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Just What the Doctor Ordered. The plot is natural but captivating as it touches upon culture differences and how each person faces and overcomes those obstacles....touches upon the nuisances of meeting the in-laws. I'll definitely be coming back to read this story again. ~PJ, Chewing the Bone book reviews

Shorts. For aficionados of m/m intimacy, Mr. Snyder definitely knows how to lay out the plot and characterizations and then turn up the flames! ~4.5 stars, Annie, Euro-Reviews

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Scarred

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Aspen Mountain Press

Scarred

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Scarred

The radio's low and the place is mostly cleared out this time of the evening when we hear the roar of regulators down the street. Delia looks at me, eyes wide with fright, and the knife she's using to chop the vegetables clatters to the wooden table. "Dae-"

"It's okay." I'm the big brother; that's what I'm supposed to say, though she doesn't believe me. I busy myself with the bills and try to ignore the choppy thunder of motorbikes outside. Maybe if I pretend I don't hear them, they'll disappear into the night. They're just looking for fun, that's all, and there's none to be had here.

Only someone forgot to tell them that because the next thing I know, the bikes cycle down outside and harsh laughter punctuates the still night. Then the bell above the door tinkles out in the main room, heavy boots echo off our worn floor, someone whistles and someone else laughs and then Maeve scurries into the back of the diner to tell us, "They're here."

Regulators. I remember a time when they didn't exist in my world, where a man trying to make an honest living could manage to get by without having to answer to such lawlessness. My da used to tell me stories before the terror attacks, stories I've told my sister Delia on the nights when she cries herself to sleep. It wasn't always like this

and maybe that's all the hope we need to go on, to know that there *was* something more, there can *be* something more, if we can just get through this present strife to find it. We *can* get by, I tell her, when I hold her close in the darkness. We *will*.

But I can see she doesn't buy that—it's in the way her hands tremble as she scoops the minced vegetables up from the cutting board to dump them in the soup that boils beside her on the stove. From out in the dining room, a ragged voice calls for service, and I see the way she clenches the knife in one fist, toying with the idea of hiding it on her somewhere for protection.

I hate this fear in her. "Don't." I place a hand over the knife. She looks up at me, her lower lip stuck out in a slight pout, and I shake my head for emphasis. "It'll just get them mad, Delia. You know that."

"They'll touch me," she whispers. "They'll want—"

"I won't let them."

She stares at me a moment longer and then nods. She knows I'll not have that in here. I've stood up for her before, I have the scars to prove it—emotional scars that cut deeper than the scratches from McBane's belt that cross my lower back, scars that ache worse than the bones he crushed in my wrist that never quite healed.

When another of the men calls out for service, I nod at Delia and whisper, "Go on. The sooner they're fed, the sooner they'll leave."

Maeve twists her hands in her skirts and watches Delia push through the service door that leads behind the counter. "I'll mind the soup," she calls out, ever eager to please. She's only fifteen, Delia's charge, picked up from an alley not far from here one day some years back, and the child didn't want to speak or eat or even live until Delia convinced her otherwise. Another war orphan, like the rest of us.

I try to tell her my da's stories, too, to keep that world alive, but it's nothing she remembers and she thinks they're just fairy tales, she's said as much, make-believe things I come up with to get us through the day. She doesn't remember a mother or father or a time before all this. Delia doesn't, either—she's four years older than Maeve and all she knows of our da is what I can tell her, which isn't much anymore. But she

wants to believe things haven't always been like this; ragtag rogues running the streets, shells falling in the night, the world crumbling around us like so much brick and mortar.

I want her to believe there can be so much more than this. Otherwise, what's the use in going on?

"You want I should go out there?" Maeve asks, breaking into my thoughts.

I sit at my desk by the walk-in refrigerator, not far from where she stands stirring the soup, and I can hear every word that's said out in the main room—the catcalls when Delia steps out from around the counter, the raucous laughter, the snickers and jokes. Five different voices, maybe six—regulators don't travel in larger packs.

One leader, usually the roughest of the bunch, mean enough to scare a handful of others into following him. They tear through the city on their motorbikes like postmodern desperados. Nothing more than street gangs, that's all they are. There's so many, too, I can't keep track of them. They ride in here like glory and shake us up a bit until they lose interest and we just have to hope we can hold together that long.

McBane's group is the worst of the bunch, but I don't hear his voice out there in the main room. Thank God for that. He'd have called me out there to him by now.

"Dae," Maeve starts.

"Shh."

I want to hear what's said. The regulators quiet down. Delia must have approached the tables, and then I hear her low voice telling them the daily specials, probably passing out menus and trying to avoid their hands.

Maeve bites her lip, stirs the soup, and asks again, "Should I go, too?"

Out in the main room, Delia's voice rises in anger amid wicked laughter.

"Stay here," I tell the younger girl as I stand. The chair scrapes out behind me and she jumps back, startled. "It's okay." I don't quite believe that myself. Pushing through the swinging door, I repeat, "You stay here."

There are seven regulators altogether, a sordid and mean-spirited group, taking up two of the largest tables along the windows by the exit. Beyond the glass I see their

bikes lined up single file, gleaming in the floodlights that illuminate the small stretch of concrete I like to call a parking lot. We'll not have another customer tonight with those hogs out there. Anyone passing will just keep on going by. Already the couple we had sipping coffee at the bar stands by the register, anxious to pay their bill and leave. An older woman and her husband—neither of them look at the regulators.

I watch the men from the corner of my eye as I ring up the coffee. They don't wear McBane's signature bandannas and I've never seen them around here before, but that doesn't mean anything. A rival gang, then, or someone new looking to score this turf. That means fights in the street, a new reign of terror until McBane backs down or manages to run these punks out. I'm not looking forward to this already.

One regulator stretches along his side of the booth, across from two of his men, and I assume he's their leader. He's a young kid, no more than a boy, really—Delia's age, if that. But there's a hard look about him, his eyes are like flint in his stony face, and a smattering of healed scratches crisscross his nose like freckles. His hair is buzzed down to just a hint of darkness that clings to his scalp, and as he drinks the water Delia's set before him, I notice his knuckles, battered and scraped. He glances at me with mercurial eyes that look almost silver from here.

I look away before he wants to start something. *Just go,* I pray.

When I dare to glance back at him, he's still watching me, and he's got that look on his face that I recognize all too well. I see it every time McBane rides up in here looking to score. It's a hunger, a lust that has nothing to do with Delia and everything to do with me.

Dread curls in the pit of my stomach and I tell myself I'm going to ignore it, pretend I don't notice the weight of his gaze on me as I wipe down the counter. I keep an eye on Delia; she's handling herself very well, asking each man for his order and not rising to any of their barbed comments or implied threats. When one of the bastards flips through the menu and asks where she's listed on the thing, I twist the towel in my hand to curb the anger that eats at me inside.

She catches my eye and I can see how frightened she is. We're all terrified here;

the sooner these regulators leave, the better. *It's okay*, I want to tell her, even though it's not. Instead, I just nod her way and that's enough to make her turn back to the customers—at least she knows I'm here.

The next table's worse, the one with the guy I'm assuming runs this show. He doesn't say anything to her—I don't expect him to, he's the type to corner me if I let him, she's safe as far as he's concerned—but the men he's with, they scare me. The one on the end's as big as a bear, burly and gruff, lank hair hiding his eyes and a foul mouth beneath an ill-kempt beard.

"Hey, doll," he bellows as Delia comes up to him. I swear the windows shake when he speaks.

Before she can answer, he has a hand on her waist and he's pulling her into his lap, a flurry of flailing arms and kicking legs. "Let me go!" she cries, dropping her order pad to the floor.

The more she struggles, the more the regulators laugh. They think this is funny, even the one by himself, he's got a smile on his face and he's watching me again, waiting to see what I'm going to do. I'm wondering the same thing.

"Dae-"

I come around the counter, wiping my hands on my apron. Unarmed, of course —this is my place, I don't carry weapons. I'm not one of *them*. I'm not much to look at, I've got muscles but they're from lifting stock and I wouldn't know how to throw a punch if my life depended on it, but it's not me at stake here, it's her, and I promised I'd not let them touch her. I swore I'd watch out for her, it was the last thing I told my da, I'd be the big brother and keep her safe. That's the only thing steadying my voice when I approach the table . "Let her go."

Silence. It's shock value I'm riding on here, and the few moments it takes for the lug to notice me is enough for her to wriggle free from his grip. Straightening her skirts, she cowers behind me, her hands on my back.

And then he realizes he's got to do something to save face here, I should know better than to start something in front of the whole gang.

He hauls himself up from the booth, a head taller than me and three times as wide, his eyes gleaming with a mean spark I don't like at all, his hands fisting at his sides. Hands like that crushed my wrist, the first time I stood up for her. I've been torn open by men like him, left bleeding and broken. I have the scars to prove it.

Behind me Delia gasps, pulls me a step back. "Dae," she whispers. "Oh God, Dae __"

I don't know if it's courage or stupidity that makes me look up at him and say, "I'll not have that in here. If you're wanting to touch her again, you can just leave now."

He laughs. I expected him to; that's how it normally starts.

He looks around at his friends, they're all laughing now. Looks like I'll give them a spot of fun tonight after all. He raises his voice until it booms through the room even though I'm standing right in front of him. "Can you believe this?" he asks, motioning at me, and that makes the others laugh again.

Delia's nails bite into my back. This is ridiculous; this man is easily twice my size. If he's of a mind, there's nothing I can do to stop him and he knows it.

"I've got a bit of a sweet tooth." He gives me with a bawdy wink, "And your girl's just the thing to hit the spot. Whaddya say, sugar—"

When he lunges around me, I move away, keeping Delia out of his reach. She bumps into one of the bar stools, then scurries around the counter, pressing against the wall, ready to run if I tell her to. As the regulator closes the distance between us, I caution, "You'd do well to sit down."

The threat sounds hollow to my own ears, and it just makes him grin. But at least my voice doesn't quiver when I say, "Sir, I'll not have trouble here."

Sir is too kind a word for a man like him. He smirks at me; that *sir* bit gets them every time. "Sir," he echoes, adding a lisp to goad me.

I cringe when he pats my cheek. I hate him for doing this to me, to *us*. I hate them all.

Leaning close, he lowers his voice until it's just a raspy whisper and tells me, "Don't worry, kid. I don't go for the boys."

Thank God. I've had men like him, men who barreled into me because they just wanted release and they didn't care if it was me or Delia, and I did it protect her from them.

McBane's the one who's scarred my back. He likes the sight of my blood when he comes, he's sick like that. I just close my eyes and disappear when it happens, I'm not alive at that moment, I don't exist. I learned long ago how to cancel myself out of this world, with its hate and bigotry and hurt, and if it keeps men like *this* away from Delia, then it's worth it to me.

But he's not interested in just another fuck. He wants her, I can see it in his eyes, the way he studies me for a moment, my face, my lips, then glances over at her and his grin widens. He wants her. When he starts around the counter, I tell him, "I'll have to ask you to leave, *sir*."

My words don't faze him. "Delia —"

That's as far as I get before she pushes through the door to the back and runs, I can hear her bare feet on the stairs, she's probably grabbed Maeve's hand and is dragging her along. At the top of the stairs, she'll bolt the door to the attic we share and she'll be safe, he can't break through that. Then he'll come back after me.

Only he doesn't get that far. He doesn't even make it through the door, still swinging from Delia's hasty retreat, when a soft, deadly voice says, "Sit your ass down, Tarn. You heard the man."

It's their leader who spoke, the one with the scars across his nose and the eyes like quicksilver; he's glaring at his friend as if he can drop him with that look alone. Tarn scowls at me like this is my fault, and the others have stopped laughing. This isn't funny anymore. "Coby," Tarn growls. "You said—"

"I said sit your ass down." Coby speaks slowly as he fixes Tarn with that stare. Knocking me aside, Tarn crosses the room in two steps to tower over Coby where he sits, but Coby doesn't flinch. The third regulator at the table frowns into a glass of water and doesn't look up.

I expect something dramatic now, something loud and destructive that will tear

through my small diner with the force of a whirlwind and leave us to pick up the pieces when echoes from the last of the motorbikes have faded into the distance. I've seen that all too often before—after a while, the paint doesn't cover as much as it should.

But something passes between these men, something I don't quite catch, even though I'm watching Coby openly. I'm fascinated by his hard eyes and can't look away. Part of me doesn't *want* to, and I know that's horrible, he's nothing but trash like the others, another McBane in the making and they're just trouble, the whole lot of them.

For a heart-stopping moment, nothing happens, nothing at all. Then Tarn sinks back into his seat, grumbling under his breath words I can't quite catch, and Coby glances at me. My knees go weak and I want to sink into the floor, just let him have whatever it is he wants and go, *please just go*.

"If she'll come back out," he says in that same soft voice, seductive and dangerous, "he'll apologize."

Tarn glowers across from him like that's the last thing he's about to do, but I know Delia, she'll not be down until these men are gone.

"That's alright." *Now* my voice cracks, and someone sniggers. It's enough to pink my cheeks and I duck down to pick up Delia's order pad to hide the blush that colors my face. I have to clear my throat twice before I manage to ask, "She took your orders?"

Coby nods at the other man at his table, prompting him to mumble, "A burger all the way. Make it two."

Tarn mutters, "Same."

I scribble as fast as I can, I want to get out of here, away from these men and the tension suspended over them like fire ready to fall. When I turn to Coby, he's watching me again. I hate the way his eyes make my fingers tremble. "What about you? What can I get for you, sir?"

It's that *sir* again, I know I shouldn't humor them but my da taught me better than that. *Sir the devil, son,* he used to say. *If he tips his hat, you say how do, you were raised with manners and just 'cause no one else has 'em don't mean you have to forget yours.*

I feel the familiar lump rise in the back of my throat, the hitch that always comes

up when I think of my da and the way things were before the attacks, before the city fell to ruins and people went bad. I'm about to ask for the order again when Coby smiles—a *real* smile, something I haven't seen on a man like him in a long time—and he asks, "What do you got here that's good?"

Tarn smirks like he knows what the kid's asking, but I'm ignoring that, remember? So I rattle off the menu from memory, burgers and hoagies and dives, the soup of the day that's still cooking in the back, the meats we have in the fridge. I stare at a spot on the wall as I talk, above the window so I can pretend I don't see the way this Coby's gaze trails down my body, as blatant as Tarn's advances on Delia.

When he doesn't choose something I start to flounder, repeat the more popular menu items, and he interrupts me. "What do you suggest?"

I look into those eyes and my mind goes blank.

I know what he wants, it's written plainly across his face, I've seen that look a hundred times from regulators passing through here, wild men just like him. I'm surprised he hasn't made an offer yet, or grabbed my ass, or hell, just thrown me on the table, have his men hold me down while he shoves into me like others have done before.

But he hasn't *said* anything yet, maybe I'm reading him wrong. *I suggest you leave*, I want to say. *Just take your gang of hooligans and hit the road, find some other Ma and Pa place to rattle tonight*.

I'm not that bold—whatever courage I had earlier is gone now, fled upstairs with Delia. Without her I lose my strength, and in a low voice I mutter, "The burgers are good. Everyone else is getting them."

"I'm not everyone else."

Oh fuck. The last thing I need is to piss him off after he's reined in his men. "The soup, then, though it's not quite done—"

He waves dismissively. "A burger's fine."

Across from him, Tarn laughs, releasing some of the tension that's built between the two men. *Don't ask me about soft buns*, I pray, scribbling down another burger on the

order pad. Don't say anything else, please.

Someone must be listening to me tonight, because one of the regulators at the other table calls out to Coby and suddenly I'm not there anymore, I don't exist for them.

Without another word, I hurry around the counter to the back. I push through the door, let it swing shut behind me, and refuse to glance over my shoulder when I swear I can feel him watching me again.

* * * *

Delia doesn't come back down—I don't blame her. She knows the routine.

When we have regulators in the main room, I don't want her near them, and she's more than happy to stay in the kitchen. Thing is, these men sniff her out like dogs. They howl for want of a soft body beneath them, someone they can force their way into and now Maeve's of an age where they're starting to notice her, too.

I'd rather the both of them stay out of sight when men like this ride in, scaring off our usual customers and looking for trouble. Can't they stick to the Outlands and leave those of us left in the cities to die in peace?

When I tell her to run, Delia listens. She races up the stairs that curve above the kitchen into the attic space, bolts the door, and waits for me to come up behind her. She knows what it is I do; what I go through to protect her.

The first time she heard my cries she crept downstairs only to find me lying bloodied and beaten on the floor, discarded like a broken toy tossed aside by a careless child. She held me in her arms and wept, whispered that I didn't have to do it, I didn't have to let them do it to me, I could've hidden with her and let them just go about their way. Then she stitched up what she could, put salve on the rest, helped me up the stairs and into my narrow bunk and told me it didn't have to be this way. "We'll find someone to help us," she promised.

I didn't have the strength or the energy to ask her who she had in mind. There are no superheroes, no one to police this lawless world—all that we have left is each

other. I do this for her. She's my little sister, and the only family I have.

When I could find the words, I told her what our da said, right after the first attacks leveled most of the city. I was what, eight? And he took me aside to tell me he had to go. There's a war going on, son, he said then, as if I was too young to notice the men who disappeared from our community, shipped off in camouflage trucks. I can't shoot and I don't have it in me to kill, you know I'm against fighting of any sort. But I've got family to think of. Sometimes what you have to do is the only thing you can do, and shit on what you want. You'll get by, remember that. As long as you got someone else to think of, you'll manage to get by.

I have Delia to think of, and she has Maeve. We'll manage to get by.

* * * *

I stay behind the counter while the regulators eat; keeping an eye on the time as I wipe out the coffee and tea pots, refill the salt, restock the ice. That I save for last, I'm not looking forward to it—I have to climb up on one of the bar stools, haul a bucket of frozen cubes above the soda jerk, dump it in the unit and lean over into the cooler to settle the chunks.

When I'm up on the stool and have to bend down for the bucket, I hear the first wolf whistle. One of the regulators says I have a tight ass, someone else says he wants to sink his teeth into it, tear me open and eat me up and *that* starts the laughter again. I've heard this talk before. I have scars, too, in places I'd rather not think about, from men like these.

When I dump the ice, the sound covers their talk but only briefly. Then I'm leaning into the cooler and I can feel them staring at me. I hear more laughter, the scrape of a chair pushed back from a table. Now it starts.

I think of my da telling me I'll get by, the sharp sting of his aftershave still poignant in my mind after all these years. Here's where I disappear.

Coby's voice cuts through the laughter like a knife, surprising me. "Sit down."

"Aww, Coby," one of his men starts.

Silence. I straighten up, turn around slowly on the stool, unsure of what's happening. A young boy stands halfway between the tables and the counter—a nondescript kid with a shock of yellow hair that begs for a comb, watery eyes that remind me of puddles and a chipped tooth like a fang in the front of his mouth, that I see when he licks his lips.

He's dressed like the others, dirty jeans and a ratty leather jacket, the sleeves torn off and thrown away long ago, and he can't be but seventeen, if that. But he carries a rusty blade in one hand and his other curls into a fist. He's gauging how far away I am and trying to figure out if he'll be able to bring me down before Coby can stop him. I don't know *why* Coby would do that, what he's planning for me himself, but if it keeps this punk away...

"Ravid," Coby warns.

The kid takes another step toward me. I catch the way Tarn looks at Coby two seconds before the room explodes around us in a rush of men. Tarn wraps one thick arm around Ravid's neck, pulls back until I'm sure it'll pop and the knife the kid wields clatters uselessly to the floor as he claws at Tarn, struggling to breathe. One man dives for the floor, knocking Ravid's legs out from beneath him, another pins his arms down, a third sits on his legs to keep them from lashing out.

Only Coby remains seated, still chewing his burger with a thoughtful expression on his face. He glances up at me and I'm not sure if that's the hint of a smile or not. I don't know what it is I see glistening in his eyes, but my legs are like water, ready to run out beneath me, and I sink to the bar stool gratefully. Do I thank him? Does he expect something in return?

I'll find out soon enough. When Ravid stops thrashing about, the men help him up, joking and laughing as they dust him off like this isn't the first time things have gone this far. Tarn ruffles the kid's hair, tells him to stop thinking with the wrong head, like *he*'s one to talk.

Ravid glares at me balefully. He still wants to take me on. I see the lust

smoldering in his eyes and have to turn away so he won't see just how terrified he makes me.

I can handle men. I know how to close my eyes and vanish from the things they do to me, leave my body behind like a hollow shell and let them do with it what they please. I can deal with fists and nails and teeth, and I've had to put up with cigarette burns before, broken beer bottles, razor blades once, so sharp I almost didn't feel the cuts they left until I saw the blood well up beneath the skin.

But that knife he's carrying, that scares me, and the way he ignored Coby, that terrifies me, because these regulators answer to their leader if no one else. Look at Tarn, he gave up on Delia when Coby told him no. None of McBane's men will touch me, they know he won't go for it. If Ravid's not listening to the guy in charge, chances are he's the type to take no prisoners, and there won't be enough of me to stitch back together again once he's through.

The regulators file out into the night, their laughter trailing behind them. Tarn keeps a strong hand on Ravid's back, keeps him from turning around at the last minute and rushing me. The only one to stay behind is Coby—I figured as much.

He waits until the door closes on the last of his men before he pushes away from the table and stands, not looking my way. I watch him approach the counter, digging in his pocket for a battered wallet, the leather held together with rubber bands to keep things from falling out. Not that there's much inside—he opens it up on the counter, riffles through the few bills in there, frowns slightly and asks, "What's it gonna be?"

I'm surprised he's paying. Most regulators try to talk me into giving them a tab, which I try not to do because that's an open invite right there to come back and that's the *last* thing I want. But it's quiet in here now, the noise from his men trapped outside beyond the window panes, and he hasn't raised his voice at me, hasn't touched me, and there's something to be said for that. Another time and place, he might be just a normal boy on the other side of my counter, paying for a meal.

This close I see he's about my height, maybe a few inches taller, and he's my build, too, though more muscle than me, not as filled out in some places, bulkier in

others. Those eyes are like silver dollars winking in the lights overhead, and the scars across his nose just add to his boyish air. I wonder who he'd be in a different world, if he'd still be this soft-spoken, this polite. I watch his fingers as he toys with the cash—he has big hands, with scuffed knuckles and scraped palms, and I wonder if they're as deceiving as the rest of him. If they're as soft, as gentle, as his voice when he prompts, "Sir?"

Sir. It's the sir that makes me undercharge him, I decide, not his hands or his voice or his eyes. "Five's fine," I tell him, taking the offered bill and turning away. "Have a good night."

He doesn't leave. Instead he leans on the counter, stares at my mouth and says, "We need a place to stay."

Here it is then, what I've been expecting since they walked through that door. The proposition. Let me fuck you and I'll keep the men away from your sister, that's what those words mean. Bend over and we won't trash your place. I've heard it all before. How could I even think he might be someone different?

My voice hardens. "There's a boarding house down the street. Kyla's. She's got extra rooms in the back, don't let her try and tell you she doesn't."

He watches as I wipe down the counter. It doesn't need cleaning. It's just something to do to keep from meeting his steady gaze. He's trying to get a bead on me, I know he is, and as long as I don't look at him, he can't really pin me down in his mind. *Go on*, I plea silently, feeling him watch my every move, the circular motion of my hand as I rub the counter, the muscles in my arms flexing. *Go on*, *don't say another word*. *You said you weren't like everyone else, remember? So prove it already. Just say goodnight and go.*

I should have known better. So he has pretty eyes, so what? So he has manners and a nice smile and a soft voice. He's still a regulator, he's still one of *them*, those men who ride through this war-torn wasteland and control what's left.

"You don't get my drift," he says in that damnably quiet voice of his, and then, when I don't reply, he wants to know, "That girl? What did you call her, Delia?" Involuntarily my hand closes into a tight fist, a gesture he doesn't miss. "Who's she to

you?"

"My sister," I tell him through clenched teeth. "I'll not have your men stay the night—"

"Just me," he corrects.

Yes, that's what I thought. *Now* I look up and I see the hunger in his eyes, the lust, the *need*, and damn it the hell, I was right all along. I don't realize there's a part of me that hoped he might prove different until I feel my heart twist angrily in my chest. *Fuck him.* "I guess I can't really say no, can I?"

He shrugs.

No would be stupid, *no* would dissolve this civil discussion into a brutal rape, *no* would send Tarn up the back stairs for Delia and Ravid in here with his knife.

I can't say no. That's not even an option.

I let this kid have his way, a quick fuck and a bed, and it's over with. He might smack me around a bit but I'm not thinking of me anymore. I've been hit before. I'm thinking of the girls upstairs. I'll get by as long as I think of them.

Touching my hand, he trails one finger down an old scar that's healed crooked along my thumb, more of McBane's handiwork, when I made the mistake once of trying to shield myself from his blows. "I'm gentle," he murmurs, tracing the scar. "I'll not hurt you, I promise."

That's something I've never heard before, and the faint press of his skin against mine rouses my blood in a way I'm not sure I like. I *don't* like it, I tell myself, I *won't*. But when he looks at me with those mercurial eyes, I find that I can't look away, and his hand covers mine with an unexpected warmth that surprises me.

"One night, sir," he says. There's that sir again. "That's all I'm asking."

One night. And he's asking so sweetly, too, like there's nothing else at stake here, we're just two boys looking to find something together, and that's not the way it is, not at all.

He's not even asking, not really—I say no and this whole charade, this whole pretense, is over. He signals to his friends and they come back in, hold me down, he

takes what he wants anyway. That gentle crap is just another lie.

But his hand on mine is softer than I imagined it would be, his touch *is* gentle, and he holds his breath as if I might actually say no after all. I stare into his depthless eyes and think I've had worse. A *lot* worse.

And it keeps Delia safe...I pull my hand out from under his and attack the counter with renewed vigor, hating the small part of me that is almost looking forward to a tender touch, sex without pain or blood, sex with him. "Fine," I say, defeated.

If it keeps his men away from Delia, then fine.

* * * *

When he leaves to tell his men to ride on, I have half a mind to lock the door behind him and rush up the stairs, but I don't dare. Fifteen minutes, thirty at the most, and it'll all be over. I can hold out that long. *And if he's gentle*, a voice inside whispers, a voice I try to stifle and can't, *if he keeps his word and doesn't hurt me, then maybe it'll be worth it*.

It won't be – I won't let it be.

He's the same as McBane, just wants someone warm beneath him when he comes, something more than the lonely road and his hand or another hardened regulator. He wants someone soft, that's it, and it's just me tonight because I got the luck of the draw. Maybe he liked the way the light fell from my windows out into the street, I don't know, but he saw me and wanted a taste, so he held his men back when one went for Delia and the other came at me. He's worked me into a corner now. I can't say no. If I do, he'll release his grip and send the wolves in here to tear us apart.

So he's got soft hands and a nice smile, so what?

McBane talks sweet when it suits him, but only after I'm bruised and sore, only after I've given up. Then he strokes my back, tracing the scars he put there, and he tells me how good I am, like I care. *One more time*, he'll say, just when I don't think I can take it again. His fingers are deceptively gentle when he's trying to get me to respond,

rimming around and around until I could scream from the touch. *Is your sister as tight as you are? I should like to find out.*

At least this Coby kid hasn't made any threats like that, not yet.

Alone, he comes back in from the night amid rude laughter. He slides into a corner booth, watches as I bolt the door behind him. Outside the motorbikes come alive, the roar of their engines easily mask his friends' lewd comments. I pretend I don't see the gestures they make when they look my way. I pull the shades, turn off the signs, and wipe down the tables and chairs. "It'll be a few minutes," I tell him, just to fill the silence that stretches between us.

"It's okay."

I feel his gaze like a hand on my body, roaming down my back, around the curve of my ass, over my hips. He stares openly at me and my skin feels hot, too tight, dry as tinder beneath the flame of a match.

I pray Delia doesn't venture down here before he's gone. She doesn't need to see me like this, objectified in his presence.

When I get to where he sits, he watches my hand rub over the table top with a slight frown on his face, an expression I can't quite read. I studiously ignore him, scrubbing the table harder than I need to, steeling myself for what's coming when I've finished cleaning up.

It surprises me when he touches my wrist and asks softly, "What's your name?"

A million different things flit through my mind and are gone. Lies, pseudonyms, all the things I've used to answer that question before in the past. It's his fingers on my flesh, though, his thumb smoothing over the bump at the base of my thumb where the bone never quite healed properly, it's that tender touch that makes me whisper, "Dae."

"Dae." The way he says my name, it sounds exciting and new, like an elusive word caught on the tip of my tongue that I couldn't seem to remember before. "That's short for?"

He doesn't need to know, but before I can stop myself, I'm giving him my birth name. I should just shut up now. "Daelyn." I pull away from the table and him. "I'm

almost through here."

As I turn, he nods and I hear my name again, beneath his breath.

I busy myself with the broom and sweep the floor, rough and fast so we can get this over with already. He's unnerving, to say the least. Hasn't touched me really, hasn't grabbed my ass or pulled me into his lap or felt me up.

McBane doesn't even wait for his men to leave some nights. When he's been to the Outlands and is looking for a fuck, he'll have his dick in hand and pump it good while he shoots the shit with whatever regulator's the last to leave. Sex is just power to him, he uses it to control whoever he can, and he doesn't care who knows it. It's how he keeps his men in check, the same way I use it to keep him away from Delia.

Trouble is, he's just as free with his fists, and I try not to imagine what'll happen when he finally goes too far, cuts too deep, leaves me for dead; who'll watch out for her then? Who'll keep her safe?

I won't think about that.

I stack the chairs up on the tables, then run a mop across the floor, just enough to wet the cracked linoleum. I should empty the register but I won't, not until he leaves. Hopefully he'll get his fill and slink off to join the rest of his gang before morning. I don't want to wake with him beside me. It's bad enough I'll have him in me, on me, splattered across my skin and staining my sheets.

When I realize I'm just stalling for time, I until the apron from around my waist and pull it off over my head. "Come on," I tell him, balling the apron up in my fists, tossing it aside.

He stands slowly, stretches like a cat, reaching for the ceiling and his shirt pulls free from the front of his torn jeans, exposing a tan, flat stomach, a black design tattooed around his belly button.

I push through the door into the kitchen, let it swing shut behind me—I don't turn to see if he follows, but he does. I hear the door creak as he enters, hear it hit the jamb when it closes after him.

I don't take him upstairs - no one goes up there with me, just the girls. My bed

has never known another body but mine and I plan on keeping it that way. I need something to myself, some place to call my own.

Instead, I lead him to a cabinet beneath the steps, a narrow door that opens on a crammed storage closet, barely wide enough for the cot I've placed inside. One person crowds the room; two's almost claustrophobic. There's a small table beside the cot, one oil lamp and a book of matches on top, Delia's kit of gauze underneath.

The sheets on the cot are washed out and worn in spots so the pinstriped mattress shows through, and the two pillows at one end are bare and soiled. My blood, that's what discolors them, spilled from McBane's touch. The dark stains on the mattress are also mine—despite the low lighting I still see them, and I can remember each blow, each cut, each wound torn into me. I close my eyes and can still see the blood. I hate this room.

Coby sits on the edge of the cot and I have to lean across him to light the lamp.

Once the wick catches, I shake out the match and close the door, locking us into this cramped space. Without looking at him, I pull my shirt off, up over my head, feeling the familiar sense of disbelief settle over me and numb my mind.

I'm not here, I tell myself. I'm not doing this. I'm eight again and safe, in the backyard of the house where we used to live, when we called it living. This is where I go when I disappear, back to a time before the war, before all *this*.

My fingers find the buckle of my belt on their own, unbutton my jeans, push the thin denim down to the floor, and in my mind I see my da pruning back the branches of a spindly dogwood. He has a deep voice that still echoes through me after all these years. It'll only grow if you cut it back, son.

Hooking my thumbs into the waistband of my boxers, I pull them down to my ankles, then kick them away. You sacrifice the limbs you don't really need so that the rest can bloom.

I stand undressed before Coby, unashamed, compliant, gone. I'm not here, this is just a hollow shell, my body waiting for him. Waiting.

"Turn around," he commands.

I obey.

He sits on the bed and studies me, the bruises on my hip where McBane hit me with a bottle when he came by last week, the cigarette burns along the inside of my arm, the scars...

When Coby's hand touches the small of my back, where the skin's raised from wounds that will never fully heal, the touch is so kind, so unlike anything else I've ever felt before that it wrenches me back into the present, into this tiny room where I'm naked and cold. Warm fingers tentative and unsure trace the patterns that scar my back and buttocks.

I hold my breath, almost afraid to let it out and shatter this sudden tenderness.

Behind me I hear the creak of springs and then Coby's hands slip up my back, around my waist, over my arms as he stands. "Who did this to you?" he whispers, so low that I might have imagined the words.

He turns me around and I don't like the incredulous anger I see in his eyes, the harsh frown on his lips. When he looks at me, demanding an answer, I don't know what to say.

His hands are strong on my chest. He thumbs the crescent-shaped scar that curves beneath one nipple, another McBane trademark. I can't meet his gaze anymore. I can't bear to see the pain in those silver eyes, so I look down past the thick hair curled at my groin. I just want this over with already.

He hasn't hurt me, no, but I can't take much more of this compassion. I'm not used to it, I don't know how to reply. When his arms envelop me, I close my eyes and stand still, let him pull me close, hold me. I don't know what else to do.

Finally, my body responds to his, my arms come up around his waist hesitantly, my hands fist into his shirt. I've never been held like this before—there's nothing sexual in it, nothing blatant or demanding, nothing *mean*. I close my eyes and bury my face in his shoulder, I could get used to this if I'm not careful.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs, over and over again, as if these scars, these wounds, are *his* fault. His hands are soothing, his body warm against mine. "I'm so sorry."

I pull away and he lets me go.

"Lie down."

I do as he says, lying on my stomach on the thin cot because that's usually what these regulators want. I feel each spring poke into me through the mattress, and the sheets feel dry and cold against my naked skin. My arms are trapped beneath my stomach, my ass an invitation. I watch the desire rise up in him again as he gets undressed, a sense of dread filling my body at his nakedness.

His leather jacket is tossed on the floor. The mesh shirt he wears, the tank top beneath it, thrown aside. The jeans shucked off, the boots kicked away, the boxers gone until he's naked, too.

Coby's flesh is inked with Oriental characters I can't read, artistic lines knotted together, images that cover his body like the scars on mine. Low on his belly, a cross is tattooed into the flat muscle, pointing down to the patch of light hair kinked around a reddening erection. He's already hard, that doesn't surprise me. That's the reason he's here.

For a moment he looks at me on the bed and then at the wooden steps that come out of the ceiling above me, the underside of the stairs leading to the attic space.

McBane just fucks on his knees, thrusting into me with his hands on the lowest step to keep from knocking his head into it. I can arch up a little, if it'll help, but I don't offer and Coby doesn't ask.

Instead he leans over the lamp, the light licking his dusky skin gold, and blows out the wick. Tiny embers burn bright before fading into nothing. Around me the room seems to open up in the darkness. When I can't see the walls, they stretch out forever.

Here it comes. The bed shifts as he kneels beside me and I tense up, every muscle in my body. I shouldn't because it hurts more that way but I can't help it.

He crawls over me, straddles my legs, and I feel the cool tip of his cock brush against my buttocks before he's lying down beside me, naked and smooth and warm. One hand strokes my back, his fingers playing down my spine from my neck to my tailbone and back again, and his lips are inches from my ear, his breath tickles along my

neck, he's so close and barely touching me, how is that possible? "Relax." He strokes me, gentle. He said he was gentle, didn't he?

I stare into the darkness and wait while he pets my skin, trying to put me at ease.

I've never had anyone do this before, regulator or not. I tremble beside him, my whole body aches, *just please*, I pray, even though I'm not sure what it is I'm asking for here. Relief maybe, or release, I don't know. *Please*—

"I'm not going to hurt you." His words are just shapes his mouth makes against my ear. "I promise."

I hate that I'm shivering, it's so cold in this room and he's so hot against me. "Just do it and get it over with," I whisper.

"Do what?"

As if he doesn't know.

Damn him. When I start to answer, though, he leans against me, the hard thickness at his crotch pressing into my thigh, and kisses the corner of my mouth. Turning away, I rub the damp imprint of his lips on my pillow. "Not there."

"Why not?" His arm curves around my hip to pull me closer.

I don't answer. Not my lips, they're still mine. Unmarked, unscarred, mine.

McBane doesn't even touch them. He's not one for kissing, and he can yank my hair all he wants, rip it out like he's done before, but he can't force me to blow him.

I won't.

I have to save something for myself. I have to hold onto *one* thing, if nothing else. Let them fuck me, let them touch me, beat me, bruise me, hurt me, sex me, I don't care, but these kisses are mine, these lips, this mouth, *mine*.

How can I explain that? How can I hope that he'll understand there's still a part of me they haven't managed to defile?

He rests his head next to mine, his breath steady and even in my ear. "It's okay. Can you back up against me? Like this?" He rolls me over on my side and pulls me back until my body spoons against his, his nipples biting into my shoulder blades, his dick hard against the crack in my ass. He reaches down towards the foot of the cot for

the threadbare afghan folded there, drapes it over our bodies to ward off the night's chill. Then his arms slip around my waist to hug me tight, his hands easing between my legs to cradle my balls. There are scars there, too, tiny marks that sting when he touches them, but his palms are soft and warm and he's not squeezing, not feeling me up, not thrusting into me so I can let him hold me if he wants.

"There," he murmurs, kissing the nape of my neck. "Relax, Dae. This is as bad as it gets, okay? This is all I want to do. I'm not going to hurt you, believe me, please."

I want to. All of a sudden, here in the tiny closet beneath the stairs, I want to believe him. I want these arms around me, I want this innocent intimacy. It makes me sad in a way I never thought I'd be for something I didn't know I needed or missed. When he kisses me again, the tension fades from my muscles and I melt into the bed, into *him*, and finally manage to disappear.

* * * *

I don't like to stay long after the sex if I can help it. McBane starts to snore before he's even pulled out of me most nights, and if I'm not too badly beaten, I drag myself upstairs, tend to my wounds the best I can, wash him off before collapsing on my own bed. That's if I'm conscious when he's through.

If I'm not, I'll wake sometime in the night to find he's already gone, leaving me on sheets stained with my own blood. Once or twice, when it was *very* bad, he woke Delia before he left, hollered up the stairs to her, told her come down and sew me back together again. That's what *she* said. At any rate, I don't remember it.

But here, now, Coby's arms are strong and comforting and when I rouse myself awake, I'm surprised to see bright morning light slanting in through the window above the cot. For long minutes I stare at the sun where it cuts across the ashy and faded door. I savor the warm flesh pressed against mine, arms around my waist, hands on my groin, Coby's face buried in the space between my shoulder blades where angels have wings. His breath fans my skin like kisses, and I don't want to move and spoil this

moment.

I've never felt this way before—I haven't felt this safe in a long time. Right now nothing else matters; the diner, the regulators, the world itself is gone. It's just me and him and this cot beneath us that creaks when he shifts behind me, settling his body closer to mine.

I hear the faint chink of pots out in the kitchen and wonder what time it is.

Delia's up and she's probably already checked my bed, knows I didn't sleep in it last night. She's just waiting for this door to open so she can come in and pick up the pieces.

Only it was different last night, wasn't it? He's *not* like everyone else, he didn't fuck me; he didn't bite or punch or cut. He just held me, that was all, he's *still* holding me, and for the first time ever I don't feel the rush of shaking him off, I don't feel dirty or unclean or soiled, I don't feel *used*. I almost don't want to wake him up and have this end.

But it must be getting late. I hear Maeve's voice beyond the door; she's talking low so she won't wake us. Delia's reply is short and curt. I can't make out the words but I know she's angry. She hates that I do this, that I *have* to do this.

He's different. I carefully roll onto my back so I won't disturb Coby too much. He mumbles something I can't understand, pulls away long enough for me to get comfortable, and then snuggles up to me again, the rasp of his hands on my chest muffled by the afghan covering our bodies. In the morning light, he looks much younger than I originally thought, his skin unlined, just a scruff of hair beginning to take hold along the curve of his jaw. The scars over his nose actually lend a rough boyishness to him, they make the rest of him look perfect—dark lashes that curl like a girl's, untamed eyebrows, hollows in his cheeks, full lips.

Tentatively, I brush my thumb across his lower lip. It's so incredibly soft, I can't begin to imagine how it'd feel pressed against my mouth. Just thinking that sends a thrill through me. That thought scares me and I pull away. I don't need to think shit like that. He's a regulator, like all the others. I have to keep that in mind—he's just like all the rest.

When I flip the afghan off my legs and start to get out of bed, Coby's hands tighten around me. "Don't," he says, his voice low and clear, as if he's been awake this whole time. "Lay here a minute."

"I've been lying here." But it's not much of an argument. The air is colder than I thought it would be, so I pull the afghan back over me and hate the way my body tries to get closer to his. We fit together so easily.

He doesn't speak, just stares at me, and I glance at him, at those silver eyes, and look away. I feel like I should thank him for not hurting me, for keeping his promise, but I can't find the words. It'd just make this tender moment between us that much more awkward. Ask him what he's doing here in the city, a voice inside my head whispers. Ask him how old he is, what Coby stands for, if he wants to come back. Jesus, Dae, don't let him just slip away.

Before I can say anything, though, Delia bangs on the door. With a spoon, perhaps, hand on her hip and face clenched, she'll be pissed by now that I'm still in here. She's thinking this guy's like McBane and she's ready to come to my rescue. "Dae!" she cries. "Are you—"

"I'm fine," I call out. Coby's watching me intently and I can't meet that gaze so I study the wooden steps, inverted above us.

The door knob rattles. "Open up. Is he still here? Dae, open up and let me in." "I'm fine."

Coby fingers an old scar on my stomach. That one's from when McBane threw a lamp like the one on the table beside our cot. It shattered on the wall, rained hot oil and glass down on me while he laughed. He's a sick fucker. I don't know what I ever did to snag his attention, and if it wasn't for Delia...

She's waiting. "I'm fine, Dee, really." I don't think she believes it. "Give me a few more minutes here, please."

"Dae," she starts.

God. I don't want to have to spell it out, not with Coby right here. "Please." Please, Delia. Let me have this, please. "I'll be out shortly."

She doesn't answer, but I hear her footsteps as she walks away. That'll buy us a little while longer, at least. Eventually Coby's men will show up looking for him, he needs to be out of here by then, I realize that. I know this is nothing more than passing time for either of us. Once that door opens, he's gone, and I'll never know this again, these arms around me, this intoxicating security, this *freedom*. So I want to hold onto it for as long as I possibly can.

"Dae." His voice is a whisper in my ear.

I turn to find myself trapped in that steady gaze, those eyes like headlights in the night, freezing me in place. One hand comes up to stroke my cheek and I lean into the touch, I'm going to miss this. The next time McBane comes to break me, I won't need my da to disappear—I'll have *this*, I'll go *here*.

With a shy smile, I tell him, "She's just watching out for me." He nods, presses his lips against my shoulder, and I feel the need to explain. "She thinks..." I'm unsure of how much I want to tell him.

"I know." His hands fill in what he doesn't say—he touches the scars on my chest, one nipple almost X-ed out completely where it'll never quite heal. He hasn't asked me about the marks again. I don't know what exactly I'll tell him if he does. McBane, I'll say. It's the truth. That man has tried his hardest to tear me apart.

But Coby's hands are nothing like McBane's. Coby's are more tender, more sure, and he touches me as if I'm fragile, like he thinks I might break. That's what makes me want to give him something more, some part of me to remember. My blood surges at the thought, my stomach flutters, my groin aches sweetly and when I look at him, his brow creases to see the sudden lust in *my* eyes, a mirror of the hunger I sensed in him last night. "We can have sex," I offer. "If you want."

It sounds strange to actually *say* it. I've never had to use the word before. With other regulators, with McBane, it was always understood, this is what they were going to do to me. The hurt and the pain, those were extra. The blood was just an added thrill for them. It was all about the sex, and sticking it to me, and getting off in me, on me, from me. They like my ass, they look at me and just *know* I'll do anything to keep them

from Delia so they ravage me and I let them, and they come back for more.

No matter how badly they've hurt me before, it's never enough for them, they always want more. When I'm with one of them, it's not passion, it's not *fun* for me. Even if I don't fight back—I can't, that'll just make it worse—it's still rape. It's still them taking something from me. Something I don't want to give. Something I'll never get back.

So I'm not sure how I'm supposed to feel right now. This desire that rushes through my body and hardens my cock, *that* terrifies me. I don't know where it's coming from. I've never enjoyed sex, *never*, but suddenly I look at this boy beside me and think it might be nice to feel him above me.

He's a regulator, I remind myself as he stares at my chin, my mouth. You can't forget that. Whatever you think it might be when he fucks you, it's just sex to him, you can't pretend it's not. There's a half dozen other guys just like you, scattered in hovels all through the city and Outlands, guys he shacks up with for a night and they've all been misled by his hands, his eyes. Don't you fall for that, too.

He hasn't answered me yet, and the silence that stretches between us has grown awkward, uncomfortable. I move away from him, I should get up now, Delia's waiting. Did I actually *offer* to have sex with him? My cheeks grow hot. What was I thinking? "I didn't mean—"

His strong hands on my waist keep me in the bed beside him. I lie back and he crawls on top of me, straddles my legs, looks down at me and smiles. Beneath those scars, his mouth is wide and beautiful. "You're all about getting out of this bed, aren't you?" he asks, with a playful tone in his voice that makes me laugh. Then he starts to stroke my abdomen, his fingers twining through the coarse hair at my crotch, brushing over my stiffening dick, the lightest of touches like gossamer spider webs or half-spun dreams, and somewhere between his smile and his hand on me, I'm lost. *Damn him*.

Taking my budding erection in both hands, he rubs it between his palms, watching my face closely to see how I react to what he does.

I resist, I never let them see I like it because I never do...but I can't deny the soft

touch, the pliant fingers, the way he strokes and kneads and caresses me until I can hardly stand his hands on my body, the sensation is just too much. I didn't know anything could ever feel this good.

There's a slight grin on his face, a sheen in his eyes that tells me he's enjoying this as much as I am

I shouldn't give, I shouldn't let myself lose control, I shouldn't *enjoy* this but I do. God, I do, and I can't stop myself from arching up against him. I can't stop the moan that rises in my throat. I never thought I'd actually want someone as badly as I want this man, this Coby. The way he's holding me...I never knew a man could be so gentle, so tender—I never knew hands like his could form anything other than pain.

I feel betrayed by my own body and hate myself when I thrust against him, gripping his knees where they rest on either side of my hips. I hate my sharp intake of breath when he squeezes my aching cock. I hate my gasp when he thumbs beneath my balls and along scarred skin that somehow still manages to respond to his touch.

"Please," I sigh, and it's barely audible but it's there. I said it. He has me begging. I can't believe I've let myself be brought to this. It's his touch, his smile, the light in his eyes that says this moment is all about me. There's nothing in this for him, nothing to get him off, but somehow, incredibly, he enjoys seeing me savor his ministrations. Somehow, my pleasure is enough to bring him release.

My fingers dig into his thighs as he takes his own dick in one hand, strokes until it's hard and red, his other hand working me at the same time. Just when I don't think I can go much longer, I'm going to *have* to come, he presses our erections together, encircles his hands around them both, thrusts into his palms with a rhythm I easily match.

"Please," I sob again. I want him so bad, I don't even hear Delia on the other side of the door when she knocks again with that spoon and calls my name. I sit up too quickly and knock into the lowest step above me. "Shit!" I rub the top of my head, angry at the sudden intrusion. "Delia! What the fuck? I *told* you I'd be right out—"

"Are you okay in there?" Concern laces her voice and makes me wonder just

what time it is...how long have we been in here together? *Not long enough*.

God. "I told you—" I start, and that's as far as I get before Coby's there, his hands smoothing across my scalp, massaging the knot where I hit my head. I let him lay me back to the pillows, my body still throbbing from his attentions.

When he presses his lips against my cheek, I have to pull away to keep from turning to kiss him. I wonder what those lips taste like, that tongue..."I'm fine," I mutter, but I'm not sure who I'm trying to assure. Raising my voice, I call out, "Delia, please, I'm fine."

"Dae," she says, upset. "Is he still here? Can't you at least open the door just a little? Are you sure you're okay?"

I don't want to open the door—then the real world will fall in between Coby and me, distance us until he's nothing but a regulator again and I'm just a guy trying to eke out a living in one of the back alleys of the city. As long as I don't open that door, I can pretend this intimacy between us isn't something desperate and fleeting.

But she's waiting. This time she doesn't leave, I hear her breathing on the other side of the door. It's so hard to think of words to assure her I'm fine when Coby's stroking me beneath the afghan again, his thumb rubbing a tender spot just beneath the tip of my dick. I arch into his hand, close my eyes and rest my head against his shoulder, he's so warm and smells heavenly, musk and sweat and dust from the road that mingle together in a heady man-scent that stirs me more than I like to admit.

Delia knocks on the door again, "Dae—"

She's right, I have to end this, squash the moment before it blossoms between us into something more. I'm not like this. I've resisted stronger men, harder men. I'm not some gawky teenager crushing on the first boy to look my way. Still, it takes every ounce of reserve I have to roll away, out of those arms, from under that touch, and my body screams in protest when I kick the afghan off my legs.

Before I change my mind I sit up on the edge of the cot, plant my feet on the cold hardwood floor, and snag my boxers from where they lie jumbled with the rest of my clothes. "You should really get going," I say, my voice thick.

I don't look over my shoulder at him, just busy myself with pulling my boxers on one foot, then the other. I only asked McBane to leave once...that earned me skin sliced to ribbons with razor blades, and McBane cackled at my audacity. I never dared ask again.

But Coby doesn't say anything, just presses his hand to my lower back. He's touching the scars there, from a belt McBane used, the leather torn into strips that flayed my flesh as he rode me, whipped me like a horse—each time the belt strapped across my back, he shoved in harder, faster. I was bloody and raw when he finally came.

I hate those scars, all of them, the marks along my body that speak of the horror of sex. I don't look at myself if I can help it—there are no mirrors here, and I try not to catch a glimpse of my reflection in the kitchen pots or the stainless steel counter tops. Each scar aches with its own pain, its own memory.

They're all the proof I've ever needed to convince myself I'm better off alone, the nights I lie awake in my narrow bed and struggle against tears that I won't let fall. I have my sister to look after. I don't need another reason to live. I don't need anyone else to love.

When I stand, Coby's hand falls away from me. It's easier now to tug on my pants, hide my nakedness from his eyes. I don't want his sympathy. I feel his gaze on my body, my scars, my ass, and I shove my still-hard cock into my pants and button up the fly. That's the only reason he's here. Sex. Just what everyone else wants when I lead them to this little room.

So he didn't *fuck* me, so what? So he has soft hands and a gentle touch, so *what*? I hate the way my voice sounds when I mutter, "I'm sorry...well, I'm sorry you didn't get what you came for."

"What is it you think I want?" he asks softly.

I shrug — I have no idea. Sex, that's all I can imagine.

But he saw the scars and it frightened him, or he felt sorry for me, or he's the type who wants to be asked and I *did* ask him this morning, didn't I? And we still didn't

get a chance to do anything, not with Delia just on the other side of the door.

I tell myself it doesn't matter—he'll be in another bed tonight, he'll get a piece of some other boy's ass—but there's a part of me that feels strangled and dead. A part that wishes he had *something* to remember me by, something other than a half-assed handjob and a few stifled moans.

As I pull my shirt on over my head, the cot creaks behind me, and his hip bumps mine when he stands. "I'll have Delia make you something to eat."

My back's to him but from the corner of my eye I watch him dress, those tattoos moving like oil over water when he bends to retrieve his clothes from the floor. I wonder what it'd be like to watch my fingers trace the patterns on his flesh, to lick the black lines—I've never wanted to lick a boy before.

That desire scares me.

Everything about him scares me, more than McBane and his penchant for pain ever could. I don't like that fear. I don't like what he's done to me. *Nothing*, my mind whispers, *he's done nothing to you, and you hate that? What the hell's wrong with you?*

I don't know.

"No charge," I say as I open the door. Maeve's sitting at my desk by the fridge—she looks up at me, eyes wide, and then Delia's there, touching the girl's shoulders to keep her silent.

Behind me, Coby asks, "For?"

"Breakfast."

I pull the door shut halfway and nod at Delia. She's watching me with disbelief, looking for the blood and the hate and the pain that's simply not there. "Make him something to eat."

"Dae," she begins. There's fear in her voice, a trepidation that says she'd rather he left now, and the thought of making him breakfast is simply way beyond her scope of reality. She stares at me, not entirely convinced he didn't hurt me in some way.

I shake my head. "Just make him something to eat, Delia, will you?"

The sooner he's gone, the sooner I can forget kind hands still exist in this world.

* * * *

Delia doesn't look at me as she scrambles eggs. Her anger radiates from her like the waves of heat off the stove. When Coby comes out of the back room, fully dressed and tugging on fingerless black gloves that leave his knuckles exposed, she dumps the eggs onto a plate and leaves them on the edge of the stove.

Coby frowns at me. "It's really not that big a deal—"

"No, it's okay."

I push by Delia and take the plate. "Be civil." I keep my voice low so Coby won't overhear.

"I don't like him." She doesn't bother to lower her voice.

"I don't care."

At the desk, I motion for Maeve to stand, and then hold the chair out for Coby. "Have a seat," I say with an apologetic smile. When he does, I set the eggs in front of him and whisper, "Don't mind them."

But it's hard not to. Delia leans against a nearby counter, her arms crossed in front of her chest, and glares at him while he eats. Maeve, following her lead, keeps throwing nasty glances his way as she sweeps the floor. The kitchen feels small and cramped and crowded, almost as hostile as the place did last night when it was filled with regulators.

Brushing past Delia, I wash the pan and few dishes already in the sink. "Isn't there work to do?" Her jaw tightens when she turns to look at me. Before she can say anything, I warn, "Don't start. Not now."

"Dae." She starts, and when I shake my head, I don't want to hear it, she scoots closer to me and turns her back on Coby. Leaning over the sink, she barely speaks above the sound of rushing water from the spigot. "He's a regulator—"

"I'm well aware of that." I set the rinsed dishes in the drainer a little harder than I intend to, and the chink of china on the steel counter fills the room. "We can talk about

this when he leaves."

She opens her mouth to say something more, but I'm not hearing it. "When he leaves," I repeat.

I finish up the dishes, dry my hands on a nearby towel, and try to think of some reason to go over to the desk where Coby sits, eating. Any pretense will do. I just want him beside me, I want him to touch me again.

Delia fumes next to me, she hates being put off. If looks could kill, Coby would be on the floor by now, writhing in pain. *He's not McBane*, I want to tell her. Isn't that obvious? I'm fine, he didn't hurt me, he didn't sex me up...*even though I want him to*.

I don't like admitting it to myself, even in the privacy of my own mind, but it's the truth. I didn't ask just to be nice or solicitous. I asked because for the first time since I don't know when, I wanted a boy inside me, to hold me and love me. I wanted *him*.

Watching him lean over his plate as he shovels eggs into his mouth and ignores the women in the room, even now I want him. I'd give anything for a few more minutes, it wouldn't take long. Another fifteen minutes and I might actually come this time, I might cry out in pleasure for a change, I might *like* it. That's the thought that stirs me the most, that I might get off on it if he's as gentle as he has been so far.

But there are no words to ask him to stay, not when he finishes his breakfast and pushes back from the desk, already shrugging into his leather jacket. I look around, desperate for something, anything, that might keep him here just a little while longer, but there's only one thing I have to offer him and I can't ask again, not in front of Delia and Maeve. How suspicious would it be to pull him aside and lower my voice, invite him upstairs?

Upstairs...God, just leave now, please. I've never even *thought* of asking anyone upstairs before. To my bed, my last refuge against the world, a single mattress I've never shared with another soul. Am I seriously considering inviting Coby up *there*? God...the sooner he's out of here, the better.

Coming over to where we stand by the sink, Coby holds his empty dish out to Delia and nods courteously. "Thank you for the food."

She doesn't take the plate, no surprise there.

I nudge her gently. "Take it."

She has better manners than that. Apparently she's forgotten them, because she flips her dark hair over one shoulder and turns away, nose in the air like cleaning up after him is beneath her.

If he were McBane, he would take a hunk of that hair, twist it in his fingers until she fell to her knees, maybe break the plate over the top of her head and threaten to cut her throat with the shards, I wouldn't put it past him. Then again, I remind myself, if he was McBane, I wouldn't have invited him to stay. She wouldn't have cooked for him, and I'd probably still be on that cot, in agony as my body tried desperately to close up the wounds he left behind.

He's nothing like McBane, *nothing*. So I take Coby's plate and flash him a quick smile that I hope says everything I try to put into it. *Don't leave yet* is what I want him to see when he looks at my mouth. *I can give you so much more, just don't leave right yet, don't go.*

"My men will be gathering." He glances at Delia, then at Maeve, and finally those silver eyes look my way again and my knees go weak. "I should go."

I nod as if I understand. I do, it's for the best; if those men come back here, they'll spoil whatever rapport's grown between us and I don't want that—but to leave so soon? Without giving him anything, just food and a warm bed that he'll forget the minute he's ridden out of sight?

Turning his collar up as if to ward off my sister's evil eyes, he asks, "Walk me out?"

When I push away from the counter, Delia starts, "Dae-"

Coby silences her with a look, the same hard stare that stopped Tarn in his tracks yesterday when the oaf tried to follow her into the kitchen. *You have him to thank for that*. I watch her struggle to speak. Her throat works around words that never come. I couldn't have stopped that one for the world but this boy here, Coby gives the guy that look and he's ready to apologize to you for being an ass. And you're not even giving him a chance.

"I'll be right back," I tell her, setting his plate in the sink. She nods, that's about all she *can* do. "Clean up in here. You know we open in a half hour. Maeve..."

Maeve jumps from the corner she's in, the broom held out in front of her protectively. The guilty look in her eyes suggests she hoped maybe she had disappeared.

"Help Delia out here."

Maeve nods quickly, eager to please. She glances at Coby, looks away, then scurries along the wall to keep the distance between them.

With a sigh I step in front of him and lead the way out into the main room. "Come on," I tell him. This time I hold the door open as he walks through. When it swings shut behind us, I murmur, "I'm sorry about that."

"Don't be." There's no malice in his voice. He's seen the scars on my body. He knows how it is.

At the front door, I dig the keys out of my pocket, all too aware of him close behind me. His hand snakes around my waist, the briefest of touches that's gone when I turn the key in the lock and push the door open, letting the bright sun and crisp morning air into the stale diner. He steps past me outside and stops, squinting in the light as he looks around the wakening street. With a leonine yawn, he stretches in the crisp morning air, his arms reaching for the faded denim sky. "It's nice here."

I'm not sure if he's just making conversation or if he's searching for something to say that will keep him here longer. I hope it's the latter.

When he steps off the sidewalk and into the street, emptiness opens in me. I don't want him to leave. He goes and what's there to look forward to? McBane, other regulators, their harsh hands and cutting words, their fists and belts and knives. *You're putting too much on this boy.* I watch him climb onto his motorbike. His helmet's resting on the handlebars, where he left it the night before.

He's just a kid really, a good five, seven years younger than you, and you're painting him into the knight you want him to be. He can't live up to that. Let him go already so you can get over him and move on. As Coby pulls the helmet on over his shaved head, he says

softly, "You never did tell me about those marks."

My first instinct is to say *what marks?* and the words are on the tip of my tongue before I bite them back. He means my scars, he asked about them last night and I simply brushed him off.

What's there to say? *McBane*, that name says it all, but what does it mean to him? If Coby's just passing through, he must've heard of the bastard. All regulators know each other, don't they? He'll know this is McBane's turf, and that he should keep a low profile on his way through.

Unless he knows and doesn't care.

The thought surprises me. He must know McBane rules this strip; he *has* to know. If he's talked to any of the other regulators around here, then he has to know who I am. McBane's bitch, that's what they call me. They keep away from Delia just because they know I'll proposition them and if McBane finds out they fucked me, he'll get pissed. Hands off his property, that's what I am to him; a horse he can work and ride and whip when it pleases him.

If Coby knows *that*, then he knows where these scars come from.

When I don't answer, Coby nods. "Just wondered," he mutters, like he didn't really expect a reply anyway. Starting the bike, he revs the motor and raises his voice over the choppy stutter. "I'd like to come back. If you don't mind."

My heart skips in my chest. *I'd like to come back...*"Tonight?"

Please say yes, please.

He half shrugs, half nods, and frowns slightly. "If you don't mind." Revving the engine, he shouts above the rumble, "The others won't come—"

The word is free before I can stop it. "Sure."

Then I shrug, I don't want to sound *too* eager, but the thought of him lying beside me again, his arms around me, his hands cupping my cock..."I don't mind."

He gives me a wide grin. "Maybe I'll get to take you up on your offer then."

Before I can ask what he means by that—before I can hope he means what I *want* him to mean—he's gone.

* * * *

Delia starts in on me before the door even swings shut. "What'd he do to you?" She stands at the sink, scrubbing hard at Coby's plate with angry hands. When I enter the kitchen she turns to watch me closely, looking for bruises and cuts and pains that don't exist. "I can't believe you wanted to feed him. Dae—"

"He didn't do *anything*." I sink into the seat at my desk, still warm from his body. He's returning tonight, didn't he say that? *Tonight*. Sitting back in the chair, I stretch languidly and savor that smile he gave me, when he said maybe he'd take me up on my offer then.

My offer. That makes me feel smug and cool in a way I've never felt before. Sure, I've been told I have a great ass, I have sexy hands, I have a thick cock. But those complements came from regulators who just wanted to hurt me, whip me into submission, make me theirs the same way a hunter wants to bag a prize buck. I never asked anyone for sex, I never wanted to. And I sure as hell never thought it'd be someone like him, with his soft voice and mercury eyes and slow, confident grin.

Delia can't see that. The plates clatter together as she stacks them in the cabinet and her voice is strained. "He's a regulator, Dae. I know how they are."

She knows how *McBane* is, and the guys who come in here looking for a piece of ass and don't care if it's hers or mine, as long as it's someplace hot and tight to stick it in the dark. "He's different."

I just met him and already I know he's not like anyone else I've ever met. Hell, probably not like anyone I'll ever meet again. I need to clean the place up, if he's coming back. Put some good sheets on the cot, maybe change the mattress out. Sweep that closet definitely—

A glass falls to the floor and explodes like a shotgun blast, shattering my thoughts into a million faceted splinters. The chair beneath me wobbles unsteadily as I surge to my feet, already reaching out for Delia. "You okay?"

She nods numbly, wiping hair and tears from her cheeks as she struggles not to cry. "Oh, Dae."

She sighs as she kneels, pulling her skirts into her lap. The ground around her bare feet winks in the overhead lights, glass everywhere, I see tiny slivers on her skin, embedded in her ankles. She picks at the larger shards, gathering them in one hand. "I didn't mean—"

"It's okay." She won't rise when I tug at her arm. "Maeve," I call, glancing around for the younger girl as I squat down beside my sister. "Can you get the broom? Delia, it's okay, it's just a glass."

Maeve was in the middle of lighting the oven and now stands like a statue, watching us with wide eyes, a long match in one hand, a small flicker of flame eating its way towards her fingers.

"Maeve!" I snap.

She shakes her head and looks at me, puzzled.

"Watch that thing."

Noticing the match, she lets out a thin gasp and drops the flame into the nearby sink.

"Get the broom, will you?" I turn back to touch Delia's shoulder. She's trembling, crying silently as she scoops up the glass. Beads of blood dot the top of her bare feet, and small scratches like spider webs crisscross her legs. "Delia, it's okay." I rub her back. "Stop crying, hon, it's okay—"

"He's a...a regulator, Dae!" she sobs, covering her mouth with the back of one hand. The word's an anathema coming from her, and when I try to brush the hair away from her face, she turns from me so I won't see her cry. "You're mooning around here like some lovesick puppy just because he didn't beat you down but don't tell me you can't see it in him. Don't tell me he's different, he's not. Can't you see that?"

"You don't know," I say quietly.

That makes her cry harder. Maeve comes up to us, broom in one hand and dustpan in the other. She looks at Delia as if she wants to say something, anything, but

she doesn't know where to begin. I can't talk to Delia here, not with Maeve hanging on our every word. She's only fifteen and if Delia can't understand, there's no way I can pretend Maeve might.

Gently, I try to raise Delia up but she resists. "Come on." I try to get her to her feet. "We have to get you cleaned up. Delia, please."

Finally she lets me help her stand, but there's glass everywhere and I don't want her walking on it, not without shoes on. She doesn't like to wear shoes, says they're too confining, though I know it's because the only pair she has is old and faded and worn. The diner barely brings in enough to keep us alive. If we weren't in McBane's favor, such as it is, the wolves would come baying at our door, hungry to steal what little we do have.

I pay what bills I can, leave enough for food and a small savings I haven't told her about, money I'm putting away for her in case something ever happens to me. In this war economy what's left is simply not enough. Luxury doesn't exist anymore—even if we *did* have money, there's nothing to spend it on, no fine clothes, no jewelry, no expensive toys. They're all gone.

Delia's crying into her hands and Maeve kneels at her feet, sweeping around her as carefully as she can. "Delia." I scoop her up into my arms like a bridegroom, her skirts a swirl above Maeve's head, just to get her out of all that glass.

I take two steps towards the stairs, intent on taking her to the attic and getting her washed up, we can talk *there*, but I'm not as strong as I think I am and the scars across my back feel like constricting bands, pulling my skin taut, until my muscles scream in protest at my sister's weight in my arms. "Damn, girl," I huff.

That brings a muffled giggle, at least it's something. "Put me down, silly."

I don't listen. Instead I navigate around Maeve to the sink, and only when I bump against it do I lower Delia down onto the stainless steel counter top. She tries to slide off. "Dae, really—"

"Sit here a minute."

She obeys, letting me maneuver her legs until her feet are in the sink, and I turn

on the spigot just to cover my words when I speak. Gingerly I pick at the glass stuck to her ankles and tell her, "Don't get all worked up over this. It's not what you think."

Delia folds her skirt beneath her legs, rests her head on her knees, and stares at me through a veil of thick hair that hides her face. "What do I think, Dae? Tell me that. What do you think I'm thinking right this minute?"

I lean on the sink and look at her, really *see* her for the first time, see the dark hair that's so brown it's almost black, falling in faint waves because she sleeps with it tied back in a braid. I see her narrow chin, her thin cheeks, her straight nose that's not quite pretty and not quite *not* pretty, but somewhere in between. I see her dark eyes, like mine, large and round and rimmed with long lashes, framed by eyebrows she puts candle wax on to smooth down. Her skin is pale, also like mine, almost olive in certain light, and her lips are red and thin—when she draws them together in anger or consternation, her mouth forms a tight little bow that she wraps around her emotions to keep them in.

Our da used to call her a gypsy child, because she's got that look about her, a certain restless spirit that hates this diner and these regulators and the way we live. I can see that when I look at her, that wandering soul trapped in flesh. I see myself in her — my hands are larger than hers, my body hard planes where hers is soft flesh, but we resemble each other, so much so that when a regulator wants to fuck her, he'll settle for me instead. She has my eyes, my nose, my smile, everything except the manhood coiled in my pants and the scars that riddle my body. Looking at her is like looking in a mirror and seeing how smooth and beautiful my skin could be, in another world, another life.

But I can't see what she's thinking right now, though I suspect it's about Coby, and chances are it's not good. So I let the running water splash over my hands and onto her feet, washing away fragments of glass so tiny that I can't even see them. "I don't know, Delia. Why don't you tell me what's on your mind?"

She buries her face in her skirts and sighs. "You're a fool," she murmurs. Before I can argue, she hurries on. "What did he promise you? He's gonna scare off McBane? Whisk you away from here? Rose petals in the bed sheets, what? What lies did he sell

you last night?"

I cup my hand to catch the water, watch it fill my palm and dance over my fingers, fall to her feet and then swirl away down the drain. Nothing, that's what he promised me. Nothing at all.

Then why are you suddenly interested in him? That's Delia's voice in my head. When I have doubts, they come through her. What is it about him that excites your blood and makes you look forward to seeing him again?

Aloud, Delia tells me, "He's not all that to look at, Dae. His mouth is too wide—" "I like it." Coby's mouth speaks softly, those lips curve into delicious smiles.

She continues as if she hasn't heard me. "I don't like his eyes, they're too light. They change too quickly, that can't be good. He's got a mean streak in him, can't you see it? He looks at you and it's like he's looking *through* you, you're not even there—" With a short laugh, she amends, "It's like *I'm* not there. He sees you. He sees only you."

My heart quickens at her words. *Only me*. I like that. Smoothing one of her feet between my hands to wipe away the glass and little drops of blood that cling stubbornly to her skin, I hope I sound nonchalant. "What do you mean by that?"

She doesn't answer me. I'm not surprised. Delia has a tendency to just drop the subject when she's finished with it, as if conversations are nothing more than old newsprint, to be balled up and tossed away when its usefulness is gone. She watches me as I wash her feet, wiggles her toes at me playfully, laughs when I pinch her ankle out of spite. As I turn off the water, she tells me, "You don't need him, Dae. You have us."

Us. My sister and the girl-child she's taken under her wing. "You two mean the world to me." A hand-towel hangs from the handle of one of the cabinets by the sink and I use it to dry her off, gently rubbing each foot in the thin terry cloth. "You know that."

Frowning at me, Delia prompts, "But?"

I shrug. "I don't know."

Yesterday this time I would've sworn all I needed was the two of them, this

place, and it would be enough to get by. But that was before I saw those silver eyes shine when they looked my way, before I felt how tender a man's hands could be on my body. With a weary sigh, I say it again. "I just don't know, okay?"

For a minute I don't think she's going to buy that. She's only looking out for me, I know. She saw the motorbike and the regulators and thought *McBane* — she came downstairs this morning expecting to patch me up again. Only last night was different, *Coby's* different, he's not McBane or any other regulator I've ever met, ever.

Quietly, I admit, "I've never had anyone..." It's hard to say the words, harder still to speak them to my sister, but she needs to know, she has to understand. "No one's ever wanted to just hold me before."

"That's all he did?" Delia asks, surprised. "He didn't hit you or want... something more?" I shake my head, no, and her face clouds over, thoughtful. "He's coming back tonight."

It's not a question.

When I don't say anything, she sighs. "Dae, why? He'll bring his friends—"

"He's coming alone." Taking her ankles in my hands, I turn her around so her feet dangle over the edge of the counter, then take her by the waist and help her down. "Door should've been open five minutes ago. Maeve, how are you coming with that glass?"

I look over my shoulder at the girl, still in the middle of the floor. She's watching us, probably straining to hear what we say, moving the glass around with slow, ineffectual sweeps of the broom. "Maeve? You getting that cleaned up?"

With a start, she sweeps faster, brushing the shattered fragments into her dustpan. "Almost done," she says, as if she's been cleaning all along and not trying to eavesdrop on us. "You want I should unlock the door?"

"I'll get it," Delia says. Before she leaves, she throws me a quick glance I can't quite decipher. "You're a fool. Like da, always one to fall for the sweet talk. Just because he hasn't hurt you yet doesn't mean he won't down the line."

"Go open the door." I don't like her talk of our da. She doesn't remember him,

except from stories I've passed on, and she's quick to tell me he could still be here today if he hadn't rushed off into the war.

That's our ma talking. I heard that one over and over again until the year I turned twelve, when she finally stopped holding on and passed away. *Your da had to save the world*, she used to say. I can close my eyes and still see her, sitting on the porch swing and watching the hot summer sun sear the grass. *Gung-ho into the fight, wouldn't back down, wouldn't hide away like the Johs did, gathered the kids together and just left for the hills, and good riddance. But your da, he had to hurry up and die.*

Everything she loved about him, everything he was, *that's* what killed him—he would have done it all again, even if he knew he'd die in the first air raid, that's just the way he was made. Still, it didn't make the days any shorter or the nights any warmer, and most of the time her heart was a whirlwind of anger and sadness and love and hate that was too much for her to weather alone.

Delia's a lot like her. I see it in the flash of her eyes, the set of her jaw. She loves me, I know she does, but she hates what I have to do to protect her, and when I come away wounded and bloody, it justifies the whirlwind inside *her* heart. As long as it breaks me, she can tell herself she hates the regulators and what they do to me, what they force me to do. But what if there's a part of me that could *like* it, if it wasn't cruel and painful? What if there was someone I might actually *enjoy* it with, if given the chance?

No. That's when she shuts down, the anger takes over, the hate, and it has to be Coby's fault for doing this to me, it can't be the way I'm made, it can't be in my nature. The same way our ma couldn't understand why my da would want to leave us behind, why he felt he had to—Delia can't understand that there's something inside me that might need Coby, and his soft words, his gentle hands, his strong arms. She won't let herself see through the regulator to the man I saw when he smiled my way.

* * * *

Every time the door opens, I think it's him and look up, holding my breath, expectant. I don't even realize I do it until it's not his voice that drifts back to where I sit in the kitchen, it's not his face that smiles at me from the other side of the counter. Disappointment hollows out my chest, making me tired and bitter and weak. But he *did* say he was coming back, right?

Delia doesn't say anything more about Coby—she sees the way my face falls as the day wears on and when she looks at me, she doesn't *have* to say anything, it's written in her eyes, in her bow-shaped lips. She watches silently as I clean out the closet beneath the stairs, change the oil in the lamp, change the sheets, take the mattress out in the back alley and beat out the dust and memories, all the hate McBane's poured onto it, into me.

When I drag it back into the kitchen, Maeve stands at my desk, fresh sheets draped over her arms. "Delia says you'll want these." She hands me the linens. They smell fresh like spring and they're so thick, I can't see the bloodstains on the mattress through them. They're clean and white and brighten the dingy cabinet. They make it a different place, they make it *new*.

Excitement courses through me when I see the way the late afternoon sun slants through the window to splash across them. Tonight they'll look golden by the lamp light, like Coby's skin.

In the kitchen, Delia feeds the old, battered sheets into the fire beneath the ovens. I kiss her cheek as the thin fabric disappears into the flames. "Just cause I'm doing this doesn't mean—"

"I know."

"I don't like him." She shakes her head, just in case I haven't clued in to that yet.

"I know," I say again. I'm not going to argue with her about it. I don't even know if it's *worth* arguing about. I don't know anything about Coby, not really, just that he's new to this part of the city. If he's only passing through, I'll have to get over him soon enough. Or if McBane manages to scare him away...

I won't think about that.

* * * *

As nine o'clock approaches, I dawdle about cleaning up, don't bother to lock the door right away, don't chase the last of our customers out on the dot like I usually do. The longer I wait, the more likely it seems that he's not going to come. I'll sleep alone tonight, and for the first time I can remember, that depresses the hell out of me.

Just as well. Delia was right, he was just passing through, it meant nothing to him and I shouldn't have let it mean anything to me, either. Still, that doesn't lessen the sting that pains my heart or the tears that burn my eyes and choke my throat when I put the key in the lock to close up for the night.

When I click off the neon *Open* sign, I hear the rugged whirl of a motorbike in the distance and hate the sudden surge of emotion that thrills through me. It's him. I know it is. It *has* to be him.

In the dark glass of the window I can see Delia's reflection. She's sweeping the floor, and at the sound of the engine, she stops and looks at me, a fearful frown on her face. What if it's not? that frown asks. She doesn't have to say the words aloud; I can read them in the grip of her hands on the broomstick. What if it's another regulator, out for kicks? What if it's McBane?

It isn't, it's Coby. I know it is, the same way I know the sun will rise in the morning or set at night. I draw the blinds across the windows so I don't have to see Delia's skepticism, and then I peek through the wooden slats, watching the road. A motorbike zooms into view, starlight sliding over the chrome like liquid dreams, the engine choppy and loud, a lion's roar in the quiet night.

I can't see the regulator's face through the helmet's visor but those hands, those are Coby's. Such gentle hands, I'd recognize them anywhere. Those hands ease the bike to a stop in front of our place, tug the helmet off his head, and then there's his close-cropped hair, the smattering of scars across his nose, those eyes. "He's here," I sigh.

The only response I get from Delia is the scratch of the broom across the floor.

When he knocks on the glass, I jump to open the door. I hate the tremble in my hands, the quiver in my voice as I stand aside to let him in. "Hey, Coby." I sound like I'm gushing, I hate that too.

He flashes me that smile and Delia's right, he sees only me. She doesn't exist for him. He doesn't even glance her way, though I know he has to hear the broom. But she's not here, it's just him and me and before he even says hello, his arm comes up around my waist. He leans in so close I think he's going to kiss me. He smells like sex and sweat and the road and I want to taste that, I won't pull away this time—

Only his lips don't find mine, they brush my cheek because I turned from him before. "Daelyn," he purrs, *purrs*, his hand at the small of my back and his breath hot along my skin. He rubs against me. I feel the bulge of an erection already filling the front of his jeans. "All I've been thinking of today is you."

Me too, I want to say, but Delia's right here, I swear I hear her growl in the back of her throat like an alley cat ready to fight, so I just duck my head, embarrassed, and don't reply.

Coby lifts my chin—God, those hands! And then he's staring at me with those silver eyes, large as the moon outside. "You okay?" he asks softly.

I nod, a little too quick. "Fine," I glance at Delia. "I'm fine. You?"

He sees that look and lets go. As he steps away from me, he shoves his hands into the pockets of his jeans, rocks back on the heels of his boots, looks around the room like he's just seeing it for the first time. "Well," he drawls, but that's all he says.

Then he leans on the booth behind him, his hips jutting out and I can *see* the swell of his cock, his jeans are tight over it as if he painted them on. Everything about him cries out *I want you*, *only you*, and it's such a heady rush, to look at him and see the raw lust in his eyes, the desire and anticipation barely held in check.

"Delia." My voice squeaks and I have to clear my throat to try again. I can't look away from him. "Why don't you and Maeve go on up, hmm? I'll finish things here."

"Dae—" she starts.

Now Coby looks at her, and his eyes harden, his mouth draws down in

consternation, it's that same hateful stare he gave her this morning and her protest dissolves beneath it.

Her gaze flickers to me. See what I'm talking about here? The violence in him, you must see this, right?

Before I can say anything she turns, flips her hair over her shoulder, props the broom against the counter, and disappears into the kitchen. I frown at my hands, twisting together awkwardly, and I'm not sure who I'm apologizing for when I mumble, "I'm sorry—"

"It's okay," he says, like it's no big deal. She's not the reason he's here anyway, is she? No, it's me. *Me*. With her gone he touches my waist again, his fingers slipping easily into the waistband of my pants. A slight tug, that's all it takes, and I'm in his arms, his hands smoothing along my back, his mouth pressed into the hollow of my throat. "My men are jealous," he murmurs into my flesh. I laugh self-consciously, but he just nuzzles against me and says, "They are! I'm one damn lucky bastard to be here tonight, don't you know?"

"I'm not all that," I protest, but his hands say otherwise.

His hands slip down over my ass and cup my buttocks, pull me to him, until his dick is hard and thick against mine. When he starts to bite at the top button of my shirt, trying to unhook it with his teeth, I'm suddenly all too aware that we're right in front of the door and there are no blinds shading the window *there*, anyone passing by will get quite a show. Suddenly self-conscious, I ease out of his embrace. "Come on."

He doesn't let me go far, but catches my arm and holds my wrist as if he's afraid I'll fly away. I don't want to have to ask him if he wants to fuck, I don't want to mention sex, so I hope I sound nonchalant when I ask, "You hungry? I could get you something to eat."

His eyes light up at that and I look away, discomfited by what I see in his face. He's hungry alright, but not for anything I might have in the cupboards. Unless it's that closet beneath the stairs..."I'm fine," he tells me, kissing the back of my neck.

I imagine those lips on mine, so soft, so tender. Maybe I'll let him kiss me later.

It's the only thing I have that I can give him, the only thing that's truly mine, and when his arms come up around my waist, hug me back against him, his erection pressing between my buttocks, hard and sweet, I'm sure I won't regret it.

"Lead the way," he whispers.

I know what he means.

We make it as far as the kitchen before he stops me. The door's still swinging shut and we're just a few feet away from the door beneath the stairs. That damn door has never looked so inviting to me before. I can't wait to lock it behind us.

But he pulls up short and turns me around in his arms. "Dae," he sighs.

I love the sound of my name in his voice.

"Almost there," I say. I like the coyness that laces my words.

But he murmurs, "Here," and then his mouth is on my neck again, his breath ruffling my hair, his hands working at the strings that tie my apron around my waist. He gets the knot free and moves back just enough to get the apron off over my head. Now his fingers fumble with the front of my shirt, the buttons pop open one by one, and his touch is as gentle as I remember when he runs his hands along my chest. I lean back, reaching for the counter top behind me, and let his hands recall the feel of my muscles, let his mouth relearn the taste of my flesh. His tongue dances down my throat, along my collarbone. His fingers push my shirt out of the way.

Here, in the kitchen, with my sister and her ward just up the stairs, they'll hear every gasp, every moan. Here, where the light is harsh overhead, it illuminates every scar etched in my skin—there are no shadows to hide the old wounds, no diffused lamplight to blur the lines. Here—

I push him away, uncomfortable. Here he can see everything, my twisted skin, my bruises, my scars. "No," I tell him when his hands try to convince me otherwise. "Not here."

He frowns at me but I look away. I can't seem to meet those eyes, I can't bear the compassion I see in their depths. "Dae," he sighs, rubbing my shoulders. Such gentle hands. "What..."

Tugging my shirt closed, I brush by him, head for the closet and the cot and the darkness that will erase the reminders McBane has carved into my flesh.

"Not here," I say again. I don't think I can explain.

For a moment he doesn't follow and I think I've pissed him off. He's going to leave now, I'll sleep alone after all. At the closet door I hesitate, hand on the door knob. I tell myself I won't be upset if he leaves, though that's a lie. I never thought I'd lose someone like him before. I never thought I would care...

So I'm relieved when he crosses the kitchen towards me, and I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding. *Thank you*, I pray as I enter the closet. I light the lamp, shake out the match, and set it on the table beside the cot.

I don't turn around until the door closes behind me and I hear the lock catch, quiet confirmation that he's here with me. Here. I take off my shirt, let it fall to the floor, unbuckle the belt that cinches my pants and unbutton the fly, push them down to my ankles.

Coby's hands curve around my ass and up into the leg of my boxers, warm on warm skin, a touch I've been wanting all day. Grabbing the thin material, he pulls the shorts down, away from me, kneeling as they slide down my legs and then his lips are on me, on the scars that cross my back, on hidden places that have never know anything as tender as his tongue, his lips, his gentle fingers. I have to hold onto the wall in front of me so my knees won't buckle as his wet tongue presses into me.

Sweet *Jesus* nothing's ever felt like *that* before. "Coby," I gasp, and his hands smooth around my thighs, strong hands, they encircle me easily, start to work at my erection, I can't remember how to breathe, how to speak, how to *think* anymore. "Coby," I sigh again—it's the only word I know.

It's over in a few minutes. I come in his hands, a quick burst that's through me before I even realize it, and he kisses up my spine, kisses the scars that mark my back, kisses the sweat from my neck and my cheek and my shoulder.

"You're beautiful," he tells me.

I laugh, that's a lie.

"You're so beautiful, Dae. You just don't know."

I laugh again, a shaky sound that scares me. "I'm not." But there's not much argument in my voice and when I turn around, I look in his eyes and see yes, I can be beautiful, if that's what he wants me to be. My arms find their way around his neck and I let him pull me into a tight embrace. "I'll be beautiful for you," I whisper, burying my head against his shoulder. "If that's what you want."

I feel him grin into my neck, and then another kiss. I love his kisses.

He takes a step back, sinks to the cot, his hands caressing my stomach, my waist, as I stand before him. "Come here."

He helps me straddle his legs to sit in his lap. Then his arms are around me again, I can feel the erection in his pants push up against the scarred skin just beneath my balls. I want him so bad. He rests his chin on my chest, looks up at me with those silver eyes, and smiles as he holds me tight. "Tell me something."

"Anything," I promise. His smile does that to me.

I drape my arms around his neck and wrap my legs around his waist. He waits until I'm comfortable before he starts to kiss my chest, his tongue tracing the faint scars that rim one nipple. "What happened here?" he asks, indicating a crescent shaped mark.

I don't want to talk about that. "It's really not important anymore. Is it?"

The look he gives me suggests that he thinks otherwise. "How about here then?" He presses his cheek against my other nipple, the one so badly mutilated that I can't even feel his touch.

"Coby..." I don't like this. I pull away from him, cross my arms in front of my chest to hide my nakedness, and frown down at him. "Nothing, really."

Gingerly, he takes my wrists in his hands and holds my arms out at my sides, until I'm bared and open to him. I try to twist free but he's strong. "Coby."

I don't know what he's doing, I don't like it. I don't want to do this, to let him scrutinize me, to tell him what happened so I can have his pity, I don't want that. I want him in me, above me, holding me close and not staring at the marks on my body,

because then he'll see I'm *not* beautiful, he'll see he was wrong about me, he'll want to leave. "Coby, please."

He takes my hands and places them on his shoulders. "They go here." Touching my hips again, he looks up at me, frowns slightly. "Don't move."

"Look, why—"

"Dae," he warns.

It's the tone of voice that stops me, the same one he used with Tarn when that bear went after Delia. I bite my lower lip, maybe she was right about him, I don't want to piss him off and lose this gentleness so I have to be careful. I'll just shut up, I don't want to lose him, not now. But I hate my trembling mouth, the tears that fill my eyes. I blink those away before he can notice them.

He fingers the scar that puckers the smooth mound of my belly. "This one? What's this from?"

My chin quivers, I'm losing him here. "Coby, please," I whisper. "Don't make me_"

He glances up at me, eyes wide, waiting.

"Don't make me remember, please."

He rubs my skin, slow circles that move up and up until he's rimming my navel with his thumb. "I got something for you," he says, changing the subject. When I raise one of my hands from his shoulders to wipe at my eyes, he looks at me and says, "I told you not to move."

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

Can't we just get back to where we were? Please? I grip fistfuls of his shirt to keep from letting go. "You didn't have to get me anything."

"You can't have it."

He sounds like a petulant little boy and I laugh, surprised, which brings a smile to his face. "Not until you answer one of my questions."

I sigh. "Coby, I don't..."

I don't want to tell you. I'm embarrassed; I hate my body, the scars, McBane's

marks on me. If I don't look down, they don't exist, and if I don't mention them, then I can pretend they never happened in the first place. I can forget the beatings and the punches and the whips, the razors, the hate pounded into me.

Or maybe you don't want to give him any ideas, a voice inside my head whispers, but that's Delia talking and she just doesn't understand. Coby's not like that, not at all. "Please," I whisper, my face crumbling as I struggle not to cry. "Don't make me say it, please."

He cradles my face in both hands and pulls me down to him, until our noses touch, we're that close. I see him through the facets of tears I refuse to admit are mine. His eyes shift like sunlight over beaded mercury and there's so much compassion in his face that it hurts my heart.

"Dae," he breathes. That's what does me in, that tender voice; it makes the first tear course down my cheek and over his fingers. He frowns at that tear but before I can apologize, he tells me, "I know what he does to you. I can *see* it, and that's all people talk about when I ask around, that's all they know of you."

God. So he's asked about me, he *knows* about McBane and the other regulators and all the hurt, the pain, the hate that's bottled up in this room, he *knows* that. "Then why make me say it?" I whisper. "Coby—"

His eyes search mine, beseeching. "I have to hear it from you. I have to hear his name in your voice, I have to hear what he's done to you in your words. I almost didn't believe it until I saw you undress last night."

More tears, I'm crying now. I don't want to believe he already knows about the things McBane's done to me. Was I too naïve to hope he might be ignorant of all that? That he might not know, or care? "You're just here to see for yourself, then," I say, my throat thick with emotion. I try to shake his hands off me but he won't let go. "Fuck you, Coby, I don't need your sympathy or pity. I don't need you to remind me that I'm some sort of freak—"

His hands tighten on my cheeks, threatening to crush my head between them; *now* I've made him mad. I can see the anger that curls his lip, gnashes his teeth. "Listen

to me, Dae. It's not like that at all."

When I struggle against him, he loosens his grip but still doesn't move away. "I think you're beautiful. Do you think I'm one to say shit like that outta my ass? Do you think I *lied* to you?"

That's *exactly* what I think, but I don't have the energy to argue about it right now. "Please," I sigh. "Just let me go. Just...please."

But he doesn't. "I want to know one thing, okay?" He waits until I nod, grudgingly, before he continues. "He says you like it. He says that you *beg* for it—is that the truth?"

I stare at him, incredulous, as his words sink in. He says you like it...he's talked to McBane? About me? And that bastard thinks you like what he does to you? He thinks it's fun for you? That you get some sick sort of pleasure from his fists and his belt and his razor blades?

"Dae?" Coby prompts. "Answer me."

I can't. Something inside of me breaks, a million fragments tearing into my heart, my soul, my mind, and I can't keep the tears back anymore. I can't even pretend to try.

* * * *

He thinks you like it.

I lie curled up on the cot, as close to the wall as I can get, my arms wrapped around my stomach, my knees pulled up to my chest. I've cried myself sick. I feel weak and nauseous and bitter, oh *God* so damn bitter, that asshole thinks I *like* what he does to me? I can't breathe, my nose and mouth and head clogged with tears, every hitched breath a labor, a pain. I've cried so hard that I've forgotten how to stop. *He thinks you like it*.

Coby's hand rests on my shoulder. He's staring at me. I feel his gaze, hot along the scars that mar my naked back. "Dae," he whispers, his fingers kneading my flesh. Is that supposed to be comforting? I don't need his pity.

"Just go," I mutter.

The bed shifts as he stands and more tears sting my eyes. This is McBane's fault; he had to ruin it, didn't he? Somehow, he had to ruin the one thing that might have made it all bearable, the one thing I might have liked. And now he'll come in here tomorrow, ride back in from the Outlands or wherever it is he's holed up right now, and he'll flay me for being with Coby, he'll whip me until all the joy I've had today is gone. If it wasn't for Delia asleep upstairs, there'd be no reason to ever get up from this cot again.

Behind me I hear the soft sigh of material falling to the floor...Coby undressing, why? I can't imagine. I don't want to know, he should just leave. But when he crawls onto the cot and presses his body to mine, he's naked and warm against me, and I don't have the strength to push him away. His arms encircle my legs and his head rests on my shoulder, I feel the coarse stubble of hair that's starting to grow along his cheek.

"You don't want me to go," he murmurs.

Dammit, he's right, I don't.

Somehow he manages to get me unfurled. Hours pass, it seems, but with his sweet words and soft hands he manages to stroke my arms, my legs, my back, until I open up like a bruised rose, closed against harsh winds. I let him lay me back against the cot, I let him kiss my chest, my stomach, my scars, but I don't turn to him, I don't want to see his face.

With one hand tangled in the kinked hair of my crotch, he tongues one scarred nipple, asks again, "What did he do here?"

It sounds like a stranger's voice that answers. "Out in the main room." My words ring hollow, emotionless—they fall dead when they leave my lips. "Boasting about titty twisting. Claimed he could snap a man's nipple off with his bare hands." The memory plays out in my mind like a movie, unreal, as if it never happened to me. "Called me over to prove it."

Coby kisses the scar, moves to another one, the crescent around my other nipple. "This one?"

"His thumbnail," I reply. My voice is as distant as the events that unfold in my

memory. "Said he wanted to cut my heart out and hold it in his hands when he came. Passed out drunk before he got that far. Delia stitched it shut."

Touching each of my wounds, he asks how I got the scars. This one, and this one, and this one. In my leaden voice I tell him—his belt, a tire iron, the keys to his motorbike, teeth and electrical wire and a pocket knife, I remember every one. When I'm through, waiting for the next scar, the next memory, he presses his mouth to the mark as if kissing it away, making it better, and then his hands smooth over it, erasing it from my body.

"This one," he says, tracing an L-shaped scar on my hip. "What about this one?"

"Caught me in the alley." My body tingles from his kisses, damp imprints of his lips drying on my skin. "Shoved me head-first into a garbage can before I could react. I didn't even know it was him. Tore my pants down, fucked me right there, broad daylight. No one stopped him. That's from a scrap of metal sticking up out of the trash."

Coby kisses the scar, then lies down beside me. His fingers are strong on my jaw when he touches my face, tries to turn me towards him. "Look at me."

I'm too ashamed. "No," I whisper.

"Is that what you tell him?"

Fresh tears fill my eyes.

"You tell him no and he hits you? Is that why he hurts you?"

Shaking my head, I tell him, "I don't say no. I can't."

"Do you like it?"

His hands are so gentle on my skin, one on my face, one on my lower belly. How can he even think I like anything other than this? The world shatters in new tears that stream down my hot cheeks and I shake my head again. *God, no.*

"Why don't you fight back then?"

I choke on the words. "I can't. He'd hurt Delia."

"You do it for her."

I blink back the tears and nod, yes, everything I do is for her. He has to

understand that -

But he pulls away, and I've never felt so cold and all alone, *never*.

The bed shifts beneath him, his knee presses into my thigh, and from the corner of my eye I see him reach for something on the floor, his clothes maybe. He's going to dress and leave. I brace myself for the slamming of the door. I don't know how I'm going to get out of this cot in the morning if he walks out tonight.

Only he doesn't get up. He fumbles through the pockets of his jeans where they lay by the side of the bed, and then he rolls back to me, one hand closed in a tight fist. "I got something for you."

I don't respond.

"Look at me."

I can't.

He opens his fist and liquid gold pours from his hand onto my skin, something cold and hard that curls in the hollow of my throat. Surprised, I start to sit up but Coby's there, easing me back to the pillow. Gingerly he picks up the gift in two fingers, holds it up so I can see it. A necklace, *gold*, it winks in the lamplight and I've never seen *gold* before.

"Where did you get that?"

Now I look at him, and he grins at my wide-eyed stare, my open mouth. "Coby, how—"

"It's for you," he says, as if that's all the explanation I need. "Sit up a bit."

I do as I'm told, leaning forward so he can clasp the golden strand around my neck. It's a short piece, what they used to call a choker, it just barely comes below my collarbone and when I try to look at it, I can't see anything but a sliver of golden herringbone.

Coby's eyes light up when he sees the way it looks on me. "It was made for you."

I know it wasn't, but he tells such lovely lies. The necklace is cold against my skin but it warms quickly, until it feels as if it's always been there, that's where it belongs. "You didn't have to get me anything." I lay back down. I like the way the

necklace pools in the hollow of my throat. "I don't have anything for you."

Taking my hand, Coby laces his fingers through mine and kisses my knuckles. "Nothing at all?" he asks gently. "Nothing you want to give me? To only me?"

He guides my hand to his crotch, where he's hard enough to still be interested in doing something tonight. When I grasp at him, though, he rolls into my embrace, rolls onto me, straddling my hips again and picking at the necklace that rests against my throat. He stares at me, through me, I'm sure he can see every thought in my head.

"I don't really have anything that's all mine," I whisper. Nothing *gold*, that's for sure, and I've already offered him sex but he still hasn't taken me up on that one yet. I could kiss him, but I can't imagine that would be enough.

As if he knows what I'm thinking, he raises one hand to my face. His finger hovers just inches above my lips like temptation. "Can I?" he asks.

I'm not sure what he means but I nod. I want his hands on me. I'm all I have to give.

Tentatively, he touches my mouth. I kiss the tip of his finger, barely there. Then his thumb traces the curve of my lower lip, smoothes across the faint hair that struggles to grow along my chin.

"You can kiss me. No one's ever done that before."

"So I'll be your first," he says gently.

I laugh at that. He smiles, leans close, closer, until I'm not laughing anymore and his breath tickles along my upper lip. Suddenly I'm nervous and scared. What if I do this wrong? What if I regret it? What if —

And then his lips close over mine, softer than I believed possible, warm and wet and sweeter than anything I've ever tasted before. His tongue licks into me, his body rubs against mine, he sighs my name and presses me back to the pillow, kissing me hungrily, as if he needs me to survive.

My body knows what to do, it responds to him without my intervention. My hands cradle his head, my fingers rub across the bristle of his hair, my knee comes up between his legs and I thrust against him. I want him, I *need* him. My tears, my scars,

the man McBane has made me out to be, all that disappears beneath his kisses.

* * * *

I dream of the house where we used to live, back before the war when my da was alive and Delia wasn't yet my responsibility, when the Outlands were just row upon row of suburban houses, grassy lots, schools and office parks and shopping malls. Before the first of the bombs wiped that away, before I had to grow up in a hurry and leave all I loved behind, before I had to move Delia into the city with its squalid streets and crumbling buildings and trash-strewn alleys. In the dream is the time when I was eight and all was right in the world, my da was the strongest of men, my ma delicate and swollen with child, the future on the brink of the horizon and mine for the taking. Even in sleep, the memory of that small clapboard house, with its wraparound porch and tree-lined, chain-link fence, is enough to make my throat close with nostalgia. I hate knowing that I'll have to wake up and lose it all over again.

In this dream it's late afternoon, summer from the light slanting across the yard and the distant buzz of lawnmowers down the block. I hear kids calling to each other in the woods behind our house, building forts or searching out adventure, whatever it is kids do when left to their own devices. I'm just inside our fence, standing in the front yard and facing the house, which seems smaller than I remember, the paint faded, the flowers wilting. One of the windows in the attic has a shutter coming loose, that needs to be fixed, and someone left the hose unraveled across the concrete path leading up to the porch. I see these things through an adult's eyes—I'm not a child here, not in this dream. This is what the place would look like today if I returned.

Or rather, if there was any place left to return to after all these years.

Behind me, a bike swoops by —a bicycle, not one of these souped-up motorbikes but an honest to God *bike* — pink aluminum with spoked wheels and a little silver bell attached to the handlebars. The girl riding it is no more than twelve, her hair pulled back in one floppy ponytail that streams out behind her as she flies by. Without

stopping, she pulls a newspaper out of a bag she wears slung over one shoulder and she doesn't even look at me when she pitches it into our yard. It lands at my feet.

Just as I bend down to get it, I hear a faint creak from the porch, the bolt that holds up the hammock my da hung across one corner. I leave the paper where it lies and start up the walk...part of me realizes this is a dream, this isn't real, and that's the part that wonders who I'll find at the house. My da, probably. Most of my dreams like this have him in them, always dressed the way he was the last time I saw him, military fatigues still stiff and new. Or my ma, dressed in jeans and a battered shirt of his, one she wore continuously once we got the telegram saying he was gone. In these dreams it's never Delia—I don't think of her at that house, in those memories. She's tied too firmly in the present to exist in that past.

But it's not my da or ma or even Delia this time. As I step onto the porch I see that it's Coby stretched out on the hammock. He's barefoot, wearing a white tank top and jean shorts cut high enough that I can see the bluish-white pockets peek out beneath the frayed hems. His eyes are closed. His hair has grown in, a wild shade of dirty blonde that makes my mouth water to see it, fine strands that fall across his forehead, almost translucent where the sun hits it. His nose is buried in freckles—no scars, they don't exist. For a moment I wonder if it really *is* him, what's he doing here? In this dream, at this house, *here*…

Then I see his hand, resting high along his thigh, near his crotch, as if he had been adjusting himself unconsciously while he dozed. *That* leaves no room for doubt. I know it's him; I've never met anyone with such strong, tender hands before. It *has* to be him. His other arm is curled up behind his head as a makeshift pillow, and one foot pushes against the side of the house in a lazy rhythm, just enough to stir the hammock into motion. "Coby," I sigh, reaching out to touch the delicate skin on the exposed underside of his arm. "Hey, Coby."

He doesn't answer. Instead, his eyes open and he looks at me.

I see everything I ever hoped someone would say to me, all the words of love and kindness and forever, all that I see written in his silver eyes.

His hand comes up from his crotch, his fingers closing around my wrist gently, and he tugs at me, just enough for me to realize what he wants. I climb over him into the hammock, careful not to shift too much and dump us both out onto the floor. His body is hot beneath mine, warmed by the summer sun, and his arm comes up around my back as I slide into place beside him.

When I rest my head against his chest, I smell the sweet scent of cut grass and summer sweat rise up from him like a promise and his heart beats beneath my ear, steady and reassuring. His hand smoothes along my shoulders, his lips rest against my forehead, and I've never felt so safe, so protected, so *secure*, *never*, as I do right here, right now, with him.

I want him to tell me he loves me, but he doesn't say the words and I don't ruin the moment by asking. Minutes stretch out around us, the light dims, the sun sinks low in the sky, the lawnmower in the distance grows irregular and faint and then cuts off completely, its job done. But the hammock keeps its slight motion and Coby keeps his arm around me. I feel him beneath me, hear his steady breath, smell his summery scent. I tell myself this doesn't have to end.

If only I could make this real.

* * * *

The first thing I'm aware of when I know I'm awake is the fact that I'm alone. Coby's arms are gone. I fell asleep with him wrapped protectively around me but it's cold now, even with the afghan pulled up to my shoulders. I don't like this.

Last night was wonderful, his lips, his hands, he's everything I thought he would be, so sweet and gentle, but when I asked if he wanted to have sex, he just quieted me with more kisses, rubbed me until I thought I would scream with need of him, licked my scars and told me again how beautiful I was, how he loved the necklace on me.

I remember pieces of my dream: him in shorts that showed the pale flesh of his upper thighs, the sun warm on my skin, his heartbeat in my ear keeping time with my

own. I want that back.

The cot shifts beneath me when I roll away from the wall and *there* he is, on the edge of the mattress, already fully dressed and tugging on the fingerless gloves he seems to favor. Tentatively, I stretch myself awake, reaching out for him, and I hook my fingers through one of the belt loops on his jeans.

He smiles down at me and says, "I've got something to tell you that you might not like. I thought I'd get dressed just in case you tell me to get the hell out."

I frown, confused. *I've got something to tell you*...I can't imagine anything he might want to say that will make me ask him to leave. "You've got to go," I say, my voice thick. It's the only thing I can think of. "This is it, isn't it? You're leaving now, and I'll never see you again."

With a sad smile, he leans back across me, his weight welcome and warm along my chest. I'm right, I know I am—I see it in his eyes. I feel it in the way he kisses me, his lips lingering on mine as if he wants to sear them with the memory of me. "Coby." I cover my face with one hand. I knew this was coming, part of me knew he was too good to be true. "Please—"

"I didn't even say good morning," he murmurs, kissing my chin. "How rude of me. You sleep well last night, sunshine?"

I ignore that. "Tell me," I say. Just get the words out and get this over with already, that's all I'm asking for here. Make this as painless as possible, please.

But he's not one to be rushed, and he pulls his knees up onto the cot, lies down across me and runs his fingers over the necklace at my throat. "Did you have nice dreams?"

I close my eyes, savoring the feel of his fingers on my neck, the gentle press of flesh along the underside of my chin. "I dreamt of you. You had blonde hair and freckles—"

He laughs at that. "How'd you know it was me?"

"Your hands," I admit, as one of them comes up to cradle the side of my face. I lean into his touch and whisper, "What is it you want to tell me?"

"Maybe nothing."

I squeeze my eyes shut tight. I *hate* this, his indecision, the pain that twists through my heart.

His touch is soft when he ruffles my eyelashes with his thumb. "I'm not leaving, Dae. It's not that."

"What is it then?" Pressing my lips into his palm, I kiss him and hate that it sounds like I'm begging. "Just tell me, please."

I feel his mouth on my chest, tiny kisses trailing between my nipples and up to my throat. He noses the necklace aside, plants kisses in the hollow of my throat, then up my neck until his lips close over my earlobe, his tongue swirls up the ridges of my ear. "Coby," I sigh, trying to push him away, but I have no strength to resist him. "Don't do this to me."

"Do what?" There's a playful note to his voice that tells me he's not going to say anything until he's good and ready to tell me what's on his mind. Kissing the sensitive skin behind my ear, he asks, "You don't like this?"

I turn from him when his mouth tries to find mine. "You know what I mean." I push at him with my palms. "Get up."

He climbs off me, wedges into the tight space between my body and the wall, and grabs my waist when I try to get out of bed. He pulls me back to him. "Not yet." Our bodies fit together easily, his clothes rough against my skin. "Where do you think you're going?"

"If you're not going to tell me—"

"You didn't give me a chance."

That's not quite right, is it?

Still, I settle back against him and try to get comfortable despite his zipper biting into my ass, his mesh shirt sticking to my back. When he starts to kiss my neck, I bury my head in the pillow and remind myself that he said he wasn't leaving, didn't he? So what is it then?

"Dae?" he asks softly.

My voice is muffled against the pillow. "What?"

"Do you know why I'm here?"

I don't want to know. "I'm hoping it's because of me." I don't want him to tell me it's not.

I feel him grin against the nape of my neck, his lips damp, his breath warm where it curls beneath my hair. "Now it's because of you," he murmurs, "but I didn't know you yesterday, did I?"

Reluctantly, I shake my head, no, he didn't.

"Why do you think I stopped here?"

"I don't know," I whisper. "Coby, please, I don't care, okay? It doesn't matter."

"It doesn't?" he echoes. "You don't care to know?"

I shake my head again.

With a sigh, he says, "I want to tell you."

"Does it matter?" I turn in his arms so I can look at him, those silver eyes, that wide mouth. "I mean, really. I don't care how you found me, okay? Just that you're here now, that's it. Okay?"

For a moment I think I've angered him. He frowns down at me, at my nose, my lips, my chin, the look in his eyes threatening like thunderclouds gathering overhead. I'm about to apologize, simply say *tell me already and let's just be done with it*, if that's what it'll take to get his clothes off again, but then he kisses me. I love the feel of his lips on mine. His hand caresses my stomach, moves lower, tangles in the hair at my crotch and cups my already stiffening cock as he nuzzles my face.

"Dae," he sighs, like he's humoring me. "You're right—I came back because of you. That's the only thing that matters now." He thumbs the necklace around my neck, smiles as he kisses me, I can feel his lips curve against mine. "So maybe I should get undressed again, hmm?"

With a laugh, I agree. "Maybe."

I pull his shirt from the waistband of his jeans. Easing my hands between the fabric and his warm skin, I run my hands up his chest, pick at his nipples – that makes

him catch my hands through the shirt, hold them tight because he's ticklish there, how cute. "You don't want to have sex?"

He frowns again, suddenly serious. "Who told you that?"

I'm shaky with relief because he's not leaving me. He said he wasn't leaving, so I shrug nonchalantly and watch my hands beneath his shirt, rubbing circles around his nipples. I like the way they stand up in my palms. "I'm just guessing," I say, coy. "Since you haven't *done* it yet—"

He growls deep in his throat, his eyes like silver bullets and he turns me over and crawls onto me, all animal and hungry, his mouth hot and eager as he presses me back to the pillow with his kisses. "If I had known you were *waiting* for it…" He nibbles at my neck.

I laugh and find the zipper on his jeans, get it down and have him in my hand, working to get him hard, when there's a knock on the closet door. Coby freezes above me. *Delia, shit*.

"Maybe if we're real quiet," he whispers, "she'll go away."

No such luck. She knocks again, harder this time, "Dae? Come on, it's getting late."

Just when we were finally getting somewhere. "God," I sigh.

When she knocks a third time, I raise my voice and holler, "Jesus, Delia! I'm up already. Quit with the knocking and shit."

I *am* up, hard and thick where Coby's body meets mine, and would fifteen minutes really make that much of a difference? We could do it and get it done with and I'd have the memory with me the rest of the day, a memory of sex without hurt, without pain, a memory that would keep me happy and warm while he's not here. As he climbs off me, tucking himself back into his jeans and zipping them up, hiding himself from me, I sit up. "Coby, we can be quick—"

"I don't want quick." He climbs off the cot, then leans down and kisses me a final time. With his lips against mine, he whispers, "Tonight, I promise. You'll wait for me?" I almost *can't* wait. *Tonight*.

* * * *

This time Delia has eggs cooking on the stove when we come out. But they're just sitting in the pan, congealing beneath the heat. As Coby takes the seat at my desk, I pull the pan off the burner. "Delia, watch it," I grumble, scraping the eggs onto a plate. "You trying to burn them on purpose?"

Her glare is the only response I get, but I ignore it. Setting the plate in front of Coby, I apologize. "They're a little crispy."

"'S okay." His hand touches mine as he takes the fork from me, and his smile tells me it *is* okay, they're just eggs. Before he can turn away, I kiss him quickly, a little peck on the corner of his mouth.

Behind us, Delia drops the pan into the sink, the clatter of cast iron on stainless steel loud in the tiny kitchen.

"Delia!" I shout, growing angry.

"Sorry," she mutters, sounding anything but. As I watch, she throws the spatula into the sink after the pan, then a handful of silverware, a couple of plastic cups, a plate that I hear crack. I cross the room and grab her elbow before she can dump anything else on top of the dirty dishes. "I don't want him here," she says, loud enough that I know he has to have heard her.

Pinching her elbow, I mutter, "I don't care. What are you going to do, throw him out?" The look on her face suggests that she might do just that, but it dissolves in pain when I tighten my grip on her arm. "Think a minute, Delia. He's a *regulator*, you keep saying that yourself. You think he's going to stand for much more of your attitude?"

"You're hurting me," she says, twisting from my hand. "Let me go. I said—"

I release her suddenly and she staggers away before catching herself on the counter top. Can't she see Coby's good to me? Can't she just let me have that for however long it's going to last?

Her eyes are like twin fires smoldering in her face when she glares at me. "He's

not welcome here. This has to stop, Dae. Can't you see—"

I turn away so I don't have to see the hate in her eyes. "We'll talk about it when he leaves." I pick up a nearby towel and wipe the counter down. When she starts to say something else, I shake my head, I'm not hearing it. "Later, Delia."

She retreats to the corner by the stove, as far away from Coby as she can get. I still feel her simmering from here, her anger and bitterness like steam cloying in this small kitchen. I want to tell her to go out in the main room, out where I hear Maeve sweeping the floor, go out there please and give me a few more minutes with Coby, is that asking too much?

But I don't want to make things worse. She's already mad. Let's just leave things as they are for now. Once he leaves, though, we have to talk this out. If he's going to keep coming back, I don't want her to treat him like he's McBane. He's not anything like that man. Can't she see that already?

McBane would've hurt her for talking about him the same way she speaks of Coby. Yes, I'm definitely going to have words with her.

When Coby finishes his breakfast, he comes up behind me, leans his pelvis against my ass, trapping me between his body and the counter. He sets his plate in the sink as his arms come up around my waist, so possessive. I see the way he watches Delia out of the corner of his eye to make sure she's seeing this.

She is. I see that bow-shaped frown that tugs at her lips and she rattles the pots she's putting away. She's going to break something. "Delia—"

But Coby's mouth presses against the back of my neck, his tongue licks at my skin, his breath warm, and it stops the words in my throat. I want him. I don't know how I'm going to wait until tonight.

"Walk me out," he murmurs.

I nod and he takes my hand, leads me to the door, pushes through into the main room and holds the door for me, his eyes never leaving Delia. I want to tell her I'll be right back, but she's not looking at me and with the mood she's in, anything I say might set her off. I'll wait until he leaves, that's the safest thing. A few more minutes and we'll

be open for business anyway, it'll be easier to talk to her then—she's less likely to cause a scene if we have customers in the place.

She'll get over it. I let Coby's hand on the small of my back guide me to the front door. She'll have to.

Coby's hands stay on my waist as I unlock the door. I want to say something about Delia, apologize for her behavior maybe, or ask him not to mind her so much, but I don't know how to say that without sounding like it's his fault and it's not. If anyone, it's McBane's, because he's made her like this. All the shit he's done to me in the past has made her cautious and protective of me.

McBane. When I step out into the bright morning sun, Coby's touch warm on my body, it's almost hard to believe there was ever anything other than this. It's hard to believe that somewhere out there is a man who'd rather break me open and see me bleed than hold me or kiss me or tell me I'm beautiful. He must be in the Outlands, McBane...it's been over a week since I saw him last. The bruises on my hips are just now starting to fade.

At his motorbike, Coby leans back against the seat and pulls me into the space between his legs. "Come here," he says, like I have a choice. Shy in the morning sun, I look down at his chest, the belt at his waist. "Look at me, Dae."

Reluctantly, I do as I'm told. In the bright light he can see the veins beneath my pale skin, the faint scratches on my jaw that are part of McBane's legacy, but I have nothing to be ashamed of now, do I? Coby knows all my wounds, I named them for him and he's kissed them all away. Still, I'm hesitant, out here in the middle of the street, where the neighbors can see the protective way his arms encircle my waist and pull me in close to him.

"Dae," he says in that soft voice of his, and when he speaks that way, I'd do anything for him. I can't help but meet his silvery gaze. He smiles, his wide lips pulling into a quick grin. "That's better. You want me to come back tonight?"

Come back? I don't want him to leave. "Please." It's the only thing I can think to say.

He nods as if that's what he expected from me. Then his hands come up my back, around my shoulders, up my neck until he cradles my face in his palms. He pulls me close, closer, until I stumble against him, my own hands awkward between us. I don't know where to put them. His lips glance over mine, his tongue peeking out to lick at my mouth before he pulls me in for a kiss, deeper than the ones back in bed earlier, lustful and hungry like his kisses last night.

Mine, this kiss says, to whoever happens to be watching. Hands off, you hear me, world? This is mine. I fist my hands at his sides, moan against him, letting his mouth and tongue claim me. I don't care who sees, who knows. When he breaks away, I still feel his lips on mine. As he rides off down the street, the ghost of his body clings to me like a promise.

Mine.

* * * *

Delia's at the counter when I come in. As I click on the *Open* sign and raise the blinds, she starts in on me. "Must be nice, not to care what people think."

I don't like the barb I hear in her voice, but I take the bait. "What do you mean?" She waves her hand at the windows in disgust. "That display out there," she explains, as if I don't know what she's talking about. "He's just marking his territory, you know that, right? Look what I'm getting and you're not. That'll get around, you know. That's got to get back to—"

I cut her off before she can say McBane's name. "I don't care." I nod at an elderly couple who come in from the street, regular customers who always stop by for a cup of coffee first thing in the morning. Did they see that kiss? I wonder. The way they avoid looking at me as they slide into a booth near the end of the bar tells me they did, but in this day and age one doesn't admit to seeing much. Maybe they'll talk about it amongst themselves, at home with the lights out so there's no chance of anyone else overhearing, but if I ask them straight out, they'll deny it.

Easier that way, to pretend they don't see, don't know. That's what the customers do when McBane is in here, hurting me, because if they speak up, if they look, what's to stop him from turning on *them*, as well? That's the mentality people have now, after the war; if it's not happening to them, it's not real.

Hell, I took that a step further. I ignored the pain, retreated to a place deep inside my past when McBane came. The blood, the scars, I could pretend they didn't exist, they weren't real, they weren't me.

Until Coby.

Maeve appears from the back to take the order, and I don't like the way she glances at Delia as if trying to gauge our moods by the scowl on my sister's face. She'll hate Coby because Delia does, I know it already. Don't they realize that if Coby spends his nights with me, his men will stay away from them?

That's not the only reason you want him to come back. You know it has more to do with his gentle hands and soft words than any threat his men might pose.

Oh so true. I lean across the counter, reaching for a handful of silverware to set out on the tables. If I keep busy maybe Delia will lose interest in nagging me, but when she gasps, I frown up at her. "What?" I ask. I've about had it with her dramatics. "Delia __"

Her hand goes to her throat unconsciously, and suddenly I'm all too aware of warm metal against my neck. "What the hell is that?" Her voice is tight, barely reined in. "My God, Dae, don't tell me he gave you that. Don't tell me you *let* him."

"What?" My fingers close around the chain protectively. "It's a gift."

"It's a *leash*," she spits, her anger boiling over. The emotion blotches her face, bringing color to her hollow cheeks. "Can't you see that? He bought you for the price of that chain. So what, you're *his* bitch now?"

I don't even think. I see the smug set of her mouth, the haughty gleam in her eyes, I hear her words echo through me, *his bitch now*, and before I can stop myself, I slap her. Hard. With the palm of my hand, open and flat, across that bow of her lips. My flesh stings where it smacks hers. Anything to take that judgmental glare from her

eyes.

For a moment neither of us move. I'm vaguely aware of Maeve watching us, the customers staring, but all I see are Delia's eyes, wide and unbelieving. A red welt blooms on her cheek, the shape of my palm on her skin.

My *God* what did I do? I didn't *hit* her, did I?

No one hits Delia. No one..."Dee—"

Her eyes blaze with hatred. I try again. "Delia, Jesus, I didn't mean..."

Without a word, she gathers her skirts in her hands, turns on her heel, and disappears into the kitchen.

Oh fuck. "Delia —"

I don't get to the door before it swings back at me and then Maeve is there, pushing past me into the kitchen.

"Delia, wait, I'm sorry..." But she's already racing up the stairs.

I hear her bare feet on the wood, her ragged breath as she starts to cry. Maeve is right behind her cooing her name.

I hit her.

That's the only thought going through my mind, I hit her, *me*. I'm supposed to be the big brother. I'm supposed to protect her. I'm not supposed to lose it and hit her, that's not who I am. "Delia!" I call out, tears lacing my own voice. I didn't just hit her — dear Lord, tell me I didn't, *please*.

The only answer I get is the slamming of the attic door.

* * * *

I didn't mean it.

That's the only thing I can think to say. I didn't mean to hit her, I didn't.

She's still upstairs by the time the lunch crowd shuffles in and I don't have time to apologize.

Maeve comes down to help with the orders but Delia stays in the attic space,

crying or moping or I don't know what and Maeve won't tell me. "Just leave her alone, Dae." She sounds far wiser than her fifteen years.

"She's my sister. I'll talk to her if I want."

But she's right, Delia needs some time alone, so I don't call up and tell her to get down here and help us out, even when things get a little hectic.

Maeve and I handle it. She takes the orders and I cook the food. We're not swamped or anything, just half the tables are full and that's about what we get on an average afternoon. My hand still tingles from where I hit her. I can't close my eyes without seeing that palm-shaped mark on her face. I want to say I'm sorry, the apology is eating away at me. As soon as we get a free moment I'll run up and knock on the door, press against the wood and whisper I'm sorry through the keyhole if she won't open up for me.

When the place slows down, we have to have a talk. Before Coby comes by tonight, I need to sit her down and explain what he means to me, what I *want* him to mean. I'm not even sure of that one myself, not yet, but we'll talk about it and I'll figure it out. She'll see how good he is to me, she has to see that.

She *has* to, because I'm not giving him up.

We slow down after lunch, we always do, and I leave Maeve to clean the dishes. I head upstairs, taking the steps slowly, almost afraid of what I'll find at the top of them. A closed door, shut like an accusation. I try the knob—locked. I expected as much. With a light rap on the wood, I call out softly, "Delia?"

From the other side of the door comes her muffled reply. "Go away."

That's not an option. I knock again, a little louder this time. "Come on, Dee, open up." No answer. With another knock, I tell her, "We have to talk."

I hear the floor boards creak as she crosses the room, then the latch unlocks, the knob turns in my hand, and the door opens a crack. She stares out at me balefully, her eyes rimmed red from crying, her face blotchy, her hair a mess. She's not a pretty weeper, none of that *woe is me* crap like the fairy tales say. Her tears stain her skin, pull her mouth down into an ugly pout, plaster her hair to her cheeks and I can't help but

grin as she tries to smooth it out of her eyes.

"You look frightful," I say gently.

"No shit." There's a hint of a smile in her voice, even if she pouts harder as she steps aside. "You coming in or what?"

I enter the room, closing the door behind me. I know Maeve's at the foot of the stairs, listening, but this doesn't concern her.

The room the three of us share is just an unfinished attic above the diner, not much to look at with its wooden beams and low ceiling. No insulation to speak of. In the cold months we sleep with extra blankets, afghans or patchwork quilts Delia's made from whatever material she's managed to find. There's a small bath in one corner of the room, a tub and a toilet and a sink. I put the drywall up myself to give us some semblance of privacy. Mattresses on the floor, mine on the opposite side of the room from the girls', two large trunks that house all the clothing we own, and a bookcase whose shelves are filled with more knick-knacks than books, stuff Delia's picked up along the way.

Mostly angels. She collects them, says they're keeping watch over us, keeping us safe. Ceramic angels she's found in alleys, with chipped or broken wings; saints' medals and rag dolls with sewn-on wings and pictures she's torn from books. Angels everywhere, they stare at me with lifeless eyes as I step into the attic space.

I should keep one of them in the closet downstairs to protect me from McBane. If only I believed it'd work.

Folding her legs beneath her, Delia sinks to her mattress, her skirts blossoming out around her like the petals of a wild rose. She grabs her pillow, picks at the ticking that's coming through the cover, and frowns at it like she's waiting for me to start.

Sitting down beside her, I touch her knee. "I'm sorry."

She pouts harder, if that's possible, but she sniffles and wipes her eyes with the back of her hand and says in a tiny voice, "It's okay. It was a mean thing to say."

"It was hateful!" I say, wounded, and that makes her giggle, the reaction I hoped for. Rubbing her knee through the thick fabric of her skirt, I smile sadly. "It's not like

that with him."

She sighs. "Dae—"

"It's not, Delia," I interrupt, earnest. "Please, listen to me. He's not like that at all."

"He's a regulator, Dae. So he's nice to you, so what? He's got a half dozen men beneath him who'd just as soon kick you as look at you. He rides around the city looking for trouble, he's *trash*. You don't need someone like him."

I frown down at my hand, tracing the paisley design on her skirt, and try to think of how I can make her see that Coby's different than just that. There's more to him, I know there is. He can't touch me the way he does and not have something in him that's good and wholesome and pure.

I know he's a regulator. I know he lives in the streets on his bike with his gang of men. I know they terrorize people between here and the Outlands—that's what regulators do. They make their own laws in this lawless land. They scare others into following them. They take from people like Delia and me, hard-working people who barely survive as it is. I *know* all this. But in another time and place, would things still be the same?

If it wasn't for this war-torn land, this hate-filled world, would he still be the way he is today? Hell, for that matter, would I be who *I* am, scarred, broken, and bruised by stronger men? "I'd like to think he's not like all the others."

Delia laughs, a bitter sound. "And I like to believe in angels." She sweeps a hand at the bookcase against the wall, "but they're just a fantasy, Dae. They're not real."

"He is." Before she can speak, I hurry on. "Do you know what it's like to finally have someone touch me the way he does?"

"I don't want to hear it. He's a regulator—"

"You've seen what McBane's done to me." I don't have to point out the scars on my body for her. She's the one who stitched them together, she's the one who stopped the blood. "I never knew a man could be so gentle, Delia. I never knew I could *want* him to be."

Tears fill her eyes again but she blinks them away angrily. "So what, you like him now? Is that it? You like the way he does...whatever it is he does when you're alone?"

Basically, yes, but I don't say the words aloud.

Instead, I run an arm around her shoulders, pull her against my chest, smooth her hair out of her face and wipe away the tears that spill down her cheeks. "Delia," I whisper, kissing the top of her head. For a moment she resists, tries to pull away, but I hold her tight and she gives in. Her arms snake around my waist and she lets me hold her close.

She buries her face in my shirt and sighs. "This can't last forever. You've been hurt too much already, Dae. I just don't want to see him hurt you, too."

"He's not like that." I repeat.

She shakes her head, she's not talking about that.

"He's not going to hurt me."

"I mean when he leaves," she whispers. Then she sighs, a defeated sound. "But I guess it's already too late, isn't it?"

* * * *

It's quarter after eight when I hear a familiar thunder down the street. My heart leaps into my throat. *He's here*.

Then I realize the distant sound is more than one motorbike, it's a battalion of them, and I don't know if Coby's is among them or not. When the choppy motors stop in front of our place, Maeve comes back into the kitchen, eyes wide and terrified, and presses up against Delia, who stirs the soup on the stove. "Regulators," she whispers, as if afraid I'll overhear.

Delia nods, curt. It's hard to tell what she's thinking by the set of her mouth, and she doesn't look over at me as she says, "Dae—"

"I know." I rise from my desk. "You two stay here."

When I push through the swinging door into the main room, the few late evening customers we had, an older couple with their two teenaged kids, have already lined up at the register, eager to get out of here before the regulators file in.

Beyond the windows, I see the street in front of our place, the only light a circle of incandescence thrown by the floodlights above our door. It's enough to illuminate the bank of chrome and steel angled against our curb. Not one bike, not eight, but easily a dozen or more. I've never seen so many. The men astride them are hard, their laughter like knives stabbing the quiet night. As I ring up the customers, more bikes approach, growling to a stop. How many of them *are* there? Coby doesn't have this many men.

The only thought that comforts me is McBane doesn't, either.

Delia peeks out from the kitchen, gets a good look at the motorbikes through the window and steps up behind me, already reaching for the bills that one of the kids holds out. "I'll get this." She counts change from the register and effectively moves me out of the way. "You wait on them."

What I'd *like* to do is lock the door and not let them in, but that's just asking for trouble. I simply nod and grab a handful of laminated menus from the stack beneath the register. As I come around the counter, the bell above the front door tinkles and the first of the regulators comes inside. I don't recognize him as any of the men Coby came in with that first time, but he's not wearing McBane's signature bandanna so at least there's that. He leers at me, an ugly grin that shows a mouth full of rotted teeth, and then his gaze turns to Delia. I want to gouge his eyes out for the way he looks at her. *Please Coby*, I pray, wondering if it'll do any good. *Don't wait until nine tonight, please. Come by now so I don't have to put up with someone like that.*

The thought of even *suggesting* myself to this man turns my stomach. Now that I've known Coby's hands and lips, his soft words and wide smile and silvery eyes, I can't imagine anyone else. McBane doesn't even exist anymore.

The regulator keeps moving, doesn't stop at the register, doesn't say anything to Delia, just settles for that leer and a smarmy stare before he slides into a booth at the far

end of the diner, and before I can even think to start in his direction, the rest of the regulators pour in from the night. Tarn, I'd know him anywhere, has to duck to get through the door he's so big. He has the audacity to wink at me, *ugh*.

Behind him is that kid with the knife. What did they call him? Ravid? His hands clench at his sides when he sees me, like he's still waiting for his shot. He takes a step towards me, out of the flow of the crowd. I really think he's going to come for me this time and I back up against the counter but there's nowhere else to go...

Then Tarn grabs the kid's collar and yanks him away from me. He staggers after the larger man, glaring at me like this is my fault and he's going to take it out on me the first chance he gets. They pick a booth and Tarn throws the kid in first, then squeezes in beside him, trapping him between himself and the window, away from me. I wonder if I should thank him for that.

More men, dressed in faded denim and worn leather, dusty boots, spiked collars, chains hanging low from their pockets and shaved heads or long hair pulled back in ponytails, windblown and unkempt. Regulators, the whole lot of them. I've never had this many in here at once, *never*.

This isn't one of the trashy bars near the brothels downtown; our food isn't anything special, nothing to warrant *this* crowd. One or two of the faces I remember from the times McBane's come in here with his gang. A few of these guys are *his*, but the blue bandanna is missing from their arms, they're not wearing his colors. Still, they nod at me like they know me, take their usual seats around the place, side by side with Coby's men.

What's going *on* here? I have no clue, and I'm almost afraid to ask. A tension is building in the air around us, an energy that hums between the men, something building like a summer storm and God knows, I don't want to be here when it finally bursts. I don't need hate and pain to rain down around me, not now. *Please*, *Coby*, I pray numbly as I pass around menus to anyone who holds out a hand. Forty-five minutes until we close, and now *this*.

The men call to each other and raucous laughter fills the room. It sounds like a

roadhouse in here and the door hasn't shut yet, they're still coming in. I count twenty easily, twenty-five, maybe another half dozen outside. *Oh God*.

I clutch the rest of the menus to my chest, a paltry attempt at protection. In a strangled voice, I say, "Delia, you should go on back."

She doesn't argue. The customers huddle together by the counter to keep out of the regulators' way. They eye the door as if watching the swing of a pendulum, waiting for an opening to dash through to safety.

Delia backs away from the register, her face taut with fear. She looks at me and I see her thoughts written in her eyes; all these *men*, their rude catcalls, their whistles, their laughter. I can almost hear her words as if she's talking to me. *Where's that Coby now?* she's thinking. I hate to admit it but I'm wondering the same thing. *Where is he now that you need him here?*

"Get in the back." I hope my voice sounds more confident than I feel. At least it's steady, I'll give it that. "Go on."

Without hesitation, she pushes through the swinging door into the kitchen and vanishes. I hear the front door close, *finally*, and I'm about to start around the tables taking orders when the bell tinkles again. I look up in time to see Coby step inside.

Thank you, I pray, watching the self-conscious way he smoothes the hair down on the top of his head as if it's actually long enough to be mussed by his helmet. Oh, sweet Jesus, thank you.

I don't go to him, not here in this room full of his men. I'm not *that* lovesick, and I'm not sure what such a display would get me, angry words or a sweet kiss. I just don't know him well enough yet to predict his reaction to something like that.

Still, I smile when he looks my way, my heart flutters nervously as he approaches, and it's all I can do not to lean against him when he stops in front of me, so damn close I can smell the sexy, raw musk of his scent. "Hey, Coby," I say softly, keeping my voice low in case he doesn't want his men to overhear. I nod at the regulators around us. "What's this all about?"

"I missed you."

That reply makes me blush, here in front of everyone. He said it loud enough that the men nearest us hoot appreciatively.

Coby glances around, a satisfied smirk on his face—what did Delia call it?

Marking his territory, and right now in the midst of this crowd, I'm all too ready for him to declare me off-limits.

His arm comes up around my waist and he draws me to him, his lips finding mine. It's a tender kiss, brief and to the point, his tongue just barely licking into me while his men carry on. The way they clap and laugh, it makes me grin against Coby's mouth because they all know now, don't they?

I'm his—they all know.

When he breaks away, he keeps his arm around me but my arms are between us, the menus folded to my chest keeping us apart. "Coby," I sigh. I don't want him to let me go.

"Remember this morning?"

How could I forget? I remember every moment I've spent with him, every caress, every kiss.

"When I wanted to tell you something." He waits for me to nod before he continues. "I said it was something you might not like."

I glance at the men around us, every one of them a regulator, with their harsh voices and wild eyes. Already there's an arm wrestling match going on at one end of the counter, Ravid scratches into a table with his knife, someone near the restrooms rams another man's head into the wall amid more laughter.

"Some of these men aren't yours," I whisper, afraid to speak any louder. I search his eyes—how can he be so calm around men like this? And how can he make me feel as if I have nothing to be scared of as long as he's by my side?

"They're mine now," he says, like that's answer enough.

A muscle in his jaw twitches and he stares at me, hard. I almost think he's staring *through* me. "You listen, Dae. These men are mine, all of them. This street, it's mine, too. This whole section of the city, mine."

A thrill runs through me at his words, a mingling of fear and excitement and anticipation, this is all *his*. Me, I'm his, too.

"I came here looking for a place to call my own," he continues—I watch the shape his mouth makes around the words—"and I've finally found it. I know you've had nothing but hurt in the past from men like me and I can't change that, I can't take your scars away. But I want you, and it's not just because you're part of the territory or because *he* had you and I'm taking things over now. I don't want you to think that."

"I don't," I assure him. All I heard was *I want you*. "Coby, I don't think that at all __"

He silences me with another quick kiss. "He's coming here."

My veins turn to ice, he means McBane. He's coming in here. Oh God, no, please no.

Coby must see the horror rise in my face because he tightens his arm around my waist and gives me a bitter smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. "I'll not lie to you, Dae. I came in here the other night looking to see what he brags about. He's just so much talk. I had to see for myself if you're all that. So I came here thinking I'd fuck you and go back to the Outlands and rub it in his face. I had me a piece of your bitch, what do you think about that?"

My hands tremble. I'm not hearing this. He's doing this just to get at McBane? He's doing *me*? *Oh God, please*. Coby nods as if affirming my fears and I push away from him, suddenly angry.

"Dae, it's not like that. Not anymore."

"What's it like, then?" *Delia was right*. When he tries to pull me closer, I twist out of his embrace. "Fuck you, Coby."

A hush falls over the men closest to us and his face hardens. "We'll talk about this later. When we're alone."

"There's not going to be a *later*," I say bitterly.

How could I have been so blind? He's nothing but a regulator, nothing different from McBane or any of these bastards in here now. How could I think he'd be something more? *His hands*, a voice in my head whispers, even as I pull away from him.

He's gentle with you, Dae. Don't throw that away. So what if he came here just to spite McBane? Didn't you say yourself that you didn't care what his reasons were? What's it matter why he came the first time? At least you kept him coming back.

For a long moment, Coby doesn't speak, doesn't move. I stand up beneath that mercurial gaze, clinging to whatever pride I have left. *He didn't have to tell you*, that damn voice points out. I *hate* that voice. *He didn't have to say shit*. *But he did and in front of his men, all these regulators, they're listening to his every word and you think this is easy for him?*

His voice is hard with undisguised anger. "Don't be stupid, Dae. Do you think I'm here now because of him?"

"Why are you here?"

He doesn't answer, not with words. But in his eyes I see everything I ever wanted staring back at me: all my hopes, my needs, my desires, like my dream last night only now it's real. Those things are within my reach, they're in *him* and he's willing to give them to me. Maybe McBane's the reason he came out this way to begin with, but he came back because of me.

My voice breaks. "Coby, I'm sorry—"

Outside the roar of an engine tears down the street, vile and angry like a spitting tomcat looking to fight. Chrome streaks past the window like molten steel, tires squeal in protest, the engine chortles and falls silent. Coby steps in front of me, shielding me, even as I peer over his shoulder.

The door flies open, kicked in with the brute force I'm all too familiar with, setting the bell jangling like nerves. My blood freezes in my veins and the world stops around me. I hate myself when I duck behind Coby but I don't want to see, I don't want to know, I don't—

"What the *hell* do we got here?" the newcomer drawls.

It's McBane, I'd know that harsh voice anywhere. It sickens me, numbs me like poison, twists my stomach into knots until I want to die. Unconsciously, I fist my hands in the back of Coby's shirt. How can he stand so tall? I almost faint when McBane looks

his way.

"You Coby?"

With a curt nod, Coby replies, "I am."

McBane laughs, an evil sound that's haunted me for months. I bury my face between Coby's shoulder blades and squeeze my eyes shut but I can still see McBane loom above me, face hard as flint, bloodshot eyes the color of mud, salt-flecked hair chopped to his chin and wild from the wind. He's taller than me and wiry like a whip, with a biting tongue and a quick temper, words that cut to the bone, hands that tear and crumple and hurt—such pain he has rolled up in those palms, those fingers! The memories flood through me until I want to simply disappear.

"Step away from my bitch, boy," he growls, "nice and slow, and maybe there'll still be something of ya left when I'm through."

My knees buckle, threaten to go out and spill me on the floor. *It was too good to last*. My mind is a blur. *You didn't think you'd get to keep him, did you? You didn't think he'd* let *you?* He's going to kill me now for sure. This time there won't be anything left to stitch together. He's going to tear me asunder and toss me aside like so much garbage and then—

And then Coby's hand reaches back to touch my waist, tender, gentle, *kind*. His voice is soft and clear. "Take your women upstairs, Dae. Let me handle this."

Thank you. I don't want to let go of his shirt, I don't want to lose his touch, but he wants me to go upstairs and I can do that. He wants me to take Delia and Maeve out of here and yes, I can do that, too. As long as I don't look at McBane, as long as I don't see that hate staring back at me, locking me into place, I can do that—

"Dae." McBane's voice is as hard and dry as the air in Hell.

My name in that voice, it strips away the man I am. It takes away my control, it imprisons me into what *he* wants me to be. He says it again, "Dae," and I tighten my hands into fists of denial. No, he's not talking to me, *no*—

"Get your ass over here, Dae, and maybe I won't kill you for this."

God. I don't realize I breathe the word until I hear McBane growl, an evil sound

deep in his throat.

"Don't fuck with me, boy. You're mine. Now get over here."

He waits. The whole world is waiting. The regulators and Coby and McBane, they're all waiting on *me*. *God*, *please* —

I hear the grin in McBane's voice when he adds, "You want me to bring your sister into this?"

Delia.

"No," I sob, *sob*. He's reduced me to this, fuck him, but I can't let him get to Delia. I do this for her.

I see my hands as if they belong to another. They detach themselves from Coby's shirt, smooth down the dingy material that's bunched in the memory of my touch.

I do this for her. Those are someone else's hands now, not mine. I'm not here. Someone else steps away from Coby, someone else bumps against the counter, someone else wipes tears from cheeks that don't belong to me. I'm not here.

I'm lying in the hammock that swings on my da's porch and there's a boy lying beside me, dressed only in short denim cut-offs. His arm's around me. I'm not here, I'm there. I'm his, and nothing McBane does or wants to do to me can change that.

An iron fist clamps onto my wrist, jerking me back to the diner and the ring of men watching us with hooded eyes. My mind whirls out of control.

Here it comes, oh fuck here it comes. Just let me disappear, please just let me go back to that boy and his eyes and his hands please, oh please, oh please –

"Dae, stop."

That's Coby. It's *his* hand holding me so tight. I'm already halfway around him and he's the one keeping me in place. I stare at that hand on my wrist, I never knew someone so gentle could possibly be so damn strong. "He's not yours anymore, McBane."

It's that tone of voice again, the one he used with his men before, the one that matches everything in McBane's, every ounce of meanness and hate.

McBane just laughs it off. I don't have to look up at him to see the wicked anger

hidden beneath his grin. *Be careful, Coby,* I pray. *You don't know what he's capable of. You've seen my scars but you don't really* know...

"What did you say?" McBane asks.

"You heard me." Coby's voice is calm but hard, the hint of something deadly in his voice, like roiling water beneath the frozen surface of a lake. His thumb rubs a tender spot into my wrist as he speaks. "None of this is yours, McBane, get used to it. I'm about sick of you, don't you know? Wherever I go you're there, bragging about your strip or your men or your bitch. You're nothing but talk, old man.

"Back in the day you might've been something, sure, but now? You get drunk and fight and then drag your sorry ass over here to cut up this boy just because you can. You get off on fucked up shit like that? You think that makes you tough, makes you someone?" Coby makes a disgusted sound in the back of his throat, leaving no doubt in anyone's mind what *he* thinks of McBane. "You've got nothing here, do you hear me? Nothing. All this is mine."

He's not just talking about me. He means the regulators here, the street outside, this whole section of town, his. His. Still, he's holding onto me and I can't help but feel a little proud of the fact that I'm his, too. Me.

Coby's voice is an eerie echo of McBane's when he says, "You leave now, and maybe I won't kill you for this."

From the corner of my eye I see McBane's face bunch in anger. "I've about had it with you, kid," he drawls. "Get your hands off my bitch *now*—"

Coby's grip loosens and my heart pounds in my chest. My whole body starts to shake, he's giving me up just like that? *No*, I want to tell him, but I can't seem to find the words. *No*, *please*, *I said I was sorry*, *I can make it up to you*, I want *to* –

Then he touches my stomach, so gentle that I want to break down and cry, and he gives me a slight push behind him, away from the other regulators. "Go on up, Dae." He never takes his gaze from McBane's. "I'll let you know when this is over down here. Go on."

"Dae," McBane warns. "You don't want to try me like this. You know what I'll

do to Delia."

"Go on," Coby says again.

I take his hand and his fingers close over mine. That gives me the strength I need to take another step back. And another.

"I'll be up for you shortly," Coby promises.

This time when he lets me go, I don't allow myself to fall under McBane's spell. I'm better than that, I'm *more* than that, I'm this boy's, with his tender hands and soft words and hungry kisses. I'm not McBane's any longer.

I hit the counter with my hip and edge around it, not quite daring to turn yet, not willing to just run for it, not yet. McBane lunges at me, frustration and anger mingled together in a heart-stopping growl that erupts from him like the wild call of a desperate wolf, but suddenly a half dozen men are there blocking his path. Tarn with his massive bulk, Ravid and his quick, rusted knife, Coby standing tall for me, protecting me, *me*.

Now I look up and I see McBane's face, red and mottled with hate, his hands reaching for me, closing over empty air, futile fists that can't hurt me anymore.

"You're mine," he vows, but there are too many men between us, keeping us apart, and his voice sounds hollow, no more frightening than the wind through broken reeds. "Dae—"

He reaches for a blade he wears at his waist. I see the hate in his eyes, the anger and bitterness and deadly promise, and I hear Coby's voice again, *let me handle this...*

I turn and run.

* * * *

Coby said upstairs and that's all I'm thinking right now, upstairs, *upstairs* – "Dae," Delia cries out as I burst through the swinging door. "My God, is that McBane out there? What's going on? What –"

"Upstairs!" I grab her elbow as I rush by.

She doesn't need any prompting – she gets a glimpse of the men out in the main

room and that's all she needs to see before she's hiking her skirt up around her knees, racing for the steps. "Maeve!"

The girl's by the stove, stirring the soup. She looks up and sees the fear on my face and freezes, her eyes wide as dishes.

"Maeve," Delia calls out from halfway up the stairs, "come on, honey. Dae, she's not—"

"I got her." I slide to a stop, already turning, my back twisting painfully but I have to get upstairs, Coby said to take the women upstairs, that's all I'm running on now.

As I cross the kitchen, heading for the stove, I see the door swing back, affording another view of the main room—a jumble of limbs and bright blood, God so bright, splashed across the counter. *Please don't let it be Coby's, please let him be okay, please, please, please*—"Maeve!"

I snag her arm but she's seen the blood, too. It's locked her in place. She's a statue and there's no way she's going to snap out of it now. What happens if McBane gets past Tarn and Coby? What happens if he gets back *here*?

"Come on," I coax, but she's beyond hearing, beyond listening. This doesn't exist for her anymore, she's gone somewhere else and left her body behind. I know that one all too well.

Without thinking, I tuck her beneath one arm, every muscle in my neck and shoulders straining in protest. She's heavier than Delia, dead weight because she's not helping any here, and it takes all I have to get her to the foot of the steps. "Maeve, please—"

Someone hits the door, falling into the kitchen and she screams, a shrill shriek in my ear, deafening, disorienting. It's McBane. *Fuck*!

He's bleeding from a gouge across his forehead, bright red lines streak his face — I've seen that look, too many times, those violent eyes through a haze of blood, only it was always *my* blood before, it was *me* in pain. He looks around wildly, not quite comprehending where he is for a moment, and that's all the time I need to give Maeve a

shove up the stairs behind Delia. "Go!" This time the girl listens, stumbling up the steps on her hands and knees.

McBane sees me and snarls. "You're a dead man," he swears as he sweeps one arm across the counter, sending dishes and pots and silverware clattering to the floor. "Where's your whelp to save you now? You thought I'd let you get away with this shit? I'll fuck you 'til you bleed, boy, and then I'll have your sister. I'll make you watch."

That 'til you bleed part doesn't scare me anymore. He's done that before, hasn't he? But he's not getting me again, and he sure as hell won't touch Delia. I'll kill him myself if I have to before it comes to that. Only you don't have to. You have Coby now, you're his. McBane was nothing but hurt and pain and hatred but Coby's not like that. He'll look out for you, he'll protect what's his. Just get your ass upstairs and lock that door like he said, and wait for this whole thing to be over with. Let him handle McBane.

So where is he?

I don't know, and when McBane throws himself across the room at me, I don't want to stick around to find out. I barrel up the stairs, taking the steps three at a time. When I pass Maeve, I grab her around the waist, drag her along after me. At the top of the steps Delia stumbles, falling headlong through the door into the attic space, but she crawls out of my way and when I'm in the room, she kicks the door shut, holds it with both feet while Maeve scrambles out of my arms and throws the bolt. *Safe*, I think, double-checking the lock. *Thank God* —

McBane's boots echo in the stairwell, heavy footsteps that ring out like judgment through the tiny unfinished attic.

"Dae," Delia sobs, scuttling back against the far wall. She gathers Maeve into her arms, holds the girl protectively, the two of them cringing away from the door. "Oh God, Dae, get away from there, get away—"

When he hits the door I fall back, landing hard on my ass and knocking the wind out of me. He strikes again and I see the wood splinter around the lock. Another good blow and he'll be through. Struggling to breathe, I scurry back until my hand touches Delia's leg and I press up against her, keeping her behind me. He'll not have her, I

swear it. Her fingers dig into my shoulder and I hear Maeve's hitched breath in my ear. McBane hits the door again and this time the frame actually *buckles* beneath his attack. *We're dead*. Where the *hell* is Coby?

Another blow, and another, and when Delia screams my name, her voice is lost in the screech of wood on metal as the bolt twists free. The top half of the door leans dangerously inward, toward us, and I can see McBane's blood-smeared face staring in from the darkened stairwell when he tries to push his way through. He snarls like a rabid dog, his teeth gnashing together, closing over half-formed words that I can't understand.

Please, I pray, shielding Delia and Maeve the best I can. Please God, please Coby, please, oh please, oh please —

And then he's gone.

I hear him cry out in frustration as he's pulled back by a half dozen regulators, hands closing around his throat and mouth and nose. He bites at fingers and arms, anything in his way, anything keeping him from me, but there are too many of them, too much strength, and he stumbles away from the door.

I see his silhouette framed in the splintered crack where the door and its jamb no longer meet; his arms pinwheel uselessly at his sides as he tries to shake free from the men holding him down and can't. He growls my name, and all the hate and pain that he's ever thrown at me, all the evil that's in him, it's all set free in that one word, that voice. It peals through me like a knell, ringing out death—my death.

But he's overpowered, outnumbered, and when he takes a step back, there's nothing but empty space behind him. The stairs fall away and there's nothing holding him up. One of the regulators grappling with him tumbles down the steps with solid, broken thumps. I curl into myself, cover my ears with my hands, try to blot McBane out until all I think of is Coby and the way he smiles when he looks at me. That's the only thing keeping me sane right now.

Not yours anymore, McBane, I hear him say.

That's what I hang onto as McBane's cry falls away. There's another sickening

crack of bone and blood and flesh, and then he's gone.

* * * *

After he falls, I don't dare move. He's on the other side of that door. I know he is, waiting for me to come close and look down, and then he'll grab me and pull me out after him. He's waiting for me. He's out there, waiting.

I just know it.

"Dae." Delia prods gently. "Dae, come on, we have to bar the door. If he comes back up here..."

I don't want to think about that.

If he comes back up here we're dead. That's all there is to it. I hear shouts downstairs. Dishes shattering against the floor. Pots clatter together, drawers scrape, silverware rattles and cabinets slam. It's all distant, far away, not really happening *here*, to *us*. It *can't* be. *Coby*. I let Delia help me to my feet. *Why didn't you stop McBane*?

That damnable voice speaks up inside my head, the one I don't want to listen to anymore, the one that whispers, *Maybe he's* –

He's not, I counter, shaking the thought away. Don't even think it, he's fine, he has to be.

Delia tugs at Maeve's mattress, trying to lift it from the floor. She struggles with the awkward bulk. "Dae, help me."

Together we manage to get it up against the door. It's not much but it blocks the ragged hole McBane's torn in the wood. It muffles the fight downstairs. Then I scoop Delia's angels off the bookcase, careful not to damage them. She stands behind me, her skirt held out in her hands. I set each piece of porcelain on the makeshift sling, wincing when they clink together. When the bookcase is empty, I shoulder it into place against the mattress. That should slow him down, if he gets away from Coby's men.

Please, I pray, helping Delia set the angels up against the far wall, where Maeve still huddles, *please don't let him get away from Coby. Please*.

* * * *

Sometime later, Delia manages to coerce Maeve away from the wall, and they lie down together on Delia's bed. "It's okay," Delia murmurs, smoothing the younger girl's hair back from her brow, but the sounds drifting up through the floor boards suggest otherwise.

How long has it been? I'm not sure. I've lost all track of time and it's cloudy beyond the small window set high at one end of the attic. I can't see the moon or stars or anything but darkness out there; nothing to tell me what's going on. What *is* going on? Where's Coby?

I don't know.

I pace the small attic space. How did the three of us ever live up here? It's tiny. I count a few dozen steps in one direction before I reach the end and have to turn around, start for the other side. I swear the walls are closing in on us. They're shrinking. They have to be.

Downstairs it still sounds like a barroom brawl, crashes and breaking glass and shattering wood. I can't even imagine what it looks like down there. A battlefield, I'm sure. Blood everywhere...and bodies. *God, just let it be over already. Just let Coby come up here and knock on the other side of that door and tell me it's alright, everything's going to be alright, please.*

I reach the wall, stop, turn, retrace my steps, frown at Delia as I pass her, frown at Maeve's glassy stare. Another crash, this one hard enough that it rattles the angels we've set out along the wall.

Their wings chink together like ice in glasses of lemonade, and the sound makes me think of that hammock on my da's porch, and my dream of Coby and me together on an endless summer afternoon. What I wouldn't give to be able to lie down and disappear now, vanish back to that dream and that porch and that hammock, his hands on my body, his lips on my skin.

Another shout from the kitchen below — McBane's voice. *Please, Coby.* I'm not sure what I'm even asking for here, but that doesn't stop me from praying. *Please.*

* * * *

I lie on my mattress, stare at the beams that cross the ceiling, and listen. Heavy boots stomp up the stairs—McBane? Coby? They get halfway before an angry shout stops them in midstep, and then I hear the sound of a body thrown against the wall, the crack of wood as the banister snaps, a hoarse, startled cry that ends in a wet crunch far below. Through the attic window, the sound of tinkling glass carries in on the damp wind. A scuffle outside knocks over the chain of motorbikes—from here they sound like aluminum foil crumpling as they fall. Someone shakes one of the bikes free from the others and the engine roars to life before whining away into the distance, gone. Another bike follows, two more, then silence.

Silence.

It settles over me like snow, that gentle and amazing, that still. I hold my breath, close my eyes, strain to hear something more from downstairs, anything at all.

Across the room, Delia shifts on her mattress and whispers, "Dae?" "Shh."

Still nothing. As quietly as possible, I sit up. Where are all the regulators? Coby, or McBane? One of them should be trooping up the stairs right about now, unless they're both—

No. Coby's not, you know he's not, he can't be, so don't even think it.

I won't.

For a brief moment, I consider crawling into Delia's bed behind her, holding her close and just not thinking of anything anymore, just waiting until morning to see what's happened downstairs. Coby will find me by then, I'm sure. If I just wait long enough, he'll come up here for me. He *has* to. He promised he would come for me when it's all over.

It *sounds* like it's over, though. So where is he?

"Dae," Delia whispers again, and she scoots up tight against Maeve, who's already on the edge of the mattress and staring at me with those wide, unseeing eyes. Delia pats the bed behind her. "Come over here."

There's no room, not really, and what if Coby needs my help? What if he's hurt? What if he's lying at the bottom of the stairs and can't find the breath to call up to me? What if —

I shake the thoughts away as I stand. "I think it's all over now." I head for the door, crossing the room carefully to avoid making any unnecessary noise. I hate the squeak of the floor boards beneath my feet. "I'm just going to take a quick look—"

"Dae, no." She sits up and hugs her knees to her chest like a little girl. "Don't go down there, that's stupid."

I push against the bookcase that bars the door and manage to slide it out of the way. "Coby might be hurt," I explain, raising my voice over the scrape of wood on wood.

"He might be dead."

I'm not hearing this. "Don't talk like that. He's not..." I choke on the word, shake my head again. "Just don't say that, okay? He's not."

"How do *you* know? McBane might be waiting for you. Dae, you can't go down —"

Maeve's mattress falls against me as I try to shoulder it out of my way. "I have to."

I don't expect her to understand. She doesn't see him the way I do, she *can't*. She doesn't know how he makes me feel. I can't explain it to her. I can't describe the way my heart swells in my chest when he looks at me. I can't describe the way my body aches for his gentle touch.

After losing my da, after the war, after McBane, why can't she see how much I need someone like him in my life? After all the wrong things I've let others do to me, I've finally found someone who will make everything right.

I let the mattress flop to the floor. I'm not going to let her stop me. The fight's over, she can hear that as well as I can. Coby said he'd be up but he hasn't come yet so I have to go to him. I *have* to. Picking at the splintered lock, I tell Delia, "Try to lock this behind me."

She rises from the mattress and comes over to me. "Dae, no. Listen to yourself—no. You can't do this. I won't let you."

"You don't have a choice." The lock breaks open easily in my hands, the door knob falling at my feet. I frown at it for a second. *That's* not going to work. She can't lock it back up when I leave, but there's nothing I can do about it now. "Can you move that bookcase?" I look over my shoulder at her. "Just push it in front of the door after I'm downstairs—"

Her face crumples as she struggles against tears. "Damn you," she mutters.

She raises one hand balled in a useless fist and hits my shoulder with all the strength of a newborn kitten. Her fingers clench in my shirt. "You *have* to do this? You'll get yourself killed."

Gently, I take her in my arms. She fights me at first, her fists hard between us, her arms unyielding. "It's over." I rub her back until she buries her face against my chest, the first sobs already racking her body. "It's all over, Delia. Shh, it's over."

Her voice is muffled in my shirt. "You don't know that."

No, I don't, but I can't just stay up here and hope for the best—that never worked for me before. Gingerly, I push her away, open her tight fists to release my shirt from her grasp, hold her wrists so she can't hit me again.

"You're a fool." But her words hold no conviction and she lets me lead her back to her bed. "Just like your da, nothing but a fool. He got all righteous about the war and you? You let some boy sweet talk you into thinking he'll keep you safe."

I don't rise to her bait. Yes, that's *exactly* what I think, that Coby will keep me safe, keep men like McBane away from me, keep *her* safe and keep the pain and the hurt at bay. How can I not want that? How can I not love someone like that?

"You stay here." I kiss her forehead. She covers her face with her hands and

sighs as I sit her down on the edge of the mattress. "You look after Maeve, you hear me? How's she holding up?"

Not well, I can see that when I look at the younger girl, lying on the bed folded into herself and just staring, staring at the wall. When I mention her name, she doesn't stir, doesn't even move, like she's nothing more than another one of Delia's angels, posed forever in porcelain. "You look after her," I say again, smoothing Delia's hair away from her face.

She nods, numb. Then she sighs, a heart-wrenching sound that seems to stem from the depths of her soul, but she lies down beside the girl, gathers her into a strong embrace, rests her head against the girl's back and squeezes her eyes shut. "Go," she whispers. When I start to say something else, she shakes her head. "I don't want to hear it, Dae. If he means that much to you, just...just go."

I don't wait for her to change her mind.

* * * *

The stairs are dark and slick. I tell myself it's not blood I'm stepping in but I can't ignore the coppery stench that hangs in the air, clouding my head and filling my veins with fear. I take the steps carefully. I don't want to fall and land in the gore. I don't want to feel it seep through my clothes and into my skin.

There's nothing to hold onto as I make my way down. The banister is gone, snapped off in the fight. I see it lying across the counter below, shattered into toothpicks. The wall is smeared with more blood, handprints I don't want to touch. So I watch my feet, watch the steps, watch the pattern that the soles of my shoes leave in the splashes of blood when I can't avoid stepping in them. *Don't let this be Coby's blood*, I pray, making my way down the stairs. *McBane's*, *yes*, *but not Coby's*.

A man lies facedown at the foot of the stairs, dead. His hand is outstretched and bent at an awkward angle, the skin already lifeless and gray. Blood clots his hair, stains his clothes. He could be any one of the regulators who came in here earlier, but I don't

recognize him. He's not Coby, though. At least there's that.

The blood reminds me of McBane and all the things he did to me in the past, all the marks that scar my body, all the pain he poured out into me. I want to close my eyes, shut them tight against this gore and hate and death, but I can't—I can't. Still, my stomach roils as I step over the regulator's body and before my foot even touches the floor, I'm dancing away as quick as I can, eager to distance myself from him.

Dead.

I'm going to have to clean that up. I don't want Delia seeing the place like this.

The kitchen isn't as bad as I feared. True, it looks like a whirlwind blew through — broken plates litter the floor, silverware's scattered along the counters, the pots that once hung above the stove are now thrown around the room. But there's no water spurting from the sink, no fire burning in the oven, no smell of gas permeating the air. There's some blood streaked across the counter tops or pooled onto the tile, and most of the doors to the cabinets have been torn off, tossed aside, but that's it. No more bodies, live or dead. I even peer into a few of the cabinets, just to make sure—no, no one. Except for the man by the stairs, I'm alone.

A draft blows in around my ankles. The back door's open. I hear an overturned trashcan rattle away down the alley. I call out, tentative. "Coby?"

Where is he?

I cross the kitchen, catch the screen door as it knocks against the garbage cans, look out into the empty night and call his name again. "Coby?"

No reply.

I pull the screen shut, latch it, then close the back door, fumbling with the bloodied lock until the bolt slides home. Maybe he's out by the bikes, I don't know. Maybe he's in the room beneath the stairs—

But that door's still locked, the key in my pocket, and I don't bother to check it. I know he's not there. In the main room, then, or outside. Maybe McBane's the one I heard take off into the night, and Coby gave chase. Maybe—

You don't know, a voice in my head whispers. It's my da's voice, a comfort in the

midst of this storm. *Just go have a look out there and stop supposing already.* You won't know until you see for yourself.

True. And if McBane somehow came out the victor, wouldn't he have been upstairs already? Tearing through the door to get to me, ripping at Delia—if Coby wasn't there to stop him, who would've?

No one, but I don't see McBane so that must mean Coby's still here somewhere. That must mean he's still alive. The door between the kitchen and main room is shut, but I feel the anticipation gathering as I approach. One push, that's all it'll take. That'll set the door in motion and get me through. One push, that's it...

I step over silverware strewn out along the floor, watching my shoes move through the utensils, careful not to kick anything and draw attention to myself. No one knows I'm down here—I don't *want* them to know, not until I find Coby, not until I know he's alright. *Please, let him be alright*.

A large butcher knife lies on the counter by the door, pointed at me like an accusing finger. There's no blood on the handle and the blade reflects the overhead lights, it's that polished, that clean. Without thinking I pick it up cautiously, savor the weight in my hand. *Just in case. That's all this is for, just in case.* I hold it at my side, the blade aimed at the floor, and push through the swinging door into the main room. "Coby?"

Here's where the other men are. Tarn sprawls in one booth, his legs draped up across the table, holding his head in two mammoth hands. Another man sits on the floor nearby, his face streaked with dark blood. Behind them the window is gone, punched out in the course of the fight. The few blinds still hanging flutter in the night air. On the curb, the motorbikes are piled together like kindling.

One man lies stretched across the counter; he moans as the door swings shut behind me. I inch away from him, press back against the wall and edge around the register, out of his reach. Like he's in any position to attack me. He's covered in blood. They all are. Tarn and the man by him and the one on the counter, the others tossed around the room like discarded dolls, all bleeding, dying or dead.

My voice is barely audible when I exhale, "Coby?"

Tarn opens one eye and looks at me, looks *through* me, looks away. Tightening my grip on the knife, I try to see everything at once but there's so much blood, so many bodies, so many broken men, I can't begin to believe it. Coby's in this somewhere, isn't he?

And McBane...he's got to be here, too. I'd give anything to see him brought down to this level, where he was always so eager to bring me.

"Hey." The gruff voice comes from somewhere deep inside Tarn's bulk. I raise the knife as a warning and dare to take a step closer to him, away from the counter and the man there.

"Hey yourself." I stop a few feet from the man sitting on the floor in front of his table. "Where's Coby?"

Tarn shrugs. He wipes his hair out of his eyes and now I see the wound cut into his cheek, right above his beard. He'll need that stitched. "Your sister," he says, his voice thick and unsteady. Clearing his throat, he presses his hand to the wound, staunching the blood that flows like tears down his face. "She okay?"

"She's upstairs. She's fine."

He nods like that's good to hear. "That bastard," he starts, but that's as far as he gets before his head lolls to one side, against the back of the booth.

"Tarn?"

He doesn't answer. I climb into the other seat in the booth, lean across the table to touch his neck, feeling for a pulse or a breath or *something*, he can't be dead, someone like him, too damn *big* to die...

There, I feel it, a slight but steady throb just above his Adam's apple. He stirs slightly when my fingers brush against his hand. He's still alive, but I'm not sure for how long—how much of this blood is his? What about the rest of the men? And where's Coby?

"Delia needs to get down here," I mumble to no one in particular as I extract myself from the booth. When the regulator on the floor reaches for me, I skip away

from his hand, into the center of the room, turning so I can keep an eye on the whole place. I don't want anyone else touching me. "She's needed here. She can stitch these men back together, I can't do this alone."

Raising my voice, I call out, "Coby?" I'll get her as soon as I find him –

A groan issues from the far end of the room, a flash of fire through my body, hurrying me across to the booths on the other side of the front door. "Coby?" I call out, stepping over broken and bloodied limbs. I try not to notice the sightless eyes, the open mouths, the blood-splattered faces that blindly watch me pass them by. "Coby, where..."

"Dae."

It's a coarse whisper from the last booth by the window but it's my name, my name, it has to be him and I let the knife fall away as I scramble to reach him. "Coby!" I cry, pushing through the regulators propped up against the booths and the tables and the bar stools. "Coby, God, it's me, it's okay, you're okay, everything's fine."

I fall to my knees as I reach the booth, climb over his legs beneath the table, ease my arms around his shoulders, pull him to me, "Coby, it's me. It's okay, it's me—"

Only it's not Coby I'm holding. I realize that as I wipe at the blood obscuring the man's features. No scars on his nose, no wide mouth, no silver eyes staring back at me. It's dark here under the booth and I can't see too well, the stench of blood rises around me with a grubby smell like pennies warmed in the palm of a child's hand. Sweat stings my eyes and blinds me and it's not Coby I'm holding, it *can't* be.

Thick hair falls across my hand, he doesn't *have* hair like that, long enough to brush his collar, it's not him..."Dae."

My God. I know that voice.

"No," I mumble, trying to back away, but suddenly a bitter hand latches onto my chest, hard fingers grind into my shirt, my flesh, twisting, digging. I grab the hand in both of mine but it's too strong, it's always been too strong for me. I can't move away. "No!"

"Dae."

My name again. This time I recognize the sneer. How could I have thought *he* was Coby?

"You little fucker," McBane growls, his fingers tearing into me, aiming for my heart. "You did this to me, you happy now?" His other hand comes up, hits me in the face, a stinging slap that rings through me. "Look what the *fuck* you've done!"

Like this is all my fault; the blood, the death. I reach behind me for the knife—didn't I have a knife? Where did it go? What did I do with it? Don't tell me I dropped it, it has to be here somewhere. I fumble for it, my fingers dancing over hands and bodies and glass but no knife, no, *no*—

McBane finds the chain around my neck, Coby's gift, and his rude fingers close over the gold greedily. "You little *whore*," he spits, pulling me towards him.

The necklace bites into my throat; he twists it until the herringbone cuts my breath. I claw at my neck, I can't breath.

"You fucking cunt."

Tighter, until the world winks out around the edges of my vision, a blinding white nothingness that eats into my mind. I feel his hand on my body, his fingers tearing through my shirt, gouging my flesh as I choke, I can't even find the air to scream

"You're mine." He jerks the chain. "You hear me, Dae? Mine."

His. Who was I kidding? I'm his, he said so himself, I've always been his. I wasn't meant for anything more, anyone gentle, anyone like Coby, that's just not for me. My whole life's been nothing but pain and hate, ever since the war took my da. Why did I hope for anything more? Why did I even believe I was worthy of it? Look at me, the scars on my body, the scars on my soul.

I don't deserve anything more than this man, one hand strangling me with the only gift I've ever received even as he's rubbing himself hard through his pants, he gets off on shit like this, on doing this to me. And this time he'll hurt Delia, he'll hurt Maeve, and he'll probably kill me, fuck me until I'm ripped apart inside, leave me to bleed to death and where's Coby now? The only gift I've ever received is slowly strangling me.

Just like McBane to ruin every little part of me, and just when I've found something different, something *else*, someone like Coby, the bastard has to wrest that from me, as well.

As if thinking of him called him into being, *his* voice fills my world like an archangel's song. "I told you he's not yours anymore."

Coby, his voice, his words, coming from everywhere at once, coming from inside me. I can't breathe. I'm dying and this isn't happening, Coby's not really here...

But McBane's grip loosens and I gulp in a hungry breath, stagger back. As my vision clears I see someone outside, leaning in through the broken window, a hand fisted in McBane's bloody hair and pulling him back. It's Coby, I see his eyes flash like quicksilver when he looks at me, and his lips are a wide grimace when he yanks McBane away.

"Not yours," he says, ramming McBane's head into the wall below the window, into the jagged glass still set in the frame, to emphasize his words. He yanks again, harder, as McBane tries to reach behind him, tries to get a grip on him and can't. "Not yours, you get that? So keep your goddamn hands off my boy, you fucking get that?"

As McBane claws at Coby's face, I look around me wildly. *The knife* –

I see it. It's a stretch but I manage to snag it by the blade, pull it towards me. "Coby!" I cry out as McBane kicks at me, his boots hitting me in the stomach, the chest. I try to stand but I'm too dizzy from lack of air, there's no way I can run around to the other side of the wall and help Coby hold this monster down.

McBane's knee connects with my crotch, dropping me in a puddle of pain. "Coby!" I cry again, crumpling into myself like an empty sail on a windless day. The name reverberates through my mind and I'm not sure if I'm saying it aloud or not. Coby, please —

My hand tightens around the knife. Its blade bites into my skin like so many of McBane's steel-tipped weapons have in the past. But that part of my life is over now. It ended with Coby, and I am *not* giving him up.

When McBane kicks out at me, I duck around his legs to bring the knife up

I have, but then Coby's hands tighten around his neck and those hard eyes bulge out almost comically. I'm not afraid of this man, not anymore.

With every ounce of strength in my broken, scarred body, I shove the knife into McBane. God, it's so much easier than I ever dreamed it could be, just one forceful lunge and my hands are slick with hot blood. Those mean, thin lips open in surprise; as the light fades from McBane's dying eyes, he sees me, *me*, not some prized ragdoll to be butchered and beaten but *me*.

Then Coby's climbing through the window, climbing over McBane's prone body, beneath the table, over to me. I feel his fingers as he pries the knife from my hand, then his arms come up around me, his breath warms my ear, he murmurs my name and tells me he was coming for me, didn't I know that? I should've waited upstairs, he was coming to get me.

Doesn't matter, I think, turning away from McBane. I bury my face in Coby's chest and breathe deep his sweaty scent as he holds me tight. His hands are gentle on my back, my arms, my body. It doesn't matter, Coby. You have me now.

* * * *

Coby helps me to my feet, holds me close as he leads me through the bodies back to the kitchen. Now the men are beginning to stir. They aren't all dead, just wounded and torn up and hurt.

"Your sister's good with a needle, isn't she?" Coby asks.

Tarn still sits like a small boulder in the booth by the counter, his face bleeding through his hands, and he looks up as we pass. Coby frowns at him, looks around and frowns at all of them.

"We need her down here." Coby holds the swinging door open as I step into the kitchen. "She needs to patch up my men."

"I don't want her seeing this." I glance around at the blood that splatters the

cabinets and paints the floor.

Coby's hands tighten on my waist. "She's seen your wounds, hasn't she? This isn't much worse."

His words cut deeper than I'd like to admit. He's right, these men *do* need her. She can sew them back together and it's selfish of me to try and keep her upstairs at a time like this.

But he sees the small pout that tugs at the corners of my mouth, it's been such a long night and he didn't have to bring my scars into it, did he? He didn't have to remind me that my body's ravaged beyond repair—"Dae," he murmurs, his lips against the back of my neck, kissing the swollen skin where his necklace bit when McBane strangled me. His hands roam across my stomach, he pulls me back against him.

He's so strong and tender. "Dae, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it to come out like that."

"No." I try to pull away. "You're right. Coby, please—"

He doesn't let me go and turns me around in his arms, his lips finding mine. His mouth tastes faintly of blood and I wonder if he's hurt, but then his arms come up around my back and he holds me so tightly, I forget everything else but his tongue and his hands and his hard body pressed against mine. I can feel the shape his lips make against my own when he whispers, "I think you're beautiful, Dae. You're amazing, and you're mine. I'm going to be the best thing that's ever happened to you, I swear it. You don't have to worry about anyone anymore, don't you know? You're mine."

His words fill me. I never expected anyone like him in my life, ever, and now that he's here, I can't imagine being without him. "If you think I'm beautiful," I whisper, "then that's all that matters. Let me get Delia."

This time he lets me slip free from his embrace. I hurry to the foot of the stairs as the kitchen door swings open and the first of Coby's men stumbles through.

"Clean up in here a bit," Coby says as another regulator comes into the kitchen, and then another. They're wounded and bleeding—one holds a dishcloth to the side of his head to close up a ragged scrape, another keeps his arm tucked against his chest, a

third can't move the broken, bloodied fingers on his left hand. But they nod when Coby gives them orders. They shuffle around the place looking for clean towels to mop up the blood. They scoop up the silverware to toss it in the sink. "We've got women coming down," Coby explains as I start up the stairs. "There's only two, so whoever's hurt most gets stitched up first. Make one off-color comment or cop a feel and I'll finish you myself, you got that?"

Halfway up the steps, I feel faint and dizzy and have to stop. "Delia," I call up into the darkness. "Come on, hon, it's okay. It's really over now."

I see the faint outline of the bookcase, backlit by the lamps in the attic, where the door no longer meets the jamb. I hear the scrape of wood on wood as the bulk is moved aside and then Delia stands silhouetted in the doorway.

"Dae?" She gasps when she sees the blood that covers the walls, the stairs.

Behind me, two regulators drag the dead man away from the foot of the steps, and I hear Delia moan softly, her hand on her throat. "I'm not," she starts, and then, losing that thought, she tries again. "I can't..."

"Some of these men are hurt." A wave of nausea rushes through me and I reach for the banister that's no longer there. My hand closes over empty space and I jerk away from the opening before I can fall. "Dee, please—"

She sees how unsteady I am and is already hurrying down to me before I think to tell her to put something on her feet. When her cool hands press against my face, though, I notice she's wearing her old pair of high-top sneakers, black with ink where she scribbled on them when she was a child; she couldn't have been more than eight or ten when they were new.

Perhaps she clings to them as desperately as I do the memories of my da; they remind her of a simpler time, a kinder world, where her brother didn't have to give his body up to save hers. Seeing those sneaks makes my eyes water with unexpected tears.

Delia takes me in her arms as if she's the older one, clucking her tongue like a mother hen. "Dae, shh, what happened?" She smoothes a hand across my back and I bury my face in the pillowy softness of her breasts. "It's okay now, right? You said it's

over. McBane - "

"Dead," I say, my voice muffled in her shirt.

That makes it real to me, that makes it sink in. He's dead, *dead*. I wielded the knife that killed him. Composing myself, I pull away from Delia and wipe my eyes roughly with the back of my hands. "He's dead."

For a moment I'm sure she's going to comment on that, but she surprises me with a defeated sigh as she says, "He can't hurt you anymore, then."

I hug her tight. Behind me, someone comes to the bottom of the stairs, and then Coby calls out, "Dae?"

There's steel in his voice and I pull away from Delia, suddenly self-conscious. "We need your help." I take a step back and hold onto her hands, hoping she'll follow, but she keeps her ground, glares past me at Coby, she still doesn't like him much. "Some of the men need attention. You can mend a wound—"

"What if I won't?"

I don't want to turn around and see the hard look on Coby's face. I'm sure he hears every word she says. Her fingers squeeze mine almost painfully. "I don't owe them anything. You don't, either, Dae. They're regulators. Let them bleed to death for all I care."

Before Coby can say anything, I tug at her hands, gentle. Doesn't she see how gentle he is with me? "Don't be this way," I say softly. "You're better than that. They fought McBane to protect you, don't you know?"

"Now you sound like *him,*" she replies, tilting her chin to indicate the man behind me. "You deserve so much more than someone like that."

I sigh — *not now*. "This isn't the time," I start, but Coby cuts me off, calls up to me again.

"Dae? What's the holdup here? My men are dying."

"I'll not do it for him," Delia says stubbornly. She tries to pull me up to her, back into the attic where I've always hidden her before. Where she's safe.

"Delia, stop." I shake free from her hands, fold my arms across my chest. I'm not

having this. "There are men who need our help. You don't *have* to do it for him—do it for me. Please. It's not asking much, is it? To stitch up their wounds? They fought for us __"

"They fought for him," she spits angrily, like a riled cat. "He wanted this strip, Dae, didn't you hear him say that? So he found a few guys who had nothing better to do but tear our place apart just because he wanted what McBane had. He wanted you."

With a sigh, I cover my face with one hand and rub at my temples. Why does she have to make this so hard? "McBane is dead." I enunciate each syllable to drive the point home. "If not Coby, then someone else would've come by later on. That's the way these things happen, you *know* that."

I look up at her, my fingers drawing long furrows into my cheeks, pulling the corners of my mouth down into a caricature of sadness. "Delia, please. I know you don't like him, fine. I know you don't like him with me, that's fine, too. But he's not McBane, no matter what you see when you look at him. He's not like that with me at all." My fingers find the chain at my neck and twist around the gold, savoring the warm kiss of metal on my skin. "You don't have to like these men. I'm not asking that. But they'll die if they don't get help, and you *can* help them. If you don't, does that make you any better than McBane?"

I wait for my words to sink in. "Jesus," she sighs, a phrase she's picked up from me. "Dae..." she starts, but the argument dries up in her throat and she sighs again. She looks at the wall, smeared with blood. She looks at the steps, soaked with gore. She looks at me, past me at Coby, and then she turns away. "Maeve?" she calls out as she heads back up the stairs.

The younger girl appears in the doorway of the attic, a dark shape against the light. "Come here, honey. Take my hand—cover your eyes, like that. We've got work to do."

* * * *

What little medical supplies we have are in the closet under the stairs, tucked away in a wicker basket beneath the small table beside my cot. As I dig them out, I remember all the times I lay on that mattress, bleeding and broken, holding on because I couldn't let Delia go on alone. I had to be strong for her. I never let her see me cry, no matter how bad the wounds were. I always turned my face into the pillow when she had to set a bone or when the needle entered my flesh. Most of the time I wasn't even conscious until after she finished sewing me back together again.

But that's over now. McBane is gone, *gone*, I'm still not quite comprehending that fact. With Delia's kit in my hands, I stand and look around the small room—at the clean sheets that cover the bloodstains, the cot that now holds memories of Coby. I can almost see him lying beneath that afghan, naked and warm and cuddling up to me. This is *his* room now, there's no more hate in here, no more pain. This is where he belongs, in here, with me.

With me.

I take the basket out into the kitchen, where Delia's set up a makeshift infirmary along the counter by the sink. Maeve stands in front of the stove, boiling rags in one pot of water and stirring another pot of soup, which she dishes out to whoever holds up a bowl.

Most of the blood that covered the place is gone. Pink suds congeal in corners where mops didn't quite reach and there are a few streaks left on the walls, but it's beginning to look like *our* kitchen again. Except for the missing cabinet doors and the stack of broken dishes in the sink, I can almost believe tonight never happened.

But it *did* happen. That's painfully clear when two regulators push through the swinging door with another body carried between them. I step out of their way and tell myself I'm not going to look but I can't help it, I have to see who it is this time, I have to know...

McBane's eyes stare up at me blindly as the regulators shuffle by. His hands are still curled into fists, his mouth still snarled in hate, his eyes bloodshot and glassy, like frozen puddles of mud. The butcher knife sticks up from his chest like a stake, driven

deep into his heart. *I did that,* I think in dazed amazement as I back away from the corpse.

Behind me Delia touches my shoulder, whispers, "Oh Dae." Then she presses her hand to her mouth and turns away.

"Here." I hand her the basket full of bandages and gauze, then hurry back to the closet, edging around the men who carry McBane. I don't have to see him anymore, I don't have to take his anger and hatred and pain. I feel as if I should *do* something—spit on him, maybe, or punch him just because I can. Now I *can*.

But I don't. I don't feel anything at all, really, not hate or joy or anger. Just relief —not that it's over, because after Coby left that first night I knew it was *already* over. I knew McBane wasn't going to come back to me, not as long as Coby was around. No, this is more of a release, a letting go, a freeness that I never knew could exist. It has nothing to do with the dead body those two men carry through the back door to dump into the alley with the rest of the garbage. McBane hasn't set me free.

I did that. Coby helped me free myself.

He sits at my desk, one arm folded around his waist and the other propping up his head, like it's too heavy to stay on its own. When I come close enough, he reaches out for me, his fingers brushing against mine. "How are you holding up?" he asks softly.

I catch his hand and flash him a quick smile in reply. Then I notice the dried blood on his knuckles and fall to one knee beside him. "How are *you* doing?"

His shirt is stained black in spots but I don't know if that's his blood or McBane's. The material's still damp and when I touch it, he flinches as if afraid I might hurt him. "Coby, has Delia looked at you yet?"

When he shakes his head, a dull anger rises in me. I know she doesn't like him, but she knows what he means to me, she can't just ignore him. Rising to my feet, I frown and call out, worried, "Delia?"

Coby squeezes my hand to quiet me. "I'm no worse than any of the others." When Delia looks up from her basket, he shakes his head, *no.* "Tarn needs her first, Dae.

She'll get to me soon enough."

"I don't care about Tarn." Instantly I regret the words.

Coby's eyes harden and his voice takes on a sharp edge. "He saved your life," he mutters. "If you're that ungrateful—"

"I'm not." I run my fingers over the top of his head and the bristles of his hair tickle my palm. "God, Coby, I'm just saying you're what matters to me, that's all. You're the one I care about here."

He lets me pull him close, rests his cheek against the flat of my stomach, sighs when my fingers work their way down the back of his neck to rub at the tension coiled there. "You better let her fix you up." I keep my voice low so none of the others will overhear. "You promised me tonight, remember?"

He laughs at that, a gorgeous sound that spills through the room like refracted sunlight. A couple regulators by the stove look at us over the steaming bowls of soup they hold, and Maeve glances over her shoulder, catches my eye, turns away. By the sink, Delia's spreading thread and gauze out along the counter; she stops, looks back at me, at Coby, her lips already pulling into that all-too-familiar bow.

Before she says anything she turns away, busies herself with the supplies, nothing but a shake of her head to show her disapproval. Coby's hand comes up around my hip, curves over the swell of my buttocks, then slips between my legs to rub at hidden flesh, his fingers tender and promising. "Coby," I warn, but I'd be lying if I said I don't want him touching me there.

Suddenly the others are all studiously looking elsewhere—the regulators into their soup, Maeve at the wall, Delia at the counter, anywhere but at us and his hand cupping my ass. Gently I pull away from his touch. "Not right *here*."

He laughs again. "Later, then." He winks, then lets me go.

Behind me I hear the screen door slam shut. I turn as the regulators come back inside, McBane's body gone. *Gone*. The sound of the back door locking shut has all the finality of a coffin lid nailed into place. Coby's hand finds mine, his fingers closing over my own. *Gone*.

All that remains of him are the scars on my body, the bloodstains on my cot. But Coby's already kissed the scars away, hasn't he? He's smoothed my skin out beneath his hands, made me new again with his gentle touch. I've never wanted anyone the way I want him—I want to take him to *my* mattress, the one on the floor upstairs that's never known a body other than my own, the one that's still firm like his hands.

But there's Delia to think about, and Maeve. They share that attic space, too. I don't want an audience when I lie with him at night. And I don't want to send them downstairs just because I want to offer myself to him. I like the way we are when we're alone, his hands on my naked body, the golden dusk of his skin in the lamplight.

He's taken McBane's strip, his men, me. That closet beneath the stairs, that's his now, too. It's *ours*.

The mattress is small and worn. It doesn't take much for me to drag it out from where it's crammed between the stairs. The cot itself is Army issue, narrow with metal legs that have already withstood so much. I light the lamp and hold it above the cot as I inspect it, looking for stains or tears or any reminder of McBane being here. Nothing—it's all on the mattress, my blood, his cum, alcohol and spittle and tobacco; all those stains blend together into a pattern of pain and torture I don't care to remember. Lying the mattress out on the kitchen floor, I strip the sheets off, toss them aside. Then I push the mattress over to the sink, where Delia's already begun to stitch up the first of the wounded, a man with a flap of skin pulled loose above his eye.

Other men line up behind her, sipping at Maeve's soup or coughing into their hands, their gazes sliding over my sister and her ward like oil over water. "You can use this."

A half dozen men vie for a position on the battered mattress. They sink gratefully to the soiled surface, eager for any small amount of comfort they might find.

Delia gives me a tight smile that doesn't reach her eyes. Stepping up behind her, I watch her stitch the regulator together, the black thread angry against bruised skin. "Have you looked at Tarn yet?" I ask. Tarn first, then Coby.

Blowing the hair out of her eyes, she sighs. "Which one is he?"

I gather her hair together carefully, hold it back behind her as she works. "You can't miss him." That makes her grin. "Yeah, that one."

"Not yet," she says. A short strip of gauze rests on the counter beside her. Picking it up, I unravel it and tie her hair back to keep it out of her face. She smiles up at me. "Thanks."

"Tarn's next."

She nods, curt, and turns back to the other man's wound. When she's finished sewing him up, I take her elbow and lead her to the swinging door. One or two of the regulators waiting start to protest, but I tell them, "She'll be back, boys. Just need to check on—"

"We was next." A bloodied regulator blocks our path, his arms stretched out at his sides to bar the door.

I glance over at Coby, already on his feet and heading our way. "Let them through, Jace."

The regulator's eyes go wide, large white circles in his dirty face, and he steps away from the door before Coby can tell him again. "Sorry," he mumbles as we pass. "Sorry."

"I'm coming right back," Delia promises him.

I hold onto her, not daring to let go until the door's swinging shut behind us. "They *were* next in line," she murmurs.

I kick broken glass out of our way. "Tarn's next." That's what Coby said—end of discussion. Then, as an afterthought, I add, "He asked about you, you know."

"Who?" Delia stifles a girlish giggle that surprises me. "Tarn? When?"

"When I first came down."

The main room has been cleaned up some. No bodies litter the floor, at any rate, though a chill breeze whistles through the shattered windows and rattles the blinds. Tarn still sits in one of the booths, heavy boots kicked up onto the table, huge hands pressed to his face. His breath is shallow and unsteady, like the bursts of night air that curl around my legs.

Delia looks at him, hunched into himself like a troll in a fairy tale, waiting for unsuspecting travelers to cross his path. Then she looks at me, rolling her eyes in that way she has that says, *you're joking*. "Dae, I don't really think—"

Tarn rouses from his stupor, stares at us with one heavy lidded eye. "You," he sighs.

Delia takes a step back, her foot crunching over my toes.

With a rumbling cough, Tarn tries again. "You okay?"

I give Delia a slight push in his direction and she nods.

"Fine," she tells him, picking the needle out from a spool of thread clenched in her fist. She climbs into the booth to sit down on the table beside his legs. She looks almost elfin next to his bulk. "How about you?" Gingerly she touches his face. "You okay?"

"Been better." He drops his hands to his lap where they lie like fallen birds, broken and unable to fly. With trepidatious fingers Delia touches his cheek, presses the skin together, frowns at the dark blood that seeps from the wound.

Seeing that frown, Tarn asks, "Is it bad?"

Delia hands the spool of thread back to me. "Dae, can you do the needle for me?" She holds one hand on Tarn's face to keep the wound shut. "It's not bad at all."

I fumble to get the thread through the tiny eye of the needle. I don't think Tarn believes her. As I tie the ends of the thread into a thick knot, he says, "I lost a lot of blood."

Delia gives him one of the strained smiles she's so good at. Taking the needle from me, she tells him, "This ain't nothing for a big guy like you."

She leans close, closer, until I'm sure she's going to fall into him. When she starts to stitch his cheek, he hisses in pain, one hand straying to his face as if to swat at an annoying fly. Halfway to his cheek he lets it drop again, this time coming to rest on the booth by Delia's feet.

I don't like that, the way he drapes his arm around her ankles so nonchalantly, and I'm about to say something when Delia shifts a little closer, crossing her feet so his

hand falls away. *Good girl. That's my sister.* "Hold still," she murmurs.

Tarn winces as she sews, his hand closing into an involuntary fist by her feet. I don't like this, not at *all* – how close she is to him, how his hand flexes open and shut right next to her leg, how her hands hover just inches above his cavernous mouth. She's practically in his lap, leaning closer with each stitch she puts in his skin as he tries to pull away from her. Maybe I should do this one. "Delia —"

I hear the faint squeal of hinges behind me and turn to find Coby leaning against the door frame, arms crossed, watching us, watching *Tarn*, and that puts me at ease. He'll step in. I won't have to, thank *God*, because that is one big-ass regulator and I don't relish the thought of trying to go against him if he turns on Delia. Even in his present state, there's no doubt in my mind that he can best me.

I kick at the glass on the floor and try to curb the ire rising in me when Tarn's hand brushes along Delia's leg.

"Don't," she warns, but I'm not sure if she means his hand or the way he pulls back from the needle.

"Sorry." His voice is gruff around the unfamiliar word. I have a feeling he's not one to apologize much.

Delia shifts uncomfortably, her knee angled against his chest as she works on his cheek. "It's okay," she mumbles, but I can see the tension in her shoulders and I know she wants this over with as much as I do.

"I mean about the other night." Tarn sucks in his breath as her needle pulls a little too hard, and Delia hushes him. "Sorry for that. Didn't want to scare you."

He twists away from her but she grabs a fist full of his thick beard and holds him steady. "I just thought you was pretty. I wasn't gonna hurt you or nothing."

I don't think Delia's going to respond. But when she does, her voice is softer than I've ever heard it before, and there's something in her words that makes me think of my dream of the hammock. "Yeah, well," she says, wiping gently at the blood that's begun to cake on Tarn's cheek. "You gotta warn a girl next time you're just being friendly."

When his hand brushes her leg again, she's not so quick to pull away this time.

"You can go on, Dae," she tells me, watching her fingers as she puts tiny stitches into his skin. "I'm fine here." When I don't move, she stops and turns to me. "Dae? You can go."

"You sure?"

Tarn looks at me over her hands.

"I'm fine," she says again. She waits until I head for Coby and the door he holds open before she turns back to Tarn, and when Coby's arm comes up around my waist, leading me into the kitchen, I hear her ask quietly, "You really think I'm pretty?"

I don't catch Tarn's reply, but it makes her giggle. *If only he told her that from the start,* I think, letting the door swing shut behind me. *How hard would that have been?*

* * * *

My mattress upstairs is heavier than the other one. The springs are still coiled, the cover unstained, the wood frame nailed into place and unbroken. It's the same size as the other but thicker, more awkward, and it doesn't help that the stairwell is dark and the steps still slick as I maneuver it out of the attic and down the stairs. It rests on my back, the frame digging into the sensitive skin between my shoulder blades, and each time I take another step down, it thuds into me, reverberating through my bones.

Step, *thud*. Step, *thud*. Step, *thud*, and that's as far as I get before Coby's at the foot of the stairs, hands on his hips, his silver eyes like twin coins in his face as he looks up at me. "What are you doing?"

"We need a place to sleep." Step, *thud*. I hope he realizes what this means to me —no one's slept on this mattress but me, *no* one, not even Delia. I always crawled into her bed to hold her close until she cried herself to sleep. This mattress is the only thing I have that's untouched by hands other than mine. Step, *thud*.

Somehow Coby seems to sense that. He doesn't call anyone else over to help, like I thought he would. That would have been awkward. I'd have to tell him no, I don't want anyone's hands on my bed, no one but his and how could I put that into words so

these regulators would understand? They'd just grab the mattress and lug it downstairs before I got a chance to speak.

But he doesn't do anything until I'm just a few steps away from him and the mattress starts to wobble, threatening to fall through where the banister used to be. Then he reaches up, holds the mattress steady, and helps me ease it the rest of the way down the stairs. "Had to pick the heaviest one," he jokes, shouldering half the weight.

As the mattress settles across his back he winces, and I frown at the blood staining his shirt. Fuck his men, Delia's taking a look at him next. "Coby, maybe you shouldn't—"

"I'm fine."

But I see the pain shining brightly in his eyes and I don't believe him.

Still, I let him help me with the mattress, and together we manage to get it into the tiny closet beneath the stairs. It overhangs the edge of the cot by a good three inches and bunches a little bit at one end where it crams up against the wall, but when I sit down, that seems to straighten it out. We can make this work, I think, smiling up at him.

The words dry up in my throat when I notice how ashen his face is, despite the warm glow from the lamp by the cot. "Coby?"

I take one of his hands in both of mine. His fingers are cold, his eyes unusually dark, unreadable. He touches his side where blood clots on his shirt, leans forward a little, shakes his head like he's trying to clear it and can't—

"Coby?" Alarm fills my voice and the next thing I know, he's fallen to his knees, suddenly in my arms, his head pressed into my lap and his hand gripping mine hard enough to cut off the circulation to my fingers. "Jesus, Coby, please don't..." I'm not willing to give my fears weight with words.

As carefully as I can, I pull the shirt off over his head, and for the first time I see his wounds, ragged lines carved into his stomach and chest, thick and dark with blood. "Coby," I sob, helping him to his feet.

He should've let Delia look him over, he should've told me he was hurt. He lets me lie him back on the mattress, stuff the pillows beneath his head, and I hold his hands

out away from his body so I can get a good look at the wounds.

They're deep, no doubt about that, but they've begun to close up on their own.

No fresh blood flows when I prod gently at his bruised flesh. "You should've told me,"

I murmur, wiping the sweat from his brow with a clean part of his shirt.

"I'll be fine," he whispers, his eyes slipping closed. "Just overdid it, is all. I just need some rest."

He needs someone to look after him. He needs me.

In the kitchen, I get a bowl from beneath the sink, stainless steel and in one piece unlike the rest of our dishes. I fill it with water, as hot as I can stand, and then use the tongs Maeve's set out on the counter to lift one of the sanitized rags from the pot of water boiling on the stove. A few bandages, a handful of gauze, and then I sit on the edge of the cot to wipe at the blood that's dried on Coby's skin, careful not to reopen the wounds. He bites his lower lip and watches me with hooded eyes as I clean him up, my hands tender and loving on his body.

"You're mostly healed." I bandage the uneven gashes in his skin. "This'll scar, though."

"That's okay."

I help him sit up. I don't like that unhealthy sheen in his eyes, but his skin is clean now and his wounds covered, he looks like he's going to be alright. *Please, let him be alright*.

"Arms up," I command.

He obeys, holding his arms up, his knuckles tapping against the underside of the riser right above us. I wrap the gauze around his waist. Every time I lean close, my arms going around him to pass the binding from one hand to the other behind his back, he kisses the tip of my nose or my cheek or my eyebrow, somewhere odd that sends a thrill through me like electric current.

The final wrap, I turn at the last minute and the kiss lands on my lips, his mouth pressing against mine with a sweetness I've hungered for all night, and I don't want to pull away. As his tongue slips into me, I tuck the edge of the gauze into the wrap to

hold it tight, then ease him back to the pillows, lean down over him, my hands caressing his neck, his arms, his face. When I stand up, he tries to hold onto me but I point at the open door. "We're putting on a show here."

He lets me go. I close the door and lock it, turn the lamp down low, then undress as quickly as I can. I hope I don't seem *too* eager, but it's hard to pretend I don't want him when he can see my need standing up from the hair at my crotch. As I help him out of his own pants, he takes me in his hand and kneads until I'm hard, his fingers so amazingly gentle. I toss his clothes to the floor, climb over him onto the bed, curl up into his arms like I did in my dream, only this isn't my da's hammock, it's my mattress, and this isn't a dream, it's real.

Real.

His hands on me, that's real.

His breath against my skin, his damp lips, his mercury eyes. All real, all mine.

Pulling the afghan up to cover our nakedness, I cuddle against him, mindful of the bandages along his side. "It doesn't *have* to be tonight."

My body begs to differ, but he needs his rest. I understand.

With a shaky laugh, Coby pulls me onto him, spreading my legs until I straddle his hips, then wraps his arms around my waist, holding me tight. "It can be tonight." He rubs his hands up my back until I lean down over him, and then he kisses my chest. His tongue licks the scar that encircles one nipple before tracing a path up to my collarbone. Nosing my necklace out of the way, he plants a kiss in the hollow of my throat and thrusts his hips up against me—I can feel his own desire coiled between my legs. "Just remember one thing."

"What's that?"

The words are lost in a gasp as his hands smooth along the small of my back. His lips find mine and he pulls me down to him.

"Be gentle."

J.M. Synder's prolific resume includes several short works for Aspen Mountain Press. These can be found in the following anthologies:

Creatures of the Night, Creatures of Delight - Devilish Good Time

Babes in Toyland - Boytoys

Cupid's Arrow - A Haunted Love

Stand alone stories include *Trin* and *Just What the Doctor Ordered*.

Here's an excerpt from *Just What the Doctor Ordered*:

But I shook my head. "You eat some," I said, and when he held out another forkful, I made him eat it instead. "Tell me about your mom. Why'd she call?"

The way Lee shrugged told me he didn't want to get into it at the moment. Even at thirty-four years old there were times like this where I could see the boy he once was shining through the man I loved, like white, virgin wood peeking out between cracks in a tree's hard trunk. "Just to talk," he said, stabbing at another piece of steak.

"About what?" I pressed.

He winced and I could almost hear his thoughts as if he spoke them out loud. *Curt, please, not now.* I braced myself for it, the sigh, the corner of his mouth pulled back to flatten his lips into an annoyed line. *I don't want to get into it,* he'd say, or maybe, *Can't we just enjoy this and talk about her later?*, or *You're going to ruin the mood.* If he said any of that, if he protested at all, I would've dropped it for the time being. I wanted him—my body was beginning to ache for his touch, my lips growing hungry for his, my hand stroking him gently now eager for so much more—and I didn't want to do anything to endanger my chances of a good time. I'd been flying high since the letter that afternoon and I wanted to crash into him tonight. If that meant not

saying another word, I would be mute until dawn.

But his brow cleared and when the sigh came, it was resigned, not angry or frustrated. "You've never met my mother," he started. I shook my head. With a forced laugh, he tells me, "She isn't like yours."

"I should hope not," I joked.

My mother lived in Philadelphia and spent more than half of her social security check every month in Atlantic City. "I don't *gamble*, Curtis," she told me once. "I play the slots. There's a difference." But the staff at Harrah's knew her by name—that was the part that scared me. She was also perpetually sick. An incurable hypochondriac, if nothing else. She hated the fact that I was gay and used to continually try to match me up with unmarried or divorced daughters of the women she played bingo with at church…until I met Lee. I should have never told her he was a doctor. "I'm not feeling too well," was the way she liked to start conversations. I had learned long ago not to ask her how she was doing whenever she called. Lee's mother was already different from mine, as he wasn't still on the phone with her trying to hang up.

Lee's wry smile told me he was probably thinking the same thing. Taking another one of the shrimp, I popped it in my mouth and wanted to know, "What's her name?"

"Mai." The way he said it made it sound like *my*. "She lives in this house with a few other women her own age, all Chinese. None of them speak much English."

I laughed to picture it, a few old Asian women sitting around a table playing bridge or canasta. What's the word for *bingo* in Cantonese? "So what'd she want tonight?"

The look Lee gave me was painful. "She wants to see me," he said.

I could read behind his dark eyes, the set of his jaw, the hesitation in his voice when he spoke. For some reason he wasn't telling me, seeing his mother wasn't a *good* thing. "What's

wrong with that?" I asked gently.

With another sigh, he poked at the steak on the plate in his hand and didn't look at me when he said, "She wants to come here."

I sank a little lower into the hot tub, the water rippling around me in faint waves. Here, to our house, our home. *Here*... "We could arrange something, I guess. My mom came down once, remember? Last Labor Day weekend?"

Lee smiled weakly at that. How could he forget? For three days straight my mother pointed out different ailments to him. "Does my wrist look swollen to you?" and "My neck hurts right here—what do you think it can be?" and "You don't happen to have any samples of anything around here, do you, Doc? I think I'm coming down with something." When I reminded her that he was a pediatrician, she gave me a hateful look and said, "Children have all the same parts I do, Curtis."

Under my breath I muttered, "Yeah, but they have newer models than you." Three days of her and I had been more than ready to get back to class on Tuesday. With a worried glance at Lee, I pleaded, "Tell me yours ain't as bad as mine. Please."

~*~*~

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