<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Explicit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>F/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Fallout 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Robert Joseph MacCready/Female Sole Survivor, Robert Joseph MacCready/Sole Survivor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Robert Joseph MacCready, Codsworth (Fallout), Preston Garvey, John Hancock (Fallout), Daisy (Fallout 4), Clair Hutchins, Fahrenheit (Fallout), Nick Valentine, Dogmeat (Fallout), Piper Wright, Deacon (Fallout), Arthur Maxson, Paladin Danse (Fallout), Lucy MacCready, Duncan MacCready, Magnolia (Fallout), Female Sole Survivor, Sturges (Fallout), Mama Murphy (Fallout), Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Fluff, Alternate Universe - Soulmates, Romantic Soulmates, Familiars, Alternate Universe - Reincarnation, Fluff and Angst, Mutual Pining, Slow Burn-ish, Mac is kind of a huge pervert, Non-Bostonian SoSu, Eventual Smut, reluctant romance, Age Difference, Older Woman/Younger Man, Country Girl/City Boy, Mostly Canon Compliant, Comments keep the lights on in my heart Supernatural Elements, Psychic Bond, Telepathic Bond, Canon typical drug use, Companionable Snark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2019-09-13 Updated: 2019-12-27 Chapters: 20/? Words: 141134</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sassafras Roots**

by WastelandMama

**Summary**

Four lives, two hearts, one soul...and more banter than you can shake a stick at.

*I bet you’re the prettiest girl in Diamond City.*

*And I bet you’re the dumbest man in the Commonwealth.*

*So...what you’re saying is we’re both right?*
MacCready had just started to wake up, the lingering taste of whiskey almost making up for the splitting headache it had so generously bequeathed him during the night, when cold swept over him. Cold so deep it burned.

He instinctively curled up, pulling the ratty blanket Clair had begrudgingly loaned him - for five caps, of course - and shivered on the lumpy couch. VIP room or not, the Third Rail was always a little chilly, but this was ri-goddamn-diculous. His teeth were chattering and he was actually shocked when his bleary eyes opened and he couldn’t see his breath. Something must have gone wrong with the ancient air conditioning system.

If he’d been awake, or at least mostly awake, he’d have remembered that it was, in fact, October. Hancock had switched everything over to heat weeks ago as fall in the Commonwealth was just a glorified winter. The cold wasn’t coming from the room. It was coming from him.

His hands rubbed together, unable to generate heat even with the friction and he blew into them, his breath just as icy as the rest of his body. Or, at least, that’s what it felt like.

Pain suddenly bloomed in his chest and he winced. Pain, anguish, fear, sorrow. It left him gasping for air. He hadn’t felt his heart stutter like that since his wife had…

Oh, no.

Someone else was in his head, banging around, wordlessly screaming into the void. He scrunched his eyes up and tried to will it away, but it was useless. The bond, though new, was already permanent and fixed. Only a bullet could help him now, and it was a tempting thought.

The fear finally settled a bit, replaced by rage he could taste. His limbs were slowly unfreezing and he could finally move his toes.

Irritated, Mac sat up and scowled to himself, lighting a cigarette and pulling all the hot smoke he could into his lungs, trying to chase away the shivering that belonged to someone else.

He didn’t want another soulmate. That’s not how shit worked. He’d had one already, and she’d been…everything. Lucy’s death had done nothing to dim the love he felt for her, even as his heart constantly mourned that lost connection. If they hadn’t had a child, conceived with the love and endless devotion one only found with the other half of their soul, he’d have happily followed her.

But they had, and now Duncan was everything. His last link to Lucy. He’d obeyed her final wish, made in the chaos of that feral attack, and taken their boy far away from that cursed subway tunnel. ‘Save him.’ That’s all she’d said and it had codified into law immediately in Mac’s mind. When he’d gotten sick just a year later, that command had resonated anew.

Which was the whole damn reason he was hundreds of miles away from their son now. Desperately searching for a cure to the mysterious illness that had abruptly sapped the joy and vitality from the four year old.

He didn’t have time for this bullshit.

Whatever his new not-soulmate was up to, she was pissed. He had no idea why the connection had just now formed, and he wasn’t interested. Usually, you felt the pull the second your mate was born. People were linked their whole lives. He and Lucy had met when a caravan had dropped her
off at Lamplight, just eight years old, shaking and terrified after losing her parents to a super mutant raiding party. He could still remember when he finally, finally, got to lay eyes on her. How it felt like the whole world had lit up.

He’d been lost from the moment she looked at him and said his name, and he’d remained happily lost for ten years before cruel fate had torn them apart.

Maybe he was just imagining it. Some kind of strange waking nightmare brought on by too many shots of whiskey and too few doses of Calmex. This whole thing was screwy. Soulmates just didn't work like this.

Where was her damn familiar if she was his actual mate, hmm? There was no…wait.

Shit. It had been a while since he’d left the Rail.

Mac grabbed his pack and jogged through the bar, tossing a casual wave at Whitechapel Charlie as he went. If the Mister Handy noticed, he gave no sign. Ham certainly noticed though, and dropped a hand on his shoulder as he went past.

“Hey, careful, kid. Hancock wants you to keep your head down. Got Gunners camped outside the gate.”

He slid to a halt and frowned at the bouncer, “Sh-shoot. Seriously?”

“Yup. Just around the corner.”

A frustrated sigh rang through his head and he was right there with her. “Just returning Clair’s blanket.”

“Oh. Alright then. Just stay inside the walls.”

“Right.”

Mac headed on out and crossed the street to the Rexford Hotel. Normally, he’d tell whoever tried to order him around to get fucked, but Hancock had stuck his neck out for him with the Gunners, and it was his town, so he was trying hard to play the part of good boy. It was difficult though. His wife had once found an old psychology journal and told him he acted like he had something called ‘ODD’. Oppositional defiance disorder. Never could tell if she’d been joking or not on that one.

He’d been running shit since he was seven years old. No mungo was going to tell him what the fuck to do. Not then, and certainly not now that he’d joined their ranks. Looking back on it, he should have known the Gunners wouldn’t be a good fit, what with the sticks up their asses and their rigid adherence to rules and order and shit.

Clair took back the blanket with a sniff, disdainful as ever. “It smells like shit now. I ought to charge you extra.”

“Uh-huh.” He slapped ten caps on the counter. “Need a room.”

She scoffed at him and slid a key over, “Just gonna sleep the whole day away, huh? Lazy mercs. You’re all the same.”

He tipped his hat to her as sarcastically as possible and headed upstairs, unlocking the door and tossing his shit inside. Until he got a handle on this new, foreign entity in his head, he was going to be distracted, and distracted assholes inevitably got robbed...or worse.
Mac dug a Nuka from his pack and headed back out of the hotel, settling on one of the benches just under Hancock’s balcony. Lucy’s familiar had been a sweet little molerat named Candy. Truth be told, he’d almost shot the damn thing before he realized it was from her...or the universe had sent it on her behalf? He wasn’t sure about that.

It had gotten on famously with the wiry mongrel she’d shown up in Lamplight with. A scruffy, one eyed pup. Tracker. Once the familiars had been together, the bond between him and Lucy had been amplified by a ridiculous amount, almost entirely eliminating the need for talking at all. He could see through her eyes, feel anything she touched. It never really faded, just sort of became background noise. He barely even noticed it after the novelty wore off. Then puberty struck and...well...a link like that came in very, very handy for a pair of fumbling teenagers.

Honestly, he was shocked it had taken as long as it did to conceive Duncan with how much they’d -

*I need help.*

Mac scowled. His plan had been to sit here and wait and see what showed up. *If* anything showed up. She’d already figured out how to talk through their link though. Fast learner. He ignored the voice, took a long swig off his Nuka and kept his eyes out for anything. Dog, cat, molerat, bird, whatever.

She’d better not be a fucking bird person. There was silly made-up shit about how your familiar somehow matched your personality. Dog types were loyal, cat types were stuck up little priss pots. That kind of thing. Molerat people were supposed to be tenacious but gentle. An evolution from the pre-war mouse types. Certainly Lucy had fit that. From what he’d seen, bird people seemed to be flighty, anxious idiots who never stopped talking. That was the last thing he --

*I know you’re there. I can feel you. Please.*

He grit his teeth and fought against the instinctual pull to help her. Her voice was soft and sad, full of pain, with an odd accent he couldn’t place. It didn’t sound *that* young, so maybe she’d recently lost a mate, too? His head tilted a bit as he considered it. It would make sense, maybe, for the universe to match up two people who’d already suffered through the same kind of pain.

*Do you know anything about guns?*

Shit. Maybe she *was* young, then. *What’s the problem?*

*I figured out how to load it and everything, but now the slide-y thing won’t go back and I think I broke it.*

He frowned. The slide-y thing? *What kind of gun is it?*

*Well, let me just check the label on it, oh wait! It doesn’t have one! Exasperated laughter flooded their link. How the hell am I supposed to know?*

A label? Mac wanted to throw his hands up in the air. How the hell...she couldn’t even identify guns? Seriously? *What does it look like?*

*It’s...metal. Fits in my hand.*

Mac rubbed his face with his hand and muttered to himself. “They’re all metal.” *Okay, are you out of ammo?*
I think so.

It’s probably a 10mm. You need to reload.

Okay.

There was a long stretch of silence and he sighed, Do you know how to do that?

No.

Maybe she was some pampered Diamond City idiot who’d…what, wandered out into the ruins? Or somebody from a vault, maybe? Okay…do you have another magazine?

A what?

The thing that holds the bullets.

Oh! Oh, yes. I have that.

Okay, first you need to disengage the magazine catch. It’s like a little button on the side. He waited what seemed like forever and was about to scream with frustration when she finally answered him.

It popped out!

Mac chuckled despite himself. The last person who’d been this excited to learn how to handle a gun had been his son. Good. Now slide the new magazine into the hole. You’ll have to push hard.

Okay…got it. The slide-y part is still messed up.

He rolled his eyes, It’s just called a slide.

Oh.

Just pull it back a little and let go. It should snap back into position. Watch your hand or it’ll pinch you.

Another minute ticked by. I got it!

Great. He frowned down at his bottle. Hey, listen…I know how this usually works, but…I’m just not interested, alright? I’ve got a lot going on and --

Same. I feel exactly the same.

There was an icy sort of sorrow under her words and he nodded to himself. Definitely a widow. Alright…well…have a nice life, I guess.

You, too.

He felt her move away from their connection, like she was holding it out at arm’s length. Probably all they could really do, given the circumstances. He responded in kind, pushing firmly until her existence was only something he was barely aware of. Like something caught at the very edge of his peripherals.

A couple of hours later and he gave up waiting for her familiar to show up. Maybe she didn't have one anymore. Maybe it had died already. Lucy’s Candy had passed peacefully in his sleep, curled up on a rug by the hearth, entirely too old for any normal molerat, shortly after Duncan had been
born. Tracker had lasted until the feral attack, going out in a blaze of glory tearing the neck out of one of those monsters while it’s friends swarmed all over him.

The choice had been Duncan or the dog, which meant it hadn’t really been a choice at all. Mac still felt terrible guilt every time he thought about it.

He grabbed a few provisions for the night from Daisy, avoiding saying much of anything while those too sharp eyes studied his face, and headed back for his room. It was kind of a waste, he guessed, but it had been a few months since he’d slept on an actual mattress. Surely the expense could be justified.

The next morning, the voice woke him before dawn and he grumbled at how his heart sped up hearing her.

“I’m so glad you’re a dog person. Dog people are the best people, don’t you think?”

His eyes snapped open and he abruptly sat up, My familiar died two years ago.

Well, that’s funny because I found him just now. There was a heavy pause. You really shouldn’t drink so much, you know. It’s bad for you.

Shit. So the link was already amplified on her side. Fantastic.

Everything’s bad for you.

That’s true.

Did you need something? I thought we agreed neither of us is interested in this bullshit.

No...I just...I don’t really have anyone else to talk to, and you’re there whether I want you to be or not, so...

He shook his head, No. I’m not interested in being friends, either. It felt harsh, and his gut twisted when he said it, but it was true. No one could ever replace Lucy. Universe be damned.

Hurt leaked through from her side, quickly replaced by that icy sorrow from earlier. Fine. Sorry I bothered you.

Mac felt her go. It kinda felt like she’d shoved him as hard as she could as she went, and his head actually moved to the side a bit, like she’d physically done it. Crap in a hat. His eyes fell on the clock next to the bed and he bit back a curse. Five in the fucking morning. What kind of asshole woke up that goddamn early?

Definitely some kinda bird person.

He all but fell out of bed, still slightly sloshed from the night before, and headed out, making a beeline for the State House. It was crazy early, but Hancock never fell asleep before breakfast, so he knew he’d still be up and at it. Whoever ‘it’ was.

The ghoul mayor jumped a bit when Mac slammed the door open, a smile of welcome quickly replacing the irritated scowl when he realized who had darkened his doorstep.

“MacCready! What brings you up my way, brother?”

“I need whatever you’ve got that can knock me out. Something strong.”
Hancock’s eyes got soft, “Nightmares again?”

He couldn’t meet his gaze, “Something like that.”

“Alright.” He moved over to his desk and dug around through the drawers.

Mac watched him search through the chaos and tried to ignore the guilt he felt. It was bad enough that he was having to fight against his body’s response to feeling his mate’s existence and knowing she was out there somewhere, hopelessly incompetent and alone. It was a whole other to have to lie to one of his best friends, a hardline romantic who he knew would give his eyeteeth for a bond with someone. Anyone.

Most people nowadays didn’t have a soulmate. Or if they did, they died before meeting them. Life was harsh that way. Hancock had often lamented, at great length, how much he longed for a connection with someone that went down to the bone the way a soulmate link did. Daisy had had that with her husband before he died, but she was pre-war. Clair and her husband had reportedly been soulmates, but he’d also died far before his time. Some kind of fast moving cancer if he remembered correctly.

For something that was probably once geared towards helping weak, helpless humans survive, soulmates had become something of a tragic liability in the wasteland. Even if you did have one, and managed to find them before death did, that was still no guarantee at lifelong happiness. Your chances were good that the person on the other end of the psychic bond was a chemed out raider or someone equally insufferable, like a Brotherhood jagoff.

Setting aside what he and Lucy had shared, the entire concept seemed like a huge waste of time to him.

Hancock finally held up a syringe and grinned triumphantly. “Ah ha! Just the ticket, kid.”

Mac took it and squinted at the needle. “Is it clean?”

He scoffed, “Course it is!”

“Alright.” He took it and reached into his pockets, “How much?”

He blinked at him, “You ain’t even gonna ask what it is?”

“Nah, man, I trust you. How much?”

A look of inexplicable affection came over his face, “This one’s on the house.”

“What? Seriously?”

“Yeah...you tell me if it works though, alright? It’s something new I had Fred come up with.”

“Oh, okay, so I’m your lab rat now?”

He chuckled, “Or you could always pay the fifty caps.”

Mac’s eyes went wide, “Fifty...sh-shoot. What the heck’s in it?”

“Bit of this, bit of that. Don’t worry about it.”

“Alright. If you say so.” He quickly pocketed the chem, “I’ll see you around, man.”
“Sweet dreams, brother.”

Back in his room, Mac got as comfortable as he could before sliding the needle home and pushing down on the plunger. A wave of warmth flooded through his system and he closed his eyes, smiling at the tingling sensation before sleep swept him away.

This shit was the real deal. The dreams it gave him were warm and gentle. Visions of Lucy in pristine dresses and time spent together with their son in glorious sunshine on beautiful, perfect green grass in the dappled shade of a tree by a lake. Impossible dreams, really, but welcome. A part of him fretted a little over the addictive properties of a drug like this, but it was quickly quieted by the feel of Lucy’s hand in his, the sight of Duncan curled up between them.

He smiled at her, “I miss you.”

She smiled back, “I miss you, too.”

“No, it’s not.” Her face changed suddenly, a panicked sort of look replacing her naturally sweet expression. “Oh, God.”

Mac held tighter to her hand, “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God.”

His eyes widened. This was just like when they’d been in that tunnel. Her sharp eyes, always so much better at seeing through darkness than his, had seen the ferals before he had. She’d screamed at him to take the baby and run before he’d even been able to get his rifle up. Mac squeezed his eyes shut and tried to fight slipping back into that nightmare, shaking his head even as he instinctively curled up around his wife and son.

Oh, God!

That other voice, different and unwelcome in this soft place, shattered the dream and Mac sat back up, sweat pouring off him. Goddammit. He might have known.

The fuck is your problem now? How the hell had he ended up with such a difficult mate? How? Why?

I can’t...I can’t, oh, God. Help me. Please help me.

He tilted his head. She didn’t seem to realize she’d reached out at all. There was panic and terror in her voice again. Worse than before. His heart kicked up in speed, matching hers pounding from miles away. He wanted to ignore it, leave her to whatever her ultimate fate was, but he couldn’t. Lucy had always seen him as the best version of himself, and with her memory so fresh in his mind, he couldn’t let her down. Not again.

Hey! Calm down. What’s wrong?

It’s a...a dinosaur! Oh, God! I’m going to die. I’m going to die right here. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.

He didn’t even know who she was apologizing to. “A dinosaur?” His mind filled with images from his time spent viewing Lamplight educational holos. Long necks and big feet, and his personal favorite, the T-Rex. His eyes widened. Shit.
Does it have horns?

She seemed confused to hear from him, but clung tightly to their link like he could actually save her. He almost swore he could feel her hands clutching at his arms. Yes. Yes, it’s got horns.

Fuck. That’s a deathclaw! Run away!

Her wailing filled his head, I can’t! I can’t! I’m in power armor and the leg busted when it threw me and something’s wrong with the release. I’m trapped!

The merc in him said this was the perfect opportunity to lose this extra baggage. He could pull away and leave her to die and that would be that. Lucy’s ghost said otherwise though.

Do you have a weapon?

Yes! It’s a...I don’t know. Sturges called it a minigun?

An inexplicable feeling of pride filled him. Holy shit. She’d gone from not knowing how to reload a 10mm to operating power armor and wielding a minigun in a single day. Maybe the universe knew what it was doing after all.

Aim for the belly! Don’t stop firing for anything!

Okay!

He held his breath as silence filled his head. The link wasn’t strong enough on his side to see her or feel what had happened. She was still alive though. That weird, quiet static of an active bond was still there. Minutes ticked by and he felt like he was drowning, like he couldn’t breathe. Everything in him said to run to her, but he didn’t even know where the hell she was, and even if he did, she was probably so far away that she’d be dead before he actually got there.

Relief finally flowed from her side and she lightly brushed against him. It felt a lot like a kiss on the cheek and he involuntarily flinched away from her.

She pulled back a little. Thank you.

Yeah. Glad you’re alright. He really was and wasn’t that a pain in the ass?

Dogmeat’s okay, too.

Dogmeat?

Your familiar. I met a woman who knows him. She told me his name was Dogmeat.

Oh. He scowled. What a crappy name.

I won’t bother you again. I promise.

He sighed in the empty room. Nah, it’s...I mean, we’re stuck with this. You were right. It’s fine.

Fondness poured over him and he knew she was smiling. Wherever she was. Alright...don’t be a stranger.

Mac chuckled, Yeah.

Back in Concord, Charlotte waited for the man to distance himself from their link before pushing it
away on her end. Dogmeat came trotting over to her and she smiled down at him.

“Well...y’all are both stubborn idiots, but pretty handy in a fight. I’ll give you that.” Her hand pushed at the suit’s release, but nothing happened and she sighed. “Still busted. Great.” Walking wasn’t impossible with the damaged leg, of course, but she hated feeling trapped in the damn suit. Maybe Sturges could fix it.

Anyway, she had to pee like crazy. That Radaway stuff was no joke. Codsworth had warned her it was a ‘potent diuretic’, but she hadn’t realized that potency lasted all damn day. She clumped along and headed back into the Museum. Preston and his friends were already down by the door, talking quietly among themselves and she waved a little.

“Hey.”

Preston grinned, “That was... a pretty amazing display. I’m just glad you're on our side.”

“The feeling’s entirely mutual, I’m sure.” She was just glad this one hadn’t tried to shoot her or anything. Men nowadays seemed to be extra special spicy with rage. Maybe it was a radiation thing. He held up a bag of caps and she immediately backed up, shaking her head. “Didn’t do it for the money, honey.”

He looked confused, “Oh...sorry. I'm used to everyone being in it only for themselves.”

What a wonderful world. “It’s alright.”

“You know, you remind me of my friends. The other Minutemen, the ones who gave their lives for something bigger than themselves...I didn’t know there were other people like that in the wastes.”

Jesus tap-dancing Christ on a cracker. No wonder the whole planet seemed like one giant trash heap. Charlotte frowned a little. This completely went against everything she’d ever been taught in history. “People are supposed to help other people. It’s just how we’re wired.”

Preston laughed, “Well, if that’s true, it’s the first I’m hearing of it.”

She shook her head at that, “So...what’s next for y’all?”

He motioned to the frail old woman with them. The one who’d known Dogmeat. “For the longest time, Mama Murphy's had a vision of a place called ‘Sanctuary.’ Some old neighborhood... but one we can make new again. Why don't you come with us? I could really use your help.”

She glanced at the others. The angry, exhausted woman and the man with her who’s eyes looked as hollow as her own. The tiny old woman and the mechanic...none of them but Preston were armed, and even though she knew the way back to Sanctuary Hills was already clear, she was worried they wouldn't make it on their own. Shaun needed her, too, of course, but she had no idea of which way to run there and these people were already right in front of her.

Anyway, this way she could introduce them to Codsworth herself.

“Yes...maybe once we get there, Sturges can help me get out of this thing.”

He stood up and came over to inspect her suit, “There’s a latch on --”

“Yeah, I figured that out, darlin’. It just won’t open.”

“Huh.” His hands ran over the back and found a large dent right along a seam. “Ah...yeah. I’ll have
to manually override it. Can’t do it without tools though.”

The Rosa’s across the street had been big on power tools. Surely they still had something over there. “Pretty sure there’s tools back home.”

Preston blinked, “Home?”

“Yeah, uh...I lived in Sanctuary a...a long time ago.”

Mama Murphy slowly stood, “Ah, but the distant past ain’t so distant for you. I saw you leave that ice box. This whole world is like some bad dream you can't wake up from, isn't it?”

Charlotte fought the urge to cry and nodded. “Yes, ma’am, it is.”

“You’ll be alright, kid. You're gonna find him and it’ll be alright.”

“Find him? You mean Shaun?”

She shrugged, “Sure, him, too.”

A weight lifted from her. “Thanks.” Trusting some random old lady like this would probably seem crazy to most people, but her grandmother had been a seer. She’d grown up with stories of disasters averted and lives saved by the old woman everyone, family or not, had simply called Granny. There are more things on heaven and earth and all that. Mama Murphy had known Dogmeat was her new mate’s familiar. Had known his name, even. Clearly she was a seer of some kind, too.

It took a little over an hour for them all to reach Sanctuary and get settled in. Codsworth was gracious to a fault after he realized it was his mistress in the power armor, and helped Sturges get the stubborn suit to open and let her go. Charlotte stumbled backward out of it and Preston just managed to catch her before her butt hit the pavement.

“You alright?”

Absolutely not. “Yeah...yeah, I’m okay, honey. Thanks.”

Sturges tapped his wrench on the side, “I’ll get this spiffed back up for you.”

“Don’t bother. I’m never wearing it again. Ever.”

“Aw, it’s not the suit’s fault you got tossed around by a deathclaw.”

He said it like the thing had feelings and she just managed not to roll her eyes, “Uh-huh.”

Codsworth hovered around her anxiously, “Mum, shall I prepare the guest room?”

What the hell? They hadn’t had a guest room since before Shaun was born. Maybe ‘a few dings to the old chronometer’ wasn’t the only damage he’d taken after two hundred years. “Sure, Codsworth. That’d be great.”

“At once, mum.”

He floated back into their old house and she sighed, “He didn’t use to be so weird.”

“Hey, as long as he’s not attacking anybody, I’d say he’s perfect.”

She chuckled at that, “Yeah, I guess it always could be worse...so, Preston, what’s the plan? Y’all
just gonna set up shop here?”

“For now...but, you know, what I said before? About you reminding me of the old Minutemen? Something tells me you’d like to see the world be a better place, too.”

The idea of trying to raise Shaun in all this mess and terror was horrifying. She shuddered a little and nodded, “I guess somebody’s gotta, right?”

“Yes! Yeah, exactly! So I was thinking...maybe we, that is, the two of us, could get the Minutemen going again? Really make a difference out there!”

She watched the way his eyes sparkled with a rare sort of blind faith and bit back a sigh. He looked just like Nate had before he’d gone marching off to war for the first time. Idealism practically haloed this guy. She couldn’t just abandon him. He was like a babe in the woods, clearly. “Sure, that sounds good.”

“Fantastic!”

Two hours later, exhausted in every imaginable way, Charlotte crawled onto her old couch and groaned as every muscle rioted in protest. What she wouldn’t give for one of those glorious baths Codsworth used to fix for her. With the oils and the candles and the soft music playing on the radio. She pulled her blanket tighter around her, grateful that the bot had agreed to take the night off patrolling to quietly float nearby and give her a source of warmth.

She’d grown up in the foothills of Eastern Kentucky, where the summers were hot and humid and the winters wet and freezing. Cold was no stranger, but since waking up in that awful pod, she hadn’t been able to shake feeling chilled.

Charlotte scowled in the darkness and tried to focus on anything else. Dogmeat slunk in through the broken kitchen door and hopped up on the end of the couch, curling up around her icy feet and she was grateful for his furry warmth.

“Oh! No! Bad dog! Off the furniture!”

“It’s alright, Codsworth. I’m pretty sure the couch is beyond saving at this point.”

“But --”

“Goodnight, honey.”

He grumbled a bit, “Goodnight.”

She closed her eyes and tried to calm her breathing. The truth was, she really did like the dog and all, but he reminded her that she had somebody waiting out there for her. Sort of. Well...maybe ‘waiting’ was too strong a word. More like ‘hoping to avoid like the plague’ if she was reading him right.

Not that she disagreed. She was smart enough to know that Nate had probably been dead a while now, otherwise why bother refreezing them at all? But feeling a new connection seamlessly picking up where the old had left off was...unacceptable. Cruel. Almost hateful. She’d never heard of anyone having two soulmates in her whole life. Not even in fairy tales. It was ridiculous.

Still. The dog was nice, though. Nate had been a dog person, too. His Rufus was a big, goofy, lovable Saint Bernard who’d sadly passed away just after they’d moved into the house and was still buried out back under a burned out maple tree. She’d been a dog person herself. That’s how it
used to go. Dog people with dog people, cat people with cat people. God only knew how the world worked nowadays, and she didn’t care to ask.

She’d already had her great love, and she’d just lost him. She didn’t need or want another. No matter how warm and centered his voice made her feel and how parts of her already longed for his presence.


Unfortunately, with Dogmeat had come an amplified anchoring to the mystery man, whoever he was. She knew he was currently asleep and knew it was an unnatural sleep, so he had to have taken something.

Nate had been a teetotaler if ever there was one born. He’d even gotten irritated over the bourbon balls she made every Christmas and the way the bourbon-soaked pecans and warm chocolate had filled the house with their heady scent. To her, the simple candy smelled like Christmas, but to his more refined Californian sensibilities, it had just seemed like an excuse to get tipsy for the holidays.

Now she was attached to somebody she hadn’t felt sober once, who was now on God only knew what to sleep off what had to be the world’s worst hangover.

Funny how things worked out.

The way he so easily navigated their connection and his wary, reluctant acceptance told her a lot though. She’d figured this wasn’t his first rodeo, either. He’d had a partner of some sort and probably lost them, too. That had been confirmed when he’d told her his familiar had died.

Come to think of it, she’d never heard of someone getting more than one of those, either.

Hers had been an adorable blue-tick coonhound named Sassafras, or Sassy for short. She’d disappeared shortly before the bombs had dropped though. Probably ran off with the neighbor’s ridiculous golden retriever on some big doggy adventure. Tears pricked her eyes as she thought of what must have happened to her and she curled up a little tighter. She missed her, too. Losing her husband and her baby was bad enough, but to come to the surface and not see those big brown eyes had zinged right through her.

It had felt like being on the business end of a kick to the gut, actually. From a Clydesdale.

Oh, God. Had horses survived?

More pain and guilt built in her and she shook her head, trying to stop thinking so she could sleep when she felt a drowsy, annoyed nudge.

Could you pipe down over there? For a minute? Shit.

Crap. She hadn’t even realized she’d reached for him. Goddamn instincts. Well, excuse the hell outta me. It’s been a hard day, alright?

His annoyance faded a bit, You okay?

No. Not at all. You?

Haven’t been okay in years.
She almost laughed. He sounded so young but so world-weary. *What’s your name?*

There was a long pause, *RJ.*

*I’m Lottie.*

*Lottie? Like la-ti-da?*

Charlotte smiled, *Yeah, sure.*

Another thoughtful pause, *Where are you from, anyway? Your voice is...weird.*

She bristled a bit. Despite taking accent reduction classes once she’d moved to Boston, her inner voice had never lost it’s soft twang. Nate had always thought it was cute. *Maybe your voice is weird. Ever think of that, smartass?*

*No, cause it’s not.*

She huffed. *I’m from Kentucky. Berea, Kentucky.*

His laughter filled her head. *Kentucky’s not real, come on.*

*Of course it’s real!*

*Nah.*

*Why wouldn’t it be real?*

*It’s where that faker President Eden always said he was from, right? I was born in the Capitol Wasteland, you know. I’m in on that joke.*

*Who the hell was President Eden? What joke?*

*You know, the jokes everybody makes about Kentucky. Saying stuff like ‘he went to Kentucky’ just means he fucked off and disappeared somewhere. It’s like saying you’re from Neverland. Are you a fairy, Lottie? You got pixie dust and shit?*

*I am from Kentucky. My entire family is from Kentucky goin’ all the way back! I’m descended from both Daniel Boone and Simon Kenton, even!*

*Yeah, I’ve got no idea who those people are.*

*They’re...they were both scouts! Famous pioneer scouts!*

*Okay, if you say so.*

She could tell he was laughing at her and it irritated her more than she cared to admit. *Fine. Don’t believe me. You’re the one who looks like an ass here, not me. I know where I’m from.*

*Uh-huh...your voice is kinda nice though, I guess. Could be worse, anyway.*

*Was that supposed to be a compliment? It’s hard to tell what with how obnoxious you are.*

He chuckled, *Yeah, it’s a compliment.*

She felt her cheeks grow hot, *Well...thanks, then.*
You gonna be able to calm down and sleep now?

His tone had changed. Right back to being all business. Must have felt her responding to him. Dammit. Like she could help it.

Yeah. I’m good.

Alright. Good night.

Night, RJ.
Three weeks later and Mac had been stuck in Goodneighbor going on a month and a half now. He felt like he was slowly going out of his mind. Hancock had felt that, with enough time, the Gunners would simply lose interest in him as a threat to their business. He was starting to feel like maybe the mayor had underestimated just how highly effective and in demand his services really were. Or how big of an ego the Gunners had. Collectively speaking.

He hadn’t felt Lottie reach for him since that night where they’d learned each other’s names and he wasn’t sure if he was okay with that or not. On one hand, he still wasn’t interested. At all. On the other, he was involuntarily committed to her on a level that went straight down to his core. He didn’t wanna be, but he was, and there was a constant irritation in his heart now that he wasn’t next to her. Keeping her safe and...and what? Happy? Probably.

Yes, okay, he wanted her to be happy. There. He’d admitted it.

Whatever she was off doing though was no business of his. Or at least he didn’t want it to be his business. She was still alive, anyway, and that should be more than enough.

It didn’t help that he’d started having dreams of Lucy. Actual dreams, even. No more nightmares. Never once did he dream about the life they’d shared though. It was always ridiculous scenarios like finding a ‘babysitter’ for Duncan so they could ‘go to the drive-in’ or meeting her parents at the airport for Christmas. Attending backyard BBQs with annoying neighbors and ice skating in the winter. Sometimes just being cuddled up together on a couch somewhere with a roaring fire in a cozy room.

Not that they weren’t fun and interesting and all, but he had no idea where this sudden obsession with pre-war fantasies had come from. He missed seeing her adorably dirty from pulling up carrots and the comforting feel of those soft long johns she’d always slept in. This new Lucy, with her brightly polished fingernails and silky gowns was strange to him. She didn’t feel right in his arms. It created some kind of dissonance in his mind, and the dream always ended just before they came together. Always. He’d lean in to kiss her like he had a thousand times before, and inevitably the world would blur and she’d be gone again.

It was maddening. He almost preferred the nightmares at this point.

He was back to being camped out in the VIP room. Bored out of his mind and sharpening a stick with his combat knife while he waited for the word that the Gunners had finally fucked off. He’d started off trying to whistle it into something like Lucy would have been able to, but he’d never had that kind of talent. A pointy stick was as far as his artistic ability went.

A strange buzzing filled his mind and he paused, tilting his head a little and trying to figure out what the sensation was when Lottie’s slurred voice entered his head.

So the letters came from an army camp...in California then Vietnam, and he told her of his heart - it might be love! - and all of the things he was so scared of...

He’d never heard the song she was singing. It went well with her accent for some reason. She wasn’t a bad singer, actually. Or she probably would have been if not for all the blubbering she
Lottie?

He said when it's gettin' kinda rough over here, I think of that day sittin' down at the pier and I close my eyes and see your pretty smile...

Hello?

Don't worry but I won't be able to write for awhile...bum bum bum! How I cried, never gonna hold the hand of another guy...

Her voice dissolved into sobbing and Mac frowned. Was this her drunk? Great. His soulmate was a sad drunk. Just...great.

He took a deep breath and focused on stabilizing their connection from his side while hers wavered wildly. Hey! Boozer!

The bawling abruptly stopped, but the buzzed feeling remained. RJ? What do you want?

Mac sighed and rolled his eyes, You reached out to me.

I did not.

You did, too.

I did not.

Yeah, you did. You're drunk and screeching some sad fucking song at me and I don't appreciate it. The hell is wrong with you now?

Indignant irritation flooded his mind and he winced. She had almost no control at this point and that was making things very difficult on his side. Every emotion she felt was getting slammed directly into his brain like someone was hitting him with a sledgehammer made from her feelings.

Well if I did, and I'm not saying that I did, but if I did, I certainly didn't mean to disturb you, your majesty.

He chuckled. He kinda liked her cranky and inebriated. So what's wrong?

A desperate need for affection nearly overwhelmed him before she yanked it back. None of your business.

Oh, it's none of my business. Okay then.

Nope, it's not.

If it's none of my business, then why'd you reach out?

He'd never, ever admit it to her or anybody else, but he was actually glad to hear her voice again. Their last conversation had ended in a tense, terse sort of way after he'd caught that hint of tenderness coming from her. He regretted that. She couldn't help that the link was causing her to have involuntary responses to his existence, but it had still...startled him? Scared him, even? He hadn't felt warmth like that since Lucy. It had taken him by surprise and his kneejerk reaction had been to push her away. He'd felt too awkward about it in the following days to reach out and make amends.
She huffed, *I didn’t mean to.*

If he focused a little, he could swear he could feel smooth glass and worn paper under his fingertips, a slight smokey taste on his tongue. She was still clutching the bottle that had gotten her so soused.

*Not much of a drinker, huh?*

*Pfft. It’s just bourbon. That’s mother’s milk to me.*

*Uh-huh.*

*It is!*

*Clearly.* He felt her irritation grow and grinned a little. This was kinda fun. Not boring, anyhow. *Where are you, anyway? I feel like we’re closer to each other.*

There was a long pause. *We shouldn’t...I mean, details are probably bad, right? If we’re trying to avoid each other?*

That was true. He shrugged, *Okay, no details. Just a general ballpark.*

She giggled, *A ballpark...that’s funny. You’re funny when you aren’t tryin’ so hard.*

Ah. Diamond City. So she was one of those idiots. Probably making a fool out of herself at the Dugout. At least she was safe.

*So what’s got you so down that you decided to drown it in liquor? You uh...don’t really seem like the type.*

*You dunno what my type is.*

*Sure I do.*

There was another pause and Mac felt the taste in his mouth grow. Another drink down the hatch.

*Well, if you must know, I’m probably going to die tomorrow, and Nick...that is, my friend said I should get some sleep first, only I can’t sleep, so I asked the bartender for a bourbon milk punch and he just handed me a bottle of Four Roses and here I am.*

There was a lot to unpack there, but he focused on the obvious first. *What’s a bourbon milk punch?*

*Bourbon, milk, sugar, vanilla. Makes you go to sleep. He didn’t even know what a hot toddy was, so I figured I’d make it easy for him...then I get handed this. Ridiculous. I don’t even like Four Roses.*

*A hot toddy? What the hell was that? What’s wrong with Four Roses?*

*Just not my brand.*

He chuckled, *You have a specific brand of bourbon?*

*Doesn’t everybody?*

*Uh...*
Knob Creek. That’s the good stuff.

He’d never heard of that, either. Okay...why do you think you’re going to die tomorrow? That part had his heart beating a little faster than usual.

She sighed, Cause we’re finally gonna find him and he’s...he’s really scary. Even Nick says so.

Who’s scary?

Kellogg.

Mac sat up suddenly, his whittling forgotten. Kellogg? The merc?

I guess.

The man was a legend. A bad, scary legend. He shook his head, Lottie...a man like that...why? Why are you going after him?

Her pain and anguish felt oddly familiar. He...I had a husband, before. Kellogg came into...into where we were and tried to take our baby. Nate fought back but...he shot him in the head and took Shaun anyway.

Sorrow rolled over him. He couldn’t even say if it was coming from her or him. So deep it felt like he was drowning. It made tears stream down his face suddenly and he shook his head again, trying to clear his eyes. You had a baby?

No, I have a baby. He took him and I’m getting him back. Come hell or high water.

The resolute note in her voice made him swell with pride, even as he was starting to panic. Lottie, listen to me. You can’t go up against a man like that, alright? Please. Let Valentine handle it or...shit, hire somebody else to do it, but do not try to do it yourself.

How do you know about Valentine?

There’s only one Nick in Diamond City, genius.

Oh...hey, I never said I was in Diamond City.

Just promise me you won’t do it.

I thought you didn’t care.

I don’t. I mean...I care that you’re not dead, I guess.

Gee, thanks.

You know what I mean.

You don’t even like me. All I do is bother you.

Her mood, lubricated by the bourbon, had clearly shifted. She had that pouty, petulant thing happening now. The same one Lucy used to pull on the very rare occasion that he’d been short with her.

That’s not true.
Yes, it is.

No, it’s not. I’ve been...worried. I guess. Maybe he had been, but it was still hard to admit. He could feel her trying to clumsily get a feel for his emotional state and sat passive, allowing it even though he could have easily brushed her off. It felt a little like standing patiently while someone drunkenly groped at you.

She finally pulled back and seemed more confused than anything. Where are you?

You said no details, right?

You’re close though, aren’t you?

Close enough.

I thought you’d be far away. Nate was on the whole other side of the country.

I’m not going to be here long.

Oh.

Just here on business. He didn’t want her getting silly ideas about fate or some shit.

Oh...well, since you are here, listen, I got somethin’ for you.

Mac shook his head, I don’t want anything from you.

Well, that’s too damn bad.

I’m not --

Shut up, I’m tryin’ to be nice to you. Fuck. She paused and he felt her trying to concentrate. I got a place, okay? Here in Diamond City. It’s...I mean, it’s a hole but, still. It’s a place. I had to pay two thousand caps for it and it’s a piece of shit, but if I die they’re just going to confiscate it and rip off somebody else and I don’t want that asshole mayor to get another dime...I mean, cap out of anybody!

Okay?

So if you...ya know, feel me go and all, I want you to have it.

You want to give me your house?

Yup.

I don’t even live here.

That’s fine. Sell it, burn it to the ground and salt the ashes, I don’t care. Just don’t let the city take it back. They just nickel and dime people to death here. It’s a den of thieves.

Lottie, I’d really rather you just didn’t go.

I gotta.

Come on.

No! I gotta!
More irritation from her side and an inflexible belief she was in the right hit him right between the eyes and he flinched again. Mac blinked a few times and tried to shake off the feel of somebody poking at him so hard.

Okay, alright. Shit.

It’s got...well, two doors. Red and blue. Right by the market. They call it Home Plate and I’m gonna go right now and put the key under the mat.

He rolled his eyes, Don’t do that. Only idiots do that.

I’mma do it!

Mac sighed heavily and finally gave up. Alright.

I’ll sleep at Nick’s. He won’t mind. I dunno why he even has a bed. It’s not like he sleeps.

Why?

Cause he’s a robot or somethin’.

No, I mean, why are you going to sleep there?

Cause I can’t very well leave the key under the mat and then lock the door behind me, now can I? The locks use a key on both sides.

You could just not leave the key anywhere since I won’t need it.

I swear to God, if you let those fuckers take my house back, I’ll come back and haunt you all the days of your life, RJ!

He chuckled, No, I mean, you’re going to be fine and it’ll just stay your house.

Oh. She grumped a little, So now you’re all for me taking on the boogeyman, huh? Changed your tune pretty fast.

People as dumb as you are impossible to kill. It’ll be fine.

She surprised him by not blasting him with another wave of aggravation and laughed instead, God watches out for the innocents and the idiots. My granny used to say that.

Yeah, I bet she said it to you a lot.

Asshole.

Yup. Mac felt her trying to fight the inevitable drowsiness that too much booze produced and pushed at her a bit. Hey. Don’t fall asleep at a bar. That’s a good way to get knifed.

Pssh.

Don’t ‘pssh’ me. Go sleep it off somewhere safe, drunkie.

Fine, fine...hey, RJ?

Yeah?

There was a long, loaded pause and then when she spoke again, it was almost a whisper. I like your
Before he could figure out how to respond to that, she was gone again. Their connection faded back down to an ever-present static in his mind and he sat alone, contemplating his hands and wondering what Lucy would want him to do.

He had to go, right? Knowing Kellogg’s reputation, she wasn’t even going to get within five hundred yards before he blew a hole right through her head. That was...he couldn’t let that happen. Only an actual asshole would let that happen.

She was completely drunk off her ass right now and he knew where she was. He also knew who she was going with. He could get to Diamond City before she ever woke up, tell Nick Lottie had hired him to go in her place, and then…

Shit. Was he actually going to go take on this monster? For her? He still had the Gunners breathing down his neck, still had Duncan and Lucy’s final wish to deal with. What if that bastard gunned him down? What then?

Self-preservation warred with his nobler instincts for a few minutes before he finally got to his feet with a heavy, aggravated sigh.

He had to do it.

Mac gathered his stuff and headed for the State House.

Just a few miles away, Charlotte stumbled through the door of the Valentine Detective Agency and gave her best smile to the detective.

Or tried to, anyway.

Nick, ever the gentleman, moved around his desk and helped her back onto her feet before kindly brushing the dust from the floor off her pants. “Got a little thirsty there, did we?” Dogmeat slunk in behind her and he rolled his eyes. Place was turning into a zoo.

She clung to his coat and shook her head, “Couldn’t sleep before...dog tired now.”

“Alright, alright. Pipe down, will ya? You’re gonna wake Ellie.”

“I like Ellie.”

“Everybody does.”

“And you really like Ellie.”

Nick muttered something under his breath that she couldn’t catch before hoisting her up under one arm. “Come on, let’s get you to bed.”

Charlotte stared down at the floor as he carried her to the back. “You’re so strong.”

“It helps that you don’t weigh anything.”

She pouted at that. She’d always been proud of her curves, but it had been so hard to keep food down lately. She ate twice as much as she usually did and her body rejected more than half of it every damn time. “S’hard to eat.”

“Yeah. It’s the radiation in everything.”
“Stuff tastes funny.”

“That, too.” Nick tossed her onto the bed as gently as possible and helped her remove her boots.

She watched him untie the laces and smiled, “You’re so nice.”

“Thanks.”

“Nicer than he is.”

Nick frowned a bit and glanced at her face, “Who?”

“He’s kind of a jerk...and Dogmeat’s so dang nice. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Alright.” He set her boots down and got up, sliding her under the covers and tucking her in tightly enough that he wouldn’t have to worry about her getting ideas about wandering off.

“I don’t want another soulmate.”

His frown grew, “What?”

“S’not fair.” Charlotte pouted at him for a moment before her bleary eyes closed. “Not fair.”

Nick watched her a moment longer before he brushed the messy hair off her forehead, “Goodnight, Charlie.”

It was morning before Mac could finally convince Hancock to let him leave Goodneighbor. Their ‘compromise’, if you could call it that, negotiated by Daisy who’d wandered in after the shouting had started, was he had to go in disguise and he had to promise, repeatedly, to be back within a week.

As a sign of good faith, Mac left behind his rifle and his regular pack. Or at least, that’s what Hancock thought it was. Really, he just didn’t want some asshole getting his hands on the treasures inside. His rifle, that small stack of letters from home and the wooden soldier Lucy had carved for him were his most precious possessions and if he did die, he’d feel better knowing they were in the mayor’s hands than some random scavver’s.

He slipped out of Goodneighbor at dawn, dressed in simple road leathers and an assault mask to cover his face, and easily navigated the two hour trek through some of Boston’s worst scenic spots to Diamond City.

His eyes took in the market and landed on the blue door just a little down the way from Diamond City Surplus. Was she there right now? Sleeping off her bender? God, he hoped so.

Mac made his way around the corner and followed the signs to the Valentine Detective Agency. She’d said she was going to sleep there, but surely not. Nick was a soft touch and all, but the woman had a house here in town. There was no reason she couldn’t just sleep there, right?

He knocked a few times, almost polite, and was about to give up when a girl suddenly opened the door.

“We don’t open until --”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m sorry. Is Nick here though?”

She frowned, “No, I’m sorry, he’s out for the day. I’m his secretary. Can I help you?”
Shit. “Any idea where he went?”

Her face went all blank and cagey. “No, but even if I did, I wouldn’t tell you.” She stood a little straighter and shifted. Mac realized she’d kept a foot behind the door the entire time. Smart girl. “Now, if you don’t have any other business here, I really have to ask you to leave.”

He backed up and held his hands up to show he wasn’t a threat. He knew enough about Valentine’s reputation to know any trespass against his precious girl Friday was as good as a trespass against the man himself. “Alright. I’m going. Thanks.”

She promptly shut the door and made no secret of locking it. Mac huffed a little at the obvious implication that he was someone untrustworthy and dangerous before remembering that’s actually exactly who he was. For now, anyway.

Someday, though, he’d get back to that man Lucy had always thought he was.

He headed back for the market. Someone had to have seen something, right? Myrna in DC Surplus saw everything, but she was fruit loops. Moe saw nothing but baseball, Takahashi was a bust…

His gaze finally settled on Commonwealth Weaponry and he smiled behind the mask. Arturo wasn’t an idiot. Maybe he could help.

He eased up to the counter and nodded to him, “Hey.”

The gunsmith smiled, “Hey there. Looking for a new weapon? Maybe some ammo?” He glanced at the humble rifle on Mac’s back and tutted, “No, definitely a new weapon…for you, I’m feeling…a hunting rifle, right?”

Close. “Actually, I was wondering if you could help me with something else? I’m looking for Nick Valentine.”

“Hmm, need somebody tracked down, huh?”

“You could say that.”

“His office is just around the corner.”

Crap. “Yeah, no, I know. I just came from there. His secretary said he was out for the day. I figured he had to come through here, so I was wondering if maybe you knew which direction he was headed?”

Arturo considered the question for a moment. “Twenty caps.”

Mac sighed, “Fine.” He dug through his pockets and managed to come up with twenty caps, slapping them one by one onto the counter. “There.”

His eyes practically gleamed as he swept them up. “He came through this morning. Early. I’d barely even opened. Got some ammo and headed out with the new girl. I don’t even think they knew where they were going with how they were following the dog.”

New girl? That had to be Lottie. “How long ago?”

“At least two, maybe three hours.”

Shit. It would be impossible for him to pick up a trail that cold from Diamond City. The idiot security force kept the outskirts too cleared out. He’d never be able to tell which way they’d gone
at this point. “Okay, thanks.”

Arturo leaned on the counter, a roguish gleam in his eye. “You see her yet? Pretty cute with all those freckles. Friendly, too.”

Shit. Shit shit shit. He could feel a raw wave of possessive protectiveness rise up in him and he wanted to sock the gunsmith right in the mouth. Instead he stepped back and shoved his hands in his pockets, “Nah.”

“Too bad. Ella es linda.”

Mac had no idea what that last part meant but in the interest of keeping himself sane, did not ask. He just nodded and turned away, blindly heading away from the shop and stopping only when he found himself in a corner. He couldn’t unclench his fists and his lizard brain wouldn’t stop howling and stomping around, demanding satisfaction.

Having no other outlet, he shaped his frustration into an arrow and shot it towards Lottie. Where the fuck are you?

There was a tiny, startled moment of reflexive surrender, a natural reaction to his own feelings, before she pushed him away, irritable and resistant to any kind of interaction, and went back to ignoring him.

His anger grew. He knew it was irrational and ridiculous and nothing but the leftover prehistoric urge to mark his territory and drag her off to a cave somewhere, but he wasn’t able to overcome it just yet.

Lottie, answer me, dammit!

I’m busy! What’s got your back up?

He practically growled, Where are you?

None of your damn business. That’s where.

I need… No, that was wrong. You need to tell me where you are.

Nope. I dunno what’s gotten into you this morning, but you’ve been perfectly happy ignoring me for weeks now, so if you want to pitch a hissy, you go right on ahead but leave me out of it. I’m out here running all over hell’s half acre looking for…I’m just busy, okay!

He felt her shove him away and stumbled a bit. She was definitely nearby but he couldn’t figure out which direction she was coming from. If she’d had a familiar, he could’ve, but right now, he was at a disadvantage. Their link was unbalanced and would remain so until they met and touched. She had all the power here. Mac tried to reach for her again and it felt almost like she’d smacked the back of his hand when he did.

Fine. If she wanted to be stubborn, that was just fucking fine.

People were starting to stare at him though. A few uneasy mutterings. Mac swore under his breath. Blanking out and then clutching your head in Diamond City could get you shot. They were going to think he was some kinda synth on the fritz. Myrna especially was giving him the evil eye and he turned away, trying to get a sense of where he was before he planned his escape.

He was facing nothing but corrugated steel and took a few steps back. He was right between
Lottie’s two doors. There was a welcome mat in front of the red one and he walked over to it, sliding it over with his foot and smirking at the gleaming brass key it revealed.

 Fucking dumbass.

Mac swiped it and unlocked her door, slipping into the dark house and quickly locking it behind him. It was too dark to see anything with the mask on and he pulled it off, tossing it blindly and running a hand through his hair while he leaned back against the door and took deep breaths.

The fact that he immediately felt more settled and in control being in her home was probably a very bad thing. Bad and dangerous and he was not interested at all. Nope. Not even a little.

His eyes finally adjusted and he switched on a nearby lamp.

He didn’t know what she had been bitching for. This place was practically a paradise compared to most of the places he’d stayed.

There was a decent couch and a few chairs, rugs on the floors, an old radio that sparked to life when he turned the knob. He glanced upward and saw a bedroom of sorts up in the loft.

Fuck, that was tempting. He could go up there and wrap himself up in her scent and…

Nope. Not happening.

Irritated and feeling peevish at himself and the world in general, he stomped around and got a feel for the layout. There was a large, unused space in the back that was full of odds and ends. A small kitchen had been set up in the hallway between the two sections of the house and someone had begun building a brick wall in a corner. The toilet and sink just beyond the wall made him assume this was some kind of attempt at a proper bathroom and he rolled his eyes at the excessive attempt at modesty she was clearly going for here.

It was her house, for fuck’s sake. She could shit wherever, right? Fuck.

Mac wandered back to the couch and flopped down on it, lighting a cigarette before realizing there was no ashtray anywhere that he could see. There was, however, an old Nuka cola bottle near the radio, so he used that instead, glowering over the ridiculousness of this entire situation.

He’d come here intending to do something good and noble and look where it had gotten him. Riled up over some stupid involuntary bullshit. He’d made an ass out of himself, too. She could feel him a million times better than he could feel her, which meant she had to have felt that spike of jealousy. Had to have felt that he was apoplectic with rage over the dumbest fucking…

This was just like back in the Capitol Wasteland. He’d tried so hard to join the Brotherhood, be a good little squire and all that bullshit. Then Lucy had come to visit him (he’d never forget how proud he’d felt as she cooed over him in his uniform) and some fucker just had to make a comment about her ass and that had been it. Mac couldn’t even remember what he’d done after that. He just knew it had to have been bad since he’d gotten tossed out of the Citadel with a few broken ribs and loose teeth.

On the other hand, he was fairly certain they’d conceived Duncan on the hormones that had flooded them both in the aftermath so...not all bad, probably.

He was also irritated that he now knew more about Lottie than he’d ever intended. She was cute. She had freckles. She was friendly...at least to some people. If Arturo liked her, she couldn’t be an idiot.
Not all the time at least.

And now he was stuck here. In her home. Great.

Mac shoved the remainder of his cigarette into the bottle and laid down on the couch, scowling up at the piecemeal ceiling and trying to figure out his next move. Valentine was a good man to have at your back. Plus she still had Dogmeat. He’d keep her safe at all costs. She’d be fine. Right? Sure. Fuck it.

He wasn’t ready to go back to Goodneighbor just yet though. It felt like he’d been granted parole or something and he didn’t want to waste it. He just wasn’t sure what to do with this newfound freedom.

His stomach growled and he made a face. Well...there was something he could do, anyway.

Mac got up and went back to her little kitchen. A working fridge, oven and sink with decent counters and a whole rack of various implements. She had a well stocked pantry, too, with a bin of Rad-X sitting right on top. Huh. Must have a soft stomach for rads then.

He opened the fridge and was kind of surprised at how full it was. Most people didn’t keep this much food on hand. There was a large pitcher full of some kind of dark liquid and an unidentifiable dish of...something on the middle shelf. Something yellow. He pulled them both out and puzzled over their contents. The liquid kind of smelled like mutfruit, but it was darker than regular juice. The stuff in the casserole dish felt squishy when he poked it and he made another face.

Well...not every woman could be handy in the kitchen like his wife had been, he guessed.

He waited for her to respond and scrunched up his nose at her obvious irritation. She had to know the madness had passed and he’d calmed down already. Hey, what’s this stuff in your fridge? Looks weird.

A startled kind of squawk came from her, What the hell are you doing in my house?

You gave it to me.

I did not!

Yeah, you did. Last night.

I don’t remember talking to you last night.

He snorted, Well, you did. Sang to me, too, so it must be love.

Shut up! Get out of my house!

Come back here and make me.

Her exasperation practically buzzed in his brain. I can’t. I’m busy!

Too bad for you...so what is this?

Lottie sighed, What?

The stuff in the pitcher.

That’s...an experiment. Don’t drink it.
Mac was already pouring a glass. Okay.

Heavy silence for a moment and then she sighed again, You’re going to drink it, aren’t you?

Yup.

Well...it’s not right yet. It’s not supposed to taste like that.

He took a sip and smacked his lips a little. It wasn’t bad. Some kind of bitter liquid paired with the mutfruit. Cut the sweetness of the fruit. He couldn’t taste any alcohol in it, which was kind of disappointing, but it wasn’t bad. What is it?

Sweet tea. Sorta.

Sweet tea?

House wine of the south.

I thought tea was supposed to be hot.

Not all tea.

It tastes fine. What’s wrong with it?

I tried using mutfruit syrup to sweeten it but I need real sugar...or honey, even. It just doesn’t taste right.

Oh...and this other stuff? The yellow brick of questionable origin?

That’s spoonbread.

He frowned. “What the hell?” What’s spoonbread?

It’s...it’s spoonbread! I don’t have time for this today!

Mac shrugged, Alright, whatever.

Don’t you eat all my food!

One person doesn’t need all this food.

Shows what you know.

 Aren’t you busy today? Isn’t that what you said?

She huffed at him and was gone again.

Mac grinned and found a drawer full of cutlery, digging into the mysterious jiggly food and taking a large bite. It wasn’t bad, he guessed. Soft and almost sweet in his mouth. Some kind of cornmeal thing happening. Satisfying and heavy in his stomach.

Probably better hot.

An hour later and he had a steak dinner...or lunch, whatever, with a side of reheated spoonbread and some kind of noodley vegetable thing he’d found in another pan in the fridge. He almost felt bad for eating her stuff. Almost. But all he had to do was focus on all the bullshit she was putting him through and all that guilt magically melted away.
Anyway, he hadn’t had a home cooked meal in years. Literally years. Lucy had been better at…well, everything, but Lottie’s cooking was pretty damn good all things considered. (Those things mostly being that he didn’t recognize half of what she made as food before he took a bite.)

Constitution restored, he decided to poke around a bit. He was curious about this stranger the universe had decided to yoke him with. He couldn’t deny that, and while it was probably a good idea to not get too specific with each other, he still felt a pull to know everything he could about her.

Plus, when had he ever been able to resist looking through other people’s things, really. Never. That’s when.

Mac eased up the stairs and tried to not look at the bed. If he looked at it, he’d want to roll around on it like some kind of slobbering idiot and he wasn’t allowing himself to go that far. This was purely a fact-finding mission. He just had a few questions he wanted answered.

For example, after seeing how much food she kept on hand, he was kind of concerned she was built like a super mutant. He just wanted to see if she’d be able to actually crush him if it ever came to that. Not that it would.

He poked around through her dresser and almost laughed. No one needed this much pink in their life. Shit. His hands finally landed on a dress and he held it up, trying to imagine the body that filled it.

Not built like a mutant at all, then. Slender and shapely, like his wife had been. That was…nice. That was nice, wasn’t it? If he had to be saddled with her, at least…

At least what?

His forehead furrowed and he hastily refolded and stuffed the dress back into it’s drawer. None of this mattered. Even if he did ever meet her, which he was not intending to, the bond between them would guarantee that he’d look at her and see…perfection. A goddess walking. He’d be drawn to her body and soul the second they touched. Just like she’d look at him and only see goodness and strength.

He’d hated that part of the link with Lucy. It had felt dishonest to him. She always saw him as this amazing, extraordinary person when he knew better. Knew he was nothing but a liar and a killer. She’d deserved the person she saw when she looked at him, not the trainwreck of a human being he actually was.

She’d been objectively amazing. Everyone had said so. Their friends in Lamplight had all adored her and how gentle and smart and strong she was. Men had made passes at her so often that he’d gotten banned from several settlements in the Capitol Wasteland, so he knew it wasn’t just him seeing something gorgeous because the hormones in his brain had tricked him into it. She was gorgeous. That mop of strawberry blonde hair and those beautiful hazel eyes had turned all sorts of people into idiots. Not just him.

He was King of the Idiots, sure, but she’d had a whole flock of admirers.

Mac stomped back down the stairs and decided to take a nap and head back to Goodneighbor after sunset. Travel was always safer at night and it’s not like Diamond City had a lot going on. He’d normally rob a few places. A few caps here a few fusion cores there, but he couldn’t take the risk right now. Drawing attention to himself would just serve to get him offed by some asshole faster.
He had no idea how long he’d slept, as Lottie’s humble abode had no windows, when a sudden sharp pain in his right shoulder had him jerking awake, falling off the couch. Mac gritted his teeth, grabbed his gun from under the coffee table and came up ready to fight only to find himself still alone. His arm throbbed though. A pain he knew all too well. Gunshot.

Just not in his arm. His eyes closed and he reached out, slipping right past the wobbling defenses around her psyche and able, for just a moment, to see the scene before her. A strange room somewhere he didn’t know, full of electronic equipment. She had to be on the floor, staring up at a man who’d just shimmered back into sight and seemed ten feet tall. There was a rifle laying useless in her lap, the barrel resting on her feet. The look the man gave her was equal parts pity and admiration.

A dark, rumbling voice filled his ears. “I told you. You shoulda just turned back. Now…” Kellogg raised his revolver and Mac felt icy panic race through them both.

*Shoot him, Lottie!* 

*I can’t! My hand won’t move. I’m sorry, RJ. I’m so sorry. I should’ve just --*

Her right hand might be useless right now, but her left worked just fine and was still resting on the gun. *Just pull the fucking trigger anyway!*

She flinched as Kellogg’s gun came level with her head and squeezed her eyes shut. Mac could no longer see what was happening, but he definitely felt the shock that swept through her after the rifle went off and blew a hole through Kellogg’s shin bone. Her whole being seemed to spasm in alarm and abject terror. The sound of another round being fired resonated through their link and then suddenly she was quiet. Shockingly quiet, actually.

Mac’s head was killing him now, but he reached for her anyway. *Lottie?*

*I did it.*

*What?*

*I really did it. I really killed him.*

He fell back onto the couch and took a deep breath, grinning at the darkness around him like she could actually see him. *That’s great, sweetheart. Good job.*

*Can’t move my arm.*

*Did the bullet go all the way through?*

*I think so.*

*Then use a stimpak just above it. Where the hell is Valentine? Why hadn’t the man done his damn job and kept her safe? Shit.*

*Oh, he’s...oh, God! Nick!* A burst of panicked static and she was gone again.

He wasn’t worried. She’d killed the biggest threat in the room and Valentine was a tough sonofabitch. A few new nuts and bolts and he’d be fine. They’d probably be headed back here once they got their feet back under them though. Mac scrubbed at his face with his hands and checked his watch. Only six o’clock, but it’d be nearly dark out now anyway.
He took his time getting ready to head out, even going so far as to wash and dry the dishes he’d used in her kitchen. He’d meant to leave them as an asshole tax for her being such a jerk today, but he figured she’d already more than paid with what she’d just gone through.

Hell of a thing. He hoped she’d be able to track down whoever Kellogg had sold her baby to. Couldn’t imagine him as the fatherly type.

The key went right back under the mat after he made doubly sure everything was locked up. She didn’t really have anything of value for people to steal so even if someone figured out her hiding spot, it would probably be fine. The marketplace was still open, and he decided to take the opportunity to pursue Fallon’s Basement.

Atom knew he could use some more socks.

Across the Commonwealth, a bruised but no longer bleeding Charlotte and a still sparking Valentine finally exited Fort Hagen. Kellogg’s bizarre cybernetic implant made for a strangely heavy load in her pocket. She was busy staring at Dogmeat bouncing along next to them, wondering at how he could be so carefree and happy after what had just happened, when she walked right into Nick.

She stumbled back a bit and frowned, “What’s…” Her eyes lifted heavenward and she gasped. “What the hell is that?”

Several vertibirds dropped down and flew off in all directions from the dirigible drifting through the air above them. A voice, impersonal and almost robotic, rang out from their speaker system.

“People of the Commonwealth. Do not interfere. Our intentions are peaceful. We are the Brotherhood of Steel.”

She blinked at that and a line appeared between her brows. “Oh, that doesn’t sound good.”

Nick was staring up at them like he couldn’t believe his eyes. “Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there, wondering, fearing…”

Lottie narrowed her eyes, trying to remember the rest of the line. “...doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before.”

“Poe.” He looked down at her, “You didn’t strike me as the literary type.”

She stuck her tongue out at him, “I only talk slow, honey.”

He chuckled, “Yeah...how’s the arm?”

“Kinda feels like that time my horse threw me through a barn wall...it’ll be fine, though. How’s uh…” She waved a hand around to encompass all of him. “Everything?”

“Well past the warranty date, but still kicking.”

“I hear that.”

“Let’s get moving. Set up camp someplace that’s not here.”

“Yup.”

She followed him down some scaffolding and paused when she felt a little nudge. RJ. This made the second time he’d saved her bacon and it was starting to get irritating.
What?

.Left a present for you, Annie Oakley.

How do you know who Annie Oakley is? Her head tilted, Wait, you left me a present? What’s that supposed to mean?

Mac grinned as he left Diamond City, It means what it means. I left it in your mailbox.

Okay...what is it?

.Ribbon.

.Ribbon?

Pink ribbon. Seemed like something you’d be interested in.

It was. Dammit. He must have snooped around through more than just the fridge. She shook her head and continued following Nick.

You didn’t have to --

I ate all your spoonbread. It was the least I could do.

Goddammit. A whole pan? That’s enough to feed a family of four!

Or one very hungry man, yeah.

She huffed, Well...did you like it, at least?

Nah, I ate it all because it was gross. When her only response was indignant sputtering, he laughed. Hey, I’m...I’m really proud of you today.

The sputtering immediately stopped and she could feel her cheeks grow hot. I only did what you told me to.

Maybe, but you faced him on your own first. That took guts.

Charlotte didn’t know what to say and went with the first smartass thing that popped into her head.

Is that what all the boys are into nowadays? Guts?

She could feel him smirk. I dunno what boys are into, but this man is.

Her cheeks grew hotter and hotter and it made her want to hide somewhere. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were flirting with me. Poorly, of course, but still.

He just laughed again, Good thing you know better.

Nick was already twenty paces ahead of her and she jogged a bit to catch up.

Yeah, it is. She pushed RJ back to his usual place at the far edge of her mind and huffed to herself.

“Trouble in paradise, Charlie?”

“What?”

Valentine shook his head, “Nothin’. Pay attention out here, doll. This isn’t some kind of snipe
“A snipe hunt.” She scoffed, “Is this how you’re going to be forever? Just gonna keep making references to the Beverly Hillbillies and whatever the whole time?”

He grinned, “It’s not my fault. Your accent only comes out when you’re aggravated. I like hearing it. Ergo, I have to aggravate you.”

God, it was just like when she first moved up north and people used to ask her to recite nurse rhymes and shit. And Nate had wondered why she’d worked so hard to drop it altogether. “Lucky me.”

Chapter End Notes

Song Lottie sings is "Travelin' Soldier" by the Dixie Chicks.

Spoonbread = ❤️
After breaking camp the next morning, Charlotte and Nick followed old I-90 all the way back into Boston and made a brief pit stop at Diamond City. The detective wanted to keep Ellie in the loop and Lottie had a duffel full of fancy Institute pistols and rifles to sell to Arturo. The things felt like toys in her hands and she hated the way they smelled like ozone every time you fired one.

She still hadn’t found the right gun. Handguns didn’t seem to phase the monsters that roamed the Commonwealth. The laser musket Preston had given to her was a joke, not that she’d ever say it to his face, but she’d left it mounted up on the wall of her home in Sanctuary ‘as a keepsake’ and left it at that. The minigun was crazy heavy and she wasn’t looking to spend her days feeling like canned CRAM in that horrible power armor, so she’d chosen a simple combat rifle for when they’d taken off after Kellogg. It had power and decent speed and it kind of reminded her of hunting with her grandpa several lifetimes ago, but something was off about it, too.

Too bad archery seemed to have become a long forgotten relic of the past. She’d always been decent with a bow.

Several hundred caps richer, she casually made her way over to her home and, after checking to make sure no one was watching, opened the mailbox.

A pristine piece of pink satin ribbon shone softly as the light hit it and she grinned like an idiot. She just couldn’t help it. The first gift exchanged between soulmates inevitably became a treasured heirloom. It’s just how it was. Her mother had saved a pressed daisy from the first bouquet of flowers her father had ever given her. Charlotte knew that even if she denied everything else between her and RJ, she’d now be compelled to hold onto this stupid ribbon until the day she died.

Just like she couldn’t bring herself to take off the silly leaf-shaped pendant Nate had presented her with the first time they met. He’d said he’d chosen it because the woods always reminded him of her. It wasn’t fancy or expensive, but it was still absolutely perfect because it had come from him.

At least RJ had good taste. This pink was bright enough that it wouldn’t clash with her auburn hair.

She started digging through her pack for her key and about had a panic attack when she couldn’t find it. No matter how many times she checked and rechecked her key ring, it just wasn’t there. Charlotte sighed and tried to think what she could have possibly done with it.

Her eyes landed on the welcome mat and she moved it with her boot, happily relieved when it finally appeared. Sensible. She must have done it when she’d gotten too tipsy at the Dugout and allegedly gave her house away.

When RJ had so mockingly let her know he was in her home, messing with her stuff like he had the right, she’d assumed he’d just broken in. It seemed like everybody knew how to pick locks nowadays. Kinda nice to know that he wasn’t that type.

The second she opened the door and stepped inside, she could smell him—that, and stale smoke. Her nose wrinkled at that part. She’d always hated cigarettes.

Dogmeat trotted in after her, sniffing all around and wagging his tail like a crazy person. It made her smile. Familiars had two jobs. One, keep a person’s mate safe no matter what and two, lead them to that person. So far he’d done great at the first, and been swell about not pushing with the second. He probably couldn’t help but be excited sensing his master’s presence.
She headed upstairs to get changed and could smell him up there, too. Warm and masculine, gunpowder and that odd canvas kind of smell military uniforms usually had. Her head tilted a little and she frowned thoughtfully.

Smoke aside, he actually smelled remarkably like Nate.

Of course, that was probably to be expected, really. It made sense that he would, but it also made her miss Nate terribly. That ache she felt where her heart used to be swelled within her chest and her vision went wobbly as her eyes filled with tears.

_Lottie?

She jumped. RJ. Goddammit. She kept reaching for him without even thinking about it. Charlotte hurriedly rubbed at her eyes and stood up a little straighter, shoulders back. Immediately prepared to lie her ass off about this particular slip up.

_Hey.

_What’s wrong?

_Notthing. Sad movie. Just...watching a sad movie.

_So early?

_What’s wrong with an afternoon matinee?

There was a long pause. _Shit, it is after noon. Alright. Well...how’s the shoulder?

_Fine. It’s fine.

_Fine, huh? Is that why you’re taking it easy today?

She rolled her eyes and started looking through her dresser for a new flannel and jeans. _I’m not taking it easy. I’ve been up and at ‘em since six. Just taking a break before heading back out.

There was a grumble of concern from his end. _Don’t push yourself. Joints take a while to heal up all the way. You should relax a little.

_No time. Besides, you do more than enough relaxing for the both of us.

_What’s that supposed to mean?

_It means what it means.

More grumbling. _Did you get your ribbon yet?

She was, in fact, already tying it into a bow around her ponytail and made a face when she got a weird, obnoxious little shiver from him asking about it. _Yes. Thank you. It’s...nice.

_Pink your favorite color?

_Maybe.

_Mine’s green.

He seemed more willing to share things now. More eager to talk. Charlotte made another face at
that. She might be physically compelled to want to crawl all over him sight unseen, but her heart certainly wasn’t. She wasn’t that far gone yet. Even if she could still hear the way he’d called her ‘sweetheart’ last night ringing through her ears. Nope. It just wasn’t happening.

RJ?

Yeah?

I’m still not...I mean, I don’t know if I’ll ever be ready for… She frowned at herself. Why was this so hard to say?

Is this about the ribbon?

The regret and embarrassment in his voice gave her pause. How young was he anyway? She sat on the bed to put her boots back on and shrugged, It’s about a lot of things.

Alright...message received.

She irritatingly felt the need to soothe his hurt feelings and sent a wave of cautious warmth his way. Don’t be like that.

Like what?

It’s not you. You seem like a perfectly nice person and all. Honest. I’m just…

I get it. It’s fine...I’m sorry if I made you feel obligated or whatever.

No, you didn’t. You don’t have anything to be sorry for.

I just kinda thought maybe we could try being friends...or something.

Platonic soulmates?

Sure, why not?

She laughed a little, Are you not into women?

No, I definitely am.

Well, there you go. That’s why.

Right… He chuckled, So Arturo says you’re cute.

Yeah, definitely young. She huffed, Is that what made you go all Grognak yesterday?

Maybe...so you’ve got freckles, huh?

Charlotte shook her head again. Some line was coming up, she just knew it. She tried to go for firmly disapproving. RJ...

You aren’t a redhead, are you? Cause, I gotta say, I’ve always kinda had a thing for redheads.

She froze for a moment in sheer panic. Deflect deflect deflect. Uh...well, you know what they say about redheads.

What?
If you see one, you should approach it gingerly.

Silence reigned for almost a full thirty seconds before his laughter, loud and boisterous in her mind, rolled through their link. His delight made her laugh, too. So much for being stern.

That’s a good one.

Thanks.

I got one. What’s the difference between a raider and a ginger?

She started layering sweaters over her shirt. It was almost December and she was starting to feel like she’d never be warm again. I dunno, what?

You can negotiate with a raider. He snickered after and she tried to not smile but failed miserably.

Now that’s a new one.

So you are, huh?

What?

A redhead.

She rolled her eyes, I thought we agreed no details.

I’ll tell you what color my hair is.

Pfft. I bet it’s brown. She could feel his shock bloom and grinned as she slipped on her coat.

What...how?

Dogmeat’s a big fluffy baby with the nicest brown hair. I figured you were, too.

Oh, I’m big alright.

God, you don’t miss a beat, do you?

Nah, I can keep a pretty good rhythm, especially with a partner.

Is this your plan now? Just gonna keep firing innuendo at me until I capitulate?

What’s ‘capitulate’ mean?

Charlotte was fairly certain she now resembled the Stay-Puft marshmallow man for how much clothing she had on, but at least she wasn’t shivering anymore. She pulled a warm cowl over her head and tucked her hair into it.

His question gave her pause though. Capitulate wasn’t exactly a five-dollar word, was it?

RJ? How old are you exactly?

God, if the universe had tried to match her up with some kind of horny teenybopper, she’d absolutely die. Nate had been five years her senior and the awkwardness they’d experienced while they both waited for her to grow up had been endless and embarrassing as all get out. It was the whole reason they’d deliberately stayed separated by thousands of miles until she hit eighteen.
Twenty. I’ll be twenty-one soon though. Why?

She winced. Dear Lord baby Jesus. Twenty was still felt ages away from where she was standing. Just curious.

How old are you?

You aren’t supposed to ask a lady her age.

That old, huh?

Charlotte locked the door behind her and slipped on sunglasses for the journey. Nick was across the market and she waved to get his attention. Thirty.

Oh.

Her head tilted a little. Was she just imagining the mild flavor of disappointment his ‘oh’ had there? Sorry I’m not the nubile little filly you were expecting.

No, I...wait, what’s a filly?

I’m leaving Dogmeat here in Diamond City. He’s pretty wore out after yesterday. If you want to stop by and get him, that’s okay, just let me know.

Oh. You’re leaving the city already?

Told you I was just taking a little break.

Do you really think it’s a good idea to leave him behind? It’s his job to protect you, right?

His main job is to make sure we meet and I think we’re both in agreement that that’s a bad idea.

Right...I’d just feel better if he was with you, though.

Charlotte smiled at Piper as she came out of her office to collect Dogmeat. Right on time. Well, it’s not up to you, now is it?

“Hey, Blue!”

“Hey, Piper! You ready for some high quality snuggles from this guy?”

“Absolutely!” She knelt down and scratched Dogmeat behind the ears, “We’re gonna have a great time, aren’t we, boy?”

He waggled all over and Nick chuckled, “You sure you wanna leave him behind?”

I just think if he already found you, there’s probably a reason. You should stick together.

Charlotte brushed RJ off and grinned at Nick, “Sure. He’ll have a much better time here hanging out with Piper and Nat than with us going to stinky old Goodneighbor.”

The detective tipped his hat down so it covered his eyes and laughed, “If you say so.”

Down in the Third Rail, Mac tried to reestablish contact from his end, but she’d effectively shut him out for now. He sighed heavily and wiggled down against his couch in the VIP room a little more. Man, she was stubborn.
He’d probably been a little heavy handed with the flirting there. She was no doubt completely right to push him away. Really, he hadn’t meant to start anything, she was just...kinda stuck on his brain in a way he knew he couldn’t shake and he’d started to feel like maybe trying to was stupid and pointless.

She’d already taken down a deathclaw and the Commonwealth’s meanest mercenary, for fuck’s sake. She was cute and funny and the more he learned about her, the more it seemed like she’d really been tailor-made for him. Or he’d been made her for? She was older and all.

Lucy and he had been exactly the same age. They’d learned about life and grown up together every step of the way. Having himself tied to an older woman suddenly was...

Well, it was kinda hot, actually. Lottie was older, clearly educated, probably more experienced, too. Certainly she was bolder and more aggressive than Lucy had ever dreamed of being. His wife had always just accepted that he was in charge, even when they were children, but Lottie clearly did not. He’d given her a direct order yesterday and she’d actively shrugged off her own instinctive submission to basically tell him to go get fucked.

That was sexy as hell.

He just wished he had somebody to talk to about everything. Somebody who was not in his head and incredibly distracting. He’d been tempted to go to Daisy, who seemed to know everything about everything, but part of him was worried he’d make her sad...or angry. This strange wrinkle in how the universe normally worked was extraordinary. Unheard of. Mac knew there were people who’d be thanking their lucky stars at a second chance at fairy tale happiness.

He and Lottie just weren’t those people.

He’d feel like a total brat basically going to Daisy and whining about this amazing miracle they were both not at all grateful for. She’d probably run him out of town or something...and if she’d be mad, Hancock would absolutely lose his shit. He’d drag him straight to Valentine and demand an introduction right on the spot.

What he really needed was a high quality distraction that didn’t involve the hazy vision of Lottie dancing around in his head.

Mac got up and headed back into the main part of the bar. Magnolia gave him a little wink from her spot onstage and he tipped his hat to her in response. Before he’d been ensnared by this new link, he’d spent an inordinate amount of time, and sometimes caps, on the ‘Flower of the Third Rail’ as everyone called her. She was probably starting to wonder why he’d suddenly stopped being her best customer.

Maybe she’d be good to talk to? ‘Hey, Mags, I know we used to fuck like radrabbits, but I’ve got this new soulmate and I was wondering if I could tell you how confusing that is and how I’m pretty sure I’m already in love with her even though she barely wants anything to do with me?’ He shook his head a little. Jesus. Fuck, no. Even he wasn’t that clueless.

Whitechapel Charlie was idly ‘cleaning’ a glass with a filthy rag when he took a seat. “Oh, it’s you, is it? The usual? Or you here to finally settle your tab?”

Fuck. He’d almost forgotten. “What was it? A hundred caps?”

“Oh no, MacCready. I told you... a hundred caps covered the finder’s fee, but you still owed me for the disposal...but I'll tell you what. For old time's sake, I'll let the debt go. But you owe me a
favor.”

Jeez. Hancock must really like him if he’d programmed his bartender to like him, too. “Wow, thanks. You’re all heart, Chuck. I uh, I was wondering if you had any work for me?”

The bot sighed. Or made a noise like a sigh, anyway. “Told you already, kid. His nibs don’t want you wanderin’ about these parts, gettin’ your pretty little head blown off...”

“I know...I just figured...I mean, it’s Goodneighbor. I figured there’d probably be something for a guy like me to do around here.”

His middle eye focused on him, the aperture widening a bit. “Oh, I see how it is. Gettin’ a little antsy to keep your skills up, ay?”

He shrugged, “Maybe.”

“Well, it just so happens I need a dirty boy to do some dirty, dirty work. Blood on the pavement. Bodies in the ground. That kind of thing. Interested?”

“How much does it pay?”

“Our mutual benefactor is payin' top dollar for a cleanup job. Internal political struggle. You know how it is. Three locations. Everyone inside. No witnesses.”

“How much?”

“Two hundred.”

“Two hundred? For three locations? Come on, man. I don’t load my rifle for less than two-fifty.”

Whitechapel Charlie chuckled, “Alright. Two-fifty then.”

“Four.”

“What? Four now?”

“It’s a lot of time...a lot of bullets.” He stared him down and raised an eyebrow. The bot wasn’t stupid. He knew the proper price of doing business and he definitely knew Mac was worth every cap.

“Givin’ me a right kick in the Alberts. Fine. We'll make it four hundred caps, but that's as high as I'm goin’.”

“Sold. Locations?”

“The old warehouses. All three of ’em. Cleared out, top to bottom.”

Right. That meant Triggermen, which meant Markowski. The man was a useless lush, but he was a powerful useless lush. Mac would need to go incognito...good thing he’d held onto that assault mask.

“Sounds good.” He slung his rifle across his back, checked his pistol and stuffed his hat into his pack before holding it up. “Watch this for me?”

“For ‘ow much?”
“Come on, man.”

He scoffed, “Fine. Toss it back here.”

Mac grinned and threw the bag onto the counter behind the bar, “Thanks, Chuck.”

He grumbled something that almost sounded like a goodbye and Mac headed on up the stairs, pulling his mask on as he went.

About damn time he had some fun.

Around the same time Mac was finishing up gleefully taking care of Hancock’s little uppity gangster problem, Lottie and Nick walked through Goodneighbor’s gate.

Valentine paused just inside and lit a cigarette. “Stick close, sweetheart. This is no place for a lady.”

She stared wide-eyed at the assaultron who was apparently this settlement’s weapons dealer and swallowed. There were several men wandering aimlessly about; a particularly shifty one by the general store had already turned his attention to them and she felt her back go up. The whole town had a dangerous edge to it and it practically reeked of vomit and other, less pleasant things. “Right.”

A rough looking man in leather approached them, smirking a little when Lottie instinctively stepped behind Nick. “Well, well, it's the detective. Tracking down another wayward husband to his mistress?”

He scoffed, “Why, someone stand you up?”

The man clearly didn’t get the joke and just seemed to get more aggravated. Another angry guy just spoiling for a fight. Lottie was starting to think Preston and his friends were the only good-natured men left in the world.

And maybe RJ.

“Tryin' that, what d'ya call it? Evasive language, on me?” When all Valentine did was laugh, he turned his attention to her. “And who are you, huh? Valentine's new dick-in-training?”

Her hands tightened on her rifle and she decided no answer was better than a smartass one that could set this guy off.

He frowned, “I said, who the hell are you?”

Shit. “We’re...we’re working together, yeah.” To her great embarrassment, her voice wobbled a little at the end. Goddammit. She may as well have chummed the water.

The sinister smile he gave her had a shiver running down her back. “Really? Well you're in luck. I got a special offer on some insurance for partners of the great gumshoe here.”

Valentine scoffed again, “Don’t try that bullshit on us.”

Bolstered by the detective’s defiant attitude, Lottie relaxed the stranglehold she’d kept on her legendarily smart mouth. “Unless it's ‘keep-dumb-assholes-away-from-me’ insurance, I'm not interested.” At least her voice didn’t shake so much this time.

His smile only grew and she realized the cheese had slid clean off his cracker some time ago.
“Now don't be like that. I think you're going to like what I have on offer.”

He looked her up and down and if Lottie hadn’t already felt violated, she definitely did now. It made her furious.

“I highly doubt that, honey.”

“You hand over everything you got in them pockets, or ‘accidents’ start happenin' to ya. Big, bloody ‘accidents’.”

He meant it. She could see it in his eyes. Rage bubbled up inside her. Ever since she’d woken up in this nightmare world, it seemed like every Tom, Dick and Harry was personally invested in getting between her and her son. She’d had it. Enough was enough.

Lottie raised her rifle and pulled the trigger without even thinking, only vaguely registering Valentine’s reflexive jerking to get out of her way as she added the grifter’s grey matter to the other miscellaneous offal already decorating the pavement. His body hit the ground and she actually laughed. Now that he was dead, he was just another pathetic corpse in the gutter like all the rest. Not so scary now are you, big man?

“Whoops. Accidents like that, huh?”

Nick finally recovered his composure and put a hand on the smoking end of her rifle, lowering it before K-LE-0 got any ideas. “Gotta hand it to you, Charlie. You’re definitely a woman who knows how to make an entrance.”

She grinned up at him, feral and terrifying still. “It slipped.”

“Sure. These things happen.”

Lottie caught movement from the corner of her eye and turned, glaring at the ghoul in the fancy coat who was sauntering up to them. She went to raise her rifle, but Nick’s hand stopped her.

“Nope. Bad idea.”

She frowned at him, but lowered her weapon anyway. She did, however, step in front of her friend, still ready to fight.

For some reason, it seemed to amuse the ghoul.

“Whoa ho ho, I like you already! Walk into a new place, make a show of dominance. Nice.” He stopped a good five feet away and gave her a small bow before turning his attention to the synth at her back. “Good to see you again, Nick.”

“Hancock.”

The dark eyes slid over her, interested but not threatening like the other man had been. “Who’s your little friend?”

“New client. Charlie, this is Hancock, the mayor of this...charming little town. Hancock, this is Charlie Apperson.”

The civility she’d been steeped in as a child suddenly reasserted itself and Charlotte found herself smiling politely at him. “How do you do?”

“Ah, manners.” He smiled back at her and she was surprised at how handsome he suddenly was.
“You alright there, sister?”

She nodded, “Yes, sir, thank you. I’m fine.”

“Sir, huh? I could get into that.” Hancock laughed softly and put his hands in his pockets, casual and friendly to a fault. “It’s too bad about Finn. We’re gonna miss him next super mutant attack, but...he had it comin’. Goodneighbor’s of the people, for the people, you feel me? All are welcome here.”

Well, she could do without all the double entendre, but at least he seemed relatively harmless. Shameless flirting aside, of course. “I feel you.”

“Good. You stay cool, and you’ll be part of the neighborhood. Just consider this town your home away from home.”

“That’s awful nice of you.”

He grinned wide and she cursed internally. Her accent had slipped. His interest immediately sharpened, “Not from around here, huh?”

Valentine finally spoke up, “It’s a long story, John.”

“Oh, I bet it is. I bet it is.” His eyes went back to her face and seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time on the curve of her mouth. “I can tell I’m gonna like you already...you come see me if you uh...ever need anything. Alright, Charlie?”

She was betting this one had never been told ‘no’ once in his whole damn life. He was charming as all get out. “Thanks, but we’re just here on business.”

“Oh, business.” His eyebrow went up a bit and she almost winced. Now he was even more interested. “Well don’t let me keep you, love.” Charlotte went a little pink at the boldly familiar endearment and when her mouth dropped open a bit, he smirked. “See ya around, Nick. Take good care of our girl here.”

Valentine took her by the arm and shook his head in a fatherly, disapproving sort of style as he dragged her past. “Keep it in your pants, Hancock.”

He chuckled, low and dark and it actually made her shiver a little. In a good way. “Now where’s the fun in that?”

Lottie?

Shit.

A smug sense of satisfaction washed over her from his end. Thinking about me?

She tugged her arm out of Nick’s grasp and finally put her rifle away to give her hands something to do while she tried to shrug off how a bit of flirtation from a man who was clearly a wolf in sheep’s clothing had affected her. She’d always been a sucker for a sweet-talker.

Not even a little.

M’hmm.

He was practically purring at her and she ground her teeth. Charlotte glanced back towards the gate as they rounded the corner and caught Hancock staring, one hand clearly adjusting the bulge in his
pants and the other on his hip. He caught her catching him and did nothing but smile, slow and
dangerous, and she whipped her head back around and hurried along until she was practically on
top of Valentine as they entered the Memory Den.

That man was all sorts of trouble. She could tell.

_You’re pretty excited for somebody who isn’t thinking about me._

There was no way in hell she was ever going to admit to him what a few slick words from a duded
up dandy in a silly hat had done to her, so she feigned ignorance. _I’m sure I don’t know what you
mean._

_You want a few details? Make it easier to imagine it?_

Nick was talking to some lady in a fancy feathered gown and she waved vaguely when he pointed
at her.

_Imagine what?_

_You know what._

_How many times do I have to tell you I’m not interested? And what the hell happened to you not
being interested? I thought we had an agreement here._

_Changed my mind._

_No._

_Yup. His tone surprisingly turned serious for once, Listen, I get what you’re going through. You
know I do. I’m willing to wait if that’s what you need._

_Well better bring a book with you because it’s gonna be a while._

_That’s fine. I’m pretty sure you’re worth it._

Valentine was now headed down into the bowels of the old theater and she shook her head, trying
to focus on what was happening here in front of her and not the confusing mess in her head.

_This old grey mare ain’t what she used to be._

_Who is? Mac felt her push him away and flinched a bit at how harshly she did it._

He sighed irritably and continued looting the warehouses. The buildings belonged to Hancock,
sure, but their contents were all Triggerman goods, and Whitechapel Charlie hadn’t said anything
about not pilfering everything he could get his hands on.

It hadn’t been that many bodies, really. Maybe thirty total? Took less than that many bullets to
take them all down. They’d been loud and clumsy and stupid, and he hadn’t. Pretty easy way to
earn a living, really.

He stopped by Daisy’s and sold everything he could, grabbing a few packs of snack cakes and
water. Pretending like he didn’t notice her slipping in a generous serving of grilled radstag,
slathered in homemade sauce and wrapped up tight in wax paper, in with his purchases. She’d
never said if she’d had kids, and he didn’t have the balls to ask, but she sure seemed to want to
mother hen him to death.
Not that he was complaining.

Hancock and Fahrenheit were milling around and he gave them a friendly wave as he headed back for the Third Rail. There was a new red smear on the old cobblestones and he decided not to ask. That was the prevailing wisdom here in Goodneighbor. ‘Don’t ask dumb questions.’

Whitechapel traded him one hefty sack of caps for a bloodied fedora and he decided to splurge a little and get a room for the night. Why the hell not, right? He had enough caps on him to make renting space in K-LE-0’s safe a necessity. He could get the good room, even. The one with a bathtub. Maybe rinse out a few things.

Clair scowled at him as he entered the Rexford, despite his attempts at a pleasant sort of smile. “What do you want?”

“Your finest room, hot stuff.”

“Mayor’s already reserved it.”

Bullshit. Why would Hancock need a room when he had a whole house? He frowned, “I have the caps.”

She rolled her eyes, “Even if you did, he already reserved it. I can set you up in one of the other suites. They’ve all got showers.”

“Fine. How much?”

“Twenty.”

“Sh-shoot...twenty caps. Highway robbery. Water better be hot then.”

“It’s plenty hot, smartass. Do you some good, too. You should try some soap while you’re at it.” She snatched the caps from his hands and almost threw the key at him.

“So who’s staying in the penthouse? Hancock got a new squeeze I don’t know about?”

“Why? You jealous?”

Jealous? When he already had a pistol like Lottie in his pocket? Hardly. “Nah, just curious.”

She shrugged, “Some kid came in to town and blew Finn’s head off. Room’s for them.”

Mac chuckled, “Nice. Guy had it comin’.”

“Yeah, he did.”

He headed on up the stairs, past the typical piece of crap room he could usually afford and further along to the suites. There were four in the hotel and each one had a working full bathroom. Crazy opulence for the wasteland. His eyes flicked over to the door across the hall from his and he bit back a regretful sigh. As much as he hated getting wet, he had actually been looking forward to a bath.

Get a little buzzed, maybe a little loose. Slip into the hot water with some soap and ‘accidentally’ let Lottie get a feel of what she was missing…

He grinned to himself and unlocked his door. It was still a tempting idea.
This room wasn’t so bad, he guessed. Way too much furniture, with the two beds and the couches and dressers, but the mattresses were a million times nicer and each one actually had sheets and blankets on it. Fucking lux.

He upended his pack on one of the beds, setting aside the odds and ends before sorting through his laundry. Mac tended to travel light these days, but when he’d added the new socks he’d picked up in Diamond City to his gear, he’d noticed just how dirty everything else was.

And the new socks weren’t even *that* clean, to be honest.

The bathroom had an old enamel bucket and a box of Abraxo for regular cleanings, and he borrowed them both, filling the bucket with hot, sudsy water and adding his underthings first. They’d probably need a few rounds of scrubbing at least.

Lucy would have a fit if she saw how he was living these days.

His hands paused for just a moment and he frowned, a fresh wave of guilt pulling him back down into that sad, spiraling place he always seemed to naturally fall into since leaving the Capitol Wasteland.

Lucy.

He couldn’t deny the pull Lottie was starting to have over him. He liked her sass and her humor and her grit …and clearly the universe wanted them together, but it still felt kinda wrong. Kinda like he was being unfaithful to his wife. She’d been gone two years already but she was never out of his mind, or his heart. Or at least she hadn’t been until Lottie had showed up.

That had made him furious, at first. The idea that some other girl could just slide into his life and try to take Lucy’s place. He’d been all too happy when she’d told him she wasn’t interested.

But now…

Mac shook his head and went back to scrubbing his clothes. Lucy would say it wasn’t his place to question the wisdom of the universe. That if he’d been matched with someone else, that it meant something. That it was a gift, and he shouldn’t just throw it away.

He’d had two years already to move past his wife’s death though. He was pretty sure Lottie’s husband had only been gone a month. Maybe. If someone had come onto him one month out from Lucy’s death, he’d have put them in the dirt.

No wonder she was constantly irritated with him.

He should give her space. Give her time. Be a gentleman and back off until she came to him…but could he actually wait that long? Would she need two years, too? That felt like forever when he had her sweet voice in his head and could practically taste her every time he closed his eyes.

She wasn’t helping shit either, with how she kept reaching out for him. She clearly needed him as much as he needed her. His idea about trying to be platonic soulmates had probably been silly, but he just wanted to be near her. Wanted to feel her hand in his and wanted to memorize her face. That wasn’t asking too much, was it?

Mac was just hanging up his things to dry when a fresh wave of Lottie’s despair crashed into him. He dropped to his knees by the walk-in shower and held his head, trying to push it away, just a little, so he could get steady enough to help her.
Lottie? Sweetheart, it’s too much…pull back a little. I’ll help you just --

Another blast, this time potent regret and anger. It didn’t even feel like it was coming from her. Had a whole different flavor to it. He felt himself getting sucked into some strange tangle of consciousnesses and bit his tongue, hard, drawing blood and using the pain to keep him in his head.

Lottie! What’s going on? Can you hear me?

Nothing but raw emotions kept pushing at him. He swore he could hear her screaming, somewhere way far away. It echoed through his mind, but he still couldn’t get through to her. Couldn’t even feel --

An image flashed into his head suddenly. Lottie trapped in some kind of contraption, frost obscuring the window, but he somehow knew it was her. Directly across the cold room a dark-haired man was trying to fight off somebody, unarmed and outnumbered by the creepy scientists circling around them. A baby was crying and he was swamped by an overwhelming sense of protectiveness and fury. Lottie’s baby. Someone was making her baby cry and he wanted to tear the world to pieces to make them stop. A creeping feel of shame and guilt was just starting to show up at the edges of the rage he felt and then…

Nothing.

He felt nothing at all.

When Mac could finally get his eyes open, he was surprised to find himself staring up at the bathroom ceiling. Cold ceramic tile under him and a soggy undershirt still clutched in his hands while icy water pounded down from the shower head onto his body. He sat up slowly, rubbing the goose egg on the back of his skull and trying to figure out what the hell had just happened.

He and Lucy had shared plenty of experiences in their time together. Mostly good, some bad…like when she’d been in the throes of labor and he’d felt like his body was also being torn apart as their son came into the world. He could have done without that, but still…nothing had ever been this fucked up.

His watch said he’d been out at least two hours. Shit. Mac stood, almost surprised that his knees didn’t give out from under him, and managed to get his shirt hung up before he stumbled out of the bathroom and collapsed on the bed. His head was killing him and his arms felt weirdly empty. Like he should be holding…

Oh, shit. Lottie.

Hey? Lottie? Their link was still there. She was alive and all. Just unresponsive. He took a deep breath and tried again. Please answer me.

An uncomfortable kind of silence swelled between them. Too many emotions all twisted together. It was impossible to get a sense of any of them.

Go away. Just…leave me alone. Please.

What happened? Are you alright?

Go away.

Do you need me to come get you?
No! Go away!

He felt her try to push him away, but she wasn’t even able to manage that. Whatever had happened was bad enough that she’d lost the ability for now. That only ever happened in life or death situations.

Where are you? I’ll come get you.

No, I’m...I’m safe. I’m fine. Just...go away. I can’t deal with this right now. Please.

So maybe not actually life or death, just close enough that her brain thought she was in dire circumstances. Are you sure?

I highly doubt anyone is going to attack me here in the Rexford. I’ll be fine, just...I can’t be...I can’t...

Mac sat up and felt his heart start to pound in his chest. You’re in Goodneighbor.

Her anger spiked and almost knocked the wind out of him. Don’t you dare come here. I mean it. If you show up trying to play hero, I’ll shoot you where you stand, you hear me? I swear to God I will.

She meant it, too. Fuck. Was she the person who’d taken out Finn? Could she really be right across the hall? Their connection didn’t feel strong enough for that, but maybe whatever she’d been up to had somehow interfered with it. Mac didn’t know what to do. His entire being said to go to her, but she’d drawn a line he was actually afraid to cross right now. She was so far past enraged, teetering right on the edge of snapping.

He needed to get away from here while she was distracted. The way she felt now, the chaotic anger that was slowly taking form and pointing in his direction, practically guaranteed that if they met now, it would be the last time. She’d either drop him or...

Well, no, that was it. There was no ‘or’. She’d put him down like a dog in the street.

Okay. Okay, just...let me know...um...

She finally managed to break away from him and he actually sighed in relief, falling back against the mattress and trying to figure out his next move.

He had the room for the rest of the night, anyway, and most of his clothes were dripping wet still. He couldn’t very well leave them behind and waste a ton of caps resupplying. Anyway, he was safe here for now. He had at least two doors and...fifty feet between them?

Mac laughed at that but it somehow came out as a whimper.

Why’d she have to be so fucking difficult anyway? This was the part where they were supposed to run into each other’s arms, embracing fate and breaking a few beds in the process. Right? It should be. He felt like he was getting a raw deal here.

Despite her cutting him off, he was still getting battered by her emotions anyway. Regret and sorrow and pain and that terrible, familiar sense of loss. She needed to rest, but he highly doubted she was the type to take something for that.

Luckily for them both, he was exactly that type.
He rose and pawed through his possessions for something to take the edge off. With them so close and still so enmeshed, she’d feel the effects of whatever he took almost as much as he would. She’d probably be pissed once she realized what he’d done, but this was the only way he had to help her. Help them, really.

His fingertips finally fell on a syringe full of Hancock’s newest party favor, a potent combination of DayTripper, liquid UltraJet and CalmEx Fred had named ‘DayDreamer’. It was the same stuff he’d taken that first night they’d connected to each other. The one that gave people such amazing dreams. The mayor had given him a permanent discount on the stuff as long as he promised to go easy with it. Just one dose per week.

It was a risk, taking something psychotropic designed to amplify desires and all, but it was the best he had to work with.

Mac flopped back onto his back and shoved the needle into his arm, refusing to second guess himself. He pushed the plunger down and felt that wonderful tingling warmth sweep through him, right up to his eyelids where it gently tugged them down as he slipped into sweet darkness. He felt a startled response from Lottie, something far away and confused, and then she was sliding down, too.

His last conscious thought was he hoped she’d been someplace comfortable.

When his eyes opened, he was back there in that peaceful park. The same warm, dappled sunshine spilled over him and he breathed deep, savoring the sweetness of the nearby flowers. He was leaning against the tree this time, the bark sharp but not unpleasant on his back, his fingers combing through Lucy’s hair as she lay sleeping with her head in his lap. Duncan was nowhere to be seen, but this was still pretty nice.

He looked down and wondered at how the sun and shadow made her hair seem strawberry blonde one moment and deep russet the next. Little streaks of gold and copper dancing together in the messy waves. Her hair was longer here than he’d ever seen it in real life, soft and full with a gloss he wasn’t used to seeing. Still gorgeous.

“Hey, sleepyhead.”

Her eyes opened, looking strangely dark in her face. The smile was familiar though. Sweet and adoring as ever. “Hey.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.” Her smile grew even as tears streamed down into her hair. “I miss you so much. Every day. It just gets worse every day.”

God, his heart hurt. “I’m sorry.”

She shook her head, “No, it’s not your fault.”

“I just wanted you to be happy.

“That’s all I ever wanted for you, too.” She sat up and held his face between her hands, “None of it was your fault, honey. Not a bit. It was just...something that happened.”

He closed his eyes. Her forgiveness was too much, even if it was just a dream. “It shouldn’t have happened. If I’d been...stronger, better, then --”
“Impossible.”

Mac shook his head and felt her wipe away a tear slowly rolling down his face, “I should’ve taken
better care of you.”

“You took wonderful care of me. I loved every single second we were together.”

He laughed at that, “Liar.”

“Well...maybe I could have done without the snoring.” She pressed her forehead to his, “I don’t
want you to feel guilty for a thing. Not a single thing, alright? You did your best and I love you. I’ll
always love you. Wherever you are, I want you to be happy. Can you do that for me? Try, at
least?”

His eyes cautiously opened. She was too close to get into proper focus, but still beautiful. “Do you
mean that?”

“Yes, I do.”

He nodded and put his hands over hers still on his face, “Okay. I’ll try. For you.”

“You better.”

She slipped her arms around his neck and his went to her waist to pull her close. Their lips almost
managed to touch before Mac opened his eyes back in reality. Hazy sunshine spilled in through the
window and he managed to last a whole five seconds before silent sobs wrecked his body. He
rolled over, curling in on himself and trying to memorize the warm feel of Lucy holding him close
before it faded away again.

He had to get away from here. Had to. He needed to deal with the Gunners, find a way to crack
MedTek and get the hell back to Duncan. Lottie said she needed time? Well, fine. Time and a few
hundred miles might do them both some good.

She was already gone. He couldn’t feel her nearby. She seemed to be an early riser by nature.

He was geared up and storming into Hancock’s office in less than thirty minutes.

“We gotta talk, man.”

The mayor looked up from his paperwork and frowned at him, “The hell is wrong with your
voice?”

Nothing other than he’d spent half the night freezing to death, unconscious in his shower. The cold
that had settled in his chest was annoying, but easily ignored. “Nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

His head tilted, “M’hmm...so what do we gotta talk about exactly?”

“I gotta...look, I appreciate all you’ve done for me. I really do. But this waiting around bullsh-crap
has to stop. I gotta get home, Hancock. You understand? I can’t just be stuck here forever.”

Hancock frowned harder and sat back. “So you just wanna run out there and die, is that it?”

“Of course not.”

“Cause if I recall correctly, aren’t those assholes holed up someplace nice and cozy?”
Mac sighed. He’d almost forgotten about that. “Yeah.”

“M’hmm.” He leaned on his elbows and propped his chin in his hand. “Tell you what, kid. I might actually be able to help you there.”

“What? No. We already talked about this. You’re too important to Goodneighbor to --”

He waved him off, “Nah, I ain’t talkin’ about handling it personally.”

“Then how?”

“I dunno if you’ve heard, but the Minutemen have a new general. She’s uh...she’s got style. Kinda plucky. After that massacre at Quincy, I’m bettin’ she’d be all for taking some of those Gunner fucks out.”

His brow furrowed, “You want me to ask the general of the Minutemen for help?”

“And deprive myself of having a private audience with her? I don’t think so. No, I’ll ask. You just show up. On time for once, if you can manage it.”

He fidgeted in place a little. Being indebted to somebody like that didn’t exactly sound like a good time. “What will it cost me?”

“Nothin’. Time, I guess. Need...maybe two days to get it together.”

“Two whole days, huh? That’s a little slow for you, isn’t it?”

Hancock scoffed, “I can get her to agree to it, and probably a lot more, in under ten minutes. I just happen to know she’s going to be busy setting up another settlement for a couple of days. Hangman’s Alley.”

“I thought raiders had that place.”

“Well, they did, and now they don’t.” He grinned, “She’s somethin’ else. I think you’ll like her.”

He was starting to get suspicious. Hancock seemed oddly invested in this person. Lottie couldn’t possibly be a general though, right? “What’s her name?”

“Charlie. Charlie Apperson. Name doesn’t do her justice though, so I’ve decided to call her Sunshine.”

“General Sunshine. Yeah, that’ll strike fear into the hearts of evil-doers everywhere. I’m sure she’ll love it.”

He chuckled, “I’m only plannin’ on callin’ her that when it’s just us two, if you get my meaning.”

“Uh-huh.”

“So? Can you give me the time or what?”

Mac grumbled, “Fine. Two days.”

“Great! Consider it done.”

Two days later, Lottie and Preston, fresh up from Sanctuary, walked through Goodneighbor’s gate. She scowled as they entered, already on edge. The last time she’d been here, her asshole of a
soulmate had drugged himself and taken her along for the ride. She’d actually passed out in her bathtub. Waking up in the icy water at four in the morning had left her with a nasty kind of congestion in her head. Not to mention she could have drowned. He better damn well hope he was miles away by now. She pulled the scarf she’d wound around her face a little tighter and coughed, drawing her lieutenant’s eye.

“General, I really think you should put this off until you feel better...ma’am.”

She rolled her eyes behind her sunglasses. “It’s just a sore throat, Preston. Stop fussing. Mayor Hancock radioed us and asked for this favor himself. Weren’t you the one saying we needed allies?”

He frowned down at her and stepped a little closer as they headed for the State House. “Yeah, but…”

“But what?”

“This is Goodneighbor we’re talking about. Are you sure you want them as allies?”

Lottie tossed a wave to KL-E-0 as they went past. The combat shotgun she’d purchased from Kill or Be Killed, on the assaultron’s recommendation, had turned out to be exactly her kind of gun. “War makes for strange bedfellows, honey.”

“I guess.”

It was marginally warmer inside the centuries old mansion than outside, but not by much. Lottie was glad she’d picked up a few new sweaters from Daisy. She nodded at the guards stationed outside the Mayor’s office and walked right in.

“Hey, Hancock.”

He turned and frowned a bit, “The hell’s wrong with your voice?”

Her scowl deepened. Why was it that whenever you obviously had a sore throat, everybody suddenly wanted to talk to you about it? Jesus fucking Christ.

Preston, thankfully, spoke for her, “The general has a sore throat today.”

“Huh. Mac here’s nursing some kinda cold. Something must be going around.” He grinned cheekily at her and winked, “You know...as a ghoul, I’m immune to all diseases, both foreign and domestic.”

She huffed irritably. He was somehow less appealing today. She couldn’t say why. Maybe it was because she was still sore from a day of building cozy shacks for local idiots. “Good for you.”

He pouted a little at her clear lack of interest and gestured to the man wearing head to toe leather with some kind of old poncho over it standing next to him. “This here’s MacCready. Best gun in the Commonwealth. He’ll be your sniper for the upcoming festivities.”

Lottie nodded at him. He seemed sorely underfed and underwhelming, but the rifle on his back was gorgeous and well-maintained, and if Hancock said he was the real deal, she’d believe it.

Preston held out his hand for a handshake, “I’m Lieutenant Preston Garvey, and this is General Charlie Apperson. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”
“Yeah.”

His voice was hoarse and gravelly and Lottie felt herself shiver. What was it with men and gravelly voices lately?

“Well, you kids have fun out there. Mac, be sure to check in once you’re done. You know Daisy’d be upset if she thought anything happened to you.”

Mac rolled his eyes behind his assault mask. “Sure.”

He eyed the strange puffball of a person next to Garvey. He’d heard good things about the lieutenant and all, but the girl standing next to him looked like two sticks holding up a pile of pillows. She had to have on at least ten layers of shit over her frail frame and the only thing that even signaled she was a woman was her mouth and even it was barely visible with the knitted muffler she had swaddling her head. Plump and perfectly pink. Like someone had stuck a piece of bubblegum in a glass of milk.

She looked like the type of person who’d shatter if you breathed on them wrong.

Charlie nodded to the mayor before heading out, “Be seeing you.”

“Well, you all take care of each other out there.” He made significant eye contact with Mac, “Just not too good of care, yeah?”

He shook his head and followed the odd pair. Not going to be a problem.
Chapter 4

Preston kind of felt like the meat in a sandwich made of awkward silence as they headed southwest, following I-90 over towards the Mass Pike Interchange. Charlie seemed to be in a particularly bad mood since before he’d arrived to help her at Hangman’s Alley. He’d shown up just in time to watch her beat a nail through a board so hard that it had actually broken the handle of the hammer she’d been using. She still hadn’t calmed down in the slightest, even though she was clearly making an effort to be as pleasant as possible towards him.

He appreciated that.

His former CO, Colonel Hollis, had been a short tempered, taciturn sort of man. Barking orders and strictly maintaining the proper distance between him and his subordinates. Charlie was different though. She called him her friend and meant it and that...well, that meant a lot to him. A whole hell of a lot.

So when he’d found her clearly sick in more ways than one, he’d tried everything he could to get her to stop for a minute and rest. Just a minute. He didn’t think that was asking too much, but she was driven by both vengeance and her (terrifying, frankly) maternal instincts to get to the Institute and make them pay for everything they’d taken from her. His carefully expressed concern in the face of that hadn’t even made a dent.

Now they were on this test run to see just how difficult it would be to take out a squadron of Gunners in preparation for taking back Quincy at some point. Mayor Hancock’s offer of an alliance forged in the blood of their mutual enemies had just come at a bad time, really. It probably *was* smart for them to join forces with the second largest settlement in the Commonwealth. Especially since the first never seemed to want anything to do with them anymore.

Which was pretty rude, in his opinion. Without the Minutemen back in 2180, Diamond City would have fallen ages ago to the super mutants that were constantly trying to overrun it. Historically, they should be their strongest supporters. Mayor McDonough though had always looked down his nose at their militia. Not that he could blame him. There had been a few hard decades between then and now for the Minutemen.

But now they had a new general. Someone clever and thoughtful and *invested*. Things were already starting to turn around. They had Sanctuary, Tenpines, Abernathy, the Slog, Hangman’s Alley...more settlements joined their coalition every week. Charlie’s ability to make friends with anybody and to inspire others was invaluable to the cause.

Too bad her natural, easy charm didn’t seem to affect Diamond City’s mayor.

It had definitely effected Goodneighbor’s though. He could tell. Hancock was known for his flirtatious ways and all, but he could tell the libidinous ghoul was more than just passably interested in Charlie. He wasn’t quite sure how okay with that he was. She didn’t really seem to be his type from what Preston had seen.

He was glad for the loan of Goodneighbor’s famous resident sniper though. MacCready had only been in the Commonwealth for a few months, but he’d already amassed quite the reputation. He knew he’d been involved with the Gunners originally, but given the circumstances, he could forgive that. It wasn’t like they advertised that they were actually just better-dressed raiders. He could completely understand how someone from outside Boston could fall in with bad company like that.
The important thing was that Mac had clearly seen the error of his ways and was now looking for payback himself. Preston knew all about the blacklisting the Gunners had done regarding the sniper. He’d received a few threatening messages himself about the dangerous nature of daring to hire the man.

He had no idea why Mayor Hancock had insisted it be this particular group of Gunners that the three of them take on, but he was glad for the opportunity to put more of these monsters down. Guarding Sanctuary was important, of course, but so was chipping away at these assholes’ numbers. Especially if Charlie’s long-term goal of taking back Quincy was ever going to come to fruition.

When Mama Murphy had explained to her exactly how many friends, and family, they’d lost in that attack, he’d seen how her face had slowly shifted from sympathetic to furious. He’d felt real hope and a renewed sense of determination take root in his heart. Charlie was a sweetheart ninety-nine percent of the time, but man, once you got her mad about something, look out. She turned into a whole different person. A whole different, scary, brutally vicious kind of person.

Sturges had said it was just further proof that she was a natural redhead.

In any case, he’d like to personally be the person to put a bullet in that turncoat bastard, Clint. If he hadn’t defected like he had, they might have actually stood a chance at holding them off. At least more of Quincy’s population would have survived to flee for safety elsewhere.

But if Mac really did know his stuff, he wouldn’t mind seeing a .308 round blow the man’s head off either. So long as it got done.

He cleared his throat a little and Charlie looked back at him. “Feeling okay, ma’am?”

She smiled and nodded, tugging her regular hood down a little more to cover her forehead in an effort to protect it from the icy wind. “Yeah.” Her voice was still hoarse and croaky, but she wasn’t sniffling as much. Maybe her cold was really on the way out.

“Should we break for lunch?”

Charlie shook her head.

“You sure?”

She nodded and went back to watching the road and he sighed.

Preston hated how skinny she’d gotten since they met. When she’d arrived in Concord, in that form-fitting vault suit, she’d reminded him of some kinda Vault-Tec promotional pin-up with how curvy she was. He couldn’t deny checking out her hind end a few times their first couple of days in Sanctuary.

All that had been before he’d known her story though. How she’d been recently widowed and her son had been kidnapped. When she’d finally sat down and explained the situation, he’d felt absolutely awful for the way he’d been secretly leering at her whenever she wasn’t looking. It just felt disrespectful to after that.

Nowadays though, she was, in her words, ‘so skinny you couldn’t hit me with a handful of corn’. Her pre-war digestive system was having a hard time adjusting to the rads in everything and she hadn’t found a way to keep anything down long enough for her body to make proper use of it. It made him worry like crazy to watch her slowly waste away like she was.
He turned his head and glanced back at Mac. Guy was super skinny, too. The poncho he was wearing gave him an illusion of substance, but Preston was pretty sure he actually looked like a skeleton under his clothes. You’d think he’d have fattened up hanging around Goodneighbor like he had been. The Third Rail was pretty famous for its decadent menu. Maybe he was just naturally inclined to be that way though.

Mac noticed Preston staring at him and gave him a polite nod. So far, this trip wasn’t too bad. At least it was quiet. The little general, Charlie, was leading the way, shotgun at the ready, and she clearly knew exactly where she was going, so that was nice. Preston didn’t seem to want to play the ‘get to know you’ game a lot of idiots did, and that was also nice.

If it weren’t for the burning feeling in his throat and the way his body kept suggesting he go lay down for a few days, this excursion would probably be a blast.

He was also distracted by the bristly quiet coming from Lottie. He knew she was still pissed, but he hadn’t excepted this radio silence to go on so long. She was keeping him at the absolute maximum distance possible between them and he couldn’t even get a feel for if she was nearby or not. For all he knew, she’d fucked off to New Vegas or something.

His finger tapped on the stock of his rifle for a minute while he considered attempting to make contact, but he ultimately decided not to risk it. Yes, this frostiness was worrisome, but he had a job to do. Getting into it with her while bullets flew and bodies hit the ground was probably a very bad idea.

Charlie suddenly stopped ahead of them and held up a hand, head tilted and her attention on something neither he or Preston could see yet. Mac stopped and immediately backed up ten feet while her lieutenant came forward and spoke quietly with her. He nodded and turned back to Mac, raising his voice only enough to be heard.

“The general says we should stop for a bit. Radstorm’s coming.”

He grunted in agreement to save his voice and followed them into a nearby hardware store. They were already more than halfway to the interchange, so they could afford to make a few stops. It’s not like they could attack before nightfall anyway.

Mac made a face behind his mask. Oh, man, please let them know they couldn’t attack before nightfall. Shit.

Charlie lead them into the thoroughly looted store like she’d already been here before. He noticed a few fresh bloodstains here and there while they walked through some kind of appliance warehouse in the back and figured maybe she had. Hancock had told him the general was personally handling clearing out Boston proper of all raiders, ferals and super mutants.

Seemed like an overly ambitious task for a twig to undertake, but hey, whatever blew her skirt up.

They went up an old set of rickety stairs and ended up in some kind of office. There was a desk near a rotted out hole in the floor in the corner and a couple of couches by the door. She immediately flopped on one. Preston took a seat next to her and Mac got a couch all to himself. Nice.

The lieutenant seemed a little twitchy now that they were all stuck in the same room together. He smiled nervously at Mac, “So...living in Goodneighbor? What’s that like?”

He rolled his eyes and wordlessly tapped at his throat and Preston immediately apologized.
“Oh, right. Right, sorry, my bad. I forgot you’ve got a cold, too.” He frowned to himself, “Man, I really hope something isn’t going around. We don’t need another flu like last year.”

Charlie tapped the side of his boot with her own and gave him a small smile when he looked over.

“Yeah, I know. Don’t borrow trouble.”

She nodded and snuggled back into the old couch, leaning her head against the cushions and sighing.

“You sure you don’t want anything to eat?”

She nodded and tucked her hands into her pockets.

“Just gonna sleep, huh?”

“M’hmm.”

Preston’s nose scrunched up just a bit, but he didn’t argue. Instead he turned to Mac and grinned a little. “You wouldn’t believe what a chatterbox she usually is.”

Her head came up briefly and she kicked his boot, hard. It only made him laugh.

Mac chuckled and set his rifle carefully on the floor before laying down on his couch, using his pack as a pillow. The Minutemen on the whole seemed to be a bunch of idealistic idiots to him, but these two weren’t so bad. The easy way they communicated with each other made him wonder if maybe they weren’t soulmates, actually. They vibed with each other so well. Most people didn’t exactly announce that kind of thing to strangers. Too risky. If they weren’t, he was actually impressed with their synchronicity.

It was cold enough that he kept his mask on. His whole body seemed to be carved of ice today. When it wasn’t burning up, anyway. If this had been any other job, he’d have begged off, but it couldn’t be helped. Getting Winlock and Barnes out of the way was step one to getting his son saved. Once those bastards weren’t cockblocking him at every turn, he could pick up more jobs, which meant more caps. More caps meant he could afford to hire as many people as he needed to help him get through MedTek.

Hell, maybe he could even take a few more Minutemen missions. They probably had a list of targets a mile long if Charlie was looking to make the entire Commonwealth a safe place to live.

Of course, that meant impressing the hell out of them today. He was already doing better than he normally would, since he couldn’t run his mouth. All he had to do now was show off his skills in the field a little and bam. He could negotiate his way into being the general’s contract killer of choice. Easy.

He opened one eye and watched her from across the room. No way to get a read on her yet. Preston followed her around like a lovesick puppy though, and the man had a rep for being intelligent and an all-around decent guy, so she probably wasn’t a bitch. Mac still thought she looked ridiculous. All those layers had her looking like she was headed on an expedition to the arctic. Off to cuddle with some polar bears...if they still existed. He literally had no idea. He’d just read about them in an encyclopedia back in Lamplight.

Her spindly little legs barely touched the floor, the boots at the end of them looking comically large compared to the rest of her. She reminded him of a cartoon character. Or a little kid.
He knew she wasn’t, of course. Hancock had said she was hot. If she were a kid, he’d have already put the word out that no one was to mess with her. Instead Mac had been forced to endure two days of him waxing poetic about her bubblegum pink lips and the big brown eyes she kept hidden behind those aviators.

Even if she was cute and even if he hadn’t already formed a bond with Lottie, Mac wouldn’t have been interested. He was already skinny enough on his own. Trying to get down with someone equally bony wasn’t very appealing to him.

Shit, if he wanted to go that route, he’d just fuck Hancock himself.

She shifted just a little, head tilting to the side and her mouth easing into a surprisingly alluring pout, just barely visible between the layers of fabric that covered most of her face, as she finally got comfortable enough to relax. He found himself unable to look away for almost a full minute, a tiny spark of interest taking root low in his stomach.

Okay, so maybe there was something about her. He wasn't going to chase after her or anything, but he probably wouldn’t turn her away if the opportunity ever presented itself, at least.

*Thinking about me?*

That spark fled as terror spread through him. Shit. She’d actually felt that. Mac froze and tried to think up a response that wouldn’t piss her off anymore than she already was, but she beat him to it.

*Want a few details to make it easier to imagine?*

He frowned in confusion. She didn’t seem angry at him anymore, but there was a strong undercurrent of simmering fury underneath everything else. Maybe she’d found a new target for her wrath. Nice.

*Sure, that’d be great.*

She laughed softly and her tone immediately changed. Gentle and concerned. *Are you okay?*

*Yeah. Why?*

*Because you feel cold.*

*Something’s going around. It’s no big deal.*

*Yeah, I’ve heard that. Lots of people are sick, I guess.*

*Yup.*

*Look, RJ, I’m sorry for how angry I was with you the other night. I was just...mad at the whole dang world and feeling...things, and I dunno. I lashed out, I guess. You were just trying to help and all. I get that. I’m sorry...and I’m sorry if I hurt you.*

*Hurt me? Why do you think you hurt me?*

There was a long moment of thoughtful silence. *Well, don’t most addicts use stuff to cope with hurt and whatever?*

He frowned harder, *I’m not an addict.*

*Oh, come on, honey. I felt you use something. Something strong enough that it got to me, too...I*
was in the bathtub, you know. You almost drowned me.

Shit. She really had been in that room with the fancy tub and everything. *Damn. Lottie, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize.*

*I know. I mean, I was madder than a wet hen for a while over it, but I figured you wouldn’t have known.*

Mac winced a little. He’d known exactly what he was doing actually. He just hadn’t known she’d be in the worst possible place for it. Not that he was going to tell her that, though. *Yeah.*

*If I drove you to that --*

No. No, you...I’m not an addict, Lottie. I just use stuff recreationally.

*Uh-huh. Next you’ll say ‘I can quit anytime I want, I just don’t want to right now’.*

He huffed, *No, I won’t, because that’s something only an addict would say.*

*M’hmm.*

*If it really bothers you though, then I’ll stop.*

She took her time answering, *Would you really?*

Sure. *I mean, I’d probably have to still use Med-X now and then. Occupational hazard and all, but yeah.*

*What do you do for a living, if you don’t mind me asking?*

Shit. He was in the same situation he’d been with Lucy when the only job he’d been able to find after getting booted from the Brotherhood had been running with a group of bloodthirsty mercs collectively known as Talon Company back home. Lottie had already assumed he was some kind of chem fiend. He didn’t want her knowing he was nothing but a hired gun, too. Not yet, anyway. His eyes wandered back to Charlie and Preston.

*Bodyguard.*

*Oh.*

*What do you do? Besides sitting around looking pretty, I mean.*

You don’t know I’m pretty.

*I can feel it.*

Lottie laughed, *Okay, Romeo...well, I guess I’m...uh...I’m a community organizer.*

Mac almost snorted. *Yeah, that didn’t sound like a totally fake, made up lie at all. I totally believe you ‘cause I’m just that dumb.*

*No, I really am!*

Okay, sure. *Sure you are...what’s a community organizer supposed to be then?*

You know, I get settlements organized. *Make sure everybody has a job that matches their skill set.*
That kinda thing.

Huh. She actually didn’t sound like she was lying at all. Her job kinda seemed like something Lucy would have been good at. Do you do a lot of work for the Minutemen?

Yes, I do.

Do they pay well?

They do, actually. How do you think I afforded my house in Diamond City?

Oh, the shithole you wanted me to burn to the ground?

The very same...and shithole or not, it was still expensive.

I don’t doubt it. He let himself relax under the influence of her good humor for a moment before asking the question he had to ask. Hey, so...what had you so mad anyway? Or do you not want to talk about it?

She sighed. No, I can talk about it. I just...okay, I killed Kellogg and all. I got him. He was the man who murdered Nate.

Yeah, you told me when you were three sheets to the wind.

Okay. Well...it’s just...I thought I’d feel better, you know? Killing him was almost all I could think about and then it happened and I’m just...

Empty.

Yes! That’s exactly it! I don’t feel anything about it at all! It felt amazing in the moment but once the adrenaline wore off...

Yeah.

It pisses me off. I’m so tired of feeling sad and hopeless all the damn time.

Mac tried to convey understanding and comfort through their link and felt her warm response. Almost felt like a hug. It’s because he didn’t suffer enough.

What?

When that asshole ruined your life like he did, the pain he inflicted on you was...huge. Incalculable. Even if you’d taken him apart piece by piece, inch by inch, and made him suffer as much as you possibly could, it still wouldn’t have balanced the scales. You’d still have pain left over...and now, you’re just stuck with that feeling and no way to lance it, so it just festers and rots you from the inside out.

She was very quiet when she responded, Spoken like someone’s who’s been there.

Yeah...yeah, I...well, you probably figured out I had a wife once myself. She um...she died. Torn apart by ferals and I couldn’t stop it. Couldn’t do anything to save her. Now, whenever I see one of those fucking monsters, I just...lose it. They make me so angry everything just goes red...and it’s so dumb. The ferals who tore Lucy apart are hundreds of miles away from here, but it doesn’t matter. It’s like they’re all connected in my head.

Oh, honey. I’m so sorry.
Yeah...I’m sorry about Nate, too.

Thanks.

What really sucks though is most of my friends are ghouls, right? Actually...now that I’m thinking about it, they pretty much all are. But sometimes I can’t even stand to be around them. I know there’s a difference. I know a feral is no more a ghoul than a...than a super mutant is still a person, but there are days when I just can’t. I just can’t take seeing them. I don’t want to be one of those asshole bigots. Some jerk who just hates anything that isn’t human, but there are days when I feel like that and it makes me...it makes me feel so ashamed of myself.

Mac had never told anyone how he felt in the aftermath of Lucy’s grisly death. How could he when the two people he leaned on the hardest where both ghouls themselves? He felt disgusted with himself. More so than usual. Lottie’s silence wasn’t helping the sick, twisting feel of mortification building in his stomach.

I get that.

He blinked, What?

I get how you feel. I um...well, Nate, he got hurt once. A long, long time ago. Barely even made it home. The people who did it...I know, logically, that they weren’t all like that, of course, but...it made it hard to look at the people who looked like them and not have hate in my heart towards them.

Oh.

I never told anybody how I felt. Not even Nate. He was a very...high-minded sort of person and he would have been so disappointed in me. He always said that having an ‘us vs them’ mentality was why the world was the way it was...and I mean, I agreed with him and all, it’s just...

It was hard to put that kind of thinking into practice?

Yeah. It was.

You tried to though, right?

Every damn day.

That’s all that matters...I’m sorry you’re going through all this shit, and I’m sorry I can’t be there to help you through it.

No, it’s better that you aren’t. What I’m doing...it’s dangerous. The people Kellogg gave my baby to are not to be trifled with. I’d hate to drag you into it, too.

You know who has your son?

Yeah.

Well, shit, sweetheart. Give me a name and a direction.

Lottie laughed, No...well, maybe I would if I could, but I’m still working out the details on that...and anyway, it makes me feel better to know you aren’t involved. I...I dunno what I’d do if you got hurt.

He forgot to breathe for a second. She actually meant it. Maybe he had a chance after all. You won’t
have to worry about me soon anyway. I’ll be headed back to the Capitol Wasteland by spring, probably. When her disappointment immediately washed over him, he grinned. Ah ha. He knew it. She did want him to stick around.

Oh, that’s...that’s nice.

Yeah, it’ll be good to be home.

M’hmm. I bet.

Nothing like the open road.

Yup.

Mac almost laughed out loud. She was so determined to act like she was totally cool with this. Course...the open road gets a little lonely sometimes.

Her tone changed into that wary irritation she always seemed to get just before he hit her with one of his best lines. Like she could tell they were coming. Oh, yeah?

Probably have a lot of time to myself, too.

Hmm.

Might get a little...distracting for you. Her amplified side of their link would guarantee that she’d get hit with a rush of arousal every time he whacked off. He’d held off on doing anything like that thus far, not wanting to upset her or anything, but come on. She couldn’t expect him to go full monk the rest of his life. Even if he wasn’t getting proper road head or anything, he had a right to at least get himself off occasionally.

She was right back to being pissy with him, I highly doubt there’s anything you could possibly do that would be that distracting.

I dunno...be pretty hard to interview settlers or whatever when there’s a party happening in your pretty pink panties, wouldn’t it?

Lottie huffed, My panties and what goes on inside of them are no business of yours.

Pretty sure you’re wrong about that.

Well, who’s to say I won’t get lonely myself? Ever think of that?

Oh ho ho. Now they were getting somewhere. Lucy would have died of embarrassment before she ever masturbated...not that she’d ever really had a reason to with him around, but still.

He grinned, Actually I think about that all the time.

She sighed heavily, Yeah, I bet you do. You know, I had a moment there where I really thought you were wise beyond your years and all, but now I can see that you are actually perpetually stuck at thirteen.

Maybe that’s exactly what you need. Somebody who’s not so damn serious all the time and knows how to have a little fun.

Her voice practically dripped with sarcasm, Oh, yes, that’s exactly what I need. Some clown humpin’ my leg twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.
Mac let the idea of her slipping into that warm bath in Goodneighbor bloom in his mind. Her soap-slick skin had been almost within reach. So fucking close. If he’d known she was there when he’d decided to try and put a stop to that maelstrom of emotions she’d been caught up in, he’d have gone a whole other direction. A messy, delicious, depraved kind of direction.

_Do your freckles cover your whole body, or just your face?_  
_That’s none of your business, either!_

_I’m only asking because if its your whole body, I’m absolutely going to play connect the dots with my mouth._

Stunned silence met him and he smirked. There was movement from the other side of the room that caught his attention and he pressed pause on torturing Lottie to check in on his two companions.

Preston was snoring peacefully, an arm thrown over the side of the couch, his fingers twitching occasionally. Dreaming.

Charlie though was curled up in some uncomfortable looking ball, her back to the room and her head on the armrest. She made some kind of disquieted chirping sound, drawing her legs even closer to her chest, and he narrowed his eyes. Fever dream perhaps? Maybe she was sicker than she was letting on.

Fuck. He was going to be pissed if she ended up giving him pneumonia or something equally disgusting. Satisfied that he was, for all intents and purposes, alone in the room, he turned back to Lottie.

_Wish you were here right now._

_You need to stop._

_Oh, yeah?_  
_Yeah._

_Why? Cause you like it too much?  
_Not at all. I’m just...busy today._

_You always say that._

_Well, it’s always true._

_You should learn to take it easy._

She scoffed, _And I suppose you’re gonna volunteer to teach me, huh? God, you are so predictable._  
_Not at all. If anything I’m hoping you’ll teach me some stuff._

_What?_  
_Well, you’re older and all...if I’m a naughty student, are you gonna punish me?_  
_Oh, my God._
A little spanking, maybe? Oh! What if I write ‘I will be a good boy’ one hundred times. With my tongue. On your --

Stop.

He chuckled, You know I can feel you, too, right? I know you’re at least a little interested.

You shouldn’t confuse involuntary bodily responses with genuine interest. It’s reflexive and you know it.

Exactly, which is why I’m never going to have to teach you to take it easy. When the time comes, you’re gonna take it real, real easy.

I swear to God if you were here right now I’d slap the taste clean out of your mouth.

He considered it. Alright, yeah, I could definitely be into that. We can try that sometime.

Don’t you have anything better to do than aggravate me all damn day?

Mac smiled, Actually, I do. I’m at work right now.

Jesus. You’re like this at work?

Well it’s not like the job’s hard or anything. Plus the people I’m with are crazy boring...which is why I’m free to fantasize about how cute you’re going to look bouncing on my --

RJ!

I’m just saying. You know as well as I do that once our link is balanced, it’s going to hit you like a runaway vertibird. You won’t be able to help yourself.

We’ll see about that.

Yeah, we will.

Get back to work, RJ.

He pouted, Aw. You’re going to abandon me to these nerds?

Don’t be ugly. I’m sure they’re nice...and if they aren’t, well, you deserve it.

He sighed, Well at least tell me what you’re up to today so I can picture it better.

No.

Come on.

Fine...I’m just running a few errands.

Back in Diamond City?

No, not back in Diamond City. They’re errands for work.

Ah. So equally boring shit. What are you wearing?

Goodbye, RJ. Have a nice day at work.
Be nicer if you were waiting for me to come home after a long, hard day. So, so hard.

Uh-huh.

Mac chuckled quietly and let her go. He’d bet big caps her cute little face was the color of a tato right now.

Across the room, Charlotte pressed her forehead against the cold leather of the ruined couch and took a deep breath to try and calm down. The mouth on that man. She’d never known someone so forward in all her life. Even with Nate, he’d...well, actually, she’d been the forward one in their relationship. Even when he was overseas, she’d wait for him to signal it was all clear and then immediately fill his head with whispers about all the naughty things she was going to do to him when he got home.

Maybe this was some kind of karma or something.

She heard the sniper, Mac, chuckle low and rumbly, and shivered again. At least somebody was having pleasant dreams.

The last dream she could remember having had broken her heart all over again. Nate and her under their favorite tree in Boston Commons. He’d been so sad, apologizing again and again. It had felt absurdly real and she was actually worried his spirit was stuck in some kind of purgatory. That his guilt over not stopping Shaun’s abduction was keeping him chained here.

Charlotte wasn’t even sure if she believed in an afterlife. She’d gone to church with everybody growing up, knew all the hymns and said all the prayers, but she’d never felt anything. One of her aunts would actually speak in tongues sometimes, supposedly filled with the Holy Spirit or something, but she’d always just thought she was a drama queen who liked the attention. Honestly, she’d never even cared about that stuff. She had Nate. She’d always had Nate. His voice was the only one she ever needed to guide her through life.

Now he was gone though, and she remained, constantly aware of that silence where there’d always been a comforting kind of quiet strength for her to fall back on. She desperately hoped that Nate was in heaven, happy and free. Even if it wasn’t the fluffy clouds and singing angels she’d learned about in Sunday school, she just wanted him to be someplace nice. Someplace not like this world.

She’d had a few dreams of him before that. Silly, strange things like the two of them fighting giant ants for some reason, or building a city in a cave. What the heck was that supposed to be about? Had to be too many B movies and a few too many hikes through Mammoth Cave back home or something. She liked how scruffy and assertive he was in those dreams though, even if he didn’t always look quite right. Sometimes his eyes, usually so dark blue that they almost looked purple, would shimmer for a second and remind her of a bright summer sky. His hair, too, was weird when the light caught it. Looking almost chestnut even though she knew it was black.

Since that last one though, back in Goodneighbor when RJ had been an idiot and knocked them both out, she hadn’t dreamed at all. She hoped it meant he’d accepted her forgiveness and truly moved on. No matter how much she missed seeing him, she really, really hoped he had.

The Pipboy she was wearing, hidden under a good four layers of clothing, beeped softly at her. Storm was over.

Charlotte sighed and eased off the couch, stretching a bit and making a face when her back popped all the way up. And to think, she used to bitch and moan about how their feather mattress was too soft. Puh. She’d been an ungrateful idiot back then.
She slipped her sunglasses back on and rearranged her scarf a little, keeping her mouth and nose both covered. Her kingdom for a tin of Sucrets cough drops! There was another thing she’d taken for granted. Her throat felt like it was on fire. She wasn’t even sure if anything was out there making honey anymore, either. How the hell was she supposed to make her throat feel better without a lozenge or honey? Fuck.

Preston woke easy enough, just a tap to the side of his boot had him snapping to attention like some kind of wind-up toy soldier.

He blinked up at her and rubbed his eyes, “We good?” She nodded and motioned to her wrist then gave him a thumbs up. All clear. “Oh, good.”

She backed up enough for him to get up and stretch himself.

“Hey, Mac. General says it’s time to move.”

The sniper rolled off the couch, onto his feet, and gave her a perky little salute before picking up his pack.

Charlotte narrowed her eyes at him. Why did it feel like he was mocking her somehow? She checked to make sure her shotgun was ready and headed out, assuming the two men would follow and not looking back.

Mac scowled behind his mask as she went. It seemed like she was strutting a little extra prissy for some reason. Like she had anything to strut to begin with. Preston gave him a friendly smile and he nodded before taking up the rear. He kinda felt bad for the guy. Charlie had gone from being pretty loose and relaxed, a neutral sort of presence, to practically radiating irritation for no discernible reason. Had to be a pain in the ass following such a flighty, capricious kind of leader.

Outside the storm may have passed, but it was still brutally cold and windy. Middle of December in the Commonwealth meant winds coming in off the Atlantic had an especially sharp bite and he shivered under his poncho. He was still pretty sure he was warmer under it than in his usual gear though and was grateful Daisy had suggested it. If he’d gone out in nothing but leather, he’d have hypothermia by now.

They crossed the Charles River with minimum interference. Just a few stray raiders that he was able to spot way far out. Charlie and Preston both stopped and watched every time he took a shot. He smirked a little at the way the general’s head would tilt thoughtfully whenever another head exploded into pink mist. Her lieutenant was a little more open with the praise, whistling low or giving him a smile and a thumbs up every time. Clearly they recognized the skill he was all too happy to show off.

Mac had been sniping for over thirteen years. Ever since he’d become mayor of Lamplight at seven. His confirmed kill list was well past triple digits by now. They’d be lucky to have him on their payroll.

He just hoped they realized that.

Charlie made an abrupt right turn and followed the path between the river and I-95, heading north instead of continuing west to the interchange. Mac frowned but decided to not question it. The decision paid off a few minutes later when Preston turned back to him and grinned, a conspiratorial kind of gleam in his eye.

“The general was through here just the other day and noticed a lift up the way. It’s totally
unguarded and we should have a clear path right to the Gunner’s base.”

His eyebrow went up at that. He hadn’t known there was a second lift set up anywhere around here. Seemed too good to be true. “Trap?” Goddamn, it felt like every letter of every word he spoke was rolled in broken glass, but he managed to get it out anyway.

“Nope. It’s kinda hidden. We think it’s some kind of emergency escape thing or whatever.”

Huh. Well, that did sound like Barnes. The guy always had a million contingency plans for every possible scenario. He nodded and gave a thumbs up and they continued on.

There was absolutely nothing of interest out this way. Just a few old boarded up houses and the occasional rotting feral corpse. If Charlie had actually cleared this place out, she’d done a damn fine job of it.

Almost an hour later, they headed off road, up a steep embankment that had her slipping a few times. He noticed how quick Preston was to settle his hands on her hips to steady her and smirked again.

If they weren’t soulmates, at the very least they were fucking. Had to be. He had a pretty good view of her ass from his position and it wasn’t bad, he guessed. Her baggy jeans weren’t doing a thing for it, and she was still a little too scrawny for his tastes, but the shape of it was nice. Whole thing would probably fit in one hand. Mac snickered at the idea and shook his head.

Thank God he could barely talk today or he’d definitely have been fired by now.

A simple yellow lift was indeed set up at the top of the ridge, completely unguarded. No mines, traps, nothing. Arrogant assholes. They rode up while the last lingering rays of the setting sun turned everything gold and his eyes caught the nervous way Charlie clutched at Preston’s coat. Not one for heights, then.

They hopped off and immediately sank low as a group. The Gunner’s base was visible maybe a thousand yards up the broken road, turrets chugging along, guarding a barricade that only had one narrow entrance. A perfect kill zone.

Great...that was...yeah, that was just great.

Charlie and Preston turned and headed away, further north up the interstate, stopping only when a large, burned out bus blocked them entirely from view. They both immediately dropped their packs and she took a seat on the pavement.

The general glanced up at him and patted the ground next to her. Time to talk strategy. He took one last careful look around before coping a squat, using the butt of his rifle for balance. She might want to freeze her bony butt off on the frigid concrete, but he’d pass, thank you very much.

Preston plopped down next to her and cheerfully passed over a thermos, completely ignoring the exasperated sigh she gave him. When he noticed she wasn’t opening it, he gave her a stern sort of look that wouldn’t intimidate a kitten.

“Come on, don’t be that way. Mama Murphy’s always said fern root tea was just the thing for a cold.”

She huffed and little and tugged down her scarf enough to expose her mouth before unscrewing the thermos’s cap in the brattiest way possible and taking a drink of the steaming liquid. The way her freckled nose scrunched up after, it had to be gross.
Preston seemed satisfied though and nodded, “Alright then.” He turned his attention to Mac. “So here’s the plan...and let me know if you have any kind of recommendations or anything. You’re the expert here. The general and I will set up two minefields. One outside that barricade we saw and another further in. Our recon told us they’ve got an assaultron and some decent power armor, so I’ve got a few pulse mines, too.”

Mac nodded. At least they came prepared. His eyes kept being drawn to the hilariously dramatic stank faces Charlie was making though and he had to fight from laughing out loud.

“Once everything is set up, Charlie’s going to get their attention and try to lure them through the fields. Now, this is the important part for you. We want you set up as far back as you can and take down anyone not immediately blown to bits. How does that sound?”

Sounded like a hell of a good way for them to get shot, actually. Mac cleared his throat a little and whispered, “You’ll never get close enough for that.”

Preston grinned, “We’ve got stealthboys. We’re going to get right up under their noses before they even realize anything is happening.”

Okay. That raised their odds from terrible to doable. He nodded.

“After the fight starts, I’ll concentrate on taking out the assaultron, if it’s still operational. Charlie’s going after the power armor.”

Seriously? Send a little girl against a steel killing machine? Mac shook his head at that, but the lieutenant didn’t seem fussed.

“Oh, don’t worry about her. She’s practically an expert on breaking suits of power armor. Isn’t that right, General?”

She just stuck her tongue out at him and he laughed. Mac’s brain for some reason only registered that it was almost the exact same shade of pink as her lips were.

He blinked a few times and willed away the confusing, dangerous scenarios that threatened to fill his head and tapped his watch a few times. “When?”

“We’ll hit them right after sundown. Our intel says these guys tend to wait until the second night falls and then they lower their guard. Drinking and whatnot.” He shook his head, “Terrible discipline.”

Charlie nodded along and screwed the cap back on the thermos before handing it back to Preston. He shook it a little and frowned at her.

“You barely drank any of it!” She just shrugged and he shook his head. “I dunno how you expect to get better if you don’t take care of yourself.”

She glared at him a moment over her sunglasses and went back to tucking her muffler back into place. Mac could see her eyes were dark through the tinted lenses on his mask, but if they really were ‘chocolate brown and soft as velvet’, like Hancock had said, he couldn’t tell. They just looked dark and cranky to him.

Preston just rolled his eyes and set the thermos aside. “Anyway. Let’s all go ahead and get in position. It’s almost showtime.”

Mac nodded and stood, glancing around. He could always climb to the roof of the bus. It would be
comfortable, safe and nearly undetectable. Charlie walked past him, Preston hot on her heels and he shook his head.

He had a feeling they were going to need him a little closer than that.

They both went low as soon as the base came within sight, and shimmered into nothing as they moved around a broken concrete barrier. Even knowing they were there, Mac could barely see them in the twilight. Shit might actually work.

He decided to set up right behind the guardrail. It was sturdy and he was in even deeper darkness with the shadows thrown by the upper levels of the road above him. He’d focus on the turrets flanking the Gunner’s barricade first. They’d be relentless and have better aim than the fuckers who’d set them up. If something was going to mow Charlie down, they’d be it.

Little mines started appearing along the road, the red light winking merrily at him every time the Minutemen set one in place. He was pretty impressed. Charlie seemed to laying them out in a pretty standard staggered pattern that would ensure maximum destruction while still enabling her to run through the field without getting her own legs blown out from under her. Smart.

Minutes ticked by. He thought he saw her reappear for a second, and the turrets immediately ticked up to attention, but then went back to their regular patrolling and he breathed a sigh of relief. She must have activated another stealthboy.

Damn. These rubes had serious caps. They could definitely afford him. Absolutely.

A few more minutes passed and then there was some kind of commotion from inside the barricade. Lots of shouting and epithets and even a few explosions here and there, then Charlie suddenly ran out from the encampment. She was surprisingly swift for a short shit and a whole horde of idiots were running behind her, weapons raised and ready.

The turrets whirled to life and Mac took them both out before they managed to fire even a single shot. Some of the Gunners chasing her seemed to sense this was a bad idea and slowed, but not enough to avoid the deep wall of mines she’d set up. He watched her easily jump from safe space to safe space and chuckled at the clumsy fools who tried to follow her path. Most of them ended up blown to smithereens, a leg lost here, a torso exploded there. Mac only had to take out maybe every fifth one.

Which was handy. Fewer bullets wasted. Ammo was expensive, after all.

Charlie finally reached the end of the field and spun around, her combat shotgun taking care of two stragglers who were standing frozen with fear behind her. Larger, brighter explosions had started happening deep within their base and she immediately took off at a sprint towards it.

Mac grumbled a little, but followed anyway. What kind of idiot ran towards shit like that? Honestly.

He didn’t bother trying to catch up, just set up shop inside the Gunners’ own barricade, high up on a platform right by the smoldering wreckage of a turret. Round after round flew through the air and he turned it into a game in his head, trying to see how many kills he could steal from Charlie as she bobbed and weaved in and out of view.

One perfect shot right through the ear of an idiot she was less than a foot from covered her in a bright red spray, causing her to jump. She turned back towards him, a hand on her hip and somehow managing to convey a chastising sort of air from two hundred yards away. Mac laughed
and waved in response, his grin only growing at the irritated way she threw her hands up at him before heading back into the fray.

Alright. He had to admit these Minutemen might not be quite as boring as he’d originally thought. Maybe.

Preston, his coat still smoldering a little, finally appeared and he grabbed Charlie’s arm as he passed, saying something to her that had her nodding. They split up and Mac watched as a man in power armor came clomping through the smoke. He took the shot, and watched his bullet shatter on the helmet. Goddamn shit. He needed armor-piercing rounds to get through something like that. His only hope of contributing at all was if he could hit the fusion core, but there was no fucking way from the angle he was stuck at.

The lieutenant fired a few bright shots from his laser musket, right across the Gunner’s field of vision. Mac frowned for a second at how stupid that was before he realized what was happening. Preston was the bait. Must have drawn the short straw.

His laser bolts ineffectively ricocheted off the steel plating and he backed up quickly, always just staying out of reach of the impressive power sledge being swung at his head. Finally though, he found himself pressed back against another bus set up as housing quarters and Mac’s hands tightened on his rifle. Whatever was happening better happen soon or Preston was going to be a whole foot shorter in a second.

Charlie suddenly sprang out of the smoke and landed on the power armor’s back. The man inside stumbled forward a little, overbalanced by her weight so high up, and managed to grab her by the coat and sling her away.

Mac flinched as she hit the pavement, bouncing a little thanks to her many layers as she skidded along. Still had to hurt like hell though.

Smoke had started to pour from the fusion core and Preston bolted away while the power armor’s operator turned in confused circles, clearly trying to figure out what was happening. The handle of a combat knife was just barely visible through the sparking. Charlie had still managed to sabotage the suit.

She was just getting back on her feet when Preston hauled her up like a sack of potatoes over his shoulder and sprinted towards the barricade. The suit started beeping behind them, the outer casing around the fusion core turning orange and then red before it finally overheated and red lined, erupting in a massive explosion and barbecuing whoever was still trapped inside the suit along with it.

He looked back at the fireball and slowed to a jog now that the danger had passed, only setting Charlie down once they were back to where Mac now stood, clapping and jumping up and down since he couldn’t shout.

Gone. Fucking gone! Just like that, his biggest obstacle for getting his son saved was blown away. Fuckers never even knew what had hit them.

Mac grinned down at the lieutenant and earned a grin back when he gave him two very enthusiastic thumbs up.

“Yeah! We did good!” Preston looked down at Charlie, “Right?”

She nodded and gave him a more subdued thumbs up. “Right.”
He jumped down to join them on the pavement, “Sorry about your couture, General.” It came out barely above a whisper and was painful as hell, but the irritated stance she immediately shifted into made it worth it.

“Yeah.” Her entire front was covered in blood. Even if she hadn’t sustained a few bullet holes here and there, all her layers were essentially ruined. Charlie tapped Preston on the chest then motioned to Mac and then the wreckage behind them before walking away back down the interstate.

Preston nodded, “Yup. On it.”

Mac watched her go, worried he’d fucked up with his smart mouth (again), when the sweet sound of jangling caps caught his attention. He turned just in time to take the large bags the Minuteman was pulling from his pack and holding out for him.

He paused and counted the burlap sacks in Mac’s arms and then nodded to himself. “Alright, that’s all of it. One thousand caps and you get first pick of the gear, of course. We’ll send some guys along later to grab whatever you don’t want. Give you twenty-four hours, at least.” Preston held out his hand and Mac just barely managed to shake it. “It was real treat. You do damn fine work. Let Mayor Hancock know we appreciate the recommendation when you see him, alright? I’m sure we’ll have other work for you later, too, if you’re interested.”

Was this a dream? Mac couldn’t believe this was actually happening to him. Winlock and Barnes were out of the equation, and he’d just been paid more than he’d ever been paid for a single job in his life, plus he got first pick over all this sweet, sweet loot? And the Minutemen were planning on hiring him again? Shit. Holy fucking shit. How the hell had Hancock pulled this off?

Where had these assholes been when he’d first arrived in the Commonwealth? He could have already been headed back home by now if he’d joined up with them from the jump.

He finally managed to answer him, “Yeah. Yeah, man, sounds good.”

Preston grinned and thumped him on the back. “Alright! We’ll be seein’ you. Take care of that cold, alright?” He turned away and then paused, “You wouldn’t want some of this tea, would you? I’ve got like, three thermoses with me.”

Mac chuckled and shook his head. The way Charlie had grimaced with every sip guaranteed he’d never drink fern root tea in his life. No fucking way.

He shook his head, “Smart. That shit’s disgusting.” He waved one last time and jogged off after the general.

Mac watched him go for a minute, still momentarily stunned at what had just happened before hurriedly stuffing the one thousand - one thousand! - caps into his duffel and all but dancing deeper into the ruined compound, kicking a few Gunner corpses here and there for funsies. He hadn’t had fortune smile on him like this since Lucy had been around. She’d always joked that she was his lucky charm and he’d started to believe she’d been right; that all his luck had died with her.

Maybe things really were starting to turn around.

Back down old I-95, Charlie waited for Preston at the lift. She’d be damned if she rode this rickety death trap by herself. He finally came into view and she waved.

“Ready?”
“Yup. MacCready seemed pretty happy with everything. I think he’ll definitely sign on to help us take back Quincy. Maybe even the Castle, too.”

She nodded and pressed the button. A thousand caps had seemed like a crazy amount, but Hancock had insisted Mac was the best of the best, and if you wanted that kind of skill, you had to pay for it. She’d learned that the hard way ages ago when Nate had cheaped out with a plumber and the whole damn house had flooded. Sometimes you just had to suck it up and pay the big bucks if you wanted a job done right. Preston started unwinding the scarf around her face and she looked up at him, one eyebrow raised in a clear question.

“You look like you should be in some horror movie. If we walk into Diamond City without cleaning up a little first, they’re going to think you’re some kind of raider.”

“Pssh.” Charlotte rolled her eyes but let him continue to unwrap her. She couldn’t deny she felt gross. Thank goodness her face had been covered the whole time or she would have ended up with a mouthful of Gunner blood. She pulled off her glasses and tossed them over the side. “Cold.”

Preston nodded, “Yeah, but I’ve got a few extra things you can wear for the trip back.” He frowned at the red splotches on her hood and tugged it off, too, before running a hand over her messy hair, checking for wet places. “At least nothing got in your hair.”

“Hmm.” She could feel it whipping in the wind. Braid must have come loose. Her hand went up automatically to check to see if the ribbon holding the front off her face was still there and she was relieved to feel it was.

His eyes followed her hand and he smiled a little, “Don’t worry. You’re still the cutest thing for miles.”

Charlotte laughed at that and peeled off a few layers until she got to one that didn’t have blood soaking it. She just managed to croak out a thanks and he immediately frowned.

“I really think you should take at least a week to rest, alright? I mean it. This was important and all, but I’m worried about you.” He handed her an extra coat from his pack and she shrugged into it, nodding.

“Alright.”

“Can’t even barely hear you right now. How are you supposed to be the general if you can’t yell at people?”

She grinned up at him and grabbed his arm, pulling him onto the lift and into a quick hug. “That’s what you’re for.”

Preston tried to pretend he wasn’t flattered, but couldn’t help but smile. “Pssh.”
Chapter 5

“What do you mean there’s no hot water?”

Abbot scowled, “You didn’t say nothin’ about hot water.”

“I paid you to set up my bathtub!”

“Yeah, and I did that.” He gestured to the kind of clean clawfoot tub that sat behind the newly finished brick wall. “See?”

“What am I supposed to do with a bathtub that only has cold water?”

“How the hell am I supposed to know?”

Charlotte sighed, “Fine. How much to get hot water?”

He snorted, “Hot water? Down here on the field?”

When he began laughing, she sighed again. “Alright, alright...take your caps and go on, then. Thanks...I guess.”

She locked the door behind him and huffed to herself. It was hard to tell if this was some kind of racket or not. Looking back on it, she should’ve known fifty caps was too good a deal.

She also should have let Preston stay the night instead of paying for his room at the Dugout. He’d have known if she was being taken for a ride or not. It just hadn’t seemed proper though. Ever since RJ had been in her home, having other men in here made her feel...weird. Itchy, almost.

The whole walk home from the interchange, she’d told herself that a long, hot bath would be her reward for soldiering on. All she wanted to do was slip down into steaming water and let it relax her sore muscles and soothe the bruises she could feel starting to bloom on her legs and shoulder from where that jerk in the power armor had thrown her. But no. Now she had to deal with this shit, too.

It was already so late. Past ten. She could just give up and go to sleep, or she could suck it up and do this the old-fashioned way. Her great-great-great whatever granny had only ever had a water pump and a coal stove, right? This was doable. Mind over matter. She’d read Little House on the Prairie as a girl. Everybody in one tub, the water heated up over a rustic fire. They’d all survived...she was pretty sure, anyway.

An hour of schlepping hot water from her stovetop to the bathroom, one pot at a time, and she was starting to understand why they’d only ever done one tub for five people.

By the time she got in, the water was nowhere near hot and barely covered her body, but she groaned anyway. It felt like heaven.

Lukewarm heaven, but still. With the bar of Lux soap she’d found in a partially collapsed apartment, still wrapped in plastic after all these years, it was almost a religious experience.

Cleaned and starting to feel warm for the first time in ages, Charlotte ran her hands down along her ribs and frowned to herself. Preston had said he was worried about her, huh? Well, she was petrified. Her body only had so many resources. If she’d known the kind of situation she’d be in,
she never would have tried so hard to drop the baby weight.

Instead, she’d gone walking every damn day, ate like a bird, used Shaun like some kind of squishy barbell. Vanity. That’s what it had been. Beauty is as beauty does. She should have remembered that.

Nate hadn’t even cared if she’d kept a little tummy and if her hips were a bit softer after Shaun. He’d liked it, he said. But adjusting to motherhood had been a tough enough transition without her body looking like a mother’s. She loved her baby, and she loved her body for giving her a baby and all, she just didn’t love the aftermath of it.

Didn’t have to worry about that now, though. Her curves were practically concave at this point. The walls probably envied her. Charlotte closed her eyes and willed herself to relax in the warm water, trying to not think about the severe scolding she’d have gotten from her entire family if they could see her now. Her mama had never met a problem you couldn’t feed into submission, and Daddy had always worked so hard to keep everybody fat and happy.

Being a ceramics professor at Berea College had come with a lot of prestige in their historically artistic little town, but not a lot of money. Certainly not enough to feed twelve kids on its own. Every day Daddy had gone to town to teach kids from all over the world how to carefully sculpt the red clay synonymous with their region into beautiful works of art and sturdy utilitarian vessels; and every evening he’d spent hours working in the fields on their farm, doing the heavy work her mama simply couldn’t. Hunting every legal season for supplementary venison and fishing all spring and summer long just to make sure no one went to bed hungry. She couldn’t remember ever seeing either of her parents idle.

Even when she’d become an adult, the house was stuffed to the brim with grandkids and cousins and poor relations. It was constant work and a never ending fight between having just enough and the unthinkable...someone going hungry.

She wasn’t even going hungry, technically, but she still felt guilt over it. Like her body’s rejection of everything was somehow a blight on her family’s good name. Every time she lost the fight and threw up another meal, it was like she could feel the ghosts of her parents fretting over her.

Not to mention, she was embarrassed. The way Preston’s face had gone from happy to see her to clearly troubled by how bony and fragile she really was under all her layers after she’d hugged him hello had shot right through her heart. She honestly didn’t know what to do. Doctor Sun had told her to start a Rad-X regiment and she had. She dutifully took a pill every damn time she ate anything, and then she threw it right back up along with everything else.

The only thing she could consistently keep down was that godawful tea Preston always kept trying to make her drink. Mutated fern was supposedly a natural anti-rad plant, which was great and all, but she couldn’t just eat fern for the rest of her life, even if she wanted to. Her body needed more than that.

As if that weren’t bad enough on its own, she was actually starting to worry what would happen if RJ ever actually saw her. He certainly had... notions about what would happen if they met, but would he really want this? Would anybody?

What she really needed was some of that ironized yeast all the magazines had always advertised back before the war. Stuff to make you bulk up quick. She’d never had to worry about that back then. Of course she’d need it when you could no longer just pop on down to the drugstore for some tablets or a can of Ovaltine or anything. Story of her life.
Charlotte sank further into the water and blew bubbles irritably. This was silly. She didn’t care what some two-bit bodyguard with a dirty mind and filthier mouth thought of her. Why should she? She was recently widowed, and her missing baby apparently wasn’t even a baby anymore. Her body still thought he was, still kept filling her with hormones that made her irritable and restless to hold him to her nonexistent breasts, but nope. He wasn’t. He was practically grown at this point. She’d seen him plain as day on that weird brain simulation thing in the Memory Den. Looked just like Nate with red hair. She’d known who he was the second she’d laid eyes on him.

That wasn’t fair. She’d missed out on all the cute baby cuddles. His first steps, first words, first teeth, first day of school. All of it...and he’d referred to some stranger as his father. ‘You’re taking me home to my father?’ That’s what he’d said to the man who’d appeared in a bolt of lightening. She covered her face with her hands and tried to not cry. Maybe she should just leave well enough alone. What if he already had a family? What if he’d grown up calling somebody else his mama? Was it even okay for her to try to take him away from all that? Was he even hers at this point?

You aren’t allowed to be sad right now.

Shit. Charlotte muttered a few curses and gently banged her head back against the hard porcelain a few times. She really needed to get a handle on that reflex. RJ might feel kinda like Nate, but he wasn’t and no amount of her mindlessly reaching out hoping to hear that calming presence call out to her was going to make it so. It wasn’t his fault, but it made her furious that her stupid brain apparently couldn’t tell the difference between the two men when they may as well be night and day.

Mind your business.

You are my business.

His words practically sparkled with glee in her head. Odd for somebody who usually felt like a bitter orange peel dipped in chocolate. Fun on the outside, acerbic on the inside. It felt kinda rude for him to be so damn chipper when she was trying to properly wallow for the first time since waking up in this hellscape.

The hell are you so happy for anyway?

Oh, me? I just won the fucking lottery, baby.

She grumbled and sank even lower in the water until she was fully submerged. Well, good for you. Now go away.

Aw, don’t be like that.

Like what?

A buzzkill.

Excuse the hell outta --

Know what would make this night perfect?

What?

Guess.
Charlotte popped back up and rolled her eyes, *Absolutely not.*

His laughter filled her head, *So what’re you wearing?*

Predictable. She pulled the stopper and stood, wrapping a passably clean towel around herself. *Also none of your business.*

*It’s pretty late...I’m guessing nothing.*

*Guess again.*

*There’s no point. Even if I do, you aren’t going to tell me.*

*Ah, it can be taught.*

*M’hmm...anyway, I’ll just imagine whatever I want. Probably better than what you’re actually wearing.*

Charlotte made her way upstairs, *You think?*

*You kinda seem a little high-maintenance. I bet you’re one of those types that’s never actually naked.*

Her towel dropped and she grinned to herself, *Yup. That’s it. I’m a super high-maintenance priss pot. That’s me to a T.* The silence stretched on long enough for her to slip into a pair of long johns and snuggle into bed.

*Goddammit, you were naked this whole time, weren’t you?*

She laughed and wondered, just for a moment mind you, what it would be like to share a bed with a man so intuitive. Nate had spent the majority of their relationship in a perpetual state of shock and surprise at the things she’d do, but RJ just seemed to *know* stuff. Like he already knew what she was thinking or doing before she did. It was kinda weird in a good, even weirder, sort of way.

*Maybe.*

*Sonofabitch.*

*But even if I had been, it’s not like there’s much to see. Certainly nothing to get hot and bothered over.*

*I’ll be the judge of that.*

*No, you won’t.*

*I bet you’re the prettiest girl in Diamond City.*

*And I bet you’re the dumbest man in the Commonwealth.*

*So...what you’re saying is we’re both right?*

Charlotte laughed to herself, *Idiot. You know you just admitted you’re a fool, right?*  
*Just a fool for you, Lottie.*

*You really are in a good mood, huh?*
You know it. Remember I was on that job?

Yeah.

Well it went great!

Oh, that’s nice.

How were your errands?

She winced a little and rolled over. The bruise on her hip bone was going to take ages to heal, she just knew it. Fine. They went just fine.

There was a thoughtful pause, Are you hurt?

Oh, no, not really. Just a bruise.

Aw.

It’s no big deal.

Want me to kiss it and make it better?

Not in this lifetime.

Heh.

I should really get to sleep. She yawned behind her hand and pretended to not notice Dogmeat jump onto the bed and curl up against her back.

You don’t want to stay up and talk?

Not really. When a flicker of actual hurt came through, she sighed, I’ve been...sick lately. I should rest.

His interest and worry immediately flooded into her mind. Sick? Sick how?

Don’t go getting your panties in a bunch. It’s not a big deal.

Lottie. Sick how? With that thing that’s going around?

She frowned to herself. He seemed almost in a state of panic already. God, please don’t let him be a worrywart.

No. Well...I mean, I had that, too, but the real problem is I haven’t been able to keep food down lately. I already talked to Doctor Sun and he’s working on it. Don’t worry about it.

Is it the rads?

How did you --

You have a whole box of Rad-X sitting in your kitchen, sweetheart.

Oh, right.

So is it?
Yeah.

Hmm...you know, my wife had a sensitive stomach like that.

She fought the urge to roll her eyes. Everyone’s stomach should be sensitive to radiation. The fact that she was considered the weird one for noticing the food most people ate these days was poison was insane.

Oh?

Yeah. When we were growing up, it wasn’t a problem because we only ever ate...well, I mean, our food was pretty radiation free. But once we were adults and had to move away, she kept getting sick.

Radiation free food? Had RJ been some kind of vault dweller? She knew there had to be some vaults that hadn’t been fucked up experiments. Surely. Vault 81 here in Boston was relatively normal from what she’d heard.

I’m sorry to hear that.

She fixed it though. Maybe it could work for you, too.

God, if only. Fixed it how?

Lucy would drink a big glass of brahmin milk before every meal. I dunno why it worked, but it worked.

Brahmin milk?

Yup.

That seemed ridiculously simple, but then again the best cures usually were. And that actually did the trick?

Yeah. You should try it.

The idea of throwing up a big glass of that wasn’t very appetizing, but neither was starving to death. Maybe I will.

Promise?

She couldn’t help but smile. He sounded so young when he said it. Alright. I promise.

I’m going to hold you to it.

Okay.

Okay...goodnight, Lottie.

Goodnight, RJ.

He felt her go and his smile faded as soon as she did. Sick. Lottie was sick, and there was nothing he could do because there was no way she’d let him.

Mac rolled back over onto his stomach and stared down at the comic some Gunner fuck had left behind. He’d been reading it when he’d felt her reach out. A strange combination of sadness and
frailty and confusion looking for reassurance. The only time he’d ever felt a thing like that had been after Lucy had given birth to Duncan. Once she’d healed, she’d started giving him every possible excuse as to why they couldn’t possibly sleep together. She was tired, he was tired, the baby might wake up, she had other things to do. The list had gone on and on.

It took him forever to realize she didn’t feel comfortable in her body anymore and she definitely didn’t feel comfortable sharing that body with him. That had blown his mind and the fight that followed was one of their all-time greats. He’d been furious with her for doubting herself and his love for her, and she’d been just as angry that he seemed to not care what she looked like.

The whole thing had been incredibly confusing for him, to be honest. Fighting with your wife, kicking things and yelling about how beautiful she was and that the outside didn’t matter had been surreal enough. Getting pelted by her tears and feelings of rejection in the face of his undying adoration had been a whole other level of crazy.

In the end, he’d proven his point the only way he knew how, by all but tricking her into bed and relentlessly worshiping her until she was forced to see reason.

Lottie had said she had a baby, too, right? Depending on how young the baby was, she might be right in that same zone of insecurity...and getting sick on top of it had to suck. It seemed like a new problem for her, so maybe it was something that only happened after she’d given birth?

Mac stuffed another pilfered snack cake into his mouth and turned a page without really reading. Man, that would be the literal worst. He couldn’t imagine having a fridge full of food and not being able to actually eat any of it.

Oh! That’s why she had so much on hand! Okay. He got it now.

He swallowed and winced a little at how painful it felt. Now that he was practically a Rockefeller, he could afford to splurge a bit. Rent out that fancy room at the Rex for a few days and recuperate for real before getting back out there and taking every job he could.

Maybe he could even convince Daisy to make some of that amazing vegetable soup she was so good at.

Tonight though, he was stuck camping out in the old Gunner stronghold. Most of the smoke had finally died away, and he’d already stripped everything of value from the place. The power armor had been a total loss, of course, but there’d been an extra frame in an old shipping container. He could use it to help him drag his loot back to Goodneighbor and sell the whole lot to K-LE-0 for another bucket of caps.

Life was, for once, looking pretty good.

He was just worried about his girl was all. Even if she still didn’t consider herself his girl. They both knew it was inevitable deep down, no matter what she said.

Mac hoped she appreciated how gracious and patient he was trying to be here. He knew where she lived, after all. If he really wanted to be a dick about it, he could just go to her house, pick the lock and stand someplace she’d be guaranteed to see him. Their eyes would meet and bam! Done.

Or at least, that’s how he was pretty sure it was supposed to happen. He didn’t really know. He and Lucy had met young enough that their connection had started off innocent and platonic. The ‘bam’ hadn’t happened until they’d both been old enough to appreciate it, but damn, when it did...

When both the Mayor and the only doctor in town were both suddenly rabid for each other, life at
Lamplight had basically ground to a halt for a good month.

He had no reason to think it wouldn’t be the same with Lottie. Everybody grew up with stories of seeing your soulmate and having ‘love at first sight’ happen, after all. Mac had always assumed that was some kind of euphemism or whatever for the ridiculous marathon of fucking that inevitably followed finally connecting with the other half of your soul. Like your bodies wanted to merge together, too.

And did. At great length and with powerful urgency.

Of course, now that he was thinking about it, it was hard to think about anything else. He tossed the comic and laid his head down, trying to not shift against the bed too much and just exacerbate the problem. Lottie must already be asleep or else she’d be mercilessly teasing him right now.

This was some old bullshit. He had her voice in his head, the rush of adrenaline and good time hormones from finally taking out all these assholes, and he couldn’t even appreciate any of it...maybe?

No, definitely. As much as he’d like to, taking care of business right now was probably not the best idea. It was cold, for one. Plus, he still felt kinda sick and Lottie needed rest…

Mac grumbled to himself and rolled over, throwing an arm over his eyes. Sometimes being a grown up was the worst, but he’d already committed to showing her what a gentleman he could be. Or could pretend to be, at least. Anyway, this just guaranteed when they finally came together, it would be fucking phenomenal, right?

Or he’d come in his pants before she even got a chance to get them off and he’d just go shoot himself. Either way, problem solved.

At least he had his handy dandy poncho. The smoldering wreckage was more than enough to attract scavengers. He didn’t want to build a fire and add further temptation. Mac curled up into a little ball, his pistol under his pillow just in case, and eventually drifted off.

Furtive rustling and soft laughter had him opening his eyes. The entire world around him was green and dark. He tipped his head up and stared at the bright blue sky just barely visible between the leaves.

Another dream then.

He took a deep breath. Warm, humid air, softer than what the Capitol Wasteland had to offer. Wet earth, green life. He had no idea where he was. The rustling to his left grew, but he was unafraid. Nothing in this forest could hurt him. He knew that for some reason. A pale arm appeared and grabbed him by the shirt.

“Come on, silly!”

Mac grinned and happily followed Lucy through the underbrush, taking her hand in his and threading their fingers together. She felt warm and soft and alive.

It kind of killed him, to be honest.

“What are we going?”

She laughed, “I told you! It’s a surprise!”
Alright then. He gave up caring about their surroundings and focused on her instead. That messy hair up in a high ponytail. It seemed a little more curly than usual. Must be the muggy air. Tendrils had escaped the elastic and fell around her face in loose ringlets. She was in some kind of fancy shirt today. Fancy to him, anyhow. Pink plaid, folded down collar, tied up high in the front so a delicious strip of her torso showed above jeans that looked painted on.

Mac watched as a single drop of sweat escaped her hairline and rolled down the back of her neck. He ached to lick it off. Dreams shouldn’t be allowed to be this real. It just wasn’t fair.

She stopped suddenly and let go of his hand, picking something off a low hanging branch. When she turned to look at him, her eyes were dark and sparkling. She held up some kind of fruit.

“See? I told you! Deer candy!”

His eyes reluctantly left her face and he frowned at the orange-ish thing in her hand. It’s outside was wrinkly and looked almost rotten. “Are you sure that’s safe to eat?”

She rolled her eyes, “Of course it is. Here, we’ll share this one.” She easily broke it apart, and handed him a slimy piece. “Careful of the pit.”

Mac waited until she popped her own piece into her mouth before cautiously tasting his. Sweet, sticky and delicious on his tongue. He inhaled it and stripped the flesh off the pit before spitting it out. “It’s delicious!”

“Told you so! Persimmons are so yummy. I just wish they were good for more than five minutes out of the year.”

He chuckled, “That just makes them more special, right?”

“I guess.” She licked her fingers and grinned, “Wanna taste something else that’s special?”

His face went hotter than it already was and he found himself suddenly very, very nervous. “Wha...here?” He frowned at himself as soon as he got it out. Why was he being so fussy for? He could just lay her down in the soft grass and pine needles and --

“No, over there. By the pawpaw.” She pointed a little further along and he saw a strange little platform built into a sturdy tree. “I thought...up in the deer stand? Bugs, you know.”

“You said pawpaws are edible, too, right?”

“Yup, but they’re not ripe yet.”

“Oh.”

“I am though.”

His eyes went a little wide. Lucy had never been this bold before. He liked it. Mac grinned at her wicked smile and opened his mouth to speak when someone else’s words came out of his mouth. Again.

“The wedding’s tomorrow. You can’t even wait one more day?”

“But I’ve been waiting! My whole dang life!”

“So what’s a few more hours?” Jesus fucking Christ, was he crazy? What the hell was he talking about?
She was pouting at him now, big doe eyes flashing at him while she slowly walked backwards towards the stand. “Just a little?”

“Nothing’s ever ‘just a little’ with you.” Well, that was certainly true, but fuck, you shouldn’t say it out loud. Whoever he was supposed to be here was an idiot.

“If I didn’t know any better I’d think you were afraid of little ol’ me. That can’t be true, can it?”

“What I’m afraid of is your father’s shotgun and my mother’s...everything else.”

The pouting grew to irresistible levels and she walked back to him, her hands sliding up his chest and twining around his neck. He had a perfect view right down her shirt and realized she didn’t have anything on under it. God, he could just rip it off her right here and --

“Don’t you wanna...”

Yes. Fuck, yes. Please, for the love of God, just say --

“We should head back before anyone misses us.”

Disappointment and hurt flashed in her eyes before she lowered them and stepped back. “Oh, okay. Sorry.”

“Hey, it’s fine. There’s nothing to be embarrassed about here. You just got a little carried away... again. We should just try to be sensible about these things. You know? Keep a level head. I mean, we aren’t animals, are we?”

Mac wanted to punch himself in the face. The words had tumbled out and he could do nothing to stop them. There was a red flush creeping up her neck and into her cheeks now. He’d humiliated her. Pushed her away like he didn’t want her more than anything in the world. He could have had her right here in this magical place where the trees just grew delicious fruit for no real reason and the air was heavy and sweet. The soft forest floor under them and a canopy of leaves above. What the fuck was his problem?

She just kept her head down and pointed vaguely towards his right, “Trail’s that way.” He didn’t have time to respond before she took off at a brisk pace, almost running away, leaving him to fight through the scrub that somehow seemed to part around her but clawed at him.

“Wait! Please wait!”

He was forced to watch in agony as she got further and further from him. Tiny, sharp thorns tore at his skin and clothes but he didn’t care. She was like a candle moving through the darkness and he just wanted, needed, to follow her before she disappeared altogether.

Tears ran down his face and mingled with the sweat there. “Lucy, please...”

RJ!

Lottie’s voice suddenly rang through his head and he snapped awake, almost falling off the bed entirely. Mac barely managed to catch himself and panted, still winded from his dream...or nightmare, maybe? It kinda felt like a nightmare. Being trapped in a milquetoast version of himself was pretty fucking terrifying. He flopped back, a little further from the edge, and stared up at the ceiling of the shack he was currently staying in. Sunlight was creeping through the open doorway. Morning already.
He realized he could still taste the sweet exotic flavor of that persimmon on his tongue and frowned.

He’d never even heard of a persimmon before.

*RI! You’re awake, right?*

Mac rubbed his face and focused on taking deep, calming breaths. *Yeah. Yeah, what’s up?*

He felt her reach out a little, a tiny filament of caring brushing against him. Like a cool hand on his forehead. There and gone before he could even miss it.

*Are you alright?*

*It’s nothing. Bad dream. What’s going on?*

*Oh...it worked!*

*What worked?*

*The brahmin milk!*

Her buzzing excitement finally broke through the fog of disorientation and melancholy he was floating in. *Oh. Oh, hey, that’s great!*

Yeah, it is! I just had the biggest breakfast of my life! It was so good!

Mac chuckled. *What’d you have?*

Well, at first I just had some dry toast. I was kinda nervous, you know, but once that stayed down, I fixed up the works! Eggs, CRAM hash, gravy, biscuits, silver dollar pancakes! I’m full as a tick!

*Jeez, all that for one person?*

She huffed, I’ve always eaten a big breakfast. It’s the most important meal of the day!

*Uh-huh.*

Anyway, you’re supposed to eat breakfast like a king, lunch like a prince, and dinner like a pauper. Everybody knows that.

*Oh, everybody knows that.*

*Yup.*

*I’ve literally never heard that in my life.*

*Well now you have so there you go.*

He smiled, I’m glad you feel better.

*Me, too! Now maybe all my friends can calm down a little.*

*Calm down a little?*

Yeah, they basically grounded me. I’m grounded for a week. I’m not supposed to leave Diamond City or take on any new projects until I’ve rested.
Dang. That was going to be hard. A whole week of him knowing exactly where she was and somehow resisting the urge to go there. Fuck.

Well, if you need to rest then you should rest.

What I need to do is eat. A few days eating like this and I’ll be right as rain.

Going to make some more of that spoonbread?

Probably...oh! And chicken-fried steak with mushroom gravy! God, that sounds delicious right now! Bread pudding for dessert! I’m sure I can figure out some kind of bourbon sauce that doesn’t require actual sugar...maybe...

He had no idea what more than half of that shit was, and he’d long ago sworn off all forms of fungus, but the way she said it made his mouth water. That does sound tasty. Wish I had some of that.

I could leave a plate in the mailbox.

Nope. Bad idea.

Why?

Because there was no way he could stand there next to her house, eating her food without doing something monumentally stupid like knocking on the door and trying to return her plate in person. He only had so much self control.

Just is.

Oh...well, what are you up to this week? Out there causin’ trouble for somebody no doubt.

Heh. Probably going to stick around Goodneighbor for a bit. It’s kinda my base of operations. See if I can pull in some jobs. I need all the caps I can get.

Hmm. There’s a lot of tough guy types that hang around there, isn’t there?

I guess.

You weren’t friends with that swindler that used to be by the gate, were you? Finn or whatever?

He chuckled, No. Guy was an asshole. I try to not associate with those types.

Didn’t you just say last night that you won the lottery?

Yeah, but --

Caps aren’t everything, you know.

The only people who ever say that are loaded. Are you loaded, Lottie?

Why? Are you looking for a sugar mama?

Maybe. You offering?

She laughed, Is that why you’re up here in Boston? To make a bunch of caps?

Kinda...I’m actually looking for something.
Looking for something?

Yeah.

There was a long pause and then she huffed, *Well are you gonna tell me what it is or aren’t you?* And risk it getting out there where anybody could try to track it down? Not on your life. *Nah, it’s not important. I mean, it’s important for me, but not for anybody else.*

*Oh...that sounds very mysterious.*

*Not really. It’s just...boring. Don’t worry about it.*

Do you need help? I have a lot of friends. Maybe one of them knows something.

He winced. This is exactly why he didn't want to say anything else. *No, I’m good. Really. I've got friends, too, you know.*

*You do? Well, Hell’s bells!*

What?

I’m surprised, is all. *You don’t exactly strike me as the sociable type.*

Well that’s because you don’t know me very well yet. *I can be very...uh, sociable.*

*M’hmm.*

*I can!*

*Sure, honey. Sure.*

*It’s true! Some people find me very charming, you know.*

*People or just a person?*

At least five in my lifetime, *so people.* Her laughter shone through and he grinned, *Anyway, you can’t resist me. That’s all that matters.*

See, here I thought I was doing a damn fine job of resisting you.

That’s only because I haven’t turned it on yet.

*Turned what on?*

*My mojo.*

*Oh, Lord help us all.*

*I could sweep you off your feet if I wanted.*

*I thought you did want to though.*

He narrowed his eyes a little and sat up, *Is that a challenge, sweetcheeks?*

*Of course not.*
Cause that feels a lot like a challenge.

You’re just hearing what you wanna hear is all.

Man, she was feisty when she was fed and happy. He’d have to remember that. If that were true, all I would be hearing is you moaning my name.

She scoffed, Is this your best material? Cause it needs polish. You’re gonna have to do better than that if you wanna butter my biscuit.

He almost choked, Do what to your what now?

Oh, get your head out of the gutter!

You put it there!

Lottie tried to feign annoyance but ruined it by laughing, God, you are fun. You know that though, don’t you?

I have heard it said before.

M’hmm. I bet.

Want me to swing by and show you how fun I can really be?

She snorted, You talk a big game, but I bet if I said ‘yes’, you’d about shit your britches.

If you actually said yes, I’d be there in sixty minutes flat and we’d be in bed about thirty seconds after that.

Golly, that sounds romantic.

Romance is for when you’re too tired for the fun stuff. He waited for a minute, but there was no witty quip from her and he tilted his head. Lottie? You still with me?

I’m just...shocked, is all.

Shocked? Why?

Never been on this side before. It’s kinda weird.

This side?

Charlotte finished washing her breakfast dishes and shook her head, Nothing. Don’t worry about it. I gotta go.

Aw, come on. We were just starting to have a good time. Don’t run away just because I’m winning you over.

She laughed and grabbed her coat off it’s peg by the door before whistling for Dogmeat. I’m not running away...and you’re not winning me over, so don’t get any ideas! I’m meeting a friend for coffee.

Oh...a guy friend or a girl friend?

Her eyes rolled at the clear note of possessive envy in his voice. A none of your business friend.
He sighed, *Fine...have a nice time, I guess.*

*You, too.*

She felt him reluctantly let go of their connection and shook her head while she locked the door behind her. Dogmeat sat patiently at her feet and wagged his tail when she glanced over at him.

“Your master is capital T trouble. How is that possible when you’re the best boy in the whole wide world?”

He just kept waggling his tail, tongue lolling out at her in a goofy doggy grin. Charlotte sighed and scratched him behind the ears.

“Yeah, I dunno either. Let’s go find Preston before he heads out and let him know the good news.”

They headed for the Dugout Inn and walked inside. She tried to imagine baseball players jogging through the long tunnel but was surprised to find she couldn’t. This new world was still so weird and funhouse mirror-y to her, but it was surprising how quickly her mind was adapting to it. Surprising and scary, really.

It shouldn’t be normal to worry about rad storms and contaminated water and to feel at home in a bar made from a locker room, but somehow it was. If she didn’t have her crystal clear memories of pre-war America, she’d feel like she’d lived in this her whole life.

That was weird, right? She felt like that should be weird.

Preston was sitting at a table near a corner, eating his own breakfast when she saw him and waved. Charlotte knew better, already, than to head over without purchasing anything, and went directly to the bar, smiling at Vadim and cutting him off before the friendly shouting could even begin.

“Coffee, please.”

His eyes narrowed and he studied her face like he’d done every time she’d been in here. “I still think I know you from somewhere.”

“Highly unlikely, honey.”

“It will come to me! Do not worry!”

She tried to not wince at the volume and noticed Dogmeat had already slunk away, retreating to Preston across the room. Lucky. “I’m sure it will.”

He finally gave up trying to solve the mystery today and poured her a steaming cup of putrid bean water the people in this particular epoch of time considered coffee. She handed him his two caps and carefully carried her cup over, sitting down and immediately setting it next to Preston for him to drink.

She’d already had three cups of better swill at home thanks to RJ.

“Morning, General!”

“Good morning, sugar.”

“How’d you sleep?”

“Fine, once I got there. Had a dream about home.”
He shoveled another mouthful of scrambled mirelurk egg into his mouth. “Oh, yeah?”

“Hmm.” The warm, dark woods. Nate’s hand in hers. That sweet feel of breathless anticipation in her belly before she’d ruined everything by being herself. Again. She shook her head a little and willed all the old regrets away. “How was your night?”

“Fine. Loud. Some fight broke out, I guess. It was all over by the time I got out here.”

“Probably just a bunch of idiots doing what they do best.”

“Yup.”

Charlotte grinned, “So guess what.”

“What?”

She reached over and stole a fried tato off his plate, popping it in her mouth while he stared at her with wide eyes. She chewed, swallowed and held up jazz hands. “Ta-da!”

“You can eat!”

“Yeah, I can!”

“How? Did the Rad-X finally start working?”

“Nope. I got a tip about drinking brahmin milk before every meal and so far so good!”

He dropped his fork and actually clapped for her. “That’s amazing, Charlie!”

“Right? I’m gonna go hog wild this whole week! Next time you see me, I’ll be big as a barn!”

“I hope so!”

She leaned on the table and watched him eat, “So you’re heading out right after breakfast, right?”

“Yup. I want to check in on Hangman’s Alley along the way. That water pump was still sticking a little when we left.”

“Right, right.”

“And then I’ll be headed to Sanctuary and I’ll send Codsworth here. Shouldn’t take him too long. There’s a Bunker Hill caravan he can travel with. They’d be happy for the extra uh...muscle.” He frowned to himself, “I mean, not muscle, but...help. You know.”

“Yeah, I know.” She looked around a little before leaning closer and lowering her voice. “Listen, don’t let him take the whole treasury with him, alright? That’s crazy. I don’t need a duffel full of caps just sittin’ around here. He’ll want to, because that’s Codsworth, but tell him whatever he can carry on his own is fine. No more than a quarter at most.”

His eyes went wide. “You really think he’d even try to take that much? A fourth of it’s still...what, at least over two hundred pounds of caps?”

“Yeah, I know. He will make an attempt. He’s been hoarding those caps since about ten years after the bombs fell and he views them as the family savings account. That’s why I wrote you a note to give him. No more than ten thousand, and I mean it. It’s not like Diamond City has a bank or anything.”
“You could always ask the mayor for space in the DC storehouse.”

“I wouldn’t trust that man with somebody else’s money, let alone my own.”

Preston chuckled, “That’s probably wise.”

“Anyway, what do I need the extra caps for, really? I’ve got my house, food...a bathtub with cold water.” She made a face and he frowned again.

“Cold water? Abbot didn’t install a water heater?”

“Apparently that’s an unheard of luxury for a humble infielder like myself.”

“Hmm.” He pushed around his remaining eggs thoughtfully, “You know, I always heard Nick was the handyman before Abbot. Maybe he could help.”

“Wouldn’t that be kind of insulting to ask though?”

He shrugged, “From anybody else, maybe, but he likes you. You’re friends and all.”

“True...I don’t suppose you --”

“Nope.”

“Dang.”

“That’s why we have Sturges.”

“Right.” She sighed, “Well, once you’re back in Sanctuary, be sure to send word along to Bunker Hill. I want our boys outfitted properly. Especially the provisioners.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Also see what you can do about maybe buying a surplus of food to get everybody through the winter. That bunker behind the old Kendall place would make a great cellar.”

“Right.”

“I feel like it’s extra cold nowadays...that might just be me, though.”

He shook his head, “No, winters are harsh in the Commonwealth. Old ghouls always talk about how the storms and stuff are worse, too.”

“We used to have four seasons up here. Sorta...not like back home, of course, but still.”

“Yeah. That must’ve been nice.”

She smiled, “It was...alright, well...I’ll let you get back to eating.” Charlotte stood and patted his shoulder. “You take care, honey.”

“You, too. Any big plans for today?”

She held up a hand and ticked off her fingers. “Shop, snack, go talk to Nick, have lunch, take a nap, snack, do some laundry, have dinner with Piper and Nat, whittle up some knitting needles, have dessert, knit a few things, late night snack...”

Preston chuckled, “Yeah, I get it. Sounds like the perfect day.”
“Doesn’t it though?” On impulse, she planted a kiss on his cheek and pretended to not see how bashful he suddenly got. “Bye.”

“Bye, Char -- uh, I mean...Goodbye, General...ma’am.”

“You did good yesterday, honey.”

“You, too.”

She grinned at him one last time and headed out for Fallon’s basement, Dogmeat on her heels. RJ always felt so cold to her. Even if she had to be idle for a whole week, she could still be useful and fix that.

She just hoped Becky had some green yarn.
“...and the new girl patched me up, put me on her shoulder, and blasted her way through the rest of the complex. Synths everywhere!”

Well, that was...a colorful version of what went down. Charlotte watched Desdemona’s eyebrows go up nearly to her hairline as Deacon got to the end of his tall tale. The Railroad’s official leader, or maybe just it’s figurehead, was clearly waffling somewhere between exasperation and amazement.

“Really?”

“Yeah! You’d be insane to not sign her on, Dez!”

Dez’s face had that same look of maternal patience her mother’s often did when dealing with some of her older brother’s shenanigans. Her impassive hazel eyes met Charlotte’s and she sighed heavily.

“Well, you've certainly made an impression on Deacon. He's never spoken about, or lied about, anyone so highly before. So is any of what he said true?”

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. This entire dog and pony show was ridiculous to her. She just wanted some help taking on the Institute. An all hands on deck kinda thing. That’s the whole reason she’d followed that stupid Freedom Trail to these people, but instead she was stuck... auditioning. It felt just like when she’d tried to go out for color guard in marching band.

Of course, back then, she hadn’t been able to lie her way around being terrible with a flag.

“Every word and then some.” She ignored the knowing way Dogmeat’s head tilted at her as she lied through her teeth.

“Wow...a full hundred. I-I can’t even imagine.”

Deacon’s bright smile shining from behind Dez slid into something more resembling a shit eating grin and he smirked at her, one hundred percent bullshit even as his voice had all the innocence of a choir boy. “See? Just like I said, boss.”

Shit was impressive. He kind of reminded her of a televangelist, only without the grifting for God. Then again, they had just met. Maybe their relationship just wasn’t there yet. She’d keep a wary eye on her caps just in case.

“I was expecting Deacon to grab a full team, including Glory, to secure that prototype…” Dez started moving further into their little underground base, and Charlotte followed along, only half listening as she looked around. Place still looked exactly like she remembered it, only a few less tour guides and the gift shop certainly wasn’t quite up to snuff anymore.

Her time out in the field with Deacon, as he called himself (she didn’t believe that was his real name for a hot minute), had been...interesting. Endless personal, prying questions from a man who wouldn’t even let her see his eyes, a lot of innuendo disguised as innocent banter and a few too many ‘helpful hands’ in places where they shouldn’t be. Almost like he was deliberately trying to
provoke a reaction out of her.

It was weird, actually. He was as phony as a three dollar bill and there was absolutely zero hint of amorous interest in her aside from those odd moments. If she hadn’t had RJ in her head, she’d have punted him right off that overpass in Lexington.

As it stood, her tolerance for inappropriate bullshit had grown exponentially thanks to her mate’s incessant flirtatious comments and suggestions. Like water off a duck’s back most of the time. In the past two weeks since she’d started eating again, a lot of them had involved food for some reason.

Especially mutfruit. Boy was obsessed with the stuff.

She almost walked into Dez and blinked. The Railroad leader and her...second? She still wasn’t sure of the pecking order just yet, but both Deacon and her were staring at her with expectant faces on. Shit. They’d asked her something important.

“Beg pardon?”

As soon as it came out, she internally screamed. The way Deacon mouthed the words back to her let her know sure as shooting that her accent had slipped. Dez hadn’t seemed to notice, but he was sharp as a tack. Uncannily so sometimes. He’d definitely noticed.

“Your code name. You’ll need to pick one before I can introduce you to everyone.”

“Oh...I...I don’t really know. Can’t you just pick one for me?”

She shook her head, “No, it doesn’t work like that. Your life, your name, your choice.”

Charlotte almost laughed. Her life, her name, her choice? That was funny. She hadn’t chosen anything for herself since before the bombs fell. Her eyes went to Deacon again, but he just shrugged at her.

Helpful. The man was as helpful as a bucket with a hole in the bottom of it.

She stared down at the floor, mind running in circles and coming up empty. No one in her family had ever used their given names on anything but paperwork, so she had a million nicknames leftover from the old days. Not a one seemed appropriate for something like this though. “I’m sorry...I really am, but I’ve got nothing.”

“What about Charmer?”

Dez turned just enough to glare at Deacon over her shoulder, “She’s not a pet, Deacon. She can name herself.”

The ever-present smirk grew, “She could be my pet. I’d adopt her.”

The only name in her head now was the one her daddy had always called her, and given it’s origins, she wasn’t about to hand it over to a man like Deacon. “Is he always like this?”

“Hardly ever, actually.” Dez gave him a thoughtful, considering look. “He must really like you.”

“Aw, come on, boss. Don’t embarrass me. You’re totally going to blow my chances with the new girl.”

Charlotte frowned, “Chances at what, exactly?”
The Railroad leader was still studying his face when she spoke again, “How about...Wanderer?”

She shrugged. “Fine. Sure. Wanderer’s great.”

“Alright then. Let’s get inside and you can meet everybody.”

Deacon let Dez take the lead with a gracious bow and then fell in line behind Charlotte so he could whisper in her ear, “Come on, let me take you home. I’d take real good care of you, kitten. Plenty of string to tie you up in and all the milk you can drink.”

God, his voice could make a corpse blush. Should have stayed in her ten layers instead of opting for jeans, a flannel with a sweater and a leather jacket over all that. Men hadn’t seemed as interested when she looked like a walking puffball. Then again, it was hard to get her shotgun up with all those layers and since when had she dressed for any man, aside from Nate, of course? She couldn’t let him get to her. He wanted to get to her, for whatever reason, and it had triggered her naturally contrary nature. Charlotte would be damned if she lost to this slick-talking, shifty, perpetual sunglasses wearing con artist...whatever game he was actually playing at.

She funneled the irritation she felt at her involuntary reaction towards him into the sass machine in her head. “You couldn’t afford my adoption fees, honey, let alone my upkeep.”

Dez had just entered their inner sanctum and Deacon’s hands briefly settled on her hips and squeezed, his lips close enough that she could feel them move against her hair, “Oh, I’d be willing to go into debt for all this.”

Before she could react and slap those stupid sunglasses right off his pretty face, he’d already slipped past her, leaving her sputtering at the top of the stairs that lead down into the subbasement of the crypts.

Deacon chuckled to himself and ambled over to his desk, giving Glory a friendly nod before he sat and nonchalantly put his feet up. Traveling with Charlie had been fun, just like he’d known it would be.

Funner still for how easy it was to aggravate her.

He watched Dez make formal introductions and grinned at the prissy way she walked right past him to start the meet and greets with everyone. Her little nose up in the air, shoulders thrown back.

He wondered if she knew what that walk did for her ass.

He watched Dez make formal introductions and grinned at the prissy way she walked right past him to start the meet and greets with everyone. Her little nose up in the air, shoulders thrown back.

He wondered if she knew what that walk did for her ass.

Not that he was actually interested, of course. Well, he was interested, but not necessarily in her ass. Invested, was probably a better word. He was invested in her ass.

He’d been there when she came up from the vault, wide-eyed and terrified. That red hair blowing in the wind like a bonfire. She’d never even noticed him a little further up the hill. Zero situational awareness. Didn’t bother to check her six at all. Thought never even entered her fluffy little head.

And he’d been there the next day when she’d finally left her old home and met the dog. The gorgeous, obedient, affectionate German Shepherd who just happened to be waiting patiently for her like he knew she was coming. Because that was totally normal and not at all out of the ordinary.

That was his first clue.

The way she’d backed up in shock after touching the dog’s head, actually falling on her butt in her
attempts to get away from the thing as it covered her in kisses, had been his second.

He’d been there when she arrived in Diamond City. Still with the dog. He’d listened to her sweet talk that pompous windbag at the gate. Her carefully constructed non-accent of an accent had slipped more than once there. A shortening of the vowels and a softening of everything else. Lots of dropped g’s and the interesting, unconscious use of ‘y’all’.

Deacon had already read her records, of course. Vault-Tec had been many things, but sloppy with paperwork? Hardly. He knew she was born in some little town called Berea in the near-mythical land of Kentucky. June 3rd, 2047. Hell of a birth date for someone who wasn’t a ghoul. A Monday, if he wasn’t mistaken.

What was it that old nursery rhyme said? ‘Monday’s child was fair of face.’

Well, that was certainly true. She was a cutie pie any way you sliced her. Spunky and sweet in equal measure, wild auburn hair that couldn’t make up its mind if it should be curly or not, big doe eyes, enough freckles to be approachable. She smiled easily, laughed easily, made friends easily.

In short, she did everything he could not. Everything he lied about, she just was honestly. Naturally, like it was easy as breathing. It was refreshing, in a terrifying kind of way, he guessed.

He never did really trust honest people, truth be told. They had things like morals and shit that often got in the way of the nitty-gritty that sometimes had to be done.

Dangerous, really. Dangerous and unpredictable.

He’d even been there when she’d entered Goodneighbor and it had been that encounter that had cemented his desire to have her in the Railroad. Before that moment, she’d been a novelty. Something interesting to watch over while he waited for the Institute to make their intentions known. But the way she’d gone from frightened, helpless woman to a fearsome force of nature in a flash, and the way she’d moved in front of Valentine as if he needed protecting... that had done it. There was strength there. As easy-going as his reports of her were, she had a spine of steel under that sweet smile.

Tough, clever, dangerous, friendly to synths. What more could they possibly want?

The fact that she was also a walking piece of pre-war memorabilia was just icing on the cake.

If he hadn’t already met, and lost, his soulmate, he’d have... well. Been less honorable than he was already being, probably.

Deacon watched as she helpfully bent over to retrieve Tinker Tom’s dropped syringe, leaning far over a desk and wiggling a little when she could almost, almost reach it on the other side, just on the edge of going ass over teakettle as she scooted along. Drawing the focus of several pairs of eyes and guileless enough to not even notice. He let his gaze slide along the curves she’d started to regain after she’d finally decided to start eating again for whatever reason. Good God. What a gloriously perfect little distraction she had the potential to be.

Yeah... okay maybe a bit more than probably dishonorable.

He’d had fun with various partners since losing his wife, Barbara, of course. After all, that had been more than twenty years ago, and he’d still been a young man when she’d died for his sins. There were plenty of unbonded people out there in the wastes to relieve tension with, commiserate with, fuck into oblivion when the situation presented itself...
The thing with Charlie, though, was he was pretty sure that situation was never going to present itself. In fact, he was almost completely, entirely sure she was already bonded.

Again.

Which, as far as he knew, would make her the first person in recorded history to have been blessed with two soul mates, and wasn’t that something?

Her file from Vault-Tec had listed a known soulmate. Apparently people back then had been more willing to share that kind of information with dangerously powerful multinational conglomerates. A little asterisk by her name had led him to her husband’s file. Nathaniel Apperson, of the California Appersons. Big, old, obnoxious money that had for several generations been matched with assholes (he assumed) from other big, old, obnoxious money it seemed. Right up until the day when Nate had married the daughter of a humble gentleman farmer-turned-professor and his equally humble housewife.

It was like a movie, actually. Some kind of terrible rom-com. One of those ‘a fish marries a bird’ kinda stories.

Not that Charlie’s family wasn’t impressive in its own way. He’d done the research. The Boones had deep roots back to early America. Lots of nurses, soldiers, firefighters, teachers...actual deacons, even. A service oriented kind of bunch. Her parents, both from large families, had themselves been blessed with twelve children in all, which was just insane to him. He wasn’t sure he’d ever seen twelve kids all at once in his life and she’d grown up that way. Absolutely insane.

An effervescent sweetheart from a big, fun, crazy family...and the universe had matched her up with the only son of a snooty, snotty group of robber barons and shady politicians.

Which just went to show you how silly the whole thing was.

But now...now she had the dog. He watched it follow her from person to person, tail cautiously wagging at each before the inevitable head scratches and cooing turned it into a drooling idiot. Wary and watchful, that one, but still affectionate and friendly beneath the teeth.

Didn’t sound like anybody he knew…yet.

But he was damn well gonna find out. This was a once in a lifetime mystery and even if she’d been the most obnoxious, worthless person on the planet, this puzzle alone made it completely worth following along in her wake.

He was already so close. His best informant in Diamond City, Arturo, had told him of a masked man slipping into her home while she was out. He’d also reported that the pink ribbon Deacon had watched her squeal over, the one left in her mailbox of all things, had been from said masked man.

When he’d watched her tug that ugly old hood off her explosion of curls and waves once they were within Switchboard, it had taken everything in him to stop from shouting in triumph when he’d seen that very ribbon tied up in her hair. His third official clue.

Had to be a soulmate. Had to. He’d bet his life on it. Nate wasn’t even in the ground yet. A woman like Charlie wouldn’t have had that reaction just a few weeks into widowhood unless there was something else there driving it. An unknown variable.

An unknown, cosmic variable.

She was already proving herself to be a powerful transformative catalyst within the wastes. A real
game changer. And since that was the case, then this other person tethered to her soul was also going to need to be factored into his future plans.

So he had to know.

It wasn’t just because he wanted to know. It was a necessity...and he was going to keep telling himself that no matter how fun being Charlie’s shadow and tracking the man down got.

Sometimes work could be fun, right? Sure. It never had been before, but why not?

Charlie was chitchatting with Drummer Boy now, laughing at some awkward comment the guy had made. Her hand on his arm and standing close enough he might get ideas. Deacon chewed on the inside of his lip as he watched her. She was friendly. He’d give her that. Excessively so, really. Like she’d never met a stranger, or ever been brought up to understand the concept of personal space.

Then again, twelve kids in one house? Maybe she’d just never had the chance.

Must be why Hancock was already besotted. Arturo, too. The Commonwealth’s very own Lone Ranger. The list went on and on. If she’d had any kind of self-awareness, she’d have been a real heartbreaker. As it stood, he wasn’t sure what to call her. She wasn’t a flirt, or a tease, she was just...friendly. Cordial. She introduced herself with a handshake and usually left people with a hug. It was weird. Touchy-feely. That’s what she was.

And you’d think that would work to his advantage here, but it wasn’t. Not yet anyway.

He had a plan, see. He’d already tried feeling her out for the soulmate thing. They’d talked about her parents and how adorably sappy they’d been with each other. He’d gently asked her about Nate and gotten a sugary sweet earful of how wonderful and flawless the man had allegedly been. He’d even admitted to losing his own soulmate, which was a crazy admission for someone like him to make. All to make her feel less vulnerable so she wouldn’t actively notice she was the subject of an interrogation.

Still, she hadn’t offered up any information about her enigmatic new mate.

He’d gotten close, he thought. A few times she’d almost looked like she wanted to ask him something. Her head would tilt just a little like she was considering it, and he’d wait patiently, but every single time she’d just change the subject.

Of course, if that little head tilt and the spacey look on her face meant she was communicating with him, then that made perfect sense.

To be perfectly frank, that look was dangerous. She just looked so...receptive when she did it. Her eyes would get all dark and sparkly, a pink flush would pour into her cheeks and God, when she started to nibble on her lower lip, it just did things to him, okay? It did. He was man enough to admit that.

His Barbara had often worn the same look, and little else, when they’d been together. It was...nostalgic, is all. Nostalgic and hot as fuck and it made him kind of infuriated that he hadn’t been the one graced with her voice in his head.

Because if he had, he’d have been on her like fleas on a dog...more so than he already was.

She was suddenly there, sitting on the edge of his desk, glaring down at him with the annoyed expression she’d developed after the third time he’d ‘accidentally’ felt her up.
Which was the whole idea.

If she wouldn’t willingly give him the information he was fishing for, he’d just push her along until she was forced to.

“So Dez says we should keep working together.” Her frown grew when he didn’t immediately respond and she leaned forward, a hand on his knee for balance while she waved the other one in his face. “Hey...are you up?”

He snatched her hand, dropping his feet to the floor, and yanked her forward until she stumbled into his lap. It wasn’t as neat as he’d have liked, she was only straddling his legs and not anything interesting, but he still grinned up at her. “Oh, I’m definitely up, sweetheart. Wanna see?”

Charlie huffed at him and scrambled back out of his lap. “What is wrong with men nowadays?”

Glory snickered as she drifted past, “They’re men. Which is why you should switch sides. Pick the winning team, Wanderer.”

“I would if I could, sugar. Believe you me.”

God, that fucking accent that never failed to slip out whenever she was pissed was going to kill him. “‘Believe you me’, huh? That’s cute.”

The blush that immediately flooded her face was even cuter. “Shut up, Deacon.”

“If we’re going to be traveling together long term, you should start calling me Big D...you’ll find out why soon enough.”

“Is it because you’re a giant dick? Cause I’d believe that.”

“No, it’s because I have a --”

“Anyway! We’re supposed to go pick up some dead drop thing for Carrington? It’s near Bunker Hill, which is handy since we need to go there anyway and talk to somebody named Stockton. They have a hotel there, don’t they? We could just stay there overnight.”

His eyebrow went up and he whistled, “A hotel, huh? That’s bold of you, cupcake. I like it.”

The glaring intensified, “Idiot.” There was a tiny moment of panic on her face before she smoothed it out, turning away from him entirely.

Ah ha. Busted. Someone special must have caught on to her flustered mood. He grinned to himself and started to gather up a pack for the road. Getting this shit out of her might be easier than he thought.

Charlotte folded her arms and glared down at the packed dirt floor, trying to get a hold of herself while RJ made his usual wild assumptions in her head.

Why is this so hard for you, huh? How many times do I have to catch you thinking about me before you just admit how bad you want it?

I was not thinking about you!

So some other man’s getting you all hot and bothered? That’s not fair.

She huffed, I’m just bothered. Not so much hot.
Hmm...is he bigger than me?

A small giggle escaped her before she could help herself, *I have no way of knowing...from either side, you ding-dong.*

*He’s probably not. I’m going to assume he isn’t. It’s hard to compete with all this.*

*M’hmm.*

*I’m what the kids call ‘above average’.*

*RJ?*

*What?*

*You are a kid, honey.*

*Exactly. That’s how I know.*

She rolled her eyes, *How’d the job go?*

*Pretty good, pretty good. Playing chaperone to a bunch of idiots from the sticks who think Goodneighbor is some kind of resort town is easy caps in my pocket.*

*You never have said what you need all these caps for.*

*Need to know, sweetheart.*

*It’s something nefarious, isn’t it?*

*Nah. Just uh...you know, boring. How are your new friends?*

That’s what she’d called the Railroad. Her ‘new friends’. She didn’t know how else to describe them and they were still mostly abiding by the ‘no details’ clause of their relationship. *They’re...different. Some are nice, some are just obnoxious though.*

*Like the guy who’s got you --*

*Bothered, yes. He’s the worst of ‘em.*

*So lose him.*

She sighed, *I can’t. He’s...I dunno. I think he’s the leader? Maybe? He acts like he isn’t, but...he acts like a lot of things.*

*Well...do you absolutely have to work with them?*

*From what Nick said, they’re my best hope for getting to Shaun since all y’all said I should avoid the Brotherhood, so...yeah.*

*Just gotta suck it up then.*

*Easy for you to say.*

*Hey, I’ve worked with worse for less. Even if they’re just straight assholes, you gotta do whatever it takes to get your kid back, right?*
Right.

Well, there you go.

I just wish he’d keep his hands to himself.

Mac paused as he entered the State House. What?

Oh, don’t --

What is he doing, exactly?

Lottie sighed again, Don’t start. There’s nothing I can do about it.

The idea of another man touching her at all, even in the most innocent ways, had him in a permanent state of aggravation most days. Knowing some jerk was out there touching her in less than innocent ways had him seething.

Who is he? I’ll fucking cut his hands off myself and then he won’t be able to touch anything.

You’re sweet.

Lottie, I’m serious. Give me a name.

Can’t, honey. You know that...I gotta go.

Lottie!

She was already gone. He might as well be yelling at a brick wall. Mac had to fight with himself to not slam the door behind him, and pried his hand off the knob when it didn’t want to let go. Squeezing the ancient brass was just too fucking satisfying. Too close to what he really wanted, which to have this unknown man’s throat in his grasp.

At least Dogmeat was with her. He’d protect her if things went too far. Mac hoped the pup took the first opportunity to bite him right in the balls. The fucker.

By the time he made it to Hancock’s office, he was at least passably calm on the outside.

Or so he thought.

The mayor took one look at him and frowned, “What’s your problem?”

‘I haven’t even gotten to claim my girl yet and some other asshole’s got his hands all over her’ is what he wanted to say. “Nothing. I’m fine. Next job, let’s go.” He snapped his fingers and immediately knew it was a mistake.

Hancock just tilted his head, a hand going to his hip, right near his knife, in a slow, casual kind of way. “You wanna try that again?”

Mac popped his neck and sat down with a huff. “Sorry. I’ve just...got stuff on my mind.”

“Ah...Duncan?”

“Yeah.” Him, too. Always.

“When do you think you’ll be able to take on Med-Tek?”
He had a little over three thousand caps in K-LE-0’s safe right now. Five thousand should guarantee him a full crew and weapons to cut down all the ferals infesting the place. “Month, at least.”

He shook his head, “Damn. That’s gotta feel like forever.”

“Yeah.”

“Hmm...well, you’re in luck. Two jobs came in...well, one job came in, but I need you to run an errand for me first.”

The phrase made him smile a little. Running errands was usually what Lottie did. “Okay.”

“First, got a trade proposal I need somebody trustworthy to deliver to the Slog. From my hands to Wiseman’s and nobody else’s. Probably be a walk in the park, so one-fifty’s as high as I’m goin’. Don’t even start that haggling bullshit with me.”

“Isn’t the Slog with the Minutemen now? Why not just go through their general or whatever?”

“Cause Wiseman and I go way back and I owe him.”

“Alright.” He leaned forward and accepted the leather envelope, tucking it away inside his jacket. “What’re you trading?”

“Weapons for tarberries.”

Mac opened his mouth and then frowned, reconsidering his natural smartass response. This was Hancock, after all. “Why, exactly?”

“Tarberries are something of a luxury item here in town. Chuck says he can make up a whole new menu of drinks and shit with ’em. Stuff Diamond City won’t be able to have, not even at the Taphouse. Plus, Fred Allen says he can mix up tarberry mentats with ’em. You ever have a tarberry mentat?”

He shook his head, “No.”

“It’s like sucking on an angel’s tit.”

He laughed, but for some reason, the idea of Lottie popped into his head and he dipped his head, hiding the sudden rush of heat in his cheeks beneath the brim of his hat. “I’ll have to take your word for it.”

“M’hmm.”

“What’s the other job?”

Hancock lit a cigarette and sat back, smirking triumphantly. “It’s for the Minutemen.”

Well, that explained the smug expression. “Ah...and how is General Sunshine doing?”

“Fan-fucking-tastic. She came through here two...maybe three days ago? Headed out to Lexington. We had a little uh...private conversation.” He grinned, “You should see her. Turns out she’s got some curves under all those layers she wears.”

Oh, yeah, like he was really going to believe that. The memory of her scrawny ass, so tiny you’d need a microscope to actually appreciate it, flashed through his mind. “Uh-huh...and I suppose you
“got her out of those layers?”

His grin turned devious. “Yup. Just turned up the heat a little.”

Mac rolled his eyes. Of course he had. “Won’t that uh...you know, cause some kind of political issues or whatever if you’re screwing the Minutemen’s general?”

He pouted a little, “I didn’t screw her.”

“You said --”

“I said I turned up the heat.” He pointed to a little yellow box on the wall. “Thermostat’s right over there, kid. I cranked that bitch up the second Sunshine hit the door and she started shedding layers right on the couch almost as soon as she came in. Right where you’re sitting.”

Shit, now he was going to have to endure another talk about how amazing and divine this woman was. Again. “Oh, cool...smart.”

“Fuck yeah, it was smart.” He took a drag off his cigarette and blew the smoke out, “See, the thing with her is, she’s a lady, Mac. You ever try to get down with an actual lady before?”

Just my wife. “No.”

“Yeah, I thought not...you gotta really take your time, brother. Commit. Keep things gentle and light. Let them come to you.”

Ah, a long-term con. Now that he did understand. “Okay.”

“I figure one, maybe two more meetings...I’ll have her eating out of the palm of my hand.”

“Sure, yeah...so what’s the job?”

Hancock jolted a little, pulled from his daydream, “Hmm? What?”

“The job.”

“Oh, right. Sorry...one week from today Preston wants to meet with you outside of Quincy. They’re ready to take it back.”

He scowled, “Doesn’t give me much time to get from the Slog to there.”

“Walk fast.”

Mac huffed, “How much?”

“Two thousand.”

“T-two thousand?”

“Yeah.”

“Two thousand caps?”

“No, hugs. Yes, caps. Shit.”

He could do this one job and get right to that cure. This was it. “Fuck. Fuck! Yeah! Hancock!”
He blinked at him, “Yeah?”

“You are without a doubt, the best fu-freaking friend I have ever had, man!”

Hancock grinned, slow and honest, “You better believe it, kiddo.”

Charlotte wasn’t having quite as good a time with her new, self-proclaimed best friend a few miles down the road. If the man pinched her ass one more time, she was going to lose her shit and forget all those manners her granny had taught her.

“There really was a piece of lint, Wanderer. Honest.”

She stomped along and gritted her teeth. Dez had insisted she work with this man, for reasons that were beyond her, and she needed the Railroad, so she was going to be polite, dammit. Even if it killed her.

“Thanks...so much for that.”

“I just don’t have the best depth perception, you know. Comes from being a sniper. It messes with your vision.”

“M’hmm.”

“Course, you’d know all about that, right? Isn’t that what Nate did?”

She was starting to wonder if maybe they hadn’t stuck her with him just to get him away from everyone else. Give people a break at the expense of the rookie. “Yes, Nate was a sniper.”

“Interesting...what was his kill count?”

“No idea.”

“No idea?”

“He didn’t like to talk about that stuff.”

“Hmm...so what stuff did he like to talk about?”

The monument was barely visible on the horizon and she started walking a little faster, her eyes glancing at every mailbox they passed. “I dunno...just stuff.”

“The Appersons...they were mostly uh...philanthropists, right?”

She stopped suddenly and turned, “How do you know about Nate’s family?”

Deacon grinned, “I read a lot.” When her face got even more transparently suspicious, he shrugged, “His great-great-great-great-great-great auntie was pretty famous. I read about her in some book about women’s rights in America. She was some suffragist, yeah? Died of Spanish influenza, right?”

“Oh...yeah, that’s right.” She frowned. It certainly seemed like a reasonable explanation. “The Appersons were originally from Missouri. The rest of them didn’t move to California until she married into the Hearst family.”

“Ah...so, farmers?”
“Railroad tycoons, actually.”

“Oh, ironic.”

“I guess.”

He nodded towards a nearby mailbox, “Railsign.”

“Hmm.” She walked over, pretending to scavenge just like every other day, and dug into it. There, on top of a huge pile of trash, was a single holotape. “Got it.”

“Don’t listen to it here. We should be safe at Bunker Hill. They’re locomotive enthusiasts.”

“Okay.” She slipped it into her pocket and they continued on.

Almost managed to make it a whole five feet before he just had to touch her. Charlotte felt him pull down her hood and grabbed his wrist. “Hey! What are you doing?”

“You should really wear a helmet or something over that.”

She scowled and tugged it back into place before shoving her hair under it. “What does that have to do with you taking it off?”

“Nothing.” He shrugged, “It’s just so rare to see true beauty in the wastes. Couldn’t help myself.”

“Well don’t do it again. I don’t appreciate it...it draws the eye.”

Deacon smirked at her. Like he didn’t know that. That was the whole reason he shaved his head so often. “It certainly does.” He let her get a few feet ahead before he spoke again, “So you’re a natural redhead, right?”

“Why does it matter?”

“Just trying to picture it.”

The way she wheeled around on him and planted her hands on her hips made him want to snap her bra strap and run away laughing. “And what the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Instead he just licked his lips and grinned, “I’m pretty sure you can figure that one out on your own, kitten.”

“Stop calling me that.”

“Stop looking like a little sex kitten then. Drives all the blood right out of my brain and makes me stupid, and then I can’t control my mouth.” The best part of aggravating her was half the time he didn’t even have to make shit up. Way more fun than if he’d had to fake any kind of attraction. Which he had done, quite often, but it was always tedious after a while.

He’d always been partial to feisty little spitfires. Babs had been one. A spitting cat one second and a loving kitten the next. Just like Charlie. Whoever her mate was, he was a lucky sonofabitch.

And he damn well better appreciate his good fortune or somebody, maybe even somebody like Deacon, might have to get involved.

Well, more involved, anyway.
Her own mouth became a firm little pink line in her face and she gave him a stern look. “You are barking up the wrong tree, hound dog. I am not interested.”

Now they might actually be getting somewhere. He tilted his head, “Not interested?”

“Nope.” She resumed walking and he fell in behind her.

“May I ask why?”

“Do I need a reason?”

He shrugged even if she couldn’t see it, “Maybe not, but my ego does.”

“You ego.” She scoffed, “Your ego is none of my nevermind, thank you very much.”

“Come on, baby. I’ve been told I’m quite the catch, you know.”

“Oh, yeah? What unfortunate soul is dumb enough to think that?”

“My mama, for one.”

She laughed, silently of course. Trying to hide it, but her shoulders shook just the same. Deacon grinned. He was totally getting to her.

“Your mama...bless her heart. I bet she spoiled you rotten. Let you get away with murder, didn’t she?”

Her gentle face and that disappointed, terrified look that had overtaken it when he and his so-called friends had lynched that poor man. The way she’d shrank back from him like he was one of those dangerous men in the wastes she’d always warned him to avoid. The finality of her door shutting in his face and the way she’d forced herself to turn away from his outstretched hand every day after.

There had been no coming back from that moment, no matter how hard he’d worked to earn her forgiveness, and by the time he’d become the kind of man she might have actually been proud of, it was too late. She’d been gone for years by then. Deacon shook his head, trying to dislodge the haunting sense of regret that never seemed to fully leave him.

“Almost.”

His voice broke over the word. Charlotte turned a little and watched him over her shoulder, those doe eyes darkening with concern and compassion. He hated that look. Even if it was the fastest way to get her to soften towards him and open up enough for him to consume all of her secrets, he never wanted her to look at him like that again.

“Are you alright there, honey?”

It cost him, but he managed to grin cheekily at her and spun the truth into a lie with just the tone of his voice. “No, I’m in desperate need of love and comforting. Can’t you tell?” Her eyes narrowed at him and his grin became a little more real. “So you wanna help me with that? Maybe in a horizontal sort of way?” He finished it off with a wink and was remarkably relieved at her irritable scoff.

“Goddamn idiot.”
Y'all didn't think I'd leave my boy Deaks out of this, did you? 😊

(Btw, the little inside joke here is that this was originally going to be Deacon's story, but when I sat down to write it, somehow Mac took over. LOL)
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

She opened her eyes and was back in the cave again. Charlotte stared at the rock wall near her head and reached out, running a hand along it’s rough surface. Limestone, of course, as most caves were, but she swore this one was a whole different color than what she could remember Mammoth Cave being. The saltpeter there tinted everything along the trails a ruddy brown color. This cave was...grey. Just grey.

A bell sounded somewhere, followed immediately by the sound of small feet thundering along like a herd of elephants. She scrambled up out of bed, not caring where her blankets landed.

It was him. He was calling them.

Somehow, she was always slower than the other children. That frustrated her to no end. Outside the dream realm, Charlotte could run like a deer. A lifetime of flitting through the forest and hiking up and down steep hills had blessed her with both speed and stamina. Here though, her feet seemed to stick to the floor. She never could go faster than a jog without a dull pain settling in her lungs.

Not that it mattered. He’d wait for her. He always did.

She finally turned the last corner and felt heat bloom in her cheeks as his eyes fell on her. She slid to an abrupt halt, frozen in place by the spotlight of his attention. That feral, wicked smile that gave her butterflies every time, a smile he never shared with anyone else, flashed across his face and she was finally compelled to move again. Walking towards him, absolutely enthralled, unable to look away from the fire in his eyes.

Peter Pan.

He’d taken off his helmet for once. She wasn’t even sure why he needed a helmet, to be honest. This was Neverland, wasn’t it? Peter Pan couldn’t get hurt in Neverland. That was just silly. It was probably a game of some sort. Didn’t Peter always play games? Like how he made everyone here call him Mayor.

That was funny, too. He was always so funny.

His hair was as wild as the rest of him, permanently messy no matter how often she tried to smooth it into some kind of order. Charlotte watched him run a careless hand through it and shivered. He knew exactly what that always did to her and so of course he did it whenever possible. Brat.

“We all here?” He barely even pretended to glance around at the Lost Boys assembled below him and then shrugged, “Fuck it, I don’t care. Alright, listen up, assholes. Some tin-canned mungo fucks showed up again. Same offer as last time. We all know the drill.”

Restless murmuring from the kids had her frowning. How could they be so disrespectful? He was talking to them.

“Shhh!”

Those bright eyes pinned her in place again as he grinned. “Yeah! That’s my best girl right there! Keep ’em quiet and in line, gorgeous.”
If she went any redder, they could use her as a stop sign. He seemed to puff up a little at her reaction, somehow even more cocky than usual, hands on his hips in that classic superhero pose.

“Anyway! As I was saying, before I was so rudely interrupted by you shitstains...canned assholes. Any takers?” He looked around, almost daring someone, anyone, to raise their hand. “Yeah, that’s what I fuckin’ thought. Joseph!”

The boy standing guard at the gate just to his left jumped a bit, “Yeah, boss?”

“Go tell those dirty, shit-butt fucking mungos to go take a long walk off a short pier before we stomp a mud hole in their asses.”

He paled a bit, “Do...do I have to use those exact words?”

“Yes! Yes, goddammit! Use those exact fucking words, you gutless coward. Shit.” He rolled his eyes, “Alright, everybody stop standing around like a bunch of fucking idiots. Get back to work!”

Everyone scattered. Everyone but Charlotte. She couldn’t move. He was just so overwhelming. Always in control, always ready for a fight. She couldn’t even imagine a time before him anymore. His presence filled her from the toes up. She was pretty sure it always had.

He jumped down from his regular post and sauntered over, the butterflies in her stomach rioting with every step he took. Things were changing between them. She could feel it, like thunder in the distance. They were so, so close to being beyond thimbles and chaste kisses. Soon, someday very soon, she’d be ready. She could feel it simmering just below the surface, like a fire under her skin just waiting to catch.

She adored being his Wendy-lady, for however long it lasted. It was so easy here. She was gentle, soft, and endlessly patient in Neverland. Never too loud, too excited, too much. Everything she’d always wanted to be, finally. Effortlessly. A proper lady after a lifetime of always feeling like a rowdy country bumpkin. It felt like heaven.

Charlotte knew from the stories that keeping his attention long-term was like trying to hold sand, but they’d been together for ages now and his interest in her had never waned. If anything, it was blossoming. Ever growing. The closer she got to that space between childhood and being a real ‘mungo’, as he called them, the closer he circled, waiting to pounce.

He came right up to her, just like he always did, their noses almost touching. His scent engulfed her and it was amazing. Wild winds, gunpowder, tobacco, freedom...and under it now, something new and as enticing as it was confusing. The sweat of a man.

On anyone else, it would have scared her, but this was Peter. Her Peter. He loved her. She was always safe so long as he was around.

“How’s my girl today?”

“Good.”
“Sleep well?”

“M’hmm.” She slept very well, thank you. Especially now that the innocent kisses they’d always shared were starting to have a different sort of flavor to them. They were right on the edge of stopping playing at romance and doing it for real. Just as soon as she caught up.

His other hand slipped into hers and he squeezed, “You sure? I didn’t go too far?”

God, she loved him. She loved him more than she’d ever loved anything in her whole life. He was so gentle and kind and careful with her...and look at him now. Worrying that a few innocent touches over her clothes had caused her distress. He was so cute. If she didn’t know he’d absolutely hate it, she’d tell him what a fine gentleman she thought he was going to grow up to be.

Instead she just shook her head and whispered, “No, I liked it.”

“Oh, you liked it, huh?” That wicked smirk was back. The one that had just recently started to turn her insides to jelly.

“M’hmm.”

He stepped even closer and gently brushed his mouth against hers, waiting as he always did for her to reciprocate before he went further. The hand in her hair held her in place while his tongue slid between her lips for the first time, just barely brushing against hers. Nuka and cinnamon apples. No cigarettes on his breath, which meant he had to have brushed his teeth, just for her.

The sudden realization that he must have planned to do this long before he’d ever rung that meeting bell filled her mind. She blushed at the idea of him thinking about this even when she wasn’t right in front of him. Her mind was still reeling from the newly discovered feelings of being wanted in this way when he pulled back, chuckling at her dazed expression.

His hand let her hair go and slid along her face, the thumb tracing her lower lip. “Not yet?”

This was so fucking frustrating. Why wasn’t she ready? He certainly was. He’d been ready for at least a month. She wanted this so bad, but her body just wasn’t there yet. Somehow she knew that.

Charlotte pouted up at him and shook her head. “Not yet.”

Despite everything every book or movie had said about him, he really was a very patient sort of boy. He smiled down at her gently and kissed her forehead.

“It’s alright. You’ll get there.”

“Soon.”

His eyebrow went up, “Soon?”

She nodded and her blush grew.

“How soon we talkin’ here? Cause sometime in the next five minutes would be pretty great.”

Charlotte giggled, “Maybe.”

He grinned and then sighed heavily, feigning petulance like he was so good at. He was good at everything, really.

“You fucking flirt...you better get outta here so I can get back to work. Gotta set an example for all
these dumbasses.”

She giggled and gave him a little salute, “Yes, sir!”

“Ah, don’t call me that. Making me sound like a fucking mungo with that shit.”

Charlotte laughed and turned away from him, jumping in surprise when he swatted her behind. “Hey! What was that for?”

“For...for being such a goddamn tease!”

“I am not!”

“You are so!”

He was joking. She knew he was joking, but tears came to her eyes anyway. She couldn’t help it. What fourteen year old girl wanted to be called something like that by the boy she loved? “Mean.”

Panic flashed across his face and his arms were suddenly around her, holding on tight like he never wanted to let go. “I take it back. I take it back! I’m sorry!”

She burrowed against him, sniffing a few times like the big crybaby she was before taking in a deep breath to try to calm down.

She did not calm down.

Instead she was suddenly consumed head to toe in a burning maelstrom under her skin. It zinged along every nerve until she was trembling. It didn’t...hurt, exactly, but it made her heart race. Felt like drowning...and itchy. Crazy itchy. She couldn’t stand it. The only places she didn’t feel itchy were where his hands were.

She needed those hands everywhere. Right now.

Her hand snaked behind his neck and she pulled him down to her mouth, crushing their lips together while her body pressed against his. She could hear her heartbeat pounding in her ears and an answering tug from low in her belly. His hands flexed and clawed at her, harder than he ever had and she liked it. She wanted more of that. She needed it.

He managed to break away from her kiss and stared down at her, eyes full of dark promise and triumph. “Soon, huh?”

“Now.” She almost purred it at him and he laughed.

“Charlie?”

Charlotte shot up, or tried to anyway. The sleeping bag she was in got a little in the way and she flailed around for a moment, just barely managing to not fall off the bed.

Deacon smirked at her from the other side of the room, still sitting by the window. Acting as official lookout even though they were theoretically safe in Bunker Hill. Did the man ever fucking sleep?

“Pleasant dreams, darling?”

She was too busy panting to do much more than glare at him. There was damp heat between her legs and a tingling in her thighs that let her know she’d been very, very close to embarrassing
herself for realsies in front of the agent. She shoved the sleeping bag off her, desperate to cool
down, and finally managed to get herself under control.

“Nightmare.”

He snorted, “Sure. Sure, it was.”

Having that particular dream here, in front of him, was absolutely a nightmare. She’d been half in
love with Peter Pan her whole life, but she’d thought she was well past these silly adolescent
fantasies. What grown woman would actually want to be soulmates with somebody like that?
Honestly.

Lottie?

She bit back a curse and made herself look busy digging through her pack. She’d been hoping RJ
was asleep for that one. He was almost always asleep...or drunk, or on the job. These dreams had
been bombarding her since she woke up from the vault but he’d never actually felt her have one.
That had been a small blessing.

Blessing over, apparently.

She tried to go for brisk and businesslike, Yeah?

That smug sense of satisfaction he shone with every single time he managed to catch her out was
brighter, and more obnoxious, than ever.

Whatcha doin’?

Nothing.

Hmm...then what were you doing?

She huffed and finally found a can of water at the bottom of her bag. Sleeping.

His interested immediately spiked, You were awfully, uh...felt kinda like...

People can’t control their dreams, RJ.

Why don’t you tell me about it and we can see about turning that dream into a reality?

She thought of that strange cave of Lost Boys and their little teenage tyrant and almost snorted. Not
likely.

Boo, you’re no fun.

So you keep telling me.

I bet you could be though.

Uh-huh.

So...what are you wearing?

Goodnight, RJ.

Aw.
Charlotte firmly pushed him away and then turned to deal with the other brat in her life. “The hell are you lookin’ at?”

His smile was practically obscene, “You.”

“Well knock it off.”

Deacon huffed at her. “You can’t blame me this time, sweetheart. You were the one making cute little kitten noises over there for the past half hour. That kinda shit’s bound to attract predators.”

A few mouthfuls of flat water and she felt better. A little more sensible Mrs. Darling than precocious Wendy again. She studied his face for a moment. Never could get a good read on this one.

“Is that what you’re supposed to be? Some kinda predator?”

He grinned, “Aren’t we all?”

Her eyes narrowed, “Coyote’s all you are. All yap and no bite.”

He shifted just a little, the muscles in his legs coiling under him, and suddenly an air of danger filled the room. “Oh, I can bite, kitten. Can you?”

“No.”

Deacon blinked at that, “No?”

“Nope, don’t need to. My daddy always taught me the easiest way to deal with a coyote was to fill its backside with buckshot.” Her hand tapped on the shotgun that was never far from her side these days. “Wanna see how that bites, honey? Keep talkin’.”

He seemed frozen at some kind of crossroads while they stared each other down. Then a tiny smile lifted one corner of his mouth. Charlotte was shocked enough that it knocked all the aggravation right out of her.

A genuine smile. From Deacon. Would wonders never cease?

He leaned back against the window and shrugged, “Alright, tiger, you win. I’ll behave myself.”

Tiger, huh? Well, it was an upgrade from kitten anyway. “See that you do.”

This was just getting ridiculous. How the hell was she supposed to focus on keeping RJ at bay while simultaneously keeping this one at the appropriate distance? She only had so much patience to go around, after all.

He had to be close. Closer than Goodneighbor, which was already a little too close for comfort. RJ shouldn’t be able to pick up on her dreams yet. Her eyes wandered past Deacon out the window. It was still dark, probably just before dawn. Was he out there, somewhere? Headed out to shepherd more people through the treacherous wastes? Or maybe just up enjoying a bender as per usual?

“So what was your so-called nightmare actually about?”

She sipped her water and considered his tone. Interested, but not interested. Just small talk. Maybe he really was going to start making an effort.

“Peter Pan.”
He laughed, “Peter Pan? Like...Neverland, Tinkerbell, ‘tick-tock goes the clock’? That Peter Pan?”

“Yeah.”

“Aren’t you a little...uh, well, old to be dreaming of a little boy coming to your window at night?”

Charlotte rolled her eyes, “I’m not grown in the dream.” When he just wrinkled his nose at her, she huffed. “It’s not creepy! Stop looking at me like that!”

“Uh-huh.”

“All girls have a Peter Pan phase.”

His head tilted like it always did when he was studying her from behind his shades, “Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“All girls? Are you sure?”

“Every one I’ve ever known.”

“Huh...that’s very interesting. I’mma ask Dez next time we’re at HQ.”

“You do that.”

“So uh...your Peter, does he sport the tights and all that? Little wooden sword?”

“It’s a golden sword, and no. This Peter is...different.”

“Different how?”

“Well, he’s usually wearing a helmet.”


“Hey, I bought the damn thing, didn’t I? I’m gonna wear it!”

“Sure, sure. We’ll see.” He turned from her and watched the last lingering stars up in the sky. “I bet it would be nice to see Neverland though, after being stuck in this world. The mermaid lagoon and the beach and all...”

“It’s a different Neverland, too. It’s a cave instead of an island.”

“What?” He glanced back down at her and watched her start to repack her things. “Was there some version of the story where they were in a cave that I don’t know about?”

She shook her head, “No, not to my knowledge.”

“So how do you know it’s Neverland?”

“Well, what else could it possibly be?” Her sleeping bag didn’t want to roll up properly and she made a face while she concentrated on getting it properly tied. “A cave full of kids where adults aren’t allowed lead by some cock of the walk teenager. What else would you call it?”

Her words snapped his attention off the cute way her little pink tongue was sticking out and his eyes went wide behind his shades. No fucking way. No fucking goddamn way. “That’s uh...yeah, that definitely sounds like Neverland.” Or a small settlement in the Capitol Wasteland called Little...
Lamplight.

“He cusses a blue streak the whole damn time, too...I don’t remember any of that from the old stories.” She laughed, “Can you imagine? That cartoon version of Pan calling somebody a ‘shit-butt fucking mungo’.” Her fingers made little quotation signs in the air as she said the words. “I mean, what’s that about?”

He’d never been so grateful for sunglasses in his whole damn life. The rest of his face might be impassive as ever, but his eyes were shining like sparklers. He now had a very, very good idea of exactly who her mystery man was. Just needed confirmation. Of course, he’d have to be careful. Get her a little more invested before he pushed again so she wouldn’t just want to run away.

Deacon smiled, “Who the hell knows? I once had a dream where Tinker Tom was a tiny deathclaw. I’m talking like, two feet tall max. Your brain does weird things while you’re asleep.”

“Isn’t that the truth?”

It certainly did. Like make her relive experiencing the Bloom over and over again. As though it hadn’t been bad enough the first time.

At least Wendy hadn’t been three thousand miles away from Peter when it had happened to her. And at least Peter hadn’t panicked and immediately asked to be reassigned even further away, to the sea of goddamn Japan, just to get more miles between them. No, of course not. The Peter in her dreams had been thrilled that his Wendy had finally grown up enough for them to be together...which was kind of weird now that she was really thinking about it.

The whole point of Peter Pan was that he never wanted to grow up, right? You’d think he’d have been happy to be soulmates with a girl stuck right on the edge of womanhood forever. The Peter who ruled supreme over his little cave kingdom though was different. He was already over that line, anxiously awaiting for his mate to cross over.

Jeez. A shrink would probably have a field day with that.

She wondered what it had been like for RJ and his wife. They’d never really talked about their respective lost spouses except to say that they were wonderful people and partners and how much they each missed them. She knew her name had been Lucy and she’d been pretty and kind and sweet.

It had given her pause to hear about all that. That old sour, twisty feeling of inadequacy had drifted back into her heart. Especially with how much warmth that poured off of him whenever he talked about the venerated Lucy. The venerated, amazing, perfect model of feminine grace and beauty he was still very much in love with.

She was none of those things. Had always wanted to be though. She’d tried her whole life to be someone Nate would be proud to call his bride. Tried to temper her naturally exuberant self and stay calm and dignified and ladylike. Her record for actually achieving said behavior though was a pitiful two and a half days. No matter how hard she’d worked at it, her personality had always bubbled over the tight lid she’d tried to keep it under.

That was part of why she didn’t want to meet RJ. At least, not any time soon. She’d already been a disappointment to one soulmate...not that Nate would have ever said it outright. He was far too much of a gentleman for that. Still, she certainly didn’t want to disappoint another.

RJ’s wife had been an angel on earth and wearing a halo and wings had always chafed Charlotte.
She just couldn’t be that girl and at this point in her life, she was beyond caring enough to try. There were far more important things to worry about than constantly trying to stuff herself into a personality that was two sizes too small.

She and Deacon headed out just before the sun started to rise, moving southwest towards Kendall Hospital to check on Augusta safehouse. Should take up most of the day and then they’d be ready to help Old Man Stockton get a synth moving to another safehouse that night. Busy busy busy, just like she liked it.

Not even Deacon noticed the slender, silent shadow that appeared for just a moment a block behind them, skirting the edges of Bunker Hill on his way north.

Mac had thought about stopping at the trading hub (with it’s joke of a monument) along the road to the Slog, but he already had plenty of provisions for this particular trip and couldn’t justify the expense to himself. He did, however, make an unscheduled stop in an old alley when he got blindsided by Lottie’s arousal just a few blocks from the settlement.

He’d known she was sleeping right away, of course. It was a directionless, nebulous sort of feeling. Not the kind of thing that came from active interest in someone. The gentlemanly thing to do would have been to ignore it and keep walking. Allow her some privacy and all. Soulmates might have the ability to connect with each other’s minds, but who would actually want unfettered access, right? That would be...well, creepy, for one. Exhausting, for another.

That wasn’t to say he hadn’t been woken more than once in the night when Lucy’s unconscious feelings had spread over him like warm honey and happily acted on them. That was just one of the many perks to having a soulmate as far as he was concerned. Especially when you had a frisky kinda mate like Lucy had been.

It was actually pretty nice to know that Lottie was the frisky type herself.

If he’d been there, in person, that would have been one thing. But he wasn’t, so he’d kept his own reciprocating feelings to himself, gritting his teeth and willing the involuntary erection away. He hadn’t even planned on mentioning it to her except she’d woken suddenly and for a split second, that hazy feeling had totally been directed at him, which had about knocked him off his feet. After that, he just couldn’t help himself.

Must have been one hell of a dream for them to connect like that as far apart as they were...and if she was that potent at a distance, God help him once he finally wore her down enough to let him come to her.

But that was all just a pipe dream, at best, for now. Mac had been laying down some of his best material for weeks, and she was still stubbornly insistent on staying apart. It was driving him crazy. Especially since the day she’d left him a present, tucked in her mailbox just before she’d left Diamond City on one of her frequent errands.


When he’d touched it, it had felt like touching lightening. Which he knew was silly. It was just a scarf, but it had come from her, just for him. That made it precious and irreplaceable.

He’d managed to wear it for all of an hour before her scent lingering on it had overwhelmed him and he’d carefully tucked it away in his gear. Now he reserved it for special occasions only, like when he woke up from yet another milksop nightmare and needed comfort.
And yes, he realized that made him a grown man with what essentially amounted to a security blanket but he didn’t care.

It had come with a second gift, though almost surely by accident. A single long hair had been clinging to it, glinting like fire in the sunlight. He finally had irrefutable proof she was a redhead.

A redhead with long, curly, gloriously rich dark auburn hair the likes of which he’d never seen and was very, very excited to enjoy in person when the time came.

Lucy’s hair had been a shining strawberry blonde that he couldn’t get enough of either. Even when they’d been innocent children in the years before the Bloom had hit, inseparable purely platonic best friends, he never could stop touching it. She barely ever even got to comb it herself. Mac was always happy to have his hands in it, the gentle waves twisting around his rough fingers. It was a treasure. It was his treasure. He’d never experienced something so soft and comforting before and until her death, had never fallen asleep without his hand anchored in it.

His mind jumped suddenly from the innocent remembrance of his wife’s crowning glory to...ah, fuck, now he was thinking about the Bloom again. Shit had been popping back into his mind for months at the weirdest times. That fateful day when Lucy had approached him the sweet little girl she’d always been and then, for whatever mysterious reason known only to the universe, had transformed right there in his arms into the woman he’d wanted to spend the rest of his life with.

He could still remember how her eyes, always so worshipful and loving, like she thought he held up the cave ceiling through sheer willpower, had changed. How they’d suddenly gone dark and hungry as she stared up at him and what that had done to him. The way it had caused the adolescent lust already churning in him to surge through his whole body until all he could think about was her. Feeling her, tasting her...

His pants grew uncomfortably tight, again, and he scowled to himself, readjusting a little and doggedly ignoring it as best he could.

Would a Bloom happen between him and Lottie? Or was that just something that happened once in your life? He tried to imagine someone as spirited and bold as her going through that and grinned at the whole idea of it. Her Nate had been a very lucky man. He couldn’t even imagine getting to bed a wildcat in heat like that.

Lucy had been insatiable in the month that followed her Bloom, but still her regular gentle self underneath. Not that she’d had to be aggressive to keep him close. Even that day a few weeks into it, when his second in command, Joseph, had come rushing in saying the Brotherhood had shown up yet again demanding kids from Lamplight join them as squires. He hadn’t given two shits about any of it. They could have set the whole damn cave on fire and he wouldn’t have cared. She’d been curled up against him, trailing little kisses along his chest and the pouty look she’d flashed him was more than enough to keep him right where he was.

Anyway, it hadn’t been that big of a deal. Lamplight had still had an advocate in the Lone Wanderer back then. He’d shown up, late to the party as always, and told his brothers in arms to go get fucked. Day saved. Joseph had, wisely, decided on his own to shut the gates after that though until Mac and Lucy had finally been able to come up for air. He might have been a cowardly little asshole, but he’d always been a smart, cowardly little asshole.

He’d have to remember to stop in the lab at Rivet City and see what he was up to these days once he got back home.

Home. Shit. He still needed to figure that out, too. Mac had always been proud to come from the Capitol Wasteland. It was a harsh place that demanded harsh living. You told people you were
from there, you had their instant respect. Everyone knew what a hellhole it was, Brotherhood occupation or not. He’d always planned to raise his son there. He and Lucy had traveled up this way, ages ago when they’d first left Lamplight just to try something new, but ultimately they’d gotten homesick and returned down south.

Which, in hindsight, had probably been a terrible decision, but hey, sixteen year old kids often made terrible decisions, right? Sure.

Now there was Lottie though. She had a place in Diamond City, a steady job, friends. She seemed settled here, even if she hadn’t always lived in the Commonwealth. Chances were good she wouldn’t want to give all that up to move to a place where it still looked like the bombs had just dropped five fucking minutes ago.

Boston was just further along in its recovery was the thing. It had plants, animals, more settlements...more civilized settlements, even. Rivet City and Megaton were impressive and all, but neither had schools. The only schools in the Capitol Wasteland were in Vault 101 and Lamplight. He’d heard through Hancock that the Minutemen were dedicated to setting up schools in all their settlements. Even the teeny tiny podunk ones. Charlie apparently even had some grand plan involving the old GNR television studio for a Commonwealth-wide scholastic broadcast so any child, anywhere, could get a basic education.

If Lucy had known about all that, she’d have wanted Duncan here, right? Someplace good and less dangerous than anything they had at home. Lottie probably felt the same about Shaun.

Of course, it would be a colossal pain in the ass to travel the four hundred miles between here and there with a four year old in tow. Maybe he could hire space in a wagon? Travel along with a caravan and trade his skills for…

Movement caught his eye. Mac frowned at the small, hobbling shape a few hundred yards ahead of him. What the fuck was that?

He brought his rifle up and paused, looking through the scope in the early morning light. Some kind of dog? Feral, no doubt. It had a ratty old collar on still. God, that always made him sad. The idea of some poor dog, somebody’s beloved Spot or Fifi or whatever the hell people had named their dogs back before the bombs dropped, just trapped in a mutated body that didn’t know when to lay down and die. He sighed to himself and loaded a round into the chamber.

He could easily avoid it, of course, but it was already injured. Clearly in pain. He knew it was silly and stupid and not worth the bullet he was about to waste, but he had to put it down. He just had to. He could practically see Lucy’s ghost hovering next to him, wringing her hands and crying at the sight of the pitiful creature.

She had always cried so damn easy.

Mac took a deep breath and let his body go still and loose, waiting for that space between heartbeats to squeeze the trigger. The creature finally seemed to sense he was nearby and turned. He waited to see if it would try to charge him or just hunker down and snarl like they sometimes did, when it surprised him.

It wagged its tail.

He immediately lowered his rifle and pursed his lips, frowning a little and trying to figure out what was happening here. He’d never seen a feral wag its tail at anyone. Was this one different? A proper ghoul dog and not actually feral? Was that possible?
It sat down, holding a painful front paw off the ground, but still wiggling a little, the sad little broken tail no doubt thumping the pavement behind it. They stared at each other for a few moments before Mac finally made up his mind to try approaching it. He had a pistol on his hip, after all, if it came to that.

Plus, the Slog was about a mile up the road. Maybe this dog belonged to someone there...probably wishful thinking, but that would be nice, right? He could reunite this canine raisin with its owner and who knows, maybe he’d earn some kind of reward or something.

He scowled to himself as he walked up to it. Probably gonna have to carry the damn thing...and he knew he would. He’d always had a soft spot for goddamn dogs.

Mac stopped ten feet away. “Hey there, pup. What’s uh...what’s goin’ on?”

The wagging got a little more intense and it whined up at him.

“Something wrong with your paw, huh?” God, this was a bad, bad idea. The thing had huge, sharp teeth and the visible muscles in its jaw were thick and tough still after all these years. He slowly lowered down into a crouch and held his hand out. “Come ‘ere. Let me see it.”

It slowly hobbled over, it’s dark eyes never leaving Mac’s, and pressed it’s head up against his hand.

The world shifted.

Mac felt a push in his chest, right near his heart. Like a wave of energy rippling out. He fell back onto his butt on the road and didn’t even register that the dog was now practically crawling into his lap, all sharp claws and pointy elbows. Its tongue covered his face and neck in sloppy kisses while it whined and wiggled.

Lottie was immediately there, suddenly. He could feel her. She was walking along somewhere, shivering a little when the cold wind would somehow make its way through the heavy clothing she had on. He could feel how her jeans slid along her skin, feel that her shoes were a half size too big and the extra socks she’d worn to make up for it made it hard to wiggle her toes. Messy curls fell across his eyes and his hand went to push them back, even though he knew it was just a vision and not real. There was a heavy sort of hat on her head and she hated it, hated the way it kept slipping down over her eyes, but she had promised to wear it and --

Lottie?

She kept walking. There was someone with her and she didn’t want them to notice she was talking in her head. He knew that somehow.

Well look at you being up before noon for a change!

I’m pretty sure I just found your familiar.

Her shock came through strong and he felt her stop walking abruptly. A low, rumbly voice from behind was asking her something.

What?

Mac focused a little and saw downtown Boston in his mind. A hospital in the distance. You’re at...what is that? Garden Street and Concord?
There was a strong hand on her arm. He was pretty sure it was the only thing keeping her still on her feet.

What’s she look like?

He blinked to clear his vision and stared down at the ghoul dog happily curled up against him. Uh...it’s a ghoul. You aren’t a ghoul, are you? I mean, that would be fine and all, I just thought --

She was frozen, barely breathing at this point. No. No, I’m not...collar! Does it have a collar?

Yeah, yeah, it’s --

Is there a tag?

Nope. No tag.

What color is it?

The collar was at least two hundred years old, faded to a sad grey by sun and time. I dunno...it’s old. Some kind of plastic. Nylon maybe?

Check the inside.

Oh, smart. Mac held the dog’s head with one hand so it couldn’t keep trying to drown him in slobber and flipped the collar with the other. Orange.

Hunter’s orange?

Hunter’s orange? The fuck was that? I have no idea, just...bright orange.

Relief flooded through his mind, like a dam bursting. She was crying, sobbing all over whoever her escort was and laughing at the same time. Guy probably thought she was having some kind of fit at this point.

That’s Sassy! You found my Sassy girl! Oh, God, I can’t believe it! I thought she died!

Well he could definitely see how she would. The thing certainly looked dead. He gingerly pet it along it’s exposed spine and hoped it’s appearance didn’t reflect its owner in any way, shape or form.

Mac held her head between his hands and rubbed behind her two stubby ears, “So...Sassy, huh? Is that your name?”

She barked immediately and he couldn’t help but smile. He could almost see the cute puppy she’d once been. Deep, deep down in there, somewhere, of course.

She’s hurt. Got a bum leg. I’m going to take her to the Slog. Is that okay?

The Slog? No! Bring her to Diamond City!

He shook his head, Diamond City doesn’t like ghouls even if they’re people. I seriously doubt they’ll be cool with me showing up with Sassy.

Oh...oh, right.

Anyway, most dogs like this get shot on sight...but the Slog is run by ghouls. They’ll take care of
her for you until you can figure something out.

Lottie sighed, Right...right, sorry. I was just so excited.

He smiled, Hey, I get it. Don’t worry about it. He could still hear her companion talking, a nervous sort of edge to his voice even if he couldn’t make the words out. You should get back to whatever you were doing...gonna have some explaining to do.

Oh...oh, shit.

Mac chuckled and let her go. He could feel her just out of reach now. It made the knot in his heart that had been tightening since he’d first felt her a couple of months ago loosen just a bit. At least now, no matter what, he’d always be able to track her down. No matter where she went, or how mad she got at him. No more getting shut out just because she was in a huff, no more constantly worrying that she was alright.

Finally, he could get some peace.

He took off his pack and rummaged around in it one-handed while Sassy stubbornly remained pressed against him. Candy used to be a cuddly sort, too. It would have been annoying if it hadn’t signaled that her mistress would also be the clingy, snuggly type. She pretended to be so prickly and standoffish now, but he had the proof that was a lie cozying up to him.

Good thing Mac liked getting close. More than liked it, even.

His hand finally landed on a stimpak and he eased her back a little so he could get a look at her sore leg. There was an old, angry gash there, almost hidden among the mottled skin. Looked like some fucker had tried to shoot her. Asshole.

He mumbled an apology for the sting of the needle and injected the medicine into her shoulder, rubbing her ear to take the bite out of it and not even a little worried about the way her exposed teeth pressed against his neck.

This creature, terrifying though it may be, was an extension of Lottie. He had nothing to fear from her.

The wound knit together and Sassy whined in a grateful sort of way, snuggling against him like they weren’t in the middle of an open road, completely exposed and in danger.

Ah. The oblivious type, too. Great…

Mac managed to carefully push her back a little and stood, brushing off his pants and smiling at the way she danced around him. She was kinda cute, really, if you could get past the whole leathery skin, open sinuses thing. He slipped his pack back on and picked up his rifle, patting her on the head.

“Alright, girl. Let’s get you someplace safe so your mama can come pick you up.”

She trotted along next to him and sneezed once.

“Yeah, I know. You’d think she’d just let me bring you to her, right?” He glanced down at her and frowned, “You better not be as contrary as she is, or we’re gonna have problems.”

Sassy stared up at him with huge, warm eyes that somehow transformed her face into something adorable and sweet and he laughed.
Fuck. If Lottie was even half as endearing in person as her familiar was, he wasn’t going to stand a chance.

Chapter End Notes

Dogs never die in my stories. Y'all should know that by now. 😊

(Also, for those who never played Fallout 3, Mayor MacCready does indeed refer to little Lucy as his 'best girl'. She's quite literally the only person he never dresses down. You can't tell me she's not the girl who grew up to be his wife. I don't care what Bethesda's sloppy writing makes it seem like.)
“Okay, but like...can you count to twenty right now?”

Charlotte sighed heavily and kept her eyes on the road. “Yes.”

“Even with your shoes on?”

“Yes, Deacon.”

“Impressive.”

“Hmm.”

“Did you grow up with an outhouse?”

She ignored the dull ache settling in behind her forehead. “We had one out by the barn, but nobody actually used it. Our house had three bathrooms.”

“Jeez, three bathrooms and twelve kids. I bet that got old quick.”

“M’hmm.”

“Pick a banjo?”

“No.”

“Do that uh...what’s it called…” Deacon paused and hunched over, slapping his thighs and chest with his hands while he clomped around.

Charlotte stared at him and tried to not laugh. Laughing would just encourage him. “Hamboning?”

“Yeah! Hamboning! Play the hambone!”

“That’s not a thing. No one says ‘play the hambone’.”

“But can you do it?”

“Anyone can do it, but I don’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to, I guess.”

“Oh! I know! Play that uh...that thing…”, he mimed holding something up to his mouth and flicking it.

“Mouth harp.”

“Yeah! You play that?”

“Nope.” She had a brother who did. Banjo, too. Mandolin, guitar, fiddle, jug, harmonica. Several of
her siblings played all manner of instruments. They’d always been a musical bunch. Hell, half the family had been members of a fairly popular amateur bluegrass band back home. Not that she’d ever tell Deacon. Wild horses couldn’t drag it out of her at this point.

“Are you sure you’re from Kentucky?”

“Pretty sure, yeah.”

It was D-Day for the Minutemen. Or maybe Q-Day? Taking back the Quincy ruins day. Charlotte was sure Preston would have a name for it at some point. Probably declare it a Commonwealth-wide holiday.

Because conquering the rest of the wastes might simply be business as usual, but this? This was personal.

Six squads, two snipers, your standard fish in a barrel scenario. Gunners had the high ground, but they had a plan to get that high ground yanked right out from under them. Goodneighbor’s sniper-on-loan, MacCready, would take the northside. High up on the very overpass the Gunner’s officers had claimed as their base of operations. Deacon, who was surprisingly good with a rifle himself, would be on the southside of town. Somewhere. He hadn’t exactly said where, but she was sure it would be someplace ridiculous and impossible for anyone else to get to.

She’d never say it, lest his ego grow even larger than it already was, but the man was a wizard when it came to finding choice places to set up shop. He acted like he didn’t have the sense God gave a goat most days, but the gears whirling in his mind never stopped. Ever. The sillier he got on the outside, the more he was thinking on the inside. She’d realized that watching him watch her clear out Switchboard a week back.

It was all an act. All of it. A goofy exterior hiding a calculating, brilliant interior. Either he was totally the Railroad’s actual leader, or Dez had a serious Svengali situation on her hands. In any case, Charlotte was just glad he was on her side...maybe. Probably.

He’d said he was, anyway, and that hadn’t felt like a lie.

With the two snipers working in tandem, the topside Gunners would no doubt flee to the lower levels of the settlement, which is where Charlotte and her men would be lying in wait. It was kind of scary, to be honest. They’d done ambitious things already, like build communities out of nothing and turn Kellogg’s old house into a recruitment office in Diamond City, but never anything like this.

Never anything so dangerous.

Every man here today had been handpicked by Preston for both their skills and their level of hatred towards these highly organized paramilitary raiders. Every single person had a reason for wanting these assholes dead.

Charlotte’s reason was the handwritten list in her pocket. A scrawled note listing a few humble belongings that would be all the Longs back in Sanctuary would ever have of their son. The one the Gunners had shot in cold blood. Little Kyle. She was going to put every one of these bastards down like the rabid dogs they were and then she was going to bring home Kyle’s teddy bear and baseball cap for his daddy and mama come hell or high water.

They had a couple of hours before the operation began, which was nice since she and Deacon had to sweep around in a large arc to get in position without being noticed. Right on the edge of the
At least she’d worn her ducks for the occasion...and at least a nice, thick, pea soup fog had rolled in around midday with no signs of letting up anytime soon. Sure, it lowered their visibility, but it also gave them cover to get everyone in place. Pretty fair trade off, really.

“Are you related to the Hatfields and the McCoys?”

She sighed again. The hardest part of this day was going to be putting up with Deacon all by her lonesome. It hadn’t been so bad hanging out at Ticon after they’d gotten H2-22 into High Rise’s care. All the other agents at the safehouse had acted as a buffer between them and he’d actually kind of behaved himself. More than behaved himself, really. He’d been a right gentleman, in his own way, ever since her little...episode.

She had to admit, her cover story for becoming hysterical after RJ had found Sassy had been pretty flimsy. Claiming low blood sugar and a family history of hypoglycemia had been the only thing she could think of at the time.

Deacon hadn’t believed a word of it, even if it was technically a half truth. Hypoglycemia did run in her family, she just didn’t have it. He’d run with it, though. Stuffing her full of gumdrops and mutfruit and all the Nuka Colas she could drink at the most inopportune times he could manage. Once even during a firefight, when he’d abruptly grabbed her, dove behind a pile of rubble, and shoved a sticky handful of candy into her mouth while bullets whizzed over their heads. All because she ‘looked pale.’

Well, no shit, Sherlock. She always looked pale. Casper the friendly ghost had more color than she did. That was part of why she’d taken to wearing things to cover her face while they were out and about. Even in the winters before the war, she’d always had to wear sunscreen or risk a burn. Now there was no sunscreen and she was almost positive the atmosphere was even more screwed up than it had been in her day. Thirty minutes of direct sunlight and she’d turn red like a tato.

“No, Deacon.”

“Are you sure? Your family’s pretty big.”

“The Hatfields and the McCoys tended to stay in their own holler. They never made it over our way.”

“Ah.”

He’d been throwing every stereotype of hillbillies at her for days now. Even worse than Nick, who at least knew when to shut up about it. Charlotte had really, really hoped that stuff had died with the old world, but apparently not.

“Pretty big kerfuffle for one little pig.”

She rolled her eyes, “It wasn’t over a pig. That’s just what the papers up north said.”

“Huh.”

“Can I ask you something?”

Deacon grinned, “Of course. Anything you want.”

“Why do you sound like you’re from California if you’re from Boston?”
“Why do you sound like you’re from nowhere when you’re from Kentucky?”

She frowned, “No. No, don’t try to be slick with me. That doesn’t...that’s a false equivalency. I dropped my accent because it helped me blend in here. But you said you’re from here. There’s no reason for you to try to blend in because you already do.”

“I hate to break this to you, sweetheart, but you never really dropped the accent.”

“Course I did!”

He laughed, “M’kay. Sure.”

Why did she try? Honestly, at this point, why was she still trying to figure this jerk out? All he ever did was lie, even when he told the truth. It was like trying to talk to some crossroads devil from an old fairy tale. She grumbled to herself. And people thought lawyers were liars. Lawyers had nothing on Deacon. Why, he’d --

“Hello?”

Charlotte paused and tilted her head. “Do you hear that?”

He looked around, “Yeah...sounds like a kid.”

She raised her voice a bit, “Hello?”

“I can hear you! I can hear you! Hello! Can you let me out?”

Dogmeat whined up at her and she nodded, “Find him, boy.”

The dog shot off towards the wreckage of a destroyed home and they trotted along behind. Deacon’s finger casually flipped the safety off on his rifle. He’d seen far too many traps set up to lure in soft-hearted idiots like Charlie in his day to do anything else.

The shepherd stopped at an old fridge, blasted clean outside the house it belonged in from when the bombs fell, and sniffed it, tail up and wagging.

Charlotte’s eyes went wide and she pulled down her bandanna. “Oh, God...is someone in there?”

“Please! Let me out!”

Her hand was on the handle before he could stop her and he flinched when she tugged at it, half expecting an explosion and pleasantly surprised when there wasn’t one.

“It’s stuck!”

The voice from inside the fridge answered, “Yeah, I can’t get it open from in here, either!”

He huffed and raised his rifle, “Stand back. I’ll shoot the damn thing off.”

Charlie backed up a few feet and covered her ears. Deacon pulled the trigger and the dulled ringing thud of his silencer sang out. The ancient rusted handle fell to the ground, along with most of the door’s locking mechanism and then, hilariously, the entire door fell off. Dogmeat jumped and took off with a started yelp.

A ghoul child fell out of the cramped container and Charlie gasped.
“Oh, my God. Are you alright?” She dropped her shotgun and ran to the boy’s side, a hand hovering anxiously above him as he righted himself.

“Ugh. My legs are so stiff.”

“Take your time, honey. Easy now.” She’d now also dropped her pack and was digging through it, coming up with a Nuka Cola and a pack of Fancy Lads. “Are you hungry? Thirsty?”

Deacon’s mouth twitched. On one hand, they were still standing less than a mile from the Gunner’s stronghold. She was now defenseless and kneeling in the mud, trying to stuff food into a child who’s physiology didn’t actually require it. On the other hand, it was absolutely the same thing his mother would have done.

He decided to let it slide.

The kid reached out for the Nuka, “Yeah...yeah, I’m crazy thirsty! It’s been forever! Thank you!”

“Here you go, sweetie.” She helped him get the cap off. “I’m Charlie, and this here’s my friend, Deacon.”

He should be furious now. She’d just outed him to some complete unknown...and after all their talks about op-sec and how you couldn’t trust everyone and everything. Somehow though he found himself smiling and waving to the kid like a dope.

Maybe her kind of stupid was contagious.

The boy gave them a timid smile, “I’m Billy.”

Dogmeat finally decided the evil fridge was truly dead and returned, sniffing the child all over, starting at his toes.

“Oh, hey! You’ve got a dog. I love dogs!”

“Billy, honey, how’d you get in there in the first place?”

Half the bottle was gone in a single long drink and he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “It happened so long ago.” He looked around with wide eyes, “Back before everything got wrecked...when I heard the sirens, I tried to find someplace safe. When the house started to shake and fall apart, I just crawled inside.”

“Sweet Jesus.”

“When it got quiet again, I tried to get out, but there isn’t a handle on the inside.”

Charlie stared at him, her mouth open in shock before she managed to snap it shut, teeth clicking. Deacon watched as she rebuttoned the boy’s shirt properly and nodded to herself. “Alright...well, that’s alright. You did just what you should’ve. Duck and cover. That was quick thinking.”

“Thanks.”

She smoothed out his collar and frowned a little. “Can’t just run around in this...”, she started digging through her pack again and came up with a knitted sweater, which she promptly tugged over his head. “There now. That’ll help...maybe a hat...”

Billy worked his arms into the sleeves and absentmindedly ran his hand over the soft fabric, “Thank you, ma’am, but I’m not cold.”
The hat was already in her hand and she jammed it on his head anyway. “Not cold? Sweetheart, we're into January already. How can you not be cold?”

Probably because ghouls generated enough radioactive energy on their own to always be warm. Deacon wasn’t about to intrude on their little moment by pointing that out, however. He was too busy wondering why there was an odd kernel of jealousy floating around in his stomach.

“I dunno.”

“It’s a nice sweater.”

Charlie looked over her shoulder at him and smiled, “Codsworth made it. He knits a million times faster than I ever could.”

“Oh, you knit?”

“M’hmm.”

She went back to fretting over the kid and he pretended to keep watch, feeling petulant and inexplicably peevish. He wanted her to make him something. Even something silly like a hat or mittens or whatever. Deacon frowned a little and tried to take a mental step back from himself. Why was he getting all territorial here? Over a kid?

“Please, ma’am. I just want to go home. Can you help me? Please?”

Shit.

Charlie stood and took Billy’s hand, helping him to his feet. Standing, he was nearly as tall as she was and Deacon almost scoffed. She was treating him like he was some helpless baby when clearly the kid should be able to look after himself at his age. Ridiculous.

“Of course, honey. Of course I can. Where’d you live?”

“Quincy, but...I don’t know how to get there from here. Cindy’s dad was supposed to drive me home...and everything looks so different now.”

A troubled look came over her face but was gone before the boy saw. “It certainly does. Well...sure. Sure, we can do that. Uh...where in Quincy, exactly?”

“Under the overpass, kinda.”

“Which side?”

“Oh…”, he thought hard for a minute. “The sun rises in the east so...eastern side? We were on the eastern side, I think!”

“Oh! Oh, that’s fine then.” She smiled brightly at him, “We were headed that way anyhow! Isn’t that lucky?”

“Yeah!”

Charlie finally seemed to remember he was there and looked back to him, “You don’t mind taking a little unscheduled field trip, do you?”

Of course he did. Of course he minded. Doing this was so far beyond a fool’s errand it would require a whole new phrase just to describe how monumentally stupid it was. If this pint-sized
ghoul was really pre-war, then his parents were irradiated skeletons at best. Plus, they already had a job to do. A dangerous job, at that. One that would benefit not only the average asshole in the Commonwealth, but synth slaves as well. Plans were in place, there was a timetable to think about. People were depending on them.

But those eyes of hers. The way she was starting to look at him like maybe he wasn’t such a bad guy after all. She clearly thought he’d be all for an adventure like this. Even with all his picking and teasing over the past week, she liked him for some reason. Trusted him despite all the blatant lies. Almost like she couldn’t help herself.

The way her voice had gone gentle and soft as she’d helped the kid had clearly done something to the decision making center of his brain. He’d felt like she was wrapping him in a homemade quilt. Deacon wanted her to talk to him like that. To worry and fret over him being warm and well fed and taken care of.

Maybe it was just that hair. She was starting to remind him so much of --

“Yeah, sure. Sounds good. No arguments here, boss.”

She grinned and he felt like he’d earned a gold star. Charlie and the boy started to walk off, hands swinging between them, and he chuckled to himself.

“Hey, wait a second.”

They stopped and she turned back to him. “Yeah?”

“Forgot your gun.”

She blinked at him and then down at the shotgun laying in the dead grass. “Oh. Oh! Good lord. Forget my head if it wasn’t attached! Thanks, Deacon.” She trotted back and snatched it up, cheeks a little pink.

“No problem.”

“Wow! That’s a cool gun!”

“Thanks, pal. Robot sold it to me.”

Billy’s eyes went huge, “A robot?”

“Yeah! Hang on, I’ll tell you the story in a sec.” Charlie pushed up her coat sleeve and clicked through her Pipboy before hitting the comm button. “Preston?”

There was a little burst of static, “Yes, General?”

“Change of plans. Gotta take a little detour. If you hear shooting, consider that the signal, alright?”

“Ma’am?”

“Everybody’s already in position?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Then it’ll be fine. Spread the word. Over and out.”

Billy blinked up at her with starstruck idolization, “You’re a real life general?”
“Yup. General Charlie Apperson, Commonwealth Minutemen, at your service. We’ve got some bad guys holed up in Quincy proper, so once we get you home, I want you to dig in and hold down the fort. You can handle that, right?”

“Yeah! Yeah, I can do that!”

“Fantastic!”

“Is it the Reds?”

She laughed, “No, these are homegrown bad guys.”

Deacon trailed along after them and shook his head. Was there anyone alive Charlie couldn’t recruit for this bullshit? He glanced up and to the right, squinting a bit, just barely able to make out the moving shadows high up on the viaduct through the fog. Her lieutenant and their other sniper, no doubt. Well...here’s hoping the guy knew his stuff.

Mac scowled as Charlie’s distorted voice coming through the little radio on Preston’s lapel cut off into static. They started scaling a handy bus right under a hole in the upper level and he glanced over at the other man. “What’s going on?”

He shrugged, “Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Charlie always just change plans on the fly like that?”

Preston seemed to not really want to answer and took his time considering the question. “She...often has to make adjustments based on new intel or --”

“So yes?”

He sighed, “Yes.”

Of course she did. Probably just did whatever fool thing she wanted and left Preston to pick up the slack. Why the man hadn’t just made himself the damn general was a mystery to him.

Not that he really cared. If she wanted to run the Minutemen straight into the ground, that was fine with him. Preston had already shown him where the duffel bag (a whole bag!) full of his payment was hidden. No matter what happened here today, he’d have his payday and then he could get a move on with saving Duncan.

He let Preston give him a boost to the upper level of the highway and set up his nest, screwing on his rifle’s silencer while the other man got back on the ground and into his own position. The Gunners down the road would never even know he was there. Hopefully.

Once everything was in place just like he liked it, Mac let his mind go quiet and waited, smiling when a song started to drift through.

In the week since he’d found Sassy and safely delivered her to the Slog, he’d discovered all sorts of things about Lottie through their amplified link. She ran her hands through her hair a lot, especially when she was nervous or tired. She had a preference for cherry Nuka spiked with bourbon and brahmin steaks. She fell asleep absolutely exhausted every single night.

He hated that last bit. She was always at work before he’d even crawled out of his bedroll. Always on the go. Most nights her muscles ached and her head hurt by the time she’d stop whatever the hell it was that had her so damn busy and collapse into bed. It was like she had some kind of
compulsion to run herself into the ground every damn day. Clearly the woman was incapable of taking proper care of herself.

His wife had been like that, too. Getting her to relax, even when she’d been so pregnant with Duncan that she could barely move, had required all the charm and persuasion he could muster. She’d always said that if she didn’t keep herself busy, then she felt useless. As if that had ever once been true.

Lucy on her worst day was worth ten of anybody else on their best.

Another thing Lottie had in common with her was her predilection for singing, or humming, almost constantly. Probably not out loud, since that could be dangerous, but there was always a song drifting through her mind. *Always.* Not that he was going to complain about it. Certainly it was better than the crap they played over and over on DCR.

He never had told Lucy he could hear her singing whenever he let himself zone out. He knew she’d just be embarrassed and try to stop, and then he’d be deprived of her beautiful voice in his head all day.

He was betting Lottie’s husband had never told her, either.

It had surprised him that first time. A soft, sweet humming of some song he’d never heard before. He’d been staying overnight in the Slog’s bunk house, Sassy curled up against him, and for a moment, almost thought there was some golden-throated ghoul nearby. But the next song had actual words, and he would recognize that cute accent anywhere.

Lottie knew songs he’d never heard in his life. Even in all his travels up and down the Eastern seaboard. She seemed to prefer bouncy kind of beats, which made for a cheerful sort of vibe that kept him in a good mood most days. Occasionally though, there’d be a love song so sad it would almost make him cry.

He tried to tune it out then. Push it back until it faded like the static of their bond.

Mac cracked open a water and took a sip, watching through his scope and getting a read on his targets, humming along to the song she was currently singing. It was a favorite of hers, apparently. Made the rounds maybe three, four times a day.

*Well I've been all around this world, young and running wild. I've played with the fire that burns, and I'll live on the highway until I die. I'm living on borrowed time, right up to the end of the line, but every light that flickers and shines, will come together in the glory time...*

You wouldn’t think it would be a happy kind of song with lyrics like that, but it was. It bounced along in a peppy sort of way in his head.

He murmured the next part along with her, “All together, we fall together. We ride together. We wild together. Yes, all together, we fall together...every little light will flicker and shine.”

Not exactly his preferred rock-n-roll, but close enough.

Mac checked his watch. Just about an hour until showtime. Charlie had decided the battle should start at sunset. He had no idea why, and he didn’t care. The fog that swirled through the city showed no signs of abating any time soon, so visibility was a bust no matter what time of day this went down.

Truth be told, he was kind of bored up here all by his lonesome. Snipers had that whole lone wolf
reputation thing happening, but any idiot should know they usually worked in pairs. Being all by himself made him twitchy. Always had.

Then again, he was never really by himself these days, was he?

*Hey, Lottie?*

She was nearby. Distracted, but happy. A warm, maternal kind of feeling flowed from her. Must be with a kid somewhere. Maybe setting up one of the Minutemen’s schools someplace safe and cozy? The idea made him smile.

**Yeah?**

*How you doin’ today, beautiful?*

*Good. Busy...you know how it is.*

*You’re always busy.*

*I know. There’s always so much to do.*

*You should think about taking a vacation.*

**Hmm, and where would you suggest? I hear Chernobyl is lovely this time of year...**

He snorted. He actually got that one thanks to that old encyclopedia in Lamplight. *I was thinking someplace a little closer to home...maybe Goodneighbor?*

**Oh, the Goodneighbor where you usually like to hang out at?**

*Yeah, that’s the one. Get that fancy room at the Rex...room service from the Third Rail...*  

*And? Come on, let’s hear it.*

Mac grinned, *And your very own personal bed warmer, provided at no extra charge.*

*No, thank you.*

*Aw, why not?*

**Because I can’t imagine getting a lot of relaxation accomplished with a bed warmer like you around.**

Ha. Got her. *So you have imagined it!*

**Oh, for heaven’s sake.**

*I could definitely help you relax, you know. Make you feel all boneless and warm inside.*

*Uh-huh...you’ve got a lot of ideas for somebody who doesn’t even know what I look like.*

**Doesn’t matter what you look like.**

She scoffed, *Every man says that and it’s always a lie.*

*Lottie, baby, your voice alone is all I need to get me going. If it’s really that bad, I’ll just let you blindfold me.*
There was a long pause before she spoke again and he knew she was blushing. *Is that true?*

Mac let just a hint of the low-level desire he always felt whenever he thought about her slip through their link, his voice soft and serious. Predatory. *It’s absolutely true.*

*I...I have to go.*

*Oh...okay.*

She drifted away and he sighed, irritated with himself. Dammit. Pushed too far again, just like always. She might not be able to shut him out like she used to, but Mac wasn’t about to hold onto her if she wanted to go. That wouldn’t help anything in the long run.

Lucy had always liked it when he got a little aggressive. The more he pushed, the more she gave. It was a pretty great arrangement. He wasn’t exactly sure what Lottie liked yet, despite the hours and hours he spent thinking about it. She was pretty pushy herself, really. Maybe he should let her be the one to...no. No, if he waited for her to make a move, he’d be stuck waiting forever.

Gunfire in the distance snapped him out of his woolgathering and he dropped down against the pavement, peeking through his scope at the town below. Something was going down on the eastern side but he couldn’t get a proper look from his point of view. Whatever it was, it had Gunners running along the scaffolding built by the people who’d once lived here.

The *families* that had once lived here, actually. Quincy was the main reason he’d left the Gunners to begin with. After he’d heard what they were planning, he couldn’t stay. Attacking random caravans and other raiders was one thing. Deliberately targeting a town full of women and children was another.

Mac didn’t worry about being picky with his targets. If it wore green, he took it down, counting under his breath. He had no idea where the other sniper was, but he hadn’t started shooting yet. That kinda pissed him off. Asshole better not be getting paid the same to just sit on his ass and look pretty.

The other asshole in question, of course, wasn’t getting paid at all, and he was kind of starting to get miffed about it.

Charlie had bolted into the heart of the town as soon as Billy was (miraculously) reunited with his parents and the Gunner slaver who’d been stalking them had shown back up with his little friends. His rifle had a silencer of course, and so did the amazing gun he’d been nice enough to gift her with back at Switchboard as a token of his interest, but apparently she’d forgotten all about *that*. The second her ridiculous combat boom-stick had gone off, chaos erupted around them.

Minutemen charged in from all sides and once the Peabody’s were safely ensconced in their home, Charlie was making a bee line right into the killzone. Leading the charge. She didn’t bother to look back, just yelling at him to go get in position as she went.

Deacon jogged along, keeping a low profile against the edges of buildings. A terrified young Minutemen cadet almost bumped into him and he grinned at the guy.

“Hey, friend! Time to earn our paychecks...we’re getting paid for this, right?”

He didn’t bother to wait for a response. People shitting their pants were rarely decent conversationalists anyway. He just kept heading south, to the old brick building near a department store. Charlie had said it used to be a pet shop in her time. Big Nuka billboard on the side and no visible roof access.
The perfect spot for a little Gunner hunting.

He shimmied up the side of the building, using the rusted gutter for a handhold when needed, but really it was pretty easy going. He’d always been a climber, even if he didn’t like anything too high off the ground.

Once on the rooftop, he quickly went to the northern edge and glanced around. There was some fucker on top of the church setting up with a missile launcher. That was probably going to be a problem.

By the time he was ready for a little action himself, he knew exactly where the other sniper in the field was, although no one else seemed to have noticed. Which was good, since he’d hate to take out somebody via friendly fire. Professional courtesy was the name of the game. Besides, he’d just started to get in Charlie’s good graces, after all. Wouldn’t want to endanger that just because he was still feeling a little punchy and competitive.

Didn’t mean he couldn’t swipe a few kills though.

The dumbass standing out in the open with his missile launcher, silhouetted so perfectly by the setting sun was the first to go. He focused on taking down anyone with a weapon larger than your average rifle. Another asshole was prancing around in a busted-ass suit of power armor and he snickered a little when his bullet took out the main support on the rickety old bridge they were trying to cross. They fell like a rock directly to the pavement below and several more pieces of armor exploded off the suit.

Amateurs.

He knew exactly where Charlie was the entire time, of course. Her combat shotgun had a special sort of echo to it and he could trace her progress through the city and into a few apartment buildings easy peasy. Her Minutemen, mostly recruited from various farms in the area, used all manner of weapons, but those stupid muskets some carried were just plain hilarious. Every time he heard one of them make their patented ‘fwamp’ noise, he almost lost it. Every damn time.

Their sniper was a professional though, and so was his rifle.

Quiet, thorough, lethal. The men and women he hit went down with just one bullet every time. Shit was impressive. Real impressive, actually. The Railroad could use somebody like that clearing routes out of the Commonwealth...somebody that wasn’t him, at least. It would be nice to have a second sniper in the group so he might actually get a day off now and again.

Shit, when was the last time he actually had a day off, now that he was thinking about it? Years, at least. He was starting to come up on an age where most agents, even long-term, tenured agents like himself, retired.

God, that was a scary concept. Retirement.

Deacon shuddered a little and focused up, turning back to the battle at hand and choosing to ignore the existential one in his head.

He just managed to catch Preston in his scope and waved, even though he couldn’t see, of course. Just nice to see a friendly face and all. There was a Gunner sneaking up behind him, baton at the ready and Deacon blew a pretty hole right through her head. The lieutenant jumped a little and stared at the dead body, then turned his head up and gave him a friendly salute. He beamed and flashed a thumbs-up in response before continuing to pick off any asshole that came within his
sights.

The Minutemen had traditionally always been a thorn in the Railroad’s side, but Preston wasn’t so bad. Neither was Charlie. Maybe between the two of them, they could keep the riff-raff out and elevate the whole group.

Deacon chuckled a little. Kinda ironic, actually. Having a girl from the backwoods of Kentucky keeping the redneck element in check.

Minutes ticked by, body after body hitting the pavement. The Gunners were dug in, and prepared, but the militia had passion and numbers on their side. It wasn’t too long before Charlie finally appeared on the top of the church and tied one of their blue flags to the spire. Battle over. Quincy was theirs again.

Deacon set his rifle down and whooped, clapping and whistling until she finally heard it and waved at him. A cheer rose up over the reclaimed city just as the fog finally dissipated and the moon rose over the turnpike.

Felt good. Felt pretty damn good to be on the winning side for once. It had been a while.

Mac heard the cheering and rolled his eyes, even as he clapped politely. Charlie’s bony butt was up on the church, right out in the open like an idiot, hanging up some ridiculous flag that would no doubt draw the attention of every asshole for five miles. Just...freaking idiots. All of them. The whole damn group had a case of terminal stupid-itis.

He didn’t even know what the big deal was. The odds had been overwhelmingly in their favor. If they hadn’t won, it would have just been fucking embarrassing.

At least the job was done. He could get to Goodneighbor before morning and sleep the day away before heading out to Bunker Hill to get the word out about hiring a crew. Now that made him smile. Who knew? Couple of days from now, he could have that cure in his hand. Anything was possible. He was really starting to believe that again.

Back down in Quincy, Preston met Charlie in Sturges’s old workshop in the church. She grinned at him and hopped along, too excited for plain walking.

“We did it! Can you believe it!”

He smiled and held up his hand for a high five, not at all surprised when she hugged him instead. “Yeah! I knew we could!”

“ Heck yeah! Cause we’re the best!” She stepped back, flexing her arm muscles like some bodybuilder of old and he laughed.

“We’re definitely somethin’! This is really gonna send a message, General. A loud one.”

“Good. I hope those jerks squatting down there in that tv station hear it and it about blows their ear drums out!”

“Gunner Plaza, ma’am. That’s what they call it.”

“Minutemen TV. That’s what I call it.”

He was never going to understand where all her energy came from. It was like she was fusion powered or something. “We should probably try to take back the Castle first.”
“Right, right. Don’t worry, I didn’t forget.”

Deacon poked his head in, “Hey, is this where the afterparty is?”

“There he is!” Charlie grinned at her newest friend and turned to Preston. “Preston, this is Deacon. Deacon, this is --”

“The esteemed Lieutenant Preston Garvey! What am I, living under a rock? Of course I know this guy!” He shook his hand hard and then punched him in the shoulder. “You’re a legend, man! It’s good to meet you.”

Charlie rolled her eyes, “Don’t tease him, Deacon, that isn’t nice.”

He pouted, “I’d never!”

Preston was very confused but decided to not question it. This guy she’d found had agreed to help them, for free, and done a damn fine job of it. He wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

“It’s good to meet you! Nice shooting out there. Real nice. Thanks for taking out that Gunner before they got the drop on me.”

He grinned, “Couldn’t have them smacking you around. You’ve got such a pretty face and all.”

Was he flirting with him now? What the hell was happening? “Okay…”

Charlie watched a few of the other Minutemen filing in and frowned, “Hey, where’s MacCready?”

“Oh, I already paid him. He said he’d be on his way after the battle. Guess he’s got something super important to do.”

“Aw…that’s a shame. I was going to thank him for his assistance today. He was a big helper, too.”

Deacon seemed frozen for a second, “MacCready? That was the other sniper?”

She blinked up at him, “Oh, do you know him?”

He started to snicker, “Yeah...yeah, I know him. How do you know him?”

“Through Hancock. We hired him back when we took out a different Gunner outpost. Before you and I met.”

His head tilted a little, “Was that around the time when you were sick and walking around all wrapped up like a mummy?”

“Yes, I...hey, wait, how’d you know about that?”

“Did you see his face?”

She frowned, “What?”

“His face. Did you see it?”

“No? He was sick, too. Had a mask on the whole time...why? What’s wrong with his face?”

“Uh...nothing. Nothing, he’s just uh...handsome. You’d be surprised how handsome, actually.”

“Really? He looked like a toothpick somebody had wrapped in rawhide when I saw him.”
“Yeah, no, he’s super cute. I bet it’d be love at first sight if you actually saw him.”

Charlie scoffed, “Oh, I highly doubt that, honey.”

Deacon watched her get swallowed up into a crowd of exuberant Minutemen and smiled to himself.

“We’ll see…”

Chapter End Notes

The song Charlotte is singing is called "Flicker and Shine", by Old Crow Medicine Show.

It's worth a listen. Especially if you like bluegrass.

https://youtu.be/YoznDgt2SZk
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

TW: Attempted Sexual Assault

(Also, sorry for the lack of chapters this week. I got my flu shot on Monday and it kind of kicked my butt. Plus, that old cow Susan, the infamous manifestation of my anxiety, showed up for an unexpected visit last weekend and we all know how much she hates me writing. I've since wrangled her into submission once again. Huzzah.)

Her side of the bed was cold. The thought registered before Mac even opened his eyes.

Also their bed was just...wrong. Soft. Too soft to possibly be real.

He sat up and looked around the room. Moonlight spilled in from open french doors and he could hear the sound of the ocean, a quiet, distant murmur. The fluffy blanket still covering him was impossibly thick and luxurious, the bed it covered a ridiculous size.

The room itself was likewise ridiculously big. A fireplace on the opposite wall, fancy paintings on the walls, and when his foot hit the carpet, it was plush and strangely squishy.

Wait, his foot?

His hand was on a cane before he even realized what it was, the handle smooth and cold. Some kind of metal that caught the moonlight and shone dully. The rest of it seemed to be fashioned from driftwood, beautifully worked and polished.

He stared down and frowned. Only one leg this time. Well. That was...different.

It probably should have bothered him more, but she was gone, too. Missing her was worse than missing any appendage.

The music she’d always emanated had stopped. Total silence where there had always been beautiful melodies. He couldn’t remember that ever happening. Even when he’d been lying in a millet field in China, bleeding out from the landmine that had taken not only his foot but most of his right leg, he’d heard her singing like an angel. Focusing on that and then the sound of her calling for him once his pain had reached her had been the only thing that kept him alive long enough to crawl into a ditch and use an emergency stimpak to seal his wounds.

She was always saving him. Always had saved him. He didn’t know how he knew that, but it was true.

Mac could still feel her. The connection was shuttered and dark, like she was deliberately trying to hide, but it was there. Still gave him enough of an idea of where she was to track her down.

There was a prosthetic leg propped up against the nightstand. He switched on the lamp and slipped it on like he’d done it a thousand times before. Some kind of switch connected to a thing embedded in what was left of his thigh bone and he was taken aback at the strange feeling of suddenly having two functioning legs again. He watched his false foot flex a few times. It even had toes he could
wiggle. Kinda reminded him of an old sci-fi movie he’d seen once where everyone was part android.

Weird. This dream was very, very weird.

He still needed the cane. The signals coming from his leg took just a half second too long to be properly interpreted by his brain. It made for a wobbly sort of walk across the room to the door on the left of the fireplace.

Mac found himself in a large, shiny bathroom. At least, he assumed that’s what it was supposed to be. Everything was some kind of fancy, slick white stone that had veins of silvery grey running through it. There was a bathtub big enough to swim in and a separate shower encased all in glass. He wandered past a wall made entirely out of mirrored tiles and paused, wondering at the reflection there.

It was him, but it was also...not him? The hair and eyes were too dark, and he had a full beard. He looked older, the lines along his forehead deep and troubled. His bare chest was pitted with scars and it took him a second to realize they actually covered his entire body. His left leg was especially disfigured. It looked like he’d completely lost some of the muscle that ran along his inner thigh and most of his calf. His face was scarred, too. He knew that. He could feel the stretch of scar tissue along his jaw and cheeks. His hand came up and he could feel it through his beard.

Mac could almost taste the blood in his mouth. Feel the way that shrapnel had sliced through him, hot and hard. It had ripped through his body so fast he hadn’t even registered the pain at first. He could remember the nausea that accompanied the shock he’d found himself in. Remembered the terror he’d felt when he saw what was left of his spotter’s unmoving body laying just a few feet away.

They’d been high on a ridge, keeping a supply line open, when another sniper’s bullet had found them. If he hadn’t been laughing at a joke Evans had just told him, hadn’t had to drop his head to stifle his chuckling, it would have aerated his brain.

Cover blown, they’d made for a hasty retreat. So hasty that Evans had forgotten all about the landmines they themselves had set up only a day before. Hasty enough that he was already a good ten feet away from the blast when it happened.

But that was months ago, and now here he stood. Staring at himself in the cold light of his bathroom.

His bathroom. That’s right. This was his house. His childhood rooms. Once he’d gotten through rehab, the army had discharged him and they’d lost their base housing. Mother was throwing a party tomorrow to celebrate their return.

Or his return, anyway. She’d never really taken to his wife.

Mac’s eyes went to the closed door on the other side of the shower. Closet. She always liked to hide in the smallest space she could find. He had a fuzzy recollection of finding her in a chicken coop hours before they’d been married. At the time, he’d merely been irritated at her unanticipated cold feet. The same girl who’d been trying to get him to consummate their relationship for weeks had suddenly ‘had doubts’.

That day had been almost ten years ago and yet it still circled constantly in his mind. He’d failed her there, like he always did. He should have tried harder, listened more, protected her better. Been the man she deserved and needed.
He’d be damned if he failed again.

Mac opened the door and frowned to himself. Did anyone need this much space? It wasn’t even a closet. It was a whole other room. Cedar lined cabinets filled with shoes and fancy clothes. A massive island in the middle full of drawers. He didn’t even see her at first. There was just too much going on here for his brain to process it all properly. The mirrors everywhere weren’t helping anything, and he realized he hated this room. He’d always hated it. The overly masculine dark colors everywhere and the pretentiousness of it all.

She was on her knees in front of a mirror that reflected her from three different angles. Crying. Wearing something somber and dark. Wrong. She looked like she was going to a funeral.

Wait. Was he dead? Is that was this was?

“Sweetheart?”

Her head snapped up and around just long enough to see him before she shook her head and went back to her sobbing, hiding her face in her hands.

Mac hobbled across the room and wished to God he could get on the floor with her, but he just wasn’t there yet. His leg wouldn’t bend the way he wanted it to for that, so he sat on a bench next to her. His hand reached out to slip into those beloved curls and he was shocked when she flinched away from him.

She’d never done that before.

He went to dig in his pocket for the handkerchief that was always there when he remembered he’d left his robe in the other room. Shit. He was already screwing this up.

There was, however, a fancy scarf draped over the settee he was currently occupying and he handed it to her, shaking it a little to get her attention.

She cautiously lifted her head, staring at it for a moment before meeting his gaze in the mirror. “That’s a Hermès.”

“So?”

“So even I know better than to blow my nose with it.”

The way she said it, like she was some kind of idiot, about broke his heart. “Then I’ll just buy you a new one. As many as you want.”

She took it and stared down at the bright swirling colors, tears turning the silk dark when they hit it. “I don’t even want the ones I have.”

Mac shifted uncomfortably. Something was very, very wrong here. She was withdrawing deeper and deeper into herself, pulling away from him. Even when they were sitting so close, she felt miles away. That wasn’t a good sign.

“Talk to me.”

Her eyes welled up all over again, “I can’t...I can’t stay here.”

“Why not?”

“I just don’t belong here.”
He almost laughed. The idea that she wouldn’t fit in anywhere was preposterous. Everywhere she went, she made friends. From senators to the mailman. She saw everyone as equals. He’d always admired that about her. ‘A stranger is just a friend you haven’t made yet.’ How many times had she said that to him?

“Of course you do.”

“No, I don’t. I’ve...I’ve been trying. I really have. Mama always said wildflowers don’t care where they grow, but...but I can’t grow here. I just can’t.” Her face crumpled in the mirror and she ducked her head again. “I wanna go home.”

The words were whispered, so low he almost couldn’t catch them at all, but they rained down like hail on his heart. Home. Not here, not where her soulmate was. Not the place that should have been her home. No, she meant back across the continent. Away from him and all the bullshit that followed in his wake.

He couldn’t really blame her. He’d spent at least the last ten years trying to run away from their connection. It was probably karma of some kind that she’d want to run now that he’d finally had his head blown out of his ass by that landmine. She’d waited forever for him to wise up. Of course he’d done it too late.

The kind thing, the gentlemanly thing, to do here was let her go. Graciously. She was already in so much distress. Adding to that by pointlessly fighting to keep her where she didn’t want to be was cruel. Mac knew better than anyone that once her mind was made up, that was it.

It was his own fault. He’d spent his whole life trying to keep her at arm’s length, keep her out of trouble. To temper the fire in her into something a little more calm and respectable. He’d thought that was his job. They were so different and had always been. He’d grown up knowing that it was his duty to elevate her.

Mac frowned to himself. Had he decided that or had someone else?

He should let her go. He really should. He just couldn’t.

“You are home.” He reached for her again but this time she simply sat passive and let him rest his hand on her head. He might have thought it was real progress if her eyes hadn’t looked so hollow and bleak.

Actually, everything about her was kind of...muted. Gloomy and far too serious for her. It felt wrong. Even the dress she had on, heavy brocade black silk with a high collar and a million tiny buttons up the back, was so far from what she usually wore that he was surprised she’d even had it in the closet. He couldn’t imagine her going out on a day-trip to LA or San Francisco and coming home with this.

He closed his eyes for a long moment and took a deep, steadying breath. Chances were very good she hadn’t bought this particular frock. And he had a very, very good idea of exactly who did.

“What did she say to you?”

“What?”

“Mother. What’d she say?”

She wouldn't meet his eyes, not even in the mirror. “She’s just worried I’ll embarrass you at the party tomorrow...and she’s right to be worried. I don’t even know how to dress appropriately. Even
after all this time...how am I possibly supposed to be your wife?”

The stupid party. His mother’s big attention grab welcoming home her hero son. Showing him off to that coven of harpies she called her friends. Making him retell the story of how he survived over and over again, regardless of how he felt about it. She’d been planning it for months while he healed, spinning what should have been a simple dinner party among close family and friends into a massive charitable soiree; complete with other disabled vets shipped in from all over to mingle with her precious guests. Human party favors. Token cripples to inspire her equally narcissistic cronies to try to outdo each other with their donations.

He’d already been disgusted at the whole idea of it. The only reason he’d even agreed to it was he thought it would be a good way to finally introduce his wife to everyone he’d ever known. An opportunity to show her off and let everyone see how amazing and sparkly and great she was. Instead his mother had turned it into yet another chance to hammer in her displeasure at the universe pairing him with such a girl, just because she’d grown up running wild in the woods instead of spending her early years surrounded by wealth and privilege. Like she knew better than the universe what he needed.

She’d never understood. Ever. He was pretty sure she was jealous of the connection they shared, too. Like it was their fault she’d been his father’s second, non-bonded wife. His whole childhood, she’d constantly questioned if he was certain his soulmate was really a little girl from the edge of the Appalachian plateau who lived in a house that would have fit in their great room, or if it was just an imaginary friend. Even when their parents had all met when she’d been ten, his mother had insisted he stay upstairs, away from the little girl who would someday grow up to be his bride. ‘For propriety's sake.’

He’d seen her anyway. Sneaked down when the maids weren’t looking and hid behind a decorative column so he could get a proper look at her. She’d been staring with wide-eyed fascination at everything around her, big brown eyes taking it all in. They’d braided her hair for the occasion and the simple dress she had on, the nicest thing she owned, reminded him of something Little Orphan Annie would wear, but she was beautiful. Band-aid covered knees and all.

Well, not beautiful, exactly. To his fifteen year old eyes, she’d been cute. The affection he felt for her then was still innocent and sort of ambiguous. He cared about her as he assumed one would care for a little sister.

God knew he worried over her like one. The adventures she got up to put Tom Sawyer to shame and he was constantly having to talk her out of things that could get her hurt or in trouble. Not that she ever actually listened. She’d broken her arm once because she’d ignored his repeated pleas for her to not attempt a thing called ‘mutton busting’. You’d think she’d have learned her lesson there, but no. She just kept throwing herself at life at a hundred miles an hour. He could remember thinking that if she got any worse, he was going to have an ulcer by the time he was twenty.

The ulcer had never happened, thankfully. Not even when she’d hit fifteen and the Bloom had happened. Their link had immediately been filled with heat and desire and he’d panicked. Completely panicked. There were laws just for this sort of thing, of course. He could have married her right then, but he hadn’t. Instead he’d let his mother convince him that the best thing for everybody would be if she stayed right where she was and he went away. Far enough that the link wouldn’t ‘distract’ him from where he wanted to go in life.

He’d joined the service the next day. His degree in engineering would have guaranteed him a spot as an officer somewhere safe and boring, designing new tanks or bunkers or whatever. But he’d shown a surprising aptitude for hitting any target they threw at him, and the army desperately
needed snipers more than they needed eggheads, so off he’d gone across the world to spread
democracy one bullet at a time.

He still couldn’t believe he’d ever been naive enough to think he was actually making a difference.
She’d even told him he was being stupid. Their first fight, when she’d finally unleashed her epic
temper on him and called him a jackass. It had been shocking to be hit with that kind of fury and
hurt from so far off, but also strangely gratifying for some reason. At least he knew she cared, and
at least he knew her love and even her anger was a clean sort of thing. Free from all the hidden
motives and complications of his mother’s so-called affection.

He shouldn’t have run. He still thought it was a good idea to at least wait until she was eighteen to
marry, and an even better idea to have her stay home and go to college while he was being shipped
all over the world, but running had been a mistake. They could have done something, worked
something out so she knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that he loved her and wanted her, even if
he couldn’t be with her yet.

Instead he’d just left. Left and let the space grow between them until it felt like an impossible
chasm to cross. That wedge had only grown in the thirteen years since he’d asked to be sent across
the world and he hated that. He wanted to fix it, had wanted to for a long time, but he didn’t know
how. He didn’t know how and now it might be too late, because sometimes even soulmates just
couldn’t live together. It was rare, but it did happen.

She’d disappear back into her enchanting woods like Daphne escaping Apollo and ask him for a
divorce. His mother would push for an annulment and fight against the property laws that entitled
his wife to half of his money, the family’s money, and it would ruin everything. He’d never get her
back. She’d eventually come to hate him, if someone as loving as her was even capable of such a
thing, and he’d deserve every bit of it. Pity him for his cowardice and resent him for everything
he’d ever put her through.

He couldn’t let that happen.

“You're dressed like somebody died. I hate it. Take it off.”

There was more bite in his voice than he’d ever used with her and she jolted, finally meeting his
gaze, staring at him like he was crazy.

“What?”

“You heard me. Take it off.”

“I...alright.” Her hands went to the tiny buttons on the collar and started working them loose while
he watched.

Mac had never bossed her around, never even attempted it. Never raised his voice, never pushed.
He was kind of shocked at her reaction to him getting uncharacteristically aggressive like this. He’d
almost expected her to deck him or at least to start yelling. That open, honest heart of hers didn’t
have a lot of restraint. She tended to live life in a loud sort of way.

He loved that about her.

She’d finally gotten all the buttons she could reach undone and stood, slipping the offensive
garment off and letting it fall in a heap on the floor. Mac poked it with his cane a little as she
stepped out of the circle it made. Her eyes widened in shock when he harpooned it, tossing it
carelessly towards the middle of the room.
“It’ll wrinkle.”

“That won’t matter once it’s in the trash.”

“Your mama will have a fit.”

He shrugged. Let her have her little tantrums. Maybe he’d really luck out and she’d go for the old silent treatment. In any case, her all-important precious feelings weren’t his problem anymore. She was a grown-ass woman and he was far too old to play Mommy’s favorite boy anymore.

“What were you originally going to wear?”

She nervously smoothed out her slip. “Oh, it’s... I mean, it’s nowhere near as nice as --”

“Show me.”

Her brow furrowed at him, like she didn’t quite understand what had come over him. Well, that made two of them then. She still obeyed though, going to one of the many cabinets in the room and pulling out a hanger with a white bag around it. When she hesitated to pull the zipper down, he clenched his jaw and tried to be patient. His newly discovered temper was hard to get a handle on sometimes, and he didn’t want her catching any of his anger at this entire situation. She’d probably misinterpret it as being directed at her.

“Open it.”

There was color in her cheeks again. Bright and pink and so, so cute. She’d been terribly pale when he’d come in, far more so than usual. Every freckle standing out like the stars in reverse on her skin.

What’d her granny always say? That freckles were where angels had kissed you? If that were truly the case, then his wife was one of the most blessed creatures on the planet... or maybe that was him. He’d been given the privilege of having her as his very own, after all. Thus far he’d squandered that blessing, but that stopped tonight.

She reluctantly opened the bag and out came a creamy sunshine yellow confection of a dress. Layers and layers of sweeping Paris chiffon and organza in varying shades, from a pearl white to buttercup. She held it up and kept her eyes averted from his face.

Which was a shame, since he was grinning like an idiot.

It was perfect. Absolutely perfect for her. He could almost see the way it would swish around her knees and flair out when she twirled on the dance floor.

“See? It’s not... not really --.”

“Put it on.”

She finally looked at him and frowned when she saw how excited he was. “What?”

“Put it on, gorgeous. I want to see.”

Mac struggled a little to get up, wincing while her attention was on getting into her dress. Honestly, he could still barely stand to walk, but if it was for her, for her happiness, he’d dance all night.

He managed to get over to her in time to slide the zipper up her back and do the little hidden hook at the top. It had a sweetheart neckline that showed off her pretty shoulders and that distracting,
delicious neck he was always wanting to nibble. With her hair up and pearls on, she’d fit right in with all the other California royalty assembling tomorrow. Mac turned her so she could see herself in a nearby mirror and smiled at her from over her shoulder.

“There’s my wildflower. You look beautiful...you look like you.”

Her eyes darted along her figure, picking out flaws he could never see, her face still sad and troubled. “I can’t wear this.”

“Why not?”

“It’s inappropriate.”

“Why?”

Tears swam in her eyes again, “I don’t know...I never know.”

He sighed and rested his forehead on her shoulder so he didn’t have to see the despair so clearly written on her face. “It’s supposed to be my party, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Well, then I’m the ultimate decider for what is or isn’t appropriate for it, right?”

She sniffled a little, “I guess.”

“Then you’re fine. I think it’s perfectly appropriate.” He felt her shudder a little and knew she was doing her best to stop crying. She was always such a crybaby. Always had been. Cried for everything. When she was mad or happy or tired or...hell, even once when she’d been watching some sappy airline commercial on TV, he’d caught her dabbing at her eyes. The memory of how adorably embarrassed she’d gotten once she’d realized she had an audience almost made him laugh, even now.

But this was no laughing matter.

Mac lifted his head and turned her around, studying her face. Just trying to get some sense of just how fucked he was here. Getting a feel for the terrain he was going to have to cross to reach her. He’d seen battlefields less terrifying.

“You know what? I think we should move.”

She scrubbed at her eyes and frowned at him, “What?”

“You and me. Just you and me. Pick a place and we’ll go there. Tomorrow if you want.”

“We can’t.”

“Why not?”

Her irritated huff let him know she’d already had this argument with herself countless times. Damn those lawyer instincts of hers.

“For one, you live here. Your whole life is here. You’ve got a business to inherit.”

He shrugged, “So I can...telecommute and fly back if I actually have to sign something. Or use an
insured courier. Next.”

“Okay...two, your mother would kill us.”

“If a landmine couldn’t do it, I doubt she can.”

She almost laughed at that. Almost. “She’d still kill me.”

“Well, that’s just silly. She’s terrified of you, baby. Always has been. Haven’t you ever noticed that?”

“Why would she be terrified of me?”

“Because I love you, and I belong to you. She can’t stand that.” He shook his head, “She never could. Listen, I know I’ve messed up. I’ve been messing up for a long, long time, and you’ve been so patient. You’re just so...so...” Shit. He should have rehearsed this a little. He had no word to encompass how he felt about her at all.

“So much?”

She said it sadly, like it was a bad thing, but he nodded anyway. “Yes! Yes, that’s exactly it! You are so much. You’re overwhelming and dazzling and wonderful and...everything I could never be. Everything I ever wanted.” He took her hands and ran his thumb over her wedding ring. There were still days that he couldn’t believe she’d actually gone through it. “You’ve always been everything to me, but I thought...well, it just scared me. I’ve been a coward my whole life, and I’m sorry it took me almost dying to realize it.”

“You aren’t a coward.”

“No, I am. I used to think the universe brought us together so I could...I dunno, provide a restraining influence on you, you know? Even at our wedding, your father told me you needed someone who could tell you no.”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“Yeah...but the thing is, I think what he really meant was you needed somebody to provide balance, not just be a naysayer every damn day. You live your life saying yes to everything. Every experience that comes your way, you just go for it. Which is terrifying to me. I wish I could be that bold and fearless. I wish I could stand up against the world and never back down. I’d give anything to be like that, but I’m just not.”

“That still doesn’t make you a coward...that just makes you sensible. I wish I were more sensible.”

“No, don’t. It’s the worst. Trust me.” She smiled a little and he could feel hope swell in his chest. “Sweetheart, I don’t want to live here anymore. I really don’t. If it’s not a good place for you, then it’s not a good place for me either, right? How can it be when we’re two sides of the same soul?”

“But this is your home, honey.”

“My home is wherever you are. So pick a place. We can go anywhere you like.”

She chewed on her lip for a moment, “You’re really serious. You’d do that for me?”

“Absolutely. I’d do it for us.”

“You’d miss the ocean.”
He could lie, pretend it wasn’t so, but she’d know better. Some of the earliest memories he’d ever made with her was letting her listen to the waves through him. She knew how soothing that was to him, just like he knew how much her beloved woods made her feel safe. “Maybe, but...I’d miss you more.”

“What about...New Orleans? It’s right on the Gulf.”


“New York?”

That surprised him and he blinked, “You wouldn’t mind a big city like that?”

“It’s got Central Park and the Adirondacks aren’t that far away.”

“Hmm...no. I’ve got family there. Mother would weasel her way in as often as she could.”

“Chicago?”

“No ocean.”

“It’s right on Lake Michigan.”

“It’s not the same. Plus we should shoot for somewhere on the east coast, I think. Get as many miles between here and us as possible.”

“Or we could stay on the Pacific. There’s always Alaska.”

Mac chuckled, “Funny. That’s funny.”

“Boston? It’s right on the Atlantic and it’s not too big.”


“I just finally got licensed here.”

“So you’ll just get licensed there, too...besides, Boston’s got all that mob stuff happening. Probably a lawyer’s paradise.”

“That’s true.”

He stared at her, marveling at his good fortune for a moment before another wonderful idea popped into his head. A long-held wish of hers he could happily grant. “And let’s have a baby!”

Her mouth dropped open. “A baby?”

“Yeah. Yeah! Why not?”

“But you...you always said bringing a baby into this world was a terrible idea.”

He shook his head, “No, that was the old me. The old, stodgy, boring, cowardly me. This is the new me and new me wants to put a baby in you.”

Her entire face turned pink, “Honey!”

“What?”
“You’ve just...you’ve never...I mean...I didn’t even think you really liked, um...”

Oh, right. The other thing he’d always run away from. *Emotions.*

“Making love with you is the greatest possible thing in the whole wide world and I think we should do it more. A lot more, actually.” He felt almost punch drunk on bravery right now. Unstoppable. It was an amazing, heady feeling and he was going to ride this wave as long as it lasted. “Got a lot of lost time to make up for.”

She was still staring at him like she’d never seen him before, eyes all dark and sparkly just like they’d been that first night of their honeymoon. Before he’d panicked, again, and insisted on keeping their lovemaking confined to between eight and nine pm. Reasonable, responsible, ridiculous.

“Oh, right. The other thing he’d always run away from. *Emotions.*

“Making love with you is the greatest possible thing in the whole wide world and I think we should do it more. A lot more, actually.” He felt almost punch drunk on bravery right now. Unstoppable. It was an amazing, heady feeling and he was going to ride this wave as long as it lasted. “Got a lot of lost time to make up for.”

She was still staring at him like she’d never seen him before, eyes all dark and sparkly just like they’d been that first night of their honeymoon. Before he’d panicked, again, and insisted on keeping their lovemaking confined to between eight and nine pm. Reasonable, responsible, ridiculous.

“Okay.”

“Oh, right. The other thing he’d always run away from. *Emotions.*

“Making love with you is the greatest possible thing in the whole wide world and I think we should do it more. A lot more, actually.” He felt almost punch drunk on bravery right now. Unstoppable. It was an amazing, heady feeling and he was going to ride this wave as long as it lasted. “Got a lot of lost time to make up for.”

She was still staring at him like she’d never seen him before, eyes all dark and sparkly just like they’d been that first night of their honeymoon. Before he’d panicked, again, and insisted on keeping their lovemaking confined to between eight and nine pm. Reasonable, responsible, ridiculous.

“Okay.”

“Okay? You really want to? Still?”

“Yes, I...now?”

“Now? Like now-now?”

“Yeah.”

The idea took shape in his head before he could stop it. He could pull her over to that bench and easily...wait, no. Jesus no.

“No. If we made a baby here, Mother would know and try to take credit for it somehow...besides, no child conceived in this house could ever possibly have a happy childhood.”

Her head tilted, “Weren’t you conceived here?”

“Yup, that’s how I know. Let’s wait until we’re in Boston. First night we’re there, we’ll start trying. I promise.”

“You really mean it?”

“Absolutely.” His hands left hers to settle on her waist and he tried to imagine what it was going to be like to watch her grow heavy with his child. “So you should probably take this off before I ruin it.”

“How are you going to ruin it?

She turned around so he could unzip it and he couldn’t help himself. He had to run a finger along her spine just to see her shiver. Her eyes met his in the mirror and he grinned.

“Because we’re going to start practicing for the main event right now.”

“Oh! You know...I don’t care if it...I mean, you can totally ruin it. That’s fine by me.”

“Well, I care, because I want you to wear it tomorrow at the party.”

She made a face, “We’re still going to that?”

“Of course. Where better to announce our departure? We can turn it into a going away party instead of a welcome home.”
Her eyes went wide and she gasped, “You’re going to tell her there? Right in front of everybody?”

“Yup.”

“She’ll be furious!”

His arms wound around her, rumpling the dress despite his best intentions. Mac drew her close against his chest, pressing a few soft kisses against her neck before moving to whisper in her ear. “Good.”

He woke up exactly when he thought he would. In the moment before his hand slid under her skirt and his lips met hers. Of fucking course.

Mac grumbled to himself and sat up, rubbing the grit out of his eyes before a bolt of panic shot through him and he grabbed at his leg.

Still there. Thank God.

_RJ? Honey, are you alright?_

He swung his legs off the bed and stood, grateful that the pain in his thighs and back was already a fast fading memory.

_I’m alright, sweetheart. Bad dream._

_Oh...do you want to talk about it?_

Tell her about what a fucking weenie he kept dreaming himself as? No. Absolutely not. The guy he was there might have finally started to get his act together, but he was still weak as shit.

How could you possibly go ten years married to a woman like _that_ and not put a baby in her? By choice! Fuck.

_Nah, it’s just some weird, fucked up bullshit. I don’t even know what they’re about to be honest._

_You’ve had more than one?_

Mac winced a little. Shit.

_Maybe a couple._

_Hmm...do you have anything stressful going on in your life right now? Sometimes that can, you know, manifest or whatever in your dreams._

_Yeah, no. No, I’m fine. All good over here._ Other than it almost being February and he still hadn’t managed to put together a proper crew. Everybody he interviewed was either underqualified or just skeevy as fuck. He was starting to consider just buying himself a suit of power armor and going in on his own, even if he hated the stuff.

_Oh...well, good. Good, I’m glad to hear it._

She seemed strangely subdued for some reason. _Are you alright?_

_Yeah, sure. I’m...fine. I’m just nervous, I guess._

_About?_
Lottie sighed, *I just have an errand to run that's a little more...complicated than most.*

*Ah, worried you’ll get your ass chewed by the big boss?*

She thought of all the deathclaws, radscorpions, ferals and God only knew what else waiting for her in the Glowing Sea and shuddered. *Something like that.*

*I can’t imagine anybody ever getting mad at a cutie like you. I’m sure it’ll be fine.*

Her mother-in-law’s pinched, patrician face flashed before her eyes for a moment and she shook her head. *You’d be surprised.*

*So, what are you up to this fine...afternoon? Shit.*

Her eyes went to the clock above the sink. Two pm already. RJ slept in later than anyone she’d ever known.

*Cooking.*

*Oh, what’s on the menu today?*

*Radrabbit and dumplings.*

*The hell is a dumpling?*

*It’s kind of like a biscuit you cook in the sauce.*

*Oh. Sounds good.*

*It is. My friend is sick today and I’m hoping this will help them get better faster.*

*Aw, now I’m just jealous.*

Charlotte laughed, *Don’t be. I’m only doing it because they’re supposed to help me with this errand and the faster they get better, the faster it can be done.*

*Mercenary. I like it.*

Pitiful moaning reached her ears and she sighed. Already up. *I gotta go. They’re awake.*

*Okay. Well...good luck with your patient, Nurse Lottie...and watch out for that Florence Nightingale syndrome, alright? Save that stuff for when we’re together.*

She smiled but it died quickly. The memory of helping nurse Nate back when he’d almost been killed in action, when he’d finally arrived at the Ireland Army Hospital in Fort Knox after being stabilized in Germany, shot guilt right through her heart. That awful fall of ’75. All those long days of painful physical therapy and the longer nights of his night terrors and withdrawal further from her.

Charlotte had tried so hard to be a perfect, good, dutiful wife while he recovered and she’d failed almost immediately after they returned back to his hometown of San Simeon. If it hadn’t been for Nate trying so hard to accommodate her, even though it meant abandoning his family, they would have separated. She knew it with absolute certainty. He’d called himself a coward then, but *she’d been the one who wanted to run away. Run back to the world she was comfortable in just because she couldn’t hack living in his.*
It was shameful the things he’d sacrificed for her. She’d never gotten over the guilt. Probably never would. If it hadn’t been for her, he’d have still been on speaking terms with his mother when the bombs fell. Instead her child’s grandmother had died never even knowing he existed. That was awful. Just awful.

Her beloved saint of a husband was still stuck in that cryopod, waiting for spring thaw for a proper burial, and here she was blushing over the idea of taking care of a helpless RJ. Unfaithful. That’s what she was.

Guess Meredith had been right after all. She’d never deserved Nate.

She didn’t bother answering him, just turned away from their link and refocused on the simmering pot of food in front of her. Another hour and it should be good to go.

At least rabbit meat had improved after the bombs. Not as greasy as it once was. There’d been a time where she could only stand it in stew. So...there was one positive thing to focus on, right? Sure.

Charlotte left it to simmer quietly and headed into the living room. Deacon was tucked up on the couch, a quilt over him and a stack of diverting books next to him on the floor. She’d even let him borrow her Pipboy to play holos on. His cold had come on quite suddenly, just after they came home to Diamond City.

He’d been fine when she’d gone to the mayor’s office and successfully argued for Sassy’s right to live here (whoever had written the anti-ghoul parts of the DC charter had done a piss poor job of it; the language was so sloppy a child could have argued their way around it). But by the time she arrived back home, he was a miserable mess on her couch. She’d never seen anything like it.

“Hey, honey. How you feeling?”

Deacon sniffled, his voice quiet and weak. “I’m okay.”

She frowned at him and sat on the edge of the coffee table. His skin was still flushed and his whole face felt like it was on fire. “Liar.”

He tried to smile, “You got me.”

“I’m gonna go get you a cold washcloth, alright? Try to get this fever down...I still wish I had a thermometer. I can’t believe the only one in the whole dang city is at Doctor Sun’s.”

“M’hmm.” He coughed a few times, “Could I have something to drink, too?”

“Of course you can! Hot or cold?”

“Hot, please.” Deacon gave her great big sad puppy dog eyes, even if she couldn’t see them behind his shades. “You’re taking such good care of me, Charlie. I don’t deserve a friend like you.” Truth.

“Course you do...and I’m only doing what anybody would.” She readjusted his blankets a bit and then stood. “I’ll be right back, okay?”

“Okay.” His smile was all humble gratitude until she went around the corner, then he sighed and flopped back against the pillows she’d so kindly plumped before he’d taken his ‘nap’. There was this odd, nagging feeling poking at his stomach that he couldn’t really identify.

Guilt, maybe? No. God knew he knew what the hell guilt felt like by now.
Something like it though...shame. That’s what it was.

He rolled his eyes at his own sentimentality. This was completely necessary. He needed a name. All evidence pointed to MacCready being Charlie’s soulmate, but it was such a bizarre, extraordinary kind of thing. He required confirmation before he made his next move, and she still wouldn’t willingly give it up.

It had been three weeks since Quincy. Three weeks of them running together at least seventy-five percent of the time. She had somehow crossed the border from interesting plaything/acquaintance to actual friend. Hell, they’d even done shots together and he’d told her about Barbara and the Deathclaws and all of it.

Well, not all. He couldn’t bring himself to tell her how his mother had turned away from him. Not even when Charlie’s eyes had been full of tears and empathy. She’d cried all over him starting from when he told her his wife’s name and kept right on crying through the whole sad story. He’d been shocked beyond belief at her insistence that he’d repented and become a good man in the years between now and then. The way she’d hugged him, still sobbing about how tragic it all was, had almost knocked him right off his feet.

The acceptance. That’s what he couldn’t get over. The way she just accepted his past, the monster he’d been and the harm he’d done. It was remarkable. No one had ever done that before. Not his mother, who’d rightfully pushed him away. Not even Babs, since he’d never even given her the chance.

Charlie was an exceptional human being. Exemplary, even. His working theory, that MacCready of all people was...well, it was ridiculous. Repugnant and ridiculous. That lazy little worm, who had no loyalty to anything save himself and caps, being the other half of her soul? Insane. He just couldn’t believe it, no matter what the evidence said.

So he needed the damn name.

Which is how he found himself playing the part of poor pitiful sick baby to her doting mama-bird self. He’d tried coaxing it out of her, he’d tried sneaking it into companionable conversation, he’d tried getting her drunk and confessing his greatest sins to date. Now he had to -- nay, was obligated to do this the hard way.

The way he’d been hoping to avoid with her, even though a confused part of him was kind of excited to see what happened...the rest of him lived in abject terror of her response.

If she tossed him from her life at this point, no amount of clever jokes and quips was going to be able to cover up his shattered heart. Not this time. Not again.

He didn’t even want to do it, really, but if it was true...if Mac was connected to her like that, he felt like he had a duty to protect her from the kind of man the twerp really was. Get in there early and establish some ground rules, maybe a few not so oblique threats, to make sure the kid made an effort to behave himself. To better himself for her.

Because little Charlie Apperson, sweatheart extraordinaire, his only friend in the whole wide world, deserved only the best ...and he’d make sure it happened. Even if it meant he only got to be her friend from a distance after.

It was the least he could do.

Deacon realized he must still look troubled when she came around the corner with his steaming hot
tea and dripping washcloth and immediately came to a halt, an anxious kind of tension pouring from her.

“Honey? Are you alright? What’s wrong?”

He almost couldn’t take it. That open affection she so casually showed him. Like he deserved it or something.

“Yeah, no, I’m okay.”

Charlie came over, setting everything down on the coffee table and sitting on the edge of the couch, leaning over him and pulling his head up to hers to feel his forehead against her own. The air in his lungs refused to move and he blinked at her, momentarily dumbfounded by her genuine concern, as she frowned thoughtfully.

“I dunno...you’re still awful hot. Maybe we should go see the doctor.”

She still had her hand on the back of his neck, still so close he could see the tiny flecks of gold and copper in her eyes, even through his sunglasses. This was it. His chance. He had to take it.

God forgive him.

His left hand settled on her hip while the right slipped into her hair, and before she could react beyond a shocked expression crossing her face, he rolled, pulling her the rest of the way over him and pinning her body between him and the back of the couch.

“What the heck are you --”

Deacon loomed over her, hating himself even while he radiated wanton need and desire. She’d abruptly fallen silent the second he’d made his intentions known with a strategically placed knee moving between her thighs. He stared down at her staring back up at him and had to close his eyes. He couldn’t do this and see the growing panic on her face at the same time. Impossible.

First instinct said to go for her lips, but that felt too intimate. Too far. So instead he burrowed his face against her neck, lipping at the sensitive flesh there until she involuntarily shivered under him. She was delicious, because of course she was. He didn’t want her to be, and he definitely didn’t want to notice it, but the facts were in and she tasted like the scent of goddamn hubflowers. He didn’t know how she was managing that, but she was.

“What...what are you doing?”

He hated the fear in her voice. Fear he’d put there. Deliberately. Fuck. This was even harder than he’d thought it was going to be. Still, in for a penny, in for a pound, right?

Deacon smiled like the predator he was pretending to be against her neck and licked his way up to her ear, “I just wanted to thank you properly for taking such good care of me, kitten.”

“It’s...that’s not necessary. Really. This is...you can get off of me now.”

He winced even as the words fell out, “Or I could get you off right now. That sounds more fun, don’t you think?”

“Deacon, listen, you...I mean, I’ve never even --”

His teeth nibbled at the pulse racing in her throat and she promptly froze again. She was still trying
to spare his feelings. That was good. That meant she’d probably spill it before switching to a more violent resistance against his advances.

“Shhh...you need to relax, sweetheart. You’re always working too hard.”

“I...I don’t...this isn’t very relaxing. For me, I mean.”

Apparently her true accent came out when she was frightened, too. He moved down a bit and slid his lips along her collarbone, the hand on her hip moving up enough to start undoing buttons on her flannel from the bottom up.

“It will be. I promise.”

“N-no, I...I really think you should...we should...”

“Hmm?” Dammit. She was stalling out. He was going to have to go even further now.

Deacon surged back up and attacked the other side of her neck, his thigh pressing firmly against her core and grinding a little. She gasped and tried to wiggle away from him, but there was no escape. The most fucked up part, the part that proved he was still that depraved bastard way down deep, was how hard it made him. Still, even that could be used as a weapon right now. He deliberately pressed against her hip and knew the exact moment she recognized it for what it was by the terrified squeak that came from her throat.

He hated himself so fucking much. If God struck him down right this instant, he’d actually welcome it.

“Deacon, stop. Please.”

Close. She was nearly there. He trailed kisses up her jaw while some part of him wondered if she even registered how soft and gentle he was trying to be here, the careful placement of his hands so she’d walk away from this without a single mark, even while pretending to be a beast. That was probably too much to hope for though.

“Stop.”

He ignored her and nuzzled her nose with his own, a seductive smile painted on his face, still refusing to meet her terrified gaze. Like this was for real and he actually wanted her in this way and they were...

“Deacon, now, I mean it! Knock it off! Stop!”

His lips just barely brushed against her own and she shuddered violently beneath him. A clear rejection of his advances. He was a fraction of a centimeter from settling his mouth on hers when her whole face scrunched up and she twisted away from him.

“I’m bonded! Stop!”

He still felt like a complete asshole, but a triumphant smile spread across his face anyway and he dropped a single, friendly, utterly platonic kiss against her cheek. When she finally dared to open her eyes and look at him, her face went from scared to pissed in five seconds flat.

“The fuck are you smiling about?”

Deacon sat back and pulled her up, pushing her into a proper sitting position before getting himself
situated. He still couldn’t stop grinning, even in the face of her anger. Finally. He’d finally gotten her to admit it!

This might be the single greatest victory of his life.

“*I knew* it! Tell Me. *Everything.*”

Charlie’s eyes were as big as saucers and her mouth dropped open. “*You...that was all on purpose!*”

He shrugged, “*Yeah.*”

“You *asshole!*”

“I know. If it helps any, I’m sorry. I really am.” He gestured to the huge smile that he still couldn’t quite get a handle on. “It probably doesn’t seem like I am, but I totally am.”

“Are you even sick at all?”

His head tilted back and forth for a moment, “That would probably depend on what your definition of sick is.”

“Get out!”

Shit. That was enough to knock the smile right off his face. “I just need a name, sweetheart.”

“Fuck you! That’s none of your goddamn business!” She stood up and pointed at the door. “Out!”

“Charlie --”

“Is this why you made me put Sassy and Dogmeat outside earlier? Cause you were planning to...you know.”

Man, she was sharp. “I...yes.” Because who wants to get a double dog bite to the nuts?

“So this was *premeditated!* You just committed premeditated assault!”

He couldn’t help but roll his eyes a little. “Oh, heavens! Shall I ring for the constable, darling? Oh, *wait.* I just remembered! We don’t *have* laws like that anymore.”

“Laws are not supposed to be a substitute for morality, Deacon! You still shouldn’t have done it!”

“I know. I know.” He stood and held his hands up. “I’m sorry, alright. I really am. I didn’t want to do it, but I needed to know and you clearly weren’t going to give it up, so...I mean, you can shoot me, or whatever makes you feel better, but I still gotta have that name.”

“Why do you care so much!”

“Because you’re privy to a lot of very sensitive shit, alright? I gotta know if your other half is trustworthy.”

She frowned, “I don’t talk to him about that stuff. We keep things vague.”

Interesting. So chances were good he didn’t know who she actually was then. Such a smart, crafty girl she was...just hopefully not smart enough to tell him to get lost for good.

“Still. It’s a security risk and you know it’s my job to get a handle on that jazz before something
bad happens."

“You...you can’t possibly think he works for the Institute?”

Doubtful. He shrugged, “Anything’s possible. It could be he’s working for them without even realizing he is. Who the hell knows? That’s why I need his name. So I can go investigate and find out.”

He watched the thoughts race across her face and waited patiently. If they kept things vague, like she said, she probably didn’t really know enough about him to safely say if he wasn’t a risk. Her bone-deep sense of responsibility and decency should kick in in five, four, three, two...

She chewed on her lip thoughtfully, “I...I don’t even know if I can help you with who he is. We only use nicknames and...he doesn’t even know who I am. I just told him to call me Lottie...it’s what I used to go by back home.” She sighed and her shoulders slumped in defeat. “His name is RJ...he says he’s a bodyguard who works out of Goodneighbor.”

Somewhere, a hallelujah chorus started. Deacon managed to keep the grin off his face by pressing his nails into the palm of his hand hard enough to draw blood. It was still a struggle.

He nodded, “Thank you for telling me. I realize how difficult that was for you...and I’m sorry.”

Her eyes were still dark and wrathful. “I want you gone. You hear me? You get outta here and don’t come back.”

It was exactly what he’d known would happen. What he deserved to have happen. Nearly word for word what his mother had yelled at him decades ago. He should be used to hearing shit like that by now. It still broke him anyway. “Alright. I understand.”

“I’ll find somebody else to help me get through the Glowing Sea. Somebody I can actually trust.”

He nodded. Smart. That was definitely the right thing to do here. “Okay.”

“And you can tell Desdemona and all your other little friends that I’m done being your goddamn babysitter. I’m done with all of it. So take that stupid name y’all gave me off the board when you get home.”

Man, she knew exactly how to keep punching him right in the gut. He winced a little and ducked his head, “Yeah.”

She stomped over to the door and wrenched it open, “Now get.”

Deacon couldn’t stand to even look at her. Didn’t deserve to. He did, however, pause just before he crossed the threshold. “I’ll check him out. Make sure he’s a good guy for you.”

“Like anyone with half a brain would trust your judgement on anything. You can’t assess someone’s character if you don’t have any kind of character to speak of, Deacon. You let him alone or I will personally jerk a knot in your tail the likes of which you ain’t never had.”

He wasn’t even sure what the last part meant, but he had to assume it was bad. This whole deal was bad. He might have really fucked up here.

“Yes, ma’am.” Deacon finally left her home and wondered why the lights strung around the marketplace were suddenly brighter and looked more wobbly than usual. It took him a second to realize there were actual tears in his eyes and he suddenly turned back. “Charlie, please, I’m sorry.
I’m so sorry. That was stupid. *I* was stupid. Just...please? Please forgive me?”

The door slamming in his face was his only answer.
Mac was laying on a mattress in one of Hancock’s guest rooms in the State House, daydreaming of 
radrabbit and dumplings, when Lottie’s alarm shot through him.

He bolted upright, narrowing his eyes as he focused and could just barely bring the image of a 
man, a dark silhouette in the shadows, looming over her. Adrenaline accompanied the fury surging 
through his veins and he scrambled out of bed, only just remembering to grab his hat and rifle.

_Wh-what are you doing?_

She was talking to her attacker. Trying to get him to back down without having to use violence. 
Her hesitation and the wary shock in her voice meant it had to be someone she knew. Someone 
she’d trusted.

*Lottie, baby, it’s okay. I’m coming.*

He, unfortunately, met Hancock on the stairs and barreled past him, shoving the surprised ghoul 
out of the way hard enough that he almost fell.

“Shit, kid! Where’s the fire?”

He had a vague idea of the commotion unfolding behind him, but ignored it. All he could focus on 
was getting to her. He’d be too late. He knew he’d be too late, but he had to try.

*I...I don’t...this isn’t very relaxing. For me, I mean.*

Mac swore under his breath and slammed the gate open, running as fast as his legs would allow. 
She was still trying to be nice. He could feel the rough hands on her body, the way he was pressing 
down on her, the terror making her heart race.

*He’s not your friend, sweetheart! Fight back!*

Where the hell was Dogmeat? Where the hell was Sassy? Lottie had _both_ familiars with her. This 
kind of thing shouldn’t even be able to happen. He’d never even thought to worry about it. 
Dogmeat’s sole purpose in life was to keep her _safe_ in his stead.

He was a good three blocks from Goodneighbor when her rage about knocked him off his feet. 
Rage, shock, relief, hurt, then more rage on top of that. It was a confusing mess of emotions and he 
shook his head, trying to clear them from his mind.

*Lottie?*

*I want you gone. You hear me? You get outta here and don’t come back.*

The seething fury in her voice made him smile. Whoever this asshole was, she was giving it to him 
good.

*Yeah! You tell him!*

He kept going, but slowed to a more sustainable jog. The immediate danger may have passed, but
this little incident just proved how ridiculous this whole arrangement was. She needed someone to keep her safe and he was that someone, ordained by the fucking universe itself. Seemed simple enough to him.

She eventually went quiet and his smile faded a bit as the hurt radiating from her intensified. There was shame and disappointment washing over her now, and he couldn’t have that.

*Lottie? Talk to me. Please.*

*RJ, I just...I just need a minute, honey.*

*I’m on my way.*

*No! No, I don’t want you here!*

*Lottie -*

*No! I don’t even...I don’t...I don’t even know you!*

Mac finally came to a halt and frowned. *Of course you do. How can you say that?*

*No, I really don’t. Just leave me alone for a while. Please.*

What the hell? Did this asshole have her this shaken, or was it something else? *Baby...what’s wrong? What’d he say to you?*

There was a long, quiet pause on her side and he could feel a glacial chill rolling off of her through their connection.

*You can’t trust everyone.***

That didn’t sound like her. At all. The woman who had a million friends and who’s whole job meant she had to talk to strangers almost every day? The ice in her voice wasn’t right. Wasn’t natural for her.

*Hey, come on. That doesn’t sound like the Lottie I know. You’re just hurt right now. It’s okay. Just let me come to you and I can help. You need to let me help you.*

*No.*

This was some kind of trauma or something, right? The finality in her voice and the way she was pulling away from him. Maybe she just couldn’t stand to be around men for a while. Well, that was...that was probably okay. Certainly nothing to take personally.

He hoped.

*Okay...okay, I’ll...are you safe? You swear you’re safe?*

*I’m fine. I’m sorry I bothered you.*

Mac almost laughed, “What the fuck…”

*You didn’t bother anybody.*

*It won’t happen again.*
It was like they were having two completely different conversations right now. He took a deep
breath, Okay then...where are the dogs?

Out. He tricked me into putting them out.

Fuck. Of course he did. Asshole. Can you let them back in, please? I just wanna know you’re safe,
alright?

Okay.

He’d never heard her this passive and quiet before. It was unsettling. Do you...you know, have any
lady friends or whatever? Somebody who can stay with you that --

I have Codsworth.

Codsworth?

My Mister Handy.

Damn. Her very own fancy robot. Maybe Lottie really was a sugar mama. Where was he when --

He asked me to send him out for soda...and I just did it...

She was blaming herself for the whole thing. It made his eye twitch.

None of this is on you. You know that, right? It’s all on that asshole.

I should have known better.

You thought he was your friend, right?

Right...just goes to show how stupid I really am.

No, you’re not stupid. There’s no shame in trusting somebody you believe to be your friend,
alright? It’s not on you that he turned out to be a dick.

Okay.

Shit. She didn’t believe him at all.

Are you sure I can’t --

No.

Okay...just give me his name and I’ll handle it.

No.

Lottie, I wasn’t asking. I’m telling you. Give me the name.

He’s dangerous.

He threw his hands up even if she wasn’t there to see. I’m dangerous!

I’m not giving you a name. I’m not having you go out and get hurt on account of me...I
already...he’s...
She was crying suddenly. She hadn’t cried the whole time this asshole had been attacking her, or even when she threw him out of her house, but now she was crying. Why? Maybe a delayed reaction? Like shock or something?

*Hey...hey, it’s okay. Everything’s okay. What’s wrong? Whatever it is, we can figure it out.*

*Just...be careful. If a stranger approaches you, be careful.*

*Baby, what’s going on?*

*I gotta go.*

*You’re kind of putting me in a weird place here, sweetheart.*

*I know. I’m sorry.*

*No. No, it’s okay, I just...I’m just worried about you.*

Charlotte nodded and rested her forehead against the door. It was so cold and soothing in contrast to the hot tears sliding down her face. *I know you are. I’m sorry. I’ll be smarter next time.*

She could feel the worry still pouring from RJ and wished she was stupid enough to let him come to her, but even she knew better than that.

*Keep Dogmeat with you. At all times. Or your robot butler or whatever. Promise me.*

Maybe Piper wouldn’t mind hanging out for a bit? She’d asked, repeatedly, to tag along on one of Charlotte’s many adventures. Or Nick, if he wasn’t busy. She knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that she could trust him. He was a gentleman going way back.

*I won’t let a man get me alone like that again. I promise.*

*Could I maybe...I mean, just his initials? I can do a lot with that.*

She almost laughed, *No. Absolutely not.*

She’d caused this. She’d fix it. She couldn’t let Deacon get close to him. Charlotte was nearly certain that RJ himself was truly safe, and certainly not working for the Institute, but she knew how Deacon operated. He’d say and do anything to trick some kind of false confession out of him. Just to mess with everyone. Like their lives were just chess pieces in some big game to him. Measures had to be taken to keep RJ safe from his machinations and the less he knew, the better.

*Okay...well...guess I’ll go kill some super mutants or something. Got a lot of pent up rage over here and all.*

*I’m sorry.*

*Nah, it’s fine. It’s...whatever. Of course, if you wanted to help me work some of this out, I certainly wouldn’t mind...*

That finally made her laugh. Horny seemed to be RJ’s default state. It never ceased to amaze her how quickly he could turn on a dime from literally any emotion into a state of arousal.

*No, I’m good.*

*Dang. I thought I really had a chance there for a second.*
Be careful out there, RJ.

You, too, sweetheart.

She waited until she was sure he’d turned away before putting her back against the door and slowly sliding down until she sat on the floor, staring miserably at the living room. She’d have to do something about that couch and the quilt. They couldn’t stay here. She’d never use them again.

A part of her, a big part, wanted to just curl up in a ball on the floor and cry for a few days. Deacon had made no secret of being the biggest liar this side of Nixon, but she’d trusted him anyway. She’d even started to think they were really friends. He’d made her feel special, like she was cool enough to be on the inside of his exclusive little trust circle. In on the joke he was playing on the world.

She wasn’t special. She was just stupid.

He was probably going to return to the Railroad and have a big time with everybody laughing it up about just how stupid the Minutemen’s general turned out to be. What a trusting, naive little fool she really was deep down. Even right there at the end, he’d still been trying to fuck with her. Playing the part of kicked puppy dog to perfection. As if he’d actually ever cared about her or their friendship. And the Oscar goes to...

She rubbed irritably at her neck. She could still feel his mouth there. That fucking liar’s mouth slobbering all over her. It was disgusting.

She felt disgusting.

Charlotte abruptly scrambled up and stomped into the bathroom, turning on the water and scowling when the hot water came out tepid as always. Nick had installed a water heater for her ages ago, and at no charge out of the goodness of his heart, but had cautioned about turning it up more than this. It was old and its inner workings fragile after two centuries of disuse.

She didn’t care about that right now.

By the time Codsworth floating back in, both dogs trotting along behind him, she was wrestling with the heater, banging away on its rusted dial.

“Oh! Hello, mum!”

“Hey.”

“I’m afraid I wasn’t able to find any Nuka Grape for Mister Deacon. Not a single store in town had it!”

Of course they didn’t. Nobody did. He’d sent her robot on a fucking snipe hunt and she’d just thought it was funny at the time. God, she was stupid. Charlotte grumbled to herself. “Don’t worry about it, honey.”

“I did, however, manage to find a lovely side of beef from Miss Polly!”

“Brahmin.”

“Oh, yes! Brahmin! Of course. I thought perhaps we could try making ribs in the oven? Remember how you made them that one time for Memorial Day?”
Sure. Sure she did. Nate hadn’t been able to get enough of them. Her family’s style barbecue, always heavy on the molasses and cayenne pepper, had been one of his favorite things about visiting her home state.

“Yeah…”

He drifted in behind her, an eye taking in her efforts. “Mum...if I may, what are you doing?”

“Water isn’t hot enough.”

“Ah...did you wish to have a bath?”

“Yes. Yes, I wish to have a bath, so I have to make the water hot! And it just won’t get hot!” She threw the wrench at the frozen dial and collapsed in a heap on the floor, sobbing into her hands. Was there ever going to be anything about this world that wasn’t frustrating? Ever?

“Oh...oh, dear. Miss Charlotte.” Codsworth carefully set one of his appendages on her shoulder in a comforting sort of way. “You appear...overwrought.”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

His other arm suddenly appeared in front of her face, waving a handkerchief at her. The initials NDA in faded golden thread that still shone softly caught her eye and she snatched it from him.

“Where’d you get this?”

“It was Sir’s, mum. He had an entire drawer full. I managed to save quite a few.”

“That’s right...he did.” Tears filled her eyes again and she hugged the simple cloth to her chest. Even dead and gone, Nate was managing to take care of her. Codsworth was still anxiously hovering behind her and she took a deep breath. “Thanks. I’m sorry I’m such a mess right now.”

“Think nothing of it, mum! It is my happiest joy to take care of you in times like these. It’s what Sir would have wanted.”

“Yeah.”

“May I ask, where is Mister Deacon? Did he finally agree to go see Doctor Sun?”

Charlotte shook her head, “No, he’s uh...he had to go.”

“Oh my, I am sorry to hear that.”

“I want you to take him off the approved guest list.”

“Ah...did the two of you have a falling out?”

“Something like that.”

“Oh, dear...” A quiet, pleasant chime noise came from him. "Alright, his name has been removed.”

“Recite the list, please.”

“In the event of you not being home, the following people are allowed access...Miss Piper Wright, Miss Nat Wright, Handyman Abbot, Detective Nick Valentine, Lieutenant Preston Garvey and an unknown gentleman who will respond to the name ‘RJ’. All others will be considered an intruder
and home safety protocols shall be engaged should they appear in our house without your expressed permission.”

“What are the protocols set to?”

“Still just Defcon 3, mum. Verbal warning, strong verbal warning, warning shot, eradication.”

“Good.” She hoped he tried it. She really hoped he did. Let that sonofabitch try waltzing back into this house, by God. Just see what happens, slick. Charlotte stood and dusted her pants off a bit. “Alright. Enough feeling sorry for myself.” She pointed at the dial, “Any way you can help me with this, honey?”

“Ah...well, given that Mister Valentine was quite clear on not turning the dial past one hundred and ten degrees and that it would take at least three hours for the temperature change to fully engage, might I suggest an alternative?”

“Sure.”

“If you will allow me to draw your bath, mum, I can use my thruster to heat the water to whatever temperature you wish.”

“Oh...oh! That’s a good idea, Codsworth. Thank you.”

“Of course, mum...also, I believe your rabbit and dumplings is about to burn.”

“Oh, crap! Thanks!”

She hurriedly made for the kitchen, stirring the pot and wincing a little at the obvious burnt bit sticking on the bottom. Well...it’s not like she was having to feed two people anyway, right? She’d still have enough for her own dinner. Just as a precaution, she moved it completely off the burner and put the lid on, trusting the residual heat to finish cooking the dumplings through and began putting away the groceries Codsworth had brought in.

The new bottle of fresh brahmin milk made her pull a face. As handy as the stuff was, it reminded her strongly of buttermilk, and while her granny had been all too happy to drink a big glass of the stuff every day, she was finding it less than palpable. At least it got the job done, though. Her old clothes almost fit again, which was something.

Of course, maybe if she’d still been...no. Attraction had had nothing to do with what Deacon had pulled. He’d just wanted answers.

And the annoying part? The part that was giving her fits more than anything? She’d have told him if he’d just asked. She’d wanted to talk to him about this whole mess for a long time. He was probably one of the smartest people she’d met, before or after the war, and seemed to have a working knowledge of nearly everything. If anyone knew anything about her odd situation, she’d figured it would be him.

At least she’d been right on that. He’d already figured out that she was bonded again. He’d just needed confirmation...and she’d given it to him on a silver platter. Now he knew as much about RJ as she did and that was a problem.

She’d just been so flustered. Flustered and embarrassed and confused and he was so persuasive with that damn voice of his. Acting all concerned and protective, even as he slyly tried to plant the idea that RJ was some kind of nefarious type in her head.
Insidious. That’s what he was. A snake in the garden through and through.

But she already had a plan to handle that. Deacon might be powerful in his own right what with the Railroad and all, but she wasn’t the General for nothing. She had power of her own in this world, and it was about damn time she exercised it for something more than just building settlements and friendships.

She’d make him sorry for playing her like a fiddle or die in the attempt.

Of course, now she had other problems, too. He’d promised to guide her through the Glowing Sea. He’d even figured out where to try looking first. Some weird group of religious fanatics called the Children of Atom. He’d already marked it on her Pipboy for her.

“Mum! It’s ready!”

Charlotte wandered back to the bathroom, thanking Codsworth in a distracted sort of way as she went. She needed somebody who knew the area, was radiation proof or had a suit like hers, and wouldn’t mind fighting all the horrors lurking there.

Codsworth was out, of course. He hated fighting and he was just too precious to her. The last remaining family she had to speak of in the whole world. Plus he had to stay here and take care of the pups. Cause like hell she was risking either of them in a place like that.

Nick, too...he’d probably offer out of a sense of duty, but she worried about him. As effective as he was within Boston, could he actually handle something like that? He’d never really struck her as the outdoorsy type. Had all those little wires and things poking out all the time and that hand of his was always shorting out. Plus, she’d already nearly gotten him killed just taking out Kellogg.

There was really only one other obvious answer and she groaned at the whole idea of it, even as easing into her bath felt like heaven. It meant breaking her promise to RJ to not let herself be alone with any man again, too. He’d probably have a conniption if he even knew what she was thinking.

Mayor Hancock.

Why’d it have to be him?

Mac made his way back to Goodneighbor slowly, carefully. His flight into the ruins of Boston had attracted the attention of quite a few nasties and they were still riled up as he backtracked. Putting a few new holes into the heads of super mutants and ferals should have lightened his load, but it wasn’t helping much. All he could think about was the image he’d seen. That man, large and terrifying, laying on top of his Lottie. Every time his mind returned to it, it infuriated him all over again.

There was no way for him to know who it had been. None. She had entirely too many friends. All of Diamond City was suspect. Every man in each Minutemen settlement.

Well...probably not Garvey, but still. Eliminating one suspect when you had hundreds didn’t help much.

He turned the final corner and abruptly stopped in his tracks. Hancock was there, along with a large posse of neighborhood watchmen. They were milling about in front of the gate looking agitated and dangerously directionless as any good mob did in the moments before chaos erupted. The hell…

“Hancock! What’s goin’ on?” He jogged up and did not like how the mayor’s face went from
determined to exasperated.

“There you are! Where the hell are we headed, anyway?”

“What?”

“Way you took off, I knew it had to be an emergency. Called up a few friends to help out. One for all and all for one and all that. So? Where’s the emergency?”

Oh, crap. Mac winced a little, “It’s...already over. Sorry.”

He huffed, “Well, shit. Got my boys all riled up for nothing…” He turned back to his assembled throng and held his hands up. “Party’s canceled. Stand down.”

A disgruntled sort of muttering immediately erupted, but they all shuffled back through the gate, leaving just the mayor and Mac standing outside.

“I’m real sorry, man.”

“Nah...it’s alright, brother. It’s my own fault. Been so fucking bored lately. Got all excited about seeing some action before I even verified it.” He sighed and shoved his hands in his pockets. “So? Wanna tell me what that was all about? Ain’t like you to just shove a man down the stairs in his own fucking house and keep right on goin’ without even a kiss goodbye.”

Mac made a face, “Yeah...yeah, I’m sorry. It’s uh...it’s...complicated.”

His eyebrow went up, his interest clearly piqued. “Complicated?”

Shit. He wasn’t going to be able to blow him off this time. He’d only end up getting his ass kicked. Of course, if Hancock found out he had a second soulmate out there, he’d probably get his ass kicked anyway. It would be nice to finally have someone to confide in after all this time though...and he was the smartest person, ghoul or human, he’d ever known, after all. Maybe if he buttered him up first?

“Let’s grab some drinks. On me. I’ll tell you all about it.”

“Oh, la la. The kid’s actually buyin’ for once. Must be real complicated, huh?”

“Yeah...”

An hour later saw them down in the Third Rail, Hancock staring at him with a rare look of complete shock and awe on his face. “Another soulmate?”

“Yup.”

“Holy shit.”

He nodded and stared down into his old fashioned...or Whitechapel Charlie’s best approximation of one, anyway. “Yeah.”

“What’s she like?”

Mac shrugged, “I dunno...confusing?”

He chuckled, “Anything else?”
He wanted to tell him she was the one who took out Finn, but didn’t. If Hancock knew exactly who
she was, chances were good he’d just go grab her and drag her here whether she wanted to come or
not. “You’d like her. Feisty. Funny. She...she sings all the time. Just like Lucy did. Likes to cook
and knit. Works for the Minutemen.”

“Do-gooder type, huh?”

“I guess. We don’t actually know a whole lot about each other. She wants to keep things vague.”

Hancock frowned at that, “Vague?”

“Yeah...I mean, her husband just died this past fall and she’s still...and she’s got a baby and all,
so...”, he shrugged. “It’s complicated.”

“Ah...and you’ve got your whole situation on top of it.”

“Yeah.”

“She know about Duncan?”

He shook his head, “No.”

“Why the hell not?”

“I dunno...I...she’s already dealing with a lot. I didn’t want to put that on her, too.”

“Hmm...Diamond City gal, huh?”

“Yeah, but she’s not from there. Not originally. She’s from...” He started snickering, “She’s from
Kentucky.”

Hancock rolled his eyes, “Sure she is. Pull the other one.”

“No! She really is! I guess it actually is a real place.”

“Huh.”

“Yeah.”

“So...you know where she lives and you’ve even been inside her house, and your familiars are
already together even, but she won’t let you come to her?”

“Nope.”

“Not even after some bastard tried to --”

“Not even then.”

“Stubborn.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Well, the best ones usually are.” He waved a careless hand, “She’ll come around.”

“I dunno, man. The clock’s ticking here. I mean, what do I do when I get Duncan’s cure? I gotta go
back home and she’s...”
“She’s here.”

“Yeah.”

Hancock frowned and popped a couple mentats into his mouth. “You don’t think she’ll go with?”

“I don’t want her to, to be honest...the Capitol Wasteland is a dump. I’d rather just bring Duncan here.”

He raised an eyebrow, “You’re just gonna show up on her doorstep with your boy in tow? That’s uh...bold.”

Mac laughed and rested his head in his hands. “I dunno what to do. I really don’t.”

“Hmm...well...you gotta make a move of some kind here, kid.”

“What if I fu-mess everything up?”

“The only man who never makes mistakes is the man who never does anything...Theodore Roosevelt.”

“What?”

“Even screwing up is better than doing nothing, brother. You just gotta go for it.”

“Just go for it?”

“Sure. Why not?”

“Wh...what if I show up and she immediately hates me?”

“Is that even possible if y’all are bonded and all?”

“I dunno!”

Hancock tapped his fingers on their table for a moment, “Know what your problem is, kid? You’re stuck in some kinda holding pattern on all fronts. You need a push. Something that’ll change the game and make you reevaluate the situation properly.”

“Is this the part where you push me?”

He grinned, “Might be...I solved your little problem for you.”

“Which little problem?”

“Finding a crew.”

Mac’s eyes went wide, “What? When? How?”

“Answer was staring us right in the face the whole damn time.”

When he didn’t continue, Mac waved his hands around, “Well what it is!”

“Minutemen.”

He immediately frowned, “The Minutemen?”
“Specifically their little general and Garvey. You need the best of the best to pull this off, right? People you can trust to boot, yeah? Who better than the Commonwealth’s resident guardian angels, hmm?”

Shit. That did make sense. “You really think they’d go for it?”

Hancock snorted, “Oh, trust me, brother. Charlie’s got the softest heart around. All I gotta do is tell her your sad little story and bam. She’d plow through those ferals all on her own if it means saving a kid. That’s just who she is...and wherever she goes, Garvey follows.”

“You could really arrange it?”

“Arrange it? Shit. I’ll even go with you. Be nice to see my Sunshine in action. Been having these dreams, you know? Her and that big shotgun and my --”

“Yeah, yeah, no, I get it.” Jesus. “How soon?”

He shrugged, “I can radio her right now if you want.”

“Right now?”

“Yeah, that’s what I said.”

Mac stared at him with his mouth open. “Seriously?”

The ghoul huffed, “Yes, seriously.”

“So go do it, man!”

Hancock chuckled. He’d always liked these little reminders that Mac really was still just a kid. His impatience and cheek would have been disrespectful on anyone else, but it was just charming as fuck on him. “Alright, alright...you promise to keep outta trouble for ten minutes and I’ll go upstairs and call her right now. Sound good?”

“Yeah!”

“You stay right here and just keep thinking of ways to sweep your girl off her feet, alright? If the two of you don’t at least fuck once before you have to go back down south I’m gonna lose my goddamn mind.”

Mac glowered at him, “Don’t talk about her like that, man. Come on.”

He stood and rolled his eyes, even if the man’s defense of his soulmate’s honor was about the cutest thing he’d ever seen in his life. “Sorry...make tender, inspired love. Better?”

The merc grumbled and folded his arms, “Not really.”

“Heh.”

He made his way upstairs, still with a rueful smile on his face. Two soulmates in one lifetime. He’d never heard of such a thing and he’d done more reading on the subject than anyone he knew. Maybe Daisy would have some answers, but he’d wait until after Med-Tek to start investigating for real. Save Mac the ass-whuppin’ she would no doubt want to give him after she knew he was just hanging around here when his mate was less than a day’s travel away.

It was a remarkable thing. Hancock had lived his whole life hoping against hope that someday he’d
feel that mysterious pull towards another person, but it had never happened. It didn’t happen to most people nowadays. A lot of people assumed it was just a fairytale unless they’d personally known someone it had happened to, but he’d always believed.

Mac said his girl was a widow, which gave him a resurgence of hope. Maybe his own mate was out there already, just bonded to somebody else first. Maybe he still had a chance after all.

Stranger things had happened...clearly.

Hancock passed his daughter and second-in-command, Fahr, on the staircase and gave her a friendly wave. He’d loved her mother, in his own way, but they hadn’t been bonded by anything but shared chem use and unfortunate circumstances. He was still grateful he’d been granted a daughter from the whole thing, of course. God knew she was the best thing he’d ever done. He’d just always felt like maybe if they’d been soulmates, if he’d been able to feel that final spiral she’d gone down before it was too late. Could have maybe saved her from herself before the inevitable happened.

Hancock went into his office and closed the door for a bit of privacy. Talking with Charlie was always a high point of his day, and he didn’t want to share their growing relationship with anyone else. She’d cooled towards him since that first encounter and all, but he felt like he still had a chance. After all, he’d never failed before. He just needed to come up with the right angle to approach her was all.

Mac’s problem with saving his little boy gave him another chance to do just that.

He picked up the mic on his radio and tuned it to her Pipboy’s unique frequency. “This is Mayor Hancock to General Apperson. Got your ears on, love?”

A few minutes ticked by and then a flustered Charlie was suddenly there.

“Hey! Oh...hey! Sorry, I was in the bath.”

Oh, now there was something to fantasize about right there. He wondered if she was talking to him in a towel or nothing for a moment. Couldn't decide which would be better. "Oh, I'm sorry. Should I call back later?"

"No, of course not! I'm already prune-y enough. Just being lazy at this point...you know, it's the strangest thing. I was just thinking about you.”

Fantastic. A slow smile spread across his face, but he decided to not push it. She said it so innocently, like she had no idea it could be taken a certain way. Little cutie. “Good thoughts, I hope.”

“Um, well, yeah...so, what can I do for you?”

Oh. So many things. He tried to keep his head out of the gutter for this one though. Needed to really sell the tragic sentimentality of the whole deal. “Got a little situation here, Sunshine, and I was hoping you could help us.”

“Okay.”

“You remember our mutual acquaintance, MacCready?”

“Sure! He was such a big help at Quincy! Really just top notch work.”
“Oh, good...good. Yeah, see, you probably didn’t know this about him, but Mac’s a daddy.”

“Oh! Oh, no, I didn’t know. Well, that’s nice!”

“Yeah, and the thing is...his little boy’s real sick, sweetheart.”

“Oh, golly. I’m so sorry to hear that. Does he need a doctor? Or an escort to a doctor or something? We’ll help out any way we can.”

He grinned at that. “Well, nothing like that. He’s actually pretty far off. Back at Mac’s little homestead in the Capitol Wasteland.”

“Oh! Hey, I know someone from there!”

“Small world...anyway, there’s this special medicine he needs from this company here --”

“Med-Tek, right? I bet it’s Med-Tek. They were right on the cutting edge of stuff back in the day.”

“Right. That’s exactly right. Place is full up of ferals and its practically impossible to clear on his own. Sniper and all, you know. He’s not exactly gifted at close quarters combat like you are, darlin’.”

“Oh! Does he need help clearing the place?”

“Yup.”

“Well, I’d be happy to help, of course!”

“Oh, wonderful. I knew we could count on you.”

“What’s his little boy’s name, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Duncan. Little Duncan MacCready. He’s about four.”

“Four is such a good age. I bet he’s just precious...Duncan was my husband’s middle name, you know! It means um...oh, what was it? Dark warrior or chief or something? Anyway, it’s a great name! He picked a great name.”

His head tilted a little. He didn’t even know regular names had meaning. “That’s interesting...so --”

“How about tomorrow? I needed to talk to you anyway. In person, I mean. If that’s alright. Oh, no, wait, you are coming too, right?”

Well now he definitely was. “That was the plan.”

“Okay, great! Oh...oh, shoot. No, not tomorrow. I’ve got uh...something kind of messy to deal with. Saturday?”

“Good thinking. We’ll miss all the traffic.”

She laughed a little. “Noon? I know you like to sleep in.”

“It’s a date.”

Chapter End Notes
I know this is a bit shorter than I usually do, but it's sort of a bridge chapter.

Cause it's about to be on, y'all. On like Michelle Kwan!

Bum bum buuuuum...
Deacon had not slept in forty-seven hours.

At least, he was pretty sure that’s how long it had been. The hands on his wristwatch kept doing silly things like waving at him, and the numbers weren’t always quite right, but he was still pretty sure.

The official protocol, which he himself had written years ago, said he should do exactly as Charlie had asked. Go to HQ, take her name off the board, immediately change the pass phrase so she couldn’t access the Railroad’s already limited resources.

But he couldn’t.

In fact, he hadn’t been able to make himself go more than one hundred yards from her home before he’d turned around. He knew better than to try to beg for forgiveness. Knew just how hopeless his situation was. He’d not only burned whatever bridge he’d built with her, he’d nuked the thing from orbit.

Still. He just couldn’t leave.

Instead, he did what he’d always done best. Kept watch from a distance. Smiled and said hello to her from across the marketplace where she’d never hear it. Keep her safe the only way he knew how.

He’d initially felt compelled to go seek out MacCready. Stick to his original plan, to blackmail him with the threat of telling Charlie exactly the kind of man he really was. It was not lost on him that she’d never mentioned his son, so he was pretty sure he had some grade A extortion material there. Certainly, that plan would have been advantageous for the Railroad. Having a talented pet sniper on retainer, for free, to clear obstacles for them would be a godsend.

He couldn’t bring himself to do that, either.

It was like he was just stuck in neutral. Gears were spinning in his head but nothing was catching. He didn’t feel anything, didn’t have any motivation to do anything or go anywhere. He just wanted his friend back.

Deacon was glad she’d gone to get Piper. She’d still looked entirely too upset, even hours after his...well, he didn’t even know what to call it. You couldn’t call it a mistake, since he’d carefully thought it out and executed it knowing full well what would probably happen. He’d just sorely underestimated how much having her look at him like that, just like his mother had, would gut him. A knife between the ribs would have hurt less.

Anyway, he’d been glad she had Piper to lean on. He couldn’t stand the nosy little brunette himself, but Charlie seemed to enjoy her company. They’d brought Nat along with them, talking excitedly about a ‘slumber party’ the whole way. That was sweet. He could just imagine them all having fun together, watching movies and doing makeovers or whatever and getting fed all manner of tasty treats courtesy of Codsworth. It was a nice thought.

He could have slept. Probably. Should have? Definitely. Charlie always kept to a pretty strict
schedule. She wouldn’t slip past him in the night or anything. But what if someone else did? What if some Institute bastard was just waiting for their chance to strike? Or what if the Brotherhood sent someone to investigate the Minutemen’s general?

Someone had to be there. He had to be there.

So here he stood in the bright winter sun on a Friday afternoon, playing the part of just another DC stooge. He’d watched them skip along and take Nat to class in the morning. Watched them eat their collective weight in junk at Power Noodles. Watched them dig through Myrna’s hoard to find little knickknacks and doodads for Charlie’s house.

He also watched how she went just a little too still, her smile a bit too stiff, whenever they spoke with any man. No friendly hugs for Arturo or Solomon today, no silly harmless flirting with John at the salon.

He’d done that. He’d ruined that. Dimmed her light. That was all him.

He’d also watched as she and Piper dragged her couch and its quilt, one of the first things she’d ever crafted in this world, out of her home and up the ramp out of town. Several people had stopped and watched, actually. The comical spectacle of two small women cursing and fighting valiantly against gravity had been pretty entertaining. He’d easily slipped in behind the crowd that gathered to watch them wrestle the thing into submission.

Deacon waited about ten minutes and silently followed them out of the city. Just for safety’s sake, of course.

He didn’t have to go far.

Charlie and Piper were carefully, reverently, setting the couch down in front of baseball player statue in the middle of the plaza. A few other security guards had gathered in a loose circle, clearly confused and more than a little concerned.

Piper stretched a little and popped her back, “Here good?”

“Yeah, this is perfect.”

“And this is really a Kentucky tradition?”

“Oh, yeah. Kentuckians have a long and storied history of burning couches. You can trust me. I’m an expert. Went to State Street in Lexington more times than I can count during basketball season. Had a big time.”

“Alright, if you say so.” Piper flopped down on it and squinted up at the sun. “You sure you wanna do this? I mean...there’s nothing wrong with it, right?”

Charlotte’s face went a little stony and she set her pack down to start pawing through it. “Nothing but bad juju. It’s gotta go.”

“Juju?” Her brow wrinkled a little but didn’t ask the obvious question on her mind. “Okay, Blue. If you say so.”

Danny Sullivan, Diamond City’s security chief, finally poked his head out of his office and came over. “Uh...ladies...how are you doing today?”

Piper gave him a bright, mischievous smile, “Hey, Danny! What’s up?”
“I’m fine, thank you, Officer.”

“What uh...whatcha doin’?”

“Redecorating.” She finally found what she was looking for and came out with four molotov’s and a lighter. “Here, Pipes.”

“Yup...you sure you wanna burn the quilt, too? It’s pretty nice.”

She frowned at the patchwork quilt, “You know what? You’re right. That would just be wasteful. Grab the quilt.”

“Alright. The quilt lives!” Piper stood and walked with her a few feet back with it draped over her arm.

The security circle also backed up and Danny pulled a face.

“Is this uh...is this necessary?”

Charlotte gave him an exasperated sort of look, “Haven’t you ever redecorated, honey? This is just step one.”

“Yeah, Danny. Get with it.”

“Does it uh...does it have to be right here?”

“Are y’all gonna volunteer to carry it somewhere else?”

“Uh…” He glanced around but all of his officers suddenly had somewhere else to be, scattering in all directions. “I guess not.”

“Then I guess it’s gotta be right here. Ready, Piper?”

“Ready. Light me up.”

Charlotte lit all four molotov’s and grinned at her, “Here we go! Fire in the hole!”

They gleefully chucked the bottles at the couch and cheered as they exploded, covering the entire thing in flammable liquid and quickly catching. Danny still looked confused, but relieved that only the couch had been the recipient of their wrath, and eased back through the gate. Soon it was only the women and their makeshift bonfire.

And Deacon, of course, from a respectable distance.

Piper sighed, “It really was a nice couch.”

“Yeah, it’s a shame it had to die.”

She glanced over at her friend and watched her eyes reflecting the flames for a moment. She seemed strangely sad for something she’d been so enthusiastic about just a few minutes before. “Blue...talk to me. You alright?”

“I’m alright, Piper.”

“Something happened, didn’t it?”
“Nothing happened. It was...nothing. All of it.” Charlotte frowned a little, “Why is it that nothing can sometimes feel like everything?”

Piper shook her head and folded the quilt, “I dunno.”

“It’s dumb.”

“Yup...so now what?”

“Traditionally? We drink.”

She chuckled, “Little early in the day for me. Still gotta get Nat after school, you know.”

“Right, right.”

“But I don’t mind if you start without me.”

“Nah. I can wait.”

“So, what do we do with this?” She held up the blanket.

Charlotte stared at it. She’d been pretty proud of herself when it had been finished. It had been ages since she’d done a quilt by hand and as simple as it was, it still took a lot of love and hours to complete. The practice quilt for the nicer one currently on Shaun’s bed in the loft. She kinda felt bad. It wasn’t the blanket’s fault that she couldn’t stand to look at it anymore.

“Hang on.” A quick search of the various trash piles lining the plaza finally yielded a mostly intact box hidden under an old car. She brought it back with her and stuffed the quilt into it. “Got some paper?”

“Always.” Piper handed over her notebook and a pen from her pocket and leaned over her shoulder, laughing when she saw the note. “‘Free to good home’, huh? It’s not a dog, you know. It’s not gonna care who has it.”

She shrugged and pulled the paper free before tucking it into the box, “I care.”

“Was everybody this sentimental and weird before the bombs, or was it just you?”

“Just me.”

“I figured.”

They left the box on the other side of the statue, where it wasn’t likely to catch fire, and headed back into town. Deacon managed to wait all of thirty seconds after they disappeared up the ramp before he went and claimed the blanket for himself.

He couldn’t give it the good home Charlie wanted, but he could at least appreciate what it had once meant. Anyway, it was probably the last piece of her he’d ever be able to get. He stuffed it into his pack and tried, once again, to finally leave Diamond City. For real this time.

He should really start thinking about reporting in.

The next morning, Charlotte arrived at Piper’s door at the obscenely early hour of eight am sharp.

Alright, maybe that wasn’t obscenely early, but she clearly didn’t have the stomach for bourbon and moonshine that Charlie did. It certainly felt obscenely early.
She fumbled the door open and leaned against the door frame, groaning.

Charlie laughed, “Little uh...sleepy this morning, darlin’?”

“A bit.”

“Hmm. I told you to slow it down with the shine.”

“Yeah...yeah, just...give me a minute or thirty.” She backed away from the door and collapsed on the couch while Charlie clucked sympathetically at her.

“Actually, I have a little errand to run, so take your time, honey.” She switched on the radio to DCR and turned it down low enough that it wouldn’t wake Nat. “You’re gonna want to listen to that.”

Piper frowned and tried to lift her head, “What?”

“Be right back!”

She watched her go and tried to blink enough to get her eyes to stop being so bleary and unfocused. Had Blue had some kind of...vicious smile on her face? That didn’t seem right. She was one of the sweetest people Piper had ever met.

It took four attempts, but she finally managed to drag herself off the couch and into the kitchenette. Coffee was what she needed. Good, strong, dark coffee.

Too bad she just had the same old stale shit on hand, but it would probably work.

Billie Holiday was only halfway through her love song when there was a sharp whistle and a little burst of static, then Charlie’s voice sounded out over the airwaves.

“Is this the button? Honey. Honey! Calm down, Travis. Good God. You’re all bristled up like a cat in a rocking chair factory.”

The distinct mumbling stutter of Travis answered her, too far away to really be made out.

“Oh, so this is it? I’m on right now? Oh, great! That’s great! Thanks, honey.”

Charlie cleared her throat and Piper could literally hear the smile in her voice, “Good morning, wasteland! This is your favorite General, Charlie Apperson of the Commonwealth Minutemen! I hope everybody is enjoying this glorious sunny day!”

“I do apologize for interrupting Miss Holiday, but I have an exciting announcement to make that just couldn’t wait! I hope y’all will forgive me.”

Piper stared at the radio and grinned a little. That accent kept slipping. Whatever this was, she was either excited or pissed or both.

“I’m sure most of you by now have heard the rumors about that mysterious underground organization known as the Railroad. Mister Miles here... no, honey, I’m not done yet... Mister Miles has spoken about them before, I believe. Such a sweetheart, isn’t he? Always doin’ his best to keep us all informed.”

Her voice was extra sweet and syrupy, like one of those old pre-war commercials or something. Piper gave up trying to make her coffee and finally turned her full attention to the radio.
“Well, I am here to tell y’all that the rumors are true! The Railroad actually does exist! Isn’t that just amazing! You know, so many people workin’ so hard to make the world a better place...it just warms my heart, y’all. It really does.”

“Now, I know what you’re thinking. Y’all wanna know how you, too, can find the Railroad and join the good fight against the Institute, right? But you just dunno how to find them! Now you know I wouldn’t leave y’all high and dry like that...so! If you happen to find yourself outside the Old North Church over there on Salem Street? You know, the one with that big statue of Paul Revere out front? The guy on the horse? Well, just head right on in and go downstairs! You'll see a great big pretty seal at the end of a long tunnel and, just to save y’all the trouble, the password is ‘railroad’! Punch that puppy in and viola! Ask to speak to Deacon, and tell ‘em Charlie sent ya!”

She snickered just a little before resuming, “We now return you to your regular Diamond City Radio broadcast already in session! Have a blessed day!”

Piper’s mouth was still hanging open when Charlie came bouncing back into her home.

“You ready yet or what?”

“That...what the hell did you...was that true?”

She grinned, “Every word of it!”

“Are you still drunk?”

“Ha, you’re funny. Sober as a deacon in church!” She started laughing and clapped a hand over her mouth when Nat’s sleepy grumbling reached them.

“Blue...you just outed the Railroad.”

Her head tilted, “Oh, is that what I did? Whoops!”

“Whoops?”

“Whoopsie daisy! Now come on, get the lead out! We’ve gotta get a move on if we’re gonna make it on time.”

“Right...right, yeah, okay, just...you know they’re probably gonna come for you, right? They might even send Deacon personally.”

Her grin grew, “Good. I hope their shorts are twisting in the wind for a long time over this.”

“Uh...yeah. Yeah, okay. I just uh...I gotta get dressed.”

“So scoot!”

“Yeah...scooting.”

Charlotte watched her go and leaned back against the door. That was probably...reckless. Dangerous. Nate never would have approved...

*Hey, RJ? You up?*

*Yeah. What’s going on?*

*Did you hear the news? The Minutemen’s general just told everybody where the Railroad is on Diamond City radio.*
Holy shit! Are you serious?

Yeah, it was just on.

That’s fucking hilarious!

She grinned. Of course RJ would approve. It was pretty funny. I bet they are freaking out right now!

Do they even really exist? I always just assumed it was that one weird guy with the sunglasses playing dress up all over the place.

A snort escaped her and she bit her tongue, trying hard to not laugh loud enough to wake little Nat. Who knows?

Well...it’s an exciting day all the way around then.

Oh? Got plans, do we?

Got a job. It’s...well, you probably won’t hear from me today. I mean, unless you needed something. I kinda need to focus up on this one.

Oh, sounds important.

Yeah, it is.

Big payday?

The biggest.

Hmm, well, I’ll let you alone then. I’ve got an errand to run myself today.

Not by yourself though, right?

Of course not.

Okay...I’ll talk to you later.

Sure. Later, gator.

They headed out at ten past nine, which was a little later than Charlotte would have preferred, but for some reason Piper had taken extra time getting dressed. A few too many extra peeks in the mirror and the way she kept self-consciously fixing her hair as they walked had her wondering which of the boys they were meeting had her so worked up.

“I think I’ve almost got the list.”

“Alright. Let’s hear it.”

“Okay...it went Henrietta, Rebecca, June and James--”

“The twins.”

“Right. Everett, Andrew, Katherine, Sarah, you, Wilfred, Daniel, and Karen.”

“Wow. You got it! Took Nate ages to learn them all.”
“I’ve got a mind for details. Honestly, it’s the nicknames that are hard to remember.”

“Why? Henny, Cheep, Junebug and Squeak, Eggy, Buzz, Kitty, Sugarpop, Flash, Win-cash, Bubba and Sue-Sue. What’s hard about that?”

Piper laughed, “Yeah...easy. So, since you were Flash, was that because you were always fast or something?”

“Uh...” She felt her cheeks go pink, “Off the record?”

“Of course.”

“Daddy always said that was why, but I found out once I was grown that it was actually because they couldn’t keep clothes on me when I was little.”

She snorted, “How little are we talking here?”

“Until I was around four, I guess.”

“Oh, man...and you just went around introducing yourself as Flash to people.”

“Right? It’s so embarrassing!” They laughed for a moment before she decided to broach the topic. “So...MacCready. What do you know about him?”

Piper shrugged, “Not much. Comes out of the Capitol Wasteland, used to be a Gunner...he left before Quincy, I think, which is probably why Preston didn’t try to shoot him on sight when you guys worked together.”

Charlotte laughed at that. She couldn’t really see a man like Preston shooting anyone in cold blood. Ever.

“Supposedly good with a rifle. The neighborhood watch in Goodneighbor describe him as ‘good aim, bad attitude’.”

“Oh, a bad boy, huh?”

She made a face, “I dunno. He just struck me as another puffed up merc who thinks they’re hardcore just because they can shoot a little better than average.”

“You met him?”

“Just the one time. I went to Goodneighbor to do a story on Magnolia, since she’s so...uh, popular and all. He hung around the whole time. I guess they were...ya know...”

She waited for her friend to finish and huffed in exasperation when she didn’t. “Having sex?”

“Ugh, yeah, that.”

“Well, what’s wrong with that?”

“I dunno...Magnolia is so...and Mac is just...”, she shuddered a little. “Guess some people really will do anything for caps.”

“Hey, now. Be nice.”

“I am! He’s...I mean, he’s probably cute, to some people, but he’s just...obnoxious. Arrogant.
Rude. Kept asking me for a ‘private interview’. Like I haven’t heard that one a million times. Never calls women by their names. It’s always ‘honey’ or ‘baby’ or...I dunno, ‘sugar tits’.”

She busted out laughing, “Surely not.”

“Well, maybe not the last one. I dunno. I’m just saying it wouldn’t surprise me is all.”

“Hmm.”

“Anyway, you’ve spent more time with him than I have.”

She shrugged, “Not really. It was just for work. I barely spoke two words to the man.”

“Huh.”

“So...what about Hancock?” Her eyebrow went up by just a fraction at Piper’s immediate blush.

“He’s...you know...well. I mean, he’s the worst, of course.”

“M’hmm.”

“Just...a chemhead and...and he has sex with anything with a pulse. And probably even stuff that doesn’t. Who knows? And he’s...a politician, so there’s that. You know he’s McDonough’s little brother, right?”

“I had heard that.”

“Yeah, so...bad genes, obviously. Just bad all the way around...and...thinks he’s so cool and whatever...”

Charlotte decided to push a little, “I thought he was quite charming. He’s always been sweet to me.”

She scoffed, “That’s just how he works. He gets you all flustered and whatever and then...it’s not like anything means anything to him. He just does whatever he wants and...”, she trailed off and frowned at the road.

“M’hmm...so how far did he get?”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Pipes. Come on.”

The reporter refused to look at her for a long time and then finally sighed, “Second base. Second base and I had to go to the bathroom and by the time I came back, he already...” She shrugged.

“Was it just a crush or is it still...something else?”

Piper wrinkled her nose and looked over at her, “I still don’t understand this...hat thing.”

She smiled behind the mask and let the subject drop. Something else, then. “What’s to understand? It keeps the sun off my face...and it’s got ballistic weave throughout so I don’t have to wear a stupid helmet.”

“M’kay, but why does it make you look like you have kitty ears?”
Charlotte sighed and tried to not think about that part. “Because the ears have little receivers that connect to my Pipboy and increase the range of my radio.” She glared at Piper through the modified assault mask even though she knew the reporter couldn’t see. “It’s all very scientific.”

Her eyebrow went up, “Who sold you on this load of crap anyway?”

She paused and then shook her head. No. The design of her mask might be Deacon’s doing, but the tech behind it had been all Tinker Tom and she was still pretty sure she could at least trust him. After all, he was the constant butt of Deacon’s jokes, too. They had that in common.

“A scientist.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You’re just mad cause you can’t solve the riddle. Don’t think I forgot just because we were drinkin’.”

She made a face and pulled out her notebook and pen. “Just aren’t ever gonna let that go, huh? Alright. Hit me again.”

Charlotte laughed, “Okay, here we go. As I was going to Saint Ives…”

“Yup.”

“I met a man with seven wives.”

“Jerk and his harem. Got it.”

“Each wife had seven sacks.”

“That’s seven times seven…so forty nine sacks.”

She grinned. Already wrong. “Each sack had seven cats.”

“Forty-nine by seven that’s…carry the six…that’s three hundred and forty-three cats.”

“Each cat had seven kits.”

“Jesus…okay, three forty-nine…”

“Three.”

“Right. Three forty-three by seven that’s…fuck, two thousand, four hundred and one.”

“Kits, cats, sacks, wives. How many were going to Saint Ives?”

“Okay…okay.” She stared down at her notebook and frowned, “The trick is the sacks…you gotta eliminate that one.”

Charlotte almost laughed but just kept scanning the horizon for any threats as they walked along to meet the boys at Med-Tek. “Hmm.”

“So…seven wives plus three hundred and forty-three cats plus two thousand, four hundred and one kittens is…two thousand, seven hundred and fifty-one. There.”

“Nope.”
“Nope?”

“Nope.”

Piper sighed, “Okay, where...oh! Oh! The man! Gotta add one! Of course! Two thousand, seven hundred and fifty-two is the answer!”

“No.”

“How is that not the answer?”

“It’s just not, honey.”

“Dammit...I never was very good at math.”

“It’s a riddle, Pipes. Don’t need math for it.”

“You don’t need...what? Then how the hell are you supposed to do it without math?”

She shrugged, “Gotta figure it out.”

“Shit.”

“You’ll get it.”

“I’m going to ask Hancock. He lives for this kinda stuff.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah...this and whoring and drinking and doing every chem in existence...why is he tagging along again?”

“I think he just really wants to help MacCready out. It’s nice. Anyway, I gotta talk to him about something important, so it works out.”

“Uh-huh...is it the Glowing Sea thing?”

“Yeah, it is. Why? You weren’t hoping to go to that, right?”

“Fuck no...but you should know, it’s been said that the extra rads out there make him um... frisky, if you get what I mean.”

Oh, great. That was...great. Wonderful. An even friskier than usual Hancock. That’s just what the world needed. “Thanks for the warning. I’ll be sure to have Codsworth polish my chastity belt for the occasion.”

She grinned, “Just ask him to marry you. That should run him off if he tries anything.”

“Fear of commitment, huh?”

“Let’s just say, I’ve never seen him with the same victim twice.”

“Oh, Piper, be nice.”

“This is me nice, Blue. Embrace it.”

“You sure seem to know a lot about Hancock for somebody who claims to hate him so bad.”
She made a face, “Oh, come on. I’m over it. I’ve *been* over it. Anyway, this isn’t the playground. Next you’ll be telling me McDonough has the hots for me since he yells at me every time we run into each other.”

“Oh, gross. No. I’d never say something like that!”

They came around the corner and almost got knocked down by a Brotherhood patrol. Piper grabbed her arm and swung her back before she fell and Charlotte glared up at the man in power armor.

“Ow! Watch it, buddy!”

His voice came through the comm staticy and robotic. “Stand aside, wastelander.”

“Hey! You’re talking to the general of the Minutemen, tin can! Show some respect!”

“Piper, it’s fine.”

They stood and glared at the contingent as they marched past. Charlie couldn’t believe jerks like this had access to so much military tech. Nate would pitch a fit if he saw. Once they’d all passed, Piper gave them an enthusiastic one-finger salute and they continued on.

“Jerks.”

“Yup.” Charlotte was just able to make out two dots on the horizon. “Ah...there’s our boys.”

Her friend huffed, “Look at ‘em both...standing there...like they’re so cool.”

She chuckled, “Rein it in a little, honey. Jeez.”

“They’re jerks, too, is all. Both of them.”

“Well, one of those jerks has a little boy back home and we’re here to help, so...mind your manners.”

“If you wanted someone who could do that, why’d you bring me?”

Hancock saw them first as Mac was staring up at the old medical facility and he waved enthusiastically. “Hey! Hey, Sunshine! Hey!”

“Jesus.”

Charlotte ignored her and waved back, “Hey!”

When they finally got close enough to see the wicked smile on his face, he took his hat off and bowed. “Good afternoon, ladies.”

“Afternoon.”

Mac nodded, “Hey, Charlie.”

“Hey.”

He shifted a little and turned his attention to Piper, “How you been, angel?”

Piper stared pointedly at Charlie and said nothing. Just sighed heavily.
“Sunshine and the lovely Miss Wright. It’s like a double-date. So, to what do we owe the pleasure of your company today, beautiful?”

She glared at him, “Chaperone.”

“Hmm.” His eyes went back to Charlotte and he flicked one of the ‘ears’ on her mask. “You look like you’re a kitty cat. We should find one of those belled collars and…”

“It’s for science, Hancock. Get your head out of the gutter, for once.”

Yeah, bringing Piper along might not have been the best idea. Charlotte, having nowhere else to really look at in this uncomfortable moment, glanced over at MacCready. He was still in the same assault mask as last time. Shame. She’d kinda been wondering if he was as handsome as Deacon had claimed.

“Not still sick, are you, MacCready?”

“No. Just stinks in there.”

She nodded, “Smart.”

“You, too.”

She pointed at the ears, “It’s for science.”

“Yeah, I heard.”

Charlotte frowned a little. The masks they were both wearing distorted their voices a bit, but she could swear he sounded familiar somehow. Which was silly, since the last time they’d spoken, he’d been barely able to make a sound at all. Weird.

“Already took care of all the unfortunates out here in the parking lot. Chivalry, you know. It ain’t dead yet.” Hancock came and looped his free arm through hers, “I figure, Sunshine and I take the lead, Piper can provide backup and Mac can stay far back and do what he does best. That sound good to everybody?”

She shrugged, “Sure. Whatever gets it done.”

He smiled down at her and then his eyes slid down but paused before he got to anything good. His hand reached out and lifted the little leaf charm just peaking out above the open collar of her shirt. “What’s this?”

“Oh...my husband gave it to me when we first met.”

He smiled and let it fall back against her skin. “Pretty.”

“Thanks.”

“Looks expensive.”

“Oh, no. No, it’s not. I was never really comfortable with fancy stuff. He just got it at a drugstore or something.”

Mac had been staring at the little leaf, wondering why it was so familiar. “Drugstore?”

Hancock grinned, “Our little Sunshine here is pre-war. Didn’t you know?”
Piper huffed, “Yeah, don’t you read the paper?”

The way the tiny clear stones set in it twinkled just a little in the light kept nagging at him. He knew he’d seen it before, but where? Last time he’d actually seen Charlie, she’d been covered head to toe, so that couldn’t be it. It was actually bothering him more than the pre-war thing, which was...also odd. “Huh.”

Hancock clapped his hands, “Alright, let’s get this party started. Still got the codes for the security system, Mac?”

“Yup.”

“Then let’s do it.”

He let Hancock and Charlie take the lead, with Piper trailing along behind looking disgruntled and irritated.

He watched the way the two kept their heads together, Charlie obviously telling him something he was very happy to hear if his grin was any indication and wondered why he felt a little disgruntled himself. His eyes slid down to her ass and he grinned a little behind the mask. Hancock had certainly been right there. Turned out the Minutemen’s general had curves after all. His friend put his hand on the small of her back and held the door open, winking at her as she went through and Mac was struck suddenly by the urge to punch him in the face and stopped short.

Hancock gave Piper a salacious grin that turned even more wicked at her prissy little huff and then blinked at Mac. “Something wrong, brother?”

Had to be just this place. His back was all up. Had been since they’d arrived and had to mow down a good twenty ferals in the parking lot alone. He was immediately ashamed of himself. His prejudice against ferals was really starting to become a problem if he wanted to beat his best friend just for existing.

“No. No, I’m good.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

He leaned a little closer, “You know you can tell me anything, right?”

Ah, fuck. Now he felt even worse. “Yeah, yeah, I know.”

“If this is gonna be too much for you --”

“It’s not.”

“-- then the ladies and I can clear the building. Hell, I’m pretty sure Sunshine could do it all on her own honestly. Probably just get in her way.”

“No. No, I gotta do this.”

“Okay. Alright then.” He put a hand on his shoulder and brought him inside, “Just remember I’m here for you, kid. No matter what.”

Mac swallowed hard and tried to get a grip on himself. “Yeah. Thanks, man.”
“No problem.” He patted his back a few times and walked further into the lobby, “Alright, Sunshine, let’s show ‘em how it’s done!”

It took over two hours to clear the building and bypass all the security measures Med-Tek had implemented once the bombs had dropped. Room after room of forgotten test subjects turned ferals that snarled and snapped at the first potential snack to show up in two hundred years.

Mac did his best to keep his head in the game and take out any monsters that tried to outflank the group, but his attention kept drifting back to Charlie. She was a beast with that shotgun of hers and fearless to a ridiculous degree. Almost foolhardy. The way she would just walk right into any room without so much as checking it out first made his heart lurch every fucking time.

They got more than halfway through when he finally started wondering why he wasn’t feeling that same sense of protectiveness towards Piper. He should, right? She was a lady, too...and a lady armed with a lot less firepower than Charlie was packing to boot.

What the fuck was his problem today?

The last room to be cleared was a hermetically sealed clean room of sorts in the sub-sub basement of the place. At least, that’s what Charlie called it. The place hadn’t been clean in a long ass time. It was home to a glowing one and a few overpowered ferals that Charlie and Hancock’s shotguns took out with ease, splattering radioactive goo all over the place.

Once the dust and gore settled, Hancock glanced down at his boots and made a face. “Got liquified asshole all over my damn shoes.”

“Well, that’s a shame, honey. They were such nice shoes, too.”

“I know!”

Piper rolled her eyes. Again. She’d been rolling her eyes for almost an hour straight by this point. “Alright, get a room you two. Fuck.”

He grinned, “Now there’s an idea.”

“Funny. Piper, let’s check these refrigerators. It’s probably in a tiny little bottle or maybe an inhaler or something?”

“Sure.”

The women started opening doors while Hancock and Mac checked the tables. The mayor nudged him a bit and he nodded back. So far he was holding it together, but man, if it wasn’t here. If it had been destroyed already, he didn’t know what he’d do.

“Sick! Are these human bones?”

Charlie nodded, “Yeah...I dunno what that’s about.”

“Whoever worked here was gross.”

“M’hmm.” She turned from the last fridge and put her hands on her hips, staring at the room and thinking. “If I were a mad scientist, where would I...”. Her head tilted a little and she picked up a fat red syringe from the counter, wiping most of the goo off it. “I think this is it...”

Mac immediately came over and stared at it, “What?”
She turned it sideways and read the label, “Prevent...that’s what its supposed to be called, right?”
“Yeah...yeah! Holy shit!”
Charlie laughed, “That might be the first time I’ve ever heard you actually be excited, Mac.” She dropped it into his hand. “There you go.”
He stared down at it. Such a simple, small thing and it meant so, so much.
Hancock thumped him on the back, “Well, alright, brother! We did it!”
“Yes. Yeah, we did.” He looked over at Charlie and smiled at her, even if she couldn’t see it. “You don’t know what this means to me.”
She shrugged, “Oh, I’ve got a pretty good idea.”
“Thank you.” On impulse, he hugged her.
The world suddenly shifted again.
Charlotte jerked away from him and took two steps back. “What…” Mac ripped his mask off and she almost screamed. *Nate.* He looked just like Nate.
“*Lottie*?”
She felt frozen. Her shotgun slipped right out of her hand and clattered to the floor.
“Blue, you alright?”
“Sunshine?”
Charlotte started shaking her head, “No.”
“It’s you.”
“No.”
He smiled at her and it was too much. It was all too much. Nate’s smile. Why’d he have to have Nate’s smile? She could feel tears streaming down her cheeks, steaming up the inside of her mask and making everything look fuzzy.
His hand took hers and goosebumps ran up her arm. He was pulling her closer, babbling away but the words weren’t making any sense. *This* wasn’t making any sense. His arms went around her and she felt suffocated. She couldn’t breathe. Why couldn’t she breathe?
Charlotte tried to push him away but he wasn’t letting it happen. His arms just tightened their hold. Deacon pushing her down against the couch, keeping her there against her will, flashed through her head and she couldn’t help it.
She just reacted.
Sharp pain blossomed in his groin, followed by a twisting sort of nausea that swept through Mac’s entire being and he found himself suddenly on the floor, curled up in a fetal position while he fought to breathe. He watched Lottie’s feet dash out of the room and rolled, trying to get up and groaning when it just made the pain that much worse. The cold floor was helping though, and he pressed his cheek against it. The floor was his friend.
“Blue! Wait!” Piper ran after her and he watched her go, too.

Eventually, offal-covered boots came into his line of sight and he tried to look up. Hancock. His friend was staring down at him, arms folded with a surly sort of expression on his face.

“You know, I always thought soulmates meeting each other would be...I dunno, beautiful or some shit.” He squatted down and tilted his head a little at him, “You gonna make it?”

“I’m gonna throw up.”

He chuckled, “Yeah, that was a hell of a knee to the nuts there. You were right. She’s definitely feisty.”

Piper jogged back into the room, “Blue left. She just... *left*. Took the elevator.”

Hancock stood and frowned at her, “That’s gonna be a problem since she left her gun behind. You know if she’s got anything else on her?”

“She’s usually got a pistol, but she doesn’t like to use it.”

“Hmm...well, once our prince’s crown jewels recover, we’ll have go find his princess before something nastier does.”

“Why do I feel like everybody here is in on something I’m not?”

He grinned at her, “Sweetheart, do you believe in true love?”

Chapter End Notes

Aaaah! It happened. 😊 So, couch burning is something of a tradition here in Kentucky (& West Virginia). I don't understand it, myself, but it does happen every single year during basketball season.

Also, if you've never heard it, the riddle goes:

As I was going to Saint Ives
I met a man with seven wives
Each wife had seven sacks
Each sack had seven cats
Each cat had seven kits
Kits, cats, sacks, wives
How many were going to Saint Ives?

You can Google it if you want the answer. It's a pretty famous riddle.
Her lungs were on fire, but she didn’t stop. Couldn’t stop.

Why? Why would the universe be this cruel? Had it all been some kind of test? To see if she would remain faithful to Nate’s memory and then, when she failed, punish her with this...doppelganger?

Her initial instinct had been to head south, back to Diamond City. Hide in her home, put Codsworth on Defcon 1 status, lock the doors and hunker down. But RJ knew where she lived. He’d be sure to go there.

So instead Charlotte had blindly headed north. She had no real sense of where she was going or any kind of plan, she just needed to run.

Medford Memorial Hospital was on her left as she bolted past and she shook her head, trying to not think about all the fun and joking around she and Deacon had done while clearing the place of it’s super mutant squatters. Two friends taking on the world together. Simpler times, to be sure. Back before she’d known what a deceitful jerk he really was and before she’d seen...

It just wasn’t fair. Why’d he have to have Nate’s face?

She still couldn’t breathe and was starting to get lightheaded, so she yanked her mask off and threw it away, but kept running. Her legs wouldn’t stop. She could hear him calling to her in her head, feel the pain she’d inflicted on him slowly subsiding. He’d be able to give chase soon, so she had to get as far away as she could. Get as much of a head start as possible.

Honestly, she felt bad about what she’d done. She really did. Attacking a man like that wasn’t exactly something a lady would do. Her mama would have been mortified at her behavior.

The thing was, she just couldn’t deal with this right now. Hancock had just agreed to go to the Glowing Sea with her next weekend and she’d just effectively declared war on the Railroad this morning and Preston still wanted to take the Castle on Wednesday and…

She was a very busy woman was all! She didn’t have time for these kinds of shenanigans.

By the time she had to stop, she didn’t even know where she was.

Charlotte bent over, hands on her thighs, and tried to catch her breath. Little black dots were dancing in front of her eyes. She felt nauseated and terrified. This had to be some kind of mistake, right? If he was really supposed to be her soulmate, she shouldn’t have had this reaction at all. When she’d finally seen Nate, mere days after her eighteenth birthday, she’d all but tackled him to the ground, right there in the airport. That’s how you were supposed to react! Not this. She’d never heard of anyone reacting like this.

She stared down at the pavement and listened to her heart pounding in her ears. It almost covered up the sound of RJ calling to her, demanding she come back. She shook her head and refused to answer. If he really thought she’d just go trotting back into his embrace like a good little lost lamb, then he didn’t know her at all.

Just like she didn’t know him, apparently.

A low growl to her right was all the warning she got before something large and terrifying slammed into her. Jagged teeth clamped down on her arm and she screamed breathlessly, barely
making a sound as a feral dragged her down to the pavement.

Charlotte reached for the shotgun that should have been on her back before remembering it wasn’t there. She’d dropped it in those first moments of shock. Shit.

Her pistol, the one Deacon had called ‘Deliverer’, was inside her coat though, as always. She’d meant to sell it before leaving Diamond City, but Arturo had talked her out of it. Kept going on and on about the craftsmanship. She yanked it free and shot blindly at the abomination gnawing on her arm. The first three shots went wide, as they usually did whenever she tried to actually aim at anything, but she finally managed to clip it in the head. Not enough to actually kill it, but once it’s rotted grey matter was exposed to the air, it temporarily let go of her to howl in agony. She scrambled up from under it and took off again.

A sharp pain in her diaphragm caused her to limp to a halt just a few yards out and she pressed a hand against her side, still breathing hard. It had been years since she’d done any kind of cross country running and apparently her body was choosing this particular moment to let it’s anger be known. She sucked in a painful breath and looked around.

There. Up on the right. Some kind of building. Good enough.

She jogged over and almost made it to the door before the feral’s friends showed up, pouring out of the woodwork and every abandoned vehicle in the parking lot. The door was locked, no matter how much she yanked at it. Even if she had been handy with a bobby pin, she didn’t have time to pick anything before she became just another congealed mess on the pavement.

Charlotte backed up a bit and looked up. The door was part of some little shed and that shed had a metal roof that was almost within reach. A quick look over her shoulder revealed that she didn’t have time to find another option and she jumped a few times, finally managing to catch the edge with her hand. She swung back and forth a bit, trying to convince her arms to pull her up and wondered how things like this had been so easy when she was a kid.

She was almost all the way up when a gnarled hand shot out and grabbed her left foot, dragging her back over the side until she was barely hanging on. Repeated kicks to the thing’s head did nothing, and she felt panic rise up in her again as tears uselessly ran down her face.

“Help! Somebody help me! Please!”

Almost immediately heads began exploding around her. The first to go was the one chewing on her boot and she was finally able to drag herself up on top of the roof. Charlotte stood and watched with wide eyes as body after body dropped. It took less than five minutes before the mob was nothing more than a rotting pile of corpses beneath her.

Eerie silence reigned. Too still and unnatural for even the wasteland.

Charlotte turned her head and started carefully scanning the horizon. Someone was out there. Talented and dangerous. She felt like she had a target right in the middle of her forehead and that feeling only grew as the silence went on.

If it was a friend, they’d have said something by now, right? Made some wisecrack about how it was unlike her to be so unprepared or demanded compensation in the form of a home-cooked meal or something. She knew it wasn’t RJ. He was still miles away.

She needed to get out of here. She’d spent enough time in the woods to recognize a predator stalking prey.
Her foot moved back a little and the roof under her groaned in protest. Charlotte froze and immediately tried to shift her weight, but it was too late. The rusted tin and rotted out boards under it gave way under her and she fell, her head slamming on the edge as she went.

The last thing she was aware of as she slipped into blissful unconsciousness, far off and dim, was someone crying out for their mama.

Deacon wasn’t even aware he’d screamed when she fell. This whole fucking day, this whole fucking three days, actually, had felt like an endless nightmare he couldn’t wake up from.

First he lost his best friend in the whole wide world. His only friend. Then she’d gone and very nearly destroyed his life’s work in a fit of temper. Then he’d had to watch from a distance as he and his three least favorite people alive went into a death trap and then, as if all that wasn’t enough, she’d made him chase her for almost five miles up the damn road. At a flat out gallop. Like some kind of crazy person.

He didn’t know what the hell had happened inside Med-tek, but he knew it had to have been bad for her to run like a rabbit; an unarmed rabbit, at that. Had Mac tried something? Had Hancock? Somebody had royally fucked up here and it was killing him that he had no idea who.

Then the ferals had swarmed and he’d nearly lost her. For really real this time. He’d been terrified, frozen in place, unable to do anything until she screamed for help. Then it was like a switch flipped and he suddenly remembered what his purpose in life was.

He hadn’t been able to make himself known in the moments after. Just hid behind a rusted out truck, still too ashamed to show her his face. But then the roof had collapsed, she’d gotten hurt and that’s how he found himself inside the Mass Fusion Containment Shed, an unconscious Charlie in his arms. Not exactly the ideal spot for emergency medical treatment, but it would have to do.

Deacon carried her inside and found a couch in the old employee locker room to set her carefully on. There was an obnoxious alarm blaring and the muffled growling of yet more ferals came from the levels below them. He shut the door that lead downstairs and tipped a busted up Nuka Cola machine over in front of it, wincing a little when it slammed on the ground and made a loud, echoing sort of bang.

Charlie didn’t so much as twitch though, which was as good for him as it was bad for her.

A quick jog through the offices and he’d found a terminal that let him switch off the alarm. He gave himself one tiny moment to enjoy the sweet, sweet silence before returning to Charlie’s side.

When she’d fallen, he’d seen her head slam into the back edge of the roof. She was lucky she hadn’t snapped her cute little neck. His hand cradled her head and slipped into the tangled curls, slowly working its way upward. There was a massive goose egg right in the middle of her occipital bone. Probably had a concussion. Nothing a stimpack couldn’t fix.

He almost hesitated to slip the needle in though. Charlie was now officially persona non grata as far as the Railroad was concerned. Dez had declared her a deserter until Deacon had explained that she’d actually quit before the betrayal. By the look on her face, he knew she knew it had been his fault.

So ‘death on sight’ had been rescinded, but barely. He was pretty sure that if Glory ever saw her out and about, though, chances were good she’d have a little ‘accident’. Headquarters had been stripped down, dismantled and empty within twenty minutes after her broadcast.
The Brotherhood’s vertibirds had still been close enough that Deacon could hear them in the distance as they’d fled.

Now everyone was in the wind while Dez and PAM got a new place hammered out. Charlie’s actions had been completely unforeseen by their resident computron oracle. She’d really lived up to that ‘rogue variable’ title.

He could just...not administer the medicine. She’d probably never wake up and then…

Well. Then he’d go kill himself. That’s what would happen. Deacon shook his head and carefully pushed the needle into the side of her neck. He might be a monster, but he wasn’t that far gone just yet. Just because she was no longer Agent Wanderer didn’t mean she wasn’t still important to him...and others, of course.

Anyway, this was still all his fault. The least he could do was not punish her for his own mistakes.

A little color came back into her face and the line between her brows smoothed out as the medicine flowed through her. Deacon sat on the nearby coffee table and watched her breathing for God only knew how long. In and out, in and out. Peaceful. There was a curl dangling over her forehead, the end of it primed to jab her right in the eye when she woke up. He wrestled with himself for a few minutes but ultimately moved it. Just one finger to brush it aside. Careful to not actually touch her skin any more than he had to.

He didn’t have those privileges anymore.

Part of him wanted to stay until she woke up. See the surprise on her face when she realized he’d saved her bacon. But he knew better. What would follow the initial shock would be that same wary look he hated. He definitely didn’t need to see that again.

A quick search through his pack and he pulled out a Nuka Cola and opened it. She always did get cotton mouth whenever she had to use a stim. Deacon would never understand the appeal of even flatter soda, but that’s just how she liked it. He set it carefully on the coffee table right next to the mask he’d somehow tricked both her into wearing and Tinker Tom into coming up with. Back when she’d still wanted to trust him so much.

He’d been a little miffed when she’d thrown it aside like a piece of trash, but her face had practically been purple by then. Probably just hadn’t been able to breathe.

Panic attacks could definitely do that to you. He should know.

Felt a little bad leaving her here of all places. The roof was all but nonexistent and he didn’t like leaving her exposed to the elements like this. Especially on such a cold day.

On impulse, he zipped her up leather jacket. Just to be safe. He’d have tucked that quilt around her, too, if he’d had it. Unfortunately it was already squirreled away in one of his hidey holes halfway across the Commonwealth.

She’d be alright. The winter wind couldn’t reach her here. Ferals trapped downstairs had no way to get to her and he personally locked the door as he left. The lock was surprisingly sturdy even after all this time. It would take a (different) genius to pick it and she could just flip the button from the inside to get out.

Satisfied she was as secure as he could possibly make her, Deacon walked away from the shed and disappeared back into the wastes, his heart just a trifle lighter than it had been in days.
A few miles south, Mac had finally managed to sit up and lean back against a counter, still in the basement of Med-Tek. At least one of his balls had decided to make an appearance, and he was feeling pretty good about that, even as his annoyance at Lottie’s refusal to see reason grew.

Then she went absolutely, abruptly silent and he frowned. She shouldn’t be able to do that unless she was asleep...or unconscious.

Piper was scribbling away in her notebook, page after page of...whatever it was she was writing. She finally finished and flipped back towards the beginning.

“Okay, so...just so we’re clear...”

Hancock nodded, “M’hmm.”

“Blue, upon thawing out, apparently got a new soulmate.”

“Yup.”

Frozen. Vault-Tec had frozen her. Well. That would explain the cold he’d felt that first day.

“Which has never happened before as far as anybody knows.”

“Right.”

“And that soulmate is... MacCready.”

She said it like his name was synonymous with something disgusting and he glared up at her. If she hadn’t been the one to give him this gloriously icy cold Nuka Cola currently pressed up against his junk, he’d have told her to go get fucked.

As it stood, he figured he owed her one.

Hancock chuckled, “Yup.”

“But neither of them knew who the other one was because they’ve been using different names than what they normally go by.”

“Yeah. She only knew him as RJ and he only ever knew her as Lottie.”

She frowned, “But both Charlie and Lottie are common nicknames for Charlotte.”

Mac huffed, “Never knew that was her name.”

Piper scrunched up her face at him, “Maybe if you’d read the paper once in a while, you would have!”

“She’s got you there, brother.”

“Hey! You read the paper and you didn’t catch it either.”

Her face went a little pink, “You really read the paper?”

Hancock smiled at her, “Course I do, love.”

“Oh...well, that’s...huh.” She frowned at him thoughtfully for a minute before continuing, “Anyway, so despite meeting each other at least twice --”
“Once. We never met at Quincy.”

“Okay, once...still...I mean...why didn’t you guys recognize each other then?”

Had his other nut actually dropped back out of his body, or was that just wishful thinking? “We were both covered up and never touched.”

“Not once?”

“Nope.”

“Huh.” She skimmed through her notes, “Okay, but how the hell did she never put you, RJ from the Capitol Wasteland, and MacCready, also from the Capitol Wasteland, together? I mean, how many mercs with sick sons can she possibly think there are?”

Hancock sighed, “He never told her about Duncan.”

“What!”

“Yup.”

“Oh, boy…” The look she gave him was almost pitying, “She’s gonna be so pissed when she realizes...oh...oh, no.”

Hancock tilted his head a little, “What’s wrong now?”

“I uh...well. She kinda...asked me what I knew about Mac. Before we got here, I mean.” Piper stared off into nothing for a minute, “But it’ll probably be fine...yeah. She’s a...you know, a forgiving sort...sometimes.”

Fuck. Mac closed his eyes and rested his head back against the counter. Lottie?

Nothing but that troubling silence.

He opened them and resumed glaring at Piper. “What exactly did you say?”

“Oh...I mean...nothing that wasn’t the truth!” Both men stared at her and she in turn stared down at the floor. “Just that...he’d hit on me once and was banging Magnolia…”

Hancock winced, “Ah, shit.”

“Oh, great. I’m boned. I am well and truly boned. Thanks, Piper! Thanks so fu-freaking much!”

“How is it my fault! You did hit on me once and you were banging Magnolia the last time I saw you!”

His friend squinted a little, “But not since October, right?”

“Since she woke up and we bonded, you mean? No, of course not!”

“Good, cause I was about to kick your ass myself.”

Piper tapped her pen against her notebook, “We need to move. Blue’s fast. I dunno if you guys have ever seen her move, but when she wants to? She can outrun a radstag. She’s probably halfway to Diamond City by now.”
Mac shook his head, “No, she went north.”

Hancock laughed, “So that psychic link shit is real? That is wild, man.”

“Yeah.”

“So just tell her to come back. She’s not an idiot. She’ll listen to reason.”

“Yeah, thanks, Piper. I’ve been telling her to come back, but she won’t for some reason...I wonder why that is? Gee, do you think maybe it’s because some blabbermouth has been filling her head with crap about me?”

She glowered at him and put a hand on her hip, “Or maybe it’s cause she’s just realized you’re a great big liar who lies about shit all the time!”

“I don’t --”

“What kind of soulmate doesn’t mention he’s a father, Mac!”

“I --”

“But oh no! Couldn’t tell her a simple, fundamental fact about your life!”

“She wanted to keep things casual. Vague! No details! She insisted!”

“Bet you knew about Shaun though, huh?”

He couldn’t meet her eyes anymore, “Yeah.”

Hancock coughed politely, “If I might interject on Mac’s behalf here, sweetheart, he didn’t want to put his troubles on her is all. He knew she was already dealing with a lot, because she told him she was, and he was just trying to look out for her.”

Piper sniffed, “Bullshit.”

“Not bullshit!” Man, he really wished he could get off the damn floor already.

“She’s going to see it as bullshit.”

He sighed, “I know.”

Silence grew between them for a moment and Hancock squatted back down next to him. “How you doin’, brother? Think you can get up yet?”

“Maybe...can I get a hand?”

“Sure.” He pulled Mac to his feet, watching his face carefully. “Everything all uh...present and accounted for?”

He shifted around a little. Things were definitely swollen, but he could at least walk. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.”

“You can keep the Nuka.”

“Thanks, Piper.”

“You said she was headed north, right? Lot of nasty shit up that way. We should get moving.”
“No.”

Hancock raised his eyebrow, “No?”

“No, this is something I’ve gotta do on my own. I’ve let her run from everything long enough.” He held up the Prevent. “Take this back to Goodneighbor. Give it to Daisy. She’ll know what to do with it...and get Piper home. I’ll...work it out, somehow.”

He took the medicine from him and pocketed it, “You sure?"

“Yeah.”

There was something at the back of his mind that kept poking at him. Some old memory trying to resurface...kind of felt like trying to remember a dream you had years ago. He couldn’t really focus on it, but it was there. Circling.

“Alright. If you say so...keep me in the loop though, alright?”

“Sure.”

“We’ll walk you out.”

Mac put Lottie’s shotgun on his back and picked up his rifle, following Piper and Hancock down the hall and into the same elevator she’d taken to escape him.

This was all wrong. When he and Lucy had finally met as kids, they’d been...thrilled. Excited. He remembered giggling so much that Knick Knack had made fun of him and he’d punched him in the face. Lottie had just...freaked out. She’d freaked the fuck right out. He’d been happy to find her. So happy that he hadn’t even realized just how badly she was panicking until it was too late.

He honestly had no idea how to fix this.

The elevator took them right back to the lobby, just inside the air lock. They headed out as a group and paused outside the parking lot.

Hancock slapped a hand on his shoulder, “Good luck, kiddo.”

“Thanks.”

“Try not to screw this up anymore than you already have.”

He huffed at the reporter and put his regular hat back on, “Yeah.”

“M’hmm.” She started to walk back down south to Diamond City and then immediately halted and glared at Hancock next to her. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Escorting a lady home.”

“Yeah, no. I’ll take my chances alone, thanks. It’s safer that way.”

“Aw, don’t be that way, sweetheart...”

Mac watched them go and almost laughed. At least he wasn’t the only one stuck with a woman who didn’t want anything to do with him.

He started walking. The sun was already starting to slip low on the horizon. That worried him, too.
Piper had said Lottie wasn’t very good with her pistol. He could still remember how scared she’d sounded when she’d asked him for help with that 10mm on that first day.

The first day she’d thawed out, apparently.

She was pre-war. Was that why he’d kept having pre-war dreams? Had something from her bled into his subconscious? Like all those times in the park and that weird one with the leg…

Wait, no, if that was her memory, then why’d the dream open with him alone? She couldn’t have remembered him getting out of bed and staring at his ruined body in the mirror because she hadn’t been there, right?

The face he’d seen. Him and not him. The way she’d immediately said no when he took his mask off.

His head tilted as he considered it. It almost made sense…he just needed to see her face. Then he’d know for sure.

*Lottie? Are you alright?*

Still nothing. He could feel her. She hadn’t moved. Cold, too still, but alive. He could work with that.

It was full dark by the time Charlotte’s eyes finally opened. She could see stars above her though, and that kept her from panicking. Wherever she was, she had a way out, even if she had to climb…

Oh, wait. She had climbed. Climbed and then fell and then…

And then?

She sat up slowly and winced at the pain in her head. A cursory hand through her hair revealed a decent bruise right at the base of her skull and she jerked her fingers away when they brushed up against it. Hurt like crazy, but her eyesight didn’t seem to be fuzzy. She didn’t feel sick. No concussion at least.

She switched on her Pipboy’s light and squinted at her dim surroundings. Nowhere she knew. It was quiet and there was a Nuka Cola machine blocking a door on her left. Her eyes finally landed on the Nuka and her discarded mask and she stared at them for at least a full minute before she sighed.

Deacon.

Whatever had happened, he’d helped her. Even after she’d outed the Railroad to the world. That was…confusing, actually. That’s what it was. You typically didn’t get help from people you’d basically declared war on.

Charlotte grabbed her Nuka and sat back against the couch, sipping slowly to try and chase the dry taste of the stimpack he must have used on her out of her mouth. Always tasted like pennies and almonds. Weird.

There was a large window that wrapped around one corner of the building that she could see from the couch, moonlight flooding in through it. Outside looked peaceful and still, so that was something. At least she didn’t have to immediately run again…

Ah, crap. How long had she been out for anyway? All that running might have been for naught if
Mac had almost caught up with her. Wherever she was.

She clicked through to her Pipboy map and squinted down at it. The Mass Fusion Containment Shed. Hadn’t there been something in the papers about this place before the bombs? Some kind of scandal or…

A shadow moved along the floor in the other room and she immediately switched off her Pipboy’s light. Something was out there.

Her heart rate spiked, even as she tried to talk herself down. She was safe. This place had to be safe. If Deacon cared enough to save her from those ferals, he cared enough to not leave her someplace she’d be vulnerable. It wouldn’t make sense for him to do otherwise. He’d wanted her to wake up and know it was him that had done it. So she had to be safe here.

Why didn’t she feel safe?

A dark silhouette was suddenly pressed right up against the window, hands cupped around his eyes to see better. Even if she hadn’t seen that rifle on his back, she’d have known it was RJ anywhere.

“Lottie?”

She closed her eyes and willed him to go away. Pulled her legs up against her chest and tried to shrink down into herself so small and quiet that he’d think he’d just made a mistake.

“I know you’re in there.”

Shit.

“Go away.”

His head tilted a little, then looked up. The sound must have ricocheted out of the building through the open roof. Well…good. Maybe he’d think she was on top of the damn thing and give up. She watched him stand there, so still. Almost like a statue. Waiting.

He was hunting her.

His head turned and he walked back towards where she was, knocking on the door directly across from her. “Lottie, open the door.”

Fuck. “No!”

“Baby --”

“Don’t you ‘baby’ me!” She’d been scared before, now she was just pissed. How dare he try to hunt her down like a dog. How dare he!

Mac set his forehead against the door and tried to not lose his temper. She was scared and clearly still panicking. Just wasn’t thinking straight. That was all. It wouldn’t do any good to yell. He just had to keep telling himself that.

“Please open the door.”

“No!”

“Lottie…”
“No!”

He almost laughed, “Is that all you know how to say?”

“Fuck off!”

“You realize how silly you’re being, right? I mean, clearly the universe wants us to be together. You can’t fight fate, sweetheart.”

“You just watch me!”

“Open the door. Last chance.”

“No!”

“Fine.” Mac backed up a little and knelt down in front of the lock. Looked like one of those old single cylinder deadbolts, which meant she could easily just turn the little thumbturn on the inside and open the damn thing. Save him the trouble, but oh, no. Not her.

He pulled a bobby pin and a screwdriver from his pockets and went to work.

Charlotte jumped a little as the soft scraping reached her ears, “What are you doing?”

“Letting myself in.”

“You...you can’t do that!”

“Sure, I can, sweetheart. I do this kind of thing all the time.”

She sneered at that, “I bet you’re probably a thief, too, huh?”

“Probably.”

This had to be a joke. The universe couldn’t possibly expect her to go from Nate Apperson, Eagle Scout and all-around model citizen, to this. Surely not.

“You lied to me!”

“You lied to me, too.”

“I did not!”

The scraping paused for a moment, “Community organizer? That ring any bells? You’re saying that wasn’t a lie?”

“I do organize communities!”

“Yeah, as the General of the freaking Minutemen. How’s that not a lie, exactly?”

“It’s not the same thing! You said you were a bodyguard!”

“So? Sometimes I am.”

“You’re a...a contract killer! You’re just like Kellogg.”

“Hey! No. No, I am not.”
“Yes, you are!”

“I would never do what he did, Lottie. Ever. I’d never just...destroy a family like that.”

Frosty silence met him and he grumbled to himself, resuming his picking. Like hell he was having this conversation shouting through a damn door.

“You never told me you were a daddy.”

The hurt in her voice made him pause again. “I know...I’m sorry.”

“I don’t know anything about you.”

“Yeah.”

“Why can’t you just leave me alone?”

Mac looked up. It sounded like she was right on the other side of the door now. Just a few inches of steel separating them. He stood and put his hand where he thought her head might be.

“Cause you’re my girl.” She didn’t answer and he sighed. This was ridiculous. He needed a way to prove to her how ridiculous this all was. “Can you go to the window? I haven’t even gotten to see your face yet...that’s not very fair, is it?”

“I don’t --”

“You’ll be perfectly safe. It’s not like I can grab you through solid glass, Lottie.” He paused and grinned a little, “Unless you’re too chicken.”

“I am not a chicken!”

“I dunno, I mean, you did run away like a chicken and now you’re hiding behind this door like a chicken...” He waited and his grin grew when her heard her irritated huff from inside.

“I am not a chicken.”

“Prove it.”

“Fine. But I’m not lookin’ at you!”

Yup. That’s what he thought. He must look exactly like her husband had. “Okay.” Mac shoved his tools back in his pockets and went to stand by the window. There was a dark shadow standing in an open doorway inside and he smiled at it. “Come on then, if you’re so brave.”

She shuffled a few feet closer. Still nowhere near the glass. “You back up first.”

He rolled his eyes, “Alright, alright.” He took a good three steps back and put his hands in his pockets, trying to be as nonthreatening as possible.

It took her a minute, but she finally, reluctantly stepped into the moonlight, her eyes looking anywhere but at him and a hand nervously trying to smooth down her hair.

Mac felt something squeeze painfully on his heart. Lucy. She was a dead ringer for her. The hair was different and her eyes were darker, but that face. The same sweet face he’d known his whole life.
Fuck. If this is how she’d felt seeing him, then he totally got why she’d ran. He almost couldn’t stand to look at her himself.

His eyes slid along her figure and then worked their way up, starting at her feet. Just as cute as he’d thought she’d be. A little softer and rounder than Lucy had ever been, but that made sense if she was pre-war. Taller, too. She was only a couple of inches shorter than he was. He was about to tell her how pretty she was. How she was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen, when a twinkle caught his eye.

That leaf. That necklace she never, ever took off. No matter what. The memory finally stopped circling and hit him square in the face.

"Your necklace."

She kept staring at the floor. "What about it?"

"It’s a lie."

Her head snapped up and she almost growled at him, "What did you just say?"

Mac stepped closer and put his hands on the glass, grinning like an idiot. "I lied. I mean... he lied. The only lie he ever told you."

Lottie stared at him like he was crazy. Hell, maybe he was.

"What --"

"It was in my pocket...his pocket, the whole plane ride. He was so scared you wouldn’t like it. Had this big speech planned and all, but then at the airport you...you jumped into his arms and you...he felt like he’d been caught up in a whirlwind...and then you took him home and your family... everybody was there. They were all just as excited as you were. All your brothers and sisters and the cousins and grandkids and...and it overwhelmed him, so he asked if you could go get coffee together.‘The memory was building in his head as the words tumbled out, ‘And you got so mad at him cause you thought he meant you all were going to go parking, but he actually meant coffee, so you took him to...to a place called Waffle House?’"

Her mouth dropped open, "How do you --"

"And you just kept talking. You knew everybody, introduced him to every waitress. He had to wait until your hot chocolate arrived so you’d shut up before he could give it to you...and he was about to tell you all about it, but then you...you said..."

"I hope you didn’t go to any trouble."

"Yeah. Yeah! You said you hoped he hadn’t gone to any trouble for it and that you never wore fancy stuff because you always lost it or broke it and he said I know and put it on you and said --"

"It’s nothing fancy. Just a token of my esteem."

"Yeah." He finally took a breath and stared at her, "Yeah. That’s exactly what he said."

She frowned at him, her eyes dark and serious. "So what part of that was a lie, exactly?"

Mac laughed, "It is something fancy. That’s an original Harry Winston around your neck, sweetheart. A handcrafted Kentucky coffeetree leaf with eighteen round cut diamonds. One for
every year that you’d waited. Designed it himself. He bought it from the store on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills.”

“What?”

“It’s not silver. It’s titanium. All of it. Even the chain. So you couldn’t break it or lose it.”

“No. No, it’s...and these are just rhinestones…”

“It was almost half a million dollars.” He frowned to himself, “Jesus Christ. That’s insane.”

“No. No! Nate would never do something like that! He knew how uncomfortable stuff like that made me and he’d --”

“His mother convinced him you’d be expecting something nice. That girls always claimed they didn’t want expensive things but they actually did. He didn’t know you really meant it until he watched your face as you said it in that booth and then he panicked.”

Her dark eyes searched his face, “How do you know all that?”

“Cause I...I think maybe I was him once.”

“No.”

“You know those dreams I’ve been having?”

“No.”

“They’re all pre-war and I’m...different in them.”

“That’s not possible.”

“You took him into the woods. Your woods. When the persimmons were ripe. Cause that’s where you’d always dreamed your first time would be.”

“Stop.”

“But he wouldn’t. He wanted to, but you were so different than anybody else he’d ever known and --”

“No.”

“-- you scared him. He was always running away from you.”

She closed her eyes and shook her head, “Stop talking.”

“I’m never going to run from you, Lottie. I promise.”

“Stop.”

Mac finally fell silent and watched her. Watched the way her shoulders shook and the tears streaming down her face. He’d thought she’d be happy, but she wasn’t. If anything, he’d somehow made it worse. Anxiety and fear were pouring off her. He couldn’t stand it.

“Please let me in.”

“No...no, this is crazy. You’re crazy.”
“Yeah, that’s kind of what I thought at first, too.”

Charlotte turned away from the window entirely and moved back into the shadows. The darkness just felt safer. It was crazy. Everything he was saying was crazy and impossible. She didn’t know how he knew the things he knew, but it shouldn’t be possible.

Wait...dreams.

She chanced a look over her shoulder. He was still in the same place, leaning against the glass and staring at her with those too-bright eyes. He looked just like that old picture she had of Nate. From when he’d graduated basic. The same determined look and everything.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Anything.”

“Did...did you grow up in a cave?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I did. Little Lamplight. I was actually the --”

“The mayor.”

“Yeah. That’s right.”

That wild, fey boy from her dreams. The one she’d assumed was Peter Pan. Had their memories crossed over into each other’s subconscious somehow? That had never happened to her with Nate. She’d never heard of it happening to anyone.

Then again, this whole situation was pretty unique.

An idea suddenly popped into her head and she immediately felt a million times better. Of course. It was so obvious. “I have to go talk to somebody.”

“Uh...okay. Who?”

“There’s a wisewoman in Sanctuary. A seer. She’ll know what’s going on.”

He sighed, “Okay...I’m assuming Sanctuary is where Sanctuary Hills used to be?”

“You know about Sanctuary Hills?”

“You made me...Nate, I mean, have sex in every room but the spare bedroom because it was going to be the nursery and you didn’t think that was proper...the laundry room was his favorite because...because of the washing machine. Spin cycle.”

Her mouth fell open before she could catch it and she snapped it shut. “How --”

“I dunno. Stuff keeps coming to me. It just pops into my head as we go...like, I have no idea where Beverly Hills is at, but I know your necklace came from there. And I don’t know what the hell a Waffle House is, but I know we had...wait, you had pie and that hot chocolate and you made him order --”

“Bacon, egg and cheese sandwich. Hash browns scattered, smothered, covered.”

“Because it was the best way to eat them.”
“Right.”

“The pickles tasted like garlic.”

“Yeah.”

“I dunno what a pickle is...or garlic, either.”

She frowned at him, “That is so weird.”

“Right?” There was movement from behind him and he turned. Just a herd of radstags, but still. He was just out here, exposed. Eventually something was going to find him and try to eat him. “So can I come in yet?”

Lottie folded her arms and glared at him. He’d never in his life seen an expression so stubborn on Lucy’s face. “I still don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“I’m going to get eaten out here. You know that, right?”

“I’m fairly certain you can take care of yourself just fine.”

“I dunno...I’m pretty bad off. Junk’s still swollen, you’re over there breaking my heart...I’m pretty distracted. Something might get the jump on me.” He smirked a little at the way her face went from resolute to concerned. “And then you’d be the woman who let her soulmate die just because she couldn’t be bothered to unlock a door. That’s terrible.”

“You’re terrible.”

He shrugged, “Yeah.”

Her finger tapped on her arm for a moment and she huffed a little, “I am sorry about that. Hurting you and all.”

“Nah, it’s fine. You weren’t the first to take a shot at me like that, and you definitely won’t be the last.”

“It was a knee-jerk reaction was all.”

Mac narrowed his eyes. There was a teeny tiny satisfied smirk on her face and he chuckled, “Too soon, baby. Way too soon.”

She ducked her head to hide a smile, “Sorry.”

“It’ll be funny a couple of years from now.”

Charlotte snorted and clapped a hand over her mouth, unable to stop giggling. At least he had a better sense of humor than Nate had. That was something. She peeked up at him through her hair. That arrogant smile on his face just did something to her, too. Nate had smiled like that a few times after he’d been hurt and all, but they were usually both naked when it happened.

Of course, Mac looking at her like that kinda made her feel naked in a way, but still.

She took a deep breath and looked up at him properly, squaring her shoulders. “I’ll let you in on two conditions.”

“Okay.”
“One, no touching.”

“Ugh.” He dropped his head with a dull thud against the glass. “Fine.”

“Two, no funny business.”

“The hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means no flirting, no little comments, no trying to convince me to violate rule number one.”

Shit. She already knew him better than he thought. “Fine.”

“You promise you’ll behave?”

He grinned at her, “Depends. Do I get a spanking if I don’t?” She immediately scowled at him, but her cheeks went dark in the moonlight. Got her. She was a lot easier to read in person.

“See? That right there. Already breaking rule two.”

“Alright, alright, I promise.”

“Fine.” Lottie stomped over and unlocked the door with an audible click.

Mac was honestly shocked. He didn’t think she’d have the guts to do it...or that she was dumb enough to do it. She had to know the second they kissed, she’d be biologically compelled to --

The door opened before he even got his hand on the knob and he found himself with a pistol in his face. His hands went up on reflex.

“What are you doing?”

“You must really think I was born yesterday, huh? Just flat out dumber than a box of rocks. Like I didn’t already know the second you opened this door, you were gonna plant one on me and claim me right here and now. Come on, honey. I was a lawyer. I know how criminals think...and I’m not an idiot.”

Shit. “Hey, I already promised --”

“The promises of a liar mean nothing to me.” Not anymore, anyway.

Piper had said she was bad with her pistol, but at this range, that didn’t matter. Mac took a step back, “So, what? You’re just going to shoot me? That doesn’t seem very Minutemen-y of you.”

“No, I’m gonna let you in. I said I would.”

“Uh-huh.”

“We’re just going to Brady Bunch this.”

He frowned, “What?”

She motioned with her pistol, “Come on in. Stand by the door. No funny stuff.”

“Right.” He gathered his pack and his rifle and finally entered the building. He kept his eyes on Lottie and her gun the whole time and shut the door behind him without looking before leaning back against it. “Satisfied?”
“Not really.”

She pulled something small from her jacket and walked to the far side of the room, glaring at him the whole time. Mac watched her draw a white line down the center of the floor and frowned.

“Why do you carry chalk in your pocket?”

“None of your business.”

He sighed and tried to remain patient. This was just a temporary thing. It had to be. He’d take her to go see this wisewoman and then things would be fine.

He had to believe that.

She finally finished and stood again, “There. You can stay on your side and I’ll stay on mine and ne’er shall the twain meet.”

Mac frowned at her, “You’ve got both couches on your side.”

Charlotte huffed, “Fine.” She stomped over and, one handed, dragged the smaller couch to his side of the line. “Happy now?”

“Not really.” His eyes went to her pistol, “Are you going to keep that on me the entire time?”

“I dunno. Do I need to?”

He reached behind his back and almost had a heart attack at the way she immediately snapped into a fighting stance, fully ready to blow his head off. “Calm down. I’m just...just calm down, alright?” He brought her shotgun around and held it out. “Here. You dropped this.”

She slowly relaxed and frowned in confusion, “You’re giving me back my gun?”

“Yeah...I figure, maybe you can actually get some sleep cuddling up with this since you obviously don’t trust me yet.” Mac smiled and hoped it was more friendly than he was currently feeling. “You can just blow my nuts off entirely this time if you want.”

“I did say I was sorry.” She reluctantly reached out and took the gun from his hands.

“I know...and I said it was fine.” Mac went and sat on his couch and shrugged, “So you really must not want to have anymore kids then, huh? That’s cool.”

“Hmm.” Charlotte stared at him, clearly trying to not smile. “Shut up and go to sleep, RJ.”

“Okay.” He kicked off his boots and got comfy. “Hey, you know what’s neat?”

“What?” She sat down on the other side of the room and pointedly sat her shotgun down on the coffee table and even pulled the whole table a little closer to the couch.

He grinned, “Don’t have to wonder what you’re wearing right now.”

“Rule. Two.”

Mac chuckled and pulled the brim of his hat down over his eyes. There was no way in hell he could go to sleep staring at her all night. Just sitting here trying to be a good boy so he didn’t get his junk blown into next week was taking all the self-control he could muster.
“Yes, ma’am.”
Mac woke up far later than he’d wanted. Lottie had drifted off somewhere around midnight, but he’d been unable to resist the temptation, and had stayed up watching her sleep. The way the moonlight hit her hair turned it all silvery made her look even more like his Lucy. Especially that moment when she’d been dreaming and smiled. That same quiet, shy smile his wife had always given him.

He honestly couldn’t imagine Lottie giving him that smile but maybe someday. Probably not, knowing his luck, but maybe.

Certainly not today, as she’d already taken off on him, again, by the time he woke up. He knew she was gone before he even opened his eyes. She was headed in a more or less western kind of direction, at least two miles away already.

His wristwatch said it was barely eight am, so she had to have somehow gotten up before the sun even rose. Crazy. Being paired with an early bird was just...the worst. It really was. Lucy had always slept in even later than he had and was an adorably sweet cuddlebug in the morning. That’s how he liked to wake up. Snuggled up with his girl, starting the day off right, fighting the temptation to stay in bed all day and usually winning...and winning even when he lost, really.

Mac stretched out and groaned, dragging himself into a more or less upright position. His neck was killing him, his back was killing him, Lottie was killing him. What kind of an idiot actually thought they could fight against their destiny and win? It was ridiculous.

He was ready to go within ten minutes, already irritated at the jogging he was going to have to endure to catch up with her, when a new, even more obnoxious, problem popped up.

The fucking doorknob wouldn’t turn.

His brain was still mostly asleep, so it took him a few minutes to realize this wasn’t an accident. This was sabotage. She’d submarined him.

Lottie?

Oh, look who’s finally up.

Why won’t the door open?

Golly, I dunno.

Lottie…

If I had to guess, I’d say maybe it’s because someone broke off a pocket knife in the lock. A’course, that’s just a guess though.

Mac swore under his breath, That’s messed up and you know it.

I know! I wonder who would go and do a thing like that.

Yeah, I wonder.
Reckon it must be somebody who doesn’t like you much, huh?

Uh-huh.

Like maybe one of the many women you went and made yourself an ass over.

He sighed and set his forehead against the door. Fucking Piper and her goddamn mouth. We weren’t bonded then.

M’hmm.

None of those people meant anything to me.

Ah, there it is! The war cry of the philanderer.

Hey! I am not a philanderer, okay? I was faithful to Lucy.

Yeah, right up until she died.

He frowned in confusion, Yeah...that’s usually how that works.

Was she even cold before you found somebody else to sleep with? Or did you just hop right into the --

Hey! Fuck you!

Ha! You’d like that, wouldn’t you? This may come as a shock to you, sugar cube, but just because you think the sun comes up just to hear you crow doesn’t make it true!

What are you --

I know all about Magnolia.

Oh, he was going to kill Piper. I know. I know you do.

And I know all about you drooling over Piper, too!

That was only the one time and I was very, very drunk. Trust me, I am absolutely not into her. At all.

The hell you ain’t!

I’m not!

You stood right there in front of me and called her ‘angel’!

That was just...I was...being polite?

Are you asking because you dunno what you were doing, or you aren’t sure if that counts as being polite?

He shook the knob as hard as he could one last time, but still nothing. Mac sighed, I’m sorry.

Okay? I am. I’m not...proud of myself or anything. I just...Lucy’s been gone over two years and I didn’t even know you were out there.

M’hmm.
If I had, I’d have done whatever I could to get you out...you know that, right?

She scoffed, Oh, I highly doubt that. It’s not like there were any caps in it for you.

Well, somebody once told me caps weren’t everything.

How many?

What?

How many women have you slept with since she died?

He needed to get out of here. She could stand firm against him all she wanted in her head, but they both knew in person he could get her to crumble eventually. That’s probably why she’d run before he’d woken. She didn’t want to take that risk. He stared up at the grey sky visible through the open roof for a minute. Maybe if he stacked enough furniture…

Well?

Mac shrugged off his gear and started moving the couch he’d slept on. I dunno.

Just a rough estimate will suffice.

The coffee table might make a decent ramp if he could just figure out how to prop it up. More than ten, less than twenty.

Good God. No wonder you prance around thinkin’ you’re God’s gift. Well, let me tell you somethin’, scooter. I am not interested! You hear? You can just return to sender all that horseshit because I’m not havin’ it!

The couch that Lottie had slept on took a bit of convincing to get it where it needed to be and he took out a bit of frustration on it with a few well placed kicks.

Yeah, I get it. You think I’m the worst.

No, I know you’re the worst!

He still needed at least four feet of height. Fuck. You know, from everything I’ve heard about you I’d have thought you’d be a lot more sympathetic and a lot less…”

A lot less what?

Judgmental.

I am not judgmental! I’m just statin’ the facts! You’re nothin’ but a lying, thieving, skirt chasing --

Hey, do me a favor and shut up for a minute.

How dare you!

Her anger exploded over him, which he was prepared for and shrugged off like it was nothing. What he hadn’t been prepared for was the hurt behind it. He didn’t care about pushing her buttons, but actually hurting her was a whole other thing.

Lottie, sweetheart…
Don’t you dare use that tone with me, you two-bit tomcat! You want me to shut up? Fine! You’ll never hear from me again!

Lottie!

Goodbye!

She tried to shove him away and flounce off, but with their bond balanced like it was, he was able to keep her from breaking away.

Lottie, listen to me. Frosty silence met him, but it didn’t matter. He knew she could hear him, even if she didn’t want to. You know how awful it felt when you watched Nate die and felt him go? Felt that hole in your heart where he used to always be? Well I’ve lived with that hole for two years, alright? Two fucking years without her and before you. So you can call me whatever you want, but you don’t know what you’re talking about because you haven’t lived with that emptiness...and I hope you never have to.

Charlotte felt him finally release her and actually stumbled forward a little. She scrubbed at the angry tears in her eyes and continued onward, determined to never so much as acknowledge his existence ever again.

Waking up in the same room as him, seeing his face even from across the way...it had confused her. For a minute, she thought she was somehow still with Nate. That they were maybe camping or had fallen asleep watching TV or something.

But he wasn’t Nate. He could never be, no matter how many memories he thought he had or whatever. Nate had never so much as dreamed about looking at another woman. Ever. He’d said over and over that if something ever happened to her, then that’d be it. He’d just live alone with her memory and that would be enough.

It had made her sad when he said it. She hadn’t liked the idea of him just all alone like that, and had told him so; but even still, a part of her had been secretly thrilled that he would only want her for all time.

‘Until the sun no longer shines.’ That’s what he’d had engraved in both of their wedding rings. He’d promised to be faithful to her forever.

So RJ definitely could not be Nate, no matter who he thought he was.

She kept heading for Sanctuary though. Mama Murphy would help her get a handle on the situation. Get centered. Then she could figure out where to go from there because she honestly didn’t have a clue right now.

At least it was cloudy. She’d stuffed her hair into a knit hat and put some sunglasses on, just in case, but a sunburn was almost impossible unless a miracle happened and the dark, heavy grey clouds above her vanished. As it stood, she was pretty sure it was going to sleet or hail or...whatever it did in the winter here now. Usually Boston would be waist-deep in snow by this point, but she hadn’t seen so much as a single flurry since she’d woken up. Not even by the coast.

Man, they’d really done one hell of a job fucking up the planet. She hoped whoever hit the button was proud of themselves. Assholes.

She stopped just a bit before noon to eat something. Had to since she’d skipped breakfast. She hadn’t wanted to take the chance that RJ would wake up and try to charm her again.
It was bad enough when he was just in her head. In person, wearing Nate’s face, he was a lot more effective. A real wolf in sheep’s clothing. She’d almost been tempted to just immediately let him in the night before. That face inspired a lot of instinctual trust in her. Trust he certainly hadn’t earned. Thankfully common sense had resurfaced long enough for her to lay down the law, but it had been close.

Knowing him the way she did now, she was pretty sure he wouldn’t even have cared if their first time together happened in some disgusting, derelict building where it was so damn cold they wouldn’t have been able to even get all their clothes off. She’d seen farm animals in heat with more sense than he apparently had.

No freaking way he was Nate. Absolutely not.

Charlotte dutifully drank half her thermos of brahmin milk before munching on a snack cake. Stuff was still gross, but she was at least getting used to it. It also kept for an absurdly long amount of time, which she was choosing to not wonder about too much. Preservation in this age was...odd. She knew how things were supposed to work. Her mama had taught her all about canning and salting and whatever. But it seemed like most, if not all, the bacteria that used to break down organic stuff must have died when the bombs hit. She’d seen people happily eat things that had long since passed their expiration date and been fine. Hell, the cake she’d just ate had a ‘use by’ date of February 2079. And yet, here she was. Two hundred some odd years past that, sucking it right on down like it was fresh from the factory.

Hunger satiated, she headed back out, sticking to the roads whenever possible. Normally she had no problem making a bee line for wherever she was headed, but her legs were killing her today. Her calves burned with every step and she was pretty sure she’d pulled or torn something in the back of her thighs. Probably should have rested at least another day, but that had been impossible with him there.

So, onward she trudged. Locking him in would give her at least a couple extra hours. Maybe even days if he was too dumb to figure a way out, although she doubted it.

RJ seemed to be a lot of things, but dumb probably wasn’t one of them. She still wasn’t sure if that was a bad thing or a good thing yet.

I see you.

Charlotte sighed. No, it was definitely a bad thing. She kept walking, but glared at him from over her shoulder. He was way off down the road, a tiny dot in the distance. She could just barely make out him waving at her and realized he must be looking through his scope, or maybe those binoculars he had. Cheater.

She turned back to the road and maintained a stony silence. Every thirty minutes or so, she’d sneak a look back at him. He was always there. Always at the same distance. Doing it on purpose. She was slow moving today, he could easily catch up. Probably thought he was earning points by giving her space or something. As if she’d ever let him get off that easy.

A familiar caravan was crossing the train tracks she was about to head down and Charlotte grinned to herself. Maybe she could still increase her lead on him without having to run at all.

Mac kept his eyes scanning the area. Lottie had clearly seen him and felt no need to wait, so he’d let her stay way on up the road. Suited him better, really. This way he could see any threat way far out and take them down before they ever got near her.
Not that there was a whole hell of a lot up this way. Mostly abandoned, boarded up buildings that eventually gave away to open country. The worst thing he ever saw was a bloatfly in the distance, and it was already occupied with whatever nasty thing it was eating.

There was a little hitch in her step that let him know she was hurting. Probably from bolting so far so fast the day before. If she’d just been sensible and stayed put, she could have spent the day being pampered by him. Lucy had always said his massages were the best medicine for sore muscles. But oh no. Not Lottie. She’d rather drag herself all over the place and suffer than let him do something like that.

Woman was absolutely nuts.

There was a caravan up the way and he watched her talk to them, trading her regular jacket for something longer. He came to a halt and decided to take a smoke break. Didn’t want to get too close and spook her into doing something extra special stupid like try running again. Besides, he was still kind of angry with her for suggesting he hadn’t been faithful to Lucy. He absolutely had. Other women hadn’t even pinged on his radar when she’d been alive.

But he’d only been eighteen when she died. He’d avoided other people altogether, save Duncan, for over six months after. It wasn’t until he set up a little place just outside of Megaton that he’d…

Honestly, it had surprised him that he even could feel any kind of attraction towards another person anymore. He certainly hadn’t gone to the saloon with anything other than drinking on his mind. Duncan had been happy playing with his old friend Eclair down at the Brass Lantern, being spoiled and stuffed full of as much candy as he could. The whole Stahl family was more than happy to mind him for a few hours while Mac blew off some steam. Maggie Creel, Jenny and Billy’s adopted daughter, in particular seemed to hope showing Eclair how good she was with children might get him in the mood to become a daddy himself.

He’d been three drinks in, zoning out into nothing like he always did after she died. The blank void where she’d always been had been terrifying at first, but he’d started to embrace it. Or that’s what he’d told himself anyway. Who needed constant angelic singing in your head when you had endless, suffocating silence, right? Yeah.

When he’d felt someone sit next to him, he’d thought it was Gob, back to shoot the shit and attempt, again, to cheer him up. Instead, it was Nova, Megaton’s resident hooker with a heart of gold. At least fifteen years his senior and not exactly someone he’d ever thought of that way, but the light had caught in her red hair and the next thing he knew, he’d rented a room.

Mac wondered if he told Lottie about how he’d cried for hours after that first time, if she’d be a little more willing to forgive him his faults.

Sex with Lucy had been...amazing. Wonderful. Even when they’d been clumsy kids who didn’t know what the hell they were doing. Even when it had been slow and lazy and they’d both been half asleep after Duncan had been born. It was effortless and natural, like breathing. And the way Lucy would glow after, the way her eyes would shine and sparkle at him. Just for him.

Being with anyone else just didn’t compare. Not even close. It was nothing but a physical release. Something kind of fun to pass the time and usually cheaper than any chems he could find. Even when he and Magnolia had gotten to know each other, it hadn’t felt...right. No one else felt right.

In truth, the big part of the appeal with Mags was she was a good listener. She’d told him in her line of work, that’s actually what she mostly did. Listen. Soak up other people’s troubles and soothe their troubled souls as best she could after. He’d told her all about Lucy and Duncan, the
emptiness he felt, how he didn’t know if his inability to let her go was just part of being soulmates or something else. He’d cried all over her, too. A lot. She’d always been so nice about it. That was the reason he’d kept coming back.

Lottie couldn’t understand that. Piper had told him about her being frozen, thawed out long enough for her baby to get snatched and her husband to get offed and then immediately refrozen. So she hadn’t felt those years. She’d been asleep in cryogenic stasis or whatever and then, the moment she woke up, she’d bonded with him.

So she just didn’t know. Couldn’t know how that kind of pain and loneliness twisted you up inside. How it made you act in ways you never thought you would. Do things you once considered unthinkable.

She could be mad all she wanted, but the truth was, she had no frame of reference for what he’d gone through.

He stared at her tiny figure in the distance. The way the guards didn’t seem to care that she was petting the stupid brahmin and generally being a nuisance. They liked her.

Well, of course they did. She was chipper Charlie Apperson, Minutemen general and the Commonwealth’s favorite sweetheart. To *them*, anyway.

But not to Mac.

He tossed his butt and huffed. This was ridiculous and the moment, the very moment, he finally had her seeing sense, he was going to make her feel so bad, and so stupid, for putting them through this. He didn’t even care if he made her cry doing it. She deserved it.

They could have been... *getting to know each other* by now if she’d just been a normal human being for once in her life.

She headed down the train tracks and he resumed his walking. The caravan finally got close enough that he recognized it as Lucas Miller and he raised his hand in a friendly kind of wave. Didn’t want them thinking he was some asshole here to try to rob them or anything.

There was more than enough room on the road for them to pass on by, so when they fanned out instead, Mac immediately knew something was up. He stopped and warily watched as the guards took up positions on either side of him, just behind his peripherals. It made the hair on the back of his neck stand up and he did not appreciate it. He’d done business with Lucas before. They had no reason to try and jump him, but it sure felt like that’s what was about to happen.

Lucas finally came to a stop and folded his arms, glowering at him but not speaking.

Mac glanced back at his guards, trying to get a read on anybody, but they all wore matching cold expressions. He finally turned back to the traveling merchant and shrugged a little.

“What’s uh...what’s going on, man? I don’t need any armor today.”

His face scrunched up like he’d just smelled shit, “Son --”

Oh, God, not *that* tone.

“-- what the hell do you think you’re doing?”

He blinked, “What am *I* doing?”
“Now, I know, when you’re young, you can get...urges…”

Was he about to get the birds and the bees talk from Lucas? What the hell? He’d only met the man maybe three times in his life. Had he had a stroke or something? Mac turned to the female guard, hoping for some assurance that yes, this was crazy, but she was glaring at him so intensely that he could feel the pressure of it crushing his soul. If looks could kill, his head would have exploded by now. What the fuck was happening?

“...powerful urges, even. We’ve all been there.”

Mac went back to staring at Lucas, “Uh-huh.”

“But the thing is, you gotta know what size game you’re capable of pulling in, kid.”

“Okay…”

“And the game you’re hunting is a little uh...a little out of your caliber.”

His brow furrowed, “Uh…”

“Do you get what I’m saying, son?”

“No. Not even a little.”

The woman on his left sighed heavily, “See? I said we should just shoot him. Charlie was right. He is as dumb as a stump.”

Ah. Now it all made sense. Mac closed his eyes for a moment and could almost swear he could hear her snickering at him from a distance. A growing distance, at that.

“I’m not some kind of threat to...Charlie.”

The guy on his right snorted, “She said you’d say that.”

“I’m just escorting her to Sanctuary.”

His counterpart laughed, “Almost word for word, isn’t it?”

Lucas stepped a little closer and slapped his hand on his shoulder, “Listen, kid, you seem nice enough and normally I wouldn’t care to get involved in nonsense like this, but she was pretty clear that she wanted you to stop following her. So you can be smart about it, and head the opposite direction up those tracks, or you can be dumb about it and Lyra here can put a bullet in your knee. But either way, you’re gonna stop.”

Shit. “Is she paying you to do this?”

He frowned, “I wouldn’t take her money for something like this. We like Charlie. We like the Minutemen. We definitely like the caps she spends on the Minutemen getting them outfitted. You mess with her, you’re messing with us. Is that clear?”

“Crystal.”

“So? What’s it gonna be?”

He was absolutely, positively going to kill her. Right after Piper. “Guess I’ll be heading north.”
“That's a good call, son.”

Lyra huffed, seemingly put out that she wasn’t going to get to shoot him. “Let’s get goin’ then. I don’t like the look of those clouds.”

“Yup.” Lucas patted his brahmin to get her walking again and gave Mac one last stern look. “Remember what I said, son. She’s big game, alright? Stick with what’s actually in your budget.”

“Well said, Lucas.”

“Thank you, Lyra.”

Mac watched them go and scowled at the way the male guard kept pointing at him and then his eyes. Yes. Thank you. Got it. You’re watching. Shit.

He turned right and plodded along. It would be a pain in the ass to doubleback, but oh. That ass-whooping he was going to deliver her was going to be so, so sweet when the time came.

Think you're smart, huh? Well, the joke’s on you. They didn’t shoot me...if you were wondering.

Probably just didn’t want to waste the bullets on your sorry ass.

I thought you weren’t talking ever again.

More frosty silence met him and he chuckled.

He’d seen Lucy lose her temper exactly twice in his entire life. Once, when those Brotherhood assholes had given him the boot. She’d cussed them out along the way so fiercely that he almost hadn’t even recognized her voice. It had been hot as hell and he’d been proud that she’d apparently soaked up some of his greatest hits from Lamplight.

The second time had been when she was delivering Duncan and he’d had a rare moment of sheer panic. He usually kept his head in most situations, but seeing her in pain and all that blood and stuff coming out of her, actually feeling the way it was tearing her apart, had him freaking out pretty hard. She’d screamed at him to get a grip and he had. It had snapped him right out it. Just in time to catch their baby as he came into the world.

She’d apologized for months after for raising her voice at him, but come on. She’d been birthing their son. She could have shot him and he’d have been okay with it so long as everybody survived.

His wife had been the sweetest, most even tempered, calmest person he’d ever known. Now look where he was. Stuck with Lottie. The woman who’s temper seemed to shift whenever the wind blew. It should have been annoying as fuck. His whole life, if somebody tried to get bossy with him or take some kind of tone, he’d step right up to them. Every time. He never backed down, never gave in. No matter what the odds. He’d push back until the other side gave up or violence erupted.

So why’d he like it so much when she did it?

Almost a mile up the tracks and widening her lead with every footstep, ladies and gentlemen, our champion supreme! Charlotte Apperson!

Charlotte held her hands up and silently cheered herself as she did a little victory dance. RJ’s tone had been peevish and sulky and it had made her laugh. Served him right. She hoped Lucas gave him the business something fierce.
She hung a right at Bedford Station, happy to finally be off the rough tracks and back on mostly smooth roads. The ferals she’d cleared two weeks ago were still laying scattered along the ground and she carefully stepped around them. They may be terrifying when coming right for your throat, but dead they were just...pitiful. It made her sad that so many people were stuck suffering like this. She’d talked to Preston about making a point to have Minutemen clear as many ferals as possible, but he’d said it was a bad idea. That some people pretended to not understand the difference between feral and ghoul. Those kind of people would take any opportunity to take out whole ghoul communities if given the chance.

It made her heart hurt that even now, here in the apocalypse, bigotry was apparently live and well. Would humans ever learn to just get along with each other? Play nice? It’s not like it was hard. You just had to not hurt anybody and mind your business. It’s not like she was asking for a miracle here. Shit.

There was a rumble from above and she stopped, staring up at the clouds. Not a radstorm, or her Pipboy would have been going nuts. A tiny, stinging drop of icy rain hit her cheek and she shivered. So it was going to hail then...or something.

She was barely to Thicket Excavations when the skies opened.

Of course she had to get stuck here, in what was probably one of her least favorite places in the entire Commonwealth. A place Preston was forbidden from reminding her about. She’d never get over the embarrassment of naively helping a freaking raider clear the place for their stupid mirelurk fighting operation. Charlotte had really thought she was doing her good deed for the day when she’d about froze her butt off swimming in the gross quarry, sealing up the broken spots in the line so it would drain properly.

Then she’d come back through just a week later, and about had her head blown off by the very same asshole she’d so generously helped.

Unbelievable.

The good news though, was that since she’d then gotten angry enough to clear the whole place out, there were plenty of empty trailers for her to hide from the storm in. They’d gone all the way to the bottom, blowing up everything along the way. Right down to the last mirelurk egg. Preston had been a peach about the whole thing, really. Just an amused grin he’d tried to hide with his hat right there at the end.

She’d still threatened him with a court martial if he ever spoke of it again. Just in case.

The trailer she chose had a decent view of the road and a bedroll to sit on. That was handy. Her Pipboy said it was already three in the afternoon and she sighed as she slid the door mostly shut. It was going to be dark before she knew it and she’d really, really hoped to spend the night warm and cozy in Sanctuary. Hopefully the weather would work with her a little here and this would pass quickly.

An hour later and she had to concede that no, it probably wasn’t going to work with her after all. Charlotte was peeking out the crack in the door, trying to figure out if the clouds were thinning when a dark figure suddenly blocked her vision. She squeaked and backed up, grabbing her shotgun and ready to pull the trigger when the door slammed open.

A soaked and shivering RJ glared down at her and she reflexively made a face at him.
“Oh. It’s just you.” She relaxed a little and set her gun across her lap. “What do you want?”

He made a face back and climbed up into the trailer, saying nothing and shutting the door behind him.

“The hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Taking shelter.”

“This shelter is already taken!”

Mac sighed heavily and gestured to the window, “You’re really gonna make me go back out into that?”

Charlotte’s desire to keep him as far away as possible warred with her instinctive need to help idiots for a minute and she finally huffed. “Fine. But no funny business.”

He rolled his eyes and tossed his stuff towards the far end of the trailer. “Not gonna be a problem right now.”

She watched him strip down out of his duster and shake the water from his hair. He was, actually, remarkably handsome. Especially now, for some reason.

Must be one of those ‘just add water’ deals.

Her eyes narrowed a little. Was this another one of his tricks? Trying to lure her in. ‘Oh, look at me! I’m so wet and cold! Help me, Lottie! Help me!’ Oh, yeah. That sounded just like something he’d do.

Mac was busy wringing out his scarf when a towel hit him right in the face out of nowhere. “What the --”

“It’s to dry yourself off with. You’re familiar with the concept, right?”

She seemed prissier than usual. That shouldn’t be possible.

“Yeah. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

He patted down what he could and then sat on the floor, leaning back against the wall. His outstretched foot was just close enough to tap her boot and he did it, just once, to see how she’d react.

Charlotte about jumped out of her skin and scooted another foot away. “What are you doin’ now?”

He shrugged, “Nothing.”

“I said no funny business.”

“I know. I heard you.” He rummaged through his pack and came up with a pack of cigarettes. “Want one?”

“I don’t smoke.”

“Oh...mind if I do?”
She huffed and folded her arms, “If you must.” She tried to keep her eyes on the door across from her. Or in her lap. Anywhere but him. It took effort and she jumped again when he finally spoke.

“I like your coat.”

Charlotte scolded herself for letting him get to her so easily and wrapped the new leather duster a little tighter around herself. “Thanks.”

“Looks nice on you.”

She glared at him, “Quit lookin’ at me.”

He blew out smoke through his nose and smirked at her, “No.”

Dear God in heaven. It was like he was specifically designed to drive her nuts. She turned her head away and was glad that she’d taken her hat off. At least with her hair down, she had some protection against his eyes.

Those goddamn eyes were going to be the death of her. She just knew it.

Mac watched her turn pink and try to hide behind her hair and his grin only grew. Lucy used to do that, too. Fair skin like that showed everything and it had been so, so easy to get her to blush. Nice to know he hadn’t lost his touch there.

She seemed to collect herself a little and huffed again, “I only bought the damn thing so you couldn’t look at my ass anymore.”

“Who said I was looking?”

Her head turned just enough so she could glare at him with one eye, “I know you were looking. I could feel it.”

His eyebrow went up, “You do realize I can feel you, too, right? I thought we were both going to be polite here and not mention the little things we could pick up from each other. But, hey, if you wanna go there, we can go there.” Mac found himself facing a solid wall of curls again and chuckled. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

“It’s involuntary.”

“M’hmm.”

“Doesn’t mean anything.”

“If it doesn’t mean anything, then why are you so embarrassed about it?”

She didn’t answer him and he eventually turned his attention to the window and the cold rain pounding against it. There were little tiny ice crystals at the center of every drop. Not exactly what you wanted to go hiking in.

“So...if this rain doesn’t let up...”

“It’s gonna.”

“...you wanna share a bedroll?”

“No, I do not!”
“I don’t think we’re going to have much of a choice, sweetheart. The temperature’s been dropping all day. It might be that or we freeze to death.”

“I’ve been a popsicle before. I’ll manage.”

“Yeah, but I haven’t.” Mac pouted at her, “Can’t I just sit next to you?”

“You *are* sitting next to me.”

“I mean right next to you.” He started to ease over when her head whipped around, murderous intent in her eyes. “Hey, come on. You’ve already said I was the worst and basically Satan or whatever. Surely you can resist me even if we’re sitting with each other.”

“I can resist you no matter what you do! And don’t flatter yourself. You’ll never be half as charming as Lucifer.”

“Okay, great.” He flopped down right next to her, careful to keep an inch of space between them. Whatever brainpower she had went right out the window whenever she panicked. If he got her too shook up, she’d probably run right out into the storm and die of hypothermia or something. “See? Nice, right?”

She shifted away a little and huffed.

The sound of the rain on the roof was kinda nice, actually. Soothing. Reminded him of happier times with Lucy when they’d been forced to find shelter just like this.

Of course, it had been a little less cold and a lot more fun with her.

“This is kinda romantic, right?”

“Nope.”

“Aww, come on. You’re here and I’m here and we’re trapped in this tin box...”

“What part of that is supposed to be romantic?”

He leaned toward her just a bit, “I can show you what part, if you want.”

Charlotte whipped her head over to tell him off and found herself just a few inches from his face. She froze and when his eyes dropped down to her mouth, panic shot through her and she...reacted. Again.

Mac jumped more in shock than anything else when her hand made contact with his face. Slap or not, parts of his brain wanted to focus on how soft her hands actually were. Other parts were worried about how cold they felt.

It actually took him a few seconds to finally land on anger.

“The fu-frick was that for!”

“I told you no funny business!”

“Stop hitting me! You’re not supposed to hit me!”

“Yeah? Well I...I’m...”, she looked away. “I’m sorry.”
“Damn straight you’re sorry!”

“I dunno why I keep doing that.”

He rubbed his cheek. It hadn’t actually hurt. She’d barely tapped him. It was just the principle of the thing. “Uh-huh.” He moved back over a few inches away. “Always gotta bring violence into it.”

“I’m really not that kind of person. I’m not. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, tell that to my nuts...and now my face.”

Charlotte felt awful. RJ wasn’t the one who’d tricked her and put his hands all over her. She was pretty sure if she ever told him to stop, he would. He might like pushing it, but he’d never force her into anything like that. She knew that.

She sighed, “I’m sorry. Are you alright?”

“No. My soulmate just hit me in the face. How would you feel?”

Awful. Unwanted. Rejected. Hurt. It wasn’t his fault she was being punished with his existence, right? She kept taking things out on him that weren’t his fault. It wasn’t right. She should be the adult here and stop acting like a child.

She was ashamed of herself.

When she suddenly turned, hands reaching for his face, Mac about had a heart attack. His hands came up to fend her off, but then she was holding his head, carefully tilting his cheek up so she could really look at it.

Her hands were so fucking soft.

Lottie squinted a little in the dim light and frowned, “I don’t think it’ll bruise.” Her thumb swept over his cheekbone gently. “Does that hurt?”

Mac felt like his whole world had narrowed down to this moment. She was so close, her eyes all dark and concerned. Those gorgeous lips just a few inches away. He’d thought it was pretty funny before, the effect his presence had on her. He hadn’t really realized just how much she could actually effect him until right now.

“RJ?”

His eyes stared into hers and he felt like he couldn’t swallow. Couldn’t even breathe. “Yeah?”

“Does it hurt?”

He blinked at her. Oh, right. His cheek. She was worried she’d hurt him. Right, right, right. If he said no, she’d stop touching him so...he basically had to lie here. “A little.”

Tears filled her eyes and her lower lip did that trembling thing Lucy’s had always done whenever she was about to cry. “Oh, I’m sorry...I really am. It won’t happen again. I promise.” She’d whispered it so softly he wouldn’t have heard if they hadn’t been so close.

Oh, shit. Oh, fuck. He hadn’t meant to make her cry. She was so fiery and cantankerous all the damn time, it hadn’t even entered his mind that she might be a great big baby just like his wife had been. Goddammit.
“Hey. Hey, it’s okay. Don’t cry, okay? I’m...I’m totally going to live. It’s fine.” His hand slipped into her hair of its own accord, curls tangling around his fingers as he cradled her head.

The almost-forgotten, wonderful, warm feeling of being comforted and protected swept through Charlotte and her eyes slipped shut. She leaned into that familiar hand and smiled. “Sorry.” When she opened her eyes again, RJ was staring at her like he’d seen a ghost. “What? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

His hand was abruptly gone from her hair, back on the floor and he scooted back a few inches. Charlotte watched him and frowned a little, confused at his sudden retreat.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m sure. It’s fine.” He wouldn’t look at her and his voice had that hard edge to it. The same one from her first night in Sanctuary when she’d been a little too happy to hear back from him. When he’d pushed her away.

She felt a little embarrassed. There had to be a middle ground between being antagonistic all the time towards him and...whatever that had been. No wonder he was clearly confused and aggravated with her. She was probably giving him emotional whiplash or something.

“Okay.”

Mac felt jittery all of a sudden. Unbalanced. Chasing her had actually been a fun kind of game for him, infinite annoyances aside. Catching her though might be more than he’d bargained for. There’d been a weird moment there when past and present had overlapped. It was confusing and uncomfortable and he’d almost done something real, real stupid there. He needed something else to focus on.

“So...am I ever going to get a name?”

“A name?”

“For the jerk who made you so freaking twitchy in the first place?”

“Oh.” She stared down at her hands for a moment and shook her head, “I don’t think it’s a good idea. Especially now.”

“Why not?”

“Things are just...volatile on that front right now.” Charlotte frowned to herself. “I really shouldn’t have gone on the radio like that…”

Mac blinked at her, “So he was Railroad?”

“What?”

“The jerk’s in the Railroad?”

“Yeah...”

“And that’s why you exposed them like that?”

She took a deep breath and tilted her head this way and that for a moment. “Yeah...that was…”
“That was freaking great and don’t let anybody tell you different.”

“It probably wasn’t the smartest thing to do.”

He shrugged, “Who cares? I’m guessing you were working with the Railroad, right?”

“Right.”

“And this as-jerk took advantage of you anyway?”

“Oh, it...it wasn’t really like that.”

“The hell it wasn’t.”

Charlotte sighed, “No, he...I’m pretty sure he doesn’t think about me like that.”

“M’hmm.”

“He doesn’t. He just...he wanted information and...I mean, it worked. I told him everything he wanted to know, like an idiot.”

He’d heard of a lot of different kinds of torture in his life, but attempting to make out with somebody had never been one of them. “What information?”

“He wanted to know about you, actually.”

Mac scowled, “Me?”

She nodded, “Yeah, he uh...he’s really smart. He figured out I had another soulmate somehow and he wanted to know who it was.”

Funny. Guy sure didn’t seem smart. “Why?”

“He said it was because you could be a security risk but...honestly I think he was just curious.”

He snorted, “What an idiot.”

A corner of her mouth lifted, “Not as big an idiot as I was...I really thought we were friends and I just...never saw it coming. It’s embarrassing...and now I keep taking it out on you and that’s awful. I mean, I wasn’t ever really in danger even. He’d never...never go too far. I know that, but it was just so scary in the moment, you know?”

Charlotte wrapped her arms around herself and ducked her head down, trying to keep it together. Crying over something that wasn’t even a thing was silly. She just felt silly.

Mac watched her for a second and decided to risk it. If she wanted to go apeshit on him, that was fine. He still had to try.

She jumped a little when his arms went around her, alarm spiking through her body. Then her head was against his chest and his heartbeat was so soothing and familiar. His scent washed over her and she buried her face against him, breathing deep. Gunpowder, tobacco, wood smoke, old canvas. When his hand slipped back into her hair, she felt all the anxiety melt out of her. It made her realize just how tense she’d been for months. How much she’d missed having someone to lean on.

Mac set his cheek against her head and tried to hold onto the noble intentions he’d had when he’d first reached for her. Lottie had been upset, hurt, angry with herself and he’d just wanted to drive
those feelings away. He really had. But now she was curled up against him, practically in his lap, purring under his hands and it was hard to remember he was trying to be a gentleman here. That she’d already had one bastard pawing at her and she didn’t need another. She was just so soft and warm and smelled so good, like hubflowers on the wind.

He felt her hands come up to hold onto his arm and smiled. Well. At least he could be reasonably sure that his balls would remain intact this time. That was something.

They sat that way for a few minutes. Mac’s hand occasionally combing through her hair before resettling against her head. Charlotte was having trouble keeping her eyes open. It would be so easy to just drift off. Let someone else worry about everything for a few hours while she slept secure in the knowledge that she was finally safe.

That was probably a dangerous idea though.

She laughed a little and sat up, gently untangling herself from his limbs. “Sorry...I’m about to fall asleep.”

He didn’t want to, but he let her pull away. She needed to learn she could trust him. Keeping her close just because he wanted it wouldn’t help with that. “It’s okay. You can sleep on me any day.”

A biting comment was right on the tip of her tongue, but then she looked at him. At the earnest expression on his face and how soft his eyes looked. It wasn’t a line. He actually meant it. She felt her cheeks go pink and looked away, her gaze falling on the window.

“Hey, look. It stopped sleeting.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s good.”

“It’s only maybe another hour to Sanctuary.”

“Okay.”

Mac watched her gather up her things and open the door. She carefully set a foot on the ground and tapped it a bit. “It’s just slush. Nothing’s actually frozen.”

“Oh, good.” He’d let her get a head start, then head out after her. That was the polite thing to do here, right?

Charlotte stepped out of the trailer and then turned back to him, frowning a little. “RJ?”

“Yeah?”

“Aren’t you coming?”

“Oh...I mean, I kinda figured --”

“You already caught me, right?” She shrugged and gave him a half smile. “Seems kinda silly to pretend otherwise.”

“Oh.”

“We can walk together...unless you’d rather --”

“No! No, I’ll just uh...” He hurriedly grabbed his stuff and shrugged his duster back on, trying to ignore how icy cold it still was but unable to hide a shiver.
“Oh, is it still wet?”

“Yeah, a little. It’s no big deal.”

She watched him step out of the trailer and nodded, “We’ll get you all warmed up in Sanctuary.”

Man. It was hard to remember his manners when she just kept feeding him quality material like that. Mac put his hat on and just barely caught the way she was smirking at him behind her smile. His eyes narrowed a little and he decided to push, just a bit.

“Yeah, I bet you will.”

She laughed and rolled her eyes at him and headed out. Mac grinned at the back of her head for a moment before jogging to catch up and impulsively took her hand in his.

“Hey, don't get too far ahead of me...I like being close.”

Charlotte felt like her whole body must be bright red, but she just nodded and didn’t look back.

Her hand stayed in his.

Chapter End Notes

For your consideration: Lucas "Pretty Don't Stop Bullets" Miller = Wasteland Ron Swanson. 🤘
“Why can’t I ever get this goddamn map to cooperate?”

He watched Lottie wrestle with the giant paper in the passenger seat and chuckled, “If you just toss it in the back, I can do it when we get there.”

“No! I’m gonna do it. I can figure this out.”

“M’kay.”

She got a fourth of it folded but then it suddenly didn’t want to fold the ‘right’ way anymore and she sighed, “Dang. I almost had it that time.”

“Yeah, I saw.”

She tossed it in the back and just missed the dogs, then pouted at him for a minute, “It’s just so hard.”

He watched the men in their Red Rocket uniforms check the pressure in the back tires of their moving truck in his mirror and refused to acknowledge her innuendo. “M’hmm.” Her hand found his thigh anyway though, just like he knew it would, and she wiggled a little closer. “Lottie…”

“Hmm.” She nibbled on his neck and giggled when goosebumps raised up on his arms.

“We’re almost there, sweetheart.”

“There’s nothing wrong with priming the pump, is there?”

He laughed, “That’s...that’s not...you’re using that wrong.”

Her fingertips just barely grazed his crotch and she smiled against his neck, “Oh, I’m pretty sure I know exactly how to use it.”

One of the gas jockeys was suddenly there, in his window. “That’ll be five hundred even.” He grinned at them as he fumbled for his wallet. “Newlyweds, huh?”

Lottie smiled back, “Nope! Married ten years!”

He whistled low and took the money as he winked at him. “You’re a lucky man.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“RJ?”

Mac started a bit and blinked. The Red Rocket he’d been staring at went back to its usual derelict condition. No shiny red pumps. No helpful attendants. No protectron wandering about.

No Lottie in mouthwatering short shorts and a little pink top that looked like it was held together with good intentions and hope.
Instead she was still wearing the leather duster she’d purchased earlier that day. The same green knit hat on her head. It was freezing. They were freezing. Definitely not the sunny day he’d just seen.

“Yeah...yeah, sorry. Thought I saw something.”

She looked over at the gas station and shrugged, “There’s nothing there now.”

“Yeah.”

Her hand squeezed his, “Come on. We need to get you warm and fed, okay?”

“Okay.” Mac let her tug him along, past the gas station, down the road and over the bridge into Sanctuary. His eyes landed on the faded blue sign that still had the little hamlet’s name and a bright sun on it and the world flickered around him. One second dark and dreary, the houses around them all but destroyed. The next it was back to that bright summer day. Green grass yards, white picket fences. Kids playing kickball in the street.

He blinked hard and it was gone. Back to reality.

Maybe he really did need to eat.

Charlotte was getting worried about RJ. He’d been fine until they’d gotten to Concord. Then he kept spacing out on her. If she hadn’t had a hold of his hand, he’d have wandered away several times already. She wasn’t sure if that was a sign of hypothermia or not. Thankfully, they arrived at Sanctuary just in time for dinner. The Rosa’s sunshine yellow home had been turned into a communal house for the town. Somewhere between a cafeteria and a wash house. It was warm and insulated and, right now, full of people.

She pulled him inside and nodded to those she knew. The Longs were already digging in, as was Sturges. Preston was no doubt off somewhere patrolling. No sign of Mama Murphy though.

“Here. Sit down and I’ll get you something to eat, okay?”

“Okay.” He sat in the armchair she pushed him toward and tried to focus on the here and now.

Charlotte stared at him staring at his hands for a minute and frowned. Something was really wrong there. Her path into the kitchen took her past Sturges and she put a hand on his shoulder, “Hey.”

“Hey! How’ve you been, General?”

“Fine, fine. Have you seen Mama Murphy?”

“Oh, yeah. She ate earlier. Already went to sleep.”

“Ah. Early bird special?”

He laughed, “I guess. So uh...who’s your friend?”

“That’s MacCready. He’s done a lot of work for the Minutemen. Sniper.”

“Oh! Nice. He lookin’ to settle down someplace?”

“Oh, no. He’s just uh...escorting me, I guess.”

“Oh...shame. We could always use another lookout.”
“Hmm.”

“He seems a little...tired?”

“Yeah, it’s been a long day.”

Mac kept his eyes on his hands. It seemed the safest bet. Conversation swirled around him and sometimes it was normal shit. Brahmin being stubborn and getting a better water filter and working on a proper defensive wall. But sometimes it was weird. Stock market fluctuations, a new hotshot pitcher for the Sox, casserole recipes, a sale at Fallon’s. The floor beneath his feet kept changing, too. Shifting between a plush throw rug and the faded, chipped linoleum he knew it must actually be.

“Here.”

A bowl of something warm and filling was suddenly in his hands. He looked up in time to see Lottie sit on the arm of his chair, a bowl of her own on her lap. She was watching him closely, studying his face.

“Honey, are you alright?”

What, other than the fact that every time he blinked she shifted between pre-war pinup and the woman he actually knew? Sure. “I’m fine.”

Her hand rested on his forehead for a minute, “I really think you need to get some rest. Hurry up and eat, okay? I’ve got a place you can stay.”

“Okay.” He focused back on the bowl. It didn’t change. Still the same old faded plastic no matter how long he stared at it. It was safe. He picked up his spoon and started to eat. Some kind of brahmin stew thing. Not terrible.

Charlotte watched him eat and felt concern gnawing at her. Confusion was definitely a sign of hypothermia, right? Hadn’t she learned that in Girl Scouts? Or from an episode of Davy Crockett maybe? But he didn’t have any other symptoms that she could see. He felt cold, sure, but not freezing.

He’d been stuck in that sleet for at least an hour though, thanks to her prank with Lucas. So whatever was wrong with him now was entirely her fault. She was responsible for him until he felt better.

She quickly drank her glass of milk, gulped down her own dinner and hopped up. “Hey, listen.” His head came up slowly and she didn’t like the way his eyes looked cloudy and unfocused. “I’m going to put this in the sink and then I’m going to go across the street, okay? Get your bed all set up. I’ll be right back. Understand?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t move an inch from this spot until I come and get you. I mean it.” She grabbed their gear and headed off.

Mac watched her go and wondered where she’d gotten such a pretty blue dress from.

Charlotte quickly built a fire in the fireplace and marveled at how easily the smoke slipped up the chimney. The flue in their old house had always had issues. Always. No matter how many times Nate had cleaned it, no matter how many times Codsworth had cleaned it, the damn thing almost
always stuck.

Then along came Sturges and poof. Fixed. The man was a miracle worker.

Her old home had mostly been left alone by the settlers who’d moved into Sanctuary in her absence. The roof had been patched, as had the outer walls, but other than that, no one had messed with it.

She appreciated them being so considerate of her feelings, even if she’d never live here again. There were just too many memories.

Charlotte dragged the living room rug over closer to the fireplace and then unrolled RJ’s bedroll on top of it. It wouldn’t be as comfortable as the couch, but it would be warm, and she was pretty sure he needed that more than he needed back support at the moment. When everything was finally set up just the way she wanted, she turned to head back across the street when a dark figure in the doorway made her jump.

“RJ? Is that you?”

White walls, cozy furniture, a sparkling kitchen. They’d wanted to go camping that weekend, but a storm system had moved in and ruined those plans. Lottie would not be denied however. Mother Nature be damned. She’d set up a camp in their living room. Complete with blanket fort and s’mores supplies. It was the most charming thing he’d ever seen and he smiled at her, crossing the threshold.

“You didn’t have to go to all this trouble, sweetheart.”

Charlotte blinked at him, “What?”

“I love it.”

“RJ?”

“We should go ahead and do the s’mores first before the flue shuts on us...oh, you got Jiffy Pop, too! You thought of everything.”

Her eyes went wide. Holy shit. That first Memorial Day weekend after they’d moved. Their canceled camping trip and her impromptu solution for missing it.

“What are you...are you alright?”

He came and wrapped his arms around her in a big hug, rocking her back and forth just like Nate used to. “You’re the best girl in the whole wide world.”

Tears filled her eyes. She didn’t know what was happening here, but he needed to sleep. Or something. She just needed him to stop talking. He didn’t even sound like himself. He sounded like…

“RJ, I need you to have a little lie down for me, alright, honey? Can you do that for me?”

“Oh, I might have known. Wanna get right to the good stuff, huh? You naughty thing.”

“Yeah...yeah, sure. Just...look, there’s your bedroll. Can you take your clothes off and get inside for me?”

He nuzzled against her neck, “And then you’ll join me, right?”
“Sure. Sure, I will. I just um...gotta go to the bathroom real quick.”

“M’kay.”

“Remember. Take your clothes off first, okay? They’re wet and you’re cold.”

He frowned at her a little, “I’m not --”

“You’re cold, RJ. Take them off.”

“Oooh, I get it. Roleplay. Okay.”

Charlotte watched him just long enough for him to take off his duster and start unbuttoning his shirt before she fled into the bathroom. What the hell was happening to him? It was like he was possessed or something. Bringing him here had clearly been a mistake. She should have known better. Should have figured it out when he’d started to get weird the closer they got to here.

She needed to speak to Mama Murphy, but she couldn’t just leave him here alone. God only knew what he’d do. She just had to get through tonight. Get them through tonight. Surely that wouldn’t be too hard, right?

Her own pajamas were a simple pair of flannel pants and an old sweater and she quickly shimmied into them. She’d really wanted a shower first, but she’d never taken a shower in this house that Nate hadn’t felt compelled to interrupt. Probably shouldn’t risk it.

Charlotte poked her head out the bathroom door and breathed a sigh of relief. RJ was already in his bedroll by the fire. Thank God.

She came out, tiptoeing just in case he was already asleep. He looked so peaceful and quiet. Finally. She sighed in relief and picked up his discarded clothing, carefully draping it over the kitchen island so it would dry overnight. No underwear so he must have kept it on. At least he had some sense left in his head. She started to go to the couch when he surprised her again.

“Lottie?”

Sonofabitch. “Yeah?”

“What’s going on? Everything keeps...changing.”

“It’s alright. Everything will be alright. Just go to sleep for me, okay?”

“It’s cold.”

That had her turning back around. He was shivering a little in his sleeping bag, despite the fire roaring right next to him. She knew all too well how disorienting being that cold could make you. How scary it felt.

She sighed again. “Alright.” Charlotte unclipped her Pipboy and set it on the coffee table before plodding over and nudged his hip with her foot. “Roll over. Towards the fire.”

When he dutifully obeyed without so much as a single snarky remark or inappropriate comment, she knew it had to be bad. She knelt down behind him and wiggled into the bag, wrapping her arm around his waist once she got inside. There was a pleasant sort of wave that went through her and she did her best to ignore it. Instead she focused on how cold his skin felt and how shallow his breathing really was.
This was a medical emergency was all. She was only doing what had to be done and she’d have
done it for anybody. If she felt dizzy from so much contact, well, that was neither here nor there. It
wasn’t like she could just let him freeze to death, right? What kind of person would she be then? A
terrible one, that’s what.

His fingers threaded together with hers and he sighed happily. “Lottie…”

She huffed and resisted the impulse to press a kiss against the back of his neck. “Go to sleep, RJ.”

“M’kay.”

It took her an absurd amount of time to fall asleep. She was exhausted, cold, her muscles still ached
and her tummy was full. In normal circumstances, she’d have been out like a light in under five
minutes flat. But this whole situation had her freaking out internally and RJ’s overwhelming
physical presence wasn’t helping matters much.

She had to admit, if things were different, she’d have been more than happy to warm him up a
whole different way. He was skinnier than Nate had ever been, and she’d sort of imagined that
under his clothes, he would kind of look like a drowned rat. All bony angles and sunken skin. The
reality of it was a lot different. RJ was wiry to be sure, but the defined muscles in his shoulders and
back actually made her blush if she looked at them too long. He had a few scars that she could feel,
more in the front than the back, but nowhere near as many as Nate had ended up with. His hands
were calloused, of course, but the rest of him was pleasantly smooth and it was nearly impossible
to resist rubbing her face against his back as he slowly warmed.

Truth be told, she hadn’t felt this aware of another person since the Bloom had happened, and even
then she’d only had a vague idea of what Nate might look like to work with.

It was making her second guess herself. Maybe she really should stop fighting. Just give in. See
what happened this time around. Maybe things would be different and she wouldn’t completely
lose herself like she had with Nate.

Or maybe she would and saving Shaun would suddenly no longer matter. She’d become focused
on nothing but RJ and his happiness and her son would…

No. She couldn’t do that. She’d promised Nate she’d save him. It didn’t matter how cute RJ was or
how right it felt being snuggled up against him.

She’d promised.

When Mac opened his eyes, the fire in front of him was nothing but dying embers. The room was
already starting to cool, but it was still cozy in his sleeping bag. Somebody soft and warm was
pressed up against his back, their hand in his. It felt familiar and safe.

He smiled to himself and started to drift back down to sleep, very nearly there when a delicious
warmth of an entirely different nature swept over him. His body felt like it was being submerged in
honey. Felt familiar, too, and called up hazy memories of countless nights spent just like this a
lifetime ago.

It took barely any effort at all to change positions, his body almost entirely on autopilot as his brain
floated along in that amber haze. He didn’t even wake when he slipped between her legs, just a
sleepy smile and a hand running through his hair in an absentminded sort of way.

Mac nuzzled against her neck in the dark, a hand slipping under her sweater and gliding upward
until it found one of her breasts. Full and ripe, the nipple already pebbling under his thumb as it
swept over it. Her body was different. Smooth and rounded, like it had been when she’d been breastfeeding Duncan still. He groaned a little and rolled his hips against her, shivering when she whimpered in response.

God, he loved this dream. One of his all-time favorites.

Charlotte felt like she was floating on a cloud. Nate rarely took her while she slept, even after all the times she’d told him it was fine, but oh, when he did. Waking up to him touching her always guaranteed a good day to follow. He was nibbling at her throat and she turned her head to the side, giving him unfettered access. Each scrape of his teeth sent little shocks running through her body right down to her core.

He was already moving against her, hard and hungry. She didn’t know why he didn’t just move her nightgown out of the way so he could...wait.

Her eyes slowly opened in the dark and she tried to focus for a minute. Why was she wearing pants?

Reality came crashing down on her as the hand at her breast kneaded it roughly. Rougher than Nate had ever been. Suddenly she was wide awake and petrified.

“RJ? RJ, stop.”

“Hmm?” He left her neck and rose up above her. Stop? Lucy never said stop. Not once. He blinked a few times and frowned in confusion. “What’s wrong?”

It didn’t escape her notice that he had, in fact, stopped. Even half-asleep and clearly somewhere else entirely in his head, he’d stopped. She’d felt like she was safe with him and this just proved it. So why was she still freaking out?

Charlotte felt tears fill her eyes and she shook her head at him, barely able to squeak anything out. “Please.”

His frown grew. That didn’t sound like Lucy at all. The fear and the way her voice wobbled. Lucy was never afraid of him, even when he was raging at the world like a lunatic, but especially never here.

His brain finally woke up enough to realize what the difference was. This wasn’t Lucy. It wasn’t his wife’s body he was enjoying, but Lottie’s. It was her fear pelting against his mind.

Shit.

He immediately snatched his hand away from her and planted it on the ground by her shoulder, pushing up as far as he could within the sleeping bag. He couldn’t get away from her entirely, but it gave him enough room to jerk his hips away from hers. With his erection firmly pressed up against his stomach, there wasn’t a single part of him touching her. Not anymore anyway.

“Lottie. Lottie, shit, I’m...I didn’t…”

“It’s okay.”

“No, really, I thought --”

“I know. It’s okay, just...uh…”, her head turned a little. “Oh. The um...the fire’s out. I should --”
“Nope! Nope, I’ll get it!”

“But you were --”

“Already getting it!” Mac scrambled out of the bag as fast as he could, desperate to put distance between them and grateful for the biting cold in the room hitting his overheated skin.

Charlotte squeaked and covered her eyes, “RJ!”

He’d finally managed to get on his feet and paused, looking down at her, “What?”

“Are you naked?”

“Am I...yeah?” He frowned at the neat way his clothes were draped over the island. Completely unlike him to do something like that. He glared back down at her. “You’re the one who put my clothes up! You should know I’m naked!”

“There was no underwear!”

“I don’t wear underwear!”

“Well, I didn’t know that!”

He grumbled to himself and snatched his pants up. They were already dry and he pulled them on. “Better?”

She peeked at him from between her fingers before her hands slipped down off her face. “Yes. Thank you.”

“Yeah.” He grabbed a couple of logs from the stand by the backdoor and shoved them into the fireplace, wiggling them a bit until the bottom one caught. Once the fire had started to come back, a quick check of his watch revealed it to be three in the morning. Too early to get up yet. Crap.

Mac glanced down at Lottie and his mouth set in a hard line. She was flushed and beautiful and any other time, he’d have a million lines to throw at her. But the nervous way she was laying there, the way her eyes wouldn’t meet his, made him furious. If it hadn’t been for that asshole, whoever he was, things might have gone a whole lot different. He might have actually had a shot. Serendipity and whatnot.

Some day, somehow, he was going to convince her to give him a name. And then he was going to see just how many bullets you could pump into a human body before it fell apart.

“What about you alright?”

Charlotte actually jumped a little when he spoke. It was embarrassing. This whole situation was beyond embarrassing, actually. She’d felt almost hypnotized watching him watch the fire with that stern, authoritative look on his face. Now she felt like if her eyes so much as landed on his foot, she’d spontaneously combust.

She cleared her throat a little and tried to pretend like she hadn’t been writhing happily under him just five minutes before. “I’m...I’m fine.” There. Totally nailed it.

He watched the color in her cheeks deepen and wondered how the hell they were supposed to face each other in the morning after that. If they even did. Who knew? Maybe he’d wake up and she’d have fucked off again. One could only hope.
“Good...that’s uh...that’s good.” He was painfully aware that his cock had decided there might still be a good time to be had here, so he stayed facing the fireplace while he tried to will it back into a state of dormancy. “I’ll uh...I’ll take the couch.”

“Oh...okay.”

Crap. That wasn’t very considerate, was it? This was clearly her house. Why should she have to sleep on the floor just because he’d made an ass out of himself? “Unless you want it?”

The whole sleeping bag smelled like him. She could still feel the delectable way his muscles had moved under her touch. The places where he’d marked her neck throbbed in an incredibly delicious, distracting sort of way. There was no way in hell she was going to be able to actually sleep in this thing, but he was her guest, right? Or maybe she should take the couch so he could stay closer to the fire?

Emily Post was kind of failing her here. She couldn’t remember ever reading a chapter on how to make your guest feel at ease after...that. Jesus.

She shifted anxiously, careful to not rub her thighs together. “It’s up to you. It’s warmer here, but softer there, so…”

He winced. Man. It was like she wanted him to be a smartass...wait. Did she? Was she trying to get them back to normal already?

Should he risk it? Maybe? He put his hands on his hips and frowned at the fire like it might have the answer hidden in it.

Ah, fuck it.

“There’s nowhere softer than where I was just laying, sweetheart. Couch just can’t compare to what you’ve got.”

Absolute silence seemed to fill the whole house and Mac literally wanted to die. Right there. Just fall over dead. It would be better than the bone-deep mortification rushing through him like ice water. He sighed and shook his head. Well, at least he didn’t have to worry about having a boner anymore.

Charlotte snorted quietly and giggled. When RJ turned to stare down at her, the shocked, incredulous look on his face just made it worse and she actually covered her head with the sleeping bag, trying in vain to muffle her laughter.

Mac watched her laughing and eventually couldn’t help but join in.

He still took the couch though. Just to be safe.

The next morning started off a lot like the previous one had. Mac waking up alone, albeit on a much more comfortable couch. The house was cold, but Lottie must have draped the sleeping bag over him before she left, because he was nice and snugly warm under it. She still felt nearby. Definitely still in Sanctuary. He opened his eyes and they immediately fell on a note left on the coffee table.

‘Gone to see Mama Murphy. Be back soon. Breakfast is across the street.’

Everything seemed perfectly normal. He could almost believe the events of the night before had all just been some weird dream. Almost. Except his hands still felt tingly from where he’d touched her.
That irritated, buzzing kind of tingle he remembered from that month he’d spent waiting for Lucy to catch up to him back when they were kids.

He held them up in front of his face and frowned. They certainly didn’t look any different, but they felt different. Did this mean they were going to experience a second Bloom together? Or was he really just that hard up to touch her that he was pushing himself into a similar state? Mac rubbed his fingers together. They felt like that moment before static electricity shocked you. Like something unseen was humming there waiting to strike.

Great. Cause controlling himself around Lottie wasn’t already hard enough. Let’s just add a second dose of teenage hormones on top of it. That was really going to go well.

Charlotte, breakfast tray in hand, paused on Mama Murphy’s doorstep and shivered. RJ was awake. She could feel it. She could also feel a tingling sensation that swept up through her stomach, following the path his hand had taken the night before. That was...weird. It almost made her feel itchy.

She shifted the tray to one hand and experimentally rubbed at her side. It kind of helped. Still felt weird though. Like pins and needles, but she’d never heard of anyone getting that on their torso.

This was silly. She was just imagining things. Probably to be expected since she’d been awake since three in the morning. RJ had gone right back to sleep, but she’d tossed and turned all night. Even now, his scent was lingering on her and it was incredibly distracting.

She was absolutely taking a shower some time today. No two ways about it.

Charlotte politely knocked and waited for a raspy ‘come in’ before opening the door. “Good morning, Mama Murphy!”

The old woman smiled vaguely at her, “There you are, kid. About time you came to see me.”

“Yeah. Sorry.” She quickly came in and set the tray down on the coffee table. The room was warm thanks to Sturges and his uncanny ability to coax even the ricketiest of appliances to come back to life. A space heater hummed quietly in the corner, barely sparking at all. Pretty impressive.

She waited until Mama Murphy had sat down before draping a blanket over her legs and bringing her tray directly to her.

“Here you go! Breakfast of champions!”

“Always fussin’.”

“Yeah.”

She took a few bites of scrambled mirelurk eggs and then raised her eyebrow, “Well?”

Charlotte took a deep breath and blew it out, “Is reincarnation a thing?”

“Just gonna jump right in there, huh?”

“Sorry. Sorry, that was…” She sat on the floor at her feet, exactly as she used to always sit at her gran’s. “I’m sorry. How have you been?”

“Good, good. Can’t complain...well, can’t complain too much anyway. Preston and Marcy keep ganging up on me. Won’t even let me have so much as a mentat. Can you believe that?”
“Well, you are already the smartest person here. I’m not sure what a mentat could possibly do for you.”

Her nose scrunched up, “Don’t use that false voice with me, kid. I don’t like it.”

She sighed and let her tongue relax in her mouth. “Yes, ma’am.”

“That’s better...now. Let Mama tell you a story.”

Charlotte smiled and crossed her legs, leaning in. Her granny had always answered questions in the form of a story.

“Once, there was beautiful young girl, with a special power. Used to get in all kinds of crazy adventures…”

Her head tilted. This sounded familiar.

“She meets a handsome young boy, but he doesn't like her power. Thinks it makes her a slave to something evil.”

“Um…”

“And so the power goes away, and it's not there when the girl and the boy need it most.”

“Mama Murphy?”

“Now the boy's gone, and the girl's old. But she has friends. And her power keeps them safe. That's all that matters.” She stared off into the distance for a moment, “Yes, that's all that matters…”

“Mama Murphy?”

She blinked like she’d forgotten she had company, “Yeah, kid?”

“You already told me that story, ma’am.”

“Oh, I did?”

“Yes, ma’am, you did.”

“Well, little miss smarty pants, did I tell you that all happened pre-war?”

Charlotte blinked up at her, “What?”

“The girl and the boy met before the bombs fell. Before you were even born.”

“I thought...I mean, the way you tell it, you were the girl, right?”

“That’s right.”

“So...you’re saying you’re pre-war? Like me?”

“No, not like you...back then I had a different name, a different life. But my Tony, he stayed the same.”

“Tony was the boy?”

“Right.”
She thought it over for a few minutes while the old woman finished her eggs. “When you needed it most...was that when the bombs fell?”

Mama Murphy sighed, “Yeah. A big event like that would have been easy to see comin’, if I’d been able to see anything...instead it took us by surprise. I burned away into nothing right in his arms, but Tony...Tony was strong. Stronger than most. He turned. Became a ghoul, rode out all the looting and pillaging and killing. Went south in search of someplace he’d be accepted.” She chuckled, “He was pretty pissed when I was reborn right here. Had one hell of a walk back before he could get to me. Took him years.”

“You were reincarnated.”

“Yup.”

“And you remembered it?”

“Ah, well...not at first. Took a hit of this thing called X-Cell to knock that one loose...but after that, the dreams just wouldn’t stop and by the time Tony made it back to me, we were pretty much able to pick up right where we left off.”

Charlotte chewed on her thumbnail, thinking. “So...it’s true then? RJ is Nate.”

She shook her head, “No.”

“No?”

“RJ is RJ. Your Nate is still up in that icebox.”

“But he was Nate?”

“No, he’s always been RJ.”

She steepled her fingers and carefully set her forehead on them. This felt more and more like trying to squeeze blood from a stone. “Mama Murphy, please. Help me understand. I want to understand what’s happening here.”

“You make quilts, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, when you make one, what do you use?”

“I...uh...scraps? Usually old clothes that are falling apart.”

“Exactly. Just because your new blanket has pieces of an old dress in it, that doesn’t make it the same dress, now does it?”

“No.”

“No, it does not.”

“So...RJ is like...the recycled scraps of Nate? Is that what you’re saying?”

She huffed at her, “You’re smarter than this, kid. Look. What your mama always told you is the truth. The outside don’t matter. It’s just ephemeral wrapping paper. The soul. The soul is what counts. And Nate’s soul, your soul, my soul, Tony’s soul...they’re all eternal. They keep going in
an endless loop. Meeting over and over and over again...if you’re lucky.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense.”

“Why not?”

“Because...people almost never have soulmates nowadays. If what you’re saying was right, they still should, right? But people talk about it like it’s some fairytale or something.”

“Ah.” Her eyes got dark and sad, “You ever watch the face of a feral or a super mutant when you kill it? How right there at the end, there’s a little moment of bliss?”

“Oh, God...oh, my God. They’re trapped, aren’t they? That’s...we messed it all up. The cycles are broken because...their souls are still attached to their bodies?”

“That’s right. They’re caught in the middle, so they don’t connect to their other halves, but they also can’t move on.”

“That’s awful.”

“M’hmm.” She shrugged, “Well, what can you do but take down all the lost ones you can, right? Just cause you got a peek behind the curtain don't mean you can go and tell the world about it, cause then assholes will just use that as an excuse to gun down ghouls like my Tony.”

“Is that what happened? Bigots got him?”

She smiled softly, “Don’t cry for him, kid. He died protecting me, which is all he’d ever wanted. He couldn’t do it when the bombs hit, so he did it when...well, it doesn’t matter who it was. The point is, he's moved on...and someday I will, too, and then we’ll be together again. So it’s okay.”

Charlotte hadn’t even realized she was crying and she rubbed at her eyes, “But...okay, so the soul is eternal and that’s all well and good, but...how can he be so different from my Nate?”

“Do you think you’d be who you are today if you’d grown up somewhere else? If you’d lived a whole different life, would you still be Charlie Apperson? Or would you be somebody new?”

“Nature versus nurture. That’s what you’re talking about, right?”

“Yes, and no. There are certain things that will always be with you. You’re strong and capable and loving, and you always have been and always will be. But who’s to say in the next life you won’t be born to a bunch of assholes who take those things and twist them against you, hmm? Then your outside would look a lot different than your inside, wouldn’t it?”

Her head tilted, “Are you saying they have more in common than I think?”

She shrugged, “Maybe.”

“I mean...they look alike, but...” She trailed off, thinking of that moment in the trailer. The way she’d felt so comforted by RJ’s presence. How she’d felt safe and cherished being held by him, just like she had with Nate. Her eyes met Mama Murphy’s and the seer smiled at her.

“There you go. You’re gettin’ it.”

“It’s so weird.”

She snorted, “Tell me about it. Tony came up here expecting somebody a lot less frisky than yours
truly, I can tell you that. There was an uh...adjustment period.”

Charlotte laughed, “Yeah, I bet...can I ask you something else?”

“Sure. I don’t got anything better to do.”

“RJ said his wife, Lucy, was his soulmate, too...how is that possible if I never died?”

“Ah.” She smiled, “Now that was interesting. A little bump in the fabric of time.” She leaned down and stared deep into her eyes for a moment. “You must have had one powerful wish to follow him like that.”

This close up and Charlotte was wondering just how old Mama Murphy actually was. There was an odd, timeless quality to her that meant she could have been anywhere from fifty to one hundred and fifty and you’d never know. There was no polite way to ask her directly though, so her age would just have to remain a mystery.

“What do you mean, a wish?”

“When he died, what’d your heart scream?”

She closed her eyes and was back there, in that icy torture chamber, pounding away at the glass and screaming until she couldn’t anymore. The frost on the window grew, creeping faster and faster across the glass. The air in her lungs froze and she couldn’t keep her eyes open. Only one thought remained.

“I want Nate.”

“There you go.”

Charlotte opened her eyes and frowned up at her, “But I didn’t die.”

“Who says?”

“Um...Vault-Tec, I guess?”

She snorted, “You’re really gonna believe anything those assholes sold you?”

“So I was dead?”

“According to the universe, you were dead. Your brain wasn’t working, you weren’t breathing, your heart had stopped and your soul wanted to move on. What would you call that?”

“Dead, I guess.”

“Yup.”

“So I was his Lucy.”

Mama Murphy sighed, “No! Lucy was his Lucy. You’re his Lottie.”

“I meant, my soul was...put inside a Lucy box?”

She waved her palm, “More or less.”

Those Neverland dreams. Being effortlessly delicate and ladylike, just like she’d always wanted.
Charlotte frowned thoughtfully, “Does the universe listen all the time?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like...if I’d always wanted to be a certain way, but couldn’t, would the universe make...my packaging that way in the next life?”

“It’s possible. The universe is always listening, kid. Don’t ever doubt it.”

She didn’t. She absolutely didn’t. From RJ’s descriptions of her, Lucy was the woman she’d always wanted to be. The person she’d failed to be for Nate. She fiddled with her wedding ring and sighed.

“I can’t be her.”

“No more than he can ever be Nate.”

“I’m just going to disappoint him all over again, aren’t I?”

She scoffed, “For somebody so smart, you sure are dumb sometimes. You should ask the universe to smarten you up a little your next go-round.”

“What are --”

Mama Murphy whapped her upside the head, “Now go on somewhere. Make yourself useful. Go take a proper look at that man of yours and see if you can’t look beneath the surface this time.”

Charlotte sighed. Her gran used to dismiss her exactly the same way. “Yes, ma’am.” She stood and ran her hands through her hair, wincing a little at how tangled it actually was. She definitely needed a bath. “Do you need anything while I’m here?”

She winked up at her, “Don’t happen to have any Jet on you, do ya?”

“No.”

“Then nope. You’re no good to me. Go on.”

She had the grace to wait until she’d turned away from the seer to roll her eyes. If she thought anybody in this whole dang town was going to just blithely toss a chem her way, she was nuts. Even if Preston hadn’t already laid down the law on that one, Marcy was terrifying enough all on her own that no one would dare cross her. Between the two of them, they’d made it very, very clear that under no circumstances was Mama Murphy to ever have access to any chem stronger than a stimpak.

She took the tray with her and left, closing the door behind her when a voice from her left startled her enough that she nearly dropped the damn thing.

“Hey.”

“RJ! Uh...hey.”

He took the tray from her hands, “I’ll get that.”

“No, it’s --”

“Already got it.” He started walking towards the Rosa’s and she had no choice but to follow along.
“So um...you sleep okay?”

“Yeah.”

“You were a little out of it yesterday...how do you feel?”

Mac crossed the threshold and shook his head. The longer he was here, the more memories kept slipping into his head. Well...no, not memories, exactly. It was like watching a movie kinda. Which made sense if that old bat had been right and he really had once upon a time been the very man Lottie was still mourning.

“Feel fine.” He handed the tray off to one of the ladies and grabbed Lottie’s hand, ignoring her startled squeak while he dragged her down the hallway into the old bathroom. He slid the old pocket door shut behind them and grinned at her in the low lamplight.

“What are you doing?”

“Remember when the Rosa’s threw that godawful barbecue and you said the coleslaw was an affront to cabbage everywhere and we pretended to go see if we had any extra beer at our house, but actually we snuck in here?”

“I...yes?”

He set the lid down on the toilet seat and sat on it. “And I sat right here and you sat --”

“I know where I sat.”

“Doesn’t it make you feel nostalgic?”

She frowned thoughtfully, “Does it make you feel nostalgic?”

“No, actually it doesn’t. It just makes me feel jealous.” He reached out and managed to catch her around the waist, pulling her down to straddle him. “Makes me feel like we should be making some new memories of our own. What do you think?”

Charlotte stared down into his eyes. Okay, so maybe RJ wasn’t Nate and never would be, but he had to have some of the same core traits, right? Somewhere way down deep? She just had to figure out how to look beyond the surface.

Even if the surface was pretty dang yummy and a little harder to ignore every minute they spent together.

He was so close now. She could lean down and kiss him and then...then what? Memories of who she’d been both before and after Nate flashed through her head and she closed her eyes. There was still so much she had to do. So many people who depended on her.

She carefully set her head on RJ’s shoulder and shook her head. His arms relaxed, giving her space to escape and she more felt than heard his sigh.

“Not yet?”

Frustration built within her and alongside it, a half-remembered moment from another life altogether. “Not yet.”

Mac was a little confused. Clearly she wasn’t going to give him the ride of his life like she’d done with Nate back when they’d been bored, buzzed suburbanites. But she also didn’t seem to actually
want to go anywhere. Was this progress? He cautiously set a hand on her hip and the other rubbed her back. Whatever she was going through here was obviously complex and beyond him for now, but he could still offer her some assurance that things would get better.

“That’s alright. We’ll get there.”

Charlotte knew how this conversation was supposed to go. She was supposed to say ‘soon’ and then he’d tease her and then they’d kiss. Cue the romance, lower the curtain on the person she currently was. She remembered. But she couldn’t yet. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kept her eyes closed, wanting to hide from reality for just a little while longer.

Mac just kept rubbing her back and trying to think of anything but how her muted cries had echoed off the shiny tile and the way she’d giggled her way through an orgasm. He felt like it was kinda fucked up that he was stuck with all these juicy memories in his head and no way to actually recreate them or whatever.

This was nice, too, though.

“Hey, remember how confused Pete looked when we didn’t come back with beer? And you just stared at him and said --”

“What beer?”

“Yeah.” He grinned, “That was pretty funny.”

“I’d totally forgotten our cover story.”

“Well, who could blame you?”

“Susie and Pete did, obviously.”

A chuckle rumbled through his chest, “Yeah...hey, can I ask you something?” She nodded and he went on, “Is it me? Cause...I know I’m not --”

“It’s not you.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“I know I said some hateful things to you. Besmirched your character and all. I’m sorry.” Her arms tightened around him, “I didn’t mean it.”

“So I’m not actually the worst?”

“No, you’re not...and you’re at least as charming and handsome as the devil himself.”

“Nice. I got upgraded to charming and handsome.”

“We should talk.”

“We are talking, sweetheart.”

“No, I mean...we need to really talk.”

Mac winced. No good conversation in the history of the world had ever started with that line. “Okay.”
“Not here though.”

“Yeah, this toilet isn’t really doing it for me either…”

“We should go home. To Diamond City.”

“Sure, that’s...what eight hours? When should we --”

“Now.”

“Now. Now now?”

“Yes.” Charlotte pulled herself together and stood, holding out a hand for him. “Right now.” However this played out, they needed to hash everything out and she was pretty sure neither of them could possibly think straight in Sanctuary. Not when they were both being bombarded by the past.

“Okay.” Mac took her hand and stood, “Then let’s go home.”

Chapter End Notes

Heeeey. So.

Still have a cold. It's still kicking my butt. (Blaming all mistakes on the Day/NyQuil. Ha.)

Next week I will be working at least a little on my other stories. I feel like I've been neglecting them. 😃

Also, I hope y'all have noticed, but I'm kinda trying to hit as many romantic tropes in this thing as I possibly can. So, if you have one that I have not yet used, please drop me a comment and I'll do my best to work it in where applicable. I just think they're funny.
“Oh! It’s so good to see you, Miss Charlotte!”

“Hey, Codsworth.” Charlotte let him take her gear and coat, immediately flopping down on the new couch with a groan. “Where are the pups?”

“Out. Miss Nat came by earlier and asked if she could play with them.”

“Oh, okay.”

“I was expecting you yesterday.”

“Yeah, I know...sorry about that. Had a change of plans.”

“Of course. I just worry.” The Mister Handy finally swung around to greet their guest and abruptly fell silent, staring at Mac with all three eyes focused on him.

Her head lolled over and she frowned a little. His programming was supposed to prompt him to launch into his usual ‘welcome guest’ spiel. “That’s --”

“Sir!”

Ah, crap.

Codsworth hovered close enough that Mac took a few steps back until he found himself pressed against the door. “Uh...hi. I’m MacCready. RJ MacCready.”

“Sir, it’s you!” He grabbed one of Mac’s arms with his pincher appendage and held it up, “Goodness! Who has been feeding you? Or not feeding you, obviously. My my my, this just won’t do at all!”

Charlotte sighed and stood back up. It took both hands to pull the bot off RJ. “No, honey. No. This is RJ.”

“Mum! You found him!”

“Codsworth --”

“I knew you would! I just knew it!”

He wasn’t listening to her. Not even a little. She could use his deactivation code. Force a reboot. That’s what his user manual had always said to do. But this was Codsworth. Her eyes met RJ’s and he shrugged at her. Charlotte looked over at the metallic aperture currently staring at her with something remarkably close to hope shining in it and nodded.

“Yeah. Yeah, you said I would.”

“It’s a miracle!”

“Yup.”
“Oh! We must celebrate! I made a pot roast for yesterday! It will only take a moment to reheat it! And I have some lovely red wine to go with it!”

“That sounds perfect, honey.”

Mac cleared his throat, “Yeah, pot roast sounds pretty good right now.”

Codsworth swiveled on his way to the kitchen to focus on him again, “Sir...your voice is a bit... oh! Are my sensors deceiving me or did you...regrow your leg, Sir?”

“Uh...yes?”

“Remarkable! Just remarkable!”

He finally floated out of sight and Mac laughed softly, “Well, that was terrifying. I was pretty sure I was about to be flambeed.”

“You...you just look a lot like Nate. It confused him.”

He’d already known that, but it was the first time she’d admitted it. Mac nodded, “Yeah, I kinda figured. You um...you look a lot like Lucy, actually.”

“I do?”

“Yeah.”

“But you said she was beautiful.”

Before he could respond, the door behind him opened and he nearly got knocked down as two dogs came bouncing in, followed by a little girl who scowled at him but smiled at Lottie.

“Hey! Blue! You’re back!”

“Yeah, just got in.”

“Piper was super worried about you. I dunno why. I told her you could handle yourself out there just fine.”

“Oh...whoops. Okay. Could you tell her I’ll see her tomorrow?”

“Sure!”

“How’d they behave for you?”

“Great! Sass stayed right with me and Dogmeat went into the ruins and found things.” She held up a bag, “I got all kinds of cool stuff! Sheng’s gonna be so jealous!”

“Oh, good.”

Pleasantries over, she glared up at Mac, “Who’re you supposed to be?”

“MacCready.”

“Nat.”

“Hey.”
“Hey.”

Charlotte watched them give each other the eye and shook her head. If you didn’t know any better, you’d think Nat was his little sister and not Piper’s. “Okay, you should get on home now, honey. I’m sure Piper’s got dinner ready for you.”

“Oh, yeah.” Nat gave Sassy’s ear one final scratch. “Later.”

“Later.”

Mac locked the door behind her and turned back to Lottie, “Piper’s sister, I take it?”

“Yup.” She nodded towards the German Shepard wiggling impatiently, even as he sat like the good boy he was. “And that’s Dogmeat.”

Blue eyes met brown and it was love at first sight. He was honestly kind of blown away by how gorgeous his new familiar was. Tracker had been great, and scrappy as all get out, but this dog was...magnificent. He didn’t even know dogs could look like this.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, I don’t get it either. I mean...look how handsome he is, right? Who could possibly hope to live up to that?”

“Ha ha.” Mac made a face at her and knelt in front of him, “Who’s my good boy, huh? You did a good job taking care of your mama for me. Yes, you did.” His hands sank into the thick fur and he grinned. “He’s totally got my hair.”

“M’hmm.” Charlotte moved back to the couch, petting Sassy as she hopped up next to her. “Hey, Codsworth!”

A single eye peeked at her from around the corner, “Mum?”

“You did a good job with the new couch, honey. I love it.”

“Oh! Why thank you, mum! I um...I did a few other renovations while you were away as well.”

Her forehead creased, “I was only gone...not even three days.”

“I know. I...well, I suppose I might have gotten a bit carried away...although, in my defense, you did say I should make this place as homey as possible.”

“Oh, God...what’d you do?”

“I um...well, I may have added a master suite.”

“A master suite?”

“Yes, mum.”

“So now I have two bathrooms?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t even have two bathrooms in our old house.” Charlotte rubbed her temples and wondered how much trouble this was going to cause with the city and it’s restrictive water usage ordinances.
“So where is my bed now, exactly?”

“Ah, well...your old bed is still upstairs.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Your new bed, however, is down the hall.”

“Okay. That’s...okay.” Her head fell back against the couch and she stared up at the ceiling. “No, you know what? This is great, actually, because my legs are still killing me and if I had to actually walk up those stupid stairs, I was probably going to cry so...great. Thank you, Codsworth.”

“Oh! You’re most welcome, mum!”

Mac chuckled and finally stood, “Want me to take your gear to your new master suite, Mademoiselle Fancy-Pants?”

“Could you?”

“Sure.” He picked up her pack and headed down the hall. Since leaving Sanctuary, he’d been doing everything he could to show her how helpful and nonthreatening and totally great he was, or could be, at least. Practically falling over himself to meet her every need, anticipate every whim.

Cause they were close. He could feel it. Any day now. He just had to find that one specific thing that he could do or say that would finally convince her to let go of whatever was holding her back.

Codsworth was fussing over the stove and an eye watched him as he went past, “So good to finally see you again, Sir!”

“Uh...yeah, thanks, Codsworth. It’s good to see you again, too?”

“I just knew Mum would find you!”

“Yeah.” This whole situation was definitely weird, but he could roll with it. No big deal. He could roll with anything so long as he got to stay with Lottie.

The room that had once held a bunch of junk had been transformed into...well, a master suite, he guessed. A massive bed, dressers, side tables, even a couch. There was a new, smaller room in a corner that he had to assume was the second bathroom. The whole thing was almost a little house unto itself.

He tossed their stuff by the couch and was sorely tempted to give the bed the old bounce test, but ultimately decided not to. It was technically just Lottie’s bed for now, after all. She probably wouldn’t appreciate him messing it up.

Yet.

Charlotte sat on the couch, the wonderful smell of pot roast slowly making its way to her. Their walk back to Diamond City had been fairly uneventful, aside from RJ’s...whatever it was he was doing. He’d been cheerful and helpful and polite the whole way. It felt weird. Not like him at all. She was pretty sure he was trying to court her somehow, but if he was, he was going about it all wrong.

She already knew how he actually was. Pretending to be a gentleman for a few hours wasn’t going to erase the months of him aggressively coming onto her in her head. The funny thing was, she
actually liked him for who he was. Most of the time. She liked his brash arrogance and his wildly inappropriate sense of humor and even his over the top flirting. It’s what made all of this so hard.

At least they still had time for their talk. They could have dinner, relax a little, and then she could explain how things were and had to be. That he should just stay focused on his own life, and his son, and if everything worked out the way she wanted, they could come together sometime in the future and see where things went.

It sounded perfectly reasonable in her head, but she was pretty sure he wasn’t going to take it very well.

“Codsworth? Can I get an ETA on that pot roast?”

“Just twenty minutes, Miss Charlotte!”

“Okay...I’m taking a shower first then.”

“Right-oh. Oh! Try the new one! I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised at the water pressure I was able to create.”

“Great.” She tried to get up, but that sharp pain in her thigh that she’d been ignoring for two days would no longer be denied and she ended up sort of rolling off the sofa, onto the floor and then slowly rising thanks to an assist from Sassy.

Definitely taking tomorrow as a day of rest. Absolutely. Her body felt like it was about two seconds from critical failure.

She limped into her new bedroom and immediately shook her head. Thing was huge. If Codsworth was going to turn it into anything, she’d have figured he’d have turned it into a nursery or something. RJ was already fiddling with his rifle, sitting on the sofa across from the bed and she rolled her eyes at him from the doorway.

“Can you believe this? Who needs all this space for one bedroom?”

“Miss Charlotte, apparently.”

She laughed. His impersonation wasn’t bad. “I sound like a character from ‘Gone with the Wind’ whenever he calls me that. He won’t just say ‘Miss Lottie’, you know. I tried.”

“At least you aren’t just ‘Sir’. Never felt more like a mungo my whole damn life.”

“I’m going to take a shower before dinner.”

His head came up, “Oh, okay...did you want me to leave or...”

“No, it’s fine. I just...you know, giving you a heads up.”

“Okay.”

Shit, this was awkward. Why’d she feel so damn awkward? Charlotte walked back over and opened the top drawer of her dresser, relieved to see her personal things hadn’t been moved. She grabbed her comb, kicked off her shoes and sat on the bed, trying to make headway through the snarled mass of knots her hair had become.

Mac had put his head back down, but was watching her. Lucy’s hair had been nowhere near as curly as Lottie’s, but just as prone to tangling as hers apparently was. The fourth time he saw her
wince, he sighed and set aside his rifle.

“Want some help?”

“What?” She looked over at him, comb completely stuck in a particularly large knot at the base of her neck. “No.”

“Cause I’m pretty good at that. Had a lot of practice.”

“Well, so have I. I’ve only had this hair for thirty years, you know.”

“Uh-huh.” He stared at her, deadpan, while she continued to wrestle with her hair.

She could feel his eyes boring into the side of her head. It made her cheeks warm. “Stop watching me.”

He got up and came over, one hand on his hip and the other held out. “Give me the comb before you hurt yourself.”

Her dark scowling didn’t seem to have the same effect on RJ that it would have on Nate. Instead of backing off, he just barely lifted one eyebrow at her. Like she was the one being irrational here.

She pointedly looked away from him and slapped the comb in his hand. “Alright, fine. You do it then, if you’re so talented.”

“Well, if you insist.” He tapped her shoulder, “Sit on the floor.”

“What?”

“On the floor. Makes it easier.”

Charlotte huffed, “If I get down there, I dunno if I can get back up.”

He chuckled, “Don’t worry, I’ll help you up if it comes to that.”

She slid down and landed with a thump when her muscles gave out on her a little right at the end. “Ow. I really need a day off.”

“Or a week.” Mac sat on the bed, her head between his knees and set the comb aside for now.

“Can’t, I’ve…” She went quiet and still when his hands slid into her hair. “What are you doing?”

“Finger combing the worst of it. So why can’t you take a week?”

He sounded so blase about the whole thing. She felt a little silly for getting all hot and bothered over something so simple as his hands in her hair. “Um...well, Wednesday I have to meet Preston over by the old Fort Independence. It used to be the Minutemen’s base of operations, and if we can take it back, then we can boost our recruitment numbers by a lot. Plus, it has a radio station, I guess?”

“Hmm...take it back from what?”

The gentle pull of his fingers was making her drowsy. “Preston says a monster rose from the sea and took it as its lair.”

Mac chuckled, “A sea monster...is that a typical Wednesday for you?”
“M’hmm.” She didn’t really trust herself to speak and closed her eyes since there was no fighting how soothing this actually was.

“You know, I used to daydream about you running your little errands. I’d think about how cute you would look with a clipboard or whatever, telling idiots what to do...I don’t think I like them as much now that I know what they actually are.”

“Hmm.”

“Any other big plans for the week?”

Her whole body felt tingly. The drowsiness she’d initially felt was starting to feel more and more like being tipsy. She kept side-eyeing his leg, right by her head, and felt the strangest compulsion to rest against it.

That would probably give him ideas though.

“This weekend I’m supposed to go into the Glowing Sea with Hancock.”

The fingers in her hair immediately froze. “What?”

“Glowing Sea.”

“Why?”

“That’s where Virgil is.”

Mac frowned. She almost sounded asleep, which is probably why she hadn’t picked up on how irate he was growing. “Who’s Virgil?” He resumed working his hands through her curls, if only to give himself something to focus on other than homicide.

“Institute scientist.”

Okay, well, that just raised a bunch of new questions. “Why do you want to see an Institute scientist?”

There was a pause so long he thought maybe she’d actually drifted off, then she quietly whispered. “Because they’re the ones who took Shaun.”

The moment she said his name, another memory flashed across his mind. Lottie sitting curled up against him on the couch while their son happily nursed at her breast. The World Series had been on and he’d completely missed the end of the game. Too absorbed in the moment. Shaun’s little tuft of red hair a perfect match for his mother’s, his dark eyes watching him watching them, a tiny hand curled around her finger.

He blinked and it was gone, but the feeling remained. Shaun felt like their baby. His baby. As much a part of him as Duncan.

“I’m going with you.”

“What?”

“I’m going with you. Into the Glowing Sea.”

“No, it’s...it’s super dangerous. I can’t ask you to do that.”
“Well, you didn’t ask. I’m still going.”

She turned and looked back at him, “What about Duncan? Don’t you need to go home to him? Get him that medicine and everything?”

“It’s already on its way. Hancock took it with him to give to Daisy, who’s going to send it with a caravan for me. That was always the plan.”

“I thought you were going, too.”

“I am if it works. If they send back word that it doesn’t, I gotta keep searching for a different cure. Doesn’t make sense for me to go back home just to have to leave again. Anyway, he’s happy where he is. My friend, Eclair, and his wife, Maggie, are taking care of him. He’s fine. He’ll be fine.”

“But --”

“You’re going to need all the help you can get to find Shaun, right?”

That was certainly true. Especially since she’d cut ties with the Railroad. “Yeah.”

“Then I’m going to help you. End of discussion.”

She tried to frown up at him for using such a bossy tone, but he turned her head and went back to tugging the knots from her hair.

“Anyway, if you think I’m just going to let you prance that ass into the Glowing Sea with Hancock, you’re nuts.”

“I have heard a rumor that it makes him um...frisky.”

He snorted, “Frisky. It goes a little beyond that.”

“Oh.”

“Just a regular radstorm is enough for him to declare a neighborhood-wide orgy, sweetheart. You don’t wanna know what the Glowing Sea does to him.”

“Well, I guess I’m gonna have to, right?”

Mac grumbled, “I guess...you’ve got one of those hazmat suits, right?”

“I have two, actually.” Since a certain someone was supposed to help her through it. She’d been irritated that she’d wasted the caps on the second suit, but if RJ was coming, it would definitely come in handy.

“Maybe it won’t be too bad then. We’ll be all covered up, he might be able to actually focus a little.” He finally switched to the comb and started at the bottom, combing in short strokes to make sure he didn’t snag a missed knot.

“Here’s hoping.”

“Yeah.” He couldn’t get over how soft her hair actually was. Soft and thick and long. Far longer than he’d thought it was. “I um...I really like your hair, by the way.”

“Oh...thank you.”
“It’s really pretty.”

“That’s nice of you to say.”

She’d said it like he was just paying her lip service and he frowned, “I mean it. It’s beautiful.”

“Sure, for a rat’s nest.”

“Well it’s not a rat’s nest right now, and it’s beautiful.” He watched the way it sprang back into a looser curl as he combed it. “Do you not like it?”

She shrugged, “I dunno. I’ve always just tied it back and ignored it, or left it down and ignored it...until I have to wash it and then it’s a fight.”

“I thought there were all sorts of fancy hair salons and whatever pre-war.”

“There were. I’d go in once a week and they’d wash it, beat it into submission and use a whole can of AquaNet to keep it looking neat.”

“Beat it into submission?”

“Into a chignon, I mean.”

“The heck is that?”

“It’s like um...like a really fancy bun. Took a lot of bobby pins.”

“Oh...well, I like it as is. It suits you.”

“Cause I’m a mess, too?”

Mac rolled his eyes, “Oh yeah, that’s it. Cause there’s nothing I love more than a big mess.” He finally, reluctantly, set the comb aside and ran his hand over it one last time. “You’re all done. Go take your shower.”

“Oh.” She ran her fingers through it, “Oh, wow. You did a good job!”

“Told you. I’ve had practice.”

“Well, thanks.”

“No problem...need help up?”

“I think I can manage.” Charlotte chuckled a little when she fumbled a bit on her first attempt. “Maybe.”

He helped push her onto her feet, “I really think you should take a week.”

“Can’t. I’m --”

“Busy. Yeah.” Mac sighed and watched her limp into her new bathroom. She really was busy. Far busier than he’d ever assumed.

Maybe she’d be busy enough that she’d forget the talk they were supposed to have altogether.

By the time Charlotte was finished in the shower, RJ was already digging into his pot roast, a beer by his side instead of the glass of red Codsworth had promised. She sat down at the table in her
pajamas and sighed when the bot set a glass of milk down in front of her.

“Milk first, Miss Charlotte.”

“Yes, thank you, Codsworth.”

Mac chuckled, “Makes you feel like a little kid, doesn’t it?”

She took a drink and her nose wrinkled at the taste. “Yes.”

“Lucy hated it, too. She never said anything, but I could tell.”

“Hmm.” Of course she hadn’t. Not the perfect Lucy. She wouldn’t have complained about anything. Ever. It felt a little weird being jealous of her former self, but it couldn’t be helped. She drank down her milk and set the glass down with a thump, doing her best to not glare at Codsworth while he replaced it with her actual dinner.

Mac watched her eat a few bites before he tried talking again, “It’s good.”

“M’hmm.”

“We’ll have to remember it for next year.”

She swallowed and her head tilted, “Next year?”

“Yeah. So we can recreate it. The anniversary of our first dinner together here.”

It was such a Nate thing to say, she almost dropped her fork. Charlotte stared at him, waiting for the punchline, but there wasn’t one. He was being sincere. Was this one of those core things Mama Murphy had talked about? Could somebody as snarky and cynical as RJ really have that same level of sentimentality?

“Codsworth?”

“Yes, Miss Charlotte?”


“Yes, mum. Shall I sync to your PipBoy as well?”

“Sure.”

“At once, mum.” A confirmation chime rang and he floated away to tidy up the living room.

“There you go.”

He grinned, “Nice.”

“Yeah.” A year was a long, long time. Would they actually be together by then? Or would something worse have already happened? Charlotte sipped her wine and tried to fight against becoming maudlin. She must really be tired. She’d always gotten moody when she was exhausted.

Mac was already finished, but stayed at the table, watching her eat. He liked how she cut up everything into teeny tiny bites before she ate it. It was cute. Most people just stabbed the thing and shoved it in their mouth. Lottie had manners though. Real ones. The kinds Lucy had. Please and thank you and smiling at strangers and wanting everybody around you to be happy and
comfortable. Lucy had always fussed at him for his own rough nature. Manners matter. She’d said that a million times and he’d rolled his eyes at it a million and one.

She finally glanced up and went a little pink at the way he was staring at her. This was rude, wasn’t it? To just keep eating even though your guest was clearly finished. In any other circumstance, she’d set her fork down and pretend to not be hungry anymore, but she needed the protein, right? That’s how muscles healed. Protein and rest. Survival came before courtesy, even if it made her feel boorish.

Charlotte cleared her throat a little, “I’m sorry. You don’t have to stay at the table.”

“What?”

“You should um...oh! Take a shower. Codsworth can wash everything for you, too. Just put it in the laundry basket.”

“Oh.” Maybe she really had forgotten about their talk. Awesome. Mac had wanted to stay and keep watching her, but he wasn’t going to push it. “Okay, thanks.”

“M’hmm.” She watched him go back to the bedroom and sighed in relief. This was a good compromise, right? He had something to do and she could finish eating. Maybe not as graceful as some would have handled it, but not terrible, either. Effort counted, didn’t it? That’s what her mama had always said anyway.

Codsworth came zipping through on his way to pick up the laundry basket and swung RJ’s dishes into the sink as he went, barely slowing down. It never ceased to amaze her how efficient he really was. To think she’d fought Nate on getting him in the first place. She couldn’t even imagine having a home without the Mister Handy in it now. He zipped back through, basket in tow and both dogs slunk into the kitchen the second he left.

Charlotte smiled as they both came and sat by her chair, staring up at her with huge eyes. “Beggars. That’s all y’all are.” She fed them the last two bites of her roast off her own fork, quickly, before Codsworth could come back and fuss. Nate had always hated her sneaking the dogs table scraps and the bot had picked up on it ages ago. “Now go on. Go lay down somewhere before we get caught.”

They trotted off together and she slowly got up, wincing at the way her left calf kept wanting to charley horse on her. This was ridiculous. Just running shouldn’t have...oh, wait. She’d fallen, too. Charlotte stared down at her legs for a moment. Had she broken something when she fell through that roof? That would explain the lingering pain and stiffness. Stimpaks could knit bone back together fairly well, but they couldn’t fix bruised tissue. If her bones had been bruised, then she was just going to have to suck it up for a while.

It wasn’t like she could send Codsworth down to the A & P for aspirin or anything.

She went ahead and did the dishes herself. It gave her something to focus on besides the fact that RJ was currently naked somewhere in her home. The closer it got to bedtime, the more nervous she was feeling. Which was silly since nothing was happening. There were plenty of places he could sleep besides her bed. It was fine. Everything was fine.

The butterflies in her tummy though disagreed.

When the dishes were finished, she decided to wipe down the kitchen. Stalling, probably. Which was cowardly, but there it was.
She kept at it right up until Codsworth caught her yawning while cleaning the coffee pot and chased her out, insisting she go to bed.

Charlotte crept into her room, bracing for the worst, and was actually surprised. RJ was sitting on the couch already, his hair still wet, wearing a pair of her sweatpants and a long sleeved shirt. Perfectly decent. Thank God.

Of course, he was looking awfully comfortable on that couch. Like he had zero intention of leaving it for the foreseeable future. She coughed politely and he raised his head.

“Oh, hey...that shower is freaking amazing. I mean, I’m not a huge fan of getting wet, but damn.”

“Oh, good. Good, I’m glad you liked it...um...I was going to head on to bed, so…”

“Oh, okay. I’ll just sleep here.”

Crap. “Well, actually, I mean, there’s a whole other bed upstairs, and --”

He motioned at the door, “I’d really rather be here. Just in case.”

“In case of what?”

“Intruders.”

She frowned, “In Diamond City?”

Mac shrugged, “You never know.”

“Well, that’s...uh, real thoughtful and all, but I’m sure Codsworth can handle that stuff. He’s equipped with home security protocols.”

“Still. I’d just feel better.”

Why was he making this so difficult? She huffed, “You can’t just sleep on couches for the rest of your life, RJ. It’s not good for your back.”

“Nah, I’ll be fine...go on, go to bed. Just let me know if I should turn this lantern down. I’m trying to tighten this stock up a little, but it can wait until morning if it’s bothering you.”

Charlotte watched him go back to work like the matter was already settled. Nate would have noticed she was aggravated and let her win. Apparently they didn’t have that in common.

She grumbled uncomplimentary things about the stubborn nature of fools while she pulled the covers back and flopped into bed. It really was crazy comfortable and she immediately decided to do something nice for Codsworth for this incredible boon he’d found for her. Maybe a new hat or something.

Mac listened to her muttering and smirked. If she thought he was actually going to sleep somewhere she wasn’t ever again in his life, she was sorely mistaken. He’d already lost one soulmate (or the same soulmate, maybe?) due to his careless inattention. Like hell he was going to lose another that way.

She stared up at the ceiling, absurdly aware that RJ was just a few feet away. Tinkering like he didn’t have a care in the world. She huffed to herself and sat up, glaring at him.

“Go sleep in the other room!”
He didn’t even look up, “Nope.”

“Nope.”

“Right now!”

“Not happening.”

“This is my house!”

“Our house. You gave it to me, remember?”

“You...you are being very rude!”

He did glance up for that, an eyebrow raised, “So?”

“Nate would never be so rude!”

“Well, I’m not Nate.”

She folded her arms and glared as hard as she possibly could, “Go.”

“Nope.” Damn screw was stripped. That’s what the problem was. He could probably find a new one at Myrna’s tomorrow. He grumbled a bit. Hated dealing with her. If Lottie wasn’t so cranky, he’d go right now while Percy was on nightshift, but since she was, he wasn’t taking the risk that she’d try to lock him out.

Not that that would actually keep him out. He just didn’t want to deal with any extra aggravation.

“Nothing is going to happen between us tonight, you know.”

“I know.”

“I have to save my son first!”

He frowned a little. That seemed a strange tangent to go on. “Okay?”

“So you need to stop trying to...to woo me or whatever.”

“What?”

“I know what you’ve been up to! Bein’ so nice and considerate and weird. Well, until now, anyway. Now you’re acting like yourself.”

“Uh…”

“I’m not some bar floozy you can trick into thinkin’ you’re civilized. I already know how you are.”

That almost sounded like an insult. Mac set his rifle aside and relaxed against the couch, “And how am I?”

“Just like Piper said! Rude and obnoxious and arrogant!”

“I’m not obnoxious.”

“Yes, you are!”

“No, I’m not.”
“Yes, you are!”

“No, I’m not.”

She wasn’t used to arguing with someone who didn’t know when to back down and it infuriated her. “You are the worst.”

He rolled his eyes, “You already took that back.”

“Well, I’m taking back taking it back!”

“You can’t double-take back. That’s not allowed.”

“Says who?”

“Says everybody.”

“I dunno how you can sit there and be this cruel.”

“Cruel?”

“Yes.”

“How am I being cruel? I just wanna sleep here and keep you safe.”

“That’s not what you really want.”

The room was suddenly very quiet. The air between them heavy and filled with things better left unsaid. Mac looked away from her and shook his head, “Well I’m nowhere near getting what I really want, so I’m settling for this.”

“You’re a daddy. You know how it feels...how can you ask that of me?”

Her voice wobbled at the last part and he was surprised at how quickly her eyes had welled up, “What are you talking about?”

“You know what’s gonna happen. You know it’ll all be different. I’ll be different and...and I won’t care. I won’t care about anything anymore but you. How can you sit there, knowing my baby is lost somewhere, waiting on me, and be selfish enough to want me to set him aside?”

He stared at her and it took a minute to find his voice, “Lottie, no, I...why would you think I’d want any of that?”

“Because that’s what happens once the bond is sealed! You know that!”

“What?”

“You were married! This shouldn’t be news to you!”

He held up his hand, “Whoa, whoa, whoa. Wait. Are you saying that when Nate claimed you, you became a whole different person?”

“Of course I did!” Charlotte angrily rubbed at her eyes. The gall of this man. Like he didn’t know damn good and well what was going to happen. “Before Nate I had...I had my own dreams and - and then there was just him. There wasn’t room for anything else!”
Mac frowned at her, thinking of when he’d claimed Lucy. They’d been exchanging innocent kisses for years, right from the start. He’d thought they were gross at first, but the older kids had all said that’s what you had to do when you had a girlfriend, so that’s what he did. He couldn’t remember her ever changing though. Not even through the Bloom. She was always just...Lucy.

“I don’t think that’s supposed to happen, sweetheart.”

“What?”

“Lucy didn’t change like that.”

“What?”

“Yeah, no, I mean...she was our doctor before uh...well, before, and after, she still wanted to be a doctor. When we left Lamplight, we eventually... she eventually became a traveling doctor and I was her guard. That’s what we did until Duncan arrived and then we started looking for a place to settle down at.”

“A traveling doctor? Like Doc Weathers?”

He snorted, “No, not like that hack. He’s just a chem peddler. Lucy was a real doctor.”

She was staring at him like he was crazy, “She didn’t change.”

“Nope.”

“She’d always wanted to be a doctor, and that didn’t change.”

“Nuh-uh.”

Charlotte stared down at her blanket and tried to wrap her head around the concept. It didn’t make sense. Everyone changed, didn’t they? That’s what she’d always thought. It certainly seemed like her siblings who got married before her changed. Hadn’t they? Or had they? They’d all been a lot older than her. There was a four year gap after the twins and the rest of them. Maybe she’d just assumed they’d changed because they weren’t around all the time anymore.

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“Well, I mean, it kinda does? Why would she change? She was already perfect.”

Oh. Oh, God. Had her biology even realized how inadequate she was as Nate’s other side? Jesus, that was embarrassing. “Oh.”

Mac watched her ears turn pink and felt like he should say something. Something reassuring, but he didn’t know what. “What was your dream?”

“I wanted to be a vet. A large animal vet.”

He could see that. Lottie surrounded by animals and their grateful owners. That felt right. “So why didn’t you become one?”

“I dunno.” She shrugged, “It wouldn’t have worked well with Nate’s lifestyle and...it wasn’t exactly the kind of job anyone in his family would have approved of and...”

“Why’d you decide to be a lawyer then?”
“Nate made a joke one day. Henny and Cheep were fighting, like always, and he said that with as much as my family liked to argue, he was surprised we didn’t have any lawyers in the bunch and...so I became a lawyer.”

“Just because he made a joke?” She just shrugged and Mac mulled that over for a moment. The Nate he was in his dreams didn’t seem controlling or anything. They’d had that rough ten year start to their marriage, but he’d just assumed that was a distance thing from him always being gone. If she’d been trying to turn herself into someone else to try and fit some idea of perfection that only existed in her head the entire time, then maybe the distance had come from both sides.

Nate must have never known. He couldn’t imagine any man so gentle being okay with his wife twisting herself up like that. Then again, had he ever told her how wonderful he thought she was? Or had she only ever heard him fussing at her to behave herself?

“You know I think you’re great, right?”

She sniffled a little and wiped her nose with her sleeve, “What?”

“I think you’re...amazing and brave and...crazy. Smart. Funny.” He smiled at her, “Beautiful. You’re perfect.”

She shook her head, “Lucy was perfect.”

“Yeah...and so are you.”

“I can’t be like her.”

“Not asking you to be.”

More tears fell down her cheeks, “I wanted to be her though. My whole life. I have dreams, sometimes, where I’m...delicate and sweet and...and calm. I wish I could be like that, but I just can’t.”

“I like you as you are now.” When she just shook her head again, he sighed, “I dunno if you’ve noticed, but uh...I’m not exactly the aristocrat Nate was. And I’m never gonna be.” He shrugged, “But, I figure, if that old lady in Sanctuary was right, and the universe really is always listening, then who I am now is who he wanted to be for you.”

“What?”

“I have dreams, too. Dreams where he’s...always worried and feels like a coward and hates that he can’t just say what’s on his mind. Dreams where you intimidate the hell out of him and he’s ashamed of it. He wanted to be different for you, too, Lottie. He always did.”

“Nate did change though. He was able to be that man eventually.”

Mac nodded, “Yeah, I guess, but...he always felt like he’d failed you. That he’d wasted so much time being afraid. I mean, I don’t know. I wasn’t him, but there’s gotta be a reason I’m the way I am, right?”

“I guess.”

“I really don’t think you have anything to worry about, sweetheart. I wouldn’t change a single thing about you for all the caps in the world.”
Could he be right? Could it all have been in her head? But that didn’t explain the pain she’d experienced over the years. The suffocating way his disappointment had crushed her heart every time she earned another scolding. How she got stuck in an endless cycle of clinginess and then shame over being so needy for years.

She wished there were still ghouls in Diamond City. Someone pre-war she could ask who’d actually know. She’d always just assumed that desperate desire to please her mate had been a regular thing. She’d never questioned it, but now…

“Oh!”

Mac jumped a little, “What?”

“I gotta go!” Lottie threw the covers off herself and shoved her feet into a pair of old house slippers.

“What?”

“I’ll be right back!” She wrapped a robe around herself and was at the door before he could even get off the couch.

“Lottie!”

“Right back!” She let the door slam shut behind her and took off across the marketplace. Only Percy and Takahashi were there to witness her flight, and the odd Diamond City guard, of course. She was grateful for that, since she probably looked like a crazy person running through the city in her pajamas and fuzzy slippers.

Two minutes later and she was panting in front of a red door, trying to catch her breath before she knocked. It opened before she could even get her hand up though, and those calm, golden eyes stared at her through a haze of cigarette smoke.

“Hey, doll.”

“Nick! I need to talk to you!”

“Yeah, alright.”

Chapter End Notes

The cold remains. 😔 Hopefully I can shake it by next week so I can work on the other three stories. (& also this story because Mac was totally right. They ARE close. 😋)
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Abandonment syndrome?”

Nick shrugged, “Sounds like it.”

“No. No, that doesn’t...Nate never abandoned me.”

“Well, let’s look at the facts.”

“Okay…”

“It’s marked by excessive clinginess.”

“Yeah.”

“Feelings of inadequacy, a weakened sense of self...”

“Yeah…”

“Heightened anxiety.”

Lottie sighed, “Yeah.”

“And, in extreme cases, can cause heart palpitations, angina...even stress cardiomyopathy and death.”

“You mean when it escalates to Broken Heart Syndrome.”

“Yup.”

She took a deep breath and slowly let it out, “But I thought it only happened when your soulmate outright rejects you. When they just leave you.”

“That was the most common cause, sure.” Nick tapped his fingers on the desk and tried to think of a polite way to phrase his next line of inquiry. “You uh...you said Nate was rapid deployment, right?”

“Right. He was the best, so they sent him all over the world at the drop of a hat.”

“So you never knew if he’d be home or not?”

“No, it would have violated op-sec for them to notify me, so...sometimes I’d come home and he’d be there and sometimes not.”

“And he was gone a lot?”

“Well...yeah.” She huffed, “But so were a lot of other military spouses. There was a war going on, Nick.”

“I know. I remember.”
“None of them had this problem.”

“That you know of.”

“Yeah.”

“How often would you say he was home those first ten years? Just a percentage.”

“Oh, I...I dunno...a few weeks here and there.”

“Less than twenty percent?”

Charlotte winced, “Maybe...a lot less than that.”

“And it was his choice, right? Nate wasn’t drafted and he was an officer. He could have requested to be moved to a more stable MOS at any time, right?”

“Right.”

He watched her shoulders droop and frowned to himself. She was usually pretty sharp. It was odd that she’d never caught on to what was happening to her. Then again, it was always easier to notice a problem when you were outside of it. “He was older than you, right?”

“Yeah. Five years older.”

“So you grew up with his voice in your head?”

“Yeah.”

“What was that like?”

“Oh, I...I dunno. Pretty normal, I guess.”

“Was he attentive? Paid attention to what you were doing and where you were going?”

“Sure.” She laughed, “He was always after me to be more careful and stuff.”

“Did that change after you married?”

“No, it...”, her head dropped. “It changed after the Bloom.”

“Oh.”

“He...I guess he didn’t talk to me as much after that. It got so quiet in my head and...so I started talking and just kinda kept talking, I guess.”

“Hmm.”

“But he was always nice and treated me well and made sure I wanted for nothing.”

Nick shook his head, “Come on, sweetheart. You know as well as I do that none of that counts for anything if there’s not love behind it.”

“But I know he loved me.” Tears slid down her face and fell into her lap.

He passed her another handkerchief and nodded, “I’m sure he did.”
“Thanks.”

“The thing is though, by your own admission, he spent a long time trying to put as much distance between the two of you as he could. Right up until he got blown to Kingdom Come and had some common sense knocked into him. You ever figure out why?”

She nodded, “Yeah, uh...his childhood was...cold. His father died when he was very young and his mother kept him pretty isolated from the rest of the family. She kind of drilled into him this rigid sense of responsibility and decorum. Told him he had a legacy to protect and a destiny to fulfill and...there wasn’t a lot of room for, you know, love in all that.”

“So he just didn’t know how to deal with --”

“With me? No, I don’t think he did.”

“Nah, I was going to say he didn’t know how to deal with his own feelings, so he just ran from them. Happens all the time. Heck, I can give you at least five names off the top of my head of people I’ve known right here in Diamond City who’ve attempted the same.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Sure. Lesse...you’ve got the Pembrokes, Myrna, both the McDonough boys…” He paused. She was staring into space with a slight frown. “You with me, kid?”

Charlotte blinked, “Oh. Oh, yes, sorry.” She sighed, “Dogmeat’s coming.”

“What?”

There was a sharp kind of scratching at the door suddenly and a familiar whine. Nick got up and opened the door, shaking his head as the shepherd came and sat next to Charlotte.

“So I take it you finally found your new soulmate. That’s what this is all about, right?”

“How did you --”

“You mentioned something that night before we took out Kellogg.”

Ah, yes. The night she’d shown up drunk and no doubt made a fool of herself in front of someone she both liked and respected. That night. Right. “Oh.”

“Lover boy didn’t like you running out on him, huh?”

“What makes you think I ran out on him?”

“Cause you’re sitting in my office, past your bedtime, in your pajamas.”

“Oh.” Her face went a little pink and she scratched Dogmeat behind the ears to give herself something to focus on that wasn’t Nick’s knowing smirk. “Well...no, he wasn’t.”

“Hmm.”

“Do you know a man named MacCready?”

“Yeah. Capitol Wasteland. Merc. Widower. Got a kid, too, I think...and that’s your fella?”

“Yup.”
“Interesting...that’s uh...huh. Actually, you know what? That might work out pretty well.” He chuckled, “Between the two of you, there’s probably enough temper and guts to blow through anything that tries to come at you.”

“Yeah...he’s a lot different than Nate was.”

“That a bad thing?”

Charlotte shrugged, “I dunno...at first I thought it was, but...well, he’s been pretty obvious with how interested he is in me. I can’t deny it’s been flattering.”

“But?”

“But...he’s young, for one, and I don’t really know a lot about him and what I’ve learned has been...less than stellar.” She sighed, “But I can’t really judge him on stuff he did before I even woke up, right? That’s not fair.”

He nodded along. Certainly the boy had a reputation as something of a roughneck playboy in Goodneighbor. He could see how that would turn a woman like Charlie skittish. “So...between what you’ve heard and what you’ve actually seen, where’s the truth lie?”

She made a face, “Somewhere in the middle, I guess, like it usually is.”

“He treat you right?”

“So far.” She stared down at Dogmeat pressed up against her leg. Nate’s Rufus had been a sweetie, but never as protective. It was kind of nice. “Do you think I’m being silly?”

“Nah. Given what you’ve been through, I can’t see anyone else reacting any different.”

“I’m just delaying the inevitable, aren’t I?”

“Probably. What do you think?”

“I think...I should probably shit or get off the pot.”

He snorted and laughed, “What?”

“I’m basically doing the same thing to him that Nate did to me...and that’s wrong. I don’t want him to lose who he is. I like who he is.” She chewed on her lip. He’d told her he thought she was great, but the nicest thing she’d ever said about him was that he wasn’t the worst person in the world. Surely to goodness she could do better than that.

“Shit or get off the pot...I’m going to write that down somewhere.”

She laughed, “You do that, honey...thanks for talking to me, Nick.”

“Anytime.”

“I’m sorry I barged in here so late.”

“Yeah, if I slept, that would have been a real pain.”

“I should go.”

“Alright.” He smiled at her as she started to get up, then stood himself when she abruptly sat back
down. “What’s wrong?”

“I can’t...my legs hurt so bad.”

“What happened?”

“It’s a long story.”

“M’hmm. You want help home?”

“Yes, but...I should probably ask someone else, huh?”

Nick smiled at her, “It is his privilege.”

“Yeah.”

Hey, RJ.

What?

She winced a little. He sounded so sullen and cranky. Could you help me home? I...kinda can’t walk.

Goddammit, Lottie.

I know. I’m sorry.

I’ll be there in a minute...where are you?

Nick’s. You can just follow --

I know where its at.

Charlotte sighed, “He’s mad at me.”

“I’d be mad at my mate, too, if she’d done something like run off into the night, unarmed, in her nightclothes, while injured.”

She made a face, “I bet Jenny was never this much trouble, huh?”

The detective smiled softly, “Oh, you’d lose that bet, kid.”

Mac showed up just a few minutes later, boots on but untied. He managed a polite nod at Nick before scowling at Charlotte. “Well? What’s the matter with you?”

“My legs hurt.”

“Your legs hurt. Still. So you decide to run through Diamond City on ‘em.”

“I know, I know. It was dumb.”

“No, it was typical. It’d be dumb on anybody else, but for you? Typical.”

“Are you gonna help me or not?”

“I dunno if you deserve help.”
Nick chuckled, “Oh, this is perfect. Universe absolutely knows what its doing.”

Charlotte rolled her eyes, “Yeah, it’s great. Total domestic bliss right here. Living the dream.”

Mac yanked her up out of the chair and swept her over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry. “Sorry she bothered you, Valentine.”

“Hey! Put me down!”

He waved a hand, “Wasn’t a bother. Charlie and me go way back.”

“M’hmm.” He held open the door and whistled once, “Dogmeat. Let’s go.” He let the dog trot out before nodding again at Nick. “Evening.”

“Good luck.”

Charlotte grumbled as Mac carried her like a sack of potatoes back to her house. Completely unnecessary and undignified, but he was helping her and she definitely wasn’t getting home under her own power, so she kept her mouth shut. Dogmeat kept grinning up at her and she scowled at him since she couldn’t glare at his master from this angle.

The next thing she knew, she was being unceremoniously dumped back into bed. She pushed the hair out of her face and was about to give RJ a piece of her mind when he beat her to it.

“Idiot. Goddamn stupid idiot.” He tore the shoes off her feet and flipped her around until she was on her back. “Does it hurt when I do this?” Mac grabbed her foot and folded her leg up while she breathlessly squeaked at him and smacked at his hands.

“Yes, it hurts! Stop it!”

“You’ve torn a muscle, Lottie. You shouldn’t even be walking, let alone running around like you have been.”

“Let go of my leg!”

He released her foot and ignored the pitiful way she whined as her leg relaxed. “What about here?” His hands wrapped around her shin and squeezed.

Charlotte tried to twist away from him as pain shot through her body but it was impossible. “Stop that!”

He shook his head and put his hands on his hips, “When were you planning on telling me you’d broken your leg? Hmm?”

Shit. She fell back against the pillow and willed the tears in her eyes to go away. “I...I wasn’t sure I’d actually broken it.”

“You weren’t sure?”

“No.”

“How can you not be sure?”

“It’s...a long story.”

“M’hmm. I bet.”
He’d bet big money on it happening when she’d gone silent after Med-Tek. He’d noticed that rough hole in the roof right in front of the door of the building he’d found her in. The smeared pools of various bodily fluids and the unmistakable stench of dead ferals. Someone had cleared away most of the evidence, but there had clearly been a fight. He wasn’t sure exactly what had happened, wasn’t even sure he wanted to know at this point, but it had been bad. She’d been in real danger and he hadn’t been there.

It made him furious.

“Stay right here and don’t move. I mean it.” Mac glowered at her until she angrily looked away and stomped over to his pack. He hadn’t indulged since she’d called him an addict, but he was pretty sure he still had a few syringes of Med-X stashed somewhere.

Charlotte sat up, mostly just to spite him, but also to take her robe off. She tossed it towards the foot of the bed and huffed at him, arms folded. “What are you doing?”

“Getting you some Med-X and a stim.”

“No, I don’t...I don’t do chems.”

“It’s a painkiller. If you don’t take it, you won’t be able to sleep and then you won’t get better. You’re taking it.”

“I don’t need it.”

“Yeah, you do.” He brought the supplies over and sat next to her on the bed. “Give me your arm.”

“No.”

Mac rolled his eyes and pried her arms apart, shoving her sleeve up. “You know I can feel you, right? It’s making my leg hurt, so I know it’s gotta be killing you.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.” He watched her face for a minute and nudged her shoulder with his when she wouldn’t look at him. “You aren’t going to get addicted from one dose. You know that, right?”

“I know.”

“So can I do this or not?”

“It just seems...excessive.” Her eyes landed on the syringe in his hand and she went a little green. “Isn’t there anything a little less...uh…”

Ah. Okay. “You have a problem with needles.”

She shrugged, “I guess.”

“Okay. That’s okay.” He shifted his body so she couldn’t see her forearm and rubbed the skin there soothingly. “Just going to be a little pinch, alright?”

“Do you have to use the whole dose?”

“I gotta do half, at least. Is that okay?”

“Okay.”
Her voice sounded tiny. Surprisingly meek for her and he almost laughed. The great, fearless 
General Apperson, felled by a single needle. Ridiculous. He slipped it into her vein with the 
practiced ease of someone who’d done it a million times before and shushed the little squeak that 
came from her, slowly pressing down on the plunger until half the medicine was in her.

“There. See? Not so bad, was it?” His thumb pressed against the wound to stanch the bleeding and 
he used his teeth to pop the cap back on. “All done...feel it yet?”

“It’s cold.”

“Yeah, it’s a little icy when it first goes in.” Mac tossed the needle in the general direction of the 
couch and turned back to face her again. “Lay down for me before you get silly, alright?”

“Get silly?”

“Ever taken Med-X before?”

“Just once...after I had Shaun.”

“Remember anything from the experience?”

“No, not really.”

“Yeah, you definitely want to lay down then.” He helped get her settled and chuckled a little at 
how dark her eyes already were. “Still with me?”

She blinked once, slow and dreamy. “Hmm?”

“Yeah, okay...listen, I’m going to use a stim in your legs, alright? Half and half. Is that okay?”

“S’okay.”

Mac chuckled to himself. She was a lot easier to deal with blitzed out of her mind. On half a dose 
of Med-X. Lightweight. He rolled up her pants legs and immediately frowned, running a hand 
along her leg just to confirm what his eyes were telling him.

“Lottie?”

“Hmm?”

“Sweetheart...how sick were you?”

“Hmm?”

He turned so he could watch her face, “When you couldn’t eat because of the rads. Did you get 
radiation poisoning?”

Her head slowly turned to stare at him with owlish eyes, “Nuh-uh.”

“Then um...then why is there no hair on your legs?”

She stared at him, a little line showing up between her eyebrows. “What?”

“There’s no hair on your legs.”

“Okay.”
“That usually only happens if someone’s really sick, like...about to become a ghoul sick.”

Charlotte snorted a little and giggled, “I’m not a ghoul.”

“Yeah, no, I got that.”

“S’electro... elec... um...”, she frowned. “Electrolysis! That’s the word.”

Shit. That sounded serious. “Is it...is it fatal?”

She stared at him with her mouth open for a moment before bursting out laughing, “No! No no no.”

“Oh...good.”

“It’s not...I’m not sick.”

“Oh.” Mac took a deep breath and willed his heart to slow down. “That’s good.”

“It’s...they took my body, took me, and there was this machine, see?” Her hands waved around but didn’t really aid in the explanation. “And there was...this thing, and it went buzz buzz buzz! So loud! Crazy loud!”

“Okay...”

“Kinda...kinda looked like an iron lung.” She paused, “You know what that is?”

“No.”

“Well, it did. Anyway, they put me in it four times a year for...for...I dunno. Three years maybe.”

He’d already administered the stimpak and she hadn’t even noticed. “Okay.”

“And the buzz buzz...it was...it was the juice! The juice zapped it all clean off my body! Zap zap zap!”

Mac had no idea what she was talking about, but the way her voice slurped a little, the accent turning so thick he almost couldn’t even make the words out, was pretty funny. “Zap zap zap, huh?”

“Yeah! Zap.” She watched him pull the covers up to her chin and scrunched up her nose. “And it hurt! Hurt like crazy.”

“Oh, that’s uh...I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Mmm...but I guess it was worth it. Don’t gotta shave or wax or nothin’ ever again. Ever, ever again.”

Wax what? “Okay.”

“Even my eyebrows!” She tried to point at them and nearly poked herself in the eye. “See? They’re still pretty...and fancy. I’ve got fancy eyebrows.”

Mac chuckled again. They were graceful and arched in that way you usually only ever saw on pre-war billboards and magazines. “Uh-huh.”
“Meredith paid for it...she...she said I came from a hairy people.” She made a face, “That was so rude. She was always so rude...Mama said money don’t buy manners and she was right.”

“Yup.” He tucked the blanket around her tightly and, since he had the opportunity, pressed a kiss to her forehead. It made his lips tingle. “Good night, Lottie.”

“Good night, RJ...you’re so cute.”

Yeah, that was his cue to get off the damn bed. Mac stood and nodded, “Thanks.”

She watched him return to the couch and started giggling.

He found the Med-X syringe and stuffed it back in his pack, “Now what’s funny?”

“Your butt’s cute, too.” The giggling intensified and she pulled the covers up to hide her face.

Mac chuckled and sat down, “Oh, yeah?”

“M’hmm...all of you is cute.” Her face might be hidden, but she was still gesturing wildly with her hands. “All of it. I like watching you when you aren’t lookin’.”

Since she wasn’t going to remember any of this in the morning, Mac didn’t bother censoring himself. “I like watching you, too.”

“I know.”

“Oh, you know, huh?”

“M’hmm. S’why I wiggle a little extra when I walk.”

Ha. Busted. “I knew it!”

She finally peeked over the blanket at him and immediately frowned, “RJ?”

“What?”

“What’re you doin’ over there?”

“About to sleep. What’re you doin’?”

“You shouldn’t...you don’t...I don’t like you sleeping on the couch.”

He rolled his eyes, “Yeah, well, get used to it. I’m not going anywhere.”

“No, I mean...you should sleep here.”

“Oh-huh. Go to sleep, Lottie. That’s just the Med-X talking.”

“No s’not.”

“Yup.”

Charlotte sat up and tried to glare at him, but only managed to look mildly disgruntled, “It’s not! You should sleep here.” She jabbed at the other side of the bed emphatically.

Mac sighed, “No, sweetheart. Go on to sleep now, alright?”
“But --”

“Goodnight. I’m turning the lantern off.” He extinguished the flame and ignored her disgruntled mumbling. Without him to focus on, she should just go ahead and drift off to sleep. He got comfortable and listened to her rustling around, nodding to himself. There. She’d surely burrowed back under the covers by now. That was good. When she woke up in the morning and realized he hadn’t tried to press his advantage, she’d totally --

Warm weight suddenly settled over top of him and Mac nearly screamed.

“What are you doing!”

“Wanna sleep with you.”

“Lottie! Get off!”

“No.” She snuggled against him. “Smell good.”

“Goddammit.”

“Warm.”

He lay there, frozen, until she started to drift off to the side, then his arms went around her without even thinking about it. Fuck. She was soft and cuddly and felt absolutely right exactly where she was.

But it wasn’t right. If she woke up out of her chem haze like this, she’d assume the worst, right? Of course she would. Anyone would.

Mac grumbled and sat up, pulling her along with him. Being a gentleman was surprisingly difficult. Completely ignoring what his body wanted and the chaotic signals she was throwing his way in favor of doing the ‘right’ thing felt stupid. Totally stupid and pointless.

The more he moved, the more Lottie wiggled against him. It was maddening. It took him a few attempts, but he finally managed to stand up with her in his arms and carried her back to bed. She giggled the whole time until he set her down, then made wordless pouty sounds that very nearly drove what little willpower he had left clean out of his head.

“RJ…”

“No, now...Lottie, I mean it. Go to sleep.”

“Stay.” Her hand caught his shirt and he sighed.

“You know that’s a bad idea.”

“I’ll be good. Be a good girl.”

Oh, he bet she could be a really good girl when -- “Well, that’d be a first, wouldn’t it?” Her fingers tightened around the fabric and he grumbled to himself. “Alright. Fine. But you stay on your side of the bed. You hear me? No funny business.”

Jesus, did those words really just come out of his mouth?

“M’kay.”
Mac moved around to the other side of the bed, berating himself the whole way. This was a bad, bad, bad idea. He kicked off his boots and slid beneath the blanket. It was probably the most comfortable bed he’d ever slept in, but he couldn’t relax.

“There. I’m here. So...go to sleep.”

Nothing but the sound of her breathing. His hand reached out, cautiously, and just brushed against hers. It twitched a little, but other than that, no response. He blew out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding and settled into the mattress, closing his eyes. She was finally out. Thank God. Now maybe they could both finally get some rest.

Chapter End Notes

I know, I know. Short chapter.

The thing is, see, it’s a bridge...

(Cause it was this or one extremely long chapter of extreme long-itutde...not longitude, but long-itutde. Haha.)

Also, a note on electrolysis! The removal of hair via electrical current. Still done today, but it actually saw its heyday in the 1950s (been around since the 1800s if you can believe it). Probably went hand in hand with that whole insane ‘hygienic’ craze that swept the nation and made people think douching with Lysol was a solid idea. 😊
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Charlotte woke the next morning a little later than she was used to, or at least, that’s what her bladder was telling her. She quickly got out of bed and took a moment to sort through her disorientation. The floor felt wrong under her feet until she remembered Codsworth had moved her bedroom. So if that was the case, then there should be a bathroom directly across from the other side of the bed, right? Right. She kept one hand on the mattress and made her way around in the dark, stumbling through the door and closing it before flipping the light on.

The pain in her legs was still there, but muted. Far off. She might have to put off the Castle job for a couple of days, but they were definitely better. Codsworth had stocked the cabinet with toothpaste and new plastic wrapped brushes and she scrubbed that sour almond and pennies taste from her mouth before returning to the bedroom.

Her eyes moved towards the couch, even though she couldn’t actually see anything. Complete silence from RJ. He must’ve been worn out, too. She could vaguely remember him coming to get her and then helping her into bed. Hopefully she hadn’t given him too much trouble. The last time she’d taken Med-X, the maternity ward nurses had to use wrist-cuffs to make sure she didn’t wander off when they weren’t looking.

Charlotte sat back down on the bed and felt around her nightstand for her Pipboy. It wasn’t there, but there was a lighter, and when she flicked it, it’s dim flame revealed a candle, which she lit. She was still kind of sleepy, actually, and it wasn’t like she had any pressing matters to attend to today. Tuesday had already been allotted to resting, right? Right. She was healing. No one could accuse her of being lazy by staying in bed to convalesce. If anything, she might get fussed at if she didn’t stay in bed.

She nodded to herself. Decision made. She’d spend the day being pampered by Codsworth and if she didn’t feel at least seventy-five percent better by lunch, she’d radio Preston. The Castle could wait a few more days, surely.

Charlotte turned to settle back in bed, unexpectedly found herself less than two feet away from RJ’s sleeping form, and froze. When had this happened?

He was still out like a light. His face softer and sweeter when asleep. Most of the time, the way he strutted around like he owned the world, it was hard to remember how young he was, but here, he looked it. Or looked closer to it, anyway.

His hair was hopelessly messy and she liked the way it fell over his forehead. She carefully pushed it back and decided she liked it that way, too.

He was just too damn likable all over was the problem.

Her fingers trailed down along his face and she smiled at the way his nose wrinkled a little. He was actually really sweet when you got right down to it. He must’ve stayed to make sure she’d be alright. That was thoughtful of him. Like something Nate would have done.

Before she could talk herself out of it, Charlotte snuggled up to his side, her head resting on his chest. His heartbeat was just as familiar as it had been back at the quarry and she let it lull her back
to that twilight place just before true sleep.

This was nice. More than nice, even. It had been hard, and scary, to have to do everything by herself for so long when she was used to being surrounded by others. Her whole life, she’d had Nate’s voice in her head and her family’s love around her. It was still disorienting to think that was all gone. Gone and lost to her forever. Sure, she’d found friends here and they were quickly becoming her new family and that was nice, but that empty place where Nate had always filled kept her off-balance. He’d always been her center. The measured, thoughtful, deliberate presence that helped her spin in a steady kind of way. Without him, she felt rudderless and out of control most days. She hated that.

She still wasn’t sure if RJ could be that kind of steadying force in her life. He seemed too capricious and hot-tempered for that. It kind of felt like replacing the Rock of Gibraltar with a volcano.

Mac’s eyes slowly opened and he immediately frowned to himself. It was way too early for him to just wake naturally, so what was going on? His focus eventually zeroed in on the idle hand tracing along his chest, the way he could just barely feel it through his shirt. It tickled a little. He finally looked down and watched the dim candlelight flicker in Lottie’s hair for a moment before he chuckled. Her hand stopped moving and she slowly looked up at him, pink and embarrassed at being caught.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“Find anything you like?”

She huffed at him and looked away. “Not really, cause you’ve got this shirt on and all…”

He raised an eyebrow. Didn’t sound like she was still loopy, but that was surprisingly honest of her. Mac shrugged her off for a moment and tugged his shirt over his head, tossing it somewhere in the darkness. He tried to not smirk at the wide-eyed way she was staring at him and laid back down.

“Better?”

“Um…”

When it looked like she was about to chicken out, he pulled her back down to his chest and kept a hand curled around her shoulder.

“How about now?”

Her hand hesitantly returned to its place and she muttered, “I guess.”

Mac waited until her slow exploration continued before he spoke again. “What time is it?”

“Around nine, I think.”

“Hmm.”

Charlotte watched her fingers drift through the wiry hair on his chest. It trailed off down his stomach, which was awfully tempting, but she wasn’t quite that bold yet. She figured it was a better idea to keep her hands above the blanket. Anyway, just this much contact had her strangely dizzy. Like the world was spiraling down around her, folding in on this one spot in space and time.
“RJ?”

“Hmm?”

“Can you promise me something?”

“Anything.”

She smiled a little. He didn’t even hesitate, just jumped right in with both feet. “If...if things do change, will you promise to find Shaun anyway? Even if...even if I don’t seem to care anymore?”

His hand covered hers and he rubbed the back of it soothingly with his thumb. “It’s not going to change. You’re always going to want to get your baby back.”

“Can you still promise though?”

“Yeah. Yeah, of course.”

She sat up and held up a pinky. “I mean a real promise.”

Mac sat up, too, and ran a hand through his hair. “Oh, a pinky promise. Gettin’ serious here, huh?”

“Please, RJ?”

He stared into her eyes, surprised by how earnest she really was, and nodded. “Okay.” He hooked his pinky with hers and took a deep breath, “I, Robert Joseph MacCready, do hereby solemnly promise to do whatever it takes to help you find your son, no matter what happens.”

“On penalty of death.”

“On penalty of death.”

“Okay. Thank you.” Her finger squeezed his and then dropped back down to her lap.

“You’re welcome.” They sat in awkward silence for a few minutes. Mac felt absurdly naked even just out of his shirt. The way she wouldn’t look at anything but the blanket wasn’t helping any. “So, uh...what’s on the old agenda for --”

She suddenly moved, climbing up into his lap and straddling him.

“-- today.” He stared up at her and hoped this wasn’t some incredibly realistic dream. “What uh...whatcha doin’ there, Lottie?”

“I talked to Nick about it and...well, he says I don’t have anything to worry about. Or I shouldn’t, I guess.” She frowned to herself, “Yesterday, when you said you thought I was great...was that true?”

Other than sitting on him, she wasn’t actually touching him, so he should keep his hands to himself, too, right? Right. Mac leaned back a little, bracing his weight on his hands to keep them occupied and shrugged. “Sure, yeah. It’s true.”

“And you really wouldn’t change anything about me?”

“Well...”, he tilted his head a little. “If I had to pick something, I’d probably turn the dial down a little on your stubbornness, but...I mean, if you weren’t stubborn you wouldn’t have survived everything you’ve been through, right? So even that’s a good thing...I guess. I mean, I liked who
you were in my head and I liked you as the general so...it’s pretty cool that you’re both of those people.”

Her eyes moved over his face and then dropped, “Do...do you think...I mean, I know I’m a lot different than Lucy, but do you think...maybe someday you could love me like you loved her?”

He chuckled, “Oh, sweetheart...I’ve been in love with you a long time already.”

Charlotte looked up and found herself caught in his gaze. “Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“I know.” Mac shrugged, “I didn’t want to, you know, rush you or anything. I figured when you were ready we’d um...you know, talk and whatever.” He cleared his throat a bit, suddenly uncomfortable, “I hope you can feel the same way about me, too. Eventually, I mean, I know it’s...still early for you and --”

“I love you, too.”

He felt like his eyes almost popped out of his head. “Oh. Y-you do?”

“Yes.”

“I um...well, that’s...”, he frowned. “You know I’m not Nate though, right? I mean, I have some of his memories or whatever, but I’m never going to be --”

“I know.”

“Oh.” He nodded, “Okay. Okay, well, good. That’s uh...that’s good.”

“I think you’re great, too.”

“You do?”

“M’hmm.”

“Oh.”

“Figured I should tell you cause...well, I know what it’s like to not know. Not knowing is...awful.”

“Yeah.” He felt his face get hot and turned away a little, hoping the shadows would hide it.

Charlotte watched him fidget and smiled to herself. He seemed to waiver between absolute confidence and this adorable timidity with nothing in between. It probably shouldn’t be as endearing as it was; made her feel strangely powerful. He was usually so assertive and strong. He always stood up to her and didn’t get intimidated no matter what she said or how mad she got. The idea that she could still somehow turn someone so forceful into a bashful little puppy was kind of intoxicating, actually. It made her want to see just how far she could take it before his naturally dominant nature took back over.

“RJ?”

“Yeah?”
“I’m gonna kiss you now.”

“O-okay.”

She grinned at how he seemed to freeze in place. Like if he even moved an inch she might change her mind. Her hands came up and gently held his head as she leaned forward, barely brushing her lips against his. A wave of tingling fission rolled over her and she gasped, suddenly unsteady.

Mac shuddered as the shockwave flooded through him. Her lips were impossibly soft and sweet and all he could think was he wanted more. A lot more. He captured her mouth with his and twined his fingers through her hair, kissing her hard while stars burst behind his eyelids. Her tongue swept into his mouth and he groaned, a hand moving to her hip to pull her closer.

Charlotte felt lightheaded by the time she managed to pull back, panting to try to catch her breath. RJ’s eyes were desperate and hungry and she slid a hand down to his chest, marveling at how fast his heart was beating and the way heat was already pouring off of him. She wanted him more than anything, craved him, even. But behind it, far off in the distance at the moment, but still easily accessible, was her worry and love for her son. She closed her eyes and laughed a little.

“Oh, thank God.”

“We good?”

She nodded, “Yeah. Yeah, we’re good.”

“Okay...okay, good.” Rational thought was nearly impossible, but he still made an attempt. “Lottie...listen, if you still want to, you know, go slow or whatever, we can.”

Her eyes opened and he was nearly lost in the molten promise there. “We can?”

“Yeah. Yeah, sure. Of course. It’s...whatever you want.”

“What if I don’t want to go slow?”

“What?”

She smiled at him, wicked and shameless. “What if I don’t want to go slow? Then whatcha gonna do?” She pulled her sweater off and tossed it behind them, grinning at the shocked expression on his face. Now this. This felt familiar.

Mac took in the sight of her full, perfectly ripe breasts with their deliciously pink tips, feeling a little awed and then glanced up at her face. At the smug smirk there. He grinned back at her and pulled her head back down to his, “Is that a challenge, little girl?”

“Maybe. Are you up for a challenge?”

He grabbed one of her hands and pressed it against the growing bulge in his pants. “Oh, I’m definitely up.”

Charlotte giggled, even as her fingers wrapped around him. “I can’t believe you actually said that out loud.”

His hand skimmed up her side and cradled her breast. It felt warm and heavy and perfect. The freckles that covered her face and neck trailed down her shoulders and chest, fading into smooth, creamy perfection before appearing again across her tummy. Like stars painting the sky. He picked
a little cluster of them resting right over her collarbone and nipped at them with his teeth.

She shivered at the sharp feel of his bite and her hand involuntarily tightened on him, making him groan. His lips were moving slowly across her skin, raising goosebumps in their wake. She knew where he was heading and tried to brace for the sensation, but there was no way to prepare for the sudden burst of pleasure that shot through her when his tongue slowly dragged across her nipple. Her soft gasp was met by a murmur of satisfaction from him and then his mouth settled over her properly, surrounding the sensitive bud with wet warmth and gentle suction.

Her fingers slid into his hair as his hand slipped around to her back, both eager to hold the other in place. Charlotte was starting to feel lightheaded again. There was a tingling anticipation that kept slowly building in her stomach and that itchy feeling from before was back. The one that made her want his hands all over her body.

Mac felt her growing restless. His hand moved down to her hip and pulled her closer to him, grinding against the heat he could feel even through all the layers still separating them. His tongue swirled around the pebbled flesh still caught between his lips one last time before he finally let it go. The way it had gone from a delicate pink to a deep wine red color was immensely satisfying and he caught it with his teeth one last time, just to hear her squeak, before moving on to the other.

A whole new wave of overwhelming sensation crashed over her as his mouth latched on to her again. Between it and the relentless way he kept rocking against her center, she finally crossed the line between dizzy and downright faint. Her fingers relaxed their hold on his hair and her hands slipped to his shoulders, digging in with her nails.

“RJ, please? I’m…”

He smiled at the breathless way she said his name, nuzzling against her flesh one last time before looking up. Her eyes were almost black in the dim light, focused on nothing but him. She felt pliant and needy in his arms, exactly like he’d always hoped she be. His mouth brushed against hers and he couldn’t help but feel a little smug at the way she tried to follow after he pulled back.

“Tell me what you want, sweetheart.”

Charlotte couldn’t concentrate on anything but the wonderful way his lips felt against hers. She stared with hazy eyes at his mouth and tried to capture it again, whining a little when there was a hand in her hair suddenly, holding her back. “RJ…”

“Tell me.”

“Please?”

Mac chuckled a little. He honestly wasn’t sure she could form any other words at this point. Even with his hand fisted in her hair, she was straining against his hold, still trying to get down to him. He lifted his face just enough to nibble on her lower lip, soaking up the way it made her squirm.

“Okay.” He let her go and tried to keep his head as she kissed him, her tongue immediately seeking his own and undulating against it. He rolled them over to her side of the bed and settled next to her, one of his legs sliding between hers and pressing up against her core.

She was completely lost in the moment. RJ’s hands on her body, unerringly following the lines of electricity she felt running through her. His kiss taking all the air from her lungs in the best possible way. He finally lifted his head and her eyes slid open, clouded by a thick fog of lust and want.
But the way he was hovering above her, a darker shadow within the shadows, his hands holding her in place, drove a sudden spike of terror and alarm through her and she flinched away, arms wrapping around her own body to protect herself even as some part of her fought against it.

Mac felt the panic shoot through her and froze. It took him a minute to realize what was wrong, how things could have flipped so fast. Once the realization came though, fury and protectiveness swelled within him and left no room for anything else.

His arms went around her and he turned them both to their sides, no longer trapping her body against the bed. He held her while she trembled against him, murmuring soothing nothings and rubbing her back when all he really wanted to do was find the man who’d scared her so badly and beat him senseless.

Charlotte burrowed against RJ. She felt embarrassed and broken and just wanted to hide from the entire world. There was no reason to be afraid here. She knew that. She knew it. So why was she?

When she was mostly sure she could talk, she whispered, “I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing for you to be sorry about. I’m sorry I scared you.”

She shook her head, tears streaming down her face. “I’m not scared of you.”

“Lottie…”

“I’m not!”

He sighed, “Okay.”

God, this was awful. She really wasn’t afraid of him. She wasn’t even afraid of Deacon actually. Sure, he was bigger than her and all, but she’d never let that stop her before. Charlotte had grown up taking on bigger bullies all the time, either on her own behalf or for one of her little brothers and sisters. Size meant nothing if you knew how to fight, and she did. She’d always been a fighter.

It was just the vulnerability of it all. Letting go all the way and trusting him to never hurt her. That’s what was hard. She’d been so sure she could trust Deacon, and she’d been wrong. Now she felt just as sure about RJ, but at the back of her mind, she must still be worried that she was wrong here, too.

And that was silly, wasn’t it? He’d already proven to her that he’d stop. Multiple times even. He’d rather chew his own arm off than hurt her. She knew that.

Being here with him felt right. It felt right and safe and his strength wasn’t something she needed to protect herself from. It was there to protect her. She just had to let him.

There was nothing to it but to do it.

Or do him, in this case. Just, jump right back into the saddle or...something.

Charlotte giggled to herself a little and when RJ moved back in confusion, trying to get a look at her face, she seized the opportunity to kiss him as hard as she could. All the love and heat and want he’d made her feel got poured into it and by the time she let him go, they were both panting.

Mac had never felt so confused in his whole damn life. First she was afraid, then she was laughing and now this. He stared down at her and tried to make sense of the situation but was coming up with nothing.
“Lottie?”

“Keep going.”

“What?”

“You wanted me to tell you what I wanted earlier, right? Well...I want you to keep going.”

This certainly felt like a green light, but it also kind of felt like it might be a trap of some kind. “Are you sure?”

She ran a hand down his torso and palmed him through his pants. Her touch had him groaning softly and it made her smile. The effect she had on him made her feel more powerful and in control. Safer. “Yeah, I’m sure.”

He didn’t hesitate a second time. Mac lowered his mouth to hers and happily explored while her hand continued to stroke him. Soon he was back to being just as hard as he’d been before their little interruption and he broke off from her mouth with a groan, nuzzling against her neck.

“Touch me, sweetheart. I need it.”

Charlotte felt her cheeks go hot, but her hand slid into his pants anyway, and wrapped around his length. “Like this?”

“Fuck yes.” His hips shifted, pumping into her hold and he scraped his teeth along her neck.

She felt him swell further and giggled a little, emboldened by his reaction. “Feel good, baby?”

“So good...goddamn.” His hand tangled in her hair and pulled a little, baring more of her neck to him so he could bite down on it properly like he wanted to.

She gasped and her hand tightened around him. There was warm liquid slowly covering her thumb, and she used it to swirl around his head.

RJ was already close. He could feel it coiling at the base of his spine. Lottie’s gasp broke him out of his daze though and he pulled back, releasing her neck and pulling her hand away from him. She pouted at him for spoiling her fun while he peppered her cheeks with innocent kisses.

Charlotte huffed at him, “I wasn’t done yet.”

Mac chuckled, “I know.”

“Then why’d you --”

“Cause it’s my turn.”

He snaked an arm under her and tucked her close against his side while his other hand wiggled between them, tugging at the waistband of her pajama bottoms. “Can we take these off?”

It felt like she was on fire, being slowly consumed by the flame-bright blue of his eyes. She somehow found herself nodding and then before she knew it, she was completely naked. That dangerous, vulnerable feeling tried to climb back up her throat, but he was there to fight it back. His lips brushed against hers, as gentle as the hand skimming along her hip, and she felt herself relax. Felt that weakness turn into anticipation and excitement. It made little sparkling bubbles dance in her stomach and by the time his hand slid between them, she was eager for his touch.
In his whole life, and all the partners he’d had along the way, Mac had never actually been with someone who was completely smooth anywhere, let alone on their bits. His hand cupped her possessively and he was struck by how rough and coarse his own skin felt compared to hers. She was soft and slick already, scorching hot to the touch and he couldn’t help himself. He had to see.

He let his hold on her relax until she was laying back against the bed again. She made a little questioning noise, confused at the sudden space between them, but laid passive while he backed away from her enough to watch. His hand looked so dark against her pale skin, even with the smeared blush quickly turning her skin a glowing pink.

Mac let his fingers slip along the outermost edge of her folds and chuckled at how she squirmed. Plump and luscious, already swollen enough to hide her center from view. He rubbed and squeezed gently, acclimating himself to this new sensation and trying to imagine what it was going to be like to plunge into it.

Charlotte didn’t know what he was waiting for, but she knew she was going to die if he kept this up. The heavy-lidded way he was staring and the frustratingly light touch he was giving her was driving her insane. Her nails dug into the sheets under them and she shifted a little, canting her hips up to try to entice him to do something, anything more than what he was.

He wanted to see it. Needed to see it, even. His hand left her pussy and he ignored her frustrated huff, instead just pushing on her thigh.

“Open your legs for me, sweetheart.”

Well, she’d wanted him to do something else, right? She felt her whole face go red, but pulled her leg up before letting it fall away. The way his gaze went from hungry to absolutely ravenous almost made it worth it.

He crooned at her, “Good girl. Good, good girl.”

His hand returned to it’s gentle exploration, this time able to spread her labia apart and take in the glistening, sensitive flesh it concealed. Bright and rosy and so, so inviting the way it rippled as his finger just barely grazed it. Her clit peeked out at him, a perfect pink pearl, and he ran his thumb along the edge of her entrance, gathering the silky fluid adorning her before he carefully applied just a hint of pressure to it.

Charlotte felt the air rush out of her lungs as she arched up, whimpering as his gentle touch sent ripples of pleasure and anticipation through her. He started rubbing little circles around her clit, coaxing her body closer and closer to the edge. She twisted and bucked against his hand, desperate for more. The need to be filled was overwhelming and she almost sobbed in relief as one of his calloused fingers slowly eased inside of her, rocking with that same infuriatingly slow rhythm as his thumb while she clawed at his arm and shoulder.

“Damn, gorgeous. You’re so wet already.” Mac grinned at the helpless noises coming from her throat and kept his pace slow and steady, but added a second finger to her heat. It slid home effortlessly and he grunted a little at the way his cock pulsed in response. “See? I told you when the time came, you’d take it real, real easy, didn’t I?”

When all she could do was make a few disgruntled sounds before they were overtaken by moans, he chuckled. “Guess I finally found a way to shut you up for real, huh?”

She managed to raise her head up enough to glare at him, “RJ, that’s...oh, God.” There was a spiraling tug that was pulling at her from where his hand was on her body and she shuddered.
His smirk was infuriating and delicious and it just pissed her off more. “That’s right, baby. Come on my fingers like a good girl.”

Any thoughts of retribution were lost, consumed by the searing pressure sweeping through her. She arched up hard enough that her hips left the bed and he followed, never stopping those maddening circles or the deep, deliberate rub of his fingers inside her. She felt the pressure snap suddenly, her pussy clamping down around his hand and squeezing hard before it began spasming. Each wave just added to the next and she grabbed his neck, pulling his face back down to hers, desperate for an anchor while it swept her away.

Mac kissed her and slowed his hand, easing up before pleasure became overstimulation. He waited until the rippling around his fingers faded and then slid them out, settling his hand on her hip. When she finally relaxed under him, he lifted his head and smiled at the softly bewildered expression on her face.

“You alright?”

“M’hmm.” The adoring way she was staring up at him made him feel ten feet tall. Like he could go out and conquer the whole world for her.

“You look a little confused.” And satisfied. Brutally satisfied, even. He’d never felt so proud in his whole damn life.

“Oh, I just um…”, she blushed a little. “Why’d you stop?”

He blinked at her, “Oh...oh, well...okay. I just, you know, wasn’t sure if you’d need a minute or --”

“I don’t.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and sucked on his lower lip, scraping it with her teeth before she it go. “Do you need a minute?”

Mac rolled his eyes. That tone. She was already back to being a brat. “No, I don’t need a minute. Fuck.”

“Well, I mean, you stopped, so…”

He settled back against the bed and pulled her up over him. “I was trying to be nice.”

“Why? I already know how you really are, remember? We talked about this.”

“You know, you weren’t this obnoxious when I was knuckles deep in your pussy. I liked you better then.”

Charlotte felt her face go hot again and gaped at him, “RJ!”

He just laughed at her outraged expression and wiggled out of his pants, “What?”

“That’s...you’re...you can’t say things like that!”

He smirked at her triumphantly and pulled her against his chest. “I dunno why you’re so shocked. You already know how I am, right?”

She sputtered, “You -- you are just so --” He shifted under her and his cock was suddenly there, pressed against her.

It felt different but also not. RJ was thicker than Nate had been, and definitely not circumcised. She’d noticed that straight away. He was funny and kind and wonderful, and she did love him, but
she’d never in her life ever dreamed she’d be with anyone but Nate. The dissonance was too much. Her nerves were back, skittering up along her spine and making her shiver for the wrong reasons.

Mac’s hands carefully slid up her legs and settled on her hips. Lottie had turned her face away from him, hiding against his chest again and he squeezed her a little. “Hey. Look at me.”

She turned enough to peek at him from under her curls and the understanding and acceptance in his eyes made her want to cry. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. Everything’s okay, alright? You want to stop right here, then we’ll stop. It’s your show, baby.”

“You’d really be okay with that?”

He cracked a smile, “I’m not gonna lie, I’d definitely go *furiously* jack it in the shower, but...yeah. It’s fine.” He ran a hand through her hair and smiled at how the strands twisted around his fingers, so familiar and still so new and wonderful. “We’ve got our whole lives to get it right, so it’s okay. I said we could take it slow and I meant it.”

It sounded like something Nate would have said. Charlotte knew better though, and RJ should have, too. Sometimes ‘our whole lives’ turned out to be much, much shorter than you’d ever planned for. If she’d known she’d only have twelve years as Nate’s wife, she’d have done things so differently. Surely he would have, too.

She was through wasting time. She’d learned the hard way that it wasn’t the indefinite resource people always assumed it was.

Charlotte lifted her head and smiled at him, “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” He was about to gently suggest she get off of him so he could go christen her new bathtub, when she sat up and reached behind her. “What --” Her hot little hand wrapped around his cock and he could no longer speak.

She watched the funny, shocked expression on his face and almost laughed. He was staring at her like she’d suddenly grown two heads. “I want you.”

“Oh...okay.” He watched passively while she wiggled into position, too surprised by his miraculous good fortune to do anything else. The moment he felt the head of his cock press against her though, felt her creamy fluids anoint him, he snapped out of it. Mac came up on his elbows, one of his hands wrapping around the back of her neck to bring her face close to his. “Eyes on me, sweetheart.”

She hadn’t even realized she’d closed her eyes until he spoke. When she opened them, there was nothing in the world but him and she couldn’t have looked away if she tried. Even when he glanced down, hungrily watching as she slowly sank on down on his length, she couldn’t. The slow, delicious stretch and the bite of his fingertips digging into her hip, clearly doing everything he could to resist pulling her down before she was ready, was all she could focus on.

Hot, tight and still so, so wet for him. Mac groaned at both the pressure of her body flexing around him and the strain of keeping himself under control. He wanted nothing more than to surge up into her, to fill her in a way she’d never forget, but he didn’t. Instead, he gritted his teeth and willed his body to stay still and quiet.

When he could finally tear his gaze away from the delicious sight of his cock disappearing into her pussy, he watched the way her eyes softened and darkened as she took him in. A tiny line between
her brows appeared just before he felt resistance and he sat up a little, kissing her while the hand on her hip came around to the front of her body. His thumb returned to its circling along her clit, coaxing her body into relaxing enough to accept him. A shudder rippled through her and then she was once again slowly working her way down his cock, just a few more inches, until their hips finally met.

She was shivering all over now, and the hand he’d kept on her neck kneaded gently. He let her come up for air and smiled at the high flush in her cheeks.

“How’s it feel?”

She nodded, “Good.”

“Yeah?” He planted his hand back on her hip and held her in place while he pushed up against her until she whimpered. “What about now?”

“Mmm, better.”

Mac chuckled, “Better, she says…” He planted his feet to give himself some leverage and encouraged her to rock against him. The way her pussy clung to him, every little movement came with a fresh burst of stars at the edge of his vision. “Goddamn, baby.”

“M’hmm.” Charlotte buried her face against his neck and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. She could barely even remember to breathe. Talking felt impossible. Riding though, that she could do. Her hips moved against his, the slide of his cock inside her a tiny bit easier each time as she slowly adjusted to his girth. She was pretty sure he was the same length as Nate had been, or close enough anyway, but he was definitely thicker. It made her pussy burn just a little. She felt almost too full really, but it was so good and so right. She couldn’t stop.

There was another orgasm coiling in her belly. She could feel it just out of reach and ground against him, trying to tip herself over the edge, but it wasn’t enough.

Her frustrated sound was all the warning Mac got before she dropped heavily on his lap with all of her weight behind it, pushing his cock even further into her until he felt the tip press against her cervix. She gasped and he immediately tried to lift her, only to find her teeth in his neck while she snarled.

“No. Harder.”

“W-what?”

“Harder.”

“Harder.” She used his shoulders for leverage and pushed further down.

He could feel it now, the pressure building around his cock. Mac fell back against the bed and pulled her down with him by her hair. The hand on her hip dug in and he pumped up into her, just a few times. “Like that?”

“More. RJ, more. Please.” She was so close she could taste it.

Mac wrapped his arms around her waist and held on tight as he began to move, groaning as the friction became overwhelming. Lottie writhed against him, encouraging him to press deeper, go harder with each thrust. He felt her nails drag down his arms, hard enough to draw blood, and then she all but screamed as her pussy began to milk him mercilessly.

He pushed up into her, as deep as he could, and held still while she came apart around him. Little
shuddering cries accompanied each new flutter and he felt a flood of hot, sticky liquid pool in his lap and coat his balls. The moment she relaxed, he started moving again, consumed by the need to flood her with his come.

Charlotte purred happily on RJ’s chest and floated along in her afterglow while he chased his own release. He was able to move freely in and out of her, and there was a delicious wet sound filling her ears that, in any other circumstances, would have had her blushing. But in this nice, floaty place, there was no room for silly things like being bashful. There was only RJ and his amazing body and the way he made her feel. His pulse was fluttering in his neck, right there in front of her, and looked delicious. She smiled to herself and wiggled up just a little, licking the spot and enjoying the salty taste of him on her tongue.

“Mmm, you taste good.”

Mac chuckled, the breathy, punch-drunk way she’d said it reaching him before her words actually did, then he froze suddenly and tore himself from her body. “Shit!”

She found herself rather abruptly thrown onto her back and frowned a bit. Her brain still wasn’t exactly up to speed, but it seemed a little rude to just toss a body like that.

“What’re you --”

“I forgot!”

“What?”

Strong hands shoved her thighs apart and she whimpered a little when it pulled at her newly healed muscles. Then RJ’s mouth was moving on her, his warm tongue cleaning her own come off her body in long, thorough strokes while she melted further into a puddle beneath him. She felt like every ounce of tension and worry had completely vanished from her soul as she lay there, passive and dreamy while he worked her over.

He couldn’t believe he’d almost forgotten to taste her. Could not believe it. He’d only spent literal months thinking about it. He sucked her labia into his mouth and greedily lapped at the warm liquid still flowing from her. This might be the only time he’d be able to taste her all on her own for God only knew how long. He needed to savor the opportunity while he had it. The salty-sweet taste of her would change once his own fluids were mixed in. It would still be delicious, no doubt, but Lottie on her own was like a rare treat he might only get this one time. He couldn’t let it go to waste.

Charlotte sighed happily and slipped a hand into RJ’s hair, running her fingers through it while he devoured her. She had no idea what had gotten into him, but she was happy it had. There was a squirming feeling building in her tummy again though. One that wasn’t going to be satisfied with his hands or even his mouth. She shifted restlessly and his eyes drifted up to hers, a clear question in them even as he sucked her swollen clit into his mouth.

Her hips gently rolled against his mouth and he made soothing, rumbly noises from deep in his chest, encouraging her to continue. She watched him watching her for a moment, feeling decadent and maybe even beautiful in the spotlight of his attention. When she opened her mouth to speak, to ask him to slide back into her, only a quiet mewl actually made it out. His hands wrapped around her legs and he practically growled at her, like he was daring her to tell him to stop.

Well, that was fine. If he wanted to claim her with his mouth first, that was perfectly fine with her. Charlotte gave up trying to get her way for once and relaxed against the pillow, eyes sliding closed
and contentedly drifting along once again. The fingers in his hair rubbed his scalp in calm little
circles and she smiled when he leaned into it.

That spiraling feeling was back. Softer this time. She was grateful for that. Just a gentle quaking
that started at her core and fluttered outward.

Mac felt a fresh rush of liquid coat his tongue and groaned. Lottie still had her eyes closed,
shivering through another climax and murmuring to herself. He liked how sleepy and pliant she got
after she came.

She tugged at his hair and her eyes just barely opened. “Come here.”

He grinned against her skin and nipped at her one last time before moving up her body. Still a
greedy little brat, even like this. “Hmm?”

She licked his lips like a cat and smiled up at him, “Take me. Make me yours, RJ.”

His hips rolled against hers and he chuckled at the way she clawed at his back, “You want it bad,
huh, baby?”

“Yes.”

“Felt pretty good having me balls deep in this sweet little pussy, didn’t it?”

“M’hmm.” Her lips brushed against his and she trailed sweet little kisses down his neck.

Yeah, he could definitely get used to this Lottie. The affectionate, agreeable one who was already
addicted to his cock.

He pushed the tip into her and let gravity do the rest, sinking slowly into her body while she
squirmed under him. It still felt just as tight as it had before and he paused, murmuring against her
ear.

“Doesn’t hurt, does it?”

“No.”

“You sure?”

Her hands moved down his back and she dug her nails into his ass, pulling him harder against her.
“I’m sure.”

Mac moved his his hips in a slow circle and chuckled at the soft cries it drew from her. He took her
hands in his and braced them against the mattress before starting to move in deep, slow strokes. His
hips twisted and rolled just a bit at the end and each time she shuddered all over.

He was already right there at the edge again. He could feel it creeping up his spine. His head fell
against her shoulder and he nuzzled against her, lipping at her skin.

“I’m so close, sweetheart…” Another roll of his hips and he was that much closer to the tipping
point. He could feel his balls starting to tighten up against his body and he squeezed her hands
hard. “Where should I --”

Charlotte wrapped her legs around his hips and used the leverage to rock against him, “Inside me.
God, please, I can’t stand it, RJ. Come inside me.”
He immediately released her hands and slipped his arms under her, lifting her and changing the angle so he could get even deeper. Her legs tightened around him and he let himself go, fucking her as hard as he could, only dimly aware of the way she was crying out his name as he slammed into her. It still wasn’t enough. His teeth found her throat and dug in while she jolted suddenly in his hold, reaching her zenith while his cock was pressed hard against her cervix. Her pussy undulated around him and he managed only a few more sloppy thrusts before he was coming deep inside her. Wave after wave splashed into her and he was shocked at the sudden dizziness that swamped him.

Mac tipped forward, crushing her down into the mattress and mindlessly rutting against her, trying to get ever deeper while he poured into her.

Charlotte shakily managed to wrap her arms around him, hanging on for dear life while her body continued to pull and squeeze around him, leaving her breathless. RJ was making desperate, tortured kind of noises and she murmured soothingly in response, petting and gliding her hands along the tense muscles in his back.

She finally managed to catch her breath and tucked a hand into RJ’s hair, shushing him while his body continued to quake. Every time she thought he was finally finished, he’d twitch inside her again. She could feel a puddle forming beneath her and was trying very, very hard to be understanding and adult about the whole thing, but then he made a whining sort of groan as another spasm made his cock swell and jerk inside her again and she couldn’t help it. She caught a case of the giggles.

Mac felt like he was drowning in sensations. Lottie’s pussy had a deathgrip on him, forcefully pulling the seed from his balls. Her hands, soft and cool and wonderfully soothing, kept rubbing little circles along his muscles. And her mouth, that perfectly pink mouth, was murmuring sweet nothings against his ear and making shivery little bits of lightening run up along his back. It was paradise.

Until she started giggling.

He huffed and stifled a groan as a fresh wave of come spurted inside her. “Shut up.”

Charlotte’s giggling just got worse, “I’m sorry, honey. I really am.”

“It’s not funny.”

“No, of course not.” She patted his head, “It’s um...been a while, huh?”

“It’s not that. It’s just because I’ve been thinking about this for a very long time.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I didn’t make fun of you when you were practically comatose earlier.”

“No, you did not.”

“I should have!”

“Probably.”

He grunted and lurched forward, another round of twitching sending her into a whole new fit of giggles. “Shut up, I swear to God...”
“Aw, honey.” She pouted at him even if he couldn’t see with his head buried against her neck the way it was. “I’m sorry.”

“Sure you are.”

“It’s flattering.”

“Uh-huh.”

Charlotte grinned wickedly to herself and purred in his ear, “Mmm, feels so good…”

“Fuck!” Another whiteout explosion from behind his eyelids and he was pumping another load into her. “Shut up shut up shut up!”

“But it does!”

“Shut up. I hate you.”

“No, you don’t.”

“You’re the worst.”

She chuckled and let her legs relax. They fell against the bed practically boneless and she relaxed as much as she could, nestling him against her. “Just calm down and you’ll be fine.”

He grumbled, “Can’t calm down…”

“Sure you can.”

“Fucking embarrassing.”

“I still say it’s flattering.”

“Hmph.”

“No man has ever tried to drown me in come before.”

Mac raised his head enough to glare at her properly. “The. Worst.”

Chapter End Notes

I think I can speak for all of us when I say it's about goddamn time.
Chapter 18

Mac let the water run in the sink until it felt at least a little better than lukewarm before soaping a washcloth and cleaning himself off. He wasn’t the type to have to be squeaky clean all the time or anything, but everything between his knees to his stomach felt...sticky.

It had been hot though. Smoking hot, actually. Right up until the sticky part.

He scrubbed himself down quickly and cheerfully cataloged all the scratches left behind by Lottie on his chest. There were far more on his back, he already knew. He’d felt them twice over already, once when she cut them in with her nails and again when sweat had slipped into the long trenches she’d dug across his skin. There were also a few crescent moon shaped divots along his shoulders and upper arms where she’d clung to him, the bottoms already dark and bruised.

Not that he minded. He’d wear her marks with pride, so long as she kept making them...and as long as she didn’t mind him leaving a few of his own.

A quick rinse and pat down and he was good as new. Literally. Still at half mast despite what they’d already accomplished and the growling in his belly. Amazing. He hadn’t felt this good since...well, since Lucy, of course. Refreshed and rejuvenated instead of locked in a shame spiral of depression and self-loathing like he had been for the past few years.

He definitely hadn’t imagined it. Sex with your soulmate was just on a whole different level than anything else. Nothing compared.

There was another clean washcloth in the cabinet and he wet it down, too, folding it nice and tight to retain the heat. As messy as he’d been, Lottie had definitely gotten the lion’s share. As much as he hated to admit it, his body had seemed fairly determined to literally drown her in come. Her body had absolutely reciprocated in kind, of course, but like she’d ever admit to that.

“Hey, Lottie? You hungry? Cause I’m…” His feet and words abruptly came to a halt as he came back into their bedroom.

Codsworth hovered helpfully by her side of the bed, wholly unperturbed by his mistress’s state of undress, just a sheet held against her chest for the illusion of modesty. It about gave him a heart attack though. Seeing a Mister Handy waving his appendages so close to his naked, vulnerable mate’s body made adrenaline surge through his veins. Too many close encounters with his rabid robotic brethren.

“Oh! Sir! Good morning!”

Mac took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Right. Right right right. This Mister Handy was as harmless as a kitten so long as he went along with the happy family thing. He remembered.

“Morning, Codsworth.”

“I was just confirming breakfast plans with Miss Charlotte! Two seafood omelettes with razorgrain toast, fruit salad and coffee. Is there anything else I can get for you?”

“Uh...yeah, I dunno about the seafood part there. I try to stay away from fish.”

Lottie’s head tilted a little, “Really?”
“But Sir! You adore seafood!”

She studied his face for a moment and then shrugged, turning back to the robot sputtering behind her. “Well, looks like he don’t anymore...we’ve still got that deathclaw, right?”

“I...yes. Yes, of course, Miss Charlotte. I shall change one of the omelettes to deathclaw.”

“Perfect.”

Mac spoke up again while he had the opportunity, “No mushrooms, either. No fungus of any kind.”

“Sir! Really now!”

“Codsworth, you heard the man.”

He grumbled a bit but a small chime sound emerged anyway. “Yes, mum. His changes in preferences have been noted...I shall begin preparing breakfast straight away.”

“Thank you, honey.” She watched him go with a bemused expression on her face and then flopped back against the pillows, “So...you don’t like seafood or mushrooms, huh?”

The grumpiness in her voice made him chuckle and he crawled over the bed, peeling her sheet back while her scowl grew. “That gonna be a problem?” His tone was belligerent, borderline challenging, but his hands were gentle as he cleaned her off.

She clearly still wanted to argue but the more his hands skated along her skin, the less she felt the inclination. “I guess not...Nate loved seafood. And mushrooms. And seafood stuffed mushrooms.”

Mac did his best to not gag at the idea and tossed the rag carelessly towards the open bathroom door before laying down with her and pulling her close. “That sounds...nasty. Just one hundred percent nasty.”

“It’s not nasty! It’s delicious.” She felt compelled to defend Nate’s taste, but it was hard to hold onto her sense of righteousness when pressed against RJ’s chest. He smelled amazing and it was kind of making her dizzy again. That weird fever was building under her skin, too. It had mostly dissipated when he’d left the room, but it seemed to have followed him back into bed.

“You’re delicious.”

His hand was back in her hair, sending little shocks down her spine. It made her eyes flutter shut and she wondered if anyone had ever had an orgasm just from their hair being played with. Surely not. That couldn’t be possible, right?

“Low-hanging fruit, honey.” She just barely managed to mumble it against his skin and felt rather than heard his laughter.

“You aren’t falling asleep on me, are you?”

Sleep? How could she possibly sleep when her body was singing so loudly? It was kinda hard to remember how to speak though. “Nuh-uh.”

“M’hmm. I think you are.” God, how was she this soft? He knew she was pre-war and all, but shit. People in real life just didn’t have this kind of skin. It made him sharply aware of how rough his own was, but she didn’t seem to mind. If anything, she seemed to enjoy the contrast, purring into
every touch like…

Well, like a cat in heat, actually.

Mac lifted her face and frowned at the unfocused way her eyes found his. “Lottie?”

She smiled dreamily at him, “Hmm?”

“When you went through your Bloom...what was it like?”

Her hand found his on her cheek and she held it there, rubbing against it. “Didn’t.”

“You didn’t what?”

“Didn’t go through it. Started to. Doc Adkins gave me pills and it went away so I didn’t have to suffer all by my lonesome.”

He’d never heard of someone taking a pill to make it go away. Then again, he didn’t know half the shit she probably did about soulmates and how all that worked, or was supposed to work. “Pills?”

“Hormone suppressants. Anti-anxiety stuff. Tranquilizers the first week.”

*Tranquilizers?* Shit. “Was that...normal for back then?”

“Sometimes.”

“How old were you?”

“Fifteen.”

Late. That seemed like a late Bloom to him. Lucy had barely been fourteen when hers had hit. He’d felt like that was late, too, at the time, but that probably had more to do with his own impatience. Fifteen was practically grown though by wasteland standards.

Nate had been older than her, right? That dream...them in the woods, her restless and wanton and him...skittish and overwhelmed. She’d been eighteen by then. So three years between her reaching womanhood and them even meeting face to face. That seemed so *wrong* to him.

Another hazy memory. Her crying in that tiny, hot house with the loud birds in it. Chicken coop. Overwrought and nearly hysterical in her wedding dress, not caring if she ruined it or not among all the dust and feathers. Telling him, telling Nate, she didn’t know how to make him happy. Wasn’t sure how to be his wife and…

Oh, *fuck*. That weird static feeling in his hands. His body’s response to them finally coming together. If he was right, it made a hell of a lot of sense. He just hoped he still had the same energy and stamina he’d had at fourteen to handle what was on the horizon.

“Baby, I think you’re gonna have to reschedule a few things this week.”

She’d been busy trying to sneak his thumb in her mouth but that distracted her enough to stop. “I’m busy…”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m pretty sure you’re about to be a lot *more* busy.” He tried to keep any of the anxiety he was starting to feel out of his voice and his emotions locked down in his mind. While he’d fantasized more than a few times of what it would be like to be with her during a Bloom, with all her fire and temper, he was fairly sure the reality of it was going to be a lot harder to deal with
than he’d bargained for. She’d already had one man run from her in that respect. He wasn’t about to.

It didn’t mean he wasn’t kind of scared shitless though.

The little kisses she was trailing up his neck burned. Her hands were still gentle on his chest, lightly tracing the muscles there, but even that was building a swirling vortex of want and need in him. It completely obliterated the other kind of hunger he’d previously been concerned with. The hand in her hair became possessive of its own accord, clutching her curls like they were a priceless treasure made just for him.

She wiggled up just a little and offered him her lips. Just the barest brush and Mac felt a wave of blistering heat sweep through him. He wanted to devour her and did, his tongue hungrily seeking out hers and moaning at how sweet she tasted.

It wasn’t until he was already covering her, between her legs with her hands urging him to delve into her again that some far off reasonable part of his brain made him pull back and take a breath. He stared down into her dark eyes, panting and trying to figure out how he’d gotten from there to here.

Charlotte had never felt so worked up in her whole life. Fire burned through her, blistering lightening fast on its heels. Everything just felt so good and nothing felt as good as when RJ touched her. She wanted him to touch her all over. Everywhere. Whatever he wanted.

He’d stopped though. She could feel his cock, gloriously heavy, hot and hard as it moved along her folds. Not enough to do anything but torment her but God, she needed it. Needed him to tease and torture her. Fan the fire into an inferno so it could consume her whole. Her hips rolled a little, trying to slip him inside somehow and only managing to make it that much worse. She couldn’t look away from his eyes. So bright and burning. He was long past the days when he could’ve doubled as Pan, but the way he looked at her was the exact same. Wild and fey and full of tantalizing promise. She loved how he looked at her.

She hoped he’d always look at her just like that. As hungry for her as she was for him. She felt enraptured.

But he had stopped, and she hated that. Her back arched as she tried to reclaim his mouth with hers and she made a frustrated noise when he wouldn’t let her.

“Please?”

“Lottie...wait, we...we need to talk about --”

“Please, RJ?”

It was hard to think. Being so close to her, feeling that hot, liquid honey that flowed so freely from her coating his cock again. Impossible to be a responsible grownup this way. Mac rose up off her and fought the urge to immediately abort when cool air was able to drift between them.

Her face changed. The moment he broke all contact and began to move away, the fire collapsed in on itself. Died. Tears filled her eyes and the pitiful way she started sobbing, like he was tearing her heart out with his bare hands, made him want to go kill himself for making her so upset.

But somebody had to be the grownup here. Somebody…

Somebody, but definitely not him.
Mac stumbled out of bed and nearly fell through the door that connected the bedroom to the little kitchen where Codsworth was diligently puttering along, still focused on making their breakfasts.

“Codsworth!”

“Sir! Are you quite alright? Is something the matter?”

“Lottie...Miss Charlotte...do you know anything about Blooming?”

“Of course, Sir! I have a database full of the latest studies and protocols courtesy of RobCo’s scientists and engineers! Would you like to begin a search for a specific topic on the matter?”

“No. It’s...good. That’s...” He had no idea what the fuck he was on about, but it sounded good to the parts of his brain that could still function. “She’s in Bloom, Codsworth. So...whatever protocols you’ve got for that...engage them, I guess.”

“In Bloom? Miss Charlotte? My, that’s...she’s a trifle late to the party, isn’t she? And already a mother...this is most unusual.”

“Yeah. Yeah, it’s...yeah.”

“I shall see to it that the two of you are not disturbed for the duration. All social calendar functions will be rescheduled and meals will be auto-prompted and brought to your room, Sir.”

“Perfect. Great. Thanks.”

“Would you like to plan a menu or -“

“Just...handle it. You handle it.”

“Of course. Best get back at it, Sir! Give her what for!”

“What?”

“Ah...I apologize. I merely meant...good luck?”

“Oh. Yeah. Thanks.”

Mac hadn’t even made it all the way out the doorway, but the way Lottie was crying, curled into a ball like she wanted to disappear altogether, you’d have thought he was halfway to China by now. He closed the door again and frowned at her. Sure, he was antsy, too, but this seemed...excessive. Or maybe not if she thought he really was like her husband had been. Ready to run at the first hint of trouble. That wasn’t him, though. He’d been born to be the man Nate couldn’t after all. For her.

He should probably be grateful for that. Happy that his past self had so desperately wanted to be different. Stronger. More confident and aggressive. It had gotten him this far, hadn’t it? How many times had he survived on nothing but spite and temper?

Instead it just made him angry. All the pain and the insecurity he’d put Lottie through in his efforts to contain a wildfire in a lantern. All those times he wasn’t there for her and couldn’t sack up enough to be the man she needed him to be.

How could anyone with even a tiny sliver of sense take someone so passionate and wonderful and want them to be anything less than they were? The fact that he’d been so fucking stupid in his past life made him incandescent with rage. He almost wanted to kick his own ass. He definitely wanted
to kick Nate’s ass somehow.

She was liable to take issue with that though. If he actually went a few rounds with the corpse of her beloved husband. Any widow would...probably.

Mac got in bed behind her and wrapped himself around her shuddering form, pulling her as close as he could. She jolted in surprise and stared at him, wide-eyed and disbelieving from over her shoulder.

That pissed him off, too.

“I’m not him, you goddamn idiot.” He snarled it in her ear and was not kind about yanking her thighs open and shoving a leg between them. “I love you. I’m not going to walk away from you. Ever. Try and fucking make me. I fucking dare you.”

She was still sniffling. She’d turned away but the look in her eyes, that wounded, lost, disappointed look hadn’t changed. She still didn’t believe him. Couldn’t, maybe. Already trying to withdraw and protect her heart from what she believed was the inevitable. Un-fucking-believable.

His teeth were in her neck before he even realized what he was doing. He barely even registered her gasp. The hand on her thigh found her hip and dug in hard, yanking her flush against him. His cock was harder than he could ever remember it being and he shoved it home with one thrust.

The arm he’d wrapped around her neck and shoulders tightened and his hand found her breast, squeezing possessively before cruelly rolling an already overstimulated nipple between his fingers. Lottie whimpered and tried twisting away but there was no escape.

He kept her like that, uncomfortably close and crushed against him while he fucked her. Shallow, sharp thrusts that slammed into her g-spot with every stroke.

“You are mine. This --” he pushed into her until a little sob broke free from her throat, “-- is mine. There is no part of you that doesn’t belong to me, you understand? And I will never, ever let you go. You can’t make me.”

“RJ --”

He gritted his teeth to keep from himself from tearing her throat out. “Shut up. Just shut up. You’re so stupid. Just...fucking...goddammit!”

He couldn’t even form sentences anymore. That’s how pissed he was. Her and that stupid mouth of hers that never stopped moving. Telling lies. Or about to try to anyway. He knew she was going to try to argue with him. Make up a million bullshit reasons why he wouldn’t or shouldn’t want to be with her. It was all bullshit. Hadn’t he just shown her that? He’d fucked her senseless that first time and it had been beautiful, goddammit! Special. And then she went and got stupid just because he wanted to make sure she’d be taken care of by somebody who could still think straight while he was incapacitated. By her! Fuck! Ungrateful brat!

She was better than this. His woman was a fighter, and better than this stupid little cowardly girl who’d shown up in their bed. If she couldn’t come to that conclusion on her own, then he’d make her.

Mac forced her over onto her belly, a restraining hand on her shoulder and hip until she tried to push him away. Then he yanked her arms behind her and held them there with a hand wrapped around her wrists while the other kept him anchored to the bed. From this angle he could get deeper, nearly all the way in, and he groaned at how tight and wet she was as he pushed further
into her.

Charlotte cried into her pillow as RJ moved against her. The delicious thrill of being held down like this, properly claimed like she’d secretly dreamed of her whole life, wasn’t enough to completely break the hold her fears had on her, but it was helping. Every time he plunged into her, forceful and just over the edge of too much, another tiny piece of her resistance and worry was chipped away.

The fever was already back. Blazing brighter than ever. She could feel her own juices flowing freely, practically dripping. Or they would have been if she wasn’t currently pinned down flush to the bed. She could hear every thrust, wet and obscene in her ears.

Her head finally turned, just enough to sort of see RJ’s face through her hair. He looked...furious. Enraged and possessive and dangerous. It finally dawned on her just exactly how much stronger he was than her. Overwhelmingly so. The hand on her wrists gripped tight enough to grind the fine bones there together and she could see the muscles in his shoulder and arm bunch and contract with every angry movement he made. It should have been scary, but it wasn’t. Instead it just filled her with a strange sense of primal satisfaction.

She was his. She belonged to him. He’d never let her go. Never set her aside or let her get away.

There was another rush of heat from between her legs and he threw his head back and groaned, cursing at the ceiling.

“Fuck...so goddamn...so... shit!” He slammed into her and swerved his hips, luxuriating in the feel of her. “Goddamn that’s some good pussy.”

She made a noise. Some kind of little twitter. Almost a giggle. Mac finally looked up, still lost in a fog of lust and, if it wasn’t outright anger now, at the very least it was annoyance. She was staring. One eye peeking back at him, twinkling a little when the candlelight hit it.

“Oh, you think it’s funny, huh? Real fucking funny.” The hand he was keeping most of his weight braced on snagged her hair and he pushed her head back into the pillow, hard. “Dumb little girls don’t get to watch.” His knees spread to take more of his weight and it changed the angle. Not that he stopped or even slowed down. The fuck did he care if he couldn’t get as deep? So long as her pussy kept clenching and burning him alive, he didn’t give two shits.

Charlotte did, however.

Dumb little girl? Who’d he think he was talking to here, exactly? She took as deep a breath as she could and bucked back against him as hard as she could. The hand in her hair immediately tightened, but he let go of her wrists to regain his leverage. When his body dropped on top of hers, heavy and hot, she took the opportunity to spread her legs and arch her back a little.

The next time his cock slammed into her, it gained a good two inches and she moaned. He just felt so good. Stupid good, even. So thick and it felt like being split in two and she loved it. She wanted more though. Needed more.

He wouldn’t give it to her like this. Not unless she took some control back. She wiggled her hands under her body and pushed as hard as she could. It was hard, with his added weight, but she managed to almost get up enough to get a knee under her before he pushed her back down.

It was a start anyway.

Mac pulled her hair out of the way and bit down hard on her neck, holding her in place with his
teeth while his other hand pressed against her hip. She’d tried to get away on him. Testing his resolve, no doubt. Well, that was fine. Just fine. He didn’t mind. He liked her squirming beneath him. Made her pussy even tighter.

Charlotte whimpered as pain bloomed from where his mouth had sealed against her carotid artery and she felt him press his tongue against her pulse there. He wasn’t biting hard enough to impede blood flow yet, but it was definitely enough to make a spiraling pressure start to build low in her belly. It felt like it was pulling all the fire burning through her to it. She knew what that meant and fought against it. If she came this way, with him nowhere near as deep as she wanted him, she’d die. Absolutely die.

It hurt, and she felt more than a few strands of hair get pulled from her scalp, but she managed to get her mouth free from the pillow and panted for a few moments, trying to catch her breath before she spoke.

Mac saw that telltale bubblegum pink appear in his peripherals. Watched the lustful way she panted and the little pink tongue nestled back against her teeth. If he wasn’t pretty sure she’d bite him, he’d have her sucking him off right now. Definitely. That’d show her. Make her suffer and wait until she was begging him to let her come.

She licked her lips and it almost tipped him over the edge. His mouth was suddenly on hers again, sloppy and barely able to make a connection of tongues and teeth as he continued to ravish her. When he finally let her go, he left her with a cruel bite to her lower lip that had her whole body flexing against him.

Her head was swimming. She could barely focus on staying conscious, let alone speak. “RJ?”

“What?” It wasn’t even spoken, just grunted in her ear.

Her voice was barely a whisper. “More.”

All movement stopped. Mac felt like he was clinging to a tiny, disappearing island of sanity as he set his hands on the mattress and lifted himself away from her a bit. “What’d you say?”

She took a second to breathe, finally freed from his weight and the suffocating embrace of her pillow. When she could finally bring herself to rise up a little and look back at him, she had no idea just how menacing the glittering of her eyes was.

“I said more... you sonofabitch. Or are you too much of a candyass to get it done?”

He growled at that, but somehow it came out more like a purr. She almost sounded like the feisty, dangerous whirlwind of fire and passion he was so fucking in love with again. Angry. She was definitely angry with him at this point.

Finally.

Mac grinned at her, feeling practically feral as his hands slid under her hips. He pulled her up on her knees and smirked as she wiggled against his hold. Already trying to push back on him and run the show. Of course she was.

He leaned far over and nibbled her ear, chuckling as she jerked her head away and growled at him. “Oh, I can get it done, sweetheart. The real question is whether you can handle it or not?”

God, the arrogance in his voice made her melt. Made her want to roll over and let him do whatever fool thing he wanted with her body. Just do nothing but exist only for his pleasure.
It made her furious.

“Don’t flatter yourself, little boy. There’s nothing you can do to me that I’m sure somebody else couldn’t do better.”

As soon as it was out of her mouth she wanted to take it back. Mistake mistake mistake. Nate hadn’t been the possessive type. He’d thought it was funny when guys would hit on her or clumsily try to flirt. The mortified look on their faces when she held up her wedding ring never failed to amuse him.

But RJ was not Nate. Not at all.

It didn’t surprise her at all when she found her head shoved back down into the pillow. What did surprise her was just how much weight he could throw behind the hold he kept on her. She was pretty sure he’d given her face some kind of rug burn by this point. Or sheet-burn, in this case.

She also wasn’t surprised when his hips slammed painfully into hers. The stretch burned and there was a sharp pain from the head of his cock hitting her cervix hard, but it was exactly what she’d been craving. She couldn’t help the tiny satisfied cry that sang through her.

Mac yanked her head up enough so he’d be sure she’d hear him and snarled against her hair. “You are mine, goddammit, and if you don’t think I won’t destroy anyone who thinks otherwise, you really are fucking stupid. You are mine. Say it.”

She didn’t hesitate. He’d made it so blatantly obvious and all. “I’m yours.”

“Again.”

“I’m yours. I belong to you.”

“Huh. What do you know? It can be taught.” He unceremoniously dropped her head and sank his fingers back into the tender flesh of her hips.

Charlotte braced herself as best she could, clutching the sheets tightly. “I’m sorry. I’ll be good.”

He let out a bark of laughter. “No, you won’t. Fucking liar.”

Then he was moving, deep, hard strokes that made every nerve in her body dance. Too slow to feed that twisty feeling, but enough to keep it going. It was maddening. There was nothing she could do though. The stranglehold he had on her hips never wavered, even as the noises coming from his throat became harsh and bestial. He may lose control over himself, but clearly he wasn’t about to lose it over her.

His stance widened, adding even more force to his strokes, and she clumsily tried to compensate. Her legs spread unevenly on the bed and he immediately took over. Irritably adjusting her to his own liking before she even realized what was happening. It caused another whole new kind of sting and she gasped at the sensation, laughing helplessly at the realization that this was him fully hilted. Just now. Not what she’d experienced thus far this morning, which had already blown her mind several times over. Oh, no. Up until now, he’d still been keeping a half inch in his back pocket. Just waiting for the right time to overwhelm her with it. The jerk.

Goddamn. No wonder he strutted around like he was the king of the world.

He chuckled and pressed his full weight against her. She could feel it vibrate through her and shuddered.
“Yeah, you like that, don’t you, baby?”

Someday that ego of his was finally going to get big enough to destroy them all. No doubt. But she couldn’t lie. Not when most of her brain was already halfway to the moon. “Yes.”

His hips rolled against her. “Yeah? How’s it feel?”

Like he didn’t already know. Charlotte was pretty sure if he let go of her, she’d collapse. Every muscle in her body seemed cut free from her command. She chewed her lip and tried to think of anything but the truth to say, but it was no use.

“Big.”

Mac snickered, both at her admission and how small her voice sounded when she said it. “You wanna feel this big cock come inside you again, don’t you?”

Oh, God. More than anything ever. She needed it. She’d die without it. Couldn’t he see that already? Why’d he have to keep running his mouth? “RJ, please. Pretty please? Oh, God, please?”

He laughed, but one of his hands gently ran up and down her back in a soothing, calming motion. “You can just keep calling me RJ, baby. No need to get all biblical about it.”

“You fucking -- oh!” She’d had a whole backlog of insults to sling at him but then he started moving again, faster this time. Vicious and hard and wonderful. Whatever had affected her muscles soon seeped into her bones and made her feel liquid and strangely serene.

The hand he’d had on her back slipped around her belly and dipped low, easily finding her clit and tracing the lightest of circles over it. It barely took any pressure at all and she was flying. Her mind went perfectly blank, too awash in pleasure to comprehend anything else. His name fell from her lips, over and over, like it was the only word she’d ever need.

“Oh, shit, baby. That’s it. Good girl. Coming so hard for me. Good, good, good...” Mac wasn’t far behind. He buried his cock as deep as he could, fighting against the pressure that had built in her until it snapped and her pussy convulsed around him, a clinging crush that felt amazing, like it was trying to pull him further in.

Not that there was anywhere for him to go. His cock was already pressed as hard as it could against her womb. He realized this was exactly where he wanted to be when he finally exploded and let the feel of her body milking him tip him over the edge. A fresh burst of his seed filled her again. Not quite the endless ropes of their first coupling, but still pretty good. Certainly it felt fucking fantastic on his end.

He waited until the feeling had started to fade, just a bit, and his limbs had gotten shaky, before he let her go and immediately followed her sudden drop to the mattress. He did his best to keep his full weight from hitting her, but the little ‘oof’ she breathed out let him know he’d failed on that one. Fuck it. She deserved it.

Mac rested against her for a moment, breathing hard and enjoying the tickle of her hair over his face before he finally rolled away, settling on his back by her side. His head lolled her way and he scowled at her mischievous grin. His hand came up and shoved her head one last time, gently.

“Nothing but trouble.”

“So I’ve been told.”

“You’re lucky you’re so damn cute.”
“That’s funny, I was just thinking the same thing about you.” She smiled, batted her eyes and suddenly looked like an angel. “I love you, too, by the way.”

Oh, like he was going to fall for that face. His darkest look did nothing but amuse her so he turned back to contemplating the ceiling and tried not to laugh.

Barely a second had passed when there was a polite, borderline timid, knock on the door. “Room service?”

Mac finally lost the war and burst out laughing. The image of Codsworth, anxiously hovering outside with a full tray while they fucked was just too goddamn funny.

Charlotte huffed at him and, with effort, managed to get a blanket around their most scandalous regions. Poor old Codsworth’s delicate sensibilities were going to be sorely tested today. She could already tell.

Especially since they hadn’t managed to douse the fever she was feeling. If anything, it was worse. She wanted to crawl all over RJ and rub herself on him in extremely embarrassing ways. She couldn’t figure it out. Even her honeymoon hadn’t been this frantic, and she’d been positively desperate back then.

“Come in!”

Codsworth floated in and kept his apertures focused mainly on the floor, she noticed. “Here we are! Breakfast in bed for the happy couple!”

Charlotte accepted the tray for them and set it carefully on the bed between them. Coffee was quickly doled out and set on their respective bedside tables and he silently pushed a glass of the offensive brahmin milk in her hand while she made a face at him.

“Now, is there anything else I can get you? Anything at all?”

“No, honey, this is fine.”

“Yeah, looks great.”

“Are you quite sure? A Bloom this late in life...you’re apt to be a trifle ah...distressed? No, no, that’s not the right word, is it?”

Her head tilted, “A Bloom? What?”

“Perplexed? No...that’s not it either.”

“Wait, me? Are you talking about me?” Her gaze went to RJ but he just shrugged.

“Volatile! That’s it!”

“Codsworth!”

“Mum?”

“Why do you think I’m having a Bloom?”

“Because Sir said you were, of course.”

Her head swiveled to pin RJ in place with a glare. He’d been trying to sneak off the bed altogether.
Coward. “Where do you think you’re going, buster?”

He sat back down without thinking and then casually leaned against the headboard like it had been his idea the whole time. “Nowhere. Pretty sure we just established that. Unless you already forgot...like some kinda idiot.”

Her eyes narrowed further at his tone and she shoved the tangled hair back off her face with her hand. “Thank you, Codsworth. That will be all.”

“Yes, Mum. Sir.” He floated out as silently as he came.

She hadn’t stopped glaring at Mac but waited until the door clicked shut before she unleashed on him. “What the hell are you on about? Telling tales on me to my own fucking robot? You’ve got some balls on you, boyo.”

He shrugged, “I’m just call it like I see it.”

“I am not going through the Bloom.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I already did that once!”

“Sure.”

“Medically supervised, even, which is probably more than you can claim!”

“Yeah.” He sat up and popped a piece of melon in his mouth, chewing slowly and giving her such a passive, placid kind of stare that it made her blood boil.

“I am not --”

He moved so fast she couldn’t even get the full declaration out. Hands plunged into her hair and then his mouth was on hers, insistent and sweet. A staggering surge of heat engulfed her and she was crawling into his lap before she was even aware what was happening.

Mac broke off from her and held her off, kindly waiting until some sense came back into her eyes before speaking. “See? Is that how you normally respond to a simple kiss, Lottie? Cause if it is...shit, I’m down, but...I dunno how we’re ever going to actually leave this room.”

She blinked at him, her mouth open in shock. When she touched her lips, they felt absurdly sensitive. Tingly.

Itchy.

Shit.

“Oh, no.” She scooted back until there was at least two feet between them.

“Oh, yes.”

“What am I gonna do?”

He snorted, “Pretty sure that should be my question. I’m the one who has to put it on you twenty-four seven until you simmer down and do all the work. You could just lay there if you wanted.”
“Why aren’t you going through it? That isn’t fair!”

Mac sighed and set his fork down before gliding a single finger along her arm. The charged, electric feeling in his fingers immediately increased tenfold. “Pretty sure I’m not far behind you, actually.” He shrugged again at her terrified squeak. “Good thing we’ve got a robot, huh? At least we won’t starve.”

“I have so many things to do this week! Important things!”

“Codsworth already said he’d reschedule.”

“He can’t reschedule Hancock and Preston! He doesn’t even know how to get in contact with them!”

“Better eat and get on it then before another wave takes you back under.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah, exactly. That’s what we’re gonna be doing.” He grinned around a forkful of omelette. “You and me, livin’ the dream. Just like you said.”

Charlotte scowled again, “I don’t even know why I like you. I really don’t.”

“Sure you do.” He smirked at her until she turned pink-cheeked and then snorted in amusement, going back to his food. “Eat. You’re gonna need the protein.”

“I was supposed to rest. Stay off my feet.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll definitely be off your feet most of the time. Ninety, maybe even ninety-five percent. Promise.”

“Dang it. I need my Pipboy. Gotta call Preston.”

“It’s over here on the floor. You want it?”

“Yes.”

“Drink your milk and you can have it.”

She huffed, “I am not a child, MacCready. Give me my Pipboy!”

“Oh, no! She used my last name! Now I gotta do it!” He shoved another bite into his mouth and chewed. Slowly.

She shifted to get off the bed and he actually laughed.

“Don’t try it. You’re not gonna like what happens.”

“You aren’t the boss of me! I can do whatever the hell I want!”

“Of course you can.”

“Damn straight!”

“And so can I.”

Her tirade hit a brick wall and she stilled. Shit. That was...right. Fuck. She hated people telling her
what to do. They just might kill each other yet.

“Fine.”

Mac watched her drink her milk, still in a huff and refusing to look at him. It was pretty funny until his eyes were drawn to the way her throat moved as she swallowed. It made all the blood rush back out of his head and all that was left was the petulant realization that if she’d actually tried to make a break for it, he could’ve been fucking her into the floor by now.

By the time she finished, he was staring at her with big puppy dog eyes and an actual pout. She frowned at him, “What’s wrong with you? I did the fool thing like you wanted, so gimme back my Pipboy already.”

He nodded along and turned away, reaching for the Pipboy. The second he did, his head cleared a little and he frowned to himself. Shit. What was wrong with him?

“Here you go.” Mac turned to pass it back over just in time to watch her suck a piece of mutfruit into her mouth and almost did something real stupid and crazy. He shook his head, hard, and all but threw the device her way, keeping his eyes down and away from her general vicinity. Maybe he was a little closer to madness than he’d thought.

Charlotte watched him warily. He was acting weird. Jumpy kinda, like a dog with fleas. Still, God...look at the boy. All those lean muscles and that scruffy hair and...oh, look! Somebody was playing Boy Scout with the bedsheets. Had a sizable pup tent pitched and everything. Just for her. Wasn’t that a thoughtful gift? Didn’t that just make a body wanna…

Shit. Shit, no. Goddammit. She had things to do. Things that weren’t him.

Her Pipboy went on like she’d worn it all her life and she clicked it over to the radio. Her hand paused on the knob to tune it to Preston’s personal frequency and she fixed RJ with an arch look. “You keep your hands to yourself while I’m talking to my lieutenant. You hear?”

He rolled his eyes, “Yes, ma’am.”

“I mean it.”

“I heard you. Sh-shoot.”

“Hmph.” She turned away from him altogether and sat up straight. One foot went firmly on the floor, just like her brothers had always taught her as a way to keep steady when you’d had a few and wanted to stay on your bar stool. It kinda worked. Her mind felt a little more clear and grounded. She kept the other one tucked up close to her, keeping her presence on the bed small and trying to imagine she was just sitting in a chair, at a desk somewhere. Somewhere else. Completely dressed and normal and not at all stuck on the idea of burrowing under the covers and crashing RJ’s campsite...with her mouth.

Nope.

Totally fine.

She waited for the click in the static that let her know a connection had been made before she spoke. “Preston? Got your ears on, honey?”
The static suddenly increased in volume and then his voice came over, tinny and strange in mono. “I’m here General. Go ahead.”

“I hate to do it to you, but I’ve gotta push back the Castle operation. To next week.”

“Next week? Is something wrong?”

There was a tickling brush against her back, fire in its wake. RJ’s lips were tracing meaningless paths across her skin. Charlotte tried to not shiver, but it was pointless. “N-no...it’s um --” She released the button just before a tiny moan escaped her. His tongue was now involved because of course it was. It was getting hard to breathe normally, but she still managed to hiss out. “I am working!”

He nibbled his way up to her shoulder, “So am I.”

“You are --”

“General? Did I lose you?”

“Shit.” She pressed the button again, “I’m here! I’m just...gotta move it. Next week, I promise.”

“Where you injured during the MedTek operation?”

His lips were dragging slowly along her neck and it made her eyes flutter shut for a moment. “N-no...and yes. It’s...complicated. I’ll holler at you next week!”

“Oh...well, if you need the rest --”

“Yes, I do!”

“Okay. Got it. I’ll let the others know. Take care of yourself and let me know if you need anything! Over and out.”

“Oh, thank God.” She tore off the Pipboy, letting it tumble to the floor and grabbed RJ firmly by the hair, holding him in place while he sucked another love bite onto her throat. “You are the absolute worst!”

“You said keep my hands to myself. You never said anything about my mouth.” There was a piece of fruit being pressed to her lips suddenly. “Eat it.”

Charlotte barely managed to even get it in her mouth before he had her tipped back, kissing her senseless while a hand slid down her belly, making a bee line for the place she ached for him to touch the most. His tongue burst the little piece of berry against her own and then he sucked the juice from her lips. Her head was spinning by the time he let her go, that marvelously clever hand slipping into her while he smirked at her.

“I told you, long time ago, I was going to play connect the dots with my mouth if your freckles were all over. Remember?”

She nodded, “I remember.”

“I’m going to count every single one.” His fingers spread inside her and she gasped. “And if you’re a good girl, and eat all your breakfast while I do, I’ll give you the same number of kisses here.” His fingers withdrew and he cupped her mound possessively. “Sound good?”

Words got hard and confusing again. She decided to just stick with nodding.
“Good...start with the mutfruit. I like watching you eat it.”

God, he was a bossy britches.

And God help her, she loved that, too.
Mac pretty sure he was experiencing what was quite possibly his first ever crisis of character.

He’d known who he was, and what he was about, from a very young age. As far back as he could remember, he’d been the take charge, nose to the grindstone, get it fucking done no matter the cost kind of guy. Even as a very small child, he’d had an extremely low tolerance for both bullshit and backtalk.

It’s what had led him to becoming mayor of Lamplight at age nine when he’d violently dethroned Princess five minutes past when she’d tried to declare herself ruler for life. He’d given the older kids a chance to tell her to stuff it, but no one had, so he did. When insults and yelling (or ‘Lamplight diplomacy’ as he’d called it) didn’t work, he’d socked her right in the nose. Declared himself mayor and banished her to back gate guard duty much to everyone’s delight. Even earned himself a kiss on the cheek from Lucy, which totally made the hassle worth it.

He’d also always been a quick study. His wife had often called him ‘gifted’ in that respect. If there was a job to be done or a problem to solve, he’d always been the one to step it up and figure out how do it. He’d never encountered a situation he couldn’t handle. Ever. On the rare occasion that he did find himself temporarily stymied, his initial instinct was always to go straight through the problem instead of around it. He hit things head on. He never gave up. His dogged dedication to following through was something he’d always been proud of.

He might be a liar and a killer and a thief, but he was damn good at all three and had worked his ass off to get that particular skill set up to where it was today. As far as he knew, there was no one more suited for mercenary work anywhere. Nothing got between him and his target. Nothing had ever stood against him for long, up until the Med-Tek situation, and even that had eventually been conquered by the friends that he’d first met as contacts through work.

His work defined him. It always had, for good or ill. It’s just who he was. Determined, capable, steadfast, deadly.

Which was why, on this fourth straight day of Lottie’s second Bloom (or, as he privately thought of it: The Bloom Part II, Lottie’s Revenge), he found himself a trifle out of sorts at facing this new, improbable, completely unforeseen problem he was having.

Cause if you had told him, even a week ago, that he’d someday be too freaking exhausted to have sex, he’d have laughed his ass off.

This week? Not so much.

His pride had been taken down quite a few pegs since those simpler, more innocent times. Back before he’d actually met Lottie and his image of her had been of some sassy little pink bunting-wrapped cutie pie who would, despite the obvious temper and the occasional emotional volatility, probably be shyly, sweetly enthusiastic in bed. His saucy little firecracker of a girl.

God, he’d been a friggin’ idiot.

Instead he’d found himself in bed with an all-consuming, eternal whirlwind of fire and thunder. A ceaseless storm of primal passion that rolled right over him and then forcibly hoisted him up into
it’s mighty vortex. The living avatar of some long-forgotten old world sex goddess who could never be placated by his offerings, no matter how impressive and acrobatic they may be, and yet would not be denied her illusive satisfaction. He had actually come to believe the Five Stars had undoubtedly written that stupid song ‘Atom Bomb Baby’ specifically for her.

The first two days had been pretty goddamn amazing. They’d had sex on literally every available surface in her - or rather, their - bedroom. And also the shower. Once even at the kitchen table, and twice in the living room when she’d sent Codsworth out to pick up more kebabs, which had quickly become her food of choice thanks to the hormones flooding her body. Quite possibly the only sign of sense she’d shown since this frenzy had began. They were easy to consume one-handed, portable, and packed with protein. The perfect food for their current needs as she was burning through calories and fluids like nothing he’d ever seen and he was right there with her.

Right up until he kind of wasn’t. His body’s reaction to her seemed to be dependent on proximity. Whenever he went to the bathroom or darted into the kitchen for more provisions, the exhaustion and body aches immediately settled in and lasted until he was back in her arms. Then it was like it had never happened.

At least he’d gotten her kind of calmed down. Sort of. She didn’t seem to crave outright sex as much (although he knew in his heart of hearts twelve hours out of twenty-four couldn’t possibly be normal… he hoped) anymore, but closeness and cuddling? Absolutely. Any time he left the bed for any reason, he could feel a small ping of distress coming from her. A little less every time, but it was still there.

There was also something else. Something weird and twisty that would sometimes tug at him and then be gone in a flash. It made him feel anxious and unsure, like he’d done something and was waiting to get busted for it. He’d never felt whatever it was coming off of Lucy, and every time he’d asked Lottie if she was alright, she’d said she was perfect, but… something was still off.

It wasn’t like she was keeping something from him. She wasn’t lying about feeling perfect, so he was sure it was something way, way down deep. Something she wasn’t ready to deal with yet or maybe just couldn’t? He was not looking forward to when whatever it was finally came bubbling up to the surface, but he’d be there to help her. No matter what.

Mac had planted a flag of sorts here, back when he’d had the energy for bold proclamations and pure intentions. He’d sworn to himself that Lottie would never, ever again feel rejected or neglected or unloved. Ever. Not on his watch. If she wanted to keep him in bed with her for the next hundred weeks, then that was fine by him. Except not really, of course, since they both had sons and complicated situations to deal with, but the sentiment remained, dammit.

The thing was, he was starting to worry if he could actually get this particular job done or not. Mentally and emotionally? Sure. Physically though? Not so much. His strength was flagging on him. He could feel it. Little aches and pains that kept creeping in even when she was wrapped around him.

Made him feel like an old man, truth be told. He definitely didn’t remember his joints popping quite so much during his Bloom with Lucy at fourteen.

Then again, Lucy had still wanted to do things like sleep for a normal amount of time and rest longer than ten minutes between vigorous bouts of love making. He hadn’t appreciated that as much as he should have at the time. He realized that now. Felt kinda bad about it.

Not Lottie though. Nope. Not even a little. It was like her body was making up for lost time, or maybe there’d been some kind of pressure building up inside her for fifteen years that had finally
found a release. He didn’t know. All he knew was, he was freaking exhausted, dehydrated, and, as she would have said, ‘whupped’. She’d whupped him right into the dang ground.

The worst part? The absolute peak of absurdity here? His traitorous body just kept fucking rising to the occasion. He couldn’t say no. Didn’t even want to when she looked at him with those bedroom eyes and that sexy little pout. Drove all the sense right out of his head. That felt like some old bullshit to him.

Every time he had a moment of peace, a minute of rest, he’d come up with surprisingly tactful, gentle ways of suggesting that they do something else to bond for a while. Take a bath or snuggle by the gas fireplace Codsworth had somehow hooked up in the living room. Shit, he was down for reading a goddamn book together even. He was desperate here; a man on the edge. He’d do anything, no matter how boring, if it meant his poor body had a window to relax and recuperate.

Then she’d brush up against him. A drifting hand on his arm or even the idea of her lips on his and boom! That rush would wash over him and next thing he knew, he’d have her pinned under him...or against something, or whatever. It didn’t seem to matter so long as things ended with him in charge. That’s how they always went. She’d start something, he’d follow and then overtake her. Every time. It was crazy.

This whole thing was crazy.

Mac opened one eye and chanced a peek at her. Lottie was curled up against him, sleeping peacefully, looking so rosy cheeked. All soft and tempting. His cute little cuddly bunny. He knew it was a trap though. Not a her-trap, but a hormone-trap. He wasn’t irritated with Lottie as a person, or anything. He loved her and loved making her happy. It was just… these crazy goddamn hormones he was having a hard time with.

She’d been out almost a solid thirty minutes. A record and a miracle. It almost gave him hope that the worst had passed, but his naturally cynical nature knew that was probably just wishful thinking. Chances were good they were entering some kind of eye in this hurricane of need and desire. She’d no doubt wake up and climb right on top of him, again, and the whole thing would start all over.

He scowled at himself as his cock swelled at the thought of it. Goddamn traitor.

Lottie stirred along with it, stretching and doing that happy little purr she did every time she woke in his arms. She nuzzled against him and breathed a happy sigh, moving so that her leg was over his before settling back into sleep.

It was his hand this time. The one that should be content to just rest in her hair, but of course it wasn’t. That galvanic feeling of electricity beneath his skin was rising again. His fingers itched to touch her, to glide across her soft flesh until the musical sounds she’d make turned into a symphony. It sort of felt like when he’d briefly been addicted to Med-X that one time after a particularly rough job back in Washington. She’d become a chem his body and brain couldn’t function without.

His hand had drifted to her shoulder already. Lightly skimming along, tracing a path between freckles. He now had both eyes open. He couldn’t really remember agreeing to that decision, but he couldn’t blame his turncoat body for that one. She was too beautiful to not look at every chance he got. Everything he’d ever loved about Lucy’s appearance, and all the secret fantasy stuff his filthy mind had ever cooked up rolled into one woman.

That same sweet face, but now with eyes that flashed and challenged him at every turn. The delicious curve of her hips, emphasized further by the kind of hourglass shape he’d only ever seen
in skin mags. Some secret pre-war women had known to make their bodies take that improbable shape. There was just something so fucking majestic about it. Her breasts had the same delicate pink, oh so easily stimulated tips to them, but were fuller than he could have ever possibly hoped for. Almost like she was already pregnant or even breastfeeding, except he knew better. He’d seen that memory of Shaun snuggled against her, milk-drunk and drowsy. Seen just how swollen and truly awe-inspiring they could be when she had a babe in her arms.

It was impossible to put into words how very much he wanted to see that again. In person. With a different baby… specifically, his baby.

He just really wanted to put a baby in her was the thing. Very, very much. In fact, part of him wondered if he’d already done it. Maybe even hoped he had. She’d let him continue filing her, over and over… and over and over and over. The one time he hadn’t come inside her had been on accident. A minor slip in the shower and he’d suddenly found himself splashing across her tummy instead.

She’d literally burst into tears when it happened. Cried like it was the end of the world until he’d dropped to his knees and started worshiping her with his tongue, his fingers gathering as much of the mess as he could to press into her. By the end of it, she’d had one of her thighs wrapped around his shoulder, drowning in ecstasy even as the water raining down on them had turned tepid and then outright cold.

Easily one of the top five greatest moments of his life to date.

After that, he’d bundled her up in a towel and carried her to bed. Couldn’t even manage to get her all the way settled on it before he had her on her back, both legs over his shoulders this time as he drove into her. When he came that round, he was properly buried to the hilt, just like she liked it. It would probably seem excessive from the outside, but hey, she’d stopped crying, hadn’t she? It had worked and his life’s motto had always been ‘the ends justify the means’, so whatever.

Mac wondered if she would always run this hot for him. From the vague recollections of Nate’s final two years he could sometimes see, she seemed to constantly simmer just beneath the surface. Just the slightest push, a wink or even just putting out an openly receptive feeling, and bam. Eruption.

He’d been forced to amend his earlier assessment of her. Lottie wasn’t so much a firecracker as she was an artillery mortar waiting to go off.

What truly amazed him was that, even then, Nate had held back. He’d walk into their bathroom to watch her shower, but wouldn’t touch until invited. Stare silently at her until she finally noticed and crawled into his lap of her own volition. He’d wake up to her slumbering arousal, and usually just carefully tucked her back in and rolled over. He might have thrown a signal or two her way, but it had nearly always been on Lottie to make the actual first move. It was almost like he’d never realized he had a right to her.

Lottie had been Nate’s, just like she was now his. It wasn’t a sense of ownership, exactly. He’d never claim something so extreme. He wasn’t an idiot. He did value having intact balls, after all.

It was more like your soulmate functioned as an extension of yourself, and you of them. Their pain, happiness, contentment, whatever was something that belonged to you, just as your feelings belonged to them. Lottie had been Nate’s other half. Her desires and wants and wishes should have always been as important to him as his were to her.
No wonder she’d never felt adequate. Never felt like she was a good wife. Nate denied himself so much, either because he was afraid of it or out of some twisted sense of respectability, that he’d denied her, too. Mac understood the need for self-control and discipline. He wasn’t really a fan of either concept, but they had their purposes. Nate had just taken it too far. Way, way too far.

Your soulmate was the other side of you. Both your mirror and your heart. What you felt, they felt. What they felt, you felt. It wasn’t a hard concept.

So when you woke up in the middle of the night with that delicious warm honey feeling rising from them and flowing through you, you *fucking reciprocated*. It was just common courtesy.

The only time in his entire life he’d ever denied Lucy was after she’d had Duncan. She’d told him it would take six weeks to fully heal, stims or no, and he’d marked that time down in stone in his mind. So even when they hit the one month mark and he found himself waking up to her gentle heat washing over him, he’d held off. It had been hard as fuck and he’d only had to do it for six weeks total, including the month after that when she kept putting him off. He couldn’t imagine being married for *twelve goddamn years* and having the mental fortitude, or idiocy or whatever it was that Nate had in spades, to just shrug your shoulders and go back to sleep.

Especially when the heat that came from Lottie was more like molten lava.

Speaking of heat, there was a place on his thigh, mere inches away from her pussy, that now felt nice and toasty warm. So, naturally, it was the next body part to betray them all.

Mac shifted and the leg that had been innocently laying under hers was now pressed against her. He waited all of five seconds for some kind of reaction before some insane part of him decided to grind against her. Just a tiny bit. One small spark.

It immediately caught.

Charlotte roused just enough to become vaguely aware of where she was and smile against RJ’s skin. She’d had been having the most marvelous dreams, if you could call them that. It was really more like being cocooned in a feeling that permeated her subconscious and filled her every waking thought as well. The comforting, wonderful, delicious sense of being completely and utterly content. Everything she’d ever wanted. Love, security, safety, passion, commitment, endless devotion. It was all right here in his arms. She never wanted to leave.

Mac took her sleepy smile for the consent it was and carefully pulled her up onto his chest. Lottie murmured happily and curled her arms at his sides, laying passive while his hands brushed over her. He settled them on her ass and kneaded gently. She hummed, just a simple soft trill of happiness, and he swore he felt his body temperature leap twenty degrees.

It was nothing to maneuver his cock into place, gliding slowly back and forth between her swollen folds. He’d watched himself plunge into her enough times already to know the skin there would be going from a pale pink to a bright blush. By the time he was finished, it would be darker still. A rich, beautiful rose that had already become a signal to his central nervous system that he’d once again successfully fulfilled his purpose in life. Green was still his favorite color, but that glowing rose...it was a damn close second.

Just a slight shift of his hips, his feet coming up to let his legs do the bulk of the work so she could stay relaxed on him without being jostled too much, and he was there again. Paradise.

He groaned softly at the feeling as he slowly rocked up into her, taking his time, enjoying the sensation of just the tip going in. He loved how just that alone was enough to get her really
flowing, a creamy warmth slowly making its way down his cock. It would be easy to simply drive up into her, and she’d let him. Oh, boy, would she. But this was better. This self-inflicted torture of denying himself until he couldn’t take it any more was fucking sublime. It made his toes curl.

Lottie was starting to squirm now. Still drowsy, but there were the beginnings of one of her patented near-lethal pouts on her face. Mac smiled at that and slid a hand back into her hair, rubbing slow circles against her scalp specifically designed to settle and soothe.

His eyes slid closed as she once again went limp and compliant. She may be the impatient sort, but she trusted him to get the job done and more. Of course she did. He’d already proven himself capable about a billion times. Mac basked in that heady feeling of perfect faith and pressed a kiss against her curls.

“My sleepy little sweetheart.” He murmured low and soft. His cock was deeper now. A few inches in. Slow and steady, like they were in a rocking chair. “You feel so good, baby. So goddamn good. You like that, hmm?”

She smiled in her sleep and made agreeable noises that turned into a soft moan when he finally pushed his hips up and let gravity pull her down further.

“Yeah, you do. I can feel it. You’re already so wet for me. Always so hungry for it. You fucking love it.” A small shiver went through her and she actually rippled around his length. Mac had to bite his lip to keep from crying out and waking her fully. “Oh, shit. Fuck. Fuck. That’s so good. Fuck. I love when your little pussy does that.” He had to let his legs relax, easing down to rest on the bed, to keep himself from slamming home like he wanted. This way he just didn’t have the leverage.

The frustration was growing unbearable. His whole body flexed beneath hers in an attempt to get out some of the rising aggression he felt and he couldn’t help but buck softly into her, just a few times. She muttered a bit at the jostling, but otherwise stayed quiet.

It wasn’t enough. He needed more. His hands, never once breaking contact, went to her legs and he tugged them further apart. They then settled over her hips and firmly pressed down as he pushed up, slowly easing deeper into her. More, more, more until a shuddering breath left his lungs as the pressure and heat around his cock increased.

It was official. He was never going to get over how good this felt. Never.

“Ah, shit. There it is. Oh, fuck. That’s the sweet spot.” His thrusts had a little more power in them now that one of his legs had resurrected itself when he wasn't looking; but with his steadying hold, he was able to keep most of the movement entirely below their waists. Lottie barely stirred, just sighed in her sleep as her body instinctively responded to his, opening further to welcome him home.

She’d gotten a little more used to his girth since their first coupling, but it was still a tight fit. He knew for a fact that he was bigger than Nate had ever been. Had to be. She would never actually say it, but come on. He had eyes and wasn’t an idiot. It had been obvious the second he’d watched her take his cock for the first time. Mac felt like that was a solid bro move on the part of his past self to apparently wish for that particular self-improvement. Or maybe that had just been luck of the draw. Who knew?

He watched her face for any sign of waking, but she was still out. More color in her cheeks, maybe. Her pussy was pulsing faintly around him. Nowhere near coming yet, but he certainly was. A tingling was starting to crawl up from his toes, coiling low in his stomach.
“That’s right, beautiful. I’ve got you. You’re so tired, huh? Taking this big cock so hard day after day. Poor little baby.” He returned one hand to her hair, keeping her head cradled against his chest. “You just keep nice and quiet, sweetheart. I just need to come in this perfect little pussy real quick.”

The feeling in his stomach grew and grew until it suddenly broke over him, his whole body going rigid and starbursts exploding behind his eyelids as his cock jerked and twitched, filling her once again. Mac fought to stay quiet as it did, allowing only a stuttering groan to escape his throat.

He felt high as a kite again. A fresh rush of oxytocin, serotonin and endorphins flooded his system and left him once again feeling sated and complete. He wrapped his arms around her and hugged her tightly against him while he got his breathing back under control.

“My good, good girl. Just can’t get enough, can you? Always… always gotta start shit.” He yawned as his muscles began to relax. “Just too damn tempting… goddamn… what is it… whatsis called… succubus. That’s it. S’what you are.” It was hard to keep his eyes open so he didn’t bother.

It barely took any effort at all to get her exactly back where she’d been when they’d started. Which was good, because he wasn’t up for actual effort at this point. He kept her pressed tightly against his side, right hand sliding back into her curls for comfort, and took a deep, perfectly satisfied breath.

That should do her for a while. Surely now she’d finally let him rest. Mac held onto that hope and slid down into unconsciousness.

Just a few minutes later, Charlotte yawned and stretched a bit, rubbing her eyes and blinking blearily around her. She was still where she’d fallen asleep, in RJ’s arms, aka the best place in the whole wide world.

Her gaze drifted up his chest and settled on his peacefully sleeping face. He was so dang cute, with his mussed hair and all. It made her smile every time.

Actually, he was damn lucky he was so cute, or she’d have likely killed him by now. His wonderfully gratifying desire for her was brutally relentless. She’d never experienced anything like it. Anything and everything turned into sex with him. Even just a simple trip to the kitchen for a can of water had somehow led to him pressing her against the counter, his cock sliding between her slick thighs as he’d played with her body until she’d been forced to beg him to take her right there. Which, of course, he hadn’t since he was the most contrary person the world. He’d instead picked her up and bent her over the table in that deliciously possessive, bossy way of his. The very same table they ate at! She couldn’t even look at it’s formica top without blushing now.

Brazen is what he was. That was the only word for it. No sense of decency at all. She’d had to quickly send Codsworth out for groceries so he wouldn’t be scandalized any more than he already was.

It reminded her of deer mating season back home. When all the stags would get snorty and aggressive, tearing up trees all over the damn place. You could sit on the porch and hear them fighting in the woods, antlers clacking together as they battled for supremacy and the right to breed passing females. You couldn’t even safely walk past the tree line when it was happening unless you were armed. Everything they saw fell into two categories: things to mount and things to fight. There was nothing else. Everybody knew somebody, or somebody’s cousin, who’d been gored. There were even salacious rumors of people dying the other way, though she’d never actually seen evidence of that. She had seen them fight farm trucks and try to breed literally anything that would
stand still long enough though, so… it was possible, maybe.

The pretty little does and fawns that frequented their yard, usually tame enough to almost eat out of your hands, would turn skittish and timid. It was rare to see them at all until the season had passed. That had always made her feel a little indignant on their behalf. The notion that they were essentially being hunted by their own species.

She was kind of starting to understand how they felt with how RJ was acting.

Now, she could admit that it wasn't *all* his fault. It was absolutely true that her body was more than happy to have his undivided attention. Charlotte was constantly being woken up by soft, cascading kinds of orgasms he’d coax out of her with his hands or mouth. Gentle waves that would carry her off into some hazy, dreamy kind of place where it was impossible for real life concerns to follow. He’d held her captive in a realm of breathless kisses and burning desires for what had to be days now.

And, by God, she’d let him. Would continue to let him, no doubt. She couldn’t help herself.

There was a persistent, restless sort of feeling in her tummy that made her whine softly. The heat between her legs seemed especially wet. She felt downright deprived. Itchy again. She needed him.

Charlotte rose up a little and nuzzled at his neck, giggling at the grumpy way he muttered. By the time she’d made her way to his lips, he’d stirred enough to kiss her back in a lazy sort of way that perked up a bit when her hand sank into his thick hair and tugged gently like she knew he liked.

Mac finally opened his eyes, not surprised in the slightest that Lottie was all but writhing over him again. He nipped at her to get her attention and smirked when she backed up enough to look at him properly.

“Hey.”

She smiled. If the high flush in her cheeks didn’t do him in, that fucking dimple definitely would.

“Hey.”

“Need something?” He chuckled when she just nodded at him, big hopeful eyes staring at him like he might actually deny her. Like he even *had* that ability anymore, if he’d ever had it at all.

“Greedy.”

Lottie pouted and he was instantly lost. “Insatiable.”

Mac was still laughing when she pulled him over onto her. So what if he was probably going to die this way? Either dropping dead from exhaustion or dried into some kind of human jerky by the time she was finished with him. So what? Who fucking cared, really?

At least he’d die happy.

Chapter End Notes

12/19/19: Hey, guys! If you follow me on Twitter (www.twitter.com/wastelandmama) or Tumblr (wasteland-mama.tumblr.com), then you already know but I have broken my ankle. It's hard to get around & I'm still trying to get a handle on it, also next week is my daughter's winter break (2wks). So I don't know when I'll be able to really write.
Updates will be super slow if they happen at all. Sorry for the inconvenience! I love you guys! ❤️❤️❤️
Mac took another deep breath and savored the icy air in his lungs. It was Friday. A busy day at the market. Dozens of people passed by him completely unaware they were in the presence of a true survivor.

It had been almost a full week since he’d seen the sun or stood under the blue sky. A week since he’d worn clothes or been alone for longer than five minutes. Felt pretty damn good to just stand outside their door and, for once, appreciate what it felt like to be a free man.

_RJ?_

Okay, maybe free was a stretch. He sighed and tipped his head back, taking out a pack of cigarettes and lighting one before answering. _Yeah?_

_I miss you._

_I’m just outside the door, sweetheart._

_I know...I just miss you._

She’d actually let them sleep a full eight hours. He’d taken that as a sign that she was getting back to normal. Finally. Codsworth had assured him, repeatedly, that a Bloom so overwhelming couldn’t possibly be sustainable. That his worries of it lasting a full month, as his wife’s had, were in all likelihood completely unnecessary. He’d taken a lot of comfort in that.

So this morning, when she actually wanted breakfast before him for the first time in _ever_, he’d felt pretty good about things. He’d even managed to get actual clothes on.

It had taken him an hour and a half due to her… interference, but still. Progress was made.

Unfortunately, he’d felt her anxiety grow with every step he took from her. Like she thought he’d bolt as soon as he was out of her sight. Mac was pretty sure she didn’t consciously think that, but the way her worry had spiked the moment the door closed behind him, her heart certainly did.

He tried to keep his inner voice as calm and soothing as possible. _I’m just grabbing the screws I need to fix my rifle and then I’ll be right back. Why don’t you take a nice, warm bath or something? I won’t be but a minute._

_You promise?_

_I promise, baby...and I miss you, too._

He gently nudged her back into her own head and sucked in a lungful of smoke, letting it flow out his nose. As much as he loved how she smelled, and he absolutely did, having it constantly fill his nostrils was making it hard to take the necessary twenty steps over to Myrna’s to buy these damn screws.

Which he was starting to resent having to buy at all. Every step away from Lottie felt like a mistake. It was getting difficult to remember why he’d wanted fresh air in the first place.
It was *probably* possible that his own body’s reaction to her Bloom wasn’t quite as under control as he was currently pretending it was, but he refused to acknowledge that. Mac wasn’t some wet behind the ears kid anymore. He was a full grown man and he had control over his body, dammit. He called he shots, not some stupid hormone soup sloshing around in his system. Fuck that.

Myrna frowned at him as he finally made it over to her. “Hey, I remember you… where’s your shirt?”

He frowned back at her and looked down, biting back a curse. He knew he’d forgotten something. “None of your business.”

“Don’t you feel the cold?” Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Or are you a synth?”

Was that steam rising from his skin? Was he really still that overheated? Jesus fucking Christ. “I’m not a synth. I’m just… sick. Makes me hot.”

“Hmm.” She gave him a careful once over, “Well… you do look pretty ragged, I guess. Alright, we can do business.”

He held up a bag of caps so she knew he meant business. “I need headless plug screws. 8-40 if you’ve got them, 10-32 if you don’t.”

“That’s pretty specific.” She turned to her pile of junk and pulled out a box. It didn’t look any different than any of the other boxes she had, but somehow she knew it was the right one. “I’ve got…”, she jiggled the box a bit and squinted down at the contents. “Five of the 10-32s. That enough?”

“Yeah. How much?”

“They’re rare, you know. The headless ones.”

“How much, Myrna?”

“Twenty caps each.”

“Sh-shoot, Myrna. Why not just rip my balls off while you’re at it.”

“I don’t take those in trade.”

He glared at her but almost started laughing when he realized she was completely serious. “Alright. I’ll go fifteen.”

“Deal.”

Seventy-five caps was pretty steep, but she was right. They were rare. Once they were actually screwed in place, they almost never came loose though, so it was almost worth it. He had to dig out a second bag of caps from his duster’s pocket and tried to be okay about spending so much for so little. Money might not be the object it once was, but miserly habits died hard apparently.

He pocketed them and turned to make his way back home when he ran smack into a Diamond City guard standing entirely too close behind him.

Mac stumbled back a few steps and snarled at the man, “Hey, watch it, jerk!”

The man’s unreadable face didn’t change, save for a slight twitch at the corner of his mouth. He tapped Mac’s bare chest with his bat. “We’ve got decency laws in this town, kid.”
He watched his reflection in the guard’s stupid sunglasses as it just got more irritated but he stamped down the urge to pop off. God only knew what might happen to Lottie if he ended up spending a few days in the DC lockup. “Noted.”

He grinned, “Just passing through?”

Great. He gets the one chatty guard to deal with. Of course. Guy did look kinda familiar though. Maybe they’d talked before and he just couldn’t remember with his brain still compromised. “I’m just here with uh… a friend.”

“Oh, a friend. Yeah, that tracks. Diamond City’s residents are known for their friendliness. Who is it? I bet I know ‘em.”

“Charlie Apperson.”

“Oh, little Charlie! Yeah. Yeah, I know her.” He winked at him over his sunglasses, “How do you know her?”

Mac felt his hands reflexively clench into fists as possessive rage rose in him and ground his teeth. He had no idea what Lottie’s feelings on telling people they were shacked up were, so he went with a half truth. “I work for her.”

RJ? What’s wrong?

Nothing, sweetheart, don’t worry about it.

“Oh, right on, man. Okay. Well, that’s alright then. I was worried I’d missed my shot with her, if you know what I mean.” He gave him a friendly nudge and laughed, “Have a great day, kid. Give Charlie my love, huh?”

“Sure.”

The man sauntered off and Mac glared at the back of his head, imagining a target on it and then imagining how satisfying it would be to hit said target. He finally managed to unclench his fists but knew his hands were still shaking with the need to be around the stranger’s throat. Putting a man in the dirt probably wasn’t the best idea in a city like this, though, so his focus shifted back to Lottie. Getting his hands on her would be almost as good.

Mac forced himself to stop before opening her door and shook his head. No. They were trying to get away from that stuff. If he stomped in there and claimed her all over again, it could start some kind of chain reaction and then they’d be stuck here another week. Maybe. Possibly? Fuck, he didn’t know.

Going in there agitated just felt like the wrong idea.

Lottie, is there something you wanted from the market?

I just want you to come home.

No, like… I need… give me a job.

He could feel her confusion before she even answered. A job?

Some asshole made a comment about you and I’m… I’m fucking pissed and I need something to do for you to get it out of my system. This had always worked with Lucy. He’d get angry, she’d slide
into his head and ask him to do her a favor and poof, anger gone. He’d get it done, provide for her like he was supposed to, and feel like himself again. It had only taken them a year post-Bloom to figure that little trick out.

*I don’t understand.*

Fuck. Of course she didn’t. Nate hadn’t been the jealous, protective type. He’d never had to be. He hadn’t lived in a world where if somebody wanted your woman bad enough, they’d just put a bullet in your head and haul her off somewhere. Lucky bastard.

*Please? It doesn’t have to be important. Just… anything.*

*Um… some new yarn would be nice?*

*Yarn?*

*You know, for knitting? From Fallon’s Basement?*

*On it.* He turned on his heel and made his way over to the store on the opposite side of the market; a man on a mission.

Charlotte stood in the bathroom door and frowned to herself. What a strange thing to ask. She remembered when he’d gotten angry at Arturo calling her cute ages ago and nibbled on her thumbnail. Was this an RJ thing or something else? A quick glance at the tub let her know she had a good five minutes before it was full and she slipped her robe on, heading into the kitchen.

*“Codsworth?”*

*“Yes, Miss Charlotte?”*

*“I need you to run a search. What typically happens if a bonded man feels threatened? From a romantic angle, I mean.”*

*“Ah. Well, according to my data, in those circumstances, he will typically have one of two reactions. Either he will feel compelled to prove his worthiness to his mate, or, in some less evolved men, violence will erupt.”*

*“Prove his worthiness?”*

*“Yes, mum.”*

*“Can you give an example?”*

*“Of course. Ah… do you remember when Mister Whitfield down the street purchased that new car for the Missus?”*

*“Yeah. The little Chryslus Coupe, right?”*

*“Right, mum. Well, far be it from me to gossip on such matters, but just the week prior, I overheard Mister Whitfield raise his voice and speak quite sternly at the postman. Something about attempting to deliver packages he wasn’t scheduled to deliver, if you get my meaning.”*

*“Oh, my.”*

*“Yes, quite.”*
“So, he felt like their bond was threatened and instead of hitting the man, he… bought her a car?”

“I believe so, mum. A modern adaptation of men bringing animal skins or food to their mates.”

“Oh.”

“Was there anything else?”

“No… no, there wasn’t. Thank you, Codsworth.”

“You’re quite welcome!”

She retreated back into the bedroom and dropped her robe carelessly on the floor as she headed for her bath. It was typical. This was a completely typical reaction. Most men must have it or they wouldn’t have included information about it in Codsworth’s database.

The bath wasn’t quite finished yet, but she got in anyway and sank as low as she possibly could. Nate had never had a reaction like that in his life. He’d always just laughed it off when men had hit on her or made too familiar to be polite comments about her to him. That meant he’d never felt threatened, right?

The water finally rose enough that she could sink all the way under it and she did, listening to the roar of the spigot as she stared up at the ceiling through the waves. Did that mean he was just that confident, or had he simply not cared enough?

Even after five days of relentless worship from RJ, the old doubts and fears crawled back into her belly. She’d felt pretty good about herself lately, but wow. Wow. It hurt. It really did.

She’d always been kind of proud of how dignified Nate had been. Her brothers, once bonded, were practically wild animals when it came to their mates. One time, Buzz had thrown a man clean through a coffee shop window downtown when he’d made a pass at his husband. And Squeak got so protective of his wife whenever she was pregnant that she could barely get her shopping done the way he prowled around her, growling like a rabid dog at anyone who got too close.

Nate had always been different. Cool and calm and unruffled by such silly things. She’d always thought that made him noble and more intelligent somehow, but… if he was supposed to at least get a little upset then something was off.

And if something was off, she was betting it was off with her.

Lottie? Are you crying?

RJ’s voice surprised her and she gasped, or tried to, and immediately started choking. Charlotte quickly sat up, coughing and sputtering. The water was crazy high now and she used her foot to turn it off, wiping the tears out of her eyes. No, I’m not crying.

It feels like you’re crying.

Actually, it hadn’t. That was the nice thing about crying in the bathtub. You could pretend. Well, I’m not.

I’m on my way back.

Wait.

What?
He seemed calm now. That dangerous, primitive anger he’d felt earlier that had butterflies dancing in her stomach was completely gone from their link like it had never even been there in the first place.

*Can I ask you something?*

*Sure. Did you need me to grab something else?*

*No, I just… I know you aren’t Nate and all, but you’ve seen some of his memories and things, and I was just… I mean…*

*What?*

*Do you know why he didn’t… you know, care, about… stuff? Like, men coming on to me and… things? She winced even as she thought it out. It sounded so pitiful.*

Love and understanding flowed from his side and did a better job warming her than the bath did. *He cared, sweetheart. He cared so much it terrified him and he ran away from it.*

*It’s just… he never once got angry or whatever when men would --*

*I know. I know he didn’t. He loved you, Lottie. He really did. He just knew those other assholes didn’t have a snowball’s chance with you. He… well, I guess he took you for granted that way.*

*Oh.*

*I don’t intend to though. Don’t really have that luxury.*

She frowned at that, *I’m not… no one’s going to steal me away from you or anything.*

*They might.*

Well, now he was just being insulting. *I wouldn’t do that to you!*

*No, idiot, I know you wouldn’t. You’re living in a different time now, sweetheart, so catch up a little. If a man wants you bad enough, he’ll just try to take you. You understand? By force.*

*What?*

She heard the outside door to their bedroom open and shut before being bolted loudly. RJ’s footsteps drew closer until he finally poked his head into the bathroom. “They’ll literally try to murder me so they can take you. That’s why I can’t be as relaxed as he was. It’s a dog eat dog world, baby.”

“Oh... *oh.* Oh, no. Anyone who wants to kill you is gonna have to go through me first.”

He grinned at her, “You should see your face when you get all protective and homicidal. It’s cute.”

Charlotte flicked water at him and scowled, “Hush, you… and where’s your shirt?”

Mac rolled his eyes and leaned against the door frame with his arms folded. “Somebody had me a little distracted and I forgot it.”

She snickered, “Oh… right.”

“Are you going to survive if I sit on the couch and fix my rifle?”
Her eyes narrowed at his condescending tone and she looked away, head held high. “Oh, who needs you anyway. You can go take a long walk off a short pier for all I care.” His hands were on her shoulders before she even realized he’d moved and she shrieked. “You’re freezing! Get off me!”

The water she was in felt scalding, as did her skin, and he sank his hands down into the water to grab her breasts while he laughed in her ear. “Nope.”

“RJ!”

“My hands are cold. You should help me warm them up.”

“Let me go!”

He nibbled on her neck and knew his face must be likewise cold by the way she shrank away from him, “Nuh-uh.”

“I hate you.”

“That’s funny. Ten minutes ago you were telling me you missed me.”

“I plead temporary insanity.”

Mac smiled and bit down hard while his hands squeezed her, just to hear her involuntarily moan and laughed at the angry way she immediately huffed after. “Hurry up, I have a present for you.”

She watched him warily, even as he was slipping back out the door. “A present?”

“M’hmm.”

“You mean my yarn?”

“Nope.”

“Then what is it?”

“I dunno, you’ll have to come see.”

“I’ll have to come see… you bought the dang thing, but you dunno what it is.” She grumbled to herself but there was a smile on her face just the same. RJ drove her crazy but for some reason she was into it. Really into it. It was immature and juvenile and if he ever snapped her bra strap one day she wouldn’t be surprised, but she still liked it.

Mac finally got to sit on the couch, kick his boots off and deal with the loose screw in his stock. Only six days after realizing it was loose. Probably the longest he’d ever gone on letting a weapon sit idle in… ever. He was going to start losing callouses if they kept this idyllic lifestyle up much longer.

He’d just managed to get the old screw out and tossed it carelessly behind the couch when Codsworth floated in, Lottie’s Pipboy in his grabber.

“Ah, good afternoon, Sir! Did you enjoy your trip to the market?”

“Yeah. It was fine.”

“Wonderful. Is there anything I can get you?”
“Nope, I’m good.”

“A shirt, perhaps?”

He sighed and gave the bot a wry look before going back to work, “Nope.”

“Very good, Sir.” He continued on into the bathroom and paused at the door. “Knock, knock.”

“Hey, what’s up, honey?”

“Mayor Hancock is on the… uh, Pipboy for you, mum.”

“Oh… oh! Oh, shoot! I almost forgot! Give it here.”

“Yes, mum.” He passed it over to her and, chore complete, left to go do… whatever it was he did when they weren’t looking.

Mac watched him go with suspicious eyes. Probably wasn’t very charitable, but he still wasn’t completely onboard with this whole robot butler thing.

Charlotte didn’t bother to put her Pipboy on since her arm was wet and just held it out away from the bath, dangling from one hand as she hit the radio button. “Hancock, you still there?”

“Sunshine!”

“Hey.”

“How’s uh… how’s tricks?”

“Well, everything’s just… oh, right.” She winced a bit. The last time she’d seen him, she’d just kneed poor RJ right in the berries and then ran away. Embarrassing. “I’m fine, honey. Everything’s just fine.”

“You and Mac make out okay?”

She started giggling and it took her a minute to wrangle herself under control enough to answer politely, like a lady would. “We’re fine. It’s all been worked out.”

RJ was suddenly there in the doorway again. His boots and duster were gone and he was looking distractingly delicious standing there. The obnoxious, practically gleeful look on his face let her know shenanigans weren’t far behind. Charlotte narrowed her eyes at him and gave him her best glare, which of course did absolutely nothing but make his grin grow even brighter.

“I’m so glad you radioed me.”

“Oh?”

“I’d plumb forgot to tell you earlier but uh…” She watched him watching her while he slowly unbuckled his pants. By the time they were on the floor and she’d had to close her eyes or completely lose her train of thought. “I need to push back our trip to the Glowing Sea, sugar. I’m sorry.”

Hancock’s soft laughter was beguiling even in tinny mono. “Yeah, I kinda figured, that’s why I wanted to check in. Just confirming what I already knew.”

“Oh. Okay, well… that’s…” She trailed off as RJ’s body pushed her towards the other side of the
bath. He didn’t say a single word, just settled in behind her and gathered her up in his arms like he had a right to. Water sloshed on the floor and she was glad Codsworth had made Abbot put in that drain. “That’s um… good, I guess.”

“Yeah… I’m free whenever you are so, you know, just send the word when you’re ready.”

“Uh-huh, I’ll definitely…” His hands, thankfully warm again, were now sliding along her skin under the water. “I’ll definitely do that.”

There was a long pause and then a chuckling sort of sigh, “Charlie?”

“M’hmm?” Goddamn, the man had magic fingers. There was a little extra rough spot on his trigger finger that he knew how to work in all the right ways and --

“Tell Mac to be polite for once and keep his damn hands off you while you’re on the radio.”

Her eyes flew open and she would’ve dropped the Pipboy in the water if RJ hadn’t caught it in midair. She was blushing so hard she could hear her heart pounding in her ears and his snickering behind her didn’t help matters.

Charlotte elbowed him, hard, and abruptly left the bath altogether.

“Ow!” Mac pouted after her, “Hey! Where are you goin’?” When she didn’t answer, he turned his attention back to the radio. “Hancock! What’s up, man? How’s everybody in Goodneighbor?”

“Fine. Everything’s fine… you and Charlie doing alright?”

“Oh, yeah. We’re good. Everything’s great.” There was irritated mumbling and vague threats coming from the bedroom now, but he still felt pretty good about it.

“Got an ETA on when you’ll be comin’ up for air?”

“Probably in the next week or so.”

“Alright.”

“We’ll get the Castle thing out of the way with Preston first, maybe. Test things out.”

“Uh-huh. That’s probably a good idea… hey, you’re being smart about this, right, kid?”

“Define smart.”

He laughed, “What I mean is, you ain’t been telling everybody in Diamond City that you two are an item, right?”

He frowned thoughtfully, “No… why?”

“Cause you’re you and she’s her.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re now the Minutemen General’s main squeeze, and she’s on the arm of a… hmm… well, I’m not trying to be rude here, kid, but well, you’ve kinda got a reputation for being a colossal pain in the ass. I mean, those Gunner fucks find out about your relationship and it’ll be nonstop kidnapping attempts. You know that, right?”
Fuck. “You think they’d do that?”

“Absolutely. Even if they didn’t know you were soulmates, they’d do it. Grab one of you to get the other one to do whatever they wanted. You’ve both always had targets on your backs. You shouldn’t look to uh… consolidate ’em or whatever.”

Lottie was back in the doorway, troubled and anxious. He was feeling it, too. They’d both already lost a mate once, and neither were looking to lose each other again.

“What do you suggest?”

“Well, if it were me, I’d keep things on the extreme down-low. Treat each other in the field the way you’ve always done. Just… a general and her hired merc. Keep it professional and on the level, you feel me?”

He bit back an irritated sigh. Their friend may as well ask them to jump to the moon. “Yeah. That’s solid advice.”

“Well, I ain’t told anybody myself. Piper knows, but she’s true to Sunshine. She’ll keep it under her hat.”

“Valentine knows, too… and some fu-jerk from the Railroad.”

“Shit, man. Well… Nicky’s good at keeping things under wraps. I dunno about the Railroad. Depends on who you’re actually dealing with.”

His eyes went back to Lottie’s and he frowned at the nervous way she was fidgeting. “Yeah, I don’t have a name.”

“Hmm… and Charlie just basically went to war with them, right? You guys might want to get a lid on that particular pot ASAP.”

“Right.” She left the bathroom again and he pulled the stopper, “We’ll get back in touch when it’s time to take on the Sea, alright?”

“Yeah, sure, alright. Just take care of each other… stop by Goodneighbor when you’ve got the chance. Everybody misses you.”

“Thanks, Hancock. Later.”

“Bye.”

Mac switched off her Pipboy and almost yelled for her, but that felt wrong. She’d gone quiet in his mind, too. He’d bet a million caps she was hiding under the covers right now.

Lottie?

What?

You hear all that?

Yes.

Hancock’s right, isn’t he? We can’t go public with this.

Sorrow and worry filled their link. No, I don’t think we can.
He stood and toweled himself off before returning to the bedroom, sliding the Pipboy on the bedside table where he knew she preferred it. Lottie was nothing but a bump under the blankets and he almost laughed. So predictable.

Mac burrowed under them himself and hugged her close. “Hey.”

Her voice was mumbled against his chest, “Hey.”

“It doesn’t change anything, Lottie. You know that, right? Just because we can’t go shout it on the mountain or whatever doesn’t make it less real.”

“I know…”

He sighed, “But?”

“But I really wanted to.”

His arms tightened around her. She’d started crying, tiny muffled hiccups against his skin. Her hair was still wet and slick from the bathtub and he fluffed it a bit with his hand before slipping it in and rubbing her head.

He was truly a bastard. The lowest of the low. Somehow, her distress over this was making him feel proud somehow. Flattered beyond measure. That someone like her would be so sad she couldn’t broadcast their love across the wastes was just… ego boosting in a big way. Lucy had never been shy about telling people he was her husband, either, but she’d been a traveling doctor. A kind face people knew and liked but probably didn’t think about much.

Lottie was famous. Actually famous. They talked about her on the radio, Piper was always putting her in the paper. She was a recognizable, beloved Commonwealth hero already and she’d barely been out of the vault a minute.

Even here in Diamond City, she had power and influence.

He felt like he was in bed with a movie star.

Mac scowled at himself and set all that aside. Celebrated or not, his mate was in distress and he needed to fix that. Right now.

His lips brushed against her temple, “You think I don’t want to tell people? You think I’m happy to keep this a secret? Come on. You’re the hottest ticket in the wasteland, baby. The sweetest piece of arm candy a man could have.”

She grumbled, “I’m not arm candy.”

“Sure you are.” He waited until she glared up at him and grinned, “Beautiful, dangerous, powerful arm candy, but candy nonetheless.”

“Maybe you’re the arm candy.”

“With this figure? Nah. What I am is the luckiest man in the world, and I know it.” A small smile slipped past her irritation and he pushed on. “Anyway, maybe we’re just looking at this the wrong way.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, so we can’t tell people --”
“Or even act like a couple in public.”

“Yeah, that, too.” He nodded, “But so what? If you think I’m not going to stand there looking like the tough guy mercenary you originally hired while filling your head with images of what I’m gonna do to you when we’re alone, you’re nuts.”

Her eyes went wide, “RJ!”

“And if you think I’m not going to sneak around and cop a feel whenever nobody’s looking or clear a building to fuck you in it just because I feel like it, you’re even more nuts.”

“Okay, but what if somebody makes a pass at me and you freak out. How are we going to explain that?”

“I’m just…defending the General’s honor, is all. Making sure she’s able to stay faithful to the memory of her dear, beloved soulmate.” He grinned, “Meaning me, of course.”

“You really think that’ll work?”

“I think it’s about all we’ve got, gorgeous. We’ve just gotta roll with it.”

“Yeah.” Her eyes were still sad and troubled. “I didn’t like it when you were outside without me. I felt all… antsy and weird.”

“I know. I felt it.”

“How do we explain that?”

“Easy. I’m now officially your bodyguard. I’ll shadow you everywhere. So long as we don’t slip up, keep calling each other by the right names and whatever, it should be fine.”

“Bodyguard, huh?” She smiled a little, “Turning that old lie into a reality?”

“Sure, why not? You’re an important lady. You need a bodyguard. It makes perfect sense.”

“Do… do you think we’ll ever be able to tell people?”

Maybe. “Sure we will, baby. Someday. We’ve just gotta take out the Gunners and the Institute and maybe the Railroad…”

“Oh, is that all?”

“M’hmm… speaking of the Railroad.”

“I know.”

“You think your former friend will keep his mouth shut?”

“I… I don’t know. If you’d asked me before he pulled that stunt, I’d have said yes, but…” She frowned thoughtfully, “But then he saved me.”

“What?”

“At that shed you found me in. He’s the one who put me there. There was a feral attack and I was probably about to be eaten, but I yelled for help and he helped. It’s confusing. He’s confusing.”
“Uh-huh. See, what I’m hearing here is he’s been stalking you. That place was way out in the middle of nowhere. What are the odds he’d be there just to be there?”

Charlotte’s frown grew. “Oh… I hadn’t really thought about it.”

“How could you not think about it?”

She huffed, “Well, someone was distracting me!”

Okay, yeah. That one was probably his fault. “Whoops… well, if I catch some asshole trailing us, are you going to be irritated by me putting a bullet through their forehead?”

“I dunno… probably not?”

“Good.” Mac pulled her closer and was pleasantly surprised when the mood didn’t shift into something heated. “Wanna see your present?”

“I just… can we just stay here for a little while?”

This situation was somehow feeding into that kernel of doubt and insecurity she still carried around with her. He still wasn’t exactly sure how to finally squash that, but giving her whatever her heart desired was probably step one.

“Sure. You want me to just tell you what it is?”

“No. I like surprises. I can wait.”

“Okay.”

“RJ?”

“Yeah?”

“Can we maybe try a test run tomorrow?”

“A test run?”

“Just… go out into the ruins for a bit. See how things go.”

“Oh… oh, yeah, that sounds good. Are you up for that?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Okay, great.”

They spent most of the day curled around each other. More slow exploration and snuggling than the fits of passion that had run them both ragged. Even when things finally did get heated, it was gentle and patient. Soft. Mac finally felt himself relax for the first time in a week.

There was a sense of familiarity and ease between them that hadn’t been there before. When he woke to her swelling warmth flooding his mind the next morning, he wasn’t even put out that it was before eight. Just rolled over, almost out of habit, and kissed her awake. Sliding into her body as her eyes slid open. His hands tangled with hers as he moved within her, long, lazy strokes that drew soft moans and gasps from her.

And it was actually satisfying. Finally. There was no immediate need to do it again, no desperate
clawing at each other or urgency. Just a regular, every day kind of morning.

Mac was thrilled at this new development, and if the way Lottie kept smiling to herself was any indication, she was, too. He waited until she’d already slipped on a flannel shirt before tossing a brown paper wrapped package to her.

“Here.”

She caught it and grinned, “What is it?”

“Your present.” He finished buttoning up his own shirt and then shrugged into his duster. “Open it.”

“Okay.” She untied the twine and unfolded the wrapping, squealing in delight. “It’s a sweater!”

“Yeah.”

“And it’s pink!”

He shrugged, “Well, you’re always cold and you like pink, so…”

“It’s perfect!” Charlotte hugged the sweater to her chest and came over to give him a kiss on the cheek. “You’re perfect. Thank you.”

His cheeks went almost as bright as her new sweater and she barely managed to stifle down the giggle that threatened to escape her. He coughed uncomfortably and nodded, mumbling a ’you’re welcome’, trying to keep his head down as he checked his gear. She wasn’t sure she’d ever seen him actually embarrassed before.

It was almost absurdly adorable.

But RJ… no, he was Mac now. They were out of bed. She needed to keep practicing that in her head. Mac probably wouldn’t appreciate her pointing out how cute he looked with pink cheeks. He had that tough guy reputation to keep and all that. She slipped her sweater on and smoothed it down. It was soft and a new weave. Becky must have made it herself.

“You ready to head on out?”

“Yeah, just… hang on.” Charlotte went to the dresser and rummaged around for a moment, coming up with the pink ribbon he’d given to her ages ago. It went into her hair and she turned back to him as she finished tying it. “Okay, ready.”

His face was pink again. She couldn’t help but grin this time.

Another awkward cough and he tugged the brim of his hat down, “Alright, let’s move… Charlie.”

“Right behind you, Mac.”

They chuckled at how weird it all sounded now and headed out into the bright sunlight. Diamond City Marketplace was as bustling as it ever was. Mac stood to the side of the door and let Charlie take the lead, since she was the general and all that. He’d added sunglasses to his regular getup. Charlie had said it was better for his eyes anyway.

He liked them because it meant he could stare at her ass all he wanted and no one would be the wiser.
They rounded the noodle stand and headed towards the ramp that lead out of town when he was seized by a sudden moment of inspired insanity.

Charlie started a bit as Mac grabbed her hand just long enough to get her attention and turned. “What?”

He glanced around to make sure no one was watching and then moved closer, lowering his voice. “Let’s get married.”

Her eyes went wide, “What?”

“Right here, right now.” His head tilted just a bit, towards the All Faiths Chapel and she blinked up at him.

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah.”

_We’re supposed to be keeping things professional and on the down-low, right?_

Mac blew a frustrated breath out his nose. _Yes, we are._

_Why right now? Charlie casually stretched and fussed over her pack’s straps, pretending they weren’t having a conversation at all._

_Cause...cause it sucks that we can’t tell anybody. I want you. I love you. I want to be able to call you my wife._

_RJ…_

_Doesn’t it feel weird to not be married?_

_Well...yes, but..._

_So let’s do it._

_I dunno._

He glanced around again and then took her hand in his. _I can’t really get down on one knee here or anything, but...Lottie Apperson, will you marry me?_

She squeezed his fingers tightly before letting his hand go. _Yes._

Mac couldn’t help the stupid grin that crossed his face. “You should go get Piper.”

Right. They’d need witnesses who were already in on everything. “You should go get Nick.”

“Meet you back here in five.”

“Yup.” Five minutes didn’t give her a lot of time. She bolted over to Piper’s door and started banging away on it. “Pipes! Open up!”

The reporter looked quite disgruntled when she finally opened the door. “Oh, look who it is! You’ve got a funny idea of what ‘tomorrow’ means, Blue.”

Charlotte winced, “Right...right, I’m so sorry about that.”
“Eh...whatever. So, you and --”

She covered her hand with her mouth and moved them both inside, closing the door behind her. “Listen, nobody can know, alright? It’s too dangerous.”

“Dangerous?”

“Yeah. The Gunners…”

Her eyes narrowed shrewdly. “And the Institute.” Piper winced, “Shit, Blue. This could get really bad really fast.”

“Exactly. Which is why I need a favor.”

“Anything.”

“Okay, well, one, obviously, everything about our relationship stays off the record.”

“Of course. You don’t even have to ask for that one.”

“Two, I need you to go clear the chapel for me. Right now. Everybody but Pastor Clements.”

“What?”

“And if Mac gets back before I do, tell him I’m on my way!” She opened the door and ran back outside, leaving Piper sputtering behind her.

Mac did indeed arrive at the chapel before she did, a bemused Nick Valentine trailing in his wake. Piper scowled at him, clearly unwilling to let bygones be bygones and almost growled as he approached her and the pastor.

“If you hurt her, MacCready, I swear to God --”

“I wouldn’t dream of it...angel.” He took off his shades and winked at her just to see her get more pissed, snorting in amusement when she went beet red.

“Now, now, children.” Valentine wisely slid between them and nodded sociably at Clements. “Pastor.”

“Detective.” He smiled, “I’ve never officiated over a secret ceremony before.”

“It’s like Romeo and Juliet.”

“Oh, I hope not. That was a terrible ending.”

Nick chuckled, “Yeah.”

Charlie burst in suddenly, breathless and ecstatic. Nick watched the way both Piper and Mac’s faces softened and smiled to himself. Every cynic he’d ever known was pure marshmallow underneath and those two had just proved it.

“And the bride wore...head to toe pink.”

She grinned at him, “It was a present.”

Mac immediately reddened and he almost rolled his eyes. They were so sappy already. It was
disgusting in a cute kind of way. He had no idea how they were going to hide this relationship from the Commonwealth at large though.

“Where were you?”

“I had to grab something from home.” She grabbed Mac’s arm and dragged him over to the side for a moment of faux-privacy while Piper and Nick pretended to not pay attention and Pastor Clemets busied himself tidying the already tidy space.

_Lottie, what’s up?_

_I’m guessing you didn’t have rings already, right?_

_Nobody does that anymore._

_Oh…_

He finally realized she had something clenched in her hand and smiled, _But we’re not exactly nobodies, right?_

She peeked up at him and then resumed staring at the floor. _No, you’re right. It’s silly._

His eyes fell onto her ring finger and he was actually shocked for a minute that she’d removed the ring Nate had given her for this. The thing had been an impractical sparkler that had been practically all she’d worn for the past week, which had been fine with him. It hadn’t even entered his mind to ask her to take it off.

_It’s not silly._

_You wouldn’t even be able to wear it out in the open._

_So?_ He moved a half-step to the right and completely hid her from view. _Baby… whatcha got in your hand there?_

_It’s… I…_ She took a deep breath. _My granny was a seer, like Mama Murphy. Did you know that?_

The second she said it, hazy memories of an impossibly old woman with dark, knowing eyes started to come back to him. _I didn’t, but now I do? If that makes sense._

_Okay, well… she always said I was her favorite. We had the same hair, so… anyway, when she was dying, in the hospital that last time, she gave me her and Pa’s rings. Told me to hold onto them because I’d need them. I thought it was just the fever talking because Nate and I had already been married a good four years and she knew that. I tried to get her to give them to my little sister, but she said she wanted them passed down and I was the surest bet for that… which I also thought was just crazy talk because Nate never wanted to have kids._

_Holy shit. Had her granny really predicted all this shit would happen? Okay._

_Codsworth saved my jewelry box after the bombs fell. The rings were still in there. I’d had them cleaned and then just kinda forgot about it. She finally looked up at him, RJ, I think this might be what she was having me save them for. Is that crazy?_

_No, I think you’re right._

Her hand opened and there were two simple golden rings sitting in her palm, one on a chain. _She wore Pa’s around her neck until that day. I kept it on the chain because it seemed like the right
thing to do.

And now he could wear it around his neck where no one but Lottie would ever see it. Wasn’t that handy? I’m kinda starting to think maybe you take after your granny a little more than you thought you did.

Charlotte smiled at that. No, I’m no mystic. She passed him the smaller one. Read the inscription.

Mac tilted it so the light caught the inside curve and was surprised enough that he read it out loud. “What’s meant to be will always find a way.” Holy shit.

Yeah. Goosebumps, right?

It’s perfect...what was your granny’s name again?

Same as my middle name: Jane.

First daughter. We’re totally naming her that. He took her hand in his, “Alright, let’s do this.”

Chapter End Notes

12/26/2019: Hey, so, if you noticed, I left a new note on the last chapter, but I'll leave one here, too.


It hurts, a lot. & it makes writing v hard to accomplish, so things will be slow until around the first of February, I guess? I'm not sure.

Sorry everybody! I'll try to not be such a dink in the future.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!