck a deputy. Ever.”

I hold my palms up in surrender. “Your brothel is gonna be strictly for firefighters, got it.”

Delaney’s shock makes her pause, then her lips curl. “I’ll just call it ‘Hose’. For the double meaning.”

“Not Hole Patrol?”

Delaney’s laugh is unexpectedly loud. She throws a hand over her mouth and snorts. I grin back. Triumphant warmth pulses in my chest. Making her laugh feels like a reward, like a badge of honor.

After a moment she takes a breath and looks around. Grabbing her backpack, she walks past me and places it on the queen bed furthest from the door. Good, she’s learning.

“You cool if I take the first shower?” she says.

“Actually, can I ask you something?”

She turns back, wary again. Wary of what I might ask, what secrets I’ll pry from her.

“Do you know how to defend yourself?”

She narrows her eyes. “I can take care of myself.”

“That’s not what I asked,” I say, taking a deliberate step closer. She backs away, her legs hitting the edge of the bed. “Okay, there. First thing, you’re showing fear.”

“What? Like hell I am.”

“You backed away.”

“Because you came closer!”

“And that’s supposed to deter me? I want you, Delaney.”

Fuck. Take back the words. Shuffle them around in my head to get the right ones.

“Pretend I want to hurt you,” I say carefully. “Can you defend yourself?”

Her breathing is coming sharper now, her cheeks burning pinker. Her eyes dart around the room, before landing on a spot by my feet.

“Can you show me?”

I blink. I was expecting a fight or at least a little more pushback before she agreed. I nod and step back. Swallow around the nervous lump in my throat.

“Come here.”

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 3:23 am

15

Delaney

I want you, Delaney.

He said that, right? I wish I could slip back in time, rewind for a moment, just to make sure. My sneakers are welded to the carpet and Ares flicks his fingers at me, urging me closer.

I step up, shrugging off the strange tug in my belly. My crush on Ares is starting to be a problem. He makes me nervous, makes me feel exposed right down to the bone, and that makes me weak.

“What now?”

Ares squares up, bouncing lightly on the balls of his feet. “Pretend I’m coming at you. What do you do?”

I let my fist fly. It’s sloppy, I know that as I start my swing, but I hope I’m quick enough to catch him off-guard. Ares doesn’t even flinch. He slaps my fist aside like it’s nothing.

“Hey! Ouch!”

“I said hit me, not flap your little hand in my face,” he shoots back. I back off, rolling my wrist and checking to make sure nothing’s broken. In truth, the only thing bruised

is my ego.

“It’s not my fault you’re built like a fucking tank,” I grumble. Ares folds his arms over his broad chest, muscles bulging in his tight sleeves.

“Delaney, every guy who tries something with you is going to be bigger and stronger than you.”

I glare at him. “I thought you were teaching me how to defend myself, not batter my self-esteem.”

“I am.”

“You just said I’ve got no chance!”

Ares sighs. I’m glad I’m annoying him. It serves him right for slapping me. “Listen, you’ve got a chance,” he says. “You’ve got so many fucking chances. You just have to know what to aim for.”

I take a breath and give in. I raise my clenched fists, holding them in front of me like a boxer. “Show me what to aim for, then.”

Ares steps closer, pausing an arms length away. He reaches out and stops me from stepping back by closing a hand around my wrist.

“Any assailant, no matter the size or strength, has four vulnerable areas,” he says. His fingers glide over my hand, prying open my clenched fist and adjusting my fingers so that the flat of my palm is exposed.

I watch with a pounding heart, my breath tight in my chest, as he gently maneuvers my hand up, touching the heel of my palm to the tip of his nose.

“Nose,” he says.

Then he moves my hand down to his throat and tilts my wrist so that the point of my knuckles rub against his Adam’s apple.

“Throat.”

He takes my other hand and we stand toe-to-toe, my small hands enveloped in his large ones. He sweeps his thumbs along the ridge of my fingers, relaxing them to open, then firms up his grip on my splayed thumbs, so that I understand I need to keep them tense. He guides my hands to his face.

This feels like a bizarre flirtation. Touching me, moving me like some pliable doll. All I know is that I’ll never forget the movements he’s showing me, his confident arrangement feels fire-branded into me with each touch.

Ares’ eyes flutter closed and he presses my thumbs against his eye sockets.

“Eyes.”

He slides my hands to his shoulders, letting them find their natural grip there. He pauses, the air suddenly heavy. Maybe he realizes how close we’re standing. I know I’m aware of it. I’m also very aware of the tension in his muscles, how hard they are under my hands. I’m aware of the quickness in his breath, how his lips part just a little to let his tongue skim along his bottom lip.

With me still touching his shoulders, he settles his hands on my hips. My body tingles, heat building inside my chest and spreading out, out, out until my limbs prickle like kindling on a new fire.

“What, um... What else? You said there were four.”

The corner of his mouth tweaks up. “You’re a smart girl. Figure it out.”

I try to get my brain to work, but all I can think about is how his hands feel on me, how I wouldn’t mind if he pulled me in closer, if he notched his hips against—

“Oh!” I exclaim, then I use my grip on his shoulders as leverage, raise one knee and swing it directly into his crotch.

Ares lets out a soft ‘ Oof! ’ and since I don’t want to actually hurt him, I hold my knee there — pressing in — without the follow-through.

Of course, this just makes the whole situation even worse. My bare knee scrapes the rough denim of his jeans, and as I lower my leg, the angle forces my thigh to brush right along the firm bulge between his legs. Ares shudders. His throat bobs.

“Good girl,” he says, his voice so low and rough it scrapes across my eardrums and sets goosebumps prickling over every inch of me. I hate the words, but the way he says it? Holy fuck, it’s hot.

He searches my face and sees something there that makes him falter. The heat in his eyes dissolves like smoke and he lets me go, taking a long step back and forcing my hands from his shoulders.

Ares turns his back and crosses the room. The gap between us yawns wide, the sudden coldness making my stomach quiver nervously.

I force out a chuckle. “You think I’m ready to hold my own against all the sickos out there?”

Ares thunks his boot-clad foot up on a chair. He slides something from inside his boot and palms it. I’m surprised when he turns back and holds it out to me.

“Here. Just in case.”

The switchblade is long and narrow, the pointy end still sheathed inside. When I don't move to take it, Ares takes an urgent step closer.

“Delaney. Take it.”

My fingers tremble as I lift it from his palm. It's lighter than I expected it to be and I heft it a couple of times to get a feel for the weight. I don't know what to say. There's a bubble of tightness in my chest that rises into my throat, stopping me from speaking.

Gifts were loaded things in my house after Mama died. Even on birthdays, any present from Dad came with strings; it was an agreement to be good in exchange for something shiny. I think Dad was trying to buy my obedience and my silence. When he realized that didn't work, that he couldn't make me put on a glossy smile and pretend like everything was normal, the gifts stopped and the ‘Delaney is a troubled, angry, liar’ narrative started up.

“I just want you to promise me something,” says Ares. I tear my eyes away from the switchblade and try not to look disappointed — the realization that Ares does want something in return is a hard slap of reality to the face.

“Okay,” I say, hearing the numbness in my own voice. “What do you want?”

Ares' eyes are hard. They bore into me. “Don't hesitate. If you need to use it, you fucking use it. Got it?”

The hardness in my chest softens. I look back to the blade and wrap my fingers around it. Smooth my thumb along the handle. When I find the release, a firm press of my thumb sends the blade popping out with a sharp snick . I stare at it, trying to

imagine what it would feel like to use it against somebody.

“Delaney,” Ares growls impatiently.

“Yes, I promise,” I reply, nodding.

He gives me a stiff nod, then turns away, a hand scrubbing at the back of his neck. “I’m gonna take a shower. Don’t leave the room and—” His eyes flick back, watching warily as I turn the blade over in my hand. “Try not to hurt yourself.”

I grin. “No promises!” I call, as the bathroom door clicks shut.

16

Ares

I called her a good girl. As soon as I let the words out, I realized I'd fucked up. I let my urges get the better of me and I turned what was supposed to be a self-defense lesson into something... Well, something it shouldn't have been.

Shutting myself in the bathroom, I tear off my clothes and jump in the shower before it's warm. The cold water is enough to soften the hard-on I've got growing and I feel a little more clear headed as the lust subsides.

What was it that Sheriff Jackson said?

She can be a good girl when she wants to be.

That was the moment I knew what he had been doing to her. The disgust, the rage, all those feelings I felt in the trailer came rushing back when I said near the same thing to Delaney just now. Only this time I saw myself reflected back in her eyes and my surge of disgust was aimed back at me.

I'm supposed to be protecting her, not forcing her to touch me, getting hard while thinking about how it would be so easy for me to twist her hips and tug her close, get her to grind herself against my thigh. I can almost hear her breathy sounds in my ear as she turns into a whimpering, trembling, mess.

"Goddamnit," I grunt, my cock pulsing.

I'm a perverted piece of shit, no better than Jackson. I turn the hot water off all the way and suffer under the frigid sting for the rest of my quick shower. I have to get out of here before I do something I'll regret. I need to drink something. I need to smoke something. I need to hit something.

Not particularly in that order.

I step out of the bathroom, a towel around my waist. Delaney is perched on the corner of the bed, twirling the closed switchblade in her delicate fingers. Her eyes flash wide when she sees me and I notice her gaze dipping south along my bare chest. It sends another pulse to my dick and I growl, striding over to the bag of new clothes.

"I've gotta go out for a bit," I tell her, as I fish my jeans and t-shirt out.

"But shouldn't we stick together?"

I don't risk a look back, afraid of the expression on her face. Probably that adorable pout she does when she's pissed at me.

"I'm going to get us some wheels. Just keep the door locked and stay inside. You'll be fine."

When I do turn around, my clothes in my fist, she's by the bathroom door, kicking off her sneakers and hugging a fresh folded towel to her chest.

"Fine," she replies. Her expression is flat and controlled again. "Get some food, okay? I'm starving."

I roll my eyes. "What do I look like? Your personal chef?"

“I can always call the front desk. See if Mr. Perv offers room service?”

I try to keep my face blank, but the mention of the leering guy at the front desk makes my jaw twitch. Delaney arcs a brow and I know she’s just fucking with me.

“Yeah, I’ll bring you some goddamn food,” I grumble. “Can you just get in the bathroom so I can get dressed, please?”

Her lips pull into a teasing smile and she swings into the bathroom, one hand on the door jamb. “Aww, you said please. Must mean you like me.”

The door clicks closed and I wait for the shower to go on before I drop the towel.

Summer heat radiates off the asphalt in the motel parking lot. Stepping outside feels like stepping into a furnace. I survey the area, trying to figure out my next move. Aside from the pool hall across the street, this area of town is pretty dead.

I consider the cars in the lot. There’s no point stealing one from here; too close to where we’re laying low, and I’m not confident in my hot-wiring abilities, anyway. When we walked in, along the main road, there were a few properties with cars out front, dusty FOR SALE signs in the windows. With the cash we have left, I can scrape together a one-off payment, but then we’re in the red and we still need money for food and gas and whatever teenage girl shit Delaney needs.

The thought of leaving Delaney behind wriggles in the back of my brain, a worm on the end of a hook. It would be a lot easier to avoid detection and to pay for shit if I only had to worry about myself. That’s what Griff wants me to do.

But I can’t. I know I can’t. Even the thought leaves a bitter taste in my mouth.

Across the street, there's a burst of laughter as two women come stumbling out of the bar, the door swinging closed behind them. Might as well head over, see if they have food. They definitely have something to drink. I glance back at the room to reassure myself that Delaney is safe inside, then I jog across the street.

“What can I getcha?”

The casual confidence of the guy behind the bar makes me believe that he's the owner. He's an older guy, gray hair pulled back in a knot, and he's wearing a shirt with the sleeves torn off, some unintelligible metal band logo on the front.

As I sit on one of the worn leather stools, he pauses his work of unpacking a tray of clean glasses and lays his hands flat on the pock-marked bar.

“Tequila and coke, thanks.”

He nods curtly and scoops ice cubes into a short glass. I look around the bar as he works. It's a far cry from the Wastelander club bar where the sleaze practically oozes from all corners. This place is clean and fairly busy for a weekday afternoon. A waitress shoulders her way through a swinging door, plates of burgers and fries balanced expertly in her arms.

“Anything to eat?” The owner asks, placing my drink on a paper coaster in front of me.

“Got a menu?”

“Sure thing, bud,” he answers, sliding one over. I look at it, but I might as well be looking a blank page. I feel paralyzed. All I'm doing here is stalling for time, for

some new plan to fall from the sky and make everything better.

Sheriff Jackson won't stop looking for Delaney and now he knows I'm with her. Griff wants me to abandon her to her father, but knowing what I know now, I can't do that. Even if I hadn't figured it out, I don't think I could leave her. Not without protection.

That's what I am. A protector. An enforcer. I take the battles of my brothers and make them my own. Right now, that battle is Delaney's. She won't survive this without me.

I pick up the glass, the condensation cooling my fingers, and take a sip. Even for a shitty bar in a shitty town, it's pretty good, and I close my eyes to the spicy sweetness of it rolling down my throat.

"You a fighter?"

Takes me a second to figure out that the owner is talking to me. He moves back and forth behind the bar, popping caps off beers for customers and cleaning up empty glasses, but by the way he's angling back, it seems I've caught his interest.

"Yeah, you look like a fighter," he says, answering himself. "Been around fighters my whole life. You've got this look to you. That, or your plastic surgeon really fucked up your nose job."

I don't know how to respond, whether I should be offended or suspicious that this guy is asking so many questions, but then he swings back to me, bottle of tequila in his hand and drizzles another shot into my glass.

"Ah, sorry. My wife says I should mind my own business. I say, 'What the hell I open a bar for if I wanted to do that?'"

I relax and tilt my refreshed glass to him before taking another, longer, sip.

“Wouldn’t call myself a fighter...”

The owner grins. “I’ve heard that before. I’m Oscar.”

He holds out his hand and I hesitate. Do I give a fake name, my real name, or my real name?

“Ares,” I say, shaking his hand firmly.

“Interesting name.”

“I’m an interesting guy.”

Oscar looks me over, dark eyes seeming to catalog me, taking in everything. I feel a tug of unease in my gut. Oscar is either sizing me up to fight me or fuck me, and I really don’t have the time or interest for either.

“So, Interesting Ares,” he says finally. He tosses a cloth over his shoulder and leans down, elbows on the bar. “You interested in a little fun tonight?”

17

Delaney

I sleep most of the day. It's a surprise to me. I thought maybe I would be too wired up, my body wanting to just keep chugging. But after my shower and after Ares comes back with a bag of greasy food from the bar across the street, we both collapse on our separate motel beds and pass out.

I try hard not to think about him sleeping only a few feet away. Something happened when he was showing me those self-defense moves. That familiar bubbly feeling awakened inside — butterflies flapping wildly in my belly. A tiny part of me thought — had hoped — that he might kiss me.

Then I went and fake kneed him in the balls and ruined the whole goddamn thing.

I'm still thinking about it, even now as we head across the street to the bar. The night is humid, sweat already sticking to my skin and making me feel even more clammy and uncomfortable. I should've worn my dress, but instead I grabbed something from my thrift store haul — denim shorts, a ribbed tank, and a gray checkered flannel shirt. It's too hot to wear the shirt, so I've tied it around my waist and I feel it flapping against the back of my legs as I walk.

Ares strides in front of me. He seems tense, his body a solid mass of black as he cuts through the lone streetlight. His new jeans fit a little too well, and the tight black t-shirt is one of the ones I grabbed for him. I feel weirdly pleased that he chose it, even though it's just a dumb shirt and it doesn't mean anything.

Some rough-looking guys mill around outside the bar, smoking and talking. They quiet down as we approach and Ares slows, slipping to my side like he's done this a million times before. He flattens a hand to the small of my back and urges me forward, shouldering the door open so that I have to squeeze past him to get inside.

It's hot and crowded, the bar's AC pumping overtime to try and cool the place. It's also impossible to hear anything over the music, the chatter, and the loud crack of pool balls breaking.

"Come on," he says, ducking to speak in my ear. "I see an open table over there."

He grabs my hand and my stomach swoops as he leads me through the room. I see some women checking him out as we pass, their eyes lighting up with possibility. But then they see me, see my hand gripped in his, and turn away, lips pursed.

They're jealous. Of me . Of broken, ruined, Delaney Jackson. I bite back my grin as we find a table tucked away in the corner. It's quieter here and I'm happy to sink down into my seat. Ares takes the one across from me, his knees hitting mine under the small table.

"So... You come here often?" I say with a chuckle.

Ares looks up from the plastic menu. "Hmm? What'd you say?"

"Nothing."

What the fuck is wrong with you? I chide myself internally. This isn't a date. Why are you being so weird?

The most hurtful of my thoughts slips through before I can stop it: He wouldn't want you, anyway.

I sigh and slide my own menu towards me. Back home, eating out had been a luxury. Almost every dollar I made went to my 'Get The Fuck Outta Here' stash in my closet. Maybe I'd treat myself to a fast-food burger now and then, but nothing like this.

"They have steak," I say, my eyes going wide as I scan the 'From the Grill' portion of the menu. "I've never had steak," I muse quietly.

Ares looks up, eyebrows raised in disbelief. "You've never had a steak."

I ignore him, my eyes widening even further when I see the price. "Jeez, okay. So that's a no."

I flip the menu over. A shadow slices across the lists of salads and sandwiches and I look up at the waitress. She's closer to Ares' age and very pretty, her brown skin glowing at the high-points with shimmery make-up. She balances a full tray of dirty glasses on one palm, making it look light as air.

"Welcome to Oscar's," she says, making sure to lock eyes with us both. "I'm Shan. Can I get you started on drinks?"

"Shot of tequila," Ares orders. I blink, surprised, expecting him to order a beer or something. Shan nods, then looks to me expectantly.

"Vodka soda, please."

She crinkles her nose apologetically. "Sorry, hon, all out of those. We do have Coke, Diet Coke, Sprite..."

Ares snorts and I shoot him a glare. When I look back to her, Shan gives me a 'Just doing my job' kind of shrug, which I appreciate.

“I’ll take a Coke.”

Ares is still smirking, so before Shan turns away, I flip over my menu again.

“And the steak.”

Turns out I like my steak bloody. I hadn’t known what to say when Shan asked me how I liked it done. ‘Medium’ seemed like the right answer because it’s, you know, in the middle. As I saw into it and pop the first piece in my mouth, I let out a groan. The piece of meat melts on my tongue, flavor exploding and I wiggle in my seat, doing a little happy dance. I glance up and I’m suddenly caught, frozen in Ares’ stare.

“What?” I mumble, my mouth full.

He blinks, then clears his throat and reaches over to grab one of my fries. “Nothing.”

“Hey!” I slide my plate away. “If you wanted food, you should’ve ordered.”

“How can I, when you blew our budget on that half a cow in front of you.”

The steak gets caught in my throat. I cough, forcing it down, and look warily down at the rest.

“Did I really...” I trail off, not knowing what to say. Ares sighs.

“No. Fuck. I’m— I’m kidding, Delaney. It was a joke. I’m not hungry.”

“Oh.” I consider the steak again and start to carve it in half with my knife and fork.

“We can share. Here. I’ll cut you half.”

“Delaney, no.”

And then his hand is there, covering mine and stopping me. He dips his head, finding my eyes, and smiles. The corners of his eyes wrinkle.

“You’re fine. It’s all yours, okay?”

I take a beat, his hand on mine making my throat go tight again, then I nod and keep eating. This time I slow down and make to sure savor it.

Ares orders another drink, this time a beer, and sips it slowly as I finish. He spends equal amounts of time watching me and scanning the bar. I’m not sure what he’s looking for — nobody here knows us, so the threat of Dad finding us here is low. At least that’s what I hope.

“Maybe we could sell the coke,” I say suddenly. Ares whips back to me fast.

“We’re not selling it.”

I shrug and swirl my last bite of steak through the greasy pool slicking the bottom of the plate. “We need cash, right? I figure that’s why you didn’t come back with a car this afternoon.”

“Don’t worry about the money,” he says, shaking his head. “I’ve got it handled.”

Oh, God. Did he already take the drugs and sell them? Maybe he went through my bag? I’m hit with a biting surge of anger at the betrayal. The drugs are my bargaining chip and he doesn’t have the right to touch them.

I motion to the raucous crowd, the night finally in full swing. “Look around, it’ll be easy.”

Ares shifts in his seat again, this time rocking forward until he's bent over the table. He levels me with an intense stare.

"Delaney, we are not selling that coke. Especially here."

"Why not?" I shove my plate away, forcing him to lean back again so he doesn't get steak-juice splashed on him. He groans in annoyance and rakes his fingers through his hair. As his arm moves, my eyes flick to the colorful tattoos inked there. They're a patchwork of symbols, some shaky and faded, some bold and bright. I see a rose with pointed thorns, a black cat, a palm tree and a sun with wavy golden rays. The collection is fuller now than the ones I remember and I wonder what drew him to each design.

"We don't know if there's already a dealer who owns this turf," he says, breaking me out of my stare. "Stepping on toes is not a good idea."

I slump down, reluctant to admit that he's probably right. "Fine. Whatever."

"What's with the attitude?"

I want to say I don't have an attitude, but I do. I'm upset that he's acting like this afternoon never happened. Like something didn't happen between us. I take a deep breath. I shouldn't dwell on it. Nothing good will come of it.

"Can I have a sip of your beer?"

Ares sneaks a glance around, probably looking for Shan, then he slides the bottle to me. I pick it up and take a long swig, my lips pressed over the ghost of his.

"Thanks," I say, pushing the bottle back.

“You drink a lot back home?”

I half shrug and settle back in my chair. My stomach is pleasantly full and even without the comfort of alcohol, I feel relaxed. “Not really. It’s kind of lame to drink alone.”

“A lot of kids party out at the quarry,” he says. He flicks the corner of the peeling beer label with his thumb. “Not that you’re a kid.”

My grin twists wryly. “And what about you? Back when you were my age?”

“Which was not that long ago,” he replies, his look pointed. “We used to go to the field behind the old Harris place.”

“Classy.”

“Don’t knock it ’til you’ve tried it. Laying out in the bed of your buddy’s truck, blanket underneath you, looking up the stars. Warm from the bonfire... and the girl beside you.”

“Sounds idyllic. Did you have working internet back then or did you get all your porn from a dirty magazine you found in the woods?”

Ares tosses my balled up napkin at me and I laugh. I feel like I owe him more than a joke. There’s a tug inside me, a tug to say something real. I stall, rolling my lips between my teeth.

“Everyone at school — before I dropped out, anyway — they’d do stuff like that. I never did.”

“Why not? You didn’t like fun?”

I shrug. “I didn’t like people. People... stare and whisper. They judge you. It was just easier to stay away. Besides, with my dad being who he is, either they were afraid I was a narc, or their parents were afraid I was a bad influence. Couldn’t really win.”

The silence settles between us, heavy and sour with the mention of Dad.

“Why is your sister with your aunt?”

My eyes snap to his, narrowing quickly. “Why? Has Lilly called?” I grab my chair and drag it closer. Beneath the table, my knees bracket one of his, the denim scraping against my bare skin.

“You’d tell me, if she did. Not just hide it from me because it makes your life easier, right?”

Ares holds his hands up in surrender. “Whoa, calm down. It’s just a question.”

It doesn’t feel like just a question. Not when it comes to Lilly. The only good thing left in my life. My eyes stay narrowed, assessing him, but I take a breath. There’s no reason to lie.

“Dad’s sister keeps her most of the time. Has for a few years now.”

“Why?”

“Why do you think? To keep me in line.” I look down and flick my thumbnail against the edge of the table, bitterness rising in my throat. “I get to see her if I’m good.”

Ares makes a noise that I don’t comprehend. When I look up at him, I realize the noise isn’t coming from him. He’s gripping the arms of his chair so hard that the wood is groaning. His knuckles are pure white.

“Aunt Judith, she’s Dad’s sister. She doesn’t really like kids, but he sends her checks every now and then so she puts up with it. When Lilly was born and Mama—” I swallow hard, my throat going tight, “— My mom died, he said it was too much, taking care of both of us. So Aunt Judith took Lilly in. But Lilly’s growing up now and I think the old bat’s finally sick of her, so Dad agreed to take her back full time.”

“When?” Ares asks.

“A couple of weeks,” I reply carefully. My lips tremble and I press them together tightly for a moment. I don’t want to talk about this.

“I’m scared.”

I say the words, yet they don’t feel like mine. It’s like they’re sentient, have been growing inside me for so long that they’ve come alive and have their own desire to be free.

“I’m scared,” my lips say again. “That Dad’s taking Lilly back to replace me, because he can’t control me anymore.”

God, when did my mouth get so dry? I reach for Ares’ beer and he lets me take it. Watches me take a long gulp. When I slam it back on the table, I’m resolute.

“When she gets here, I’m taking her away. We’re leaving and we’re never coming back.”

18

Delaney

Ares doesn't say anything. He just stares. Those cold, storm gray eyes bore into me. Heat prickles over my skin, followed by a bone-deep chill that makes me feel like he's tearing at my seams, pulling me open and studying my insides. Seeing all the ugly, dirty parts of me that I don't want him to know about.

“Anything else for you two?”

Shan's already taking my plate and the empty beer bottle, not acknowledging that it's on my side of the table. I offer her a strained smile.

“I'm good.”

“And you, handsome?”

Handsome. She called him handsome.

Ares relaxes, offering her a lazy, flirty kind of smile that I've never seen on him before. My insides go even colder as he says something back, but my brain glitches and I don't catch it — instead I just focus on the way Shan props her tray on her hip and angles toward him. She was polite before, but now it's different. Heated and flirtatious. Has she decided that me and Ares aren't a couple, that maybe she has a shot with him?

Which, realistically, she does. She's beautiful, confident, put-together. There's no way she's as much of a mess as me. And she didn't get the whole town to believe he was some kind of pervert.

Next thing I know, Shan moves off, promising to return with the bill. Ares watches her go, his eyes flicking to her ass. When he turns back, he must know I've caught him, but he doesn't react.

He wouldn't care anyway, right? He has a right to flirt with anyone he wants, check out anybody. And Shan is... Shan is better for him. Shan makes sense.

"You ready to go?"

"What?"

Disappointment floods my heart. I'd been enjoying our time, with Ares talking to me like a normal person instead of snapping at me or ordering me around. But our night is over. Our date-that-wasn't-a-date.

"It's getting late. You should get some sleep."

I don't feel tired at all, but I can't argue. I feel myself shut down and we sit in silence until Shan brings the bill. Ares pays, and then we both head out. The crowd has thinned out some in the bar, but the lot is still full with cars, even over at the motel.

At the door to our room, Ares unlocks it, flicks on the light and scans the interior before stepping back and letting me in first.

"You want to watch TV or something?" I ask, flopping on my bed. I start to toe off my shoes but stop when I see that Ares is still in the open doorway, his hands deep in his pockets.

“I, ah, I’ll be out for a bit longer. That okay?”

One sneaker tumbles to the carpet.

“Um... No?” I say, tilting my head. “What the fuck do you have to do?”

Ares huffs, nostrils flaring. “None of your business. You’ll be safe, just keep the door locked and the chain on. You’ve got the knife, right?”

I shake my head as I stand and take a few uneven steps toward him, one shoe still on. “Duh,” I reply. “But that doesn’t explain what you’re going to do . You’re just... leaving?”

“Here—” He stalks past me and grabs the pen and notepad from the phone between the two beds. He scribbles something down, then tosses the notepad on my bed. “There’s my number. Anything happens, you call. I’ll be close.”

I stare at his back in disbelief as he retreats to the door. “And what am I supposed to do? Sit here and paint my nails?”

Ares steps outside and makes an irritated noise as he swings back. “Lock the door, Delaney. I’ll be back when I can.”

He closes the door behind him. The silence rings in my ears. What the fuck just happened? I scurry to the door, about to throw it open, but instead I flip back the edge of the curtain on the window and peer out. Ares is already striding across the parking lot — back to the bar.

My gut clenches, anguished and angry.

Shan.

He's going back for Shan.

“Asshole. Fucking asshole.”

I slam the lock on the door, but I don't chain it. Already, a plan is forming in my head — the blurry shape of one, anyway. He's supposed to be protecting me, and instead he's trying to get laid.

Good luck , I think with a smirk. You're going to fucking need it.

I give him twenty minutes, long enough to settle back in with a drink. Maybe Shan will have already come over, striking up a conversation about how he's no longer tied down with his 'little sister' — or whatever excuse he gives her for my presence earlier.

I change back into my dress, which is a little rumpled from being tossed on the floor earlier. I don't have any make-up with me, but I bought a hairbrush at the drugstore and I rake it through my tangles, hoping the final product comes across as 'sexy and voluminous' rather than 'frizzy and unwashed'.

The switchblade is a whole other problem. I don't have a purse, or a pocket. I try to hide it under my dress, tucked into the side of my underwear, but it's too heavy and my plain cotton underwear is too elastic to keep it in place.

In the end, I grab a pair of thick socks from my backpack and put them on with my sneakers, tucking the switchblade against my ankle. It looks a little bulky and out of place for summertime, but it'll have to do.

A few minutes later, I head over to the bar. The beer I finished earlier is still fizzing

in my blood, making me feel giggly and untethered, which works for me.

My plan is patchy and admittedly pretty juvenile. I just want to mess up Ares' little date however I can. I already know this dress attracts pervy scumbags, so what if I just sit at the bar, minding my own business, and Ares is forced to come save me? His job is literally to protect me, not leave me alone in a motel room while he goes and gets his dick wet.

As I push inside, I'm caught off guard by how empty the place is. There's a few scattered patrons and the music pumps loud through the room, which feels odd — like you'd have to shout over it to be heard in the near-empty bar.

Ares is nowhere to be seen. Neither is Shan.

"I guess the dinner rush is over," I mutter as I hop onto a stool at the bar. The bartender, an older guy with a sleeveless metal band shirt, places a fresh coaster in front of me.

"What was that, sweetheart?"

"Nothing," I say, shaking my head. I try my luck and order a drink and the bartender immediately scoops ice into my glass before splashing in vodka and spritzing in the soda. I feel little surge of triumph as he places it down on the coaster.

"Enjoy," he says, flashing me a smile, before moving on to help somebody else.

I sip my drink, the tangy lighter-fluid concoction warming my belly and take another look around for Ares, checking the darkened corners of the room.

There's a burst of noise from across the room. Three guys come stumbling through a plain, unmarked door. They're clearly drunk and they shuffle over to the end of the

bar, shouting obnoxiously for service. The bartender grimaces and strides over to the drunks.

I look around for Ares. Could I have missed him in a dark corner somewhere? Maybe I'm too late and he and Shan have already disappeared to be together. Bitter jealousy stings in my gut.

“Another, sweetheart?”

The bartender is back. I nod and push my empty glass toward him.

“Yes, please.”

“You waiting on someone?” he asks as he dumps out my glass and refills it with fresh ice and a slice of lime. “Let me guess, blind date?”

“Something like that,” I reply. I'm tempted to ask if he's seen Ares, or even Shan, but that's going to look way too suspicious. I land on a question that might get me a little closer to what I want to know.

“Are you guys still serving food?”

The bartender puts my drink down in front of me and shakes his head. “Nope, kitchen's closed for the night. Everyone's gone home.”

“Except you.”

“Except me, yep.”

I pick up my drink and take a sip. He's gone home with her, then. The realization is painful, like a knife slipping between my ribs. I take another mouthful and nod, my

cheeks bulging with drink.

“Mmm-hmm.” Swallow. Cough. Sputter. “That’s good. That’s great.”

The bartender eyes me carefully. “You alright there? Need a glass of water?”

Maybe. Yes. My head is swimming, the alcohol is hitting me too hard and too quickly. It forces my true feelings to rise to the surface is ugly, shameful clarity: I thought that Ares kind of, maybe , was starting to like me, but I was an idiot.

I shake my head.

“No, I’m good. But, I was wondering if you had... Is there a phone around here somewhere? Like a payphone?”

Screw Ares’ rules. If he lied to me about what he was doing tonight, he probably lied about putting Lilly’s number in his phone. If I asked to call her, he’d probably say no.

Asshole.

“Well, there’s no payphone,” the bartender says, scratching his bearded chin. “But, here— How about this, I’ll let you use the landline. Free of charge.”

He steps away for a moment, then returns with a cordless phone. He holds it out, offering me a small, pitying smile. As I reach for it, he pulls it back. “Is it long-distance?”

“Does Omaha count?”

I must look pathetic — drunk and pathetic — because he smiles kindly as he hands the phone over. “Take as long as you need, sweetheart.”

He walks away, leaving me to stare at the phone in my hand. It takes me a second to remember Aunt Judith's number, and I dial with clumsy fingers. I listen to the ring and down another mouthful of vodka soda.

"H-hello? Who is this?" Aunt Judith's voice is rusty with sleep.

"Fuck, sorry, I forgot it was late. I— Aunt Judith, it's me. It's Delaney."

"Delaney? Why on God's earth... Do you know what time it is?"

"I'm sorry. Really. Can I speak to Lilly, please?"

"It's— Gosh, it's gone eleven!"

I roll my eyes. Aunt Judith probably tucked herself in as soon as it hit seven fifteen. I hated visiting her as a kid — too many rules, always desperate to have everything appear perfect, even if it wasn't. I hate that Lilly's been stuck there for so long, but at least living with Judith is better than living with Dad.

"Does your father know you're placing calls this late at night?" Aunt Judith asks, as if making telephone calls after dark is in the same league as selling drugs on street corners.

"No, yes—" I stutter. "Just... can I please speak to Lilly? It'll only be for a minute. I just want to make sure that she's okay."

"And why wouldn't she be okay?" Aunt Judith squawks. "I am all that child has, and you're accusing me of—"

"All she has?" I snap, stunned. "I'm her fucking sister, you old bitch."

Aunt Judith makes a series of incomprehensible sounds. I jab the phone to hang up and set it down. Blood whooshes in my ears.

What the fuck is wrong with me? Why do I screw everything up?

I fold forward, my head thunking on the bar.

“I wouldn’t do that,” comes the bartender’s kindly voice. I roll my head to the side and blink up at him through my curtain of hair.

“My face is sticky,” I reply dully.

“Yeah, that’s why I said I wouldn’t do that.”

I sigh and force myself back up. Okay, I’m definitely a little past tipsy now. I look around the bar a final time — my weird longing for Ares pulsing in my chest — and spot the unmarked door, the one those drunks came tumbling out of earlier. It’s cracked open and strangely dark inside. It’s the only place Ares could be.

“I think I’m gonna go,” I say, sliding off the stool. I pull a crumpled bill from the front of my dress and toss it down.

“Keep the change.”

“You’re actually short,” the bartender says, punching some keys into the register.

“But don’t worry about it. You get home safe, okay, sweetheart?”

I snort. Where I come from, home and safe aren’t words that belong in the same sentence. I nod and thank him anyway, then pretend to make my way to the front door. Glancing back, I see him move off down the bar, so I take my chance and dart for the mysterious door.

I reach for the handle and almost get my head knocked off when it comes flying open again. I jolt back as a man and a woman come sweeping out, mid-conversation. The swampy smell of sweat and booze — as well as something coppery and sharp — exits with them, along with the noise. A distant roar.

I don't give myself time to think, to even consider what I could be walking into, and I dart around the couple and through the door. I let it bang shut behind me.

I blink into the murky darkness. The walls feel close and I place my hand out to steady myself as my eyes adjust. A dim lightbulb hangs a few feet ahead, lighting the way down a set of cement steps. Heat and light pulse up from the bottom.

The roar is even closer now, muffling all other sound. Now I know why the music is so loud out in the bar; it must be to cover this other noise — whatever it is.

My feet carry me down the steps, my heart jack-hammering all the way. I'm almost at the last step when I realize what that smell is. The one mingling with B.O. and beer. It's a tangy, sharp smell that connects to some primal kind of fear inside me, telling me to turn around and get the fuck out of here.

It's blood.

The stairs open up into a basement. Wooden crates are stacked in the corners and pipes hang from the ceiling. Oh, and it's packed with people. Drunk, shouting, screaming people. Some asshole jostles into me and warm beer sloshes down my arm.

“Watch it!”

My words don't even make it to my ears, that's how fucking loud it is down here. The crowd surges, all cheering at something in the center of the room. Suddenly I'm

pushed from behind. A wave of people press me forward, sweeping me off my feet. Panic claws at my chest. I try to suck in a breath but my lungs are tight, unable to expand.

Crowd crush. I'd read about it, seen it in the news when some concert venue didn't take the necessary precautions to keep people safe. I never thought it'd happen to me. As dark spots start to dance on the edges of my vision, I summon all my strength and jab my elbow into the gut of the person behind me. The pressure eases up, just a little, and my thankful feet find the floor.

I suck in a breath, sour air filling me, and I wiggle my way through the crowd, looking for an exit. I push forward, easier to work with the crowd than to fight it, and I find myself moving towards a noise I hadn't noticed before. A repeating wet thwack.

Light. Brilliant, beautiful light. I stumble to a stop, suddenly at the front of the writhing audience, and my brain grinds to a halt. I can't move, can't blink. I just stare, slack-jawed, at the sight in front of me.

Sweat rolls down his naked back, his inked skin glistening with every flex of his taut and primed muscles. His jeans hang low around his narrow hips as he bounces barefoot across the scuffed floor. His mouth is a grim slash, his jaw sharp, his eyes shadowed by his furrowed brow.

I hated Sunday school when I was a kid. Was never interested in learning about Bible stories or the Ten Commandments. But I still know a sin when I see it, and Ares' body is all sin.

He pulls back his fist, his knuckles raw and bloody, and lets fly, connecting hard against the jaw of his opponent in the makeshift ring. The sound is stomach-churning — wet and fleshy.

The other guy stumbles and the crowd Ooohs in anticipation, but he recovers fast and swings back, his hit just as hard against Ares' jaw. Like he's made of stone, Ares doesn't even flinch. He snaps forward, pummeling his opponent with a flurry of razor-sharp jabs until the guy's face is a mask of blood. He struggles on wobbly legs — one last hit knocking him clean out — and lands with a heavy thud on the cold floor. The crowd explodes — both with cheers and howls of frustrated defeat. Money passes hands.

Ares stands in the middle of the ring, oblivious to the chaos his win has caused. His hands are still curled into fists at his sides. His chest heaves with jagged breaths. He swipes at the sweat on his brow with his wrist, letting his golden hair fall to obscure his eyes.

I can't stop staring.

19

Ares

The old guy behind the bar had been right. Just by looking at me, he could tell that I'm a fighter. It's what I've done all my life — scrapping in the schoolyard, my anger burning inside me like a fire. It's what I do for the Wastelanders, although they've taught me to be calculated, how to rein in that anger until just the right moment. But this? Fighting here, in this shitty, small town fight club, it's a chance to finally let that anger out. Let it breathe.

Beating this guy feels good. With every bone-quaking blow I deliver, I imagine that it's Sheriff Jackson on the receiving end. I imagine that I'm caving in his face, making him bleed, doling out justice for what he's done to Delaney.

The guy goes down hard and the explosion of the crowd brings me back to reality. To this dim, sweat-fogged room. I saunter to the edge of the ring, taking deep breaths to stretch my chest, and mentally check myself for injuries. The adrenaline in my veins is too thick and potent for me to notice any pain.

Hands land on my sweaty back — heavy pats of congratulations. Not everyone is happy, though. Half the crowd wants me dead, the other half — the ones that bet on the mysterious newcomer — want to hoist me on their shoulders and celebrate the money they've just made. I just want to get back to the motel room. Back to Delaney. I hated leaving her. Maybe I should have explained what I was doing, but then she'd have wanted to tag along, and there's no way that was fucking happening. I couldn't bring her here, down to this shithole. She deserves better than that.

Then, across the ring: spots of yellow flowers on a white dress, a halo of curls, two shimmering green eyes.

I blink and scrub a hand over my eyes like it'll clear away the hallucination, but it's her.

“What the fuck?” I yell across the ring. She holds up a hand. An innocent little wave.

Hands. There are hands on her. Slithering over her shoulders, pulling her back into the crowd. Her mouth drops open in shock and she struggles against the guy who's far too drunk to care about her no. Then, like she's being swallowed beneath roaring ocean waves, she's gone.

I ignore the next bout that's starting, tearing through the middle of the ring. I plunge into the crowd, sending shocked, drunken patrons scattering.

“Delaney!”

I can't see her. Can't find her. My heart is loud and sharp in my chest.

There! Another flash of yellow and white. That little fucking dress. I growl and surge forward, swatting people aside. I break through to the back of the room, just in time to see Delaney jab her sharp fist into some guy's nose. His shriek is covered by a burst of noise from the crowd — the next fight already underway — and he rocks back, blood spritzing from between his fingers as he clutches at his face. I twist my fists in his shirt and slam him against the wall. His skull makes a sharp crack and he howls again.

“Fuckin' 'itch! B'oke mah noz!”

Delaney pops up at my side. Light glints off the switchblade in her hand. “How about

I cut your dick off? That'll make the nose pretty inconsequential, huh?"

The guy sneers, his teeth stained red. "You're done," he says. "You're both out of the room tonight or I'm calling the cops."

I recognize him now: the creep from the front desk at the motel. Something dark and vengeful slithers around my heart. I could just kill him. He deserves it. For touching Delaney, for putting his filthy hands on her. Then she'd be safe from him.

I lean closer, flashing my teeth in a snarl. "Can't call the pigs if you're dead."

Beside me, Delaney stills. "Ares....," she says warningly.

"Okay, okay," the motel clerk stutters. "I won't call the cops, okay? I won't. Just leave and I won't call 'em. I swear!"

I move in, close enough that I can smell fresh blood and cheap beer on his breath. He shudders, terrified.

"Liar."

"Ares, come on," Delaney hisses. She touches my arm, her nails digging in. My skin twitches under that little spark of pain and I tilt my head to look at her.

"He's not worth it," she says quietly.

But you are , a voice in my head replies.

I untangle myself from the guy's shirt and push off him. A flash of silver catches my eye — the switchblade dangles limply in Delaney's hand. I growl under my breath and snatch her wrist, prying the blade from her.

“Give me that,” I snap, as she squeaks an indignant, “Hey!”

I fold down the blade with a smooth movement and tuck it in my back pocket.

“Let’s go,” I bark at her. With my fingers wrapped tight around her wrist, I drag her to the stairs. The motel creep staggers forward and hocks a glob of congealing blood onto the floor.

“Don’t want no frigid pussy anyway! Little bitch!”

I move too fast for him to react. One moment, I’m walking away from him, the next I have the switchblade flicked open and I’m slashing a line across his face.

He howls, blood cascading from the slice through his bottom lip.

“Next time it’ll be your fucking tongue.”

The gravel of the bar’s parking lot bites into my bare feet. I barely flinch. All I feel is Delaney’s wrist in my hand and the swishing of her dress against my jeans as she tries to keep up with me.

“Wait! Just— Ares, wait!”

“For what?” I bark, ignoring her attempts to slow us down. “You want to wait around? Because that asshole’s definitely calling the cops now.”

“No, I just... For God’s sake, will you stop!” She puts on the brakes, her sneakers skidding on the gravel.

I stop, because the next stage of her protest is probably throwing herself on the ground and the last thing we need is somebody calling the police because they see an angry, shirtless man dragging a struggling girl in a pretty dress along the ground in the middle of the night.

She makes everything worse.

I feel sick that I could even think that, but it's partly true. She's the reason my hometown looks at me like a pervert and a creep.

My grip loosens and she slips free, absentmindedly rubbing at her wrist.

I hurt her.

Despair floods me and I drop my chin to my chest, pulling a long breath in through my nose. All I do is hurt people. It's the only thing I'm good at.

"Thank you for saving me. He just grabbed me and I froze and then you appeared and it was... Just, thanks, okay?"

I take another breath and lift my head. Her eyes are big, lashes fluttering like she's trying not to cry. God, he really scared her. Or maybe I did?

"You seemed to be doing okay," I say with a shrug. "Threatening to cut his dick off?"

Her lip quirks. "Adding my own flair to your self-defense lesson."

I snort and turn away. The haze of adrenaline is clearing now, leaving me wondering what the hell we're going to do. If Griff were here, if Reaper were here, they'd tell me that this is the perfect opportunity to walk away. Delaney is a magnet for trouble, and the Wastelanders don't need any more of that.

“So, what do we do now? We can’t stay at the motel.”

“Hell if I know,” I huff. My body is starting to ache now, a bone-deep tiredness that’s going to be impossible to shake if I keep going like this.

“Hey!”

My body reacts faster than my brain and I grab Delaney again, yanking her behind me. I whip around to the approaching figure.

It’s Oscar. He pulls up a few yards away, one hand raised, the other clutching my boots and my shirt.

“Whoa, man,” he says on an awkward chuckle. “I just wanted to catch you before you disappeared. Saw you run outta there without your stuff.”

He sets the boots down and he digs something else out of his back pocket. A folded stack of bills. “Here’s your cut. I threw in a little extra, an incentive to come back next week.”

I hesitate, then snatch my payment and my shirt, giving him a curt nod. Oscar’s eyes flick to Delaney for a moment. It’s a moment too long, in my opinion, and it makes my lip twitch into a snarl. Oscar clocks it.

“You two got somewhere to stay tonight?” he asks, surprising me.

“We’re good,” I reply, just as Delaney edges forward, saying “Actually, no.”

Oscar raises an eyebrow. He considers something, his body swinging back to the bar like he’s considering just going back inside and forgetting all about us. He scratches at his stubbled chin.

“I don’t know your situation. Don’t want to know, truthfully, but you seem like good kids. The bar has a room around back. Used to be a studio apartment, all done up for AirBB or whatever it’s called, but the wiring’s all screwed up, so the power’s spotty, so we never... Anyway, safe place to stay for the night.”

A new hiding place, dropped right in our laps. Do I trust Oscar enough to take him up on this? He did bring me my cut instead of just pocketing it, but if motel douche does call the cops, we’ll be right across the street when they show up, which isn’t much safer than being out in the open.

Delaney presses closer, the length of her arm warming mine.

“Thank you, we appreciate it,” she says.

I guess that’s it, then. Oscar nods once. “Up the stairs ‘round back. Key’s above the door.”

A moment later, he’s gone, the door to the bar swinging closed behind him. We’re alone again and I still have Delaney’s delicate wrist in my hand. I can feel her pulse racing; her rabbit-heart making music against my skin. Everything else is still, the music from the bar the only thing breaching the night air.

She sways a little on her feet and I look down at her, finally getting a good look at her eyes. They’re unfocused and glassy. How the fuck did she get drunk?

“Come on.”

I grab my boots and drag Delaney around the corner of the building. There’s a dumpster against the brick wall, and behind that, a set of wooden stairs hidden in shadow.

I drop her hand and shove my feet into my boots.

“The fuck are you doing here, anyway?” I mumble. I prop my foot on the wall and tie up the laces. I hear Delaney shift nervously behind me.

“Me? What about you— You and, and— all this !”

I turn around to find her waving her hand at me, as if that explains what she’s trying to say. I look down, my chest is speckled with blood that’s not mine. I press my lips into a tight line and quickly yank on my t-shirt. It sticks uncomfortably to my clammy skin.

“I was getting us cash. I told you to stay in the room. Why don’t you ever fucking listen?”

“I thought—” Her mouth slams closed.

“Thought what?”

“Nothing, never mind,” she mumbles. She hugs her arms around herself. Anger flares in me.

“Never mind?” I bark, taking a long stride towards her. Her eyes flick up to mine, flashing wide. “Are you kidding me right now? I told you to stay put, and instead I see you getting pawed at by some asshole.”

“I... I was handling it.”

I snort and look away, the anger inside turning into something possessive. “I should’ve ripped his throat out,” I mutter darkly.

“Why?”

Her question catches me off guard. Simple and innocent. I look back at her, to her eyes softening, her lips parting. The night around us is hot, making it hard to breath. I suck air through my teeth.

“Because he touched you. Nobody’s allowed to touch you.”

Her lip trembles and her throat bobs with a nervous swallow. “I thought you might be with Shan.”

“Who?”

“The waitress. From earlier.”

“Why the hell would you think that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, I wasn’t.”

“Clearly.” She pauses. Chews on her lip. God, I need her to stop doing that. Her bottom lip is plump and rosy. It shines with her spit as it pops loose from between her teeth. “How much did you get?”

It takes me a second to understand her question, but I can’t focus. I still haven’t gotten what I want from my own question and it buzzes in my head, an insect going around and around.

“Why would you care?”

“About what?”

“If I was with some fucking waitress,” I snap.

She swallows again. Her tits rise and fall, practically busting out of that dress. That fucking Little Miss County Fair dress. I want to bend her over in that dress. I want to do fucking filthy things to her in that dress.

But I can't. Goddamnit, I can't. Even my own mind recoils in horror at the things I'm imagining. I can't do any of that with her, no matter how much my caveman-self wants to. I take a step forward. My hands find her arms. Hold her tight. A little shake and she squeaks in surprise.

“Answer me.”

I'm playing with fire, but I can't stop myself. This is different kind of fight to the one in the basement, one I'm losing. Delaney takes a shuddering breath.

“B-because I was j-jealous. Of the way you looked at her.”

“And how did I look at her?”

“Like you wanted her. I want...”

Her tongue flicks out, wetting her bottom lip to make it shiny again. My fingers dig into her flesh. I'm probably getting blood on her, I can smell it in the air.

“Say it.”

“I want you to look at me like that. I want you to want me.”

It happens too fast. Like a freak wave slamming into the shore. I crush my mouth against hers, greedy and desperate. Her lips part and a soft, needy whine drifts to my ears, making my dick pulse. I sweep my tongue across her lips and she welcomes me in, her head lolling back. I sweep one hand up her arm, across her shoulder, and tangle it in her hair at the back of her neck, gripping her firmly and holding her in place. I can't stop. Don't want to ever, ever stop.

Next thing I know, I spin her around and I push her up against the wall. She moans into my mouth and rocks forward, her body lining up with my own. I buck my hips, grinding my cock against her stomach. She whimpers, her body shuddering all over.

“Ares,” she sighs. It's a sweet sound. Innocent .

My eyes fly open and it's over as quickly as it started. I spring back, horror slamming into me. My eyes dart over her face to assess the damage.

“Fuck, Delaney. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.”

I think I mumble it a few more times. She just blinks at me, eyes glassy. Her lips are puffy and wet from my mouth.

I wonder if her lips look like that after she's been sucking cock.

I rear back and drag my hands through my hair, tugging at the ends and gripping tight, like I want to tear the thoughts right out of my head.

She's drunk. She's fucking drunk and I... I still want to kiss her, touch her, watch her break under me.

I'm a piece of shit.

Whatever cloud she's standing in clears and Delaney straightens up. She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. I need to fix this. I need to fix it before she freaks out and takes off. I can't protect her if she's afraid of me. I take a breath.

"Delaney, are you okay? I... I shouldn't have done that."

"Why not?"

She tilts her head, a line creased between her eyebrows.

"It's my job to protect you and I... Jesus Christ, Delaney, can't you just be mad? Slap me or something. Kick me in the balls."

"I kissed you back."

She did. She did kiss me back. The thought flutters uselessly. A dying bird trying to fly. I shake my head.

"You don't know what you're doing."

Something about that makes Delaney change. Her curious expression goes flat. Her eyes empty.

"Because I've been abused," she says coldly.

I swallow down the bile that rises. "Look, I'm sorry," I say. I step up to her and slowly put my hands on her shoulders. I probably shouldn't touch her again, for my own sake, but I need to make her understand that this touch is different, that I'm different. "I promise, you don't have to worry about me."

Her eyes narrow and she shrugs back, forcing my hands away. "I don't have to worry

about what, Ares? You grooming me? Raping me?" A brittle laugh bursts from her lips. "That's good, because I was real worried about that."

I feel like she's slapped me, I'd prefer it if she did. The sting of her words is more painful.

"I'm not broken, Ares," she spits angrily. She comes at me and I scramble to back up. As she keeps talking, she keeps coming, forcing the space between us to shrink.

"I'm not fucking broken," she says again. "No matter what you and everybody else might think. I know when I want to kiss somebody. I know when I want to fuck somebody. Maybe some survivors shut down, maybe they need to protect themselves like that, but that doesn't mean we're all the same."

My back slams into the side of the dumpster and she stops, a few feet away. She looks away from me and I see her face change, the anger replaced by a sudden wash of sadness. For a second, she looks far older than eighteen.

"I know what my father did was disgusting and wrong, but you know what it wasn't? It wasn't kissing. It wasn't fucking. It wasn't making love. It was violence."

Her face tilts to me again, eyes glittering in the dark. "And it doesn't make me disgusting and wrong to want kissing and fucking and making love. Okay?"

I'm frozen. Pinned in place under her stare. My heart pounds against my chest and my pulse roars in my ears in the silence she's left. Words catch my throat. The words I really want to say.

Okay. I get it. Okay, okay, okay.

And then I want to take her in my arms and kiss her and fuck her and make love to

her.

But instead, I say something else.

“I’m sorry, Delaney. I.... I can’t.”

20

Delaney

“Must use this place for storage,” Ares mutters.

The door to the apartment is open behind us, white moonlight cascading in and elongating our shadows on the dusty floor. The place is cluttered with disused restaurant furniture: tables with missing legs and the tops of bar seats with vinyl so cracked that the stuffing spews out like the poplar tree fluff that floats in the air in spring time.

“Cozy,” I reply dully. I smooth out my dress, then tug at the straps. My skin itches in it now, the fabric chafing under my arms. There must be something wrong with it — it felt so comfortable before, made me feel pretty and confident, but now I can’t wait to tear it off and never put it on again.

I move around Ares. There’s an old lumpy couch, a dusty kitchenette and an open door that shows a tiled floor and the corner of a sink. There might not be electricity but hopefully there’s hot water.

“I’m going across the street to get our stuff,” Ares says from the doorway. There’s the clink of metal on something and I look behind me to see him leaving the switchblade on the kitchen counter.

“I’ll lock the door,” he says. “Stay inside and don’t go anywhere.”

“Okay,” I reply, turning away.

“I mean it this time, Delaney.”

I give him a thumbs up over my shoulder. Juvenile, I know, but my throat is getting tight and every word threatens to come out as a strained squeak. The door closes, the key scraping in the lock, and then I’m grabbing at my dress, pulling and tugging and tearing to get the thing off because I can’t wear it another fucking second.

I give up on the zip and just yank it over my head, but my arms get tangled and the dress covers my face, fabric folding over my mouth like a hand trying to silence me.

I can’t breathe. That guy grabbed in me in this dress. Stared at my tits in this dress. Ares rejected me in this dress. I need it off.

I jerk my elbows out sharply and am rewarded with the sound of seams ripping. The dress loosens and I manage to finally get it off. I throw it across the room, into some dark corner where it’ll stay.

“Idiot,” I say, staring at the pile of fabric on the floor. I’m an idiot for thinking that a dress would make Ares see me differently. That it would make him want me. Sighing, I turn for the bathroom.

I leave the door open, letting what little light there is outside filter in. The shower controls take a minute to find and I fumble blindly over the tile until I find them. The pipes shake and groan, but then clean, warm water gushes out and smacks loudly into the bottom of the tub.

“Thank fuck,” I mutter to myself as I peel off my underwear.

I fall silent as I tilt my face under the water, letting it wash away the sting of Ares’

rejection. Maybe it's because I'm still kinda drunk, but my heart aches more than usual. It's a tender, bruised feeling that pushes deeper into the core of me with every moment that passes.

I'm sorry, Delaney. I can't.

He can't, whatever that means. Can't be with me, can't love me, can't treat me like a normal girl — because I'm not normal. I never will be.

A shuddering sob explodes from my lips and I collapse to the bottom of the tub. Everything's gone wrong, right from the start.

Dad's coming after me.

My plan didn't work.

I've put Lilly in danger.

The thought of Lilly wrenches my heart open and a new round of tears mingle with the water pouring down on me. I wrap my hands around my knees and sit there, paralyzed. Like a loser. Like a failure. God, what would Mama think of me if she saw me now?

“Delaney? What are you— Shit.”

The tap squeaks off. Water gurgles down the drain, drips off my chin and the ends of my hair. Hands, big and warm, touch me hesitantly between my shoulder blades. Ares' face bobs into my view as he crouches by the side of the tub.

“Can you hear me? Baby, look at me.”

Baby.

A thin sliver of pleasure twists like a tendril around me. Warms me up. I turn my head. Ares sighs, his jaw tight.

“I called for you. You didn’t answer and I— Fuck, I don’t know, I thought you’d climbed out the window or something. Instead you’re just... having a leisurely spa day?”

His mouth twitches at the joke, but there’s just sadness in his eyes. Pity.

“I’m fine,” I say. My voice sounds far away.

Ares shakes his head. He looks around, mutters something under his breath that sounds like ‘No fucking towels’ and retreats out of the room. As he leaves, the cold seeps in. Deep and icy. I start to shiver, my teeth chattering. And then he’s there again, folding something around me, helping me stand and then hoisting my naked body into his arms.

Slowly, as I nuzzle into his chest and breathe in the filth and sweat and blood that’s quickly becoming the smell I associate with Ares, I start to feel myself returning to the here and now. I thought I would be embarrassed or uncomfortable to be cradled like a child, completely naked and helpless, but instead — Shit, could this be turning me on? I’m so angry at him, and yet a low- down warmth sparks and spreads as Ares carries me into the other room.

“Come on, kid, you’re scaring me.”

“Not a kid,” I mumble. We drop, dust tickling my nose, and I realize that Ares has set me down on the couch, with me cradled in his lap. He adjusts something to cover my chest, one of his large black t-shirts, and smooths back my damp hair. I must be

getting his chest all wet, but he doesn't seem to care.

“Why are you doing this?”

“Doing what?” he replies, frowning down at me. There's a huskiness to his voice. It vibrates deep in my chest. It's a sound, a feeling, that makes my pussy ache with need.

“Taking care of me?”

“Because you need someone to take care of you,” he replies simply.

I take a deep breath, my spine arching into his hold. His arms tighten around me.

“Then why won't you... Why don't you want me?”

Ares closes his eyes for a moment and lets his head drop back before looking at me again to answer.

“Delaney, what part of me being hard as a rock right now tells you that I don't want you? You're fucking perfect, okay?”

Oh. Oh, he is hard. His erection is pressing against my hip. I feel his heart thundering against my own ribs as I nuzzle closer to him.

“Then kiss me again,” I say.

Ares' breath ghosts over my face. His tongue flicks out to swipe at his lower lip as his eyes — God, the path they trace over my face, down my throat, to the swell of my breasts... Then his eyes shutter and I know I've lost him.

“No.”

Anger pulses hot and bright, rivalling my arousal.

“Fine,” I snip, and I wriggle off his lap, filling the space on the opposite end of the couch. “Then you’d better leave because I’m upset and turned on and I feel like relieving a little stress.”

I shift back against the armrest and fling off the t-shirt he’d draped over me. Ares makes a startled noise, like he’s choking, and springs off the couch.

“Jesus Christ, Delaney,” he rumbles, swiping a hand over his face, maybe so he’s not tempted to stare at my nakedness. “You’re a fucking mess, you know that?”

I don’t think he means it unkindly and it curls my lips into a smirk. “I know,” I reply.

Ares grabs the shirt from the floor and throws it at me. “Put that on.”

“Why? You don’t want to see me touch myself?”

Ares is quiet for a long, heated moment. He finally looks at me, good and hard, raking over every inch of my exposed skin. I let my knees fall open and he inhales sharply, eyes glued between my legs.

“I want...” He swallows hard. “I want to see you touching yourself... while you’re wearing my shirt.”

I bite back my smile and pick up the shirt, slipping it over my damp skin. It’s big on me, obviously, but what I like even more is the fact that it’s his . I nod to the vacant spot on the couch.

“You gonna join me?”

Ares clears his throat and looks around the dim space. He grabs a chair and drags it to the center of the room. He's too far for me to touch him, though I guess that's the point. He settles down, spreading his meaty thighs and folding his arms across his chest, as if waiting for me to impress him.

I laugh. "You want a show, huh?"

"I want you to stop playing around. This is your one chance, Delaney, because this isn't happening again."

"Oh, so this is for my benefit? Got it. I'll get started then."

I take a deep breath and stretch out. I keep the hem of the shirt draped between my thighs, hiding what he's already seen. My fingertips tickle the sensitive skin on my inner thighs and I slide them up, up, up — finally disappearing under the fabric.

"Pull it up," Ares orders gruffly. I pause, surprised that he's chosen to join in so quickly — or at all — but I happily comply. Lifting the shirt to my hips, I watch him watch me. My pussy is slick and warm and I tease myself slowly, playing with my clit and enjoying the added thrill of Ares' focus.

The chair creaks as Ares shifts. "You ever..." He stops. Clears his throat. "You ever finger yourself?"

My stomach swoops. I nibble at my bottom lip for a moment, then lower my fingers to my entrance. "What, like this?" I ask, mockingly innocent, and then I push two fingers inside myself. I throw my head back. It stings sweetly, my body not quite ready for it, but I keep going, pumping languidly.

Ares lets out a caught breath. "Fuck..."

The room fills with the sound of my wetness. Should I be embarrassed? I'm not sure. All I know is that I feel desired and dirty in a way that makes me light up on the inside. I can feel myself edging towards an orgasm and I'm torn between chasing it and holding it off. I don't want this to end, but God, I also want Ares to see me come.

"Lift the shirt, Delaney," he says, taking charge of my thoughts.

I snap to him. His eyes are half-lidded and he's shifted now, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees like he's watching the most enchanting thing in the world. He tilts his head.

"You hear me? I said lift the fucking shirt. I want to see your tits."

A shiver runs down my spine. His cruel, degrading tone sends a flood of wetness between my legs and I whimper in surprised delight. Rucking the t-shirt up over my breasts, I pinch the hardened peaks of my nipples.

"It feels... God, it feels so good, Ares. Want you to touch me like this."

"No," he snaps. "Keep fucking yourself on your hand. Tell me when you're about to come."

I smile, panting a little as I feel myself getting closer. "You want to give me permission?"

Ares exhales sharply through his nose. "Like you'd wait for my permission," he says. "No, you need it too badly, don't you? Greedy little slut."

My answering groan is deep and animal. Yes, maybe I am a slut. Maybe I am what everyone thinks I am: a liar, a deviant, a bad, bad girl. Maybe it's okay. Maybe it's fucking perfect.

I touch my clit. Tingling pin-pricks radiate out. I try to keep my eyes open, to focus on Ares, but I'm too close.

“Ares... Oh, fuck, Ares—”

I go completely stiff, my mouth open in a silent scream as I come around my still fingers. The wave of pleasure pulses and fades slowly, leaving me twitching and sensitive. My eyes flutter open... Just in time to see Ares' empty chair and the bathroom door click shut behind him.

21

Ares

I yank my jeans open and shove them down my thighs. Wrapping my hand around my cock I jerk myself off with sharp strokes, chasing the release that's Right. Fucking. There. All it takes is the memory of Delaney, spread out for me with her fingers shoved so deep inside that pink, glistening cunt that it was like she was fucking herself with her whole hand.

I tense, my teeth grinding, and cum splatters across the wall in a rush of ecstasy. The relief is a blip, followed almost immediately by regret.

What the fuck did I just do?

I promised myself I wouldn't be that man. That she would be safe with me. That I wouldn't touch her... But I didn't touch her. Not technically.

I crank on the shower and shed my clothes, jumping in to wash off the sweat and cum and shame. I try not to think about Delaney's naked body, or those big green eyes, or that choked little gasp that left her as she climaxed. By the time I step out, I don't feel any better. In fact, there's one thought that I can't shake: that if I'm given the chance, I'd do it all over again.

Delaney gives me a meek little smile when I emerge from the bathroom. I ignore her,

going over to my bag and rifling around for some underwear and sweats I can exchange for my jeans, which cling uncomfortably to my damp skin. I find what I'm looking for and glance at her over my shoulder. Raise an eyebrow. She huffs and flips on the couch, giving me her back for some privacy as I change. Luckily I don't get a view of her naked ass, as she's slipped into a pair of shorts. Still wearing my t-shirt, though. A low hum of pleasure rises in me, seeing her like that. Wearing my stuff like she's... Like she's mine or something. I bite back an annoyed growl and turn my back on her.

Later, after I've made a makeshift pillow from our extra clothes, I settle down on the floor beside the couch. Moonlight streams through the dusty windows, casting everything in a dull silvery glow.

"I shouldn't have done that," I tell the ceiling. Delaney makes a non-committal noise.

"What? What's that for?"

She sighs. "Nothing. Just that you seem to like saying that after the fact. Like after you kissed me, after you made me come..."

"I didn't make you—"

"Oh, trust me. That was all you," she purrs.

I clench my jaw and huff out my nose, ignoring that hum again: pleasure, triumph, pride.

"Does it make you feel better? Saying that you shouldn't have done it?"

"Fuck off," I snap.

“Make me,” she replies.

I know I’m not going to be able to fall asleep now. Not with her there beside me; even with the space between us, I feel her. It pisses me off and there’s nobody to blame but myself. Okay, maybe I can blame Delaney a little bit as well. But if I really wanted her gone, Griff has given me permission. Hell, he’s ordered it. I could slip out while she’s sleeping, leave her with some money, ask Oscar to drive her to the bus station...

“What are you thinking about?”

“Jesus Christ,” I groan, rolling over on the hard floor. “Are we really doing this? What, you want to re-live your high school slumber party days or something?”

Delaney laughs softly. “Want to braid my hair?”

Even in the low light, I see the smile melt on her lips. She frowns as she stares up at nothing, deep in thought. I should stay quiet. Just let her drift off to sleep. But I can’t fucking help myself.

“What is it?”

“I never had one of those,” she admits quietly. “A slumber party. I didn’t really have any friends at all, really. After my mom died, it was... I was just a kid, and I don’t think any of my friends knew what to say. And then my dad...” She swallows hard. “It was just easier to be alone. Except for Lilly.”

She feel her brighten, like just the thought of her sister lifts something inside her. I realize I like it when she’s happy. I want more of it.

“Tell me about her. About Lilly.”

Delaney hesitates in surprise, then rolls over on the couch, her hands tucked up under her cheek. “Really? You really want to know?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“She’s seven, turning eight this fall,” Delaney says, launching into it as if every little fact about her sister has just been sitting there on the tip of her tongue, ready to come out when someone asked.

“She’s quiet, y’know? Shy around most people. My Aunt Judith thinks she’s, like, challenged, but honestly she’s just sick of Judith’s shit. She’s fine with me. She’s so smart and bubbly. And funny ! God she’s so fucking funny. She does these little sketches, like she’s on SNL or something. Have you ever known a seven-year-old to have bits? I think she’s going to be a comedian one day. Maybe have her own show.”

“Carol Burnett,” I blurt out.

“What?”

I grimace. “She’s this actress, comedian, whatever. She had her own show in the seventies. My Gran loved her. Used to have the re-runs on all the time when I was a kid.”

Delaney is quiet for a moment and I wait for her to make fun of me, what a tough biker I am, watching The Carol Burnett Show.

“Was she funny?”

I blink in surprise. “My Gran or Carol?”

“Either.”

The thought of Gran is a little pin-prick in my chest. “They both were,” I reply. “Are. I’m not sure if Carol Burnett is still around.”

Delaney laughs. “Wow, so you grew up with two funny women and you still didn’t develop a sense of humor. That’s sad.”

I snort. Fucking brat.

“I can see you smiling,” she whispers in the dark.

“I’m not fucking smiling,” I reply, reaching up to drag a hand over my face. I feel the exhaustion creeping in now, but the last thing I want to do is sleep. To end this moment with Delaney. Delaney goes quiet. “Is your Gran... Is she...”

“She’s dead,” I reply. “Five years now.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“Me too... But thanks.”

“What was she like?”

She unfolds her slender arms, letting one hand drop to trace the knots in the wooden floor. I could reach out if I wanted. Take her hand. I push down the urge and instead I search my memory, filtering out the bad flashes — Gran angrily flushing my stash of pills, patching up my cut knuckles with a slash of disapproval on her face.

“Decent,” I say finally. “She was decent.”

There’s a burst of noise from outside: the patrons from the fight letting out, laughing and cursing and stumbling on gravel.

“She remembered you, you know.”

Delaney goes still, her fingers freezing in the middle of the little circles she’s making in the dust on the floor. “What do you mean?”

This time I do reach out. The tips of her fingers are cold, so I wrap my hand around them and let my warmth seep into her. “Just that she remembered you. The little girl who lived down the street. You liked watching her work in the garden, she said. I was going to give you her number in the retirement home.”

“What? When?”

She sounds stunned. Like it’s insanity that someone cared about her.

I swallow. “The night you came over.”

She knows what night, same as me. When she asked me to do something for her. This little kid, with her big eyes and tears, that fucking book about the God of War clutched in her bony hands.

“Oh,” she says softly. Her fingers slip out of my grasp. “She probably hated me after that, didn’t she? Because of what everyone thought.”

“Never told her.”

“Oh,” she says again. There’s a quiet beat, then she takes a shaky breath. “Thanks.”

We lie there for a long time. So long in fact that I wonder if she’s fallen asleep. The sounds of the bar patrons downstairs fade into the night. Car engines growl to life, then disappear into the distance.

“She was good at gardening,” she says suddenly, startling me.

More silence and there’s a stab of fear, like we’re running out of things to say. I feel the pull of sleep and roll over, forcing pain to streak through my sore muscles and jerk me back to life. I don’t want to sleep. Every crumb from Delaney is making me feel so good, filling me up with warmth and this fucking wholeness that I never knew I was craving. I want to know everything about her, what she thinks about, what she loves, what she hates.

“What are you good at?” I ask.

Delaney snorts bitterly. “Aside from screwing up?”

Now I’m wide fucking awake. I pop up on my elbow. “Stop,” I growl. “Stop doing that.”

She blinks back at me in surprise. “Doing what?”

“Talking shit about yourself, acting like you’re worthless.”

“What do you care?” she replies, shrugging one shoulder. “You’re always telling me the same thing.”

Fuck, is that what she thinks? That I think she’s worthless? “No,” I say, shaking my head. “I get pissed at you when you do stupid shit and don’t listen to me. There’s a difference.”

Delaney pauses. She folds her hands over her stomach and stares up at the ceiling.

“Oh,” she says.

I huff and settle back on the floor. “That’s all you got to say?”

“What if I’m not good at anything?”

Christ. Her words are so small. A tiny, trembling fear, eked out and offered up to me like some vulnerable, fragile thing. I grit my teeth, fighting the urge to leap off the floor and wrap her in my arms.

“That’s not true,” I reply softly.

I feel the sharpness of her glare in the darkness. “How do you know? It’s not like we’ve spent a whole lot of time together before this. How would you know what I’m good at?”

“Because I look out my window every day and see what you’re good at.”

She sucks in a breath. “What are you talking about?”

“Come on, I might not know a daisy from a whatever, but I know that gardens don’t just look like mine. Not without someone putting the work in.”

She nibbles on her lip. “How long have you known?”

“From the second time your scrawny ass dragged a bag of fertilizer over at two a.m. First time I thought a cow had just taken a shit in my yard.”

She laughs and it echoes in our little dim hiding place. “Why didn’t you ever tell me to stop?”

I was waiting for this question. I take a deep breath. “Two reasons. One, I didn’t want to talk to you, figured it’d get me in more trouble. And two... I didn’t want you to

stop.”

“Oh,” she says. I want to tease her, tell her that ‘Oh’ is quickly becoming her favorite word. But I think I hear a little smile in the sound, so I focus on that. That even though it’s dark, that smile shines like a beacon.

I’m not trying to fall asleep, but I do. I think maybe I dream of Delaney, of what life could be like if I wasn’t a Wastelander and a killer, and if she wasn’t some desperate girl on the run.

When I open my eyes, the sunlight making me squint, I don’t remember my dream. All those good feelings vanish like smoke, replaced by a shock of sudden adrenaline.

“Wakey-wakey,” says Deputy Flores, grinning down at me. I look to Delaney, her eyes round with fear. I can’t move, can’t go for my own weapon, because the barrel of his gun is aimed directly at Delaney’s head.

22

Delaney

“So, how did you find me?” I ask. I squirm in the backseat of the patrol car. Cracks in the vinyl pinch the parts of my thighs not covered by my shorts.

Aaron snorts from the driver’s seat as we drive out of Bowen, the empty highway stretching into the distance.

“I can’t just be a good fucking cop? I’m hurt, Del. I thought you believed in me.”

“You can choke on a dick and die, Flores. Believe that.”

I catch his eye in the rearview. Something dark flashes in his expression, a barely controlled contempt. Then, he chuckles.

“Come on now, Del. Don’t be like that. We’ve got a long drive back to your daddy, and you best believe I can make it pleasant for you, or...”

He lets it hang there. The threat of all the ways he can make it far, far worse for me. Though I can’t think of what could be worse than being hand-delivered to my father by Aaron fucking Flores. A man I’d always considered an overgrown boy with a teeth-whitening fetish.

I glance over at Ares. He looks too big for the backseat: his shoulders are curved inward, his dirty blond hair brushes the ceiling, and his huge thighs are spread wide,

taking up most of the space on the seat. I nudge him with my knee, wanting some reaction to know he's still with me. He gives me a near imperceptible shake of his head.

Not now , it says.

His wrists twist inside the metal loops of the handcuffs. Testing the strength. But there's no way he's strong enough to bust out of them. Is there? Aaron didn't cuff me at all. He probably thinks the only threat is Ares, which is probably true.

“So,” Aaron continues, “You really want to know how I found you?”

I stop myself from rolling my eyes. Aaron Flores will never miss a chance to grandstand.

“Sure, Aaron. Impress me.”

“Buddy of mine with the department in Bowen tipped me off to a call about a ‘big tattooed asshole’ and ‘some little bitch’ that were causing trouble at a motel.”

Shit.

“You'd gone by the time I got there,” he says, “but then somebody decided to place a call to Judith Jackson from that fine establishment I found you two in.”

Double fucking shit .

“The geriatric running the place was all too happy to give you up. After I threatened him with harboring fugitives.”

I feel Ares' eyes on me, sharp as knives. Knives he probably wishes he could stab me

with right about now.

“Oh, you thought your Aunt would keep her mouth shut about it?” Aaron laughs. “You gotta have learned by now, Del. You’re nothing. Nobody is gonna be on your side. That’s why...”

The patrol car slows and veers to the side of the road.

“...I suggest you play ball.”

Sitting up straighter, I watch out the windshield as he turns off the highway, through a break in the trees. We bump on a dirt track for a moment before Aaron angles the car into a secluded spot. Trees wall us in on three sides. I jerk around in my seat to look out the rear window, only to find the main road is hidden behind the bend. There’s some old, broken furniture at the treeline — a torn up couch, moldy from rain; a boxy TV with no glass in it. This is a place where people go to dump their trash.

The fear that I’ve been trying to keep down rises and spreads in me like something spilled, prickling hot and urgent down my limbs.

“The fuck are we doing here, Flores?”

Ares’ voice shocks me. It’s low and rough, a note of warning in it. Aaron unbuckles and turns off the engine. He reaches up to fiddle with the dashboard camera aimed at the car’s interior. The little red light goes dark.

“Like I said, we’ve got a long drive. I think it’s about time we spend some quality time together.” He turns to look at me through the partition. “Don’t you, Del?”

Ares lunges. He slams his fists into the metal grate, hanging on with his fingers and

rattling the thing like he's trying to break through with the sheer force of his hatred.

Aaron's laugh is blisteringly cruel and I get a sudden flash of a memory. Some little asshole I went to elementary school with. We were on a field trip to the zoo and I was watching the gorillas as they lumbered around, gently picking bugs out of one another's hair. This kid — I can't even remember his name now — walked right up to the railing, lit a string of firecrackers and threw it into the enclosure. As it went off and the gorillas threw themselves at the walls of their cage in distress, he just stood there howling with laughter, like it was the funniest thing in the world. I remember the way his nose split under my knuckles. Of course, I was the one who got suspended.

"Ares, stop," I whisper. I touch him, carefully resting my hand on his bicep. My fingers dig in slightly, pressing against hardened muscle. Ares does, though he pulls ragged breaths through his teeth, eyes locked on Aaron's smug, punchable face.

"Ares," I say again, firmer this time. "It's okay."

Is it? I don't even know what I mean, really, but just like I wanted to comfort those tormented animals in the zoo, I want to do the same for him. Something is going to happen here, something not good, and Ares won't be able to stop it.

"Touch her and you die," Ares snarls at Aaron.

Aaron seems to consider this for a moment, his lip pushed out in a mocking pout, then his mouth twists into something that makes my insides go cold.

"Oh, I'm not going to touch her. Not yet."

He unfolds himself from the driver's seat, and I follow his figure through the windows as he moves around the car. I flinch when he wrenches my door open. The

cool of the AC dissipates and my lungs constrict with the sudden mugginess in the air.

I refuse to look at him. Just the weight of his presence is enough to twist my stomach. Instead, I angle myself to look at Ares. He watches with sharp, suspicious eyes; eyes that widen only a second before I feel something hard and cold press against the side of my head.

Ares' jaw tics. "Motherfucker."

"Ah, ah, ah," Aaron tuts. There's a click, the safety of a gun being flicked off, and the barrel presses harder against my skull. "I'll do it," he warns. "Sheriff'll be pissed, but he'll get over it."

I force a shaky laugh. "He'll get over you murdering his daughter? I'd re-think that, Aaron."

Aaron chuckles. He carves the barrel of the gun through my hair and down the side of my neck. Lowering his body with it, I feel his breath on my cheek.

"He's got another daughter," he replies.

His words pierce me deeper than any bullet. I breathe out Lilly's name in a rush, feeling it leave my lips rather than hearing it.

If I die here, there will be nothing stopping Dad from doing to Lilly what he did to me. All of this will be for nothing: stealing the drugs, going to the Wastelanders...

"So, either you're both good for me, or this ends with the Sheriff down a daughter and you, Ares, riding back to town covered in this little bitch's brain matter."

He jabs the gun harder against my neck. My pulse rages against it.

“Okay,” Ares says, startling me. He forces his fists to relax, his shoulders pressing back into the sticky vinyl of the seat. “Whatever you say, boss.”

The gun lets up and I turn to see Aaron taking a step back — all to get a better view of both of us in the backseat.

“Good,” he says. “Now take off her shorts.”

“What?” Ares spits it, his body tightening up again.

“You heard me,” Aaron says, grinning. “I’m not going to touch her. You are.”

23

Delaney

There's a fuzzy sort of hum in my ears. I can't hear anything. Can't think. Did Aaron really mean...?

“No,” Ares says sharply, his voice cutting through the cotton wool inside my head. “You're sick. I'm not fucking doing that.”

Aaron shrugs, moves his arm out to aim the gun at the ground, and fires. The supersonic boom covers my scream and even as I jolt away, my face buried in Ares' shoulder, flecks of dirt spray up and spatter against my skin.

Ares says something else — yells something — but I'm not listening. I close my eyes and breath in. He smells like sweat and dust and a little blood somewhere underneath it all, because of course he does. My mouth waters.

“It's okay,” I squeak out. Ares stills and I tilt my face to him. There are flecks in his eyes, shards of silver amongst the gray. His mouth is a flat line and there's a deep crease between his eyebrows.

“Ares, please,” I say quietly, so Aaron can't hear. “I need you to do this.” And then because he doesn't look convinced... “You won't hurt me. I trust you.”

And it's the truth. It's solid and unwavering. It's the kind of truth I can hold onto, even through what's about to happen.

Ares looks deep into my eyes, maybe seeing that same truth there: that this isn't about want, it's about need .

“Okay. Okay, baby,” he says finally. Despite the low thrum of fear, the word ‘baby’ skitters around inside me, making pleasant little sparks.

“Alright, kids,” says Aaron. “Let’s get comfortable.”

He claps a couple of times, his gun now back in his holster, and he slams the door at my back. His boots crunch on the ground as he rounds the patrol car again. Ares only has time to squeeze my fingers before Aaron climbs back into the driver’s seat. He cracks his neck and adjusts the rearview mirror, aiming it for a clear reflection of the two of us.

“You two waiting for a written invitation? I said take off her shorts.”

“Fuck you, Flores,” Ares spits angrily as he adjusts his body to face me. His handcuffs clink as he reaches for me, but I’m looking at Aaron. At his hungry expression. He licks his lips and a shudder runs through me like he just licked me .

“Hey... Hey... Delaney, look at me.”

I swallow hard and turn to Ares. He lifts his cuffed hands and cups my face with one palm. Tingles radiate from his touch. I want him to touch me, have wanted it for awhile, but not like this. Not with Aaron here, demanding it, using me to punish Ares, using Ares to punish me.

“Just look at me, okay?” Ares murmurs. “Focus on me. I’ve got you.” He comes closer, his lips dipping to mine. “I’ve fucking got you,” he says one last time, just before he kisses me.

It's a firm, comforting kiss. Dry lips pressing chastely to mine. He pulls back enough to search my eyes with his. "I've got you, okay?" he repeats as the pads of his fingers scrape against my jaw.

"I... I'm sorry, Ares."

He smiles. It shocks me, a sudden dazzling smile, but it also fills me with warmth. "Don't want to hear it. Now sit back. Let me make you feel good."

His hands drop to my waist and he pops the button on my shorts. The sound of the zipper bites the air and I feel his knuckles graze the front of my panties. Despite the situation, my heart picks up speed and arousal plucks at me below the elastic of my underwear.

"Up," he says, his voice gruff, and he taps my thigh. I peel myself off the vinyl and wiggle out of my shorts, helping Ares pull them all the way off.

"What a good girl," Aaron sneers from the front seat. His voice crawls over me like something disgusting you'd find in the mud. When I look at him, I see his arm moving rhythmically. I wonder if he's got his dick out yet, or he's just rubbing himself through his uniform. Bile rises in my throat.

"Hey."

Ares touches my chin and pulls me back around. He moves closer until his lips brush mine. Not kissing, but enough that I feel every whisper of movement. "He's not taking anything from you," he breathes. "You're giving it to me."

Relief swells in my chest. He's right. And I want that, so, so badly.

"Kiss me?" I murmur back. Ares grins against my mouth.

“Anything for you, Del.”

This kiss is different than the one we shared outside the bar. That was desperate and fierce, this is a controlled explosion, so deep and intense that my body immediately floods with a steady heat. I moan against Ares’ demanding mouth and part my lips in invitation. Constrained by the handcuffs, Ares puts his hands gently to my throat, holding me steady as his tongue explores every inch of my mouth.

“Fucking hell,” he groans, pulling back just a little. He sucks in a quick breath before diving in again, his careful control wavering. It’s perfect.

It’s a kiss that sets me alight.

Brings me to life.

Takes me away from here.

“Alright, alright, enough of that shit,” barks Aaron. “Get on with it.”

Ares looks past me, his eyes darkening with anger. “What do you want me to do?” he asks tightly.

“Whatever you want, hero. Just give me a good show.”

For a second, Ares freezes, then I grab the chain between his cuffs and pull his hands down to my panties.

“Touch me,” I say shakily.

Ares licks his lips. He puts his index and middle finger in his mouth, his cheeks hollowing as he sucks. All the while, he looks at me. His eyes are glassy and bright,

but the tilt of his head, the slow slurp coming from his fucking mouth... It's the filthiest, sexiest thing I've ever seen.

His slick fingers slide beneath my cotton panties. I inch my legs open and Ares groans breathily. I watch him closely, his eyes now focused down on his hand sinking behind my underwear, like he's trying to capture the image forever. Then, all I can think about is the feeling of his fingers sliding over my clit.

"Oh, fuck ," I gasp. My head drops back to thunk against the seat. I inch my hand over the vinyl to Ares' thigh and dig my blunt fingernails into his sweatpants as he moves expertly over my clit, rubbing languid circles. Stoking the fire.

"That's it," Ares says, his voice husky with arousal. "Gonna take me so good. Just like... that."

On the final word, he sinks both fingers inside me and I choke on a gasp, my hips kicking up at the sudden intrusion. Ares forces me still with his other hand splayed on my lower belly.

"Come on, baby. Doing so good for me."

My lips twitch into a frown as Ares continues, his murmured ' good girls ' making my hackles rise. I can't tell him what I really want — not with Aaron right there — so I clench my jaw shut and focus on the feeling of him inside me. His thick fingers plunge deeper, curling to brush all those sensitive little parts that make me see stars. He sets his thumb over my clit, wrenching a cry from my lips.

Ares leans closer still, half folded on top of me, and latches onto my neck. He bites down, then soothes the burn with his tongue.

"Tell me how to get you there, baby," he grunts against me. "Wanna feel you come

on my fingers.”

I shake my head. I can't talk, can't even think, because my body is tightened like a stretched wire. My back bows and everything flashes white behind my closed eyes as my climax hits me. It's hard and sharp, almost painful — but the flood of calm afterwards? It's like nothing I've ever experienced.

I feel like I'm floating on a cloud, the seat of the patrol car is pillowy soft underneath me as Ares gently slides his fingers out of me.

My eyes flutter open and I see Ares watching me, so alert to every minuscule emotion on my face. His eyebrow flicks up — silently asking ‘You okay?’

I nod and beam at him, not really knowing what to say. My eyes lower to his crotch. His sweats are tented, his cock straining underneath. I reach for him—

“Uh-uh,” Aaron chides from the front seat. I freeze, realizing that for a stunning, blissful moment, I forgot where I was. And who else was there.

“Gold stars all ‘round,” Aaron says. He grins into the mirror. The look on his face is predatory and terrifying. “I call next.”

Aaron is up and out of the car before I can react. He opens Ares' side this time and I watch with my scream caught in my throat as he yanks Ares out. Ares shouts and I hear a scuffle, dust flying as Aaron wrenches him further away. Ares is screaming something. Something I can't make out, because all I hear is my own voice howling in my head: Do something. Save him. This is your fault. Fucking do something!

I scramble to pull my shorts on and crawl clumsily over the seat. I grab onto the open door and lean out. They're a few yards away, and Aaron lets Ares go. Ares swings around, ready to charge, but Aaron's too fast. His gun is out and aimed at Ares before

I can even blink.

“Uncuff yourself. Just one.” He motions to something down in the dirt — the handcuff keys.

“Fuck you,” Ares replies, and spits at the keys.

“Actually I’m planning on fucking her,” Aaron replies, jerking his head back at me. “You don’t have to be alive for that.”

Ares eyes flick to me and whatever he sees on my face makes his pale. I squeeze the door handle so hard my knuckles hurt. Then, Ares lunges for Aaron. For the gun.

“Delaney! Run!”

Bang!

The secluded clearing explodes with noise — the echo of the gun, shrieking birds that take off out of the trees, and my own inhuman scream. I fling myself out of the car and scramble on my hands and knees towards Ares — defying him and ignoring my own self-preservation.

On his knees, Ares cradles his hand. Spittle flies out of his mouth as he hisses through clenched teeth. Ignoring the grazes on my knees and the dust in my eyes, I cling to his side.

“Ares, Ares— Oh, God! Oh, fuck. You’re hurt.”

Blood pours from the hole in his hand, dripping down his forearm in thick rivulets and splatting onto the ground from the point of his elbow.

“Told you to fucking run,” he growls at me. He shoots me a look, dark with anger.

“I haven’t listened to you yet, what made you think I’d start now?”

Ares snorts derisively, then winces.

Aaron’s hand comes down to clamp on the back of Ares’ shirt and hauls him up.

“Play with guns, get hurt,” he tuts as he drags Ares away. I start to follow and the gun is suddenly trained on me. “Come on, Del, don’t do anything stupid.”

I stop moving, watching with rising panic as he pulls Ares over to a padlocked metal gate by an overgrown track.

“Wait for me in the backseat like a good girl and your boyfriend will make it through the day, okay?”

I know that Ares wants me to run, and if I did it now, I know in my heart that he’d sacrifice himself for me. He’d throw himself on Aaron and probably take another bullet — this one a lot more fatal. But I can’t let Ares die. I got him into all this, all those years ago, so letting him die here would be like pulling the trigger myself.

No, the only way to get out of this is to keep my head down and do what I’ve been doing for half my life...

I walk numbly back to the car and perch on the backseat. Aaron uncuffs Ares’ destroyed hand and loops it through the gate, locking him into place again. Trapping him far enough way that he can’t intervene, but so that he can still watch. It’s torture for Ares, plain and simple. As Aaron walks towards me, already loosening his belt, Ares rages.

“You touch her and I’ll kill you, Flores. You’re a dead man, you hear me, you piece of shit? Dead!”

“It’s okay,” I mouth to him, just before Aaron steps in front of me and blocks my view.

“Lie back, Del.”

I hear the thunk of his gun as he places it on the top of the patrol car, along with his utility belt. He flicks the button on his pants and I turn my head. I don’t want to see his dick. Feeling it inside me will be enough.

I shuffle back on the seat until the top of my head hits the opposite door. Aaron crawls on top of me. He digs his hips down, forcing the entire length of his body against mine. This isn’t like the other times with... with Dad. Those are like a heavy weight, an endless rolling fog. Aaron’s body is sharp and biting, pure violence under a sheen of clean skin and white teeth. He doesn’t smell like anything. Not mouthwash or cologne or even cheap gas station coffee. He is emptiness. A void where a man should be.

He tries to wrestle my shorts off and fails.

“The sooner you play your part, the faster you’ll be out of here,” he grumbles.

I’m already drifting off into a numb, distant place when I put my foot up on the seat and lift my hips. I roll my head away as he starts to pull my shorts down.

Then I see it.

The slender, narrow shape in the side of my sock. I’d forgotten all about it. When did I put it there? When Aaron woke me up, ordered me to dress. He was so focused on

the real threat — Ares — that he didn't see me slip it into my sock.

The switchblade. The fucking switchblade.

There are no options that need to be weighed. No back-and-forth in my head. The decision is made even before I wriggle deeper under Aaron. Before I bring my arms around him to trace along his back. Before I drop one to his hip, the backs of my fingers brushing against my sneaker still propped on the seat.

“Oh, yeah, there she is,” Aaron smirks. He lifts up, his face level with mine, and I stare into the hollow nothing of his eyes. “I've been wanting to do this ever since I first laid eyes on you.”

I tilt my face to brush my smiling lips against his. “Me too,” I reply.

I stab him. A lot. Aaron howls and thrashes and I keep stabbing, the blade plunging into his back and his side. He tries to get off me, but I wrap my legs around his waist and move with him as he bucks. I'm a leech draining the blood from his body.

He brings his arm up to hit me but I tuck my chin to my chest and drive the knife between his ribs. I twist it hard and feel the scrape of bone as his screams turn to rattling rasps. Then, when I'm starting to wonder how long it takes for someone to die, he makes one final effort to get up. I let him, but just enough that I can carve the knife across his throat.

Blood rains down on me, hot and slick and stinking, and then his body collapses on top of me and I can finally rest.

24

Ares

Delaney is dead. She has to be. The screams coming from that backseat, the blood... I can't see it, I'm too far away, but I can smell it. Sharp and metallic. A bitter tang in the air.

“Delaney!” I scream it like I'm in pain. Because I am. He's fucking killed her. Delaney. Fierce, perfect, Delaney.

I yank harder on the cuffs, pain spiking up my arm from the fucking bullet hole through my palm. The shot obliterated the bones there — It'll probably never work right again — but that's not a concern right now. Right now, I'm thankful that my hand has been shattered beyond repair. Half my job has been done for me.

I wrap my other hand around the broken one and squeeze. Blood, along with a fresh wave of pain that makes me retch, oozes from the wound. I clench my eyes shut and think of her. I squeeze harder.

Crack. Crack. Crunch.

My bones fold in on themselves, the size of my hand shrinking enough that I can slip it from the loop of the cuffs. I use the gate to pull myself up.

“Delaney,” I rasp.

Cradling my hand to my chest, I stumble through the dirt, my vision shrinking to the back of the patrol car. That shithead deputy is still on top of her, probably taking in what he's done. Fucking enjoying it.

“Gonna kill you, son of a bitch. It's gonna last, and it's gonna fucking hurt.”

I drag him, one-handed, out of the car. He doesn't flinch, doesn't respond at all, and as he sags off the seat and hits the ground, I can see why.

Deputy Aaron Flores is dead.

The blood pooling underneath him, covering his uniform, isn't Delaney's — it's his. In an instant, he's nothing to me, forgotten about, as I lean into the car and spot her. Delaney lies still, her eyes open and staring. For a heart-wrenching second, I think she's dead too. Then she blinks.

“Del... Baby.” I lean in, touching her tentatively. Her eyes flash to me and she squeezes the knife in her hand. The switchblade I gave her.

“It's okay. He's gone, honey. He's gone. You did it.”

I wrap my hand around her wrist and pry the knife from her trembling fingers. She lets me have it, which is probably a good sign, and then, even better, lets me help her from the car. She looks down as her feet bump over Flores.

“Don't look,” I prompt her, tipping her chin to focus on me, and then we move slowly to the front of the car, clinging to each other. I prop her ass against the bumper and the flash of her panties through the open zipper of her shorts makes a new rage pulse in my chest.

“He didn't,” she says.

I swallow hard and meet her eyes. Two sparks of green through the sea of red smeared across her skin.

“I got him before he could.”

I nod, a little relief easing the tension in me. I cup her face with my uninjured hand and try to clean off some blood with my thumb.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“I’m not.”

She means it too, and all of a sudden I’m faced with the little girl that stumbled into my yard in the middle of the night. That crashed into me and fell on her ass and looked at me like I was a monster.

That little girl who was already drowning in darkness. I wonder, if I had done something differently back then, could I have saved her from all this?

I yank her close, suddenly desperate to feel her against me, make sure she’s alive and unhurt. Her arms snake around my waist and I bury my face against the top of her head. When I breathe in, I smell only her. Not the blood or the stench of Flores’s cop car. Just Delaney.

“How do you it?” she mumbles into my chest.

“Do what?”

“Deal with it. After you’ve... killed someone.”

I take a deep breath and I feel her matching it. “Do you feel bad about what you’ve

done?”

“No,” she says simply. “But it’s like... My body feels wrong. My heart is racing and I feel... I’m all shakey and my head is...”

She shakes her head, her hair whispering back and forth across my lips.

“Adrenaline. And probably shock too,” I reply.

When Delaney pulls back, she looks hollowed out. “What do you do, after you do that?”

She tries to crane her head, searching out Flores. I catch a fistful of her hair and yank her back. It’s an accident, how sharply and desperately I grab her, and I feel like an asshole until she makes this little gasp and her eyes flare.

All thoughts of her as a little girl disappear. Now, she is a woman and my thighs are pressing into her hips and I want to kiss her so fucking bad.

“I...” I swallow against the dryness in my throat. “After I’ve killed someone, I get drunk, I get stoned... And I fuck.”

Delaney inhales sharply. Her throat bobs. “Well... You got any booze on you, Ares?”

“No.”

“Weed?”

I shake my head.

“Will you fuck me, Ares?”

There's a heavy beat, like we're waiting for the starter pistol, then we crash together — lips and teeth, hands grappling for each other. Pain screams at me when I stupidly try to grab her hip with my shattered hand. She leans back, breathless, and arcs an eyebrow.

“Your hand. Maybe we shouldn't—”

“No,” I say, cutting her off with a brutal kiss. I bob down, scoop her up, one arm under her ass, and set her down properly on the hood of the car. “Don't need two hands to fuck you.”

Delaney scrambles out of her shorts, her panties going too, and then reaches around to unhook her bra. Her hard nipples poke through her shirt and my mouth waters. Has been watering ever since I saw her like this on the couch last night. My cock throbs and I realize I've been hard for way too long. Maybe ever since I realized she'd stuck that pig and bled him out.

“You're a warrior,” I tell her as I sink to my knees. “A fucking goddess.” She opens her legs for me and I trace my tongue up her inner thigh. “Good girl,” I murmur.

There's a touch on my head, her fingers threading through my hair, and she firmly tugs me back.

“I'm not,” she says. She looks like she wants to say more, and I wait. This woman with her legs spread in front of me can take as long as she wants, to say whatever she wants, and I will fucking wait.

“I'm covered in the blood of the guy I just killed, Ares. I'm not a good girl. I don't want to be a good girl. Not your good girl, or anybody's. You understand, right? Being good, being nice, it's never gotten me anything, but being bad... being a dirty, filthy, broken thing... That's what I want to be. That's real, Ares. So call me that.

Call me a slut. Call me a whore. Because you're not degrading me or dragging me down, you're helping me take back those words and stitching me together with them."

She lets go of my hair, her fingers finding mine on her naked thigh and squeezing. Her flesh is supple, so soft and warm. The blood is drying and flaking off. I dip my head and lick a stripe through it, tasting the tang of her kill. The thought of degrading her, while loving her, makes my cock throb harder.

"You're right." I press a toothy kiss to her skin. "You're fucking filthy. Gonna make you filthier, though."

She pulls in a quick breath, just as excited as me. I snake my working hand under her thigh to hold her open, and dive forward, my mouth latching onto her sweet, wet pussy.

She tastes amazing, sweet and salty, the ghost of the first orgasm I gave her lingering in her slick. Delaney's moans turn high and strangled when I suck her clit between my lips, lightly scraping with my teeth. She grips the back of my head and holds me there against her cunt, her hips making tiny circles.

"Oh, God," she whimpers. "Ares... Fuck, that's so... Oh, God..."

I work her up good, until she's twitching and shivering and mewling. She's close, but I'm a selfish fuck and I want to feel her come on my cock, not on my tongue. I push off the patrol car's bumper and scramble to my feet, yanking my sweats down and taking out my cock. Delaney's eyes go wide as I step between her thighs. I don't give her a moment to look, to question, I just grab her hips and dip low, notching myself at her opening like I'm deserved this.

She whines my name. I tell her to shut up.

I thrust in. My brain goes still and quiet for a blissful second and I throw my head back, groaning.

“Fuuuuck. God, this cunt is...” I rock back and slide in again, this time bottoming out in her. Breath rushes from Delaney’s lungs and she clings to me, steadying herself. Her face is pinched with pain and I press my lips to her sweaty temple.

“Knew you’d be tight as fuck, baby,” I grunt. “Am I hurting you?”

She nods.

“Want me to stop?”

She shakes her head.

“Didn’t think so. Fucking whore.”

Her body shudders, her pussy spasming around me. God, she really does like that shit, doesn’t she? I start fucking her hard, thrusting into her like she’s only there for my own pleasure. I bruise her hip with my fingers, double over and bite hard on a peaked nipple. She whimpers and moans like she’s right on the edge. Her hips buck up to meet mine with every thrust, searching, desperately, for more.

“Tell me, Delaney,” I huff into her ear. “Did you like killing that prick? Say yes and I’ll fuck you in the backseat of that car. I’ll fuck his blood into you. I’ll make you come on his corpse.”

Delaney’s body tightens and snaps, her orgasm exploding without warning. She screams out, her head thumping hard back against the hood. I don’t stop, don’t even give her a fucking minute, because I’m close too. So fucking close.

Visions flash in my head: it's every dirty, filthy thing I'd never let myself picture with her. Taking her from behind, her cheek pressed against the side of that dumpster outside Oscar's; her plump lips wrapped around my cock in the corner of the Wastelander bar, desperate for my cum even with so many eyes on her; driving her into some secluded field and fucking her over my bike. She comes on my mouth, my fingers, my cock — all the while I'm calling her terrible, awful things. She loves it, and so do I.

I pull out fast and paint her blood-stained skin with stripes of cum. It spatters up over her tits, a little on her chin, and as she blinks owlshly at me, her cheeks flushed and her eyes glassy, I realize that I've fallen in love with Delaney fucking Jackson.

25

Delaney

Ares finds his cellphone amongst our stuff in the trunk of the patrol car. From my spot on a fallen log across the clearing, I can hear him muttering gruffly into it as he paces. Talking to the Wastelanders, I guess. I wonder what he's saying, whether he's telling them about what I did. I swallow the lump in my throat and my eyes flick to the black and tan of Aaron's car. Despite Ares' attempts to position me far away, to hide it from me, I'm low enough to the ground that I can see past the low undercarriage to the congealing pools of blood on the other side. Along with the splayed body of Deputy Aaron Flores.

My stomach churns. Not with the guilt, I realize, but with dread. What's going to happen when Dad finds out that I've killed his deputy? Any upper-hand I had is now gone. It's laying in the dirt beneath a dead rapist.

"You good?"

Ares' shadow falls across me and I blink up at him. He tucks his phone into his pocket, then reaches around to adjust the gun in his waistband.

"Delaney?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," I lie. I nod furiously, my blood-crusted hair flicking into my face. I need a shower. Probably several.

“What’s the plan?” I ask, adjusting myself on the log and hugging my knees to my chest. I try to hide my wince, soreness radiating from my core. Ares frowns, cool eyes scanning me for a moment.

“We sit tight,” he says tightly, his jaw clenched. “Reinforcements are an hour or so out.”

“What about...” I wave at the car. At Aaron.

“You don’t have to worry about that.”

I snort. “I’ll remember you said that when I’m sitting on death row.”

Ares settles himself down beside me. “You’re not going anywhere, Delaney.”

“How do you know? You going to take the fall?” I ask, my eyes rolling.

Ares grabs my chin. My breath stills, my chest aching with the sudden need to lean forward and kiss him. Instead, I just let him look at me.

“Yes. If I have to.”

My heart clenches painfully and I decide something in that moment, something I hope he can’t read on my face. There is no way in hell I’m letting Ares go down for this. Not if I can do something about it.

I clear my throat. “How’s your hand?” I ask, awkwardly diverting his attention. He found a first aid kit in the trunk, along with our stuff, and he’s wrapped a haphazard bandage around his wound. Ares drops my chin and follows my gaze. He shrugs.

“Lucky I’m not a lefty.”

It's his grin that breaks me. Before I realize what's happening, I'm shuddering with sobs. Ares makes some pained noise and then his arm is around me and he's tugging me to his chest. He presses his lips against the crown of my head.

And that's how we sit until we hear the roar of motorcycles in the distance.

"Hold on tight," Ares warns. "And lean into the turn, don't try to fight it."

He attempts to adjust the strap on my helmet, thick blunt fingers of his good hand fumbling with it. I shrug away and adjust it myself.

"Stop fussing. But if you're really worried about me, I could always ride with you."

The strap tightens under my chin and I let the feeling soothe the nervous butterflies in my stomach. I've never ridden a motorcycle before. Maybe if it were with Ares I'd feel safe. Maybe it would even feel good, having my legs wrapped around him. Instead I'm straddling his friend, a black-haired, heavily tattooed biker I remember from the Wastelander compound. Rev, Ares called him.

Ares looks back around the clearing. There are a few more bikes parked off to the side, the Wastelander owners standing around and talking quietly. There's also a blue van, some generic plumbing logo on the side, and a tow-truck. I know Ares needs to stay here and sort out the mess I made — and who knows if he can even ride with only one working hand.

Ares makes a low growling noise and Rev's laughter vibrates through his leather jacket.

"He's not worried about you, kitten," Rev says over his shoulder. "He thinks I'll steal

you away. Ride off into the sunset with you. Never come back.”

Ares jaw tics. I can't help but grin. Cheekily, I shimmy closer to Rev and wind my arms around his middle. Ares clocks it, his eyes flashing with anger.

“I'm in,” I say. “I say we hit up Vegas, maybe swing by the Grand Canyon—”

Ares yanks my head around by the strap of my helmet. Leaning in close, his breath whispering over my cheek, he speaks in a low, pussy-tightening rumble.

“You're a fucking brat, you know that?”

My skin tingles where I feel the warmth of his breath. I want his mouth on me, but Rev is right there, along with the other Wastelanders, all of whom are pretending they're not watching Ares send me off.

“I know. But I think you like it.”

Another growl. Then Ares surprises me. He lunges for my lips, crushing my mouth with his in a searing kiss that's over way too soon. When he pulls back, my body tries to follow and he has to steady me with his hand on my thigh.

“Got shit to deal with here, but I'll come get you soon. Listen to Rev, don't be a dumbass, and if this ride gets you all riled up, maybe a little tingly between the legs, you'd better not fucking come, you hear me?” He glances away, shooting daggers at the back of Rev's head. “Not on his bike.”

I swallow, my nervous little butterflies returning with a vengeance. “I promise.”

With a final nod, he steps back. Rev's bike roars to life and it feels like a beast between my legs. The vibrations rumble straight to my core, my inner muscles

clenching longingly. A little part of me wants to play up to Ares' warning. Maybe put on a show and see what kind of punishment Ares will dish out when he gets his hands on me later. Instead, I give him a small, serious nod.

“Hold on, kitten!” Rev yells. The bike lurches forward and I scrabble to hang on tight. Ares disappears in a blur as the bike rockets out of the clearing, down the twisting little track, and explodes onto the empty road.

Turns out that not coming on the back of a motorbike is way easier than I thought. My body is immediately at a low level of panic, my stomach swooping with every turn, every wobble. Rev occasionally yells back to warn me about an upcoming bump or another turn, which I appreciate.

I don't know how long we ride for — my butt becomes so numb that the vibrations don't even bother me anymore — but eventually I recognize landmarks and turn-offs and then we're winding through the familiar streets of a place I once thought of as home.

“Almost there,” Rev calls to me as we pull up at a red light.

“And that would be where?”

He doesn't answer, shooting off as soon as the traffic light goes green. I don't have to wait long to find out the answer. We pull up outside a strange looking bungalow that sits on spindly looking stilts, a rickety wooden staircase leading up to the front door. It's on the corner of a rundown block, which, by the look of the overgrown yards and boarded up windows, is half abandoned. Rev pulls the bike right up underneath the house and turns off the engine. My ears ring in the abrupt silence. Rev flips down the kickstand and climbs off. He groans and stretches, his back popping audibly.

“We good?” he asks, quirking an eyebrow at me.

I stumble off the bike, my legs like jelly, and unclasp my helmet. “Are you asking if I came and you need to go into hiding?” I ask sarcastically. “You’re good.”

Rev grins, takes the helmet from me and rests it on the seat. “I like you. You’re funny. Now come on, I need a beer and a piss.”

“In that order?” I ask. Rev barks a laugh as I trail after him.

Rev’s house is cluttered and cozy. I’m kind of surprised, actually, that it’s not littered with empty bottles of booze, or a line up of guns and drugs on the coffee table. He disappears when we enter, returning after five minutes with a towel and a change of clothes. He points me down the narrow hall to the bathroom and I take a hurried shower, not wanting to linger on the sight of the pink-tinged water swirling down the drain. Not wanting to remember where it came from.

“So, what’s the, uh... the plan, I guess?”

I sit on Rev’s couch and tug at my oversized sweats. He thunks a beer on the coffee table in front of me, then collapses into a leather recliner with his own and eyes me carefully.

“That’s cute.”

“What?”

“That you think we have a plan.” He gulps his beer and wipes his mouth on his shoulder. “My turn,” he says. “What’s the deal with you and Ares? I gotta say, it was not easy to convince him to let me bring you here alone.”

“Really?”

I think back. The moments after killing Aaron are a blur. Well, except for the vivid, exploding color of Ares fucking me on the hood of Aaron’s patrol car. That is as real and solid as the frosty glass bottle in my hand. I feel my cheeks heat, so I cough awkwardly and shift on the couch.

“Yeah,” replies Rev, not noticing my blush. “He’s real protective. Which, I guess, is why Griff sent him with you in the first place. Thing is, I don’t think any of us expected him to fall in love with you, considering.”

“He’s not in love with me,” I scoff, then frown. “And by considering , you mean...”

“You really did a number on him back in the day. It wasn’t easy, having people look at him like he was a kid-fiddling monster.”

I glare at him. “That was not my fault. And it’s also none of your fucking business.”

Rev doesn’t say anything. What seemed so jovial and playful about him before now feels pointed and dangerous. Like he lulled me into a false sense of security, only to claw me open and pick through my guilt. He takes a long, slow sip, his watchful eyes never leaving me. The house is quiet. A dog howls in the distance somewhere.

I take a shaky breath. “I didn’t mean for this to happen. Any of it.”

Rev swallows. He leans forward, his bottle landing on the table with a dull thud. He groans as he sinks back, flipping a lever on the recliner to make the footrest snap out.

“I know, kitten. Sometimes life has a way of just fucking us.” His head falls back, his tattooed throat just a slash of color in the light. “Sometimes all you can do is lie back and let it happen.”

I finish my beer and watch the slow rise and fall of Rev's chest. Five minutes later, he starts snoring. His words repeat in my head, swirling round and round and making me want to throw up.

Sometimes all you can do is lie back and let it happen.

What does he know about it? Nothing, that's what. He knows fuck-all about what it's really like to 'lie back and let it happen'. Like all those nights I did just that, forcing myself out of my body to some place else, just to escape the horror of what was happening to me. Or how I almost let Aaron happen, until I was saved by the switchblade Ares gave me.

Until I saved myself.

I move slowly so as not to wake him. Grabbing my blood-flecked sneakers between my fingers, I tip-toe to the front door. I turn the lock and it thunks so loudly that I'm sure it's given me away, but Rev just snorts and shoves his hand beneath the waistband of his jeans.

Outside, I pause at the top of the stairs to slide my bare feet into my sneakers. The evening air is cool, the breeze drying up the nervous sweat gathering on the back of my neck. Rev's going to be in trouble when the others find out I've gone. Ares is going to kill him, then he's going to kill me.

There's a chance Ares will never forgive me for this, that he'll never understand that this is the only way to not only protect myself and Lilly, but to protect him too. I feel a sad pang of regret as I hurry down the stairs and onto the street.

"I'm sorry," I mutter, my words whipped away on the breeze. Maybe they'll make it to Ares. Probably not.

At least not before I've killed my father.

26

Ares

Wastelanders are efficient at crime scene clean-up. Aaron Flores is loaded into the trunk of his own patrol car, then the whole thing is covered with a tarp and hitched to the tow-truck. It takes only minutes, and then I'm standing at the edge of the clearing, watching the evidence of his murder literally disappear down the road. The car and body will disappear too, somewhere, and I don't much care where. The only thing I care about is that none of this comes back on Delaney.

"Hey." A hand claps down on my shoulder and my instincts kick in, jerking it off and whipping around to see Reaper stepping back, hands raised. "Just me, brother. You good?"

"Yeah," I grunt back, then shake my head. "No."

Reaper's eyes flick to my hand. "Let's get back to the clubhouse. Get someone to look at that hand."

I nod mechanically and follow Reaper to the plumber's van. I climb into the back and settle with my back against the shell, the heat of the day warming me through the metal. Reaper slides into the front and I catch him checking his phone.

"How much shit am I in with Griff?"

Reaper chuckles as he shoves his phone away and starts the engine. "Forget about

Griff. The real question is, how much shit are you in with the girl?”

I shrug, but my jaw clenches. Even hearing another brother talking about Delaney sends a flare of fierce protectiveness through me. It was hard enough letting her go off on the back of Rev’s bike.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I reply.

Reaper makes the turn onto the main road. From my position in the back, all I see is blue sky through the windshield.

Reaper sighs. “Look, I don’t need to know what happened between the two of you out here—”

“Then don’t ask.”

“But Flores going missing is going to make things worse for her. For all of us. I need to know everything so we can deal with what’s coming.”

What’s coming... The words echo in my ears, taunting me. Because he’s right: this shit storm is about to get a whole lot worse before it gets better. I don’t care about myself, I just need Delaney to make it out alive.

The war room at Wastelander HQ smells like antiseptic and the tequila I just downed. There’s a pained wince plastered on Sade’s delicate features, like she’s the one who just had her hand blown to fucking bits.

“This is bad,” she murmurs, wrapping my hand in fresh gauze. Shockwaves of pain spike up my arm, even though she’s trying to be as gentle as possible. “You probably

need surgery. I don't think this is going to do much except stem the bleeding."

Behind her, Reaper lays a hand on her shoulder. "I know, baby girl. But you've patched me up when I've been worse than this. You're doing great."

"Worse than a bullet hole in the hand?" she snorts. "I know you're tough, Wyatt, but come on." She rolls her eyes and Reaper's mouth twitches, amused, before settling into a hard line.

"Sadie," he growls warningly. Her cheeks pinken and she busies herself with my bandage.

As Reaper moves to the door of the war room, keeping watch down the hall, Sadie meets my eyes and winks playfully. Somehow, this sweetheart of a girl has the enforcer of the Wastelanders, a professional killer, wrapped around her little finger. Have to admit, it's kind of impressive.

"How's Delaney holding up?" Sadie asks after a moment.

I'm not sure how to answer that, so I pick my words carefully. "She's stronger than she looks."

"Oh, I think she looks pretty strong," Sadie replies, shrugging. "I run into her sometimes at the gas station or around town. We went to high school together. Not in the same grade, but it's a small town, y'know?" Her eyes dart off, like she's picturing Delaney right in front of her. "I've always had this thought. Like, 'Wow, this bitch is tough as nails'. Like even when she's just standing there. It's like she carries it, y'know? This hardness around her."

I blink. Who the fuck knew Reaper's girl was so insightful. Sadie tucks the end of the gauze roll into the swath of bandages around my hand and pats my knee.

“Anyway, I think it’s a good thing, that she has you. Someone to carry that toughness for her. Let her be soft once in a while.”

I can’t protest, say that Delaney doesn’t ‘have me’, because somehow, Sadie has seen through it all. I blink, dumb, as Sadie leans back and gathers the bloodied dressings from the table.

“You’re all done. But, Ares, I seriously think you need to go to the hospital. I don’t want to be the reason you can’t ride again, or hold a fork, or —”

“Sadie!” Reaper’s voice is sharper this time. Sadie doesn’t startle, but she does pull herself back. She nods once, firmly. “I’ll let you guys talk.”

With a soft smile, she leaves, closing the heavy door to the war room behind her. Reaper lets his forehead fall against the wood. He sighs, the weight of the world on him.

“Fuck, lighten up. You’d think you were the one who just killed a deputy.”

Reaper pushes smoothly off the door and turns. “Do you think I’m fucking stupid, Ares?”

My stomach flips. My face stays cold. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Reaper’s eyes flash. I’m not surprised when he stalks toward me, but when he grabs my shirt, hauls me to my feet and slams me into the wall? Yeah, I’m fucking surprised.

“She was covered in blood. Fucking drenched in it. That little girl, she—” He chokes, his voice strangling, “ You should have done it. You should have fucking done it. Not her.”

Rage bubbles up inside me. I shove him off, one shoulder and hand doing most of the work. Reaper lets me, taking a step back.

“Don’t you think I know that? I tried. Jesus, I broke my fucking hand to get to her. I was too late.”

“You were supposed to leave her,” he spits back. “You defied a direct order. If you’d just left her, Flores would never—”

“That’s bullshit and you know it,” I snarl. “What if it was Sadie?”

Something comes over him, a darkness that floods his eyes. He steps up to me, nose-to-nose.

“You’d better think very carefully about what you’re going to say next.”

“You would have died before you left Sadie behind.”

Reaper pulls in a sharp breath. I hold his gaze. “Tell me I’m wrong,” I say, daring.

Something loosens in Reaper and he rocks back. I watch his hand come around from the back of his jeans and it takes me a second to realize how close I came to a bullet between the eyes.

“I already left Delaney once. I wasn’t going to do it again.”

Reaper cocks his head. “What do you mean?”

The words crawl up my throat, the knowledge that’s been cutting me up from the inside. Finding the chair, I sink down.

“I didn’t put it together until all this shit happened, but when Delaney came to my house that night, when she was a kid, she asked me to do something.”

“Do what?”

“She wanted me to kill someone.”

Reaper doesn’t react. I can see him trying to piece it together, but he’s not there yet.

“She never said who,” I continue. “Never got the chance. Jackson showed up a second later and then, well, it’s not like I could exactly knock on her door and ask her about it.”

“Why didn’t you tell us this?”

I bark a bitter laugh. “And say what? The Sheriff’s daughter knows just a little too much about the Wastelander M.O.? You wanted me to put a target on her back?” I shake my head. “Besides, I didn’t think much of it after... after all the shit that followed. I was kind of busy trying to keep my head down and not end up on some fucking registry.”

“We know you didn’t do anything to that kid.”

“I know! Fuck!”

My breaths come out ragged. Painful. I close my eyes. Swallow hard.

“But I know who did. It’s who she wanted me to kill. And if I’d just listened, if I’d figured it out sooner, I could have fixed it. She would have been safe — from him, from Flores, from all of this shit.”

When I open my eyes, I meet Reaper's.

"It's time to make it right. And I need your help."

27

Delaney

The house is dark and quiet. Dad's car isn't parked out front, so he's probably still at the station. I picture him pacing, frantic that he hasn't heard from Aaron.

Good, I think as I wrench open my bedroom window and hoist myself inside. He doesn't deserve a moment of peace.

My room is still trashed. I look around at the darkened shape of the clutter, the broken pieces of my small, tired life. That's exactly how I feel. Tired. Exhausted. It's the kind of tired that's beyond sleep, beyond rest. It's bone deep and will only end with one thing: death.

I pick up a shattered photo frame and Mama's smiling face stares up at me through the cracked glass.

"It's okay, Mama. It will all be over soon."

I place the frame carefully down beside my bed and then zero in on the open doorway with hardened resolve. I slip down the hall and into Dad's room. Everything is neat and orderly, not a single thing out of place, but I don't need to search for what I need.

The closet smells like him and it makes my stomach twist, the sharp taste of bile rising in the back of my throat. I push aside his row of neatly pressed clothes and find the gun safe.

He's shown it to me before, many times. Whenever he felt like he was losing control of me, or I needed a reminder, he would make sure I could see as he oh-so-casually wrenched it open and placed his firearm inside. It was like he was saying, ' I have a gun, little girl. If you think you can fight back, think again . '

But while Dad was paying attention to the message behind showing me the safe, I was paying attention to his 4-digit lock code. I was also paying attention to his back-up piece, the one underneath our passports and boxes of spare ammo. I punch in the code and the safe gives a satisfying whir-thunk as it unlocks. In the next breath, the gun is in my palm, heavy and cold. It's a six-shooter revolver and in his infinite wisdom, my clever, calculating, charming father keeps it loaded.

"Thanks, Daddy," I whisper with a smile.

Headlights sweep across the room as a car growls into the drive. My heart leaps into my throat and I scramble for the hallway in a ducked run.

In the living room, I find a spot with a clear line of sight to the front door and flatten myself against the wall. I'll wait until just after he's stepped inside, then I'll shoot. One bullet might not be enough to kill him, but at least he'll go down and then I can finish him off.

The engine dies and the night goes quiet again. Is that a car door? Footsteps? The noise is hard to make out over the pounding of my heart. My hand flexes around the gun and I pull back the hammer with my thumb. My finger slides onto the trigger and, as it does, a little thrill shivers down my spine. Is this what Ares feels before he kills someone? The anticipation buzzes across my skin like water dancers on the surface of the lake. Something ripples under the surface — the hunger for violence.

"Not gonna let you do this."

I whip around so fast that, for a moment, Ares is just a blur in the darkness. He steps forward, hands by his sides. One is bandaged up with clean, white gauze and he looks better — cleaned of Aaron's blood, his hair wet and slicked back.

The shock subsides, replaced by anger. "What... What are you doing here? How did you get in?"

"You think I've never seen you climb in and out of that bedroom window before?" he replies, the ghost of a smile playing on his lips. "You know, you're not as smooth as you think you are."

His eyes flick to the gun.

"You mind putting that down or at least pointing it not at me?"

My eyes track his and, yep, I'm pointing the gun right at his chest. I lower it slowly, carefully sliding my finger off the trigger.

"Sorry, I—"

Ares lunges for me and wrenches the gun from my grasp. He spins out the chamber and the bullets drop out, skittering uselessly across the living room floor.

"No, no, no! Ares! What the fuck?"

I start to drop to my knees, already reaching for the abandoned bullets, when Ares drops the gun and grabs me by the back of the neck. He forces me up and flattens me against the wall. He crowds close and he's all there is — all I see, all I feel. He snarls through clenched teeth.

"What the fuck ? That's my line, Delaney. So, Rev calls me, tells me you bounced

and you know what I'm thinking?"

His palm slithers around my neck. Closes around my throat.

"That little bitch is gonna get herself killed."

His fury is palpable. But there's something behind it, in his eyes... Fear. I suck in a breath, my throat rising against his hand. The tingling feeling from earlier is back, this time curling like a snake around my core. Tightening.

I want Ares to squeeze.

He sees it in my eyes — the want — and his face lowers, heavy brow shadowing his darkening eyes. His lips brush mine.

But he doesn't kiss me.

"Tell me what you think you're doing, Del."

"I..." I swallow. His hand flexes.

"Tell. Me."

My knees tremble. I want him to touch me, to fuck me right here against the wall. But I know he won't, not until I tell him the truth. And then, he'll probably be so mad he won't ever want to touch me again.

I wet my lips, my tongue briefly, accidentally, brushing against his mouth. His body shudders against mine.

"I'm doing what I have to," I say finally. "I know you don't want me to, but I don't

know what else to do. This has to end, Ares. Please.”

I don't mean the final word to come out so broken and pleading. I hate how it sounds and I flinch, tears hot behind my eyes.

“Okay.”

I blink. “Wh-what?”

Ares relaxes his hand around my throat but leaves it there, a heavy, warm reminder of him. His eyes are locked on mine in a stare that bores deep.

“We'll end it,” he says. His eyes flick to my lips. “But first, let me taste you.”

He kisses me with an intensity that makes my brain grind to a halt. He forces his tongue between my lips and I moan against him, barely keeping up as he devours me. His hand tightens around my throat and I can't breathe — don't want to breathe, if it means he stops kissing me. Finally, panting heavily, he pulls away.

“Bedroom,” he orders me.

I shake my head. “It's ruined.”

Another piercing look, cutting me open and laying me bare. His eyebrow lifts. “Does it look like I fucking care?”

He drops his hand, the skin at my throat prickling with new blood flow, and dips to scoop me around the waist. I jump, wrapping my legs around his hips. Ares grins as he positions his hand under my ass and squeezes roughly.

We start the journey out of the living and down the hall, towards my bedroom. I

drape my arms over his shoulders and enjoy the moment to study him up close. Even in the moonlit shadows, his gray eyes sparkle. I trace the line of his nose and the blonde stubble on his jaw.

“You know, with one working hand, you haven’t really seen me at my best,” he says, crossing the threshold into my childhood bedroom.

With casual confidence, he balances us on one foot and uses the other to kick my torn and crooked mattress flat on the bed frame.

“Neither have you,” I reply. He grins and then we’re kissing again. I close my eyes and my stomach swoops as he tilts me backward, holding tightly until I’m laying flat on my back. The pressure of him disappears and my eyes flutter open to see him standing over me. He pulls his t-shirt off by the back of the neck, his taut muscles shifting under tattooed skin. My mouth waters. I want to trace every single one with my tongue.

He goes for his belt buckle and for half a second I doubt he can manage it with only one hand. Buckles clink, buttons pop and then his jeans are hanging loose.

I scoff and roll my eyes. “Now you’re just showing off.”

Ares grins devilishly. My eyes follow the shadowed grooves of his abdomen to the cropped tuft of hair at his open fly and the hard hint of what’s below. A shiver hits me deep and low and I swallow tightly.

God of War.

The words pop into my head unaided. I still have that book, never returned it to the library after that night. I’d stare at his page for hours. And that’s how I thought of it — his page. I imagined the Greek god coming to life, leaping from the page, weapons

drawn, and charging through battle to save me.

“Del? Baby?”

I blink back to Ares. The real one. Flesh and blood, skin and bone. Not a god, but a man. And even if he didn't slaughter my enemies to do it, he still saved me.

“What's your real name?”

Ares cocks his head. Huffs a little laugh.

“Seriously? You know my name.”

I do. It's somewhere in there, a vague shape of vowels and consonants, but I never thought of him as that name. He was always Ares. I don't say anything, just stare up at him. Ares takes a moment, then with an amused tilt on his lips, he puts a knee on the mattress and lowers himself on top of me again.

“Cameron Warner. Nice to meet you.”

“Can I, um... Fuck, why is this so hard?”

Ares mouth twitches up, his eyes darting down. “Well...”

“Shut up,” I growl, bringing my hands up to cover my face. “I'm being serious.”

Ares rocks back on his heels, the pressure of his groin hard against my hips. He touches my wrist. Gently pulls my hand back from my face.

“Delaney, you're kinda freaking me out. If you don't want to do this...”

“No! No, I do. I just...” I swallow hard. “I want to call you Cameron. And I want you to be nice. Just for tonight. Just for right now.”

Ares frowns, considering me. Then, for some reason, he looks up and around my room. It’s like it’s the first time he’s noticing it, beyond all my torn things, my broken little life. His eyes land on something and I crane my head. It’s Mama’s photo.

Without a sound, Ares slides off. Panic slices through me. No, no, no. I’ve ruined it, I’ve fucking ruined it all. This isn’t what he wants. I’m not what he—

Ares settles onto the mattress beside me, his gauze-wrapped hand stretched over my head and out of the way. Tilting my face with the other, he trails his fingers along my jaw.

“I wish I could change it. How we met.”

My breath catches. That was not what I was expecting.

“Sure,” he continues, smiling, “it’d be weird, knowing you as the kid from up the street. But maybe we would have been friends. I could’ve helped you fix your bike when you had a flat.”

Some feeling settles in my chest. It’s weird — sad and happy at the same time, a deep longing for something I never had. I smile as his finger brushes my bottom lip and I let myself imagine it. What could have been. It’s unspoken, but I know Ares feels it too: in this fantasy, my father doesn’t exist.

“I bet Mama would have invited you over for dinner or something, since you were living all alone after your Gran left.”

Ares chuckles. “And I would’ve said no. Because I could tell you had a crush on me

and it would've been weird.”

I laugh and smack his bicep. “Mama wouldn't care about that,” I reply. “She'd laugh and think it was cute. Besides, you'd come for dinner eventually. You wouldn't have been able to resist her pasta sauce. It's the best.”

“So, what happened then?” Ares asks. “Over the years?”

The story floods to my mind far too easily. It scares me, but not enough to stop it. Ares hand leaves my chin, drifts down to my waist. His fingers make gentle patterns on the skin of my hip.

“When I'm sixteen and you're twenty-four, I asked you to be my first kiss.”

He snorts. “That sounds problematic.”

“You said no.”

“Of course I did. I'm a gentleman.” He leans in and nips at my neck. I try to breath steadily, but it's difficult because I can feel his hand. His thumb swoops beneath my waistband, not venturing any lower, just sliding back and forth.

“But... but you couldn't stop thinking about me,” I say. Ares rolls my head to the side with his nose and lays kisses up and down my throat. “We lived our separate lives, but it was always there, at the back of your mind. Then this one night, when I was a little older, you saw a guy bringing me home from a date.”

Ares growls hot against my skin. “I don't like this story anymore.”

I laugh. “It gets better. Because he was a little handsy, this no-name guy, and just as I was about to knock him the fuck out, you swooped in and threw him off me.”

“Did I kill him?”

“Oh, you tried. But I stopped you. And then... and then you held me while I cried and made me hot cocoa and we watched The Carol Burnett Show and you told me that guys are assholes and I don't need them.”

Ares is quiet for a moment, his thumb stilling at my hip. I can feel him breathing shallowly.

“I remember,” he says, his voice rough, and I almost believe that he does.

“And then you kissed me.”

He grunts a laugh, his thumb going back to work. Back and forth. Back and forth. My skin tingles.

“Still sounds problematic.”

“Hey, this is my fantasy. Shut up.” He bites me then, right on the jugular, and my shriek turns into a laugh when he pulls back to look me in the eyes.

“It's mine too, you know,” he says.

My heart swells and aches and longs for this fake past even harder. I take a breath.

“So then what happened next?” I ask. I put my hand on his bare chest, my fingers trembling a little, and start to trace the outline of his tattoos. Ares' jaw clenches.

“We waited until the right time. Your mom, she's smart, she knew something was going on.”

“But she liked you.”

“She liked me,” he repeats. “Knew I’d never hurt her little girl.”

I nod. Ares moves his hand lower, under my panties. My heart races.

“And one night, I laid you down on this very bed and I touched you.”

He twists his fingers. Moves them through the warm, wet place between my thighs. Back and forth. Back and forth.

“Made you come,” he says, “made you cry it felt so fucking right. And then when I was finally inside you...”

He pushes inside. Two thick, slick fingers. I cant my hips, a gasp caught in my throat.

“...You told me you loved me.”

I gulp. “And what... what did you say?”

“I love you too, Delaney.”

I take him by the back of the neck and drag him close. His mouth against mine, his fingers inside me, we move together, steady movements becoming more and more desperate, and when I come, I do it screaming his name.

Cameron.

28

Delaney

We lie in the darkness, my head on Ares' chest. I rise and fall with his steady breathing. My palm rests on his abs, his skin soft under my fingertips.

“How are you so calm? You didn't even...”

“You think coming is the only thing that relaxes me?” he asks, his words rumbling through my cheek. “I'm lying here with you.”

“I relax you?” I ask, rolling my head a little to meet his eyes. “I thought I infuriated you? Drove you absolutely fucking crazy with rage?”

“When you try and get yourself killed, yeah,” he agrees, grinning. “But right now?” His hand cups my face. Tucks a tendril of hair behind my ear. “Yeah, I'm relaxed.”

My body is limp and boneless. I don't think I've ever felt safer. Of course, that's when reality starts to seep in, like waste water from a broken pipe.

“He needs to die, Ares. You know he's never going to stop any other way. And once he finds out about Aaron, he'll use it somehow — pin it on you, leave it hanging over my head. I'll never be able to keep Lilly safe.”

“You're right.”

I sit up and stare at him in surprise. “Okay, who are you and what have you done with Ares?”

Something buzzes against my hip. Ares closes his eyes and puffs out his cheeks, like he was anticipating this. Dreading it, even. He takes his phone from his pocket and his face glows in the light of it as he checks the screen. I’m not in the right position to read the text. He clicks the screen off and sits up.

“Come on. I have to show you something.”

I step up onto Ares’ front porch on shaky legs. The last time I was this close to Ares’ house, I was running away, scampering in the dark and crawling through bushes to make it back to my bed before Dad could catch me.

There are lights on inside, a warm yellow glow emanating from the curtained windows. A shadow moves past the window and I jolt in fear, digging my nails into Ares’ forearm.

“There’s someone in there,” I hiss. But Ares doesn’t look surprised. He touches my lower back.

“Come on,” he says, urging me forward.

The front door is unlocked. Inside, the house feels the same, like it was only yesterday I was in here asking this big, bad biker to be my personal assassin. There’s movement in the living room, to my left, and even though I’m expecting someone, nothing prepares me for what I see.

There’s a man tied to a chair, his mouth duct taped over, dripping with sweat and a

trail of blood from a gash over one eye. When he sees me, his eyes go wide and he grunts against the tape, tugging desperately at his binds. Reaper, the tall, long-haired biker that showed up to the clearing, whacks the butt of his gun against my Dad's skull. Dad groans, his eyes shuddering closed for a second.

My mouth is sandpaper dry. I try to talk, to scream, but all that comes out is a ragged gasp. Ares walks past me and nods to Reaper who steps aside. Ares bounces down on his heels. He and Dad are face-to-face, but it's clear that Ares holds all the power here. Some of it flows back to me, emboldening me to step forward, shoulders tight.

"Ares, what is this?" I ask.

"This is retribution," he replies, holding Dad's gaze. Dad looks at him like a caged wolf — bloodthirsty, desperate, but ultimately toothless.

"This..." He seems to look up and over Dad's head. It signals Reaper, who steps around and hands Ares the gun. "This is me finally doing what I should have done a long time ago."

I slam back into my body, adrenaline pumping. Lurching forward, I pull Ares to his feet and force him back alongside me.

"No, no, you can't do this. This is... Fuck, we're in your house, Ares. Your Gran's house. There is a zero percent chance you'll get away with this. I need to be the one to do it. That way, you'll be protected."

My hand slides along his arm, but he knows what I'm doing and jerks away before I can grab the gun. All the while, Dad seems to have sprung to life, making high screaming noises against his gag.

Ares laughs bitterly. "Delaney, you came to me seven years ago, asking me —

begging me — to protect you. I wasn't ready to understand then, and I'm so fucking sorry, but I promise..." He thumbs away the tears I didn't feel cascading down my face. "I promise I will spend the rest of my life making it up to you."

I take a shaky breath. "How can you do that from prison?"

Ares kisses me. Sweet, gentle. When he stops, he rests his forehead against mine. His eyes are everything. I'm captured in icy gray, the rest of the world dropping away. I feel my guilt slipping away with it, finally accepting that this is the gift Ares is giving me. My God of War, coming to my rescue.

"Time to say goodbye to your father, Delaney."

I nod and Ares steps back, the space yawning coldly between us. Ares spins and tears the duct tape off Dad's mouth. Dad yowls in pain, spittle flying with every ragged breath.

"You son of a bitch," he croaks. "The Wastelanders are finished. There is nowhere on this earth you won't be hunted, do you hear me? Do you fucking hear me, Warner?"

But Ares isn't looking at him. He's staring right at me, a softness across his features that is so stunningly rare that he almost looks like a different person. I tear my eyes away from him and look at Dad, who finally seems to realize that Ares isn't the one in control here.

I am.

Everything about him changes, like a chameleon finding the right color to hide in. His eyes go soft, his head tilted in a pathetic, pleading gesture. He takes a breath. Licks his papery lips.

“Del, honey... Daddy’s sorry, okay. You know that I love you — you know that.”

“Do I?”

Dad beams, like he’s finally broken through to me. He tries to shuffle the chair closer; it scrapes just a little on the floor.

“Yes. Yes, you do. And I love you too. That’s how I know you’re not gonna let your own Daddy die. So, just... Just untie me and you and I can walk outta here together, okay?”

I stare at him for so long that I wonder if time itself has stopped. Nobody moves, nobody breathes. This man, once so big and terrifying, is coughing up snot and, let’s face it, has probably already pissed his pants. He doesn’t scare me anymore. Dad’s hopeful smile falters. Fades.

“You gonna say anything to your old man?”

My eyes move easily away from him, as if they’ve already forgotten he’s there, and instead I look at Ares.

“Thank you.”

He nods. From the corner of my eye, I see Reaper lunge for Dad’s back, whipping a thin wire around his neck. I don’t care enough to watch. I just leave the room to the sound of a pathetic, quiet struggle and I finally feel free.

Six Months Later

“Airy, hurry up!” Lilly shrieks as she runs for the car, twin braids bouncing with every step. Ares is a couple of strides behind her and lunges forward when she steps off the curb.

“Not on the road, Jesus fucking Christ!” He grabs her under the arms and swings her back onto the pavement. “What is it with you and your goddamn sister always trying to get yourselves killed?”

Lilly lands on her feet with a thump. She spins to face him, her peals of laughter a delightful song in my ears.

“That’s two! Two cokes!”

Ares scowls for a moment, then his grin cracks through. He tugs on her braid.

“You left your backpack on the porch. Don’t wanna leave without that, huh?”

“Oh, shoot!” she exclaims, then scampers past me and up the creaking porch steps. I watch her, but find myself studying the house that looms behind her instead. The walls still hold the memory of Dad, forever tainted by him. Sometimes I feel guilty that the good memories, the ones of Mama and of baby Lilly, don’t make a stronger impression but, then again, maybe if they did, I would feel guilty for leaving. As it stands, I can’t wait to never think about this house, about this town, again.

Muscular arms thread around my waist. Ares tugs me back sharply, forcing a

cathartic rush of air from my lungs.

“I don’t think this new system is going to cut it,” he rumbles into my ear. “A soda for a swear? Her teeth are going to be rotten through in six months.”

“Hmm, you’re probably right.”

“Any ideas?”

I shrug, my shoulders pressing back into his hard chest. “We’ve got the whole drive to California to figure it out.”

I smile, turn in his arms, and wrap mine around his neck. Ink flashes in my line of sight: thick black letters on my forearm. My first tattoo and the only one I think I’m ever going to get. Ares wrote it there seven years ago, and then again a few months ago in the back of a tattoo parlor. Now it’s never coming off.

A R E S .

“I gotta go to the bathroom!” Lilly yells from the porch. I hear the front door creak open.

“Fine, but hurry up,” he yells at her over my shoulder, rolling his eyes at me. “We gotta get on the road.”

I bite back a smile and Ares’s expression shifts, dropping into a glower. His hands flex on my waist, one far stronger than the other.

“What are you smirking at?”

“Who would have guessed the tough-guy biker would make such an excellent big brother?”

“Not really a biker anymore, remember?”

He doesn't say it sadly, but it still makes my heart pang a little. I lift one shoulder playfully.

“The offer is still on the table,” I say lightly, even though I already know the answer.

“I'm not taking any of that money, Del. Your Dad's life insurance is for you and your sister, I'm not using it to modify a fucking motorcycle.”

“I know, I know,” I sigh back.

I was shocked when the check arrived in the mail. The case hadn't even been officially closed, but the story stuck — Sheriff Trevor Jackson was dead, no doubt about it. After ‘That Night’ in Ares' house, I was convinced that everything was about to get much, much worse. I lay awake in bed, listening for sirens, for a knock on the door and men with guns coming to drag me and Ares away.

But... nothing happened.

Dad hadn't reported my theft of the drugs, in the hope that he could recover them first and save himself the embarrassment of having a thief for a daughter. It was only uncovered later, after he and Aaron didn't show up for duty, and everyone was so freaked out about a missing Sheriff, a missing deputy, and missing drugs that nobody even looked my way.

The town rumor mill was in overdrive by the time they called in some state investigators to take over the search. And when they found Dad's blood in Aaron's garage and traces of cocaine under his bed (Ares never said, but the Wastelanders definitely had something to do with that), it was all they needed to close the case.

Corrupt Deputy Murders Sheriff Over Stolen Evidence

Most people assumed Aaron had dumped Dad's body somewhere on the way to Mexico. Some even suggested they were in it together. It quickly became such an embarrassment for our small town that by the time they appointed a new Sheriff everyone had stopped talking about it. Now, it's almost like it never happened. Like Dad never existed.

I can't stop fucking smiling.

And now we're leaving.

"How long do we have until she gets back?" Ares says, his mouth drifting closer to mine. "You think I can bend you over the hood before—"

The door crashes open. "Okay, let's go!" Lilly screams, bolting past us.

"Fuck."

"Another coke, Airy! Don't forget!" Lilly climbs into the backseat of the crappy old car that's supposed to get us halfway across the country. Ares drops his head to my shoulder. His sigh is hot against my neck and my skin tingles.

"Seriously. New system."

"Or you could just not curse?" I offer with a smirk. Ares slants his mouth against mine in a filthy, toe-curling kiss. I moan into him, wanting — needing — more than he can give me right now.

After a moment, he pulls back just enough to let me breath.

"You like it when I curse," he growls against my mouth, his tongue flicking my bottom lip. "Because you're a fucking bad, dirty little slut, aren't you?"

Oh, God, I hope Lilly's got her headphones on by now.

I nod shakily. "Yes, I am."

"Damn fucking right," he grunts, kissing me again so forcefully my back bends. He palms my ass, then slides his hand up to fist the back of my hair as he sets me right again. His cheeks are flushed, his eyes bright with arousal.

"Now get your ass in the car."

He releases me, flashing me a rakish grin as he does so. I take a second, my heart calming. Fishing the car keys from his pocket, I spot Ares subtly adjusting himself before he turns to face the car. Past him, I see that — thank God — Lilly's immersed in her iPad, headphones on.

I slide into the front passenger seat and cast one final look at the house. All the worldly possessions Ares and I decided to keep are tucked into three suitcases strapped to the top of the car. Whoever buys the house can have what's left of the furniture. All of Dad's stuff went in the dumpster.

"Oh, good, you're done being gross," Lilly pipes up as Ares pulls away from the curb. I lean around to swat at her but then a flash of yellow catches my eye.

The garden in front of Ares' house is in full bloom. There's no For Sale sign in the front yard like at my old place. Ares can't risk selling it — not with who's buried under the roses in the backyard. He said the Wastelanders promised to keep the garden nice, but I don't know how long that's going to last.

I don't care. I'll have space for a garden in California or wherever we end up.

Ares will make sure of it.