Project Wanderer: The Solution Lies in the Past

by felcraw

Summary

He watched for her, planned for her, waited for her, years before she ever emerged from the Vault. His soft, clumsy savior, reliant on VATS and luck, survivor by virtue of stubbornness alone.

He was there when she first stepped into the too-bright sunlight of this burnt-out world. He was there to pick off scavengers while she learned how to handle a gun. He was there to plant a bullet in Kellogg's chest, there to guide her toward the holotape that introduced her to the Railroad, there to stab her with a Stimpak when Super Mutants dared throw a supersledge into the gears of his plan.

Deacon's been watching Wanderer's back for longer than she knows. And as she faces both the threats of the Commonwealth and her own traitorous body, he begins to realize that maybe being her shadow isn't quite enough.
I'm sure it's old news by now, but we're starting at the beginning, folks. The Sole Survivor awakens, discovers that everything is awful, and tries to gather herself together enough to cope.

And somebody's keepin' an eye on her, 'cause the solution lies in the past.

It's cold. Much colder than a few minutes ago. I can't feel my fingers; tapping my thumb to my forefinger is a brain exercise and nothing more. Pulling my eyelids apart is an effort; they're crusted together, like I've awoken with a headcold.

The decontaminator… The window. I can't see through it, not clearly; ice crystals block my view.

*Why is it so cold?* It's the only thought I can muster, and it's accompanied by a sharp slash of panic. Something's wrong.

Should I be alone? Nate was just here— but then I remember. Nate was in the pod across from me. Nate and our baby.

The rest of me is cold, but my breath is warm. The crystals melt, dark shapes taking familiar form through the fog on the glass. I see a man. He's unfamiliar, not anyone I know from Sanctuary Hills; his clothing is filthy, dark brown leather that almost looks like armor. He doesn’t belong. The other people… they’re in lab coats. The facts assemble slowly in my mind. He’s dirty. He’s got a gun. He’s wearing leather. Maybe he's... security of some kind? Did the Vault need security, guns? I can’t remember; it's so cold.

Nate’s pod hisses open amidst a cloud of swirling vapors; he begins to move, though weakly. My heart leaps. *You're okay. Oh, God, you're both okay.* Seeing him holding our baby, my chest constricts and warms. He'd always been a protective father, his hard-shelled military heart melting for the little fellow that had burst into our lives. My tough, sweet man. I raise an uncooperative hand to the glass, wishing I could push through and lay my hand against his stubbly cheek.

The people in the lab coats, though — they’re now grasping for Shaun, tugging his paper-delicate body from his daddy's arms. But Nate, he won't give him up. *Nate, they’re doctors, I think, just let him go. They're fine, he’s fine.*

Nate struggles, Shaun cries. I can only imagine their brains are as foggy and confused as mine. He pulls our baby close to his chest, pushes the Vault-Tec employee away. If my lungs weren't frozen solid, I might laugh. *You stubborn ass.* I’ve always been fond of his asshole tendencies. Strong and silent with a streak of mean; that'd always been my type.

Suddenly, though, the man in the leather — the man who doesn’t belong — he pulls his gun. He kisses the barrel to Nate's lined forehead.

My brain’s slow, but my heart is fast. *Just give them Shaun!* A simplistic thought, but— *God, Nate. They’re Vault-Tec, for Christ’s sake. If we can't trust Vault-Tec, who can we trust?*
And then the man in the leather pulls the trigger.

Someone is screaming. Me.

Nate slumps, and even as the life leaves his body his arms clutch Shaun tight. But then, inevitably, his grip slackens and Shaun slips into the doctor’s arms. The man in leather — the murderer — slowly spins, looks me in the eye.

I can’t feel my arm, but the strength I have… I slam at the glass with everything I’ve got. It’s a weak slap, my wedding ring clinking pathetically against the thick glass. Disbelief crashes through me like a wave. This has to be a joke, a dream, a hallucination, some horrific side effect of the disinfectant gas.

The man in leather speaks.

“At least we still have the backup. Terminals say not too healthy, but hell, better than nothing.”

If I could just open this goddamn pod I could tackle the man, throw him to the ground, wrestle the gun from his grip and blow his fucking brains out, but the fire of rage and grief bellowing within me cannot thaw my muscles. I pound and pound, but the crystals re-form in spite of my breath. I can no longer see; he’s a brown mass growing smaller with every step as my vision dims and my frown slackens into a frozen gathering of brow muscle.

For the better part of 2286, I’d been holed up around Vault 111. It’s clear and dry, and even though my vantage point is at a decent altitude, I hate being so exposed. It’s bright, and hot, and pretty much the worst.

The new year has come and gone — Easter, Independence Day, Labor Day… all the Old World holidays. Now it’s almost Halloween. My favorite. I’m always prepared for good ol’ All Hallows Eve. I can be Danny Zuko every friggin’ year. Once I even went as Sandy.

To be honest, 2287 is looking to be as much of a bust as the year before. Project Wanderer started out with a lot of promise, but it’s been over a year. My research is one of the few things I believe in, but there's always the possibility it's as screwed as the rest of the Commonwealth.

The solution lies in the past, not the future. I know this. Trust yourself, I tell me, even if you’re a little too screwy to trust anyone else.

I sigh, splitting the seal on a carton of dirty water. The Railroad’s reliable when it comes to supplies; a lifetime’s worth of RadAway means I get all the dirty water I want. Mmm-mmm. The job has its perks.

I’m gulping down slightly irradiated, absolutely stale water when I hear a clunk. Was that my… throat? Or was it the Vault? It’s been so goddamn long without any leads, I can’t tell if it’s my imagination. I lower the carton, though I’ve been incredulous for at least six months now.

Something is definitely cranking.

Thanking god for the twelve thousandth time for my sunglasses, I lean forward, using the scope of my sniper rifle to peer down the slope. A platform appears, a figure crouching in the middle, shielding its eyes from the horrible sun (hey, I can relate).

It’s a woman. A lady in blue. She squints, turning; her face is the very definition of “confused as hell.”
This is it; this is what I’ve been waiting for. I wish I could say I’m prepared, but I’m scrambling to stuff Yum-Yum Deviled Eggs and Grognak the Barbarian comics into my pack as quickly as possible. I can’t lose this trail, not after almost two flippin’ years of casing the joint.

My little Vault dweller has emerged, and if I play my cards right, it might just mean the end of the Institute.

Motherf**k.

Nate doesn't like it when I swear. You're a lady, he would always tell me when I let one slip. Ladies don't use language like that. But Nate came from a nice family, in a nice neighborhood on the east coast. I came from the west coast. I grew up in dilapidated apartments with mold issues. And when I’m stressed out, I revert to the language of my youth.

Mother, mother, motherf**k.

Everything around me is brown. The bombs have dropped — that much is glaringly obvious. I never realized how wholly they’d burn everything familiar, though; our home in Sanctuary Hills used to be surrounded by forest. Now it's burnt-up matchsticks, as far as the eye can see.

It feels dead. The world. Something inside me. Everything.

It takes most of my willpower to draw in a deep breath; I widen my eyes, exhale, and blink hard. All right. I just killed, like, twelve huge cockroaches with a security baton. It’s fine. I’m capable, obviously. I killed huge bugs.

Huge bugs.

Motherf**k.

Ripping the Pip-Boy off the dry bones of some long-dead Vault-Tec employee was gruesome enough, but it was the only way to escape that… that metal mortuary. But the faint green glow and the quiet beeps are comforting. This thing’s battery is going strong. If a goddamn high-tech bracelet is still functioning, some people must be, too.

I realize how desperately I need to see people. I am gripped with fear that I never will, again. I read the terminals, desperately checked each and every pod for any sign of life, but all my neighbors, our friends and acquaintances...

They're as dead as everything else.

Another deep breathe helps me clear my thoughts. This is the same Vault we escaped to after hearing the news. I’m still home. I’m home. I’ve been up here a million times; Nate and I used to stargaze on this hill, before Vault-Tec started digging it out. My heartbeat slows, closer to normal.

This is home. I am home. Everything is brown and burnt, but I’m home. It's the mantra that revolves like a generator in my mind, cranking out hope to energize my slack muscles.

The path down to Sanctuary Hills is still picked out clear as day. I don’t tell them to, but my feet move, one in front of the other. I leave my security baton at my side. This is home, this is safe.

The path is as dusty as ever. I take some small comfort in this; my shoes have always been grey when I finish walking it. It’s not too far from the Vault-Tec hill to my neighbor’s backyard, brown now, the happy turquoise patio furniture twisted into painful-looking shapes, and my heart speeds
up again. The world has crossed an indelible line. Things will never be the same.

I might as well head… home.

Something sharp jabs into my left hand. I’d slipped Nate’s ring off in the Vault, and I’m clutching it so hard the skin on my palm is almost broken. God, Nate. I was clutching your elbow an hour ago. You were alive an hour ago. God. Nate.

I slip the ring onto my thumb. A dark part of me hopes that, someday, I can shove it down the fucking throat of that man in leather. I don’t know what’s going on, but that guy is to blame. And someday… I promise myself. Someday that man will choke on my wrath.

I’ve made it to my front yard. The hedges didn’t survive the blast; the siding on my house is peeling, tiles hanging from rusted screws. Wait. Rusted?

“As I live and breathe…”

A familiar voice, one I’ve known and loved, cuts through the veritable silence. Codsworth. It’s Codsworth. I could cry; in fact, tears prickle at the corners of my eyes. Codsworth, you metal scrap heap, you’re here! After what I’ve lost in the last hour, the mundane sight of my bot trimming our brittle shrubbery feels like a gift.

“It’s…it’s REALLY you!”

I could swear the robot feels the same, but I’ve never been comfortable with the idea of robots feeling. I’ve loved Codsworth since we first unboxed him, though. As long as I have him, this can’t be a total nightmare.

“Codsworth.” My mouth forms the words, as though it had never been frozen. My voice is clear and strong. “What happened? You’re still here.”

“The world, Mum… Well, besides our geraniums still being the envy of Sanctuary Hills, I’m afraid things have been dreadfully dull around here.”

I frown. I have no idea what he’s talking about. Out with it, I think.

“Things will be so much more exciting with you and Sir back! Where is your better half, by the by?”

God-fucking-damn it, Codsworth. Right in the heart. “They… they killed him.”

It’s not real. None of this is real. The sun's heat warms me, almost too much, but I'm still waiting to wake up. Maybe I have a fever, maybe it's burning through to my dreams. I pluck at the front of my Vault suit. The fabric snaps back to my breastbone. If you can feel that, it's not a dream. My thoughts are traitorous and cruel.

“Mum… these things you’re saying. These… terrible things. I believe you need a distraction. Yes, a distraction, to calm this dire mood!”

Robots can’t swallow, but I could swear Codsworth gulps.

“It’s been ages since we’ve had a proper family activity. Checkers. Or perhaps charades. Shaun does so love that game. Is the lad… with you…?”

I’d been in a state of disbelief, but as soon as my house robot mentions my baby so fondly, so
casually — as though I'd just misplaced him — I choke. Air's too much right now. Just little breaths; it'll be okay.

But I can't keep it at bay — something small and load-bearing snaps inside of me.

"He's gone, goddamn it! Someone took him! They stole my son!"

My voice is hysterical, the heavy truth of my words cracking it in half. I'm not myself, but it's slowly beginning to dawn on me that nothing — nothing — is normal.

Codsworth clucks as though his hardware came complete with a disapproving tongue. "It's worse than I thought. Hmm, hmm. You're suffering from... hunger-induced paranoia. Not eating properly for 200 years will do that, I'm afraid."


"A bit over 210 actually, mum. Give or take a little for the Earth's rotation and some minor dings to the ol' chronometer."

I say nothing. The suspicious squint I've adopted since the new sun first blinded me doesn't seem to be going anywhere fast.

Codsworth gives an awkward chuckle. "That means you're two centuries late for dinner! Ha ha ha. Perhaps I can whip you up a snack? You must be famished."


I'm not going to think about that right now. It's hard enough to breathe as it is.

"Codsworth, you're acting... a little bit weird. What's wrong?"

We'd purchased Codsworth a few months before Shaun was born; while the bot's only been in our lives for less than half a year, I can tell he's not well. My heart breaks a little more for him. To me, robots are like puppies — innocent, earnest, adorable, and only 50% annoying.

"I... I..." Can robot voices crack? RobCo was a hell of a lot more advanced than I knew. "Oh mum, it's been just horrible! Two centuries with no one to talk to, no one to serve. I spent the first ten years trying to keep the floors waxed, but nothing gets out nuclear fallout from vinyl wood. Nothing!"

His head — which is really his torso, if I'm being honest — droops. I place my hand on what would probably be his shoulder, I guess. Poor old mess, I think to myself, You've lost your family too.

"And don't get me started about the futility of dusting a collapsed house. And the car! The car! How do you polish rust?"

There's sometimes a certain gift hidden within tragedy, a moment where another's need uncovers your own strength; a noble purpose, however momentary, to buoy you out of the abyss. My bot needs me. His need is what will keep me going for the next few minutes; I'll appreciate the distraction while it's there. "What do you know, Codsworth? What happened?"

"I'm afraid I don't know anything, mum. The bombs came, and all of you left in such a hurry. I thought for certain you and your family were... dead."
This makes my insides clench. We are dead. The thought comes unbidden. And then, horribly, We left you behind. We didn't even think about you when we fled.

“I did find this holotape. I believe Sir was going to present it to you. As a surprise. But then, well… everything ‘happened.’”

Pocketing the holotape that Codsworth offers in his cold pinchers, I close my eyes; I need a moment. Nate was alive an hour ago, and we were afraid together. Now all I have of him is his voice on holotape. Not yet, not yet.

You're two centuries late for dinner.

My eyes snap open.


One of my darkest fears is manifesting in front of me. Just my luck, I think sourly. Survive two hundred years in a glorified Radiation King freezer, just to keel over because of my blood.

"I'm won't make it a month if I don't have my insulin. Do you know if any of it… still… exists?"

Since I was first diagnosed at the tender age of 17, I’d always, always feared the Apocalypse. I used to think it was an irrational fear, before the war. The threat of China looming across the sea, the periodic loss of my Nate to mission after mission at the front had made it slightly more real, but the end of the world… It had never been a possibility. You won't last a fucking minute, I tell myself. Huge worms are going to be feasting on your sorry body soon enough. And how can you track down a baby in a huge, empty, broken world? Shaun will never come home. I need to stop thinking.

It seems improbable, but the bot actually beams.

“Ah, mum, you doubted your faithful servant, did you?”

I can feel my heart pound once, hard. I can’t be this lucky. This is what luck looks like, now.

Codsworth chuckles, pleased. “After the power went out, I knew I had to act fast. I couldn't very well serve you and Sir a spoiled Salisbury Steak dinner upon your return, now, could I? I'm afraid the milk went sour a few decades ago, but your medicine is in here somewhere. Take a gander.”

What I'd thought was Codsworth's shoulder clicks, swinging open with a small squeak. It's frosty in there, all right — cooling for his core systems, I imagine — and as I peer inside, a weak flame of hope flickers to life within me.

Four bottles. It was everything I’d had in reserve before the bombs fell. At peak potency, that meant four months’ worth of life. After two centuries and some change… well, I just hope Codsworth kept it really, really cold.
Chapter Summary

The Sole Survivor has her first combat experience. Deacon makes sure his two-year investment is safe.

Plus, let's put SPECIAL in real-world terms, shall we? :]

All I have to say is thank god for VATS.

When I first exploded into this world of hell and brightest sunlight, I had no idea how important physical strength was. And physical strength has *never* been my forte. It's not even my fifth-te.

I’m good at lots of things that aren’t going to help me survive out here. I tell jokes and make people laugh; my friends always open up to me, and I always listen. I read the classics, I aced the SATs, I majored in poetry for my undergrad and graduated law school with flying colors. I’m lucky, when it comes to things not having to do with a pancreas or an Apocalypse; it’s sinful how many close calls I’ve had throughout my almost thirty years of life.

But I’m clumsy; I trip, I drop things, I certainly can’t dance. My sense of direction is utterly laughable — I regularly get lost on a quick trip to Concord and back — and I can’t play Frisbee because it’s too likely I’ll lose an eye. And I’m weak as all get-out.

The silver lining, I suppose, is that my body can take a beating. I haven’t had the flu in years, my sugars can drop to nothing or skyrocket to the moon and I’ll stay mostly conscious, and I’ve never sprained an ankle, despite my lack of grace. I’ll have to rely on being a durable punching bag, I guess.

I kinda have to admit, I was afraid the Commonwealth would chew her up and spit her out before I had a chance to work my magic.

She’s a pretty easy trail. My little Vault dweller has zero sense of stealth whatsoever. It would be funny to watch her blunder across the ‘Wealth, if this weren’t the most important babysitting gig of the millennium. Within a couple minutes of leaving Sanctuary she’d scared up bloatflies, mole rats, and really pissed off one Scavver behind the old Red Rocket. He didn’t have a chance — I picked him off at a distance, a good clean headshot — but my Wanderer didn’t even bat an eyelash. She was too busy whirling around, brandishing a stick at the rats and, God, making these *hilarious* grunting noises —

Like I said, it would be funny if she weren’t our only hope.

Part of me is glad for the dog. He looks like he could be mean enough, but it’s good for her to have a warm, living, breathing friend — no offense to Mr. Handys everywhere, of course. Plus he gave those mole rats what-for. Big guy knows how to use what his mama gave him.

The first night, holed up in the truck stop, he was good to let her hold him. Even I know that when someone’s got their fingers curled that tightly into your hair, it better be the best night of your life.
or the worst night of theirs. Patient guy, that dog. He slept with one eye open until dawn — and I think that eye trained in my direction more than a few times.

So, yeah. Part of me is glad for the dog. But if he sniffs me out and blows my cover, the whole operation could be compromised. I’ll just have to be extra careful to keep my fire hydrant disguise tucked out of sight.

Concord’s one of the safer places in the Commonwealth — hell, everything up in this corner has retained its “wealthy suburb” vibe really well — but it’s still a shitshow when you’re new to gunslinging. And the Wanderer, well… let’s just say she’s as good with a 10mm as she is with a stick.

The science center in Cambridge always had a naked mole rat colony on display. I remember thinking they were cute, in an ugly sort of way. They looked so vulnerable, blind and fleshy as they were, cuddled up together in their warrens.

Now they haunt my dreams.

I kick a loose stone as I wind my way down to Concord. Codsworth had mentioned people. They didn’t sound terrifically friendly, from his account, but I chalk it up to his aluminum constitution. I’d probably chase off a strange robot fronting on my turf in this dirty hellscape, too.

And I need supplies. I scrounged up some Cram back at the coolant station, but if I’m in it for the long haul, I’ll need some variety. The scurvy shakes aren’t my idea of an easy retirement at the end of the world.

Dog — I don’t want to presume to name him; he’s his own person out here, after all — whines and it turns into a low growl. We’re about to round the corner to the main street. The old Museum of Freedom is up ahead.

It’s not as boring as I remember it.

There are people here, all right; fucking weirdos, by the look of them. I try not to judge a book by its cover, but it’s safe to say anyone wrapped in filthy long johns and a gas mask didn’t graduate from Miss Montague’s School of Manners and Etiquette. Especially when they’re charging at me with a fucking... tire iron.

Dog’s hackles are up, but I’m frozen. Remember all that stuff about how I’m good at jokes? This freak doesn’t look like he’s in the mood for open mic night. And if I start reciting Leonard Cohen, I’m pretty sure he’ll just bash my head in with greater enthusiasm.

Well, hell. I hope Codsworth can find someone to donate my insulin to once I’m gone.

Baby’s first Raiders, I think to myself.

Concord’s got a decent layout for someone like me. There are plenty of intact rooftops, and the lines of sight are clear enough. I’ve staked out a nice, sturdy HVAC unit to crouch behind.

So I can clearly see the moment when five wasteland psychos turn their attention to my little pet.
I don’t think a Band-Aid and a kiss on the knee’s gonna fix this impending boo-boo.

With a sigh, I unsling my rifle and sight Raider-brain in the scope. I can already tell I’m going to have to ask for more than 10 caps and phone privileges for this nanny job.

It feels like forever, but after fumbling for the 10mm I unearthed back at Sanctuary Hills, it finally comes free. I should have practiced, I groan inwardly. So many wasted Nuka-Cola bottles lying around. I have no instinct for this kind of survival.

My fingers feel bloated, uncoordinated. Do I hold it with one hand, like the mobsters on TV? Both? Both seems right, but my hands are getting in each other’s way. You do not have time to figure this out! For a moment, it’s funny, and I can’t stop a grin from forming.

A psychopath in long johns is screaming for my blood, his comrades are right behind cocking their pipe pistols, and I’m so nervous about holding hands with my gun the right way I might as well be a pre-teen on my first date at the Starlight Drive-In.

Point and aim and pull, I think. That’s how they do it on TV.

I point and I aim. The psycho is grinning, too. Maybe he does like my jokes.

Before I can pull, something happens.

Why is she smiling? It’s puzzling. She might be cracking, and it’s only day two. But while her attention’s on the freak with the tire iron, I take out three of his pals.

Clean, quiet shots. I haven’t wreaked this much havoc for almost two years now. I’d rather spy than fight, but hey, a guy’s gotta protect his bread and butter, am I right?

My Pip-Boy hums on my forearm. I must have switched on a setting while messing with the gun.

I knew my goddamn clumsiness would be my end out here.

But then time slows. I flinch as a computerized overlay of what I must now refer to as “the battlefield” overtakes my vision.

The pajama’d weirdo is still scrambling towards me, but at perhaps 1/20th his normal speed. Weaknesses are highlighted on the overlay, and include what I assume is a number reflecting the likelihood of making the shot.

Damn, Vault-Tec. Just when I was starting to really hate you, you go and do a thing like this.

The guy’s close. I’m going for his head. I really, really don’t want that tire iron embedded in mine.
I pull the trigger three times, and three times bullets burrow slowly into his brain. He begins to fall even before the overlay zips back into my Pip-Boy.

Uh. **She put three bullets in the guy’s head with surgical precision.** Is my Wanderer holding out on me?

**Oh, snap.** She kicks him in the ribs as she passes by. **We got ourselves a sassy little Vault dweller, folks.**

She’s found the other bodies; I duck back as she frowns, searching for her — hey, I’m just being modest here — guardian angel. Mmm. I like the sound of that. Maybe it’s time for a new alias. I’ll run it by Dez next time I’m at HQ.

Shouting is coming from the balcony of the old museum; looks like a ragged band of Minutemen have holed up in there, if the fellow’s wildly unattractive hat is any indication.

I guess they steal my thunder, because the Vault dweller calls back assent, hefts a laser rifle from the front steps, and disappears into the building.

This is the first time I’m not able to follow her since she rose out of the earth like Persephone ascending from Hades. I grimace a little, and something catches in my chest; it feels like my new puppy just ran off into a Mirelurk bog.

**She handled herself pretty well, all said and done,** I reassure myself. I lean back on my heels and wait, watching.

Today was just one of those days, I guess.

One of those days where you murder ten homicidal freaks in your local revolutionary war museum, rescue a shivering group of what can only be called **refugees,** and face an irradiated, angry, nine-foot-tall iguana. While wearing power armor. And wielding a gun you **ripped off a vertibird.**

Yeah, just one of those days.

I’m trembling, but I’m not afraid. I feel **fantastic.** It must be the adrenaline, but I want to burst out laughing; tears prickle in the corner of my eyes with the effort of holding it in.

I think Marcy Long might knife me in the throat if I laugh right now, anyway.

This group is considerably more polite than the Raiders, as I learn they’re called, though Marcy’s really pushing it. She’s a nasty one; a sick part of me wants to leave her behind — **someone that ungrateful doesn’t deserve to be rescued** — but Preston would probably have a heart attack.

This guy… I know I just crawled out of a giant pre-war lunchbox, but this guy is naive as heck. It’s sort of sweet. And Mama Murphy looks like she could really use a warm, dry place to sleep. She’s got a wet cough that simultaneously grosses me out and activates the mother in me. I agree to walk them back to Sanctuary Hills.

Just “Sanctuary” now, I guess. My past is already fading into a new and unfamiliar future, as much
as I’d like to keep the memories strong.

We set off, Dogmeat following happily at my side. The name’s hilarious. I love it. I don’t know how Mama Murphy knew it, but I think the dog… told her. If she were around pre-war, she’d have made a pretty penny as a pet psychic.

As the others trudge onward, I stop by the hulking mass of the… the Deathclaw, I guess it’s called. Gee, they really know how to name stuff in the future, I think, rolling my eyes.

It’s strange. Even with enhanced strength from the power armor, I could barely lift the minigun; it’s a miracle I shot out anything besides the creature’s knees, much less its soft underbelly. But it’s got bullet holes in its skull, three of them. Green-brown blood trickles down its forehead.

I frown. I scan the rooftops. Please tell me there aren’t any Raider snipers up there. I shiver, jump, and give the lizard one final look before trailing after the others, heading home.
Chapter Summary

You know what's terrifying? Running out of insulin in a post-apocalyptic wasteland.

The Sole Survivor discovers Diamond City, finds a doctor, and meets Deacon for the first time. If one can ever truly meet Deacon for the first time, that is.

I used to be so jealous of Nate.

Don’t get me wrong — there was nothing about being a lawyer I didn’t love. Arguing wasn’t even the half of it. There would come a moment in court, a moment when your evidence, your vehemence, and your godlike righteousness would form a sharp, gleaming point. It was predatory, pristine, delicious. In that moment, there would be no going back. It was the killing blow. A life changed forever in that moment — often only to end. It was the moment you won.

Even now, so far away from any semblance of a courtroom, the memory of that feeling tightens my chest. I breathe in the memory of that power like a drug.

In the Old World, though — It’s been barely a month and I’m already calling it the “Old World” — there were few who acknowledged my power. Nate was a decorated war hero. His power parted seas like fucking Moses. The kind of respect he was given? It silenced rooms and brought tears to grown men’s eyes.

I was a relentless vehicle of justice that brought electric death upon demons in human clothing every day. But my respect came in the form of a covert slap on the ass from the judge on my way out of the courtroom and sundry honorifics: “Doll,” “Toots,” and — my personal favorite, with a clever nod to the disease that will inevitably claim my life — “Sugar.”

Yeah, I was jealous of Nate. Yes, I resented it. Not him — I loved him, regardless — but I could never truly win in the Old World. Nobody would ever acknowledge my victories.

Now I win constantly.

With a soft grunt, I shift my dusty pack back into position on my shoulder. An ache has driven me from my dark reveries. A strange mood, for a day so bright and a sky so clear.

Settlers from Sanctuary to Tenpine Bluffs to the Starlight Drive-In have been babbling about Diamond City. “The Great Green Jewel of the Commonwealth.” According to my Pip-Boy, I’m getting close; according to my intuition, this was flippin’ Fenway Park.

Great. I’ve always loathed baseball.

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Somebody woke up on the wrong side of the dirt pile this morning.

My little Wanderer is especially frowny today. It’s almost like someone forced her into cryogenic
stasis for two centuries, murdered the man she cared for, then thawed her to fend for herself in a vast, arid wasteland of violence, cruelty, and death.

I may have slipped down into that Vault and done some research. What? Someone left the door unlocked. Basically a warm, welcoming invitation. If you ignore all the freezers.

Besides, it’s my job to know things.

We’re getting close to Diamond City. Thanks to some well-placed Railroad goodie bags along the way, I’m veritably swimming in Fancy Lads Snack Cakes. I’ve also got enough Stealth Boys to quietly slip into the loving arms of Her Holiness, The Wall before Wanderer does.

I’ve got a long-term plan, but the details of this particular errand are still… in the works. All right, so my playbook’s a little empty. I like to make it up as I go anyway — instinct’s one of the few things you can trust out here.

Yeah, that’s Fenway Park, all right.

I’m actually pretty impressed — using the old ballpark as shelter is ingenious. Towering, fortified walls, easily defensible entrances and exits, preexisting structures and electronics to restore and build upon. It’s more or less the opposite of the puny settlements I’ve helped put together in the past month. I cringe to think how close Oberland Station is to that Raider-infested brewery.

Dogmeat and I cross a debris-strewn plaza, shuffling over burnt magazines and kicking up dust. I’ve learned to read the dog’s body language as soon as we spot other people — I’ve already had to put a bullet in someone I thought was a semi-friendly Scavver when we drew too close to her particular trash heap.

The memory makes my stomach swim. It felt… bad. The woman didn’t know me from Eve; she didn’t realize I wasn’t there to steal her scrap, that I wouldn’t turn on her. She shot first, but it marked the first time I caused a death that wasn’t earned by dark deeds.

I’ve trusted Dogmeat’s instincts since then.

He nudges my hand, his long, wide mouth giving an easy grin, tongue lolling. It’s safe, he seems to say. A lump forms in my throat; it’s good to have a buddy watching out for me.

“Open uuuup…”

A woman, clearly nearing the “unpredictable” side of the frustration spectrum, stamps her foot in front of an intercom. Her fists, balled at her side, tighten, and she swipes a kick at the ground. She looks almost… normal. Her red leather coat is mostly clean, and her newsboy cap has a rather cliche “Press” card tucked into the band.

Despite my best effort to blend in with the garbage around me, she turns and my cover’s blown. Her eyes light up. Shit.

“Hey, you… You want into Diamond City, right?”

I’m sure the gatekeeper attached to the other side of that intercom can hear her loud whisper. I try to mask a grimace as I nod, very slightly.
“Shh… Okay, play along.” She gives me an exaggerated wink and turns back to the microphone box.

“What’s that? You said you’re a trader up from Quincy? You have enough supplies to keep the general store stocked for a whole month?”

_Oh my god._ No. Anxiety grips me. I am a bad liar. A terrible liar. I failed Drama class in high school. There’s no time to explain this, as the woman gleefully launches into her script.

“Huh. You hear that, Danny? You gonna open the gate and let us in, or are you gonna be the one talking to crazy Myrna about losing out on all the supply?”

She turns back to me and gives me a grin, nodding knowingly. My eyes close, accepting my fate.

“One. All right. No need to make it personal, Piper. Give me a minute.”

The poor fellow, sounding harangued and weary, ends the transmission with an electric crackle. Piper’s eyes and smile widen, and she beckons me to follow as the old gate cranks upward.

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After my _grueling_ years of research, field work, and the past month of active babysitting duty, I feel like I know this Wanderer pretty damn well. It only took a little light stalking and no more than five Stealth Boys to find out what happened in Vault 111.

She’s all about the short, sarcastic replies. Not my style — I like to provide flowery, poetic monologues in all my casual conversation — but I can’t blame her. You lose it all and then wake up to a place like this? More power to ya, lady. You don’t owe anybody anything.

In spite of the worst morning after in history, she’s helped a lot of poor suckers in this wasteland. I respect that. Hell, she’s bent on avenging her husband and rescuing her son, and still took the time to set up a couple of shantytowns along the way. Rickety and painfully vulnerable to a Super Mutant attack they might be, but it’s a nice thought.

There’s a lot of glaring and frowning involved, though. I imagine she’s got sort of a “beloved tyrant” vibe with the settlers.

So far, my only concern is her addiction to Med-X. She takes the stuff all the frickin’ time. _That’s no way to dull the pain, my friend._

Yeah, we’re pretty much besties at this point, ready to exchange friendship bracelets and braid each other’s hair. So why, now that she’s only a thin sheet of metal away, do I feel like it’s the first day of school and I forgot my pants?

And it’s not because I’m undercover as the school nurse?

___________________________

This place already weirds me out.

I may be an awful liar, but I can spot a greasy bullshitter a mile away — no recon scope necessary. And Mayor McDonough, eerily reminiscent of pre-war toads, seems to be a bonafide professional.

I do not like him and I will not pretend to.
“Why don’t we ask the newcomer?” Piper’s voice brings me back to the conversation I’ve been ignoring. “You support the news, ‘cause the mayor’s threatening to throw free speech in the dumpster.”

“Hell yeah, I support it. If people don’t have freedom of press, they don’t have freedom.” Brow furrowed, I meet the mayor’s eyes. They do seem a little amphibian… too watery.

Flustered, the mayor backtracks immediately. I’ve gotten scary. A wry smile finds its way to my face. Nobody’s going to slap my ass these days.

“Oh, I didn’t mean to bring you into this argument! No, no, no… You look like Diamond City material.” I’m sporting a filthy Vault suit, leather armor I tore off of freshly-slaughtered corpses, and a lovely shade of violet on my cheekbone where one Raider got in a lucky shot with a pool cue. I think I’m wearing his left shin guard.

“Welcome to the Great Green Jewel of the Commonwealth. Safe. Happy. A fine place to come, spend your money, settle down. Don’t let this muckraker tell you otherwise, all right?”

I probably shouldn’t be too much of an asshole to the mayor. I let my wry smile turn genuine. McDonough seems to breathe a sigh of relief, offers a shaky nod and smile, and abruptly flees to a nearby elevator.

Piper turns back to me. "Look, I gotta go get settled in, but, um, stop by my office later. I have an idea for an article that you would be perfect for."

A nod and a wave goodbye and I’m free of Piper, as well. I’m relieved. I’ve been silently hammering scrap into semi-livable hovels for the past few weeks; these city slickers are proving exhausting.

She’s not supposed to talk to me.

I’m dressed as a guard for a reason. To blend in. Quietly. In the shadows. Not to be the only security officer in this whole friggin’ foyer that the Vault dweller wants to chat with.

Naturally I chose the darkest corner to lean against, so I have a couple seconds’ leeway to gather my thoughts while she shifts uncomfortably in front of me, clearly feeling awkward.

She’s not saying anything. Oh god. I hate doing the talking. I operate under cover of darkness for a reason.

“Hey.” I hope I sound cool.

“Hi!” Her voice sounds funny. Bright. She’s trying to be friendly, I realize. Somehow, that makes my stomach flip.

“What’s up?” Oh yeah. I’m so cool. Cooler than the inside of a cryopod. ...Too soon?

“I… “ She falters for a second, characteristically knitting her brow. She frowns like most people smile. “I was wondering, can you tell me anything about this place? I need somewhere to stay tonight.”
The smallest slip-up could blow my cover. Can’t risk it. “Uh, well, welcome to the, uh, Great Green Jewel. You’ll totally love it here.”

Great. The dog’s nosing around my crotch now. Real rude, buddy. What, were you raised in the bomb shelter of a barn?

She raises an eyebrow. “...Totally. So, that’s a no?”

All right, little Wanderer, leave me alone before you get both of us in trouble. “Nothing more to say.”

Wanderer’s eyes widen a bit. They’re dark brown, almost black. I’ve never been close enough to see them before. I hadn’t noticed the purpling on her cheekbone from that last Raider attack, either. Fucking Raiders. This is why we can’t have nice things.

“All right. Thanks anyway.”

She walks off, a bit more stiffly than before. The dog huffs hot, rotten dog-breath on my thigh one last time, then pivots to lope after her. I finally exhale as they turn the corner and disappear into Diamond City.

Half of humanity are feral ghouls and I’m still the most socially awkward person alive.

I’m kicking myself after talking to the guard. I’ll usually seek out quieter people to ask questions — less chance of getting sucked into a long conversation — but that really backfired.

Nothing more to say.

He had a nice voice.

What an ass.

Suddenly I’m reminded of Nate, and a sharp ache pulses through my heart.

Emerging from the long tunnel, Diamond City spreads out before me. It’s so much more alive here than anywhere else I’ve been since waking up. The bright lights and red canopy of the noodle stand, the sounds of merchants hawking their wares (“Don’t let the stress of life kill ya! Relax with some chems!” “Who needs a haircut? Everyone needs a haircut! Step up!”) — it all feels strangely inviting. Not comfortable, though. I can tell Dogmeat’s on edge.

To my immediate left is a newsstand. Not wanting to draw Piper’s vivacious attention again, I slip away to the right, tucking my head down as if the bright blue of my Vault suit won’t draw her like a fly to vinegar.

When I covertly lift my eyes again, it’s like looking into the face of an angel. I can almost feel the heavens part, shining a ray of wan sunlight down around me.

A doctor.

Or at least a man in a white lab coat, surrounded by syringes. Doctor. I’m going with doctor.

He’s busily writing something on a clipboard, but my open-mouth stare must be alluring, because he stops and looks up at me.
“We offer a wide variety of medical treatments,” he offers. Seems mildly annoyed that I’ve interrupted his work.

I step a bit closer, onto the dirty concrete floor of the medical shack. “So… what kind of treatments are common around here?”

“Bandaging wounds and curing radiation exposure are the most common things you outsiders usually ask for. That, and kicking a chem habit.”

It all sounds terribly mundane. “Have you ever dealt with…?” I hesitate. I don’t even know if this word has survived the last 200 years. “…diabetes?”

I have to ask. The insulin Codsworth stockpiled isn’t incredibly potent; I’m well into bottle number two, and if I don’t find a solution soon, I’m in for a slow, thirsty death.

His eyebrows raise ever so slightly. “I have.”

My heart jumps.

“I’ve conducted several autopsies on afflicted children throughout the years.”

My heart sinks.

The doctor — Doctor Sun, it looks like, as I steal a glance at his clipboard — seems thoughtful. “Do you know such a child? I haven’t had a chance to study the effects of the disease on a living subject yet. There’s much I could learn…”

I can’t really hear him; a thick buzz has filled my ears. It’s a fight to swallow the lump in my throat. I don’t know if he’s still talking, but I have to escape this moment of drowning panic.

“I have it.”

Yep, I cut him off mid-sentence. He looks irritated at first — I guess he’s not used to being interrupted — but after a moment, he’s the one with his jaw hanging low.

“How have you survived?”

I want to laugh. “It’s a… long story. I’m running out of insulin. Are you telling me you don’t know where to get any?” I don’t want to have this conversation, but it’s like ripping off a Band-Aid. Or yanking out a Raider’s switchblade stuck in your thigh. Quick and fast, then deal with the pain afterward.

Doctor Sun frowns. It’s like looking into a grumpy mirror. “Not easily, no. It’s possible to distill the necessary protein from a bovine or porcine pancreas, but the sheer amount of necessary animal material makes it a prohibitively difficult process. Additionally, the chemicals required to refine the liquid are both dangerous and almost nonexistent in the Commonwealth. And there’s no guarantee that the resulting concoction won’t kill you faster than the disease itself, especially given the high levels of radiation most creatures exhibit.”

“So you’re saying it’s possible.” I’ve always been cynical, but I’m willing to give that up for a moment.

“It’s… possible, yes, but iterating on a viable solution will take time. And if you’re sick, you certainly don’t have much of that.”
This guy’s bedside manner. Sheesh. It’s almost like they’ll let anyone practice medicine these days.

Despite my sardonic frame of mind, my chest begins to tighten, my throat wants to close, and I’m suddenly hot all over. It was an opportunity to quickly locate a doctor in the first populated city I stumbled upon, but I can only handle so much impending doom at once. I have to find a way out.

I cut off the good doctor yet again.

“I need to find a place to stay tonight.”

He snaps his mouth shut, huffs slightly, and offers up a slight eye-roll. “The Dugout Inn should be satisfactory. It’s located near the main gate.”

Nodding, I raise a hand in farewell and turn to leave. I can feel him hesitate behind me.

“Come visit again in a week or so. I’ll… attempt to find a solution for you.”

I turn back. “Count on it.”

She’s rented Room #2 at the Dugout Inn. Not my favorite Commonwealth B&B — the Radroach sausage in their continental breakfast is just so dry — but it’ll do in a pinch.

I’ve ditched the security guard outfit. After rubbing some dirt on my cheeks and donning a padded blue jacket, I look like a Diamond City native, born and raised. Lucky for me, Room #3 was free for the night. There might be a bedbug or twenty, but hey, at least I won’t have to sleep alone.

The walls here are like wet cardboard. You can hear everything that goes on next door. It’s one of the reasons I don’t usually rent a room here when duty calls in Diamond City: can’t risk my cover. Plus, I like to wake up with my appetite intact.

So it’s not surprising when, after a few hours of waiting, I hear noises coming from the wall I share with Room #2. It is surprising when it turns into a drawn-out, one-sided conversation.

“You’re the only one watching out for me now, bud.”

I settle in, my back to the wall. This might be a long evening.

“I wish I could have your back like you’ve got mine, but I’m just no good at this.”

Huh. Who’s she talking to?

“Such a loyal buddy. Feels good to have your eyes on me.”

I scan the peeling brown walls, looking for holes. Is she… on to me?

“You’re the only pal I’ve got.” Her voice is muffled. “You’re a good, good boy.”

This is getting weird.


The realization is only a little disappointing. Deep down I know I’m still a good, good boy.
She sighs. It’s a big sigh, because it comes through the wall loud and clear. I bet she’s frowning, too. I’ve spent a good amount of time studying those frowns through my recon scope. They’re actually a lot less terrifying in person. Heck, they’re even sort of cute. Like a growling mongrel puppy, or maybe a really happy Deathclaw.

“We spent our last stupid bottle caps on this room, bud. I don’t know how we’re gonna eat tomorrow.” I imagine she’s idly scratching behind his ears. She definitely seems the type to let the huge, bloodthirsty dog on the bed.

After another sigh and a few loud creaks, it’s clear she’s settled in for the night. I should try to get some shuteye myself — I’ve got a long day of covert trailing ahead of me — but I’m torn.

Technically, I shouldn’t interfere. I’d be risking my cover and compromising the operation I’ve been planning for years. Dez would be pissed.

But technically, I’d be compromising the operation by letting my little Wanderer die of starvation. Yeah, we can’t have that. Dez would understand.

I’ve got some purified water, some mutfruit, and a metric ton of Fancy Lads Snack Cakes thanks to the generosity of the Railroad. Grab the plate leftover from my mouthwatering five-star Dugout Inn dinner, and…

There. Let her think there is a continental breakfast. That should tide her over until she figures out her cap situation.

It crosses my mind that maybe I’m getting too close to the project. Hell, it’s hard not to feel protective over Wanderer. This thing has been incubating for years, and now that my little chick is hatched and tottering about the ‘Wealth, I’d prefer it if she weren’t dinner for a stray Yao Guai.

Folding my sunglasses on the nightstand, I lay back on the mattress. I think of her frown, and her bright voice trying to be friendly. Sleep comes for me, but it can’t outrace the half-smile that touches my lips.
Nick Valentine and the Sole Survivor face off with Kellogg.

And if the whole Kellogg situation seemed a tad too easy for a soft Vault dweller newly emerged into a world rife with violence and pain... well, hey, maybe there was a reason.

“Okay, you made it. I’m just up ahead. My synths are standing down.

Let’s talk.”

I look to my left, catching Nick’s eye. He nods encouragingly. “Go get him, tiger.”

The past week has been a blur. After discovering Diamond City and following some leads, I found out about Nick. Then I rescued Nick. Now I’m friends with Nick, and we’re just a few yards away from the bastard that killed my husband and took my baby. Just a few yards away from... my baby.

Things move pretty damn fast in the ‘Wealth.

Nick’s voice, smooth and low with a hint of gravel, is a comfort. Dogmeat has proven a worthy and eager sidekick thus far, but I have to admit, it’s nice to have a partner that can manipulate a trigger. Opposable thumbs — nothing like ‘em in the world.

Around the corner awaits my future. I’m either going to save Shaun, or fail him.

Whatever happens, though, it has to happen now. Even if I run out of insulin... even if I can’t raise my son into a man... at least I can avenge Nate. At least I can free Shaun, leave him with a friend I’ve begun to trust.

Deep breath. Safety off. I square my shoulders. _This is your closing argument_, I tell myself, drawing on the power I know so well. _You’re about to put a bad man away for a very long time_. I hope the Devil’s got room for him; I’m sure He’s got His cloven hooves full with pre-war politicians and scientists.

Enough stalling. I round the corner.

The Railroad Stealth Boys that’ve been modified by Tinker Tom last a hell of a lot longer than your regular garden-variety ‘Boys. And I know how to stretch ‘em good and long. It’s one of my specialties. So it’s been a piece of cake to trail Wanderer, even when she slipped into Fort Hagen with ol’ Nicky Valentine.

I don’t love being holed up in close quarters with an army of homicidal Gen 1s, but a spy’s gotta do what a spy’s gotta do. If Wanderer wants to charge headlong into abject danger, it’s my job to snipe some of that danger from afar.
I can’t help but wish she’d put a little more effort into stealth, though. It’s almost like she’s daring the synths to burn a smoking laser hole through her chest.

Despite the odds, she’s made it to old Kellogg himself. That rat bastard has been a pain in the Railroad’s collective ass for years. I’m not really into the whole “gory violence” thing, but even I’d love to see her firmly plant a bullet in that guy’s brain.

So long as she survives this, that is. And if I have any say in the matter, she will.

She’s rounded the corner, so I inch forward, taking her place. My rifle’s cocked and ready, my Stealth Boy’s going strong. I hold my breath, waiting.

“And there she is. The most resilient woman in the Commonwealth.”

*Geez. Even Kellogg’s voice screams “I’m a huge asshole.”* I can’t roll my eyes hard enough.

“So. You don’t know the half of it.” She’s so tough. I find myself grinning. *Give him hell, pal.*

“Let’s… talk.”

I can’t see her, but I know she’s frowning. I hope she’s giving him that death-by-a-thousand-cuts glare of hers. That one’s my favorite.

“Nothing to talk about, asshole. Give me Shaun. Where’s my baby?”

“Hmph. Lady, I’m just a puppet like you. My stage is a little bigger, that’s all.” *A puppet?* Cataloguing that for later. “Shaun’s a good kid. So maybe he’s not quite a ‘baby’ anymore. But he’s doing great. Only… he’s not here. He’s with the people pulling the strings.”

*Not a baby?* That’s big. I adjust my position; I have a good view of the room now. Tech and computers everywhere, some of it still humming. Bunch of eerily motionless Gen 1s with Institute rifles at the ready. My Wanderer is facing Kellogg, back straight, but when she speaks I can hear the hitch in her voice — her response is colored with surprise, with disappointment.

“Fuck you, Kellogg.”

Her consonants are hard and full of venom. I nod my solidarity. Warm pride slowly blossoms in my chest and catches in my throat. *I knew you were the one, pal,* I think to myself. *Instinct wins again.* Wanderer, she may love a good bloody fight — something I’ll never understand — but you can’t fake that integrity.

It’s not that I *trust* her… but maybe I’m starting to really *believe* in her.

Okay, back to the soap opera.

Kellogg’s asshole voice fills the room again. “Let him go. Your time’s done. Your son is exactly where he belongs. He’s home. In the Institute.”

Oh, *shit.*

Wanderer, she doesn’t seem phased. I guess she doesn’t really get the full impact of that statement. I wish to hell that she didn’t have to find out.

“So where is it?” she spits at him. “This ‘Institute.’ How do I get there?”

*Good question, buddy. I’d love the answer to that one myself.*
“Heh. Haven’t you been paying attention? You don’t find the Institute. The Institute finds you.”

Condescending son of a bitch. I know the guy’s a sociopath, but there’s gotta be a special place in hell for people that take pleasure in needling a grieving mother.

“You open the closet, it’s just a closet. You can never find the monster that hides inside. Not until it jumps out at you. But I think we’ve been talking long enough. We both know how this has to end. So… You ready?”

Oh, I’m ready. I sight the Gen 1 nearest Wanderer and steady my aim. Just say the word, K.

At her side, Nick’s tensed up as well. I like the old synth; I’m glad he’s got her back today.

When my little Wanderer speaks, suddenly she doesn’t seem quite so naive. Her voice has an edge, an undertone of darkness that I’ve never heard her use before. Her voice is hatred and disdain and rings with this almost prescient truth.

“In a hundred years, when I finally die, I only hope I go to Hell so I can kill you all over again, you piece of shit.”

In my old life, this was the power at the end. It was always in this moment that the purity of my conviction would seal a man’s fate. I share this moment with every judge, every king, every executioner throughout time. It’s the hauling of the rope, the gravity of the axe, the sweet click of the lever as electricity flows from fingers to chair.

This is Kellogg’s death sentence.

I pull up my 10mm — nicely modded for power and speed, thanks to Arturo back in Diamond City — aim, and pull. The shot propels from my chamber, eager. But where Kellogg’s face sneered at me only a moment ago, now there’s nothing. Air.

Stealth Boy. Nate had told me of them, and I’d seen some relics floating around the shops in the city. But I’ve never fought anyone using one before. I don’t know how to fight an invisible foe.

I turn my attention to the androids around me. The… the synths. Nick’s already taken down quite a few of them in the first few seconds of battle — more than I’d have thought possible — but I can still feel the heat of their lasers grazing my arms, burning holes in my Vault suit.

Green envelops my world. VATS has taken over. I go for headshots on the last three synths, plug a critical on the last.

All is quiet. VATS can’t target what it can’t detect. I close the program.

Nick is down, cradling the left side of his head. I spare him a worried glance.

“I’ll be okay, kid. I just… need a moment…” One metal hand is fumbling beneath his lapels for a Stimpak.

Kellogg’s still here.

Wary, I glance around the room, desperate for some hint of movement, some telltale clatter of sound. This is a danger I’ve never felt before. For all that I’m a soft Vault dweller used to a world of grocery stores and policemen, this is the first time I’ve felt vulnerable out here.
Silence.

A crack rings out through the room. My shoulder erupts into hot wet pain. Looking down is a mistake. It’s like a blood faucet. Bile heaves into my throat and I stagger.

I’m not made for combat outside of VATS. I’ve been foolishly confident. My lungs feel flat and empty as I realize this is the end; I’ve failed Shaun, I’ve failed Nate, and it’s not even the insulin that got me in the end.

Hey. Heh. At least I beat diabetes.

A second deafening crack. I wince, body tense, sure that the next red fountain is going to be my head. After a few more moments of being alive, I uncoil my shoulders, my eyes darting around the room. Where is he?

Something flickers on the ground to my left, halfway behind an old steel desk. Straight out of an old sci-fi movie, Kellogg fades back into existence, the Stealth Boy wearing off. He’s gasping and grimacing, a gnarly wound to his chest gushing blood.

I shouldn’t smile, but I can’t help myself. Luck just seems to be following me wherever I go. I steady my good right arm, point the gun at his ugly fucking face… and hesitate.

*Feel this moment. This is what you awoke to do.*

Kellogg begins to croak something out. Sorry son of a bitch. I’ll let him have his last words.

“Feel… sorry for ya. Came all this way… for nothin’.”

My eyes narrow. I squeeze the trigger a little more, savoring the tension.

“Shaun’s… gone. You’ll never see him… again!”

His hoarse chuckle is the last sound he ever makes. His face explodes into a slushy red mess.

I’m bleeding out, but I feel wonderful. Exhilarated. Relieved. Alive. Nick’s here now, staunching the blood, stabbing me with a Stimpak, speaking words I don’t try to comprehend. The smile on my face is transfixed, stupid.

I’ve always relished the killing blow.

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My goddamn heart’s pounding out of my chest. *Well, that got the blood pumping.*

Breathe, Deacon. *She's okay.*

My Railroad Stealth Boy’s still powered up. I lean back against the concrete wall, slumping to the floor. Raising my shaking arm to my forehead, my sleeve soaks up the sweat that’s collected.

Renowned Stealth Boy connoisseur that I am, it’s still really frickin’ hard to detect someone who’s cloaked. I’ve been pretty good at controlling the situations Wanderer’s stumbled into so far, but today’s a slap in the face. For once, sticking to the shadows makes me feel powerless.

Seeing all that red fall out of her, fall to the floor… I don’t have a weak stomach, but damn. I thought our time was up.
My shot at Kellogg was luck, pure and simple. Or maybe I can chalk it up to instinct. Either way, something went right; I’m not about to question it.

Nick’s fussing over her now, patching up that shoulder — Shoulder. Not heart. — and outlining their next steps. Piper in Diamond City. I can hear Wanderer’s groan from here.

Damn, that’s a beautiful sound. Music to my ears. I let a corner of my mouth give in to a smile. She takes out Public Enemy #1 and still has the gumption to dread a visit to ol’ Piper.

“Hey. Hold up a sec, Nick.”

It’s almost impossible to detect, but her voice… it’s changed from before. Hell, I’ve listened to it more than anyone else alive in the ‘Wealth — I should know. It’s gone dull, somehow, where before there was a hint of shine to it. This fact shouldn’t mean much to me, but I get the urge to walk over, tell her a joke.

She’s bent down, fishing around in… Kellogg’s pockets? Straightening, it looks like she’s holding —

Bleh. Brains over brawn, I guess?

Something glints in the fluorescent light, dripping with blood. A dollop of gray matter slides down the thing’s rounded metal edge and plops onto the concrete floor.

“All this tech. You were barely human.”

She grimaces — Okay, she’s not a total freak if she’s grossed out, right? — and folds the thing in a dusty bandana, tucking it into her pack.

“Diamond City it is.”

Nick pats her good shoulder, lightly, gingerly. “Hey, chin up. I know the night just got darker, but it won’t last forever.”

That’s debatable, Nick, my friend.

It’s good to have someone to lean on.

The Stimpak’s doing its job on my shoulder, but it’s slow work. Weaving tissue and muscle back together isn’t the simplest task. But hell, slow’s better than nothing.

“So, sounds like we’re dealing with a pre-teen here rather than the swaddled babe you were expecting.” Nick’s voice cuts through the soft electrical sparking of the Fort Hagen control room. “Well, that’s all right — least we know the tyke’s safe.”

I stay quiet as we lope along. This has been the most exhausting day of my life, to date. I can’t devote what little energy I have left to thinking about the rotten tragedy my life’s become.

I can, however, use that energy to complain.

“Do we have to visit Piper? I don’t see how she could help us.” I’d almost rather face Kellogg again than muster up the social wherewithal to hold a conversation with the reporter.
Nick chuckles. “Trust me, that dame knows a lot more than she lets on. And she lets on a lot. If I know her, she’s done her homework. And we need to talk this through with someone.”

I’m not looking forward to this. All I want to do is head back to Sanctuary, curl up in the shack I built for myself, and sleep for days. No thoughts of Shaun or insulin or helping the Minutemen or finding the Institute or —

Nope. Turn off, brain, you’ve done enough damage today.

But a thought does strike me. “Nick,” I venture, “that was a lucky shot you got in there, at the end. How’d you know where to aim? Got a trick I can use on my next invisible enemy?”

He’s missing some integral chunks of face, but Nick still manages to look baffled. “Kid, I was in a world of hurt until it was all over. Didn’t get back on my feet until after fixing up your shoulder.” I frown. He frowns. “I thought you took that shot.”

“I…” I’m having trouble remembering. It was all over in under a minute or two. “I guess I must have.”

But I can’t help feeling like I’ve been too lucky. It should unnerve me, but it’s actually kind of comforting. If nothing else has gone right since the world ended, at least I seem to have my own personal guardian angel.

I stop, turning. Nick stops as well.

“Something the matter?”

The room is dimly lit, illuminated only by the flickering fluorescents and the glow of a few hardy monitors. I squint and I scan, but I can’t find anything out of the ordinary.

I don’t care if I look nuts. Credit where credit’s due. Still peering into the darkness, I offer up an awkward smile and a wave of my good arm. “Thanks.”

Nick eyes me. “Kellogg knocked a few screws loose, huh? C’mon, let’s get you to a doctor.”

We head for the exit. I feel calm. I’ve got a purpose, I’ve got friends, I’ve got luck. Maybe this won’t turn out so bad after all.

I freeze.

She’s looking at me. Right at me. Gazing into my eyes. With her eyes.

I desperately want to look down, make sure my hand is still cloaked, but moving seems like a bad idea. *Maybe she’s like one of those snakes that can only sense motion.* A man can only hope.

Her smile looks sort of goofy. *Genuine, Deacon. The word is “genuine.”*

She waves at me. It’s an awkward wave — her arm is still tangled up with the detective’s, and it’s more of a weak wrist-flap than anything else. Then, soft enough that I barely catch it: “Thanks.”

The profundity of this moment makes me feel all weird in my belly. I remain painfully motionless until I hear the door clatter behind them, their heavy steps on the concrete floor, the steel elevator doors clang shut. My body relaxes; the Stealth Boy’s still activated. *I’ve gotta remember to bring*
Tinker Tom back a nice present. When it comes to military garbage, Fort Hagen's got the pick of the litter.

I breathe in stale air, breathe out a sigh. I speak out loud to the empty room. “Anything for you, pal.”
Chapter Summary

After a depressing trip to the Memory Den, both Deacon and the Sole Survivor find solace in alcohol. Hancock is a gracious (albeit intimidating) host.

We're getting so close.

I stop into Goodneighbor every now and again. Grab a cold one at the Third Rail, plant a few holotapes, gather some intel. Usually makes for a pretty laid-back trip, as far as Railroad errands go. Unless I’m due for a rendezvous with Hancock, that is. Or give in to temptation and hit up the Memory Den.

I’m not one for chems, but I can see how reliving the past can get addicting — poor old Kent’s a testament to that. And when you’re in the Railroad, the only safe place to visit your friends and family is off in the magical land of your hippocampus.

So yeah, there’ve been times I found myself glued to the boob tube an unhealthy amount. Got to the point where Irma could recognize me, no matter the getup. Once she started with the sly winks I knew I had to go cold turkey.

It was... for the best. I know that, I do. But I’d gotten used to her smile again. The smell of churned earth, of rain. That easy laugh. The feel of her arms slipping around my waist as I cooked, resting her cheek on my shoulder blade. Heh, that was always the closest I’d let her get to the stove; the girl could burn water. In those memories, I could never see her face, but I could feel her smile. She was always smiling.

God. Even remembering remembering has got me all out of whack. Behind my sunglasses I blink once, hard, rubbing my eyes with thumb and forefinger.

So here I am, back in Goodneighbor, this time on a more complicated errand. And where do I find myself? Plugged into a goddamn memory pod, fighting the urge to give in and remember her. If I let myself get lost in her again… even just this once… If I’m weak, Wanderer’s going to slip right through my fingers. I have got to focus.

I’m least conspicuous here in a pod, as much of a vegetable as any Den regular. I can’t just lean against a wall and expect to blend with the party guests. Plugging in’s my only option, but all my memories that aren’t of her… well, they kind of suck. A depressing realization. I’m just as reluctant to plunge myself into the rest of my shitty, shameful past.

Man, nothing like a little perspective to brighten your day.

I’m still waffling between two bad choices when the heavy metal doors of the Memory Den creak open. Nick Valentine’s voice floats down the hall and around the corner.

“...The good doctor should be in, if we’ve got luck on our side.”

“Hey, even if she’s out, I think I’ve proven my chops as a Commonwealth brain surgeon.” Funny, Wanderer. I can imagine the quirk of her lips as she smiles at her own quip. But her comment brings back Fort Hagen’s control room. And her ebony eyes looking into mine. And the dip in my stomach as she quirked her lips at me then, shy, waving.

Hey, looks like I’ve got my memory. And just in time, too.

Sifting through the memories of the man who destroyed everything you hold dear is an objectively terrible experience.

Surprising, I know.

And it’s not just because I have to look at his ugly fucking face again. Not because I get this cold, shivery fear in my abdomen thinking of his invisible eyes on me. Not because of his almost bored tone when asking if I was ready to die.

It’s because he was the little boy reading comic books in bed, feeling comfortable and safe in the yellow lamplight, his mother at his side. Because his father probably hurt him. Because he knows those West Coast waters as well as I. Because he lost his wife and his baby and became harder for it. Because to that Scavver woman back near Graygarden, I was Kellogg.

I hate not hating him. I was counting on it to sustain me through the rest of this shit.

It’s maybe an hour or two before they re-emerge from the lab downstairs. Enough time for me to review my intel on Wanderer so far, and more than enough time for me to replay her grand entrance into Goodneighbor. Y’know, in case I missed something important.

I’ll admit, I had one hand on the Stealth Boy when that greasy five-o’clock-shadow-in-road-leathers started giving her a hard time. Sure, she can blow a guy’s head to smithereens without batting an eyelash, but she refuses to haggle with traders, and she was this close to falling for Parker’s charge card scam. The girl’s gullibility could fill a piggy bank. Someone else’s piggy bank.

She had Finn handled, though. Wanderer hasn’t really taken any shit since the whole Kellogg thing. Shorter fuse, blanker expression, fewer words. In this case, those words were “fuck” and “off.”

So when friggin’ Hancock came swaggering out of the shadows to maintain the peace, all I could do was roll my eyes. Didn’t expect the borderline evisceration of the thug, but that’s Goodneighbor law and order for you.

Hancock. Mayor of Goodneighbor, unofficial friend of the Railroad, huge tool. I mean, look at the guy’s outfit. Who does he think he is?

Oh. Right.

He was too eager to swoop in for the rescue, though. Held her gaze — and her hand — just a few seconds too long.
“Gives me a sexy, king of the zombies kind of look.”

“Heh heh, I can tell I’m gonna like you already.”

“Just consider this your home away from home...”

“...So long as you remember who’s in charge.”

Yeah, he’s definitely cramping our style. Tacky as hell. I know he helps us out now and then, but I’m gonna have to have a talk with Dez about the importance of making classy alliances.

I found myself groaning inwardly as Wanderer quickened her pace, overtook his retreating form, laid a hand on his arm, and asked his story. *She can’t know what she’s getting herself into, I thought. And this definitely won’t help that Med-X habit.*

Even from my place in the shadows, I could see the glint in his black eyes as he launched into his monologue. Slimy bastard.

Great, now I’m annoyed again. It’s a good place to stop, anyway — before I have to remember how rapt her attention was on his overblown autobiography, how wide her eyes — and besides, this pod has *no* lumbar support. My ass is numb and my back’s killing me. Nick and Wanderer pass by, headed for the exit, so I hit the release on the pod door and give it a moment before I climb out to follow.

Nothing feels particularly important anymore.

My baby is a little boy. Maybe ten. He’s survived ten whole years without me… and he seemed content enough with Kellogg. Happy, even.

*Maybe Kellogg was right. Maybe he does belong in the… the Institute.*

Shaun doesn’t really need me. Whoever has him is actually taking care of him.

He wouldn’t know me, anyway. I’d just be a stranger, a dusty, dirty wasteland woman who can’t remember how to win an argument without a bullet. I had only been a mother for a few short months before the world ended. I’ve been an emotionless killer for almost as long now. And I think I’ve taken to this persona a little better.

This has become a vanity mission.

We’re by the Old State House now, and I stop, laying a hand on Nick’s arm. “Hey, pal. I think I need some time alone.”

He gazes at me a moment. Funny, how his eyes — inorganic, bright yellow, sometimes erratic in their movements — feel like they’re seeing more of me than I know exists. They don’t seem inhuman. They seem superhuman.

After a few seconds, he nods. “You sure you’re gonna be all right on your own? I don’t mind stickin’ around while you do some soul-searching, friend.”

My eyes sting a little. I guess I’m not a totally emotionless killer. I still have the capacity to love robots and dogs. “Yeah, Nick, thanks though. It… it means a lot. You’ve done a lot for me, and you barely know me. I just need time to think.”
He reaches a hand out, metallic fingers squeezing my shoulder ever so gently. “Okay, kiddo. I’ll be at the agency as soon as you’re ready to get this show back on the road.” Raising a hand and nodding once, he turns, yellow trenchcoat swishing behind him as he strolls around the corner.

Heaving a sigh, I roll my shoulders back and survey the vicinity. Drifters wander about the dim, debris-strewn street, but none of them seem bent on trouble like the ill-fated Finn. I feel like I should have been more horrified at his sudden and rather gory death, but it’s just another drop in the blood bucket.

A rusty sign with red lettering captures my attention. “The Third Rail.” Well, golly, if that doesn’t seem like it could be a bar. And I desperately need a drink.

I don’t know exactly why she’s dismissing Valentine, but I suspect it has something to do with an overwhelming, crushing sense of hopelessness and despair.

Just a hunch.

I’ve gotten used to having three guns and three pairs of eyes as we travel, so I can’t say I’m pleased. This area’s crawling with Raiders and Super Mutants, and Wanderer’s sure to stumble right into the middle of them. Sigh. Next time I’m at HQ, I’m asking for a raise.

After a moment, she seems to come to a decision. The Third Rail. All right then, yeah, I could go for a beer. It’s definitely been one of those days. Good idea, pal.

I flick my cigarette onto the pavement and step on it. Readjusting my cap and rolling up the sleeves of my padded jacket, I saunter to the bar. Sometimes, being undercover has its perks.

All the functioning Mr. Handys in this world are actually pretty comforting. I’m not the only relic around. Whitechapel Charlie is especially entertaining, the surly bastard, and even gets a smile out of my somber ass before I can get my drink.

The bot can’t offer vermouth or bitters — his eye-stalks narrowed at me when I asked — so straight bourbon is as close as I’ll get to a proper Manhattan. At least it’s good and strong.

A couple patrons have already told me I’m “blocking their light” and warned me they don’t have the time — as if I even wanted to talk — so I’m hunched over my glass at the bar. It’s pretty empty up here, just a drifter in a blue coat nursing a beer to my left and a woman in a shiny red dress a few seats down to my right. How sequins have remained sparkly these past 200 years is anyone’s guess.

A few good sips and I’m already feeling the buzz. Hell, it’s almost been a year since I’ve — oh, God. Nope. 200 years. It’s, uh… been a while since my last drink. I guess my tolerance isn’t what it was in college.

I’m trying very, very hard to not think of anything at all. Most of my focus is intent on characterizing the various scratches, smudges, and stains on the countertop. That one looks like a decapitated Jangles. And that one looks like a pipe pistol. And that one looks like dried blood. Yuck.
My game is working, probably too well, because I take no notice when someone slides onto the stool next to me. It’s not until his voice — at once rasping and smooth — interrupts my simple reveries that I jump slightly and turn. Black eyes meet mine, eyebrows (eyebrows?) raised, mouth half-smiling.

“Hey there, sister.”

I swallow my mouthful of bourbon. It’s more than I expect, and damn, does it ever burn. Though I try to hold it in, I choke and sputter. “H- *hack* -hello, uh, Mayor.” *So awkward.* I have no reason to be nervous, other than my natural inability to interact with anyone who has even one iota of charisma.

Several of my settlers are ghouls, and they were kind enough to explain the condition to this ignorant Vault dweller. Suffice to say I don’t have a great poker face. So Hancock’s richly textured skin and lack of any discernible nose doesn’t surprise or bother me. More than anything, it’s intriguing. And his black eyes. They’re like one... giant... pupil. Watery and dark as night, they reflect the light from the stage. I can see myself in them, tiny, a blob of skin-tone and blue. My stomach does a little flip as I realize I’ve been staring into them longer than is polite.

“Like what you see?”

I blink. That damn poker face again. Hancock chuckles.

“This *fine* establishment has everything you need to wash away whatever bad memories you dredged up at the Den. Beautiful women, strong booze, ruggedly handsome men of power that can refill your drink at a moment’s notice.” I didn’t even realize it was empty. Or that I’m clutching my drink like it’s a life preserver. The mayor reaches over, fingers encircling the glass, covering my own. His skin is warm and surprisingly soft. I flinch and snatch my hand away as he waggles the empty cup at Whitechapel Charlie.

“Sorry,” I say, as he looks at me with raised eyebrow (eyebrow?). “The last couple... dozen... people to touch me have either been trying to stab me or bleed out on me.”

He shakes his head. “That’s a shame. Physical touch is an important part of the human condition, y’know.” He takes a long pull off his beer. “And the ghoul condition.”

I frown. “Ghouls are still human. A substantially different sort of human, mutated by radiation, perhaps, but certainly not a separate species entirely.”

With a grin, Hancock reaches into a pocket behind the lapel of his red frock coat and pulls out a tin labeled “MENTATS.” Flipping the top open, he offers me one of the small white lozenges inside. “Sounds like you’re in the mood for a good old-fashioned philosophical debate. Care for a performance-enhancing drug?”

Now it’s my turn to raise the ol’ brows. “Nah,” I say, scoffing a little. “I didn’t need those in law school, don’t need ‘em now. Thanks, though.” Besides, mixing Mentats and hard alcohol is never a good idea. Learned that lesson from one of the two frat parties I had the bad sense to attend in college.

Shrugging, he pockets the tin, but not before popping a couple pills himself. “Well, then, what’s your ride of choice, sister? Me, I’m a Mentats ghoul myself — makes me feel intellectual.”

I smile, feeling macabre. The alcohol’s doing its job, and well. “You know, I’m not really one for chems outside of the battlefield.” I pluck my precious insulin bottle from my pack. “Except for this
one. Incredibly rare — only two or three bottles left on Earth, I think.” I swirl the clear contents of
the vial around; Hancock’s eyes are locked on the bottle, mesmerized. He clears his throat,
intrigued.

“Feel like giving a connoisseur a taste? I’ve got a real discerning palate, you know.” He’s
practically licking his lips (lips?).

Pocketing the vial, I shake my head. “Sorry. This one’ll be a little strong for you. I’m the only one
alive that can handle the effects.”

Charlie’s refilled my bourbon, and I sip it while Hancock looks on, disconcerted. I may be a
dynamo in the courtroom, but I’m absolute shit when it comes to flirting, even when fueled by
booze. Miraculously, though, I’m cool as a cucumber right now. I think I even have the “mysterious
stranger” vibe locked down. The mayor shrugs again.

“If you say so.” Taking another swig of his beer, he swallows and sighs, then turns those piercing
black eyes on me again. “So, you’re a bleeding heart, huh? Ghouls are human, Super Mutants
deserve voting rights, synths have feelings. The whole nine yards.”

I’m in a strange mood. Maybe it’s the drink. Lately I feel like Nero, fiddling while Rome burns, but
there’s also a little Jesus Christ thrown in for good measure. The ‘Wealth is fucked up beyond all
hope, sure, but why not help the poor and downtrodden where you can?

I can feel Hancock’s eyes on me, and I know his question holds more gravity than his joking tone
beliees. His gaze is a weight. I look away, down into the amber bourbon, and after a moment, my
English degree kicks in. Old World, I shan’t let you down. Your culture will carry on, if I have my
say.

“I don’t have much experience with Super Mutants,” I admit, idly nodding into my glass. “But I
know some ghouls, and I’ve heard a lot about these ‘synths’ and the shit they deal with from
wasteland bigots.” Hell, even some of my settlers hate synths. It doesn’t sit well with me, but fear
is what motivates them, what keeps them alive.

I lift my chin, close my eyes, raise my hand in supplication. “Hath not a synth eyes? Hath not a
synth hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with
the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed with the same means, warmed and cooled
by the same winter and summer, as a human is? If you prick them, do they not bleed? If you tickle
them, do they not laugh? If you poison them, do they not die?”

The bar’s gone quiet. The last of my words echo across the room, the acoustics well-suited for
carrying sound. Apparently my stage voice was a touch too loud. Goddamned straight bourbon.
Heat rushes to my face. Hancock’s black eyes haven’t left me for a moment; the weight’s getting
heavy. The silence stretches long, starts to get uncomfortable.

“‘And if you wrong them, shall they not revenge?’” A voice — pleasant, melodic, strong — breaks
the quiet. It’s the man in blue to my left. His rejoinder is enough to dispel the momentary
weirdness after my monologue, I guess, because after a second, the hum of conversation begins to
rise once more.

I turn, surprised. He’s gazing into his beer bottle, though, and I can’t read his expression — his
eyes are hidden behind a dark pair of sunglasses. He shrugs, largely ignoring me. “Shakespeare.
Gotta love him.” He takes a swallow of his Gwinnett Pale; it feels like a dismissal.

I’m impressed. I didn’t think the Bard had many fans these days.
“Gee, that was just beautiful.” The mayor’s low rasp, a hint of mockery and a hint of humor coloring its tone, brings me back to our discussion.

“Heh, sorry. I got carried away.” More bourbon. Burn away the shame. I lower my glass and Hancock leans in. He’s close enough that I can feel the heat from his textured cheek warming my own. A hot flush creeps up my neck again. When he speaks, his voice is low, almost husky, and he speaks for me alone.

“I liked your answer, sister. Dangerous opinions.” A shiver runs down my spine. The way he enunciates “dangerous,” drawing out the vowels… All my lingering post-pregnancy hormones are doing a real number on my psyche. I find myself wondering what will happen if he warms my hand with his own again, if his husky voice follows through with a quiet suggestion. My second glass of bourbon is almost empty, and it’s telling me that Nate wouldn’t want me to be lonely in this godforsaken hell-world. It’s the Apocalypse, for crying out loud. Nate’s gone. Shaun’s gone. Might as well take whatever small pleasures life has left to offer. With a deep breath, I ready myself for what comes next, heart pounding.

But he looks away, his hand fishing around behind his lapel once more. He pulls out a holotape and slides it across the dirty bartop with one finger. “Give this a listen. I know some people that could use a social justice warrior who knows her way around a gun.” He winks, giving a chuckle at my expression, and reaches over to tweak my chin with his thumb and forefinger.

“Well, it’s been fun, but the mantle of responsibility is getting heavy. Got important mayoral duties to attend to.” Hancock slides off the barstool and flourishes his red frock coat, tipping his tricorn hat with a nod. “I’ll make sure the Rexford’s got a room for you tonight, free of charge. Consider it a welcome gift.”

Still taken aback at the abrupt shift in events, I flounder for a response. My heart won’t stop its wild beating. “Th-thanks, Mayor, you’re... too kind.”

He smiles, his black eyes meeting my gaze, searching. “Don’t be a stranger, sister. You fit right in.” In a few moments he’s gone, disappeared up the worn staircase of the repurposed subway station.

You fit right in. Not sure if it’s a compliment, but I do feel comfortable here in Goodneighbor. Everyone’s a refugee or a criminal, but it’s still safe, somehow. Communal. Neighborly. I kind of like this place.

I down the last few drops of bourbon and push back from the bar. I really shouldn’t get into any more trouble tonight, and there’s a mattress calling my name over at the hotel. Never thought I’d be looking forward to cozying up in a smelly twin bed, complete with pokey springs and mysterious stains. Plus, I have a holotape to listen to.

I couldn’t help myself. The girl said all the right things, and quoted fucking Shakespeare while doing it. There’s a kind of warmth in me, and it’s not from the beer. Trusting your instincts is really paying off, man, I tell myself. More and more, it looks like I chose our heroine well. Gonna give myself a pat on the back. Maybe even two pats.

And who thought I’d end the night feeling grateful to Hancock, of all people? Yeah, I got worried there for a sec when he turned on the, uh, charm. The last thing this mission needs is for Wanderer to get wrapped up with the infamous mayor of Goodneighbor.
And, well, Wanderer and I… Whether she knows it or not, we’ve been through some shit together. Not ready to lose my bud to someone else — not just yet. Hell, we haven’t even met yet. Not really.

...Which reminds me. I don’t know if he recognized me or if it was just a fluke, but Hancock giving her that holotape is the luckiest thing that’s happened in a while. Cuts my work in half. I finish off my beer and throw a few caps on the counter for Charlie, pull my hat down, and stand to leave. I’ve got a room waiting at the Hotel Rexford myself, and I could use a good night’s sleep. I have a feeling I’ll be headed home sooner rather than later, and the Freedom Trail’s no walk through the park.
I Walk The Line [https://youtu.be/xObSJWIWui0]

Chapter Summary

The Sole Survivor makes a tough decision. The Freedom Trail is annoying to follow. And while escorting her, Deacon makes a small miscalculation that interrupts their stroll. Whoopsie.

Wake up, Commonwealth.

The woman’s words keep me up later than I would’ve liked.

They were created as slaves.

I lay on the mattress in the Rexford, a rogue spring jabbing into my kidney, for what feels like hours. Staring into the darkness above, nursing along a familiar feeling inside of me.

Thinking, feeling, and dreaming beings.

I’ve fought for the vulnerable before, back in another life. Condemned their oppressors. A feeling of cold anger expands in my chest, nestles in next to my heart, hardens. My old friend.

So join with us in fighting the real enemy — the Institute.

The Institute. The Confederate-minded bastards that stole away my love and my life. I realize the coldness is filling a void, that it’s taken up residence where Nate and Shaun used to live inside of me.

The purposelessness that gripped me after my journey to the Den slowly fades, replaced with something that should probably make me uneasy. Instead, I narrow my eyes in the black of the room and smile without joy.

Three decisions are made in the darkness.

I will give up Nate. I don’t have room to mourn him any longer. One last moment to savor the memory, to pretend it's not real — his devilish smile, the strength of his arms around me, awakening every morning to his face, scruffy and tousle-haired and peaceful — and let go. It's all gone. I might visit his frozen body in the Vault, but his eyes will never look into mine again, his lips will never part to smile and tease me.

I will set aside my blind quest for Shaun. For now, it’s enough that he’s safe, possibly even happy. What I need now is direction, purpose, and allies. And... I can’t shake the fear that he won’t want me, a stranger in blood-stained blue. I’ll face that fear, someday, but it’s a day far in the future. A day that will come to me after I earn it; after I become the kind of mother a son can be proud of.

I will show the Institute what it’s done to me. What it's made of me. I’ll bury their nose in it like a dog that’s shit on the rug. As they near the gallows, they’ll feel the wild regret of the man whose neck is no longer his own. In their last moment, they’ll know my truth. They'll feel it.

The enemy of my enemy is my friend; I’ll search out this “Railroad,” whatever or whomever they
might be, and they will help me. The voice of the woman on the holotape carries a hard note, an anger that harmonizes with my own warsong.

Besides, it’ll be like shooting two molerats with one bullet. Avenge my husband’s murder and my son’s motherless childhood, fight for equality, make a couple of new friends along the way. Plus, hey, maybe these Railroad folks have the recipe for a batch of insulin. Just like mom used to make.

*When you’re ready for that next step, don’t worry — we’ll find you.*

I’ve cried myself to sleep before, but this is the first time I’ve been lulled into dreamland by a sweet sort of rage.

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I’m not a superstitious person, per se, but I’m starting to get nervous.

Everything’s gone perfectly so far. The tourists picked up the instructions from the dead drop I stashed in a particularly filthy steel drum, and Wanderer just so happened to walk by as they loudly discussed the Freedom Trail. Predictably, she slowed to listen. We’ll have to work on her subtlety as soon as she officially joins our humble ranks.

Which is happening *really* friggin’ soon.

I just can’t shake the feeling that something’s about to go haywire. I’ve popped a Stealth Boy and cleared a path for her through to the Common. She still hasn’t experienced the joy of dealing with Super Mutants, and I won’t risk one of those Jolly Green Giant-looking assholes messing this up for me. Us. Her. Messing it up for her. Us?

Man, I can’t even think straight right now. I feel like a kid on Christmas Eve.

The Trail’s designed as a sort of litmus test. If you survive the ungodly horrors along the way, it means you’ve got the smarts or the strength — and the devotion — to interview with Dez and whoever else happens to be at HQ that day. And that test starts with a real bitch of an essay question by Swan's Pond, all about what happens when you supercharge FEV and inject it into your common, everyday thug.

So here I am, hunkered down in a nice shadow, Stealth Boy humming happily, rifle at the ready, and yeah, even some Psycho and Jet handy. I hate taking chems, but there’s too much riding on this little stroll to risk goofing it up. If Swan so much as yawns, I’m positioned to take a good clean headshot or ten.

For once, though, Wanderer’s picking her way through the garbage heap of downtown Boston without attracting too much attention. Something’s different today. She’s angry. I mean, you know, angrier than usual. Her knuckles are white around the grip of her 10mm, her frown set in plaster. She’s a woman with a mission, it would seem.

Here’s hoping that mission isn’t to blow HQ into a smoking pile of rubble. Been there, done that...

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I never did the Freedom Trail circuit in my old life. I wasn’t into that gimmicky tourist crap, truth be told, and I’m not a fan of American history. The colonists were all a bunch of slave-owning assholes. And now I’m kicking myself, because meandering along toward God-knows-where
following a smudged red line through the charred mess of Boston is pretty much the worst.

In some places, the stupid line disappears under a fallen concrete block, forcing me to hunt around corners and kick debris out of my way to find it again. In others, the original line is gone, and someone’s kept the trail up with what looks like long smears of blood.

And there are a fuckton of things to kill along the way.

Feral ghouls keep crawling out of old buses to tear at me wildly. Begoggled Raiders in their dirty longjohns seem to lurk around every corner. And up ahead, it would seem that the trail is leading me straight into the territory of what are probably Super Mutants, if the hanging bags of bloody flesh are any indication.

I’ve never been patient, and the cold rage of midnight has been slowly melting away with the daylight. The longer I follow this trail, the more obstacles I face, and the longer it takes me to reach the Railroad. I have a plan, goddamn it — I want to put it in motion now.

Super Mutants. Hmph. I’m past the point of caring. My guess is they’re just slightly more sadistic Raiders, or bigger feral ghouls, or something. With VATS on my side, nothing I’ve faced in the ‘Wealth so far has been so difficult that I haven’t won. Not even Kellogg.

I follow the red line loyally, eyes on the pavement. Headed for Faneuil Hall. They used to sell slaves here, long ago. I eye it angrily. If I were strong enough to lug around that missile launcher Kleo was selling back in Goodneighbor, maybe I’d want to take a shot or two. I really need to get this sour mood out of my system. Were I back in the Old World, I’d take a couple weak (yet satisfying) swings at Nate’s punching bag. Gotta work with what you have on hand, you know?

There are fires burning ahead, but it looks deserted. Just my luck — I’m finally looking for trouble and I can’t even find any. A few corpses litter the ground. Raiders. No big loss. I swipe a kick at one, feeling petty.

The blood bags are everywhere, but nobody’s home. No Super Mutant exhibit for me today, I guess —

Out of the blue, a... trumpet sounds? Great. I come looking for a fight and I get the marching band instead.

I hear the slap of footpads on cobblestone. Heavy, moist breathing. Everything happens too quickly for me to register; before I can bring up my Pip-Boy and activate VATS, a humongous, heavily-muscled dog is on top of me, latched onto my left arm. It’s like a hundred insulin syringes stabbing into the soft skin of my forearm all at once. This thing is strong as hell! I’m careening off balance. I go down.

My skull knocks against the ground once, hard. Lights pierce my swimming vision. The relentless tug of needles on my arm slackens and ceases. The dog-thing’s realized my delicious brains are within nibbling distance, I guess, because the last thing I see before swinging up my 10mm is a slavering green maw that soon explodes into a very red mess.

Fuck. I can’t move my left arm to check my Pip-Boy; I have no idea what the health scanner will say. I need a fucking Stimpak. You idiot. You stupid, pathetic fool. My inner monologue is scathing. I was overconfident. Now I might die.

I raise myself up on my good arm, still brandishing my gun. I have to twist and reach my pack; I need to get a Stimpak in me, and fast. But as I rise off the pavement, I hear more sound. More
footsteps, heavier now, and a guttural roar. They appear in a pack, huge men, all muscle and sinew and loincloth, bursting from the darkness around the corner of Faneuil Hall. Sickly olive-colored skin glows orange from the flames, and their great lumbering mass is all that keeps them at a distance for now.

One hangs back a moment, hefting something heavy onto his shoulder. A missile launcher.

Laying in a crumpled heap on the stone stairs, I may as well have a bright red bullseye painted on my chest. The other two continue to run, one brandishing a splintering hunk of wood, the other —

At first he seems to be unarmed, but there’s something in his hand. I can’t quite make it out. It’s small, flashing red, like the hazard lights on a car. Like an ambulance siren. Nearer and nearer he plods. I’m struggling to sight any of them with my gun, but my body’s going into shock; my good arm is shaking badly. Even if I had any skill with a gun outside of VATS, I would have an icicle’s chance in hell of coming out of this alive.

There’s a soft beeping noise. It slowly crescendos. What the hell —? A growing horror overtakes me. Slowly I become aware that it’s coming from the mutant’s palm. That there’s a… a miniature nuclear warhead clasped in his meaty fist. That this monster is about to kamikaze himself into oblivion to rid the world of one human woman.

The last time I fainted was during my labor with Shaun. This time is much the same. I’m just as thankful when the blackness hits.

Don’t ever let your guard down. When you do, inevitably, that’s when everything goes to hell.

I hear the grunting roars behind me and immediately know I’ve screwed up royally. I thought I cleared this area already — all I found around Faneuil Hall were a few Raiders, easy enough to pick off and move on. But the Mutants must have retained a few firing neurons, because it sounds like they’ve orchestrated an ambush. Who knew those overgrown cans of pea soup could grasp the concept of guerilla warfare?

I’m running back, leaping over obstacles and loading my rifle as I go. (What can I say? Multi-tasking is one skill I didn’t lie about on my resume.) The fires outside of the Hall are within sight now and I aim as I run, sighting the skull of the Mutant with the missile launcher. Then I hear it.

It’s the most chilling sound in the ‘Wealth, because you just know these guys don’t value the sanctity of life. When a Super Mutant Suicider is coming your way, you either run like hell, or you trust your aim like you’ve never trusted anything before.

Wanderer and I, we’re gonna have to trust my aim today.

I skid to a stop. My Stealth Boy’s petered out; I’m as exposed as a Raider chick in a battle harness. I can’t worry that Wanderer will see me at this point; my cover only matters for another hour, at best. After two years and change, I’ll take that over the alternative any day.

The Suicider is about halfway across the square. They never run very fast. I wonder if, somewhere deep in their atrophied brain muscles, they’re reluctant to die.

With all three Mutants packed so close together, I have a rare chance. I can see Wanderer, limp on the steps, shielded somewhat by the rise of the walls around her. Time to put my faith in the only thing that’s never betrayed me.
I aim at the mini-nuke. The pulsating red glow is centered in my crosshairs. *Deep breath, Deacon.* I squeeze the trigger.

The square erupts in a deafening explosion. Air rushes past my face, whipping pieces of stone and wood against my cheeks. I grit my teeth and hunch against the blast, tense, unsure of what will be left to me once the smoke dissipates.

Wet *plops* begin to hit the cobblestone around me. Pieces of Super Mutant. The square is now devoid of life and light, the fires swallowed by the explosion and dampened by the resultant vacuum.

With nothing left to kill, I find myself running to the stairs, cover be damned. *Please be okay.* We’re so close to the start of everything, Wanderer and I. It can’t end like this, before it’s even begun.

We were gonna be pals.

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All I hear is the beeping. Late. Am I late? Do I need to wake up now?

Waking seems like a lot of work. The blackness is soft and cozy. I want to stay in it, hold it close, fold it around me like a blanket. But that *beeping.* It just won’t stop.

---

*Ugh.* That arm is hard to look at. Remind me to avoid the big, green, muscle-y puppies the next time I’m at the pound.

Kneeling beside Wanderer, I go to check her pulse. A hair’s breadth above her jugular I stop, hesitating; I’ve never actually touched her before. It almost feels like I’m breaking some unwritten rule. But she’s laying here, eyes closed, and I have to know. I just have to know.

Two fingers press softly against the warmth of her neck. Slow but strong, I feel the blood course beneath her skin. That’s a good start.

The arm’s the worst of her injuries, from what I can tell; I think it’s stress that sent her over the edge. It’s nothing a good Stimpak or two won’t fix. I fish one from my pack, uncap it, and plunge the needle into her shoulder. Within seconds, the flow of bright red blood slows and then ceases, congealing and clotting. Now, to wait.

As usual, I’m playing lookout. I settle back against the wall, legs crossed in front of me, a decent view both ahead of and behind us. We’re exposed out here, but at least it’ll be hard for anyone to sneak up on us, bottlenecked and barricaded as we are on the staircase. Wanderer’s breathing is strong and steady, and the torn skin of her forearm is already looking less ragged. Sometimes I think Stimpaks are the only reason humanity’s made it this long.

Ash from the explosion streaks her face, which, hey, if I’m being honest, is a hot mess. Blood splatters dot her cheeks like a Jackson Pollock original. There’s a chunk of hair tangled in her open mouth, strands gently floating upward with every exhale, and a tiny bead of drool escaping the corner of her lips. I smile, shaking my head. *Dez is going to love me for bringing this stray home.* Our new attack dog has a few tricks to learn.
All’s quiet in the square; once she’s closer to recovered, I’ll flip on a Stealth Boy and we’ll trek the last stretch of the Trail together. For now, Wanderer’s sleeping like a baby. I know we just had a pretty close call, but it’s sort of nice, seeing her so peaceful. This close, I can see the very faint frown lines already forming on her brow. Reaching over, I tug the lock of hair out of her mouth — looks uncomfortable — and as I do, the lines deepen imperceptibly. Something that sounds halfway between a groan and a cat’s mewling escapes her lips, and she begins to stir.

The darkness is less velvety, less warm. Where it was soft and comfortable before, now it aches. I don’t like it. I want the nice darkness back.

I struggle to keep my eyes closed, to hold onto unconsciousness, but my lids flutter, uncaring. There’s light — it’s too bright — and I can sense... someone. Ragged pieces of thought and memory float across my awareness. A red line. A green dog. Beeping.

My eyes fly open. *The Super Mutants*. They have me. They’re preparing me. I’m about to end up in one of those blood bags. *And I can’t find my gun*. My fingers stretch and wiggle and meet only air.

The someone nearby begins to resolve into an abstract face, but it’s not green. I relax slightly. Blurry. Dark hair. Strong jaw. *Nate*?

“Uhh, nope. Not Nate.” *Did I say that out loud?* “God here, actually.” I can’t place the voice, but I could swear I know it, somehow. At least it sounds friendlier than your typical Raider.

“And as God, I command you to go back to sleep.” I can feel myself frown. “Hey, no complaining. I can smite you, you know.”

I’m so tired. And I have no idea what’s going on. Sleep does sound nice… I miss the quiet dark.

All right. Sleep. Sleep it is.

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*Oh man, she’s going to be so much fun to lie to.* I’m already racking up a list of outrageous ideas. I wonder how much she’ll fall for. It’s always nice to have some personal goals, you know? Reach for the stars and stuff.

She’s close to conscious now. I fold back the canvas top of the Stealth Boy, hit the switch, and cease to exist. *Ahh, that’s the stuff.*

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When I come to, I feel… great. I don’t know what happened. Maybe I went into a blind, homicidal rage? There were definitely pieces of green flesh scattered all around the square outside the Hall. It wouldn’t be the strangest thing that’s happened in the ‘Wealth so far. I’ll take my luck and run with it, I guess; at least I’m alive.

And I’ve learned my goddamn lesson about Super Mutants.

The next stretch of the Trail is uneventful. Winding through alleyways strewn with piles of ash and
industrial clutter, I lose it a few times and have to backtrack, but I don’t run into so much as a Bloatfly.

I’m off in la-la land when suddenly there’s no more red line to follow. Oh, hell. Have I lost it again? This is definitely the most irritating and terrifying scavenger hunt I’ve ever been on.

But this time it’s different. Up ahead is an old church building, and there, to the right of the doorway — “At journey’s end, follow freedom’s lantern.” A rough outline of a lantern in white paint adorns the old brick.

My eyes widen. I actually clap. Grinning like an idiot, I jaunt to the doorway. I’m here. This is the beginning of everything; this is where I’ll find my purpose. Where, hopefully, I’ll find my allies. And, hopefully, they’re good with guns.

This is it.

Wanderer’s capable; she can handle a few ferals in the catacombs. It’s time. I can hardly believe it. Feels like I’m moving through a dream — this day has been years in the making.

I head to the back entrance. Boy, is everyone going to be surprised to see us.
Chapter Summary

Our Sole Survivor has finally reached the Old North Church. Railroad-joining negotiations have begun!

*Includes a good deal of real dialogue from the game, because it felt unavoidable... but with added nuance. >:)

Why do ferals always carry teddy bears and baby rattles and wooden blocks? It’s so sad. Their wasted bodies litter the path behind me. It’s eerie down here, dark and glowing softly green, the tunnels echoing back even the smallest sounds.

I’ve reached what seems to be the end. There’s a bronze plaque set in the brick wall before me, and another lantern in white paint on the ground. This is definitely the right place, but I have no idea what to do next.

Typical. I survive a suicide bombing only to be bested by a wall.

It looks like there are wires leading from the plaque to a place behind the brick. My advanced sleuthing skills tell me that this just may be a false door. In stately capital letters, the plaque reads “BOSTON - THE FREEDOM TRAIL,” and there’s an arrow in the center. It almost looks like… a button. In a flash of insight, I press my palm against it. The arrow depresses slightly, but nothing happens.

Hm.

I press it again. Nothing.

Strangely, the arrow’s tipped with a bit of red, and — something niggles at the back of my memory — where have I seen this before?

The plaques along the trail. They were all scribbled with some sort of graffiti. The work of vandals with no respect for history, I’d assumed. Wrongly.

It hits me. I am going to have to walk the Trail all over again. I press my hands to my temples and slide them down my cheeks, mouth open, eyes rolled back in self-loathing. I groan loudly, and it echoes down the tunnel. Mocking me.

For a few silent minutes I stare at the plaque, angry and unbelieving.

I really don’t want to walk the fucking Trail again.

Maybe I can guess the password. Like on a terminal in college. I used to be decently good at hacking into things. I rub my hands together, now relishing the challenge.


With excruciating precision, I spin the outer ring to match the arrow against each letter, depressing
Hollow clicks ring out with every try. As I hit the “D,” a low grinding sounds.

_Holy shit. It’s actually “Railroad.” Someone needs to teach these folks a lesson about cybersecurity._

I rub my sweaty palms on my jeans. Slipping in the back way was as easy as ever. That asshole Carrington didn’t even give me shit for how long I’ve been MIA. In fact, everyone left me pretty much alone. Am I turning into some kind of B-Lister around here? So anyway, here I am, back to the brick, waiting to make my grand entrance. _Poor rookie Wanderer. Dez and Glory together at once is definitely the big leagues._ Drummer Boy’s out there too, by the look of things, but he’s… not very intimidating.

_Sounds like Dez has turned on the charm. I swallow the lump of doubt that’s formed in my throat and run a hand through my pompadour. Time for me to meet my Wanderer._

The false door opens, light pouring through. After the relative black of the catacombs, I’m blinded, and I step through the entrance slowly, hand shielding my eyes.

_Blinking, I see three people silhouetted in the white glare. A woman, dark-skinned and lovely, with angry eyes and a minigun aimed at my chest. A young man in a padded blue jacket and a newsboy cap, his face youthful and pleasant, his pistol tiny and pointed at my head. And front and center, exuding an undeniable aura of authority, a straight-backed redhead, evaluating me with a hard gaze._

_“Stop right there.” _

The minigun sways menacingly. I stop.

_“You went through a lot of effort to get here. But before we go any further, answer my questions. Who the hell are you?” _

Do I want to reveal myself yet? Hell, I don’t know if these people are impostors. If they are, the wrong answer could be my death sentence. “Why don’t you tell me who you are, first?” My voice sounds small and weak in the echoing chamber. 200-plus years outside of a courtroom and I’m getting rusty.

After a moment’s consideration, the woman gives a grudging nod. Guess I’m convincing enough. “In a world full of suspicion, threats, and hunters — we’re the synths’ only friends. We’re the Railroad. So answer my question.”

She sounds sincere, and her voice matches the woman on the holotape. Plus, I want to be friends.

_“I followed the Freedom Trail looking for you. I’m not your enemy.” _

_“If that’s true, you have nothing to fear.” _She eyes me levelly. “Who told you how to contact us?”

Behind them, a man turns the corner, sauntering up behind the group. _Great. Someone new to point_
a gun at me. I keep one eye on the newcomer as I reply. “Mayor Hancock, in Goodneighbor. He
gave me your holotape, told me I might be of use to you.” I flush slightly.

The redhead nods approvingly. “Hancock’s a valuable ally, if somewhat lacking in discretion.
We’ll check into that. In the meantime, I’m Desdemona, and I’m the leader of the Railroad. And
you are…?”

The newcomer has sidled up beside her and she finally takes notice, eyes widening and morphing
into a glare. “Deacon! Where’ve you been?” Her tone is accusing, sharp. Like everyone else in the
chamber, I turn my attention to this “Deacon.”

The man actually looks kind of… cool. Dark hair in a pompadour style, t-shirt and jeans,
sunglasses. He’s really rocking the greaser look. He plants his hands on his hips. “You’re having a
party. What gives with my invitation?” Great. I’m so glad he’s joking while the business end of a
minigun is pointed right at me.

Desdemona ignores him. “I need intel. Who is this?”

His eyebrows raise. “Wo-o-ow. News flash, boss, this lady is kind of a big deal out there.” He turns
those dark sunglasses on me. “You’re the one rebuilding the Minutemen out of Sanctuary, right?”

A “big deal?” I’m pretty sure the Commonwealth has better things to do than keep tabs on one
clumsy outside-of-time ex-prosecutor. And how does he know about Sanctuary? It’s so far away.
And empty. I purse my lips. “Sounds like I have a stalker.”

Deacon shakes his head, raising his hands in protest. “It’s not like that. A lot of people know about
you. I mean, the Railroad alone owes you a crate, hell a truckload, of Nuka-Cola for what you did
to Kellogg. He was our public enemy number one.” He’s got a point — I do deserve a pat on the
back for turning Kellogg’s face inside-out. I’ll pass on the prize, though. My sugar levels feel
shitty enough as it is.

Desdemona looks at him sharply. “So… you’re vouching for her?” Is he? My heart leaps; this
fellow — Deacon — he’s making this easier on me for some reason. And he doesn’t even know
me. He looks like a soda shop-bumming slacker, but it seems he carries some status around here.
Whoever he is, wherewith he’s helping me, I won’t push my luck. Down at my side, my fingers
cross.

He’s still looking at me as he answers. “Yes.” He tears away to continue. “Trust me. She’s
someone we want on our side.”

Something about him is so familiar. I can’t place it.

“That changes things.” Desdemona sounds thoughtful. She turns back to me. “So, stranger, why did
you want to meet with us, anyway?”

This is the hard part. You need to trust these people, I tell myself. Reluctance colors my voice as I
reply. “My son, Shaun. He was kidnapped.” Should I mention Nate?

No. I gave him up. He’s got to stay buried. “I’m looking for help to find him.”

The redhead’s eyes widen and a note of actual concern enters her voice. She’s warmed up
considerably, now that Deacon’s spoken on my behalf. “Someone stole your boy? That’s terrible.
Do you know who did it? For your sake, I hope the Institute isn’t involved.”

Great. Just what I want to hear.“Actually, he was taken by Kellogg. I’ve got a pretty strong
suspicion that Shaun’s with the Institute.”
She closes her eyes for a long moment. It’s kind of sweet; she seems so empathetic all of a sudden. I wonder if she’s gone through her own brand of hell, lost her own babe to this burned-out shell of a world. She exhales slowly, troubled. “I’ll have Deacon look into this. If anyone can find a lead on your boy, he can.”

An offer of assistance so soon? It catches me off guard. I meet Deacon’s eye; he gives me a half-smile and a thumbs up. My lips twist as I fight to hide a smile of my own. Not quite right for the gravity of the conversation, but his demeanor is infectious.

“If we’re going to be dealing with you, I need to make sure we’re on the same page. You know what a synth is, right?”

Briefly, I consider rehashing my Merchant of Venice adaptation, then decide against it. Play to the crowd. “Yes.” Synths are one of the few things I’m fairly well-versed on, mostly because nobody in the ‘Wealth can stop fucking talking about them.

“All right, then.” She meets my eyes squarely. She’s a handsome woman, slender and graceful. I feel ungainly in her presence, especially with so many eyes on me; it’s an effort to maintain eye contact while she speaks. “I have a question. The only question that matters.” I brace myself. “Would you risk your life for your fellow man? Even if that man is a synth?”

At least this one’s a gimme. Last week I saved a wounded mongrel from a (stunted, admittedly) Yao Guai. “I risk my life for people every day. Makes no difference to me if they’re a human or a synth.” Or a dog, or a robot, or a ghoul...

Desdemona nods. I’ve said the right thing. “We’ll do what we can to look into your missing boy. What the Institute has done to your family, and others, is what drives us. Normally, you’re exactly the type of person we try and recruit. But right now we don’t have the time to train up a new agent. There are, however, other valuable ways for you to contribute.

“And in turn, we can help you. See Deacon for details. You’re free to go.” Business concluded, she turns and disappears down the brick hallway behind her. The lovely woman and the young man have at least put away their weapons, but they’re still standing there, staring (glaring?) at me wordlessly. My gaze flicks from one to the other, uncertain. I’m feeling a little nervy. The woman looked really eager to fire up that minigun.

Deacon’s off to the side, framed by the light of an overly bright construction lamp, swinging his arms. Stifling a sigh, I move toward him. I have no idea what to expect. I’m really winging this one — the Railroad’s not the circle of hand-holding, flower-adorned free spirits I was expecting.

Her lower lip is torn from her rumble with the Mutants; she’s been worrying it, because a drop of bright red blood wells up. I find myself reaching for the bandana in my back pocket and stop. You gotta watch yourself, Deacon. She doesn’t know you like you know her. I can already tell this is going to be the role that wins me the Oscar.

She fidgets a little. She doesn’t know what to say. It’s okay, pal. I’ll make this easier on you than Dez did.

“Hope you didn’t mind the reception. When you tango with the Institute, you got to be careful when someone new gets on the dance floor.”

She meets my eyes (or my glasses, I guess). “It’s all right. Your leader was just being cautious.”
“Yeah. Kind of killed our chance at a friendly first impression though.” I sigh. “But it’s all good now. I vouched for you. Nobody got shot. Still, I would consider it a close personal favor if you didn’t sell us out to the Institute. Thanks.”

She starts, and it dawns on me that maybe she didn’t actually believe Glory was ready to shoot her. Whoopsie.

The blood on her lip has reached capacity, starts to spill over. “Oh, oh, hey, you’ve got a little —” I whip out the bandana and press it towards her, stopping just shy of her skin. She winces — does she think I’m going to hit her? — and doesn’t move. Well, this is awkward.

He presses the blue cloth to my lip and holds it there a moment. I’d chewed the hell out of it in my anxiety fog over the last half hour, not feeling the sting. After my somewhat hostile, somewhat apathetic introduction, the gentleness of his gesture is almost… startling. My hand replaces his; I pull back the cloth and see a dark stain. “Shit.” Real eloquent. Inwardly I kick myself. “Thanks. Getting here wasn’t quite a walk in the park.”

Dark hair, strong jaw. I catch myself staring at him. He’s got a similar look to… to my Nate. Is that why he seems so familiar? I force myself back to the present, dabbing at my wound. I don’t know why he’s being so fucking kind to me. “So, why did you vouch for me?”

He gestures casually. “In our little outfit, it’s my job to know things. And with everything you’ve done, it’s clear you’re capable. A dangerous enemy. And, I’m betting, a valuable ally.”

My awkwardness has been shoved out of the way by my curiosity. “But why the trust? You can’t be taking it all on faith.” Nobody takes shit on faith in the ‘Wealth, I know that much. “I don’t know if we can trust you. But I hope we can. We just survived a hell of a crisis. So we may just be a teeny, weeny bit desperate for new members.” Deacon shrugs. “If everything was sunshine and bottle caps, we’d probably play a longer ‘getting to know you’ game. But we don’t have that luxury.”

I tilt my head to the side. I can’t see behind those dark sunglasses, but I gaze into them with what I hope is a knowing stare. “Really? Is that all?”

He chuckles and runs a hand through his hair. Inside, I feel smug; I’m winning this game of chicken. I still got it. “You just don’t give up? All right, I have a short list of people I think would be a good fit for our family. You piqued my interest, so maybe I asked around. Did my homework. If you hadn’t found us, there’s a chance I would’ve found you, instead.” He flashes me a smile. “Thanks for saving me the trip.”

It’s beyond weird to realize that someone’s been thinking of me this whole time. I’m not sure whether to be flattered or concerned. But Deacon seems genuinely nice, if his humor is a little dry. I look up into his sunglasses and return his grin — a real smile, with teeth and everything.

Not three minutes into our first lucid conversation and she’s already got me telling the truth. This isn’t good.
I don’t know if it’s the signature frown that she’s turned on me or the rare smile that came out of nowhere, but for the first time in forever I’ve got the urge to be honest. And that, my friends, is dangerous.

“So Dez wants me to make you a ‘tourist.’ That’s what we call someone who helps out with the odd job here and there.” I shake my head. “What a waste.”

She’s looking at me so damn earnestly. I swear her black eyes find mine, even hidden behind dark glasses in this hole of a hideout. Her voice sounds stronger than when she was chatting with Dez. Guess I’m not as soul-crushingly serious. “You sure you need me? Desdemona didn’t seem to care.”

*Ha. Oh, Wanderer. Being sure we need you has been my chief career goal.* “She’s just thinking of the time and manpower it would take to train you up. And if you were some hick from the ‘burbs that didn’t know your ass from a rocket launcher, she’d be right. But I’m betting someone like you just needs a few pointers and a target.”

She smiles again. Damn. I’ve been alone and undercover for *way* too long. They may be both caked in dirt and grime, but molerats just don’t have the same charm as a lady. “Listen. I got a job. Too big for me. Just perfect for the two of us. You help me out, we turn a few heads, and then Dez invites you into the fold. Then, if you get into a bind and need help, your buddies in the Railroad got your back.”

She’s quiet, thinking it over. A film of dust from the catacombs covers her hair, and she’s got a cobweb tangled on her left shoulder. I find myself fighting the urge to reach out and brush it away. She’s been my pet project for so long now; it’s going to be a real bitch to keep up the charade. My brain knows to lie. My arms, not so much. “What’s the job?”

“So up front, the only thing I’ll say is it’s going to be a wild and dangerous ride. But probably nothing new for someone like you.” Hey, a dash of flattery can get you everywhere.

Wanderer swings a hand up and slaps her blue-clad thigh decisively. “Wild and dangerous. Uh-huh. Sign me up, then.”

*Aw. Such a delightful protégé.* “Perfecto. Let’s meet up at the old freeway outside Lexington. I’ll fill you in once you get there.”

I hesitate. We’ve only just met, but... I *like* Deacon. He’s so friendly, he stuck up for me, and he’s concocted an entire plan to move me up in the ranks here. Plus... *If anyone can find a lead on your boy, he can.* Deacon might be the key to giving my blind quest some vision.

And, for the love of God, I want a *friend.* Not a father figure, like Nick, or a tiring chatterbox like Piper, or a painfully noble martyr like Preston. A real friend, like I had in the Old World. Before I was a mother, before I was a lawyer, before I was married.

Once I realize that, some small dam cracks inside me. It’s been so long since I’ve had someone to talk to, to joke with, to be easy around. And Deacon... he’s just so damn familiar. I still can’t place it, but for now it’s enough that he’s here, that he’s managed to make me smile three times now when all I’ve wanted to do since defrosting was scowl.

He’s heading back into the hallway beyond the platform, but I reach out, fingers catching the crook of his elbow.
“We-e-ell… Are you busy now? I’d rather travel together, if you don’t mind.” My voice sounds small again. I can feel a little crackle in my throat. Dear God. Don’t start weeping just because one person in this bizarro world wants to hang out with you. He’s staring at my hand gripping his elbow. The seconds tick by. Say something!

“I think I’m going a little crazy out there alone. It’d be nice to have someone to talk to besides, uh, myself.” Smooth, idiot. “And I just had a scrape with some Super Mutants. It’s not that I’m scared, exactly, but…”

Miraculously, he lifts his gaze and nods. “Yeah, hey, great idea, actually. Two guns are always better than one, right?” My hand has definitely been there too long. Hastily I pull it back. “Let me grab my pack and we’ll get this party started.”

Relief flows through me, dampening my anxiety. He turns away and I allow a tiny smile, quickly composing myself when I see that the woman with the minigun is still eyeing me coldly.

But I can’t push down the feeling entirely. A bubble of excitement has floated up from some dark puddle inside me, and my mouth twitches, eager to curve. It’s been a long time since I’ve looked forward to something.
Chapter Summary

Easing into their new partnership has been remarkably painless for these two loners. After wreaking havoc at the Switchboard, Deacon and Wanderer take a quick detour to Sanctuary before heading back to face Desdemona’s final judgement.

“You, my friend, are not stealthy.”

It’s all quiet now, synths and shrapnel littering the ground outside. Daylight has just begun to tinge the edges of the horizon with a soft glow, the interior of the old doughnut shop dark with the velvet blue of new morning. We lounge, battle-weary and exhausted, in one of the vinyl-and-formica booths. I don’t know if Deacon can make out my impassive expression, but shadows play around the quirk of his mouth. Smartass.

“Hey, I tried. It’s not my fault synths have bionic hearing or whatever.”

He chuckles. “You know Gen 1s are basically glorified toasters, right? And just FYI, frag mines don’t have ears.”

I drop my forehead to my arm resting on the tabletop, hating the memory. “I know. Thanks for that, by the way.”

“No problemo. Always happy to risk life and limb to shove a brand-new acquaintance off an explosive device.”

That makes me groan. “The Railroad isn’t going to want a rookie like me.” I only half believe it, but everything rides on Desdemona’s approval. And I sure bumbled through this mission.

“Nah, we definitely want you.”

It could be the air still chill from the night, but something in his voice makes me shiver. He holds on to emphasis, drawing it out slowly and softly, shaping his meaning. Outrageously, my cheeks burn, and I’m thankful for the still-dark morning.

“If you say so.” My gaze lingers on the wan light taking over the sky. “What’s next?”

“Back to HQ for your second round of interviews,” he says. “No rush, though. We can rest here a while longer. You know, chit-chat, maybe have brunch. I’ll share my Fancy Lads if you’ll get the mimosas.”

“Brunch.” I huff out a laugh as he tosses a box of the snack cakes on the table between us. Actually, all the excitement has awakened my appetite. I pry a cake from its plastic mold and take a bite. Chocolatey. “I don’t know how these can taste exactly the same 200 years later. If marketing departments still existed, the creatives would have a field day with this angle.”

Finished with the cake, I reach for my pack, shifting Carrington’s prototype out of the way in search of my insulin pouch. This part is always so uncomfortable. Between the stares and the naive questions, I’d almost rather skip the shot all together. It hasn’t been a problem so far in the
‘Wealth; I’ve been more or less alone, and I’m good at clandestine injections. But now I realize Deacon’s never actually seen me shoot up, and the old dread creeps back in.

“Oh, fuck.”

Judgements be damned, I hold my insulin bottle up to what light there is, squinting. A lonely drop slides down the glass to puddle in the bottleneck.

“No rush, you said.” I meet Deacon’s questioning gaze. “Do we have time for a detour?”

I roll the now-empty vial between my palms. Insulin. A part of me is relieved that Wanderer doesn’t have a nasty Med-X habit after all, but now there’s a new dilemma. What do you do when your knight in shining armor will shrivel up and die without a medicine that hasn’t been produced for over two centuries?

This marks the first time in my life I’ve ever looked forward to a chat with Carrington.

Sanctuary’s nestled in the safest part of the ‘Wealth, up north where the biggest threats are molerats and bloatflies. Still, walking along this dusty highway as though we don’t have a care in the world and the Institute’s not lurking behind every boulder… Not really my jam.

“What’s wrong?”

Oh, yeah. I guess I sort of let the conversation lapse. I exhale. “All this sunlight. I just feel exposed.”

Wanderer swipes a playful punch at my arm. “Aw, don’t worry, kiddo. I’m here to protect you, remember?”

“Well, you are my favorite meat shield. Heh.” She scrunches her nose at me. The weirdest thing about this new partnership — apart from the obvious — is how we’ve clicked. I wonder how lonely the past few months must have been for her, to suddenly blossom into the talkative creature that walks beside me.

“Who are you calling kiddo? I’m old enough to be your dad…’s cool bachelor friend who lives in a swingin’ pad and plays drums in a cover band on the weekends.”

“Deacon, I was born in 2048.”

“That’s right. Need me to whittle you a cane, Grandma?”

She laughs and my heart swells. Nobody laughs anymore, not really. And when they do, it’s because they’ve cheated you out of caps, they’re feeling particularly bitter, or they’re plotting your untimely demise. Her laugh is a belly laugh, a good, hearty sound that she’s brought with her from the past.

“It must have been something, living back then.” The road stretches on and on; it’ll be a while yet before we hit Sanctuary. The sun’s warm but not hot, and there’s a breeze; all told, it’s a pretty pleasant stroll. “I’m a sucker for whatever Old World books I can find.”

Wanderer kicks a pebble out of her way; it skitters across the concrete. “Want me to tell you some stories? I have insider information, you know.”
“That would be frickin’ awesome.”

She glances at me, the remnant of a smile playing on her lips, and checks the map on her Pip-Boy. My own sense of direction tells me we’re headed due south of Sanctuary, but hell, Wanderer needs to master a few lessons on her own. Besides, in a rare stroke of luck, we’ve got time to kill. Might be our first and last chance to get acquainted before shit hits the proverbial fan.

“Okay, here we go. Stop me if any of this is old news to you, all right? We used to have this thing, ‘delivery.’ It’s where you could call up a restaurant, place an order, and you’d have a pizza at your door in under thirty. It’s what got me through college—”

“What’s a pizza?”

Her eyes widen. In the bright light of afternoon I can see that they’re not truly black, but a deep, rich brown. “Oh, my God. Pizza. It’s this… how can I describe it? Round disc of crust, piled with cheese and tomato sauce—"

"You mean tato sauce."

"No, I mean tomato sauce. You can add whatever toppings you like. I was always fond of jalapenos and pineapple, myself—”

“What in God’s name is a pineapple?”

She slaps her forehead as I grin. Messing with her is too easy. “Hoo boy. We’re going to have to start with the basics. In the beginning, there were the heavens and the earth…”

As we crest the hill, I can see tall red silos in the distance. My stomach drops.

“Well, fuck. Deacon, I may have gotten us a little lost.” I feel guilty until I look at his expression. The cad has a shit-eating grin pasted on his face. “You knew!” I stare at him accusingly, but I can’t stop the twist of my lips. His smile grows wider.

“Lesson number thirty-two: never rely on a single source of information alone.” He gestures to my Pip-Boy and I hold out my arm grudgingly. Calloused fingers grasp my wrist lightly as his finger traces a line on the lime-green display. “You assumed we were farther north because of this highway here, but you got to take the landscape cues into account, too. See this dark spot? That’s the pond we should have turned right at around, oh, maybe two hours ago…”

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"Lesson number thirty-three: don’t trust me. Or anyone else, for that matter."

“All right. No use crying over spilt milk. So what now? It’s almost dark and we’ve been walking all day.”

“Let’s keep going. There may be shelter up ahead. I don’t know about you, but I’m beat. And I just have to know what happens next with Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy.” He hesitates, catching my gaze over the top of his sunglasses. “Will you be okay for another night?”

“Yes. Thanks. I won’t be dying any time soon; a diabetic’s doom is a long, nauseous, thirsty affair.” I pat the pack slung over my shoulder. “Besides, I’ve got some carrots and Salisbury Steak
to tide me over. No carbs.”

A shadow of discomfort passes over his features, almost immediately replaced with that now-familiar half-smile. “Right. Don’t worry, pal; I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve. We’ll figure this one out.” I nod. “Oh, and keep your gun ready. Any place that has an intact roof is bound to have some sort of unsavory element taking up residence.”

“You got it, my man.”

It’s a steep climb to the top of the hill, but as the ground levels out, we’re greeted by a sprawling, overgrown acre of farmland. In the fading light of day, it’s actually quite beautiful. Grasses wave in the slight breeze, crickets chirp their evening song, and the last rays of sun glint orange against the silo roof. We’ve been trading quips all day long, but now Deacon and I stand silent, taking it in. Beauty’s a rare thing in this burned-out world.

“She would’ve liked this,” Deacon murmurs, almost too softly to hear.

I frown, intrigued. “Who?”

He seems to shake himself out of a trance. “Huh? I didn’t say anything.” He hefts his rifle. “Let’s check out these cabins. Bet you anything this place has a nasty case of the ferals.”

A wet rasp from a toolshed to our left confirms it. The next few minutes are punctuated by the staccato bursts of our gunfire and the song of the crickets as we move from cabin to cabin, putting the poor withered bastards out of their misery. By the time we’re finished, dusk has covered the land like a blanket.

“Well, that’s all of them.”

Their arms and legs look so frail in death. I kneel beside a corpse, gently pulling an object from its tightly clasped fingers. A toy car.

“Aw, damn.” I swallow hard; ferals are the toughest for me to reconcile killing. “Poor things. They’re like children.”

Deacon scoffs. “Yes. Wildly dangerous, insane children with a taste for PB&Flesh.” His tone loses its edge as I look up at him. “But yeah, I know what you mean. The ‘Wealth is not a kind place these days.”

“It wasn’t in my time, either. Not really.” I stand, dusting my hands across my thighs. “Well, should we shack up in this cabin for the night? It’s got a fireplace and a door that bars, and we’ve got a good view of the rest of the place in case there’s trouble.”

He gives me a thumbs up and we get to work, bringing firewood inside and dragging bodies out.

“I thought you lived here.” Wanderer eyes me quizzically, looking up from the leather shin guard she’s dousing in Wonderglue. The firelight plays across her face; tiny flames burn in the black of her irises.

“You know, before the Big Freeze. How’d you get lost so easily?”

She shrugs one shoulder. “We hadn’t been here long before the bombs fell.”
“We?”

“N—” She stops, looks confused. “My husband and I. He was in the military, fought at Anchorage. Came back and decided we should be closer to his family back east. I was, uh, really pregnant when we moved to Sanctuary Hills. Not too happy about it, either.” She turns back to her task. A sheaf of hair falls from behind her ear to cover her face; I get the feeling she’s hiding. “I was on maternity leave until the world ended, so I didn’t get out a whole lot.”

Ouch. The husband. That’s right. Now I feel like a total ass.

“Hey. Look at me?” She takes a second before lifting her face again. When she does, the flames in her eyes are distorted. I soften my voice. “Shaun is out there. And together we’ll find him. That’s a promise.”

She blinks rapidly and ducks her head. "I thought you said not to trust you."

Caught in my own truth. She's a shrewd one, my Wanderer. "And you trusted that?"

She wipes an eye with the back of her hand. "Nope."

“Boss, why don’t you catch some Zs? I’ll play lookout a while longer.”

“Are you sure?"

“Hell yeah. Lydia just ran off with Wickham and it’s eating me up inside. What will people say?”

Wanderer gives a low chuckle. “You’re actually reading *Pride and Prejudice*, aren’t you?” I nod. “Well, enjoy. I swooned over Darcy many a time when I was a girl.”

“Yes, I’m preparing to swoon all night long. If tomorrow you find me prone and unresponsive on the floor, you can skip the autopsy and just assume I swooned too hard.” She laughs again. I could listen to that sound all day long.

When I was a little girl and it wasn’t a school night, my mother would sometimes let me fall asleep on our sofa, tucked under a quilt and nestled into a soft, clean pillow. Drifting off to the white noise of the television while she listened to her shows and crocheted under the yellow lamplight — those were the nights I slept best, when safety and warmth enveloped me like a hug.

The ambient sounds of the darkened countryside fill the air, peaceful enough on their own to lull me to sleep. Deacon lounges in a chair by a window, ankles crossed, engrossed in the social politics of 19th century Victorian society. Every so often he turns a page, the soft rustle of the paper familiar and oddly normal. I find my eyes resting on his unfocused form as slumber greets me.

“I think this would make a good place for a new settlement.”

She sounds thoughtful. We stand, poised to leave, on a dirt path leading north toward Sanctuary. I nod my assent.

“You know, my whole life I’ve wanted to live on a farm.” Her eyes are far away. “Maybe, when
things settle down, I’ll make my home here.”

Rather than reply, I breathe in deeply. The morning air is cool, refreshing. I remember another woman who loved the country life. I wore a different face then. “Yeah. I like it here.”

“I’ll mention it to Preston when we get to Sanctuary. He’ll help spread the word, get a supply chain set up.” She hefts her pack. “Ready, pal?”

“Ready, pal.”

***

“Brrrr. You could have warned me, you know; I’m wearing a t-shirt here.” My teeth are chattering. I’m not sure what I expected, but a descent into the old Vault wasn’t on my radar.

Wanderer snorts. “You think I’m going to trust the only pancreas I’ve got to the rusty insides of an old Mr. Handy? I love Codsworth, but a well-placed bullet could take him and his cooling system out for good. This Vault is the closest thing I have to a refrigerator.”

I appreciate that this place is keeping her medicine cold, but I’ve always found Vaults to be undeniably creepy. “I guess all those people vowing by Hell freezing over never knew about 111.”

She doesn’t laugh. We’re nearing the hallway where the cryopods are kept.

“My husband’s pod is the only one that still opens and closes.”

She says it by way of explanation; it almost feels like an apology. As we turn into the cryogenic stasis room her steps become quicker, her back rigid. She punches a button; with a hiss and a cloud of vapor, the pod opens.

I’ve been down here before; I’ve seen the poor bastard. He looks so goddamn peaceful, like he’s asleep. Kellogg’s bullet wound is barely visible. It never bled — too cold, I guess. Looking at him now, though, it feels different. I wonder what color his eyes are, under those frozen lids. If his hands are calloused and rough, like mine. I find myself imagining his voice, his sense of humor, their life together before the Big One started.

Wanderer’s wasting no time. She doesn’t look at his face, doesn’t even touch him. Her movements are quick, intentional, but her hand shakes as she plucks a vial from the floor of the pod.

For once I have no words; I’m no good at the serious stuff. My idea of comfort is a pack of cigarettes and a bottle of Uisce Beatha. Not willing it to, my hand reaches out with a mind of its own.

Before I can reach her shoulder she turns, finished. She stares at my proffered palm a moment, then grasps it, pulling herself upright. “Thanks.”

“Welcome, boss.” She punches the button again and turns her back as the pod closes with a thump.

“Let’s check in on Sanctuary real quick. Then we can head back to your friends and see if I’ve made the cut.”

Her voice is normal, her face expressionless. I can’t say I’ve ever been in her situation, but if it were my girl in that pod, I’d be a hot mess right about now.

“You got nothing to worry about.” I mean it, too. I don’t like seeing this version of Wanderer, not
smiling, not even frowning. *We’ll get your boy back,* I vow silently. *And we’ll make the Institute pay for what they’ve done — to both of us.*

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Preston’s arms around me feel like a vise. I pat his back, wondering when it will end. *He’s so emotional.*

“It’s so good to see you again, General. Any news?”

Deacon’s off to the side, swinging his arms uncomfortably. I untangle myself from the affectionate Minuteman as Deacon raises an eyebrow at me over his shoulder, as if to say “*General?*” I give him a look and he shakes his head.

“Actually, yeah. We cleared out a farm south of the old dam that was crawling with ferals. Sunshine Tidings, it’s called. Could be a good place for a new settlement.”

Preston’s eyes light up. “That’s great news! I’ll spread the word and get a team down there for supplies.” He turns to Deacon, politely offering a hand. “Are you a new recruit? We’re always looking for people passionate about the cause.”

“Oh boy, it’s an honest-to-goodness Minuteman. And here’s me without my autograph book.”

Preston pulls his hand back, confused. I sigh. “This is Deacon. He’s a charity case I took on a while back. I’ve been teaching him all about how to be stealthy and use a gun.”

The Minuteman smiles, looking relieved. “Well, friend, it’s a real pleasure. You won’t find a better teacher in all the Commonwealth.” I clap him on the back as Deacon rolls his eyes.

“This is only a quick visit — I’ve got a few errands to run. Everything okay here? Will you be all right taking care of business a little while longer?”

Mild disappointment shows in the downward curve of his lips. “Of course, General. We’re building this place back up, brick by brick.”

“It looks really good. You’ve made it feel like home again.” That’s not even a lie — the refugees from the Quincy Massacre have made Sanctuary look *nice.* The rotten houses have been cleared away, their materials enjoying a better life in new constructions. There’s even a rough marketplace set up, with a clinic and a restaurant. Preston beams at the compliment.

“Well, you ready to get going?” Deacon gives me an exaggerated nod. “Cool. And we’re bringing Dogmeat.”

“Uh, I’d prefer Cram, if it’s all the same to you. General.”

***

The murmur of voices echoes down the catacomb tunnels. Deacon insisted on going on ahead — "to butter up Dez," he said. Dread settles into the pit of my stomach. It’s like the goddamn LSATs all over again. Somehow, though, getting into the Railroad feels bigger than law school.

“...And the new girl patched me up, put me on her shoulder, and blasted her way through the rest of the complex. Synths everywhere.”

Deacon’s gesturing wildly as I turn the corner, miming my supposed heroism.
“Carrying you the whole time?” Desdemona’s voice drips with skepticism.

He catches my eye as I walk in, the dog padding along beside me. I could swear I see the hint of a wink beyond his sunglasses. “Amazing, right?”

“That’s one word for it.” She turns to me. “Deacon told me you single-handedly secured Carrington’s prototype, disabled a minefield, and wiped out a hundred Gen 1s.” Her eyes bore into mine. “So, is any of that true?”

“Every word.” I bite my lip. “And then some.”

Surprise battles sarcasm for supremacy on her face. “A full hundred. I... I can’t even imagine.”

“See? Just like I said, boss.”

“I was expecting Deacon to grab a full team, including Glory, to secure that prototype. But instead just the two of you cleared out the entire Switchboard.” I shrug, hoping it comes off as nonchalant.

“You’d be insane not to sign her up, Dez.” It’s funny, watching Deacon with Desdemona. The past few days I’ve gotten used to him in his role as teacher and guide. Here, he’s just another proletarian working for the man. Er, the woman.

She inclines her head grudgingly. “You’ve certainly made an impression on Deacon. He’s never spoken about — or lied about — anyone so highly before.”

I straighten my back a little, caught off-guard. Warmth floods my face; I tell myself it’s pride. From the corner, leaning against the brick, the minigun enthusiast speaks up.

“Damn, D. Dez is right. Sounds like you got yourself a little crush.”

“Oh yeah, Glory. You figured it out. Hey, maybe we can go on a double date with you and PAM sometime.” Glory makes a face.

Desdemona holds up her hands for silence. She looks me hard in the eyes — my heart stops — and her lips curve into the ghost of a smile. “Welcome to the Railroad, agent.”

You know, I knew Dez would make the right choice — she knows about Project Wanderer, and God knows I worked my ass off for this — but there’s still a weight lifted when I hear her speak the words.

“So you’re in. Now we need to know what to call you. Secrecy keeps us alive. Code names are a part of that. So what’s yours?”

Wanderer looks like the kid who didn’t study the chapter in history class and gets called on by the teacher. I don’t blame her. Dez is a scary lady. “Have any suggestions?”

“No. It doesn’t work like that. Your life, your name, your choice.”

Wanderer grimaces. “I don’t want a code name.”

“Code names aren’t optional.” Our fearless leader is growing irritated. “All agents need to keep their identities secret to protect themselves and those close to them.”
She shifts her feet, chews on a fingernail, tugs the dog’s ear. The silence stretches on, growing uncomfortable. Her telltale frown, absent of late, returns in full force. Finally she speaks. I hold my breath; I know her real name — it’s all there, on the terminals in Vault 111 — and I know what I’ve taken to calling her in my head. It’ll be weird to get used to a new identity for my Wanderer.

“I’m sorry. I really don’t want to choose.”

Dez looks exasperated. “Suit yourself.” Her eyes hover over the woman’s shoulder, meeting mine. “We’ll call you ‘Wanderer.’ Seems fitting.”

Wanderer can’t see the grin I offer Dez. Probably for the best — she seems lost enough as it is.

Formalities out of the way, it’s time to pay a visit to Carrington. We’ve got a prototype to deliver and a favor to ask.
Chapter Summary

Carrington is an ass, Wanderer's first synth rescue goes smoothly, and other things are also smooth. ;)

“Desdemona may place her trust in a know-nothing wasteland vagrant with zero training and no trace of a history in our logs, but that certainly doesn’t mean I have to.” His hand flutters in my face, dismissive. “Perhaps we’ll discuss this again after you secure the package.” The doctor turns his back, unwilling to hear more.

Deacon’s right. Carrington is an asshole.

“Come on, Doc. She’s a shoe-in. Nobody goes up against an army of Gen 1s alone without some serious levels of commitment. That’s like whipping out a wedding ring on the third date.”

Carrington harrumphs, pointedly engrossed in fiddling with a beaker of liquid. “You are not now — nor have you ever been — my commanding officer, Deacon. A fact for which I am grateful every single day. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.”

My hands ball into fists at my side, knuckles white. Dogmeat gives a frustrated growl. Deacon shakes his head. “Jesus. You’ve really got a heart of gold, you know that, Carrington? Helluva bedside manner.” He slings an arm around my shoulders. I start for a moment; friendly touch has become alien over the past few months. But it feels right, somehow. He leads me to an empty pocket of the room. HQ is bustling, Railroad agents holding discussions in hushed tones or hunched over paperwork or simply resting with a cool drink. The low buzz of conversation blends with our own, offering a semblance of privacy.

“I know he’s a haughty bastard, but I didn’t expect him to completely screw you over. We’re family. We look out for each other.” There’s a heat underlining his words; his voice is missing its usual lilt. Deep in my belly, buried under the frustration, something small thrills. I sense it’s a rare thing for him to lose his cool. He’s angry for me.

“I realize we haven’t rolled out the most welcoming of wagons for you. Everyone’s been on edge since Switchboard went dark. But they’ll get there soon. I promise. This next op should be the nail in the coffin, if you’ll excuse the wildly appropriate expression.”

“Excused.” We’re perched on the stone grave of some American revolutionary. Idly, I worry my lip; it’s still not recovered from my first visit to the Old North Church. “My coffin’s getting more watertight by the day. I guess I don’t mind being radworm food if it means I find Shaun.”

“Not even possible, boss. I may have mentioned this before, but the Railroad needs you.” He pats my shoulder and pulls his arm away. I feel lighter and, strangely, emptier. “Besides, there’s no such thing as a radworm. You’d be feeding the radscorpions.

“Hey, let’s gear up and get outta here. The sooner we deliver the package, the sooner the good doctor will agree to lend us his precious expertise.”

Wanderer’s off examining Tom’s “special-i-tays.” I lean against the wall, enjoying a well-deserved smoke break while she loads up.

This… diabetes thing. It throws a serious wrench into our gears. I keep telling myself I couldn’t have predicted it — hell, this would even be outside PAM’s wheelhouse — but I feel responsible all the same.

Glory sidles up next to me. Great. I sigh, anticipating a lecture.

“Be careful, D.” Her voice is low and musical, a shock of white hair falling over one eye.

“I’m always careful, Glory. Careful’s my middle name. Or first name. Or whatever.”

Her eyes roll toward the ceiling. “Quit shittin’ around, man. You know what I mean.” She rocks a thumb at the woman in the blue Vault suit, engrossed in a one-sided conversation with Tinker Tom.

“What, Wanderer? The dog’s more of a threat than she is.” That’s not even a lie. I’ve never seen the woman pop a Raider’s eyeball with her teeth.

“In all our years I ain’t never seen you so much as shake hands with someone new.” Glory snorts. “No hugs. Maybe a high five here or there. Thought you were a freaking hypochondriac.”

“Well, when’s the last time I had a partner? Maybe the ol’ ball and chain comes with a few perks, you know? Loyalty card at the Super Deacon Mart. BOGO snuggles on Tuesdays.”

She shakes her head; the lock of white hair drifts back into place. “Attachments are a liability in this line of work, Deacon. You taught me that.”

“Glory, look at me.” She turns her face to mine, skeptical. “I am not attached. I promise. But Wanderer’s the key to us taking down the Institute — I just know it. And I’m not often wrong about these things. So let me play my hand, and trust me. Okay?”

Her caramel eyes hold me hostile for a long moment, then she sighs and shrugs. “You do you, D. But we’ve got a good thing going here in the church. Don’t fuck it up.” A loud exclamation comes from Tinker Tom’s workspace. I may have forgotten to warn Wanderer about the blood robots. “And don’t get yourself hurt.”

Glory slips away with a punch to my shoulder. “Ouch, Glory. Rude.” She saunters off, her middle finger saluting me proudly.

The crosshairs waver, back and forth, back and forth. A bulbous green skull sways in and out of my vision, obscured by the dark of night. My fingers are clammy, slick against the trigger. I exhale in frustration and lower the sight.

We’re crouched on a roof by an old construction site, the last section of hostile territory around Ticonderoga that needs clearing. Of course it’s infested with Super Mutants.
Deacon lifts my gun barrel back up with two fingers. “Just focus.”

“I am focusing,” I snap, voice low. “This isn’t my thing.”

“Oh yeah, my bad, I forgot. Your thing is running into the thick of it, guns blazing, am I right? It’s a wonder your head hasn’t been blown off by snipers already.” He wiggles a finger at my Pip-Boy. “Regardless, you can’t rely on that overgrown wristwatch forever.” I glower. He chuckles. He’s right, though. Without the Pip-Boy, I’m as useless as Rad-Away to a ghoul.

I raise the sight again, target centered on the balcony where the Mutant leans, unaware.

I hold my breath.

The crosshairs steady.

The Mutant yawns.

My face purples.

I squeeze the trigger.

The Super Mutant’s arm erupts in a fountain of red and he spins, snarling. His movement is sudden, his bulk heavy, the balcony railing low; momentum carries him over and down. His guttural cry echoes against the concrete pilings, abruptly cut short by a wet crunch.

Eyes wide, my rifle clatters to the rooftop. Deacon winces. “Guess we should have started with Nuka Cola bottles, huh?”

I slide my pistol from its holster and give him a look, flipping on VATS as interested grunts begin to sound from all corners of the site. Dogmeat’s hackles are up. “Why would you ever make it easy on me?”

“Gotta toughen you up, boss. You have no idea what’s coming.”

“Oh, and you do? Been hanging out with Mama Murphy again, have you?”

The beeping sounds, softly at first, almost pleasant.

I see her go rigid. Her finger lays on the trigger, confident, ready, but the delicate muscles of her hands are locked. Deep inside some primal deer-in-the-headlights instinct has triggered; I curse. If I hadn’t been so goddamn careless — but this time, it’s better. There’s a single path for the Suicider to follow, a narrow iron beam leading from rebar to roof. Wanderer’s frozen, but I’m ready. Almost imperceptible at first, a red flashing brightens the unfinished room across the way. I see the Mutant’s blinking palm before his bulk fills the doorway. It’s enough. I aim for the light and squeeze.

Always got your back, boss.

“That felt noble.”
We’re perched on a rotting dock overlooking the Charles river, Ticon at our backs. Everything in this world is buried under three inches of grime, but the water still sparkles in the moonlight.

“H2 wouldn’t have had a snowflake’s chance in hell, if not for you. You made this happen. Remember that.”

"Do you think... do you think I'll get to see him again? That he'll remember me?"

"Doubtful. I hate to say it, boss, seeing as how you still have that peppy, optimistic 'new agent' smell, but most of the people we rescue want to forget their old life as a slave." Deacon shakes his head. "It sucks, yeah, but goodbyes around here are usually final. One way or another."

"Well, that's a happy note to end on."

"Nothing but the best for you." I sigh. I think he feels bad about being a killjoy. "Hey, think of it like... like one of those animal shelters, in the Old World. Some asshole beats his dog, leaves it at the pound, you fix the little guy up, then send him off to a nice new family in a safe new home. A land of milk bones and honey."

"How do you know so much about the Old World, anyway?"

"I read a lot. You know that. Anyway, it'll break your heart every single time you lay eyes on one of our refugees. You're going to fall in love with every single one, and it hurts when they don't know you anymore. Hurts like hell. Every single time. But every once in a while you recognize someone, working as a shopkeep, harvesting some crops, laughing with their wife. And they're happy, and safe, and you got them there. It's worth the pain. Trust me."

"Y'know, I used to volunteer at the humane society."

"Somehow, I am not surprised."

I smile. “I think I like this Railroad thing. Maybe I’ll stick with it.”

Waves lap against the wooden posts, gentle, almost normal. But there are no night sounds, no frogs croaking or fish snapping at bugs on the surface; I remind myself that this is not my world. Across the river, a creature glows an eerie green, scuttling to and fro on a floating pallet.

“That fella’s been here for years.” Deacon speaks again, gesturing. “Whenever I start to feel bad for him, I remind myself he’s a hell of a lot safer out there, all alone.”

“Aw. Bet he’s lonesome. Maybe I ought to swim this Jangles out there to him.” Someone’s perched the moon monkey on the edge of the dock near where we sit, his frozen grimace passing judgment on the cityscape before us.

Deacon’s kicking his legs over the water, hands clasped in his lap. He nods thoughtfully. “Y’know, I’m used to flying solo. But I gotta admit, working with you makes me think I’ve been missing out.” Warmth creeps into my cheeks. “Having someone watch your back… is refreshing.”

I shrug. I never know how to respond to compliments. He continues. “Especially since you never know when the Institute is watching.”

“So… you’ve never had a partner?"

“Not for a long time. Besides, partnering up in the Railroad can leave you vulnerable. One more person who can finger you to the Institute.”
Something about the way he says vulnerable stokes the fire heating my blush. “Please. You know I wouldn’t do that.”

“I hope you wouldn’t. But in this world, nothing’s set in stone. The Institute can manipulate you in more ways than one.” He stops a moment, as if making a decision. “You know, some people at HQ are jealous. You took the Big Nap and everyone you knew is long gone.”

I go rigid. “Excuse me?”

“Wait, hear me out on the silver lining. If a human in the Railroad slips up, then they expose friends and loved ones to danger. You’re safe from that.”

The waves lap against the dock quietly, same as a few minutes ago, but now the sound is no longer soothing. The warm flush on my cheeks becomes hot. “You’re saying that losing my boy is a... good thing?” My voice catches on ‘good.’

“Oh, Jesus, I… I didn’t mean that,” he stammers. His gaze, masked behind SPF 40, meets mine. “If the Church gets compromised and the Coursers are on our tail, at least you’re not putting more people in harm’s way. That’s all.”

I look away. I can’t bring myself to speak the words that weigh on my heart. I’d rather have the choice.

After a moment, I feel a warmth upon my wrist. His hand. “I just meant… Whether the Institute’s motivated by vengeance or faulty intel, it doesn’t matter to the people left behind.”

Since that night at the Rexford, not so long ago in days but a century ago in moments, I’ve locked Nate away in a place far from my heart. The hope I hold for Shaun cannot exist for my husband. His blood is frozen in his veins dozens of miles away from here. Heat burns behind my eyelids; I fight to keep an unwanted deluge at bay. I focus on the glowing ghoul far across the water. He’s lonely, but at least he belongs.

Deacon’s hand tightens on my wrist. A reassuring, apologetic squeeze. “Hey. Hey. It’s all right. I’m sorry.” I swallow the lump in my throat, squinting at the ghoul. “It doesn’t matter much to me, anyway. I’m a synth.”

The bottom drops out beneath me.

“At least that’s what they tell me. So, I really don’t have anything to lose.”

My eyes scan his face, searching. I can never tell just what’s going on behind those sunglasses.

“For Glory and me, and the others, it’s easier to dedicate ourselves to the cause.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” It’s not like I’ve shared my life story with him or anything.

“I don’t like talking about it. I was one of the first synths they did the whole… cranium reboot on. So it was a bit of a botch job. Most synths have fun fake memories. A happy home, a family. Me? I got nothin’. And that… well, it does something to you.”

“...I guess so. Yeah. If I lost my memories, I wouldn’t have anything.” It’s pointless to try for eye contact. All I see are my own dark irises reflecting back at me. “But you know, it’s not the end of the world. We can make you new fun memories, in between the uh, massacres and mayhem. Hell… I swiped a bottle of bourbon from Ticon. We can start now, if you like.”
It’s strange. Even delivering H2 to safety, I thought of him as a… robot, an android, something half a step down from human. But Deacon? He’s my friend. My partner. I’ve seen him bleed, seen the blood clot and slow, the wound heal over time. And he cares so goddamn much. Hell, he’s more human than most of the humans in this world. My stomach twists; I’ve been bigoted.

“You’re a peach, Wanderer. You know that?” His hand, still holding my wrist, moves to my palm, presses something into it. “Since we’re traveling together, I want you to take this. It’s my recall code.” A crumpled wad of paper rests in my palm. I unfold it, curious. “If you ever need to know something about the Institute, read it to me.”

I glance at him, then back at the yellowed paper in my hand. The moonlight is just bright enough for me to make out the words. You can’t trust everyone.

I know about recall codes. Dez briefed me during a seemingly never-ending lesson on synths and the Institute. Pushing aside discretion, I study Deacon. Tonight he’s gone au naturel, no pompadour to be seen. I know every inch of his face — strong jaw, proud nose, lined forehead, furrowed brow, lips at the ready for a sardonic grin, even his very slight crow’s feet — but I don’t know his eyes. I don’t even know their color. But God, I’ve been staring into those glasses so long, he could probably tell me the RGB values for my gray matter.

“Wow. That’s a lot of responsibility, Deacon.” I swallow, nervous. If I’m wrong, I’ll have to take up with Preston. And nobody wants that. “I’m honored. And kind of surprised. After all, you’re the one who taught me that you can’t trust everyone.”

His face freezes, mouth slack. A gurgling, choking sound bubbles up from his throat. One hand reaches up, clawing desperately at his windpipe. My expression remains unchanged. The gurgles morph into low chuckles.

“All right, all right, you got me.” His familiar half-smile replaces the frozen look of death. “No fooling you, huh? Don’t take it personally, I lie to everyone.” He pulls the code from my grasp, crumples it, throws it into the Charles. “Maybe I’m just another human that has people back home that he wants to protect. Then again —” his voice takes on a halting, metallic tone “— maybe not.”

For a moment I stare at him, unamused. “You know, you’re lucky I like you. You’re being a real bastard tonight.”

But his boyish laugh, at the same time devilish and pure, makes me shake my head. “Whoever you are — whatever you are — you’re good in my book, D.”

Deacon’s smile softens; he’s looking down into his lap. “I want...” His hand finds its way to my wrist again, pointer finger trailing down the muscle of my thumb. Was that an accident? I shiver. “If you believe anything, believe this. I’m in your corner. Always have been.” Want what? My heart is pounding. That felt... important. “That code is a hard truth. You can’t trust everyone. Even if someone sounds sincere, they could be a synth replacement working for the Institute.” He sighs. “The bitch of the problem is recognizing the 90% of the time someone’s on the up and up, and the 10% of the time you’re being played.”

My heart is in my throat. This night is suddenly about more than my first hands-on synth rescue. I feel like a goddamn teenager, sitting here on the dock, a boy’s hand light on my naked wrist, the river reflecting the moonlight back toward the clear black sky. It’s hard to believe we’ve left a smattering of corpses in our wake, that this dock is a rare neutral zone between Raider territory and Super Mutant zones. It’s a quiet night, now that we’ve silenced our enemies; I’m kind of surprised Deacon can’t hear my heart hammering in my chest. Almost of its own volition my elbow retracts, our hands sliding palm to palm. Tentatively, my fingers move against his, searching for weakness,
pushing between them like weeds. I’m holding his hand, rough and calloused and warm; his fingers fold over my knuckles.

For a while we sit in silence, the gentle lap of the water and staccato, far-off gun spatter our background music. I try not to breathe or swallow, try to become invisible, independent of my hand tangled warmly with his. Deacon parts his lips. I tense; his words could change everything.

“So… you watch the game last night?”
Chapter Summary

There's a light at the end of the needle, but will the Sole Survivor last as long as her insulin? Deacon and Wanderer celebrate her first successful run. That affinity level's risin'.

You’re lucky I like you.

You’re good in my book, D.

There isn’t a single goddamn molecule in my body that feels guilty about lying to Glory.

We’ve spent the dark of night traveling, hugging the outskirts of downtown Boston. The lights of Diamond City glare into the sky, not far off now. Wanderer insists she has an errand to run; she won’t tell me any more than that. Against all odds, she’s managed to keep a secret from me. I’m equal parts annoyed and proud.

As we pass under the Great Green gates, I suppress a shudder. I hate this. It’s like sauntering into the lion’s den with a ribeye strapped to your forehead. Everyone knows this place is under opposition control; my fingers itch to flick on a Stealth Boy and vamoose.

She veers toward the ol’ chop shop, better known as the Mega Surgery Center. So far my pride’s winning the violent war with my curiosity, but the tide of battle could turn at any moment.

“Doctor Sun?” She sounds unsure. The man in the lab coat is busying himself at the chemistry station. He takes his time with a response.

“It’s you. You’re quite late, you know. I’d almost given you up for lost.” Doctor Sun’s slight accent is tinged with irritation.

“I’m sorry, Doc, I lost track of time. All the calendars around here are a little out of date.” I grin. Sure, I came for the vengeful destruction of an insidious underground organization, but I stay for the sass.

Sun carefully places the test tube he’s holding back in its rack and turns to us, steepling his fingers.

“I’m pleased to see you’ve continued to survive,” he says. “The odds are certainly not in your favor.”

Wanderer’s been paying attention to our lessons together; I only catch the flash of emotion in her eyes because, by now, I know her face better than any I’ve ever worn. I feel myself tense up. Glory’s right. Attachments are a liability. Last night was dangerous, and not just because of our close call with the Suicider.

Sun continues. “I’m afraid I don’t have the news you’re hoping for.”

Her face falls ever so slightly, but she nods. “Well, thanks for trying, anyway.”
“One moment, one moment. Don’t rush off just yet.” He picks up his clipboard, scribbling. “I have neither the equipment nor the necessary chemical components to be of any great assistance to you. However, I may be able to help, in some small way.”

He rips the paper free and hands it to Wanderer. I peer over her shoulder; it’s a list. “What’s this?”

“That is everything you need to begin the process. I trust you’ll be able to collect all and sundry, being the… adventurous sort that you are.” Wanderer’s just staring at the list, mouth slightly open. Looks like some sort of recipe, only the ingredients are a bunch of caustic-sounding chemicals and… brahmin pancreas? Ugh.

“I was in the mood for spicy mole rat tacos tonight, but I guess that works too.” My joke falls on deaf ears. She’s still absorbed in the paper scrap, clutching it like a life preserver.

“This is… this is huge, Doctor,” she murmurs, swallowing. “I… I don’t know where I’ll find some of these, but thank you. You don’t know what this means to me.”

“Yes, well. You may be pleased to know that I’ve negotiated a business relationship between yourself and Ms. Polly, the… esteemed curator of meats at our neighboring establishment, Choice Chops.”

Wanderer’s eyes go wide, while mine squint in confusion. “You’re kidding me. You…?”

In an uncharacteristic display of emotion, Sun’s mouth forms something that could be mistaken for a smile. “You have access to an almost limitless supply of bovine pancreases.” She raises a hand to her lips; it’s trembling. “They don’t provide nutritional value and are largely flavorless, meaning they’re often separated into the rubbish heap. What’s more, Polly has agreed to a very reasonable stipend to procure and deliver the organs. By all appearances, she seemed pleased they would go to good use.”

Wanderer’s not the touchy-feely type. I’ve seen her when Preston closes in. But she grabs Sun’s hand, clings to it.

“What do you want?” It comes out like a hiss. The doctor looks taken aback.

“Come again?” He seems disgruntled, making a half-assed effort to pull his wrist away.

“Do you need me to — to kill someone? Some rival surgeon? Raiders fucking with an aid caravan? You need some ferals cleared out of, out of an old hospital or something?” The fact that she’s trying to sound normal is making this sadistic tirade a thousand times worse. Her voice sounds kind of strangled, high-pitched, weird.

“Excuse me, no, but ah, many thanks for the… offer.” Sun succeeds in freeing his hand, rubbing his metacarpals. “Although if there were a subtle way to get Crocker out of my hair, I might entertain the thought. Kidding,” he warns, seeing the look in Wanderer’s eyes. My little psycho, I think. Why do I feel proud?

“Why are you doing this for me?” She’s got the list pressed to her heart now, as though it were a love letter and she a lovelorn teen.

“One thing you’ll learn out there, if you haven’t already: there is very little integrity in this world. Especially in a profession made lucrative by the suffering of others.” The doctor turns back to his chemistry station, retrieving his abandoned concoction. “If I can sow a bit of honor or hope where I may, that’s my duty.”
“You going to tell me what this is all about, boss? Or do we need to play a round of 20 Questions?”

Wanderer whirls around, eyes shining. “This is the recipe for homemade insulin, Deacon!” She grabs my hand and pulls it to her chest, hugging it along with the note. Beside her Dogmeat barks, tail wagging madly. “With any luck, I might have more than a month left with you. Here, I mean.”

*With me?* Her joy is infectious. I grin at her, ignoring whatever emotional insect is fluttering through my digestive system. “Oh, hell yes. Let’s go shove this down Carrington’s throat.”

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“Hey, let’s take five before we head in.”

The Old North Church has begun to look like home; the warm glow of the lantern draws me like a moth to its flame. Deacon perches on the edge of the statue in the square, patting the concrete next to him. “This better be good, D. I want to get cookin’.”

“This’ll just be a minute.”

I sit, aware of how close he is, how warm. “What’s up?”

He rubs his palms on his thighs. “We’ve been making the rounds, doing the job. It’s time you learned the big secret.”

I peer around nervously. “Uh oh. Are we on camera? Where’s the audience chanting ‘Jerry?’”

Deacon shakes his head. “Nah, it’s nothing like that. Listen. Everyone thinks that Desdemona is the big boss. She calls the ops, gives the ra-ra speeches. But it’s just an act.” He takes a breath, claps his hands decisively. “She does what I tell her because the Railroad’s my show. It’s been that way since I founded it.”

Silence.

“I swear, if you keep trying to lay truth bombs on me while you’re wearing those goddamned glasses, I’m going to crush ’em. Schoolyard-bully-style.” I make as if to snatch them off his face and he ducks, grinning. “You really founded it?”

“Yes, you are getting crow’s feet. Maybe we ought to go pay the Mega Surgery Center another visit.”

“Ha-ha, very funny. Seriously, though. We’ve come a long way since the beginning. Done a lot of good. But the Railroad, we’re more than that. We’re the last and only line of defense between the Institute and the Commonwealth. Hell, maybe even the world.”
“Any perks, being close to the big boss?” I ask, nudging him with my shoulder. *Was that awkward?* It’s been a couple centuries since I’ve had occasion to flirt. *Cut yourself some slack, for the love of God.*

“Now that I don’t have to hide, sure. Tinker Tom will set you up. But the best perk is seeing behind the curtain.

People think our missions are all about synths. But there’s more going on. We’re building a better, brighter Commonwealth. The Railroad is really the best, noblest organization that’s ever lived. We’re… We’re…” Deacon laughs, shaking his head again. “God, I can’t keep up with this bullshit.”

I *knew* it. “Traveling with you is never dull, D.”

“I aim to please.” There go the shivers again. “But I had a point here. A lesson, if you will.” His hand moves toward my knee, hovers a moment, lands. It’s warm and — *am I really thinking this? What a tool.* — kind of firm and strong. “There are other organizations out there. And, in time, I’m sure they’re going to spoon-feed you their own patented form of bullshit. Ignore the verbiage and look at what they’re doing. What they’re asking you to do. What sort of world they’d have you build, and how they’re going to pay for it.” He gives my knee a pat and slips his hand back.

“Thanks for the advice, buddy.”

“I don’t know if it’s your good old-fashioned pre-war values, or if you just won the genetic lottery, but anyone who has you in their corner has an advantage.”

“Uh, I think it’s kind of clear that my genes aren’t winning any prizes these days.”

“Be that as it may. At the end of the day, you’ll need to make a choice. Make it the right one, Wanderer.” He hops off the ledge and lifts a palm my way. I take it.

“It’s not really a choice,” I say. “Can we go make my insulin now, or did you have another speech prepared?”

Carrington seems annoyed that Wanderer isn’t the boogeywoman he expected, but he’s a Railroad agent, despite it all. His expression might make you think he’s stepped in a steaming pile of dog shit, but he’s actually thoughtfully studying the list she’s handed him.

“Sulfuric acid, alcohol, sodium hydroxide, ammonium sulfate… simple enough. Half of these ingredients comprise Tom’s ridiculous blood serum, anyway.” He taps the list with a pen. “Bovine pancreas, though? It will take an incredible amount of —”

“Got it covered, doc!” She flips the list over, revealing Polly’s contact information and supplier credentials. He raises an eyebrow. “Ah. Looks like everything is in order, then.”

Seating himself at a terminal, Carrington begins to type, brow furrowed. “Factoring in iteration and testing… time to obtain materials and resupply… production and bottling… that’s… With my calculations, we should have a product ready fit for delivery in as little as eight to twelve weeks.”

“She needs it way sooner than that, Doc.”

“Well, Deacon, I invite you to use your fabled time machine to deliver this project into my hands
three months ago.”

She’s silent a moment, but it seems like nothing’s getting Wanderer down, not now that she’s got a sliver of hope. “Takes longer than that for sugar to kill a diabetic. I’ll make do.”

It’s not an answer I like, but it’s pretty in-character for her. Self-sacrificial and all that bullshit. She pulls something from her pack, turning my way. It’s the bourbon she swiped from Ticon.

“The nine-to-five’s over. Want to forget my worries with me?”

I grin. “You read my mind, boss.”

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I slosh the contents of the bottle around. It’s light now, lighter than I expect; with a bright clink the Old Appalachia slips and tips, darkening the concrete.

“Whoopsie,” I giggle. “No wastey. They don’t make bourbon anymore like… like Mom used to make bourbon, anymore.” I lean over my crossed legs, tongue out. Deacon is laughing; he grabs the fabric of my shirt, pulling me back. “You don’t know where that floor’s been!”

Where the floor’s been. That is, hands down, the funniest thing I’ve heard all day. I throw my head back for an uproarious laugh. “Ouch!” Forgot about the brick wall behind me.

“It’s a tradition to down a glass for your first successful run. An entire fifth is not recommended, however.” Desdemona’s leaning against the crumbling brick doorway to the back entrance hallway, arms crossed, eyebrow raised.

“C’mon, Dez, lighten up,” Deacon says, righting the bottle. “We’re having a party. You want to join? The more, the merrier!”

Her eyes roll heavenward. “Try to keep it down tonight, you two. Some agents have ops in the morning.” She turns to go, but not before I see the hint of a smile passing over her lips.

“Don’t worry, Deacon, she’s smiling,” I think I whisper.

“Keep it down, I said!”

“Shhh,” Deacon hushes at me, finger to his lips. It’s a powerful shush; his sunglasses lurch forward and clatter to the floor. I try to hold it in, but the force behind my laughter is too strong. A snort erupts from my nose and I clap a hand over my mouth. Deacon is gasping for breath, holding his ribs; I’ve fallen forward, the dirty mattress muffling my giggles. Dogmeat, enjoying a mattress all to himself, eyes us and wags his tail once.

“Okay, c’mere, last call. One more for both of us.” We down our shots and I settle back against the wall beside him, making a wry face.

“Nuka Cherry,” I demand, beckoning with urgency as he pushes the soda into my hands. He’s wiping away the traces of tears as I take a swig and hand it back. Vision’s sort of double, but I stop a second, squinting. “Oh god. S’like you’re naked.”

“Whoa, boss. Inappropriate. I’ll be filing a complaint with HR now.”

"Who's HR around here?"
"PAM's probably the logical choice." He reaches for his shades.

"Naw, leave ‘em off! I like seeing your eyes. They’re so… uh… far apart.” I giggle again as he opens his mouth in mock outrage.

“All right, but only because you asked me to. I wouldn’t suffer these blinding fluorescents for anyone else. Dez refuses to spring for mood lighting. Something about ‘maintaining what few resources we have’… I don’t know, I'm no economist.” He gives a long, exhausted sigh and stretches, his arm falling across my shoulders. *Oldest trick in the book,* I think, butterflies creeping around in my abdomen. It really is, though; Nate used it on me at the Starlight Drive-in more than a couple times, with rousing success. By some miracle of fate, Shaun remains an only child.

My playfulness begins to fade. Nate and Shaun aren’t what I want to be thinking about right now.

“What’s wrong? Thinking about the long-awaited chemical cocktail?” I nod. It’s easier. He pulls me closer, squeezes my shoulder. “It’ll be okay, babe. The wheels are in motion. Carrington can be a real bastard sometimes, but he takes playing doctor very seriously.”

“Babe?”

“Boss,” he corrects himself, giving an awkward smile. “Damn liquor.” He’s warm and his skin and t-shirt are soft; I can feel his muscles working with every small movement of his arm. I chance a peek at him, meeting his eyes, so bare and full and alive. He can’t hold the gaze long before he looks off down the long, empty hall.

“Hey, I have a question,” he ventures. That last shot’s hitting me, a fiery warmth spreading down my throat and through my belly.

“Shoot.” I close one eye and aim down the hall with my finger.

“How come my lying doesn’t bother you?”

Slowly I lower my ‘gun,’ eyes meeting his gaze once more. Er, eye. One’s still screwed shut — I don’t think I can handle two pairs of those baby blues trained on me at once.

“We-e-ell…” He looks real serious, which is pretty out of character. I muster up all the sober I’ve got left in me. “I always believe you, and I never believe you. I mean, you only lie with words. You never lie with — when —” The words aren’t coming. Frustrated, I grab his hand, tugging his arm closer around me. He chuckles.

“Yeah, I get you. You’re pretty good at saying the right thing, you know that, boss? Even when what you’re saying doesn’t make a whole lot of sense.” Deacon shakes his head. “Drives everyone else nuts. The lying, I mean. Almost kicked me out of the whole org over it once, a long time ago. Imagine that, excommunicating a deacon.”

Liquid courage courses through my veins. I wiggle and shift and scoot until I’ve nestled my head on his chest, arm draped across his stomach. This feels nice. Comfortable. Safe. Like the old days, before everything blew up. “Don’t worry. You still drive me nuts. Babe.”

"You're a god-damned liability." His free arm lifts and hesitates, then covers my own. *Oh my God. We're snuggling.* The thought feels like a victory to my bourbon-soaked mind, but I didn’t realize until now that there had even been a battle. I sigh, content and suddenly very, very tired.
“I wish I didn’t have to leave you behind,” she mumbles into my t-shirt.

“What?” That was a weird segue.

“When I go. To do the thing. You know. I wish you could come…”

“What thing? What are you talking about, Wanderer?” But she’s gone, still as a statue, softly breathing hot air onto my chest. Somehow the wild hammering of my heart doesn’t wake her.

This is not smart, Deacon. We're at HQ, for Christ’s sake. No way in hell this won’t spread like wildfire. The senior-most field agent and the new heavy cuddling by the escape hatch? Switchboard will be old news compared to this soap opera plotline. Please, God. If You’re there, and You care about me at all, please let Glory leave on a very early-morning op. Out the front door, not the back, mind You.

But she’s really, really soft, all folded up next to me. And it sounds conceited, but maybe she needs this more than just fire support. With me she loses her hard edge, becomes that woman at the Red Rocket all those weeks ago, arms tangled around a lonely mutt on a night she never should’ve lived to see.

And maybe… Hell. Maybe I need her, too.

I can’t think straight with all this alcohol and serotonin clouding my brain. All I know is that the woman I’m obsessed with on multiple levels is curled up around me, snoring contentedly.

I press my lips to her hair. Like you could ever leave me behind.
Chapter Summary

For the first time since partnering up, Wanderer leaves Deacon behind to run an op on her own. Or tries to, at least.

It's never a good idea to adventure without Deacon by your side. C'mon, Wanderer, get it together!

“Don’t let him follow me.”

She sounded sort of pissed when she said it. Resigned. Preston had this surprised look on his face, like he was hurt by her tone. It made me grin; he doesn’t know Wanderer like I do. And God willing, he never will.

She hated tying that rope on Dogmeat. If I wanted to be poetic about it, I’d draw some comparison between leashing the mutt and rejecting the unwanted responsibilities thrust upon her by an unforgiving fate. But I’m not feeling very Thoreau right now, proximity to Walden Pond notwithstanding.

Dogmeat's whines and whimpers chased us all the way out of Sanctuary. Wanderer was rigid and silent the whole time. And for once, I didn’t feel like doing my civic duty to lighten the mood. I knew what was coming, and I didn’t like it. Not one goddamn bit.

Deacon stopped talking to me somewhere between Corvega and the diner.

To be fair, I was being kind of an asshole.

“Where we headed next, boss?” he’d asked, sprightly as ever. There was a shadow behind his words, though, that hadn’t been there before. Not even when he was first vouching for me to cranky old Dez. For the thirtieth time that hour, I'd inwardly cursed myself. What did I say that night at HQ, in my drunken idiocy? I remembered the feeling of clutching his hand on the dock and silently groaned. It could have been anything.

“Sanctuary.” My reply had been short. It probably came across as annoyed, angry, now that I think about it.

“Ah. Sanctuary. A veritable hub of excitement.” He was trying to catch my eye, I knew, but I’d avoided his gaze. I’m a terrible liar and a guilty-as-hell schemer; less words equaled less opportunity to spill the beans. That probably came across badly, too. Sigh.

“Gotta check in on Preston. You know how he is. And... I’m dropping off Dogmeat.” I’d swallowed, venturing too close to the truth. “Poor buddy needs a break from all the action.”

It was the dumbest lie yet. Dogmeat loved fighting. He’d rather tear out a throat than catch a Frisbee any day. I cringed as soon as I said it, seeing Deacon’s eyebrow raise above his sunglasses.
“Well, you’re the boss. If you say it’s time for an unnecessary detour to the quietest settlement in the Commonwealth, then it’s time for an unnecessary detour to the quietest settlement in the Commonwealth.” He shrugged. "It’s not like we have anything important to do or whatever.” That was the longest reply I would get from him for miles yet.

Despite the killer hangover and the *almost* negligible puddle of drool, waking up on that disgusting mattress using Deacon’s bicep as a pillow had been one of my happiest mornings since thawing. I’d opened my eyes and laid there a long while, quiet, both unable to reclaim slumber and unwilling to shatter the moment. He looked peaceful. And handsome. Really, really handsome.

Eventually Deacon shifted, groaning, and opened those blue eyes. I’d forgotten their color. Not entirely surprising, given the empty bottle of Old Appalachia discarded in the corner. He’d looked down at me, surprised at the weight on his arm, at the feeling of a hand resting lightly on his ribcage. There was a moment of uncertainty then. It easily could’ve been… weird. But he looked in my eyes and smiled and winked.

“The best thing about drinking yourself stupid at HQ,” he’d said, squeezing me closer with his one arm, “is the delightful overabundance of Fancy Lads in the morning. Soaks up the alcohol and the pain like nothing else.” I laughed, we helped each other up, he made a couple of jokes about my bedroom hair, and everything was back to normal. Or at least not awkward and silent. And that just grew worse as we neared Sanctuary.

I’m over-analyzing. It’s useless, serving only to stir up anxiety and indigestion. My options are pretty limited out here, though. It’s either a rousing game of “is that a decaying lump of debris or a Deathclaw Matriarch?”, naming all the capitals, or dwelling on exactly which string of stupid words destroyed my easy friendship with Deacon forever.

I sigh and trudge forward. The fact that I don’t really know where I’m going seems especially poignant.

I had my doubts when I first pulled this dusty hazmat suit from the drawer at Wanderer’s house in Sanctuary, but it’s surprisingly comfortable. I can squat and lunge and everything. Stealth has never been so sexy.

Wanderer does her name justice, that’s for sure. At this point, I’ve seen more of the ‘Wealth with her than in the rest of my years combined. The farther south we go, the less scenic the terrain becomes. The trees go from being their regular, endearing, bare-branched selves to these blackened, malformed stumps. Pretty soon even those give way to a vast emptiness. Save for the occasional cameo of an especially disease-ridden bloatfly, there’s nothing out here. Nothing.

A buzz in my ear suddenly breaks the monotony of the hike. Held in front of my face, my hand flickers into existence; Stealth Boy’s wearing out. I grab another, flick it on, and toss the used-up device over my shoulder. This ain’t no National Park.

Off in the distance, a movement catches my eye. I can just barely make out a hulking torso, lanky arms, and curving horns — a Deathclaw. I’ve seen a few now, all from far enough away that there’s no real threat. I shake my head and drop a couple of F-bombs anyway, though. Sometimes a guy’s just gotta swear, you know?

This dark mood settled on me long before it had a sky to match. Everyone knows I’m a liar. It’s my thing, and everybody’s gotta have their thing. It’s what separates us from the ferals. So it took me
by surprise when I’d first realized Wanderer was lying to me.

“Where we headed next, boss?”

“Sanctuary.”

Her reply had been terse, clipped, like she was mad at me or something. I’d shrugged and given some smart-ass reply, but our last night at HQ came floating back to me. Wanderer, sleepy and soft, curled against my side. *I wish I didn’t have to leave you behind.* A cold stab of fear went through my chest then. It wasn’t a bluff or a bourbon-fueled misunderstanding. She was really going to leave me.

I’d spent the next few days wracking my brain, filing through my memories, desperate for clues. Wanderer barely spoke to me. Even Dogmeat kept his tail down and ears low, sensing change in the air.

A sudden crunch sounds beneath my boot, jerking me out of my reveries. Shit — that sounded like glass. It better not have perforated my suit. I brought along rad meds, but not enough to get me out of this hellhole without an extra arm or two.

I lift my foot and peer down at the blackened ground. There’s not a lot of loose debris here, so I’m surprised to see something familiar among the shards. A label. I squint. There’s a tiny picture of an anthropomorphized needle in a top hat, a drop of cartoon blood welling from his thumbs-up. A wet darkness spreads beneath the small pile of broken glass.

“Motherfuck.”

It had been easier to shake Deacon than Dogmeat, and that made me suspicious.

I’d half-believed I’d need to leash the agent up for Preston, too. The few times I’ve tried to take on an op alone, Deacon has flatly refused to stay behind. The guy does not like missing out. I remember taking a deep breath, centering my thoughts.

“D, you’re not gonna like this.”

He’d stopped and looked at me expectantly. “Try me, pal.”

“I’ve gotta take care of a few things. And I’ve got to do it… alone. I need you to—”

He cut me off with a shrug, a mish-mash of words tumbling from his mouth. “Hey, you need me to stay behind for this one? You got it. These settlers don’t know a melon from a mutfruit, anyway. *I* used to be a farmer, you know. By the time you get back, Sunshine Tidings’ll be a lush, verdant paradise of weird, twisted crops.”

I blinked, taken aback. I hadn’t planned on *that* response. “I… uh… well, can you plant some carrots, too?”

He lowered his sunglasses with a finger, eyeing me over their rim. “Your wish… is my strong recommendation.”

“Sheesh. If you don’t want to grow carrots, you don’t have to.” It was over so quickly; I wasn’t prepared to leave him right *then.* I’d had a whole speech ready, with rebuttals and everything. But
there was a tone of finality in his voice. *So serious about the root vegetables,* I thought to myself. Extending my arms, apparently as awkwardly as possible, I’d given him a pained smile. “I guess this is goodbye?”

He’d stepped forward and swept me up in this huge hug, my spine crackling with its force. “Nah, boss,” he’d said to my back, “it’s never goodbye with us. ‘So long,’ maybe, or ‘in a while, crocodile.’ Goodbye’s off the table, though. Sorry.”

Tears had prickled the corners of my eyes. For all that the man lied to me constantly and without a hint of remorse, I felt like a traitor. “I’ll be back soon. You won’t even miss me,” I said, voice muffled against his shoulder.

“Very unlikely,” he replied. He held me a moment longer, then stepped back. “Well, off you go, then. I’ve gotta figure out what a carrot seed looks like. Do they even *have* seeds? How the hell do carrots reproduce, anyway?”

“Some farmer you must’ve been,” I joked, wiping an eye. “See you later, alligator.”

He saluted me and spun around, strolling away. Somehow I don’t think he wanted to watch me go. And me, I hadn’t thought it would be so hard to take those first solo steps.

***

I’ve thought of those last moments at least a hundred times on this never-ending nature hike through the asshole of the ‘Wealth. I wonder how many more days of walking I have ahead of me. None of the landmarks I’m looking for have appeared. I wonder how hopeless this endeavor really is. I wonder if I’ll even see Deacon and Dogmeat again, or if one of those far-off Deathclaws will catch my scent on the breeze and end this before it’s really begun.

I sigh and peel the lid from a can of Cram, glaring at the label. *How does a can of meat have so many carbs?* I wonder to myself. But it’s Cram. I know better than to believe it’s actually meat.

I’m hunkered beneath a slight overhang, hoping that the depression in the land will hide me from both predators and particularly radioactive zephyrs alike. It’ll be another cold night spent shivering in my hazmat suit, trying in vain to pull a metallic emergency blanket over my body. It won’t cover my feet and my shoulders, and I need both to sleep. I find myself wistfully remembering the dirty mattresses at the Old North Church, wishing for a bottle of Old Appalachia to warm me from the inside, for Dogmeat’s space heater-like warmth at one side and maybe someone else on the other…

*Christ almighty.* *Stop thinking about Deacon.* I go to smack my gloved palm against my forehead and hit the suit’s helmet. *Anything to make me look like an even bigger idiot,* I think, glad for the first time that I’m alone. Removing the helmet, I pop a few Rad-X and dig into the Cram, wondering if the radiation or the sodium will take me first. I’m still hungry once it’s gone; I reach slowly into my pack, side-eyeing the wilderness as though someone might be silently judging me, and pull out a box of Fancy Lads. *It’s fine,* I tell myself, *Carrington’s working on it.* I bite into one, savoring the sweetness. I still don’t know how the two-centuries-old cakes taste like they did in 2077. They remind me of Switchboard, of a dawnlight brunch with my brand-new partner. *Nah, we definitely want you,* he’d said then. My stomach flips at the memory. I smack my forehead again, this time making contact.

Taking a shot in the hazmat suit is no simple process. I unzip the front, wriggle an arm out of its sleeve, grab my pouch, and ready a needle. The back of the arm has always been my least-favorite injection site, but there aren’t many options in the full-body suit.
I frown. My insulin vial isn’t in the pouch. This isn’t immediately alarming, though. Taking the drug is an automatic process, as easy to ignore as flipping on a light switch or putting the milk back in the fridge. I’d once put my insulin away in the pantry behind a box of cereal and spent three panicked hours tearing apart the house. Nate had come home to find me slumped on the kitchen floor, laughing and sobbing with tears streaming down my face, cans and boxes strewn about and the found bottle clutched in my hand. I was eight months pregnant and sure that if I could lose something as stupidly important as a bottle of insulin, I could never be trusted with a baby. 

Funny how that worked out.

I poke my finger into every square inch of the pouch. No insulin. I pat down the hazmat suit, hoping I’d somehow zipped it inside. No insulin. I upend my pack, contents spilling across the compacted earth. I turn it inside-out, shake it, squeeze it, comb through anything that could act as a hiding place. No insulin.

Leaning back against the earthen wall, I stare into space. When was the last time I’d used it? I’d been scrimping lately, taking far smaller doses than my meals warranted, hoping to eke it out as long as possible without turning my blood to acid. I’d only just run out of carrots today; their delightful lack of carbohydrates made them an ideal meal.

A day. It’s been at least a day since my last shot. There’s no way I could retrace my steps from the last twenty-four hours. Everything looks the same out here. And I haven’t found any landmarks.

Fighting panic, I consider vomiting my meal. But I’m out of carrots; everything else I’ve brought has about the same amount of carbs. I still need energy; there’s a long way to walk yet.

I close my eyes. I breathe deep, ignoring the wild hammering in my chest. I calculate how long it will take for my sugars to get out of control. While a drop can be swift and dangerous, glucose takes time to build up in the blood. Some people survive for months without even being aware they’re sick. It could be weeks before a coma takes me. My task will be done before then, surely.

I dig a small hole, bury my trash, and replace my helmet. I pull the emergency blanket close around me, my back to the wall, striving for a semblance of comfort. Anxiety is flooding my brain with unwelcome chemicals, but there’s nothing I’d rather do than submit to unconsciousness right now. I need a distraction. His arms around me. Feeling his muscles tremble slightly, he holds me so tight. His voice, melodic as always — was there a catch as he spoke?

“It’s never goodbye with us.”

At least part of me is warm as I finally drift off, shoving worry somewhere behind my heart.

I crouch on the outskirts of the crater. I didn’t anticipate there being people out here, but it’s not that surprising, given that they’re a bunch of loons from the Children of Atom. Why they haven’t been ghoulified living here in the dead zone, I can’t say.

Wanderer isn’t messing around though, that’s for damn sure. She finds their head priestess or whoever, spends no more than half an hour in conversation, and then she’s off again, hiking up a crater path to the southwest.

Whatever I missed was big, I know that now. And I’ve been so goddamn thorough. It’s my pride that hurts more than anything, really; how did I miss the clue that would plop us right in the middle of Ground Zero?
We hike for another day or so, me trailing a considerable distance behind Wanderer, before reaching a cave tunneled into the hillside. A weak glow pulses from deep inside.

“Oh, that’s not ominous at all,” I say under my breath. “Oh, good. Of course you’re exploring the creepy cave. I mean, why not?” I check the battery on my Stealth Boy, vow yet again to give Tinker Tom a passionate smooch when I see him next, and jog down to the cave.

***

It’s hours before she emerges. I’ve kept an ear open, but all I’ve been able to hear is the steady chugging of a turret and the distorted echo of conversation. Nothing to suggest trouble, but my feelings of unease don’t abate until I see her again, whole and safe.

She passes right by me, close enough to touch. Even in the dusky green haze, I can make out her expression behind the helmet. She’s worried. It takes everything I have to fight the urge to reach out and grab her arm, to turn that perpetual frown upside-down, to ask what the hell’s going on. But she can’t know that I’ve followed her. That’s more than a lie; that’s a betrayal, through and through.

Also, being grabbed by an invisible hand might freak her out a little, and I’m not too keen on bleeding to death out here in the middle of nowhere. When I’m a ghost, I want to enjoy the spectacle of Glory weeping uncontrollably at my grave.

The next couple of days are uneventful. We avoid a few Deathclaws and take a wide berth around the Crater of Crazies. I don’t regret my clandestine game of Follow the Leader, not by a long shot, but it’s kind of relieving to know that my rifle hasn’t been needed out here. We hit the jackpot on this route: no radscorps, no ferals, not even a stingwing. Feels safe as Sanctuary out here, to be honest.

I start to hum. Dion. Thank God that guy’s records made it through the fallout to Travis’s desk. Yeah, ‘cause she’s my Wanderer, yeah, my Wanderer, she roams around, around, around, around...

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The first time I vomit, I almost don’t get my helmet off in time.

It roils up my throat suddenly, unexpectedly; only the brief vision of disaster that flashes in my mind gets me to twist it off and throw it to the side before my lunch splatters to the ground.

It’s begun, I guess.

The next few miles are agonizing. Every fifty feet or so I double over, abdomen cramping, expelling whatever liquid my body keeps producing to fill my stomach. Eventually it’s too much. I’m on my knees, heaving, throat raw from a never-ending stream of acid traveling its length. It’s too much. The only respite I’ll get is to find sleep, I know. I squint, vision blurry; there’s another overhang not too far away. Praying that there are no hungry Deathclaws nearby, I crawl towards it, helmet off, leaving a trail of bile in my wake like some nightmarish Hansel.

With trembling hands, I try to pop some Rad-X. The helmet has to stay off, and this place is radioactive as fuck. But nothing will stay down — water, pills, everything heaves back up the minute it touches bottom.

Frustrated, I begin to cry brokenly, every couple of sobs interrupted by another loud wave of
nausea. I’ve made it so far, almost to the edge of the Glowing Sea, almost within reach of the family at Somerville Place. I set up a supply line there; they could get word to Deacon…

It’s too much. None of this is fair. None of it. I wish I’d died in the blast, wish I’d died in the Vault, wish I’d been holding Shaun in that freezer, that Kellogg put me out of my misery instead of Nate…

My frustration gives way to rage. A hoarse scream tears from my throat. I begin to smash at the glass hazmat helmet with the butt of my pistol, cracking it, shattering it.

I curl up on my side, back to the wall. Death may beckon with its glamour, but choking on my own vomit still sounds like a bad idea. I close my eyes, but sleep takes its sweet time finding me.

She won’t wake up. Wanderer won’t wake up.

It feels like someone’s reaching an ice-cold fist into my chest and yanking at my spine. Shaking her obviously isn’t helping; I force myself to stop, moving my hand from shoulder to cheek, cupping it gently. She’s still warm — is she too warm? I can feel her breath on my hand, even and regular, which seems like a good sign. But she won’t wake up. Why won’t she wake up?

When I first noticed her getting sick, I told myself it wasn’t the rads. That she’d caught some strange bug from the weirdos in the crater, or eaten a bad can of Cram, or hell, maybe she was pregnant. Maybe that night at the Third Rail with Hancock was more disturbing than I’d thought. I told myself anything and believed it, until she didn’t wake up in the morning.

“Ahh, radiation, you unbelievable bastard.” My voice sounds hollow with no one to hear it.

She’s got a shit ton of Radaway, I think, frowning. Why didn’t she use the Radaway? I unzip her hazmat suit, pulling out an arm and rolling up its sleeve. Her veins are bright blue and close to the surface; I’m in luck there, at least. I stab a bag of fluid to the wall with a combat knife, unroll the tubing, and carefully plunge the IV into her vein. The liquid begins to course downward. I exhale, realizing I’d been holding my breath. Now there’s nothing to do but wait.

She’s a pathetic sight. She really is. Her skin is pale, her cheeks flushed, and there are clean trails where tears have sliced through the dust on her face. Her dark hair is wet with sweat and clings to her forehead; I brush it to the side, tucking it behind her ear. Some of her sick still clings to her chin. I wet a bandana and wipe it away, wipe her face clean, fold the cloth, and place it on her forehead. Her lower lip juts out ever so slightly; it wrings at my heart. She cried herself to sleep.

“Why didn’t you bring me along?” I whisper, wanting to blame her. But I should have insisted. I should’ve handcuffed her to a pipe until she confessed her scheme. We could have brought a group, we could have… we could have…

I screw my eyes shut and hang my helmeted head. Nothing to do but wait.

***

It’s not the rads.

Whatever’s making her sick, it’s not the rads. The IV bag’s empty, all the fluid drained into her body, Radaway coursing happily through her veins.
I remember the crunch of glass beneath my boot. I remember the needle’s little cartoon face, staring at me from the ground, accusatory.

She doesn’t talk about her diabetes much. It makes her uncomfortable. She likes to pretend it’s not there, and I like to keep Wanderer from frowning, so honestly, I don’t know that much about it.

This must be what happens when she doesn’t take her medicine. Suddenly, it all falls into place.

Somerville Place is another day’s walk, but it’s not too far, in the grand scheme of things. We can requisition a brahmin there, get back to Sanctuary within a few days’ time. I think she might have one last bottle of insulin left in the ol’ freezer. If she doesn’t — if she doesn’t—

*Don’t you fucking think about it, Deacon*, I swear at myself. This isn’t going to happen again. It’s not. *It’s not.*

I sling my pack onto my shoulders and stand, bending to scoop her up. Her body’s limp and her head lolls into my chest. I try to ignore the ice crystals piercing my heart and trudge forward, beginning the long walk north, trusting that the Stealth Boy will keep us off a Deathclaw’s radar.

“Remember, boss,” I whisper down to her prone form, “goodbye’s off the table.”
Chapter Summary

(I hope you're all ready for a chapter just brimming with Deacon POV.)

D’s not ready to lose his best and only friend. Preston is emotional. Dogmeat is the best.

There’s a lot to be said for the resourcefulness of post-war humanity. We’ve got mini nukes. We’ve refurbished nuclear generators to power our cities. Laser rifles are pretty much black magic.

So exactly how, on God’s brown, decaying Earth, have we not figured out how to fix a car?

These are the chief thoughts that occupy my mind on the long, slow trek back to Sanctuary, the brahmin going marginally faster than if I’d been crawling and dragging Wanderer behind me with my teeth. I’m also imagining a fat, juicy ribeye on a platter. Go figure.

We’re passing the Co-op when the wild barking starts up. Great. I need a pack of feral mongrels like I need an unconscious partner teetering on the edge of death. Oh. Wait.

Peering down the long highway I spy a streak of brown barreling toward us, making an unholy racket along the way. The worst baddies in these parts are a couple spindly Raiders and a Mirelurk on a bad day, so I’m annoyed more than anything. I unsling my rifle and flip off the safety.

But it’s just Dogmeat, and he shuts up as soon as he reaches us.

“Never trust a Minuteman to do a… to do any job,” I say to no one in particular, bending down to ruffle the dog’s ears. His nose is glued to Wanderer slung over the brahmin’s back and he whines softly, nudging her hand.

“I know, buddy. I’m bringing her back as fast as I can.” Dogmeat stares at me, ears perked. “I don’t suppose you know the command ‘get help?’ No? How about ‘find some goddamn insulin?’ You got that one, boy?”

He barks once in reply, sharply, then takes off back the way he came.

“Uh… yeah. I knew that would happen.”

Sighing heavily, I flick the brahmin’s flank with two fingers. It bellows and skips ahead a few steps. It’s going to be excruciating, but we should reach Sanctuary before the day is out.

***

It’s only a couple hours before more loud, lumbering shapes appear in the distance. Drawing near, they resolve into humanoids that look remarkably like Preston and Sturges.

“Well, crack my exoskeleton and call me a Mirelurk, it is Preston and Sturges.”

Dogmeat lopes alongside them, tongue lolling, clearly proud of himself. That dog’s earned one of
“Deacon!” Preston calls with upraised hand, as if I don’t know he’s addressing me, literally the only person in sight. Minutemen. “What happened? Is the General all right?”

I roll my eyes, hidden behind my sunglasses. “She’s just peachy-keen. Can’t you tell?”

The Minuteman frowns. He’s never picked up on sarcasm well. “This looks bad. We need to get her to a doctor.”

“A fine observation, my good man.”

Sturges isn’t quite as dense as his friend, in spite of the overalls. He glares at me. “C’mon. We can get her back faster if we run.” Drawing a length of rope from one of his innumerable pockets, he loops it around the brahmin’s neck and nose, pulling it taut. With a sharp tug, the brahmin begins to trot more quickly. So do Preston and Sturges, turning on their heels and jogging in front, Dogmeat nipping at the brahmin’s hooves to keep it motivated.

I glower at the damn thing, now practically sprinting down the highway, then follow suit.

***

Fiddle with the terminal, hit the button. These Vaults all work the same. With a hiss, the pod door releases, raising upward in a cloud of vapor.

I stare at him for a moment once the air clears. *Nate*. He’s a good-looking fellow. Strong jaw, five o’clock shadow, tall, muscular. Your typical hero-soldier-returning-from-war type. Somehow I just can’t imagine my rough-and-tumble Wasteland girl as a docile housewife. But... just for a second, it might be fun to try.

A cleaner, more well-groomed Wanderer in a pretty floral dress leans over the kitchen counter, writing out a grocery list. She’s plump. Pregnant. Glowing. There’s no scar on her cheek from a Raider’s rusty knife jab, no frown lines between her brows. The front door opens; it’s him, golden medals flashing on his breast, white teeth shining at her. She looks up and smiles and hops off her stool, waddling forward, but he meets her halfway, sweeping her up in a hug, kissing her rosy cheek. Real wholesome-like.

I shake my head. A bubble of anger rises through me. “How could you ever leave her, man?” It’s unfair, of course, but I ask him anyway.

I finally look down, ready to face crushing disappointment, but it doesn’t hit.

There’s a tiny vial at his feet, frosty and clear and goddamn perfect in every way.

***

Mama Murphy pulls the vial from my fingers, tsking at me.

“No, no, no, kid, you can’t do it that way. You’ll get air in the needle. You *never* want air in the needle. Here, lemme show ya.”

She flips the vial upside-down and flicks it a few times. Trapped bubbles rise to the top of the precious liquid.

“No, you take your needle—” she pulls the syringe from my grasp, too “—and you stick it in.
Now,” she says, handing both pieces back to me, “pull the plunger down. Slowly. No bubbles, remember?”

We’ve sent word along the supply lines that we need a doctor. And not a battlefield butcher, either — a real doctor. My fingers are crossed for Amari, but it’s a slim hope. It could be weeks before anyone shows up. If they come at all.

All right. The plunger. Wanderer only ever filled the needles up a little. I’d really rather not kill her with good intentions. Not after walking all that way.

I gaze down at her. Mama’s taken good care of my Wanderer since we reached Sanctuary, I’ll give her that. She’s been bathed and dressed in soft, clean clothing — give infection an inch and it’ll take a mile, the old woman had said. I reach for her covers and hesitate, my hand landing at her temple instead.

“You’re gonna be all right, boss,” I murmur, smoothing a few strands of hair away from her face.

“Hey, she’s not Snow White, kid,” Mama scolds from her chair nearby. “It ain’t love’s first kiss that’ll wake her up. It’s that drug you gotta shoot in her veins. You gonna do your thing, or leave it to an old pro like Mama Murphy?” She cackles.

“Okay, okay. Keep your pants on, grandma.” The syringe is as full as I’ll make it. I pull the covers down and tug the hem of her shirt upward. The skin of her lower belly is dotted with dozens of tiny bruises in various stages of healing, purple and yellow and red. I’ve seen Wanderer do this hundreds of times, but I’m still unsure as I gently pinch her flesh with one hand and stab the needle in with the other.

Of course she doesn’t spring awake, fully healed and ready to take on the world. I didn’t really expect that. It’s a little disappointing, all the same. I sigh and lean back in my chair, pulling her hand into mine. She still wears her wedding ring, I realize, fingering it lightly. My eyes begin to drowse and I allow myself to drift off, holding her hand close.

Mama eyes the kids in the corner of the room. They look like they’re sleepin’, but it’s not ‘til the boy snores loudly that she makes her move. He’s left his pack slumped over next to the coffee table, and her eyesight isn’t so far gone that she missed the flash of red plastic. Old Mama’d know that shape anywhere.

She’s always been proud of her quick hands. Heck, she once pulled a Raider’s knife right from its sheath on his thigh and slit his throat with it. While she was chained to a banister. And blindfolded. Age hasn’t taken her hands from her, not yet anyway. Like a frog snapping a fly from the air with its tongue, her arm shoots into the bag, snatching back her prize as she cackles quietly to herself.

Jet.

She inhales the drug greedily. Before long the visions begin, and she melts into her chair, succumbing.

“How’s she doing?”
Startled, I shoot up, blinking around blearily. “Huh? Wha-?”

Preston stands at the foot of Wanderer’s bed, gazing down at her. He looks… sad. As the cobwebs clear out, I realize I’m still holding Wanderer’s hand. I tuck it back on the bed at her side, Preston’s eyes following the movement. He sighs and pulls up a chair, laying his rifle on the bookshelf built into the wall.

He’s silent and I’m mildly confused, until I realize he’s asked me a question. I rub my forehead tiredly. “Not so good, my friend. Doctor can’t get here soon enough.”

“The provisioners brought news that Doc Weathers is on his way. One of them ran into him over by County Crossing. He’s not cheap, but he’s mobile. We’re scraping together caps now, if you have any to spare.”

“Yeah, we do.”

“Thanks, man. ‘Preciate it.” The guy sounds so friggin’ mopey. His elbows rest on his knees, hands clasped together, tendons straining against his skin. “Listen, I know we don’t see eye to eye on a lot of things. But I just wanted to say—” his voice sort of catches here “—you’re clearly a good friend. The General is real lucky to have you at her side.”

Surprised, I shift in my armchair, pulling at my wrinkled shirt, trying to look marginally respectable. “Uh, thaanks, Preston. That means a lot, coming from you.” Cringe. How can the truth sound worse than most of my lies?

“To tell the truth, I envy you,” he continues, staring at Wanderer’s still form. “Not a day goes by I don’t wish I were the one out there with her, fighting the bad guys, watching her back.” He sighs. “But she needs me here. I know where my duty lies. Even if it’s not… what I want.”

This is starting to feel like some sort of after-school special. Pretty soon Mama Murphy will pop out of her chair and warn us about the dangers of Med-X addiction. “It’s not all it’s cracked up to be. There’s a lot less heroism and a lot more shitting in the bushes than you’d think.”

Preston pulls off his goofy hat and holds it between his knees, spinning it idly, staring at the floor. “I love her, you know.”

I sit up straighter, passing a hand across the back of my neck. “You… uh… what now?”

He nods, chewing at his lower lip. “The first time I saw her, fighting through those Raiders like it was nothing, coming to our rescue… I knew she was special. I loved her right then. Suppose you could say it was at first sight.” He quickly runs a hand over his eyes. They’re wet. Mine are wide behind my sunglasses. He sniffs, then chuckles. “And when she put on that power armor, I knew I was done for.”

“She has her moments,” I say generously, then shake my head. “We’d be screwed without her.”

Preston just stares off into space. I clear my throat. “I’m sorry, bud. I know it’s tough to see her like this.”

“Before I met her…” Preston trails off, his voice almost a whisper. He tries again. “Before I met her, I was ready to end it, you know. Blamed myself for everything that had happened at Quincy, for all the failures afterward.” He coughs. “I am who I am because of her. I’m here today because of her.”

Preston stands suddenly, overwhelmed. Slinging his rifle across his back, he claps me on the
shoulder. “Like I said. You’re a lucky man, Deacon. To have a woman like that.”

I frown. “We’re all lucky to have her. She’s a pretty cool lady.”

His brown eyes bore into mine. That expression could have been ripped straight out of Shakespeare. “Weathers should be here in the next day or so. Let’s just hope our girl can hold on a little longer.”

Mama Murphy opens one eye, watching as Preston heads back to his patrol. The kid in the sunglasses stares after him a minute, then turns back to the girl. It’s sweet, y’know, how he keeps brushin’ the hair from her eyes, like it even bothers her when she’s out cold. Mama had a lover like that, once upon a time. Always doing gentle, unnecessary things. He hadn’t lasted long out there, but this kid, he seems tough. He might make it.

“Jeee-zus Chee-rist, what’s goin’ on here? I don’t do fuckin’ exorcisms, you know!” Doc Weathers’ voice is downright soothing.

“She’s diabetic, doc. You heard of it? Di-a-bee-tees?” I make sure to sound it out slowly.

“Have I heard of diabetes. Of course the good doctor knows about diabetes. What do you think I am, some kinda hack?”

I bite my tongue. “She’s in some sort of coma.”

“Yeah, I can see that, thanks, Captain Obvious. Who’s the doctor here, huh? You or me?”

I clench my teeth. “You. You’re the doctor.”

“Right you are, my friend. Now,” he says, rubbing his hands together, “treatin’ diabetes ain’t cheap. It’s a real delicate process. Takes a lotta resources. Lotta time. You sure you got the caps for this? Doc Weathers came a long way, you know.”

Preston steps forward, sensing the snark on the tip of my tongue. “We’ve got the caps, doctor. Here you are.” He plunks a heavy bag into the doctor’s waiting hands, who hefts it approvingly. “Thank you for coming so quickly.”

“Yeah, well, you know. Doc Weathers, he don’t scrimp when it comes to helpin’ people.” He sets his bag on the ground and waves his hands, shooing us. “All right, outta here, all of you. Give us some room to breathe, will ya?”

I cross my arms, frowning. My spy sensors are on red alert. “No way, buddy. Sorry, but you’re a stranger around here, doctor or no.” He can’t tell, but I narrow my eyes. “How do we know you won’t try anything… funny?”

Weathers scrunches his weaselly face at me. “I oughta be offended at that.” He sighs, scanning the room, then jabs a finger at Preston. “You. You can stay. I like your face. Nice guy. Everyone else, out.”

Outraged, I step forward, fists clenched at my side. “Listen, pal, there is no way—”
“Will somebody get the over-protective musclehead boyfriend outta here so I can get to work savin’ lives, puh-lease?”

Preston takes me by the elbow and steers me outside. His voice is low. “I’ll keep an eye on him, Deacon. You should take a breather. You’ve been on point for days now.”

I want to argue, but it’s pointless. The quack’s our best hope, for now. Sighing, I pull the vial of insulin from my pocket. “Here. He’ll need this, I’m sure. I’ll go… try to make myself useful.”

Preston nods gratefully. “Thanks, man. Listen, I know he’s not the most pleasant guy, but Weathers is our best hope right now. Let’s just play nice and get the General back in action.”

Inwardly I roll my eyes. I already thought that, Preston. “You’re so right. Take care of her for me, okay?”

Preston looks solemn. “You know I will.”

He doesn’t notice me watching him for a long while.

At first, I’m lost. I have no idea where I am. But after some time I come to realize I’m in the Rosas’ living room, across the street from my old house in Sanctuary. Someone’s dragged a cot out here. There are chairs arranged all around my bed. Mama Murphy’s slumped in one, snoring, mouth open wide. I wonder who else has been staring at me. Seems like it’s become a popular activity.

Deacon’s settled into an armchair next to my bed, engrossed in a book. I can’t make out the title, but the blurb on the back cover catches my eye. “Driven by her emotions, Marianne falls madly in love with the charming yet unpredictable John Willoughby…”

“Just can’t get enough of the Victorian drama, eh?” My throat is raw. Every word scrapes tiny knives across my flesh as it leaves me.

“Hey, I’ll have you know that Jane Austen was a frickin’ pioneer—” Deacon starts, the book dropping from his hands. “You’re awake!”

I settle into the comfy pillow, the ghost of a smile on my lips, eyes half-lidded. Everything’s sort of fuzzy, but I know that in my last memory I felt horrible and there was no Deacon. Now I’m in a soft bed, with clean covers and a pillow, and Deacon is here. That’s enough.

“Why do my arms hurt?”

She’s frowning, that lower lip making another defiant stand. It’s the most beautiful sight I’ve ever seen.

“It’s the IVs, babe. Don’t move too much, you’ll pull them out. And then I’ll faint again when the doctor comes back to fix ‘em. And I think he’s out of smelling salts.” I don’t even know what I’m saying. “What do you need, Wanderer? Ol’ Deacon’ll take care of ya. Your wish is my command.” I brush a stray eyelash from her cheek; she looks mildly surprised at the gesture.
“Just… can you tell me what happened?” Her voice sounds so small.

“You got pretty sick, boss. You were in a coma.”

“That’s right, my insulin…” Wanderer stops, then looks at me sharply. “You followed me.”

“You lied to me.”

We stare at each other for a long moment. She breaks contact first, looking down. Those lashes are so long. I’d never noticed before.

“You’d never stay behind if you knew what I was doing.”

“Of course I wouldn’t. It was stupid to go alone. Do you even know how many whacks I owe you for Deathclaw Punch Buggy?”

“I didn’t want to bring you there.”

“I’ve gone everywhere else with you.” She looks at me again. I wonder if she wonders.

“But you’re healthy, Deacon,” she bursts out, frowning and pouting like no one I’ve ever seen. This is definitely a new side to Wanderer. I make a mental note to add *throws tantrums* to her personnel file back at HQ.

“You’ve got your whole life ahead of you,” she continues, brow furrowed. “I didn’t want to make you a ghoul, or give you radiation poisoning, or cancer, or—”

“That’s selfish as hell.” I pull off my sunglasses and gesture at her, angry. “Do you have any idea what it’s been like to see you like this? To have no fucking clue how to fix you?”

Her eyes move imperceptibly, searching mine. I suddenly feel naked. “You’re God,” she says simply. Like it’s not the weirdest fucking thing she could possibly come up with.

My anger falls flat. “Uh, come again?”

“I thought you were Nate, but you said you were God. You said you could smite me,” she says, accusatory. I raise my eyebrows and purse my lips. She’s lost it.

“The Super Mutants. You helped me, after the Suicider attacked.” Wanderer comes to a conclusion, setting her jaw. “You’ve been following me for a long time.”

“I…” What can I say? Helplessly, I spread my hands. “Yeah. I have.”


The seconds stretch into minutes as she lays there, brooding.

“You’re a perv.”

“I’m a what now?” I’d been expecting to be called a few names, but that one wasn’t on my short list.

“You’re a big perv. You watched me take baths and stuff.”

I actually chuckle at that, despite the creeping paranoia that Wanderer will never speak to me
again. “No, Wanderer, I did not do that. When it comes to career voyeurism, I’m a perfect gentleman. I did kill a couple Gunners that were watching you bathe, once.” Her eyes widen. “High-powered scopes aren’t just for sniping, you know.”

The front door flies open with a bang, throwing a blessed wrench into the gears of this conversation. It’s Preston.

“You’re awake!” he cries. If his voice were any more full of emotion, it’d pop. Wanderer beams at him as he rushes over, pushing past me to gently take her hand. I scowl. She’s smiling too hard. I suspect this is part of my punishment.

I turn the vial around and around in my fingers, disturbed.

“That quack used up half the bottle,” Deacon explains apologetically. “I hope it’s enough to tide us over until Carrington comes through.”

“It’s fine,” I say distractedly. The shape is all wrong. It’s too short.

“Can I borrow the dictionary where you get your definition of ‘fine?’ ‘Cause I could really use some of that perspective right now.”

“Yeah, it’s probably over there,” I mutter, waving vaguely to the left.

Deacon closes *Sense and Sensibility* with a snap, leaning forward. “You in there, boss? Helloooo?” He waves a hand in front of my eyes.

Suddenly I gasp. “Where’s Neil?”

“Neil?”

“Neil the Needle.” I tap the vial decisively. “He’s not on the label. And the bottle’s the wrong shape.” I wrack my brain, trying to recall my hellish trek through the Glowing Sea. “Deacon… where did you find this?”

He looks uncomfortable. “In the Vault. In the… his pod. Nate’s pod.”

I ignore the sting that pierces my chest to hear Deacon speak my husband’s name. “I didn’t have any left in the Vault, though.”

His brows knit together. “Sure you did. I grabbed the last one. Like the hero I am. Have you even thanked me yet, by the way?”

“No, Deacon. I didn’t.” I try to compose my face. “I took my last bottle with me into the Sea. That’s what I lost. That’s what you stepped on.” I say my next words slowly, as if that will help them make sense.

“This isn’t my insulin.”
Chapter Summary

It's Wanderer's time to monologue, because Deacon's lost in his own head. A retelling of a scene we all know and love, heartbreaking though it may be.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The spoon smacks me in the lip, clumps of orange mush sliding down to drip from my chin.

“You did that on purpose!”

Deacon’s bent in half on the armchair, shaking with silent laughter. “I swear I didn't.”

“Sure,” I grump. “Whatever. I don't want to eat this, anyway.”

“Too bad. You don't get a choice,” he says, aiming another spoonful of mush at my face. I purse my lips, refusing. “Open wide for the vertibird!”

“But it's so gro–” Too late. The mush has landed. I swallow with difficulty, grimacing.

“Incredibly irritating doctor’s orders, boss. Not mine.” Tenderly, he uses the spoon to scoop the fallen carrot mush up my chin and back into my mouth. “Theeere ya go. Aw, you're doing so good,” he coos. I want to bat those sunglasses right off his smug face.

“This is humiliating.” My arms are useless, pincushioned with various IVs. A maintenance feed, a vitamin drip, a couple bags of saline. Takes a lot of liquid to heal a body sapped of water and full of acid.

“Nah. Humiliating is what happens when you ring that bell for Mama Murphy.”

“If I had even one arm to hit you with right now…” My face is bright red. There are a few necessary actions you just can’t accomplish on your own when your arms are full of sharp metal.

He’s grinning, pleased with himself. Miraculously, none of the carrot mush has fallen onto his clean white t-shirt; it’s pristine, freshly laundered. To my relief he sets aside the spoon and bowl, takes a clean cloth, and wipes the remnants of mush debris from my chin as I frown, petulant. He pulls the strange insulin vial from a nearby shelf and formally presents it to me.

“Mm-mm. No.”

“You gotta take your insulin.”

“That's not my insulin.”

“Says the weak, confused invalid who just woke up from a coma.”

“My pancreas is broken. My brain works just fine.”
“You don't have a choice, babe.” He's been slipping up more often lately. Maybe he doesn't notice, or maybe he doesn't care. Either way, my heart flutters just a little. *Stop that,* I tell it sternly.

“It's probably poison. From an assassin.”

“Whatever it is, it works.”

“So?”

“So take it. Or do I have to hold you down and jab it in you myself?”

I raise an eyebrow.

“That's *not* what I meant. Take the damn insulin, you troublemaker.”

“Fine. But only because I know you'll be inconsolable if I die. Your sunglasses can't hide the tears, Deacon.” My traitor of a partner’s not wrong. It works. I'm mostly just surprised he doesn't think it's some convoluted Institute plot. It's such an *alien* little bottle. No expiration date, no batch number, no corporate branding. Just a simple white label and a purple rubber stopper. My other bottles had maroon caps, I'm almost sure of it.

Slowly, trying not to jostle the IVs dangling from my arms, I lift the hem of my t-shirt and pinch the skin of my belly. Deacon, ready with the dosage, sinks the needle in and depresses the plunger. He's grimacing; he doesn't like needles, I know.

“Atta girl.”

“Happy now?”

“Yes. I am positively jumping for joy.”

“I'm not. You strong-armed me into injecting myself with mystery fluid.”

“Oh, so you'll do it for Tinker Tom, but not for me?”

“That's completely different. Nanobots in my bloodstream is serious business.”

“You're kind of a pain in my ass, you know that?”

There’s a soft knocking on the frame of the Rosas’ front door. “Am I interrupting?” Preston’s smooth voice floats across the room. He fills the doorway, all rifle and trenchcoat and Stetson. He’s got a wooden crate balanced on one bent knee, brimming with sundries.

“Need some help with that?” Deacon’s tone is strangely flat.

“I'm good, thanks.” Preston walks over, pulling a metal folding chair close to my bed and setting down his burden. I lean forward, curious to see what he’s brought. He smiles, almost shyly. “I know you must hate being bedridden like this. I thought I’d bring over some distractions. Got a couple issues of Grognak for you from Carla.” He pulls the comics from the crate and plops them on my knees. “Jun’s taking over patrol in about an hour. Thought I’d come by around then and keep you company, maybe find out what happens in the *Jungle of the Bat-Babies*?”

“Ooh! Did she have any *Live & Love*?”

“'Fraid not. I did grab a copy of *Lost in the Snows of Lust,* but... I’m not sure I want to read that one out loud.”
I chuckle. “I can’t wait. Thank you, Preston.” The Minuteman grins, looking relieved, and moves closer to the bed, taking my hand. He’s so touchy-feely. I’ve never known quite how to respond, but he’s a kind man; I squeeze his palm lightly. He holds my gaze a long moment, his deep brown eyes looking particularly meaningful. The air in the room starts to feel stuffy. As the seconds tick by, my gaze and my hand imprisoned by Preston’s earnest silence, I fight an overwhelming urge to wince, to pull myself from his well-intentioned grasp.

Finally, he sighs. “Well, I’d best be off. That forest won’t patrol itself, you know.” He draws his hand back reluctantly. “See you in an hour?”

“You got it, P. See you then.”

Deacon has the good grace to save his eye-roll until the Minuteman turns his back. As Preston strolls out, duster billowing slightly in the draft, the Railroad agent leans back in the overstuffed red chair, tapping his fingers on the armrest.

“What?”

“Nothing,” he says. Then, “We... need to talk, maybe.”

A cold feeling of dread steals over me. “Kind of you to pounce when I can’t escape.”

“You know me, boss. Always the opportunist.”

I wait for him to begin, quiet. There’s a ball of anxiety in the pit of my stomach. We still haven’t discussed the elephant in the room. I’d asked him why he’d been following me, he told me it was classified, I told him that was bullshit, he’d agreed. After that, I was too tired and confused to chase the issue, and he seemed content to forget about it altogether.

Deacon’s looking out the window at the decaying street of the cul-de-sac I used to call home. It’s only noon, and it’s a bright, clear day. A breeze playfully tousles some leaves across the pavement, while the hills behind the river are alive with the chirping of small birds and mostly-normal-sized insects. His fingers drum the arm of the chair restlessly.

“So, Preston really cares about you,” he says finally. His tone is almost too even.

“Yeah, he’s a, uh, caring guy,” I reply, nonplussed.

“Kind of handsome, too, yeah? Soulful eyes, strong, capable hands, set of morals a mile long.” It comes out like a challenge; there’s an edge to his voice.

“He’s... attractive, I guess. Objectively speaking. Is there a point to this, Deacon? You playing matchmaker or something?”

He’s still gazing out the window, not looking at me. “You miss Nate, huh.” He states it. A fact.

It’s like a punch to my gut. I grit my teeth, trying not to let it show. “Yes.” Deacon nods idly, quietly analyzing the swirling leaves outside.

“You know he… loves you, right? Preston.” He falls silent a moment. “You could do worse than a Minuteman, you know. Not much worse, but hey.”

I snort, but I can still feel the warm press of Preston’s fingers against my palm. “He does not love me. I spend almost zero time in Sanctuary these days. What are you getting at?”
“Nothing, boss. Don’t worry your pretty, stubborn little head about it. Besides, I got something important to tell you.”

Here it is. He’s struggling with something; I’ve never seen Deacon like this. Nerve-wracked. Uncertain. It’s like stormclouds have suddenly roiled into our sunny sky; I wonder where my easy-going friend has disappeared to. “I’m listening.”

His fingers stop tapping, his hands falling into his lap. “You know, I… I really appreciate you always putting up with my bullshit. Especially the past few days. It’s not easy, I know. Truth be told, it’s been a long time since I’ve had a… friend.” He gestures my way and drops his hand again. “I’m a liar. Everyone knows it. I make no secret of it. Because the truth is, I’m a fraud. To my core.”

“You’re not—” But I can’t get a word in edgewise. He rolls past my weak attempt, holding up a hand to silence me. “Stop. You need to hear this.

“When I was young, a hell of a long time ago, I was… well, scum. I was a bigot. A very violent bigot.”

This isn’t turning out to be the speech I expected, not by a long shot. But I’m intrigued; for all that he could write my biography with frightening accuracy, Deacon’s never opened up to me. All I know of him is what I’ve learned from his words and his actions in the now, what I’ve read between the lies. His life might as well have begun the day I wandered into the catacombs below the Old North Church. “A bigot? Were you really… that bad?”

“Worse than bad.” He swallows hard, Adam’s apple bobbing. His jaw muscles clench as he weighs his next words. “I ran with a gang in University Point. We called ourselves the UP Deathclaws. For kicks we’d terrorize anyone we thought was a synth.

"We kept egging each other on. Started with some property damage, graduated to some beat downs. Then, inevitably, a lynching.” My eyes go round, but he doesn’t notice. He’s still lost somewhere outside the window. “The Claws’ leader was convinced we’d finally found and killed a synth. Looking back, I’m not so sure.”

“I... had no idea.” My voice is tight, an unnatural attempt at sounding impartial. For all that we kill people daily without a second thought, the idea of a lynching is horror-inducing. A real murder, not just another nameless Raider. The kind of crime I ended lives for, worlds and lifetimes away from here.

“No one does.” He crosses his arms, as if seeking protection. “So I turned my back on my ‘brothers,’ broke all contact. Time passed. I became a farmer, like I told you before. Then, one day, I found someone.” I freeze. Deacon doesn’t miss a beat, but his voice softens. “She saw something in me I didn’t know was there. Barbara, well, she was… She just was.”

He stops; it takes me a second to realize he’s waiting for me to say something. The words won’t come at first, and when they do, they sound flat, insufficient. “She sounds special.”

Deacon seems far away. “Being with her made me feel like the whole world had a chance. That one day we could climb out of this wreckage.” He smiles this wistful smile that I haven’t seen before. “She could do that to people.”

“What was she like?” The words come out before I can stop them. I can’t help it; an intense curiosity has come over me. Who was this woman that Deacon, my Deacon, my partner, my best friend, loved?
“She had a smile like on those old magazine covers. Her eyes…” His faint smile lingers another moment. “We were trying for kids, eking out a living. Then one day… it turns out my Barbara… She was a synth. She didn’t know that. I certainly didn’t. I don’t know how the Deathclaws found out. But… there was blood.”

“They killed her?” My heart beats faster. I flash back to Nate, slumped against his pod, Kellogg’s ugly, twisted face sneering at me through the glass. I know the story Deacon is telling. I’ve lived it.

“I don’t remember much clearly after that. I know I killed most of the Claws. I must’ve made a big impression. The Railroad contacted me after that, figuring I’d be sympathetic, seeing that I lost my wife. And, well, what I did afterwards.”

Wife? I’d built an image of Deacon in my mind: a trusty friend, an outrageous flirt, a staunch ally, a decent cook, a lover of books, fond of the sea. For all that, though, I’ve considered him walled off, untouchable, out of reach. But he’d been married. I can hardly imagine it.

He smacks the hoe into the earth one last time and straightens, pulling a bandana from his back pocket to wipe the sweat from his brow. The sun is bright and the sky an unbelievable blue — a shade you never saw pre-War.

She leans against the doorway of a comfortable-looking ramshackle cabin, watching him toil with an amused, fond smile. She’s the spitting image of the Nuka Cola girl: bright, wide smile, red lips, tousled golden hair, large, clear blue eyes. He won’t let her so much as touch the handle of those farm tools, despite her protests that she ought to pull her own weight. She’s convincing, too, which is why he always ends the arguments before they begin: by pulling her close, tilting that pointed chin upwards, and stopping all talk of hard labor with his lips pressed firmly to hers.

Today he strolls to where she leans and bends down to place a kiss on her cheek, hand cupping the curve of her hip. She revives the old debate, knowing full well how it will end.

“We could grow twice as many crops if you just let me help.”

“Hey, I plant all the seeds around here,” he says devilishly, his hand straying to her abdomen.

“I can swing a hoe with the best of them,” she counters, a twinkle in her eye.

“Not in your delicate condition.”

“You know that’s not funny.”

“With how many hours we’ve poured into that project, I sort of think it is.”

It feels so strange, like suddenly realizing you’ve been wearing your favorite shirt inside-out from day one. A part of me is jealous, shamefully so. Next to that, though, a part of me is almost… excited. “I understand.”

“Yeah, I thought you might.” Grimacing, he goes on. “I don’t even know why I lie anymore. But I can’t tell the truth. Everyone — Tom, Dez, you, even that asshole Carrington — they deserve to be in the Railroad. I don’t. I’m everything that’s wrong with this whole fucking Commonwealth. You’re the only friend I got. I don’t deserve you being okay with this.” He throws up a hand, frustrated. “Hell, I’m not even asking for it. But I figured you should know.”

“Deacon.” His attention’s squarely on the street. “Deacon.” Either he’s determined to ignore me, or something intensely interesting is happening on the leaf-strewn sidewalk. “Deacon.” My cheeks
burn, because I’m not drunk and what I’m about to ask is silly as hell. “Will you, um, take my hand? I can’t...”

Finally turning to look at me, Deacon raises his eyebrows very slightly, but does as I ask. His hand is warm and his grasp firm, the callouses on his fingers pleasantly catching against my own skin. A little shiver runs down my spine and my chest feels tight, full. “If all you do is lie to me,” I say, stammering a little, “then I prefer the lies.” This is so cheesy, but damn if it doesn’t feel right, somehow. “You... you’ve spent the last two days spoon-feeding me disgusting carrot mush. You’re either the best friend I’ve ever had, or you really, really hate me.”

He doesn’t crack a smile, but I still think that one hit home, because he squeezes my hand. “You might be a little too trusting for your own good, Wanderer. But if I ask you to believe one more thing, believe this. You are my friend. Maybe my only one. When shit goes down, I’m with you to the end. So, yeah. Good talk. Ready for more carrots?”

Chapter End Notes

(Y'all, sorry it's been so long. Writing has been tough to focus on lately — my sister was diagnosed with brain cancer in September and that's sort of distracting. Looking to writing as a sanctuary and a relief instead, though; maybe this thing will finish before it's a year old. :)
Wake Up, Little Susie [https://youtu.be/LojqhHnmyvc]

Chapter Summary

Deacon swears this is the last mission they'll spend apart, but we all know what to expect from D's promises — even the well-intentioned ones.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Pip-Boy is an unfamiliar weight on my arm. Twice now I’ve almost pissed my pants in terror from accidentally switching on the radio. Apparently Wanderer likes to hear Travis stutter at max volume. And the damn thing throws my balance off, the aim on my rifle veering slightly left. But it’s a necessary evil, and there’s no way I’m entrusting it to some broody Minuteman.

Leaving Sanctuary was rushed, a last-minute decision. The information Wanderer gathered in that cave is the key every single Railroad agent has been seeking from day one. Somehow, the fact that she was the one to finally crack it doesn’t surprise me.

Recalling the past few days, I rub a hand over my forehead. Never in a million years did I expect to tell Wanderer that story. But it snuck up on me suddenly. She had to know—no. Deserved to know. Before we go any farther. Before we get any deeper into this… whatever it is.

Sigh. I’d bet good caps that Preston doesn’t have a dozen punk-shaped skeletons in his closet.

Wanderer was none too happy at being left behind. But her body hasn’t recovered yet. It’s too thin, too bruised, too battered from within. I’d cornered Marcy and made her promise to stick to the diet Doc Wiener recommended; I cornered Jun and Sturges, too. Never hurts to have a backup plan. But what cemented it all was Mama Murphy’s vision.

The old lady had gotten ahold of a drug somehow, despite Preston’s unofficial settlement-wide ban. She’d started moaning something about the Sight, and then it began.

“I see a man in a white outfit... standin’ over your prey. And he says something. It’s hard to make out, but I’m tryin’, kid... He says, ‘Z2-47, initialize factory reset. Authorization code zeta-five-three-kilo.’ Then he falls... And he’s still.’”

I’m not a superstitious guy, but I know a recall code when I hear one. If we have any hope of breaking into the Institute, this is it. And that Courser squatting in the CIT ruins, he isn’t gonna wait around for Wanderer’s boo-boos to heal.

A pained moan pulls me from my nap. “He’s not who you expect him to be. But you’ll love him anyway…”

“Oh, Mama, no. Did you get into the Jet again?” I groan, helplessly eyeing the tubes sprouting from my veins. She ignores me, flailing feebly in her chair.
“You’re gonna have to choose, kid. One or the other… blood or the heart that pumps it… the dark in the bright light, or the lantern in the dark…”


“He’ll give you a child, but not the child you seek. Whatever your choice, you’re a traitor. You’ll live with that, under shadow or light. But you’ll live, kid. You’ll live…”

Marcy rushes in, finally catching wind of my frenzied shouts. “Mama!” she cries, rushing to the elderly woman’s side and planting hands on her cheeks. She throws a vicious glare at me over her shoulder. “You gave her *chems*?”

“Of course not, I’ve been asleep–”

“Why didn’t you *stop* her? You just laid there! Useless!”

I’ve never wanted to throttle someone more. “I can’t even move my arms, Marcy! Jesus!”

She looks daggers at me, then rushes away to find the settlement clinic’s nurse. Mama’s head topples forward onto her chest. I stare in horror, wondering, until a monstrous snore rumbles from her nose. I growl. “You did that just to get me in trouble, old lady.”

But her drug-addled ramblings stick with me, occupying my spare thoughts as I count down the hours until my friend returns to me.

“Authorization code zeta-five-three-kilo.”

My voice echoes across the room, underscored by the faint whirring and beeping of the computers. The Courser goes rigid, his eyes glazed, finger on the trigger but without the musculature to do any harm. He slumps to the floor, still. Just like Mama said.

“Glory’s not gonna like this,” I mutter, walking to the synth’s inert body. I grit my teeth, rifling through his pockets, coming up empty.

“Nothing’s ever easy, is it?” I say under my breath, ignoring the fact that I just murdered a kill-bot with six syllables. Standing again, I turn to Preston. “How much, *exactly*, would you say you love Wanderer?”

The Minuteman frowns, caught off guard. “I—the General? I’d—well, I’d do anything for her—”

“Cool, cool, cool. And do you or do you not have a hacksaw?”

“I—don’t…”

“Damn. Well, it was worth a try.” I cast about the room, but there’s a worrisome lack of serrated blades. I sigh, pulling the laser pistol from the Courser’s slack grip and aiming it at his neck.

“Nope, never easy.”

“Deacon, what are you—”

Six precise shots and the head separates from the body. Grimacing, I prod it with the toe of my boot, rolling it slightly towards the Minuteman. A semicircle of red seeps from the neck, marking
“Here ya go, loverboy. A little somethin’ for your sweetie.”

Preston looks green. “W-what do we need the head for?”

“Ever lock your keys in the car and have to devise all sorts of wacky ways to get them back?” The Minuteman stares at me, perplexed. “Yeah. Well, this is kinda like that. Except the key’s in this guy’s gray matter, and it’s going to take more than a coat hanger and some ABC gum to get it out.”

“Man, you ever gonna tell me what this is about?” Preston’s mouth is a thin, tight line. “I want to help the General, in any way I can. But I’m starting to wonder if you aren’t pushing your own agenda here.”

“My agenda is Wanderer’s agenda.”

He folds his arms across his chest, stubborn. “I’m not touching that— thing —until you explain exactly what we’re doing here.”

I look from Preston to the severed head and back again, then sigh, spreading my hands. “Listen. I know you Minutemen don’t choose sides. But what we’re dealing with isn’t on one side or the other. The Institute is the real threat here, and it threatens the entire Commonwealth—not just a bunch of synth but a few settlers, or the dudes who rub it out to thoughts of Old World tech.”

Preston frowns. “That’s not an explanation and you know it.”

“What I know is that you wouldn’t lift a finger on your own to fight the Institute, not unless they majorlyucked with one of your precious settlements.” I shake my head, disgusted. “But if you care about anything, care about this: those bastards took Wanderer’s son. They have him locked up in their secret hideout, doing God knows what to him. And we have a first-class ticket to get us into their private party. It’s just buried in this guy’s brain.”

“Her baby? They have her baby?” He sounds horrified. I get this squirmish feeling in my stomach; it’s easy to forget that my Wanderer is a mother and a wife. I can picture her cradling a gun way easier than I can an infant. “She… she never told me.”

“Yeah, well, she doesn’t like to talk about it.” Goddamn it. Preston has this special talent, this way of looking like a kicked puppy. It’s plastered all over his face now: a little bit of hurt, a pinch of confusion, a dash of betrayal. Try as I might, I can’t hold on to my anger. “I don’t know that much either, Preston. All I know is what I’ve pieced together from circumstance and a couple drunk nights where she was feeling particularly chatty.”

“It’s fine, Deacon.” Preston turns to a pile of debris, yanking on a large sheet of plastic tarp. He pulls it free with a grunt. “You two have something special. It’s almost like this pair of twins I knew, back in Quincy—” here he leans down, gritting his teeth, and wraps the sheet around the head, “—had their own language and everything—” he’s folding what look like hospital corners around the temples, very tidy, “—finished each other’s sentences, the whole shebang.” He’s fashioned a sort of tight sling out of the tarp, the head neatly wrapped and re-wrapped such that not a drop of gross Courier blood will soil his khaki fatigues. It’s actually kind of impressive, but I’m not about to tell him that.

“Twins, huh? Yeah, that Wanderer, she’s… she’s just like a sister to me.” I think of a dream I had a couple nights ago and thank God I’m a damn good liar.

“Anyway, doesn’t bother me, man. You two have your thing, we have our own relationship.” The
Minuteman flushes, trying to hide the quirk of a smile that persists despite the decapitated head now slung casually over his shoulder.

Our own relationship. I’m not proud of the sudden urge to grab his undoubtedly spic-n-span Minuteman tighty-whities and give him a wedgie.

You two have something special. Yeah, he gets a pass on the noogie-ing today.

“So, uh… where we taking this… thing?” Preston says, hefting the makeshift bag speculatively. You can tell Wanderer never takes him anywhere by the way he’s ready to ralph at one itty-bitty decapitation.

“Home again, home again, jiggity-jig.”

“We came all this way, just to turn right back around?” Preston sounds incredulous.

“Yeah, man, sorry to wet your adventure whistle, but the boss is this close to the high score on Red Menace and I’m in deep doo-doo if I keep it from her too long.” I waggle the Pip-Boy in his face and clap him on the back, staying well away from the bag-o’-gore resting against his shoulderblade. “C’mon. It’s a nice day. We’ll giggle the whole walk back while you tell me just how you plan to ask the boss to the Minuteman ice cream social.”

The pea-green pallor of nausea on Preston’s rich brown cheeks quickly morphs into a hot blush. I wonder if I’m being funny or cruel, but hey, at least he’s not about to toss his cookies all over me as we begin the long trek back to Sanctuary.

The blue dark of night wraps around us like velvet as we giggle and press our fingers to each other’s lips. We shouldn’t be here. It’s wrong, and dangerous, and we’ll be in so much trouble if we’re caught—though that’s part of the fun, after all. Our nervous laughter sounds so loud, echoing off the metallic walls, but it’s masked by the steady clicking of the projector reel and by the murmur of dozens of cars parked outside, the wet smacking of teen lips on teen lips and the rustling hems of dresses pushed too high on the thigh and the crackle of popcorn exploding at the snack counter below.

But it’s our secret place. He winks at me from behind his sunglasses—I can only tell by the way his eye crinkles and his half-smile curves upward—and yanks open a nondescript cardboard box. There’s a sleeping bag inside. He raises a roguish eyebrow as he shakes it, rolling it out like a red carpet, our own private walk of fame despite the dust. I don’t bother holding in the laugh that bubbles up, because they’re at the part where Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr are swapping spit and nobody’s paying attention to what’s going on in the projector room right now. He quietly takes me in, all of me, up and down, and a little flame of desire and girlish pride flickers up toward my throat as his gaze lingers on my breasts. He’s kneeling, gazing up at me, and I think we’re both savoring this moment, the last few seconds of anticipation before we finally give in. He grabs my hand, tugs me forward, and I fall easily against him. His mouth is hot on my neck as he presses a wet, sensual kiss on the underside of my jaw. A shiver thrills along my spine.

“This movie is such a bummer,” he murmurs against my neck, voice husky. “I don’t know why you like it.”

“I love tragic love,” I say, then gasp as his tongue meets my earlobe.

“Mmm,” he grumbles, and the sound melts my core into absolute lava. “I’ll give you an affair to
remember.”

And then his fingers are trailing at my collarbone, lower, tracing the gentle rise of my chest, fingerling the edge of my top and slipping under to graze the lace of my bra—

His name comes to my lips unbidden, forced from me by some wild, primal instinct to claim him as my own. It’s somewhere halfway between a whimper and a moan, a plea and a demand: “Deacon —”

“Hmmm. Sounds like I’m interrupting something good.”

My eyes snap open. It’s dark, the Rosas’ living room illuminated by the yellow flickering of a few stubby candles stuck straight to the wood of the coffee table. Gritting my teeth against the pain, I prop myself up on an elbow, scanning the room. The nurse removed my IVs hours ago, but the flesh is still sore, each tiny hole scabbed with dried blood and crusty saline solution.

Of course he’s conveniently obscured by shadows, and of course he’s wearing those goddamn sunglasses. But I can’t deny the way my stomach leaps at the sight of him, whole and safe and back at my side once more, his mouth quirking in a knowing smile because—

Because I’d said—

Did I moan? —

Deacon clearly saw my eyes widen in horror right before I pulled the sheets over my face and disappeared for good, because he has the gall to laugh.

“Ha-haaa! Oh, that’s rich. No, no, please, by all means,” he says generously, holding up his palms, “Don’t let me stop you. Or maybe don’t let me stop you stop me? How’s this work, exactly, boss?”

I pull down a corner of the sheet to reveal a single glaring eye. His grin is huge, shit-eating, showing off each and every one of those white teeth that moments ago had been nipping at my—

“I hate you.”

“That didn’t sound like hate to me.” If I didn’t know better, I would say his sing-song taunt sounded almost smug. “If you need some time, you know, alone, I can leave—”

“If my arms didn’t feel like total shit, I would leap out of bed and smother you to death with this pillow.” I drop my sheet-shield and sigh in exasperated defeat. Every time my worst has hit a new low, Deacon’s been there to see it. Just chalk this up to the total, I guess. I give him a look, then drop my eyes after a moment. Staring into those shades can be so intimidating. “Thank you for coming back to me alive.” I mean to lace the words with a sardonic edge, but they spill from my mouth a little too fast, a little too soft.

Deacon scrapes his chair closer to the bed and lifts my forearm gingerly, tracing the bruises purpling at my now-IV-free veins. He thinks he’s such a master of disguise, but I see the bob of his Adam’s apple as he swallows. Some ember left over from my dream glows warm and red in my core.

His voice is low when he speaks again. There’s a trace of husk to it, and the soft brush of his fingertips against my skin makes me suddenly grateful for the black veil of night and the forgiving angle of the candlelight. “This mission is the last one we spend apart, boss. The last.”
I pause at his words. I want them to be true. The Glowing Sea, the coma, the hours of wondering whether Mama’s code did the trick—they left me hollow, exhausted in a way that went beyond my weary, battered body. “You swear?”

He swallows again. “I swear.” It sounds sincere, more like a prayer than a promise.

But we both know his track record, and neither of us seeks the other’s gaze as we nod.

Chapter End Notes

Well, it's been about a million years since I updated — or two, whatever, who's counting? Hopefully I can get back into the spirit of this story, and please forgive me if it's a little rough; I do honestly think about it all the time (my love for Deacon will never die, much to my husband's chagrin).

Thanks to everyone's really kind comments on the last post about my sister; she sadly passed away from brain cancer on Dec. 6th 2017. Hold your people close and tell them you love them — you never know when the bomb is gonna drop on your world.
Go Away (Part 1) [https://youtu.be/OHkFyoZp0Ok]

Chapter Summary

Deacon and Wanderer relax at HQ after delivering the Courser chip into Tinker Tom's fidgety hands.

(This chapter is part 1 of 2.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Coming back to HQ after a long-ass trek through an irradiated wasteland, taking down an elite synth killing machine, and feeding your convalescing bestie carrot mush for a week is always refreshing.

Always. Every time that exact combination of things happens. Yep.

HQ is hopping today, chock full of agents getting shit done. Feels good to be busy again so soon after Switchboard, but I’m not a fan of all the people. I’ve staked out a dark corner by a particularly friendly-looking coffin, grabbed a noodle cup, and cozied up with a cigarette and a book. Wanderer’s off somewhere with Glory; she found a deck of cards, made a totally bizarre squeaking noise, and ditched me for a game of War.

But after all we’ve been through lately, a little bit of R&R doesn’t seem like such a crazy idea.

I take a long drag, cherry glowing hot and red. It feels good to smoke. Wanderer usually gets on my case about it. I can’t get on board with her cancer sticks argument — the sticks, the stones, the water, it’s all cancer ‘round these parts — but I try not to light up too often when she’s around. I save the cigs for my alone time, she pretends the Jet inhalers are for her asthma. We’re courteous like that.

I’d planned for a lazy afternoon, but the sight of Dez wending her way toward me with a thundercloud zapping lightning above her head neatly axes that expectation. I straighten and stifle a sigh, marking my place in Emma with a folded corner and tossing it aside.

She and Tom were practically giddy when we produced the Courser chip. Our wacky neighborhood repairman cracked the code and downloaded it to the Pip-Boy in a matter of minutes; sometimes I think Tinker must be the most valuable asset we’ve got, in spite or maybe because of all the chems and the crazy. Pretty soon Wanderer and I will head back into the Glowing Sea to deliver that code into the meaty green hands of an ex-Institute super-mutated scientist by the name of Virgil, but until push comes to shove, I’m happy to take it easy. I only just got my partner back safe and sound, after all.

I don’t know what bloatfly’s in her bonnet today, but the black look on Desdemona’s face tells me pretty clearly that it’s all my fault.

“Deacon. A word.”

I stub out my cigarette on the dusty marble coffin and rock my chair back, spreading my arms.
“Welcome to my office. What’s up, Dez?”

“Do you have a good excuse for why you missed four dead drops and three intel exchanges in the past three weeks?”

Yikes. Yeah, no. I’d been busy, sure — I didn’t know a single runner or tourist willing to breach the Glowing Sea to deliver a message — but it wasn’t what I’d call a good excuse. Our trek through that hellscape lasted a few days, max. The rest of that time I’d been glued to my partner’s bedside while she recovered. Even on a bad day I’ll spot a railsign at a hundred yards, but now that I think of it, it’s been a while since I’ve even looked for ‘em.

Wanderer is one hell of a distraction.

“I’ll take your silence as a no.”

I spread my hands with a grimace. “Dez, shit, I’m sorry. We went radio silent through the Sea, and then Wanderer… was out of commission for a while. I guess I was distracted.”

“Distracted. I see.” She nods, but I know it’s not ‘cause she agrees. “What, exactly, was so distracting that you blatantly ignored our attempts to make contact?”

Something about the way she says exactly doesn’t sit well. I’m on thin ice and I know it.

“Wanderer got pretty sick en route back to Sanctuary. I stuck by her ‘til she recovered, took a little detour to grab that chip, then we headed straight here.”

“I see,” she says again. A sheaf of ginger hair has come untucked from behind her ear. It sways as she shakes her head slightly, pursing her lips like she’s holding something back. God, I hope it isn’t tears. Whatever I screwed up, I’ll be fine so long as it isn’t something that makes Dez cry. “One of our runners from the northwest quadrant just returned a few minutes ago. She’s in bad shape, but she was able to give us a report.”

The room slides sideways. I brace a hand against the cool marble of the coffin. The northwest quadrant — that’s up near Concord. “What—” It comes out hoarse. I try to swallow, but it’s like my throat forgot how. “What happened?”

Desdemona blinks hard, but it’s not enough to keep saltwater from staining her orange lashes. “A flurry of Institute sightings in the area over the last few weeks. Outpost Zimonja, the old quarry, the mayoral shelter, the Vault. There was a pattern to it. We needed a team deployed ASAP. You and Wanderer were already up there.” She wipes at her eyes with her scarf, keeps it pressed against her cheek like it’s some small comfort. “We lost an entire shipment, Deacon.”

I drop my chair back down to the old concrete floor. It clacks loudly, an exclamation point at the end of her bombshell. “How many?” I don’t want to hear it, but I have to know.

“Two runners, a tourist, and five packages.”

Five.

That was more than we saved in a lean year. A whole work crew.

“Fuck,” I whisper, dropping my face into my hands.

“They were caught in transit out by Tenpines. The runners left coded warnings in dead drops along the way, tried to triangulate your location. But all the effort in the world is useless if you simply weren’t looking.”
Five packages. Three allies.

This might be my worst fuck-up to date.

I shoot to my feet; the chair clatters backward. I’ve got to do something, got to say something. My belly roils like I just ate a bad can of Cram. “Dez, I—”

The waterworks have evaporated into steam, because now an angry red heat tinges her face. “Don’t bother, agent. We’ll meet at the back door in five minutes. It’s time we had a talk.”

Agent. Whew. It’s been a while since anyone’s called me that. I ignore the skittish stares of the juniors as I head through HQ to the back room, hands shoved in my pockets, dread dropping over me like the final curtain in my last act.

“You’re walkin’ a thin line, girlfriend.”

Glory and I are sitting at the cluttered table in PAM’s room. There’s not much space, but we’ve got a hot game of Egyptian Rat Screw going. She places a two on a two and I slap.

“Aha!” It’s rare for me to get a slap in. Glory’s got the reflexes of a cat on Psychojet, and she’s won all three of our games today. I pull the little pile towards me in triumph. “What line? The line of finally beating you?”

Glory chuckles, a low, husky sound. “Hell no.” She throws down a ten, I pile on an eight. “You and D. Walkin’ that line hand in hand, like you don’t even see it.”

Her words are as startling as her slaps. I lay down my next card cautiously, aiming a wary stare her way. “What do you mean?”

“I warned him about you, you know.” She throws down a card. A nine.

“I don’t know why PAM hates me so much, but I sure haven’t done anything to Deacon.”

Glory sets down a queen. Her eyebrows are raised like I’ve just said something especially stupid. “Haven’t you?” She lounges in her seat, a lock of silver hair falling across her smooth forehead. Her caramel eyes are intense, beautiful, deadly, just like everything about Glory. One finger remains on the queen, lightly pushing it forward, pulling it back, again and again. “He’s losing his goddamned mind over you. I haven’t seen him this shook up in my seven years here. And if D-
man’s permanent record hasn’t been fucked with by the master of lies himself, I think it’s safe to say we don’t want him to lose his shit over a woman ever again.”

My stomach leaps at her words. “Oh, come on. Deacon’s just the same as he ever was,” I reply quickly. Then I frown. “Wait. You’ve seen his file? I thought Dez was the only one cleared for that kind of intel.”

The synth flashes a fond smile at PAM. The robot flickers a few LEDs in response. “If you have the right friends, you can hack into just about anything around here.”

“Then you know—”

“Yeah, I know. Sounds like you do, too. And I bet you didn’t learn that from Railroad Alpha’s personal diary.” She clicks her tongue and grins at me, but she looks more hungry than friendly. “Listen, we’re living past the end of the world. Every damn minute could be our last. It’s no biggie if you shack up with another agent now and then. Been there, done that.”

“Christ, Glory, we haven’t done… that.” I lean in, glancing around, and drop my voice. “We haven’t even kissed!”

“Bitch, I know. That’s the problem. Are you even listening to me?” She drums her fingers along the table edge, assessing me critically, like I’m a radstag in her path and might not be worth the trouble. “We’ve all been there. Take my advice, Wanderer. Get it out of your system once or twice. Hell, three times, if you’re feeling wild. And then—” she points at me, caramel eyes stern, “—you get it out of your system again. With someone else. Maybe that nice Minuteman with that butter-smooth voice. And you make damn well sure Deacon knows about it.”

I blink. “Glory, I… don’t think I’m picking up what you’re laying down.”

Glory groans and sinks her face into her hands, outrageously dismayed. “Do I have to spell it out for you?” She plops an elbow on the table and leans forward, clapping her hands along with each word for emphasis. “Do not let Deacon fall in love with you. Scratch the itch — you ain’t the first agent to get the hots for Mister Smoke ‘n’ Mirrors, you won’t be the last — and then move along.”

“Fall in— scratch the— move along?” I’m surprised the words come out as intelligible as they do. My face may have melted right off my skull, for how hot it is.

“I ain’t stupid, Wanderer. You got a thing for Deacon. Your hips go all loosey-goosey around him, you flutter those long black lashes, undo that third button on your flannel. It’s cool. Just… make sure he knows it’s only a physical thing. The last thing the Railroad needs is for you to buy the farm on an op and have Romeo go apeshit on HQ.”

“Um, I think you’re confusing Romeo with Hamlet…” I can’t help myself. I’m a literature geek. Glory gives me an unamused stare and I scoff. “That seems kind of heartless, don’t you think? And I don’t like Preston like that. And I don’t have any itches I need Deacon to scratch. I’m, like, very non-itchy. Super comfortable.” I fight the overwhelming urge to shift in my chair. Her words have awakened something that’s slumbered within me since Nate, something I maybe concuss every now and again to keep it unconscious.

He’s losing his goddamn mind over you. The heat kindling in my core is spreading, slowly but surely, down my pelvis and into the valley between my legs.

I don’t think of Deacon that way. I don’t… think.

...But I did have that dream.
But I’ve had that dream about my fifth grade teacher, too. It doesn’t mean anything.

But there was that night we spent in the back room, Old Appalachia and laughter on our breath, and in the morning…


“Yeah. Convincing. You gonna lay that card down or what?”

“Shit. I forgot.” I move to flip it over. Why did Glory have to open her big mouth? The seam of my jeans is rubbing entirely too intimately against my—

Her slap cracks against the table and I jump. Those caramel eyes flick up at me and she smirks, drawing the pile towards her with both hands. My own queen stares at me despairingly from between the heavy’s fingers.

“I win.”

“Color me surprised.” I toss my remaining card on the table — one of the twos I’d won, my sole meager victory — and scoot my chair back, ready to help tidy up. But then a sound comes from the crumbling archway leading to PAM’s room, a throat being cleared loudly and intentionally.

“Finished, ladies? I need to borrow Wanderer.” Dez stands in the archway, spine rigid, arms crossed. She sounds weary, strained. Something’s off. She should still be riding the high from getting that chip.

Glory snickers without bothering to turn around, scooping up her pile of cards and the bottle caps I’d tossed her way. “Oh, we’re finished.”

Desdemona offers a curt nod. "Follow me, agent."

“Sure, Dez, coming.” The air in the room feels heavier than it did a minute ago. Whatever Dez needs me for, it’s not good, and part of me wants to army crawl the hell out of HQ and into a bar at the nearest settlement. The jury’s out on whether or not I ought to thank God that the unbidden heat in my abdomen is ebbing, filling instead with cold apprehension.

Chapter End Notes

Between the last chapter and this one, I got a Railroad Ally railsign tattoo. [insert monkey-hiding-face emoji here, plz.] Totally normal. Not weird at all. Nothing to see here, folks.
Chapter Summary

The line Deacon and Wanderer walk might be a tripwire. It might be a Freedom Trail. Or it might be a line of gunpowder.

The slow burn starts to flicker and catch.

(This chapter is a bit long, apologies in advance)

Desdemona doesn’t have an actual office. Something about transparency, togetherness, and the fact that the crypt full of old dead guys where we planted HQ doesn’t have the right feng shui for cubicles. So when a situation calls for a little discretion, she herds us into the back room. All the way up against the escape tunnel door, about as far as you can get from any extra-specially-curious junior agents hungry for gossip.

I feel like 100% pure, unadulterated shit. Missions have a way of going sideways from time to time, sure, but in this case, it feels like we could have done something. The northwest quadrant is as tame as a three-legged brahmin. If I’d kept even half an eye out for the rail signs...

I wonder how long Dez has been planning this escape, how many long nights she’s spent bent over the round brick platform that serves as her desk. What identities Amari had lined up for those rescued, what lives they’d never know, families they’d never have. I wonder who’ll be waiting too long for their wife to come home from her extended Railroad business trip, if there are kids somewhere who’ll grow up hating us for taking away their dad.

And here comes my lunch again. I swallow hard, eyeing the spare ammo container by the door and wondering how much liquid volume it can hold.

Footsteps echo down the long hall. Dez and Wanderer. I’m not too worried about the punishment the big boss is gonna cook up for me. It’ll definitely be worse than coal in my stocking, but it’s possible she’ll try to reassign me to some far-off safehouse or even toss my sorry ass to the curb. But I’ve been kicked out of the Railroad before — it never sticks for long.

No, what I’m most concerned about is Wanderer. How Dez is going to frame what went wrong. What might switch off in her eyes when she realizes I’m not the big damn Railroad hero she paints me out to be. What might switch on once she realizes how preoccupied I’ve become. What...

preoccupies me.

Wanderer rounds the corner with that familiar frown on her face, those baby browns raising to me in question. Poor kid’s freaked out. I’m not surprised; from what she’s told me of her life before the bomb, she was a real brown-noser. Top of her class, never got detention, teacher’s pet, the whole package. She’s gotta be shaking in her sneakers at the look on Dez’s face right now. We’re not getting any gold stars for this one.

She sidles up against the wall next to me. Hair down, slightly tousled, cheeks flushed a pretty pink. She raises an eyebrow at me because I’m staring like an idiot, but I have to drink her in while I can.
Because I let eight people die. Innocents.

Because I can’t take my goddamn eyes off this woman long enough to make sure the dumpster behind the Concord Red Rocket isn’t smeared with white paint.

Because once she knows, she may not want anything to do with me ever again.

Dez is pacing the narrow hall like a caged lion. She moves as she speaks, like she needs to generate the power behind her words or they’ll fade to darkness. “Agent Wanderer, we have a situation.”

Wanderer glances at me warily. “What’s the matter? Something wrong with the chip?”

The big boss clears her throat uncomfortably, slowing her pace, turning to face us. “We were recently able to liberate a full work crew of synths.”

My girl frowns harder, tilts her head quizzically. “That’s—amazing, that’s great news.”

Dez shakes her head, pursing her lips, her eyes glued to the ceiling. “No. We lost them.”

“We… lost them? Like, we don’t know where they are?”

“No. Like the Institute caught up with them southeast of Tenpines Bluff, near our depot there.”

“How many?” Wanderer’s not stupid. She knows the weight behind the term full work crew.

“Five synths. Two runners. A tourist.” Dez isn’t one to show emotion, but she chokes out the last two words. Wanderer takes a step forward, laying a hand on the other woman’s arm.

“Oh, Dez. Oh, God, I’m so sorry.” She stops a second, thinking. “Tenpines? We were in Sanctuary all last week. Didn’t anybody…?”

“We tried.” The redhead’s low, melodic voice is somber, and she removes Wanderer’s hand from her arm. “Our attempts at making contact were… ignored.”

The boss throws me a look over her shoulder, meets my eyes behind the shades. Her face could be listed in an Old World dictionary right next to the word confusion.

“But how—? Was it when we were in the Sea, or—”

“Would you like to tell her, Deacon, or should I?” Dez’s words are coated with the kind of cruelty that’s a toxic byproduct of grief. If only I had a Stealth Boy handy. Disappearing never sounded so nice.

But I can’t run from those dark eyes, even though they’re boring into me right now with a sickening mix of realization and denial. I shove my hands in my pockets and slouch back against the wall, my body screaming shame in about eight different languages.

“I’ll tell her.” The words stick in my throat, like I’ve eaten a jar of pre-war peanut butter that celebrated its bicentennial ten years ago. Wanderer has this alarmed look on her face. She turns from Dez and holds out a hand to me, beckoning in her subtle way toward the fist balled in my pocket.

She still wants to hold my hand through the deepest of shit. What a partner. Something inside me cracks a little at what I’m about to do to her, what beliefs I’m about to break.

Cuz Wanderer, I’ve got a good handle on her. It isn’t caps or ego pressing her gas pedal.
Well, I can’t deny the woman a damn thing. I pull out my fist, loosen it, offer up a limp palm. My chin sinks to my chest as her fingers close over mine. I bet she had nice hands before the bombs. I bet they were pretty and clean, lotioned, manicured, the whole nine yards. But I prefer the one under my now-roving thumb, cuts and calluses and all. I’ve been there as she earned every scar.

“I screwed up, boss,” I say, huffing out a single emotionless laugh. Her fingers tighten against mine.

“What’d you do, D?” Wanderer’s voice is softer than her hands. She takes off her mask for me, baring the girl — the woman — I know so well, the woman who tangled these fingers into Dogmeat’s fur that first night in the new ‘Wealth and quietly wept her grief.

“I missed the signs, the calls for help. I — ignored them. I was focused on you. Getting you home safe and sound, getting you better. And we lost a shipment because of it.” My jaw clenches, her face goes white. “Eight people, Wanderer. God. I’m worse than the fucking Deathclaws.” Her grip slackens, her hand falls from mine. The crack inside me widens.

“I appreciate your candor, agent.” Dez nods once, businesslike. “Wanderer, I’m reassigning you to Glory.”

Her face goes blank. “But——” Wanderer looks up to me helplessly, but I’m focused on my Chucks. “But Deacon and I are in the middle of a sensitive mission. I need his stealth.”

“The decision is made.”

“I need him.”

“I know that’s how you feel, agent.” Dez’s voice is forgiving, like she’s trying to go easy on Wanderer, knows how this’ll tear her apart if it’s not done right. “But circumstances have changed. I don’t doubt your commitment to our mission.”

“But you doubt Deacon’s?”

“Deacon will be taking a break from his commitments.”

I loose a breath I hadn’t known I was holding. Taking a break. It’s probably the best outcome I could’ve hoped for. Dez hasn’t had time to confer with the doctor or Tom, and I can tell by the way her gaze is glued solidly to the floor that she’s not a hundred percent confident in the judgement. Drop the right hints to Carrington and Tinker, lay the self-deprecation on thick, and I’ll be back in business by tomorrow morning.

Yeah, I’m actually feeling pretty good about this. Now, if I can just convince Wanderer it was a stupid mistake, that I’m still worth trusting—

But one look at the boss and my bubble bursts. She doesn’t know I can Houdini us right out of this whale’s belly. Railroad politics have all the weight of an eighth grade model UN conference, but she’s still new to the game; it’s real to her. Her legs have stiffened into the melee fighting stance I showed her our first week together, her fists balled at her side, her chin jutting forward ever so slightly, defiantly—

She’s ready to make a stand, and if I want my silver tongue to do its job to keep my job, I can’t say a damn thing to stop her.
I level my gaze at Desdemona. “You’re cutting him loose. Why?”

Dez almost chokes. “We just lost eight good people — innocent people — because Deacon’s priorities no longer align with the Railroad’s. Is that so difficult to understand?”

I bite my lip. “What do you mean, his priorities?”

Deacon goes rigid beside me. I don’t know what his problem is, but Desdemona’s eyes narrow. The pain’s still so fresh — she must’ve found out about this recently. The logical voice in the back of my mind whispers that I ought to understand, ought to go easy on her.

But my heart clenches against the idea of mercy. She’s trying to take away my partner. Deacon. The only person I have left, the only person in this hell-world who knows me.

“There are no formal rules against agents becoming… close.” Red creeps into my cheeks at her words and I open my mouth to reply, but Dez bowls over my protest. “Unless it interferes with our work. In this case, whatever’s... going on... between you two cost us eight lives and months of planning. You’ve been thrown into the deep end, agent, and you’ve done well. But you’re still green — you need a partner to show you the ropes. Glory’s not much for the cloak and dagger missions, but her experience as a heavy in the field will be good for you.”

I go back to chewing my lip. The pain is the only thing keeping me from exploding right now. My teeth push down, harder and harder, until the flesh punctures and a sweet, coppery red taste flows into my mouth. That’s better.

“Desdemona,” I say, diplomatically, evenly, savoring the sting and the sips of blood that trickle onto my tongue, “do you know how to do math?”

Whatever’s happening here just took a turn.

Wanderer steps in front of me, a protective barrier between me and the imagined threat that is our dear Railroad Alpha. I may forget from time to time that my girl’s a mother, but there’s no hiding from it right now; those mama bear instincts are coming out swinging.

“You’re booting him out because of one mistake? His first mistake?”

“I’m ‘booting him out,’ as you say, for his second mistake.” I have a feeling I’m not gonna like the next thing Dez has to say.

“And his first?”

I’ve never noticed how intensely interesting my shoes are before. There’s a scuff that looks almost exactly like a Mr. Gutsy shooting off a missile, a delectable-looking wad of gum stuck to the side, and it might be time to scrounge up some new laces—

“Finding you.” Whether it’s the loss of our people or bloodlust for the coming argument, I don’t know, but there’s a harsh undercurrent guiding Desdemona’s voice that’s never been there before.

You can almost see Wanderer reel at the words. “I’ve done more for this organization in a couple months than any other agent you’ve brought on in the past five years.”
“Indeed. And we’re grateful.” Dez gestures at me and I don’t think I’ve ever wanted to pop a Stealth Boy more in my life. “But you’ve compromised our oldest and most loyal agent. He now prioritizes you over our mission. And that makes your arrangement fatally dangerous to the Railroad as a whole.”

Wanderer’s eyes are beady slits of anger. A drop of blood wells on her lip; it reminds me of the day we first met, here in the crypts. “Do you even know who you’re dealing with?”

“You’d do well to recall that you’re speaking to your superior.” Desdemona’s voice is steady, but it’s gravid with grief and anger and disappointment. She doesn’t deserve what’s about to spill from my Wanderer’s split lips; I do. I make to grab her elbow, but she shakes me off without even sparing a glance my way. I grimace as her chin pushes forward in defiance. Agents have been canned for less.

“So you know your addition. Woo-freakin’-hoo. How about your multiplication, Dez? Brushed up on that lately?”

I can sense what’s coming, the way you sense a Deathclaw’s nearby — the eerie stillness, the too-quiet silence behind the words, the feeling that even the crumbling brick of the wall is holding its breath. Judging by the gleam that’s flickered to life in Wanderer’s eyes, I’m pretty sure she senses it, too. That gleam is the last thing many a Raider has seen before they give up the ghost.

The big boss is not amused. “Enlighten me, agent.”

Wanderer gets this cocky jut to that already treasonous chin. Oh, we are in so much trouble. I’ve only seen Deathclaw Dez come out maybe twice in all her time with the Railroad. And while I’m not interested in poking the Yao Guai, something about Wanderer being an indiscriminate asshole is just… well, hot. I’m fighting the urge to stop this argument by grabbing that chin and pulling it close, by kissing that mouth above it that’s set in such an angry twist, seeing if I can’t coax it open —

And now I’m staring. That’s not creepy at all.

But Wanderer hasn’t noticed, and when she answers, her voice matches her expression.

“Ever tried to multiply something by zero, Desdemona?” I fold my arms across my chest. That polite, logical voice is screaming at me, banging on the plexiglas prison I’ve locked it in at the back of my mind. A sharp sliver in my gut is the only thing that cuts through my feverish haze, warns me that this is wrong, that I’m being cruel, that I need to save this fury for the courtroom and the battlefield.

But Desdemona wants to take away my Deacon.

And I will raze this place to the fucking ground before another person is taken from me.

The Railroad Alpha doesn’t reply, just stares at me with flat copper eyes, so I bull forward. “You multiply something by zero, Dez, you get zero. You use old-fashioned, cowardly methods of calling for help, you put in zero effort, you don’t get help. Leaving a trail of rail signs — the modern equivalent of cave paintings — to assist in an urgent rescue op? Relying on two agents on a completely separate mission to drop everything they’re doing to read a fucking note left in a garbage can and hope the code is clear enough to make it to the right place at the right time?” Dez is white with anger, but I could care less. The passion and rightness of the argument’s swept me
up. I won’t stop until I’ve won. And I always win. “Here’s a novel idea for you. There’s a brand-new technology out there in the wasteland. It’s called radio. Ever heard of it?”

She’s gritting her teeth so hard they’re showing. “Radio signals are easily intercepted—”

“And you don’t think Tom or PAM could come up with a code? He cracked that Courser chip in minutes. You don’t think Institute scientists can catch on to a bunch of chalky white symbols scratched onto the sides of buildings?” I scoff, reveling in the pain etched into the lines of Dez’s face. I don’t care. She wants to hurt me, I’ll hurt her right back. “No wonder Switchboard went dark.”

“Hey, boss, that’s enough.” A quiet voice behind me, edged with something — fear? Worry? — and a warm hand on the small of my back. Deacon, trying to minimize the damage from the shadows as I sprint into the wide open. I shake him off, my glare hot enough to melt rebar. Why isn’t he doing something? Saying something? Doesn’t he care that we’re partners, that we’re about to get ripped apart because of stupid Railroad politics and prehistoric security measures?

Deacon actually staggers at my reaction, and the heat of my glare melts into a shame that coats me from top to bottom. He’s never seen me like this; I’ve never shown him this side. The woman who could bring perps to tears. A defendant once tried to kill himself on the courtroom floor after my closing argument; I’d watched with all the emotion of a Gen-1.

I’ve never felt remorse for being ruthless before. I almost gulp down my next words, come this close to an apology, but then Desdemona speaks, all trace of emotion burnt from her voice which now rasps like a husk against the cool air of the catacombs.

“If we didn’t require your unique qualifications for this mission, Wanderer, I would be very close to reconsidering our entire professional relationship right now.”

It’s just the wrong thing to say.

Desdemona and Wanderer are the two most cunning, lethal women I know.

And they’ve both lost their fucking marbles.

“I won’t put our entire operation at risk because two of our top agents can’t control themselves enough to put our mission before their own libidos. We lost a package because of this. Insult me all you want, agent. Throwing a temper tantrum isn’t going to get you your way.”

I rub my hands along my cheeks, stifling a groan. This is getting out of hand. I can still fix it, but they’re throwing wrenches into the gears left and right. And screwdrivers. And hammers. And frag mines.

It feels like all the air in the room has sucked into a point centered on Wanderer’s darkly gathered brows. Something’s about to explode from her. And here I am, without a Pulowski shelter in sight.

“I could be on the Prydwen by midnight.”

Dez stills.

So does my heart.
“Excuse me?” Her shoulders go rigid under that worn denim vest.

“Elder Maxson would pay a pretty goddamn penny to learn about this place. And about Ticon. And the rail signs, the runners, the tourists.” Wanderer swings her arms together, gives her hands a clap. There’s a mocking sort of lilt to her words, like she’s drawing a knife across a throat slowly, savoring the round perfection of every seeping droplet of blood. “Bet I could even buy myself a rank or five.”

“Is that a threat, agent?” Deathclaw Dez has morphed into Deathclaw Matriarch Dez. I tense; I may have to move, and soon.

“It’s a reminder. I work with the Railroad. Not for the Railroad. I don’t answer to you, Desdemona. I answer to me. The Institute took my husband, and they have my Shaun. The Railroad undermines the Institute. As long as your goals align with mine, we’re dandy.” Wanderer matches Desdemona’s poisonous gaze without blinking. “You once told me Deacon was the only one who could help me get my son back. I agree. You take him away from me—” she jabs a finger at Dez, not a wise move in my experience, “—you take away my only hope in this garbage pile of a world of finding Shaun, and you can kiss my gun, my discretion, and my loyalty goodbye.”

Wanderer pivots on her heel and for a brief moment, her eyes meet mine. They’re flashing, bright with anger and unspent tears, a shadow lurking somewhere in their depths. I bite the inside of my cheek against the sudden heat that floods my core.

Over the past few weeks, something’s begun to dawn on me, something I’ve been afraid to admit to myself out loud. But almost losing my buddy in the Glowing Sea, seeing her so damn weak and fragile with all those IVs poking into her flesh, watching her lash out today to protect me, even the tug of betrayal at my heart whenever I push her toward Preston—

I’m still not ready to face it. Not yet, maybe not ever. But, hell, I never thought the stone-cold-bitch thing would be such a turn-on.

The metal door to the escape tunnel clangs shut behind her, and the room is suddenly far emptier than it was a moment ago.

The flush of — I’m not going to call it desire, that’s not what it is — fades quickly as I face Dez, trembling with unexpressed rage and residual sorrow.

“Maybe she got into the Psycho again?” I suggest with a shrug.

The back entrance is a dank, dark, filthy place. I’ve gone as far beyond the door to HQ proper as I can without getting wet; there’s only a strip of dry ground past the last doorway before it becomes a sucking mess of mud and debris, the dream home of mirelurks everywhere. Behind me, the metal door slams, cutting off the gentle murmur of the bustling headquarters. Only the irregular rhythm of slimy condensation dripping from the ceiling breaks the silence.

My heart is thundering in my chest, my hands shaking. I’m pulling wet air into my lungs in great gasping gulps, and suddenly there are hot tears tracking lines down my cheeks, steaming ever so faintly against the cool, clammy air, ghostlike in the wan white light reflecting down the tunnel.

I didn’t want to fight today. I didn’t want to say those things to Dez, didn’t want to show that side of myself to Deacon. The side that can wield words like a guillotine, that collects the fallen heads like goddamn trophies.
Some sick part of me loved tearing a hole in Desdemona’s heart. I’d snapped. There was no other word for it; I’d been pulled taut by Glory’s out-of-the-blue teasing, strained by the dismissive way Dez spoke to Deacon, as though her poor planning and vulgar caution were his fault. And then, when she’d threatened to take away my Deacon — my friend, my only —

I had snapped.

And nothing would satisfy me except threatening her right back.

The dark part of me that relished a perp’s final look of despair when I put him away for good had screamed in delight at the tremor in her voice after I mentioned the Prydwen. The killing blow — it was even sweeter after just a little bit of slow, sweet torture.

But another part of me is repulsed.

It’s a corner of myself that’s lain bare for a long, long while. All my time with Deacon, though, wandering the Commonwealth, helping lost souls settle down, the sparkle of approval behind those dark shades when I do something unexpectedly kind—

Something green and lush and tentatively healthy has begun to sprout in that stark corner lately, and every indulgent word I just spat had plucked off a green leaf and crushed it.

My gasps have turned into traitorous sobs that echo across the still water of the tunnel. They sound eerie, like someone else’s voice, a heartbroken ghost-woman in mourning. It’s so loud — I allow myself one, two more, then choke them down. I don’t want all of HQ to hear me bawling like a child who for the first time has tasted the bitter tang of regret.

Down the tunnel the door cracks open almost silently, a shadow slipping in. My shadow.

His footsteps pad softly closer, stopping just past the archway I’ve chosen to hide behind. I hope to God he can’t see me as I drag the rough fabric of my shirt along my eyes, my cheeks, my running nose. Hide the sniffle behind a cough, that surprising little sob, too. I’ve never once cried in front of Deacon, and this is an incredibly stupid reason to start. I can’t turn my head, can’t look at him, can’t let him see my pink puffy face, ravaged by tears.

Something thuds against the soft earth: my travel pack, stuffed to overflowing. If I speak he’ll know I’ve been crying, but if I stay quiet he might leave. I swallow hard and give the old leather bag a sidelong stare.

“Am I out, then?”

He’s limned by the white light reflecting off the dark water; I can make out his lightly muscled arms, the glint of his shades, the line of his nose, the soft shape of his lips. His body is tense, unnaturally still. I don’t know whether it’s from anger, or disappointment, or if he just isn’t sure what to do with himself.

“Naw, of course not. Glory’s gotten into it with Dez way worse than that. One time it was so vicious, we almost threw ’em in the mud and sold tickets. Woulda made a great fundraiser.” His teasing lilt has returned; it feels like a balm on my raw spirit. Like maybe I haven’t ruined everything after all. “But it might be smart to lay low for a bit.”

I nod, a few more tears sneaking out of my dumb eyes and running down the side of my nose. I swipe at them mercilessly.

Deacon shifts on his feet, rubbing a hand along one elbow awkwardly. “Boss, I—” he begins, then
stops, taking half a step closer. His shaded gaze hasn’t left my face yet; it must be bright enough to
see me. Ugh. Maybe if I just turn away, if I don’t look at him, I can hide a little longer—

“Listen, Wanderer, I’m uh, I’m not the hugging type. You know that. But I think maybe you could
use one.” In the low light I can see the corner of his mouth quirk into a half-smile, one arm held out
to the side tentatively. “I could maybe use one, too.”

I forget to cough when I sniffle this time. “You don’t hate me?” Part of me thinks he has to, after
my starring role in that shitshow.

“Of course not,” he says again. His voice is so soft. There’s a quiet warmth to it I’ve never heard
before. “C’mere, pal.”

He’s only a few steps away, but it feels like a yawning abyss as I consider it. Sometimes I think
that Deacon knows me better than Nate ever could have.

My Nate. I’d been with him for years before he knocked me up and married me, but our
relationship was… synthetic, for lack of a better word. I never let him see me without makeup on
in the daylight, never let him touch my legs if they weren’t shaved to smooth perfection. Deacon
and I had been together — as partners, as friends — for just a few months, but the me he knows is a
stranger to everyone outside of myself. I’d drooled on his arm in a drunken stupor, spent a bath-
free week sleeping on mats in close quarters, smeared a man’s blood across my cheeks where the
rouge should have been. We’re close. Closer than I’ve ever been with another human, in fact.
Close enough that I’d just threatened to turn the Railroad over to the Brotherhood of Steel because
someone had the gall to suggest we might distract each other on the job.

But touching… that wasn’t something we did.

Sure, we’d hugged before. He’d dressed my wounds, I’d bandaged him up. Sometimes it was fine.
Innocuous. But there were those moments when his fingers would trail across my skin lightly,
skirting the edges of a gash, at once reluctant to cause pain and yet relishing the softness of the
forming bruise. It was always electric, thrilling in the way a static shock was thrilling, surprising,
almost pleasurable.

Touching is a line we refuse to look at or acknowledge, an invisible line drawn fat and bold right
here in the soft clay of the escape tunnel.

But that arm is still extended, that half-smile strangely… vulnerable. And so I step over, and into
Deacon’s arms.

One wraps around my waist, drawing me right up against him; I clutch my hands to my chest, fold
them up like wings and tuck them under my chin. His other encircles my shoulders. After a
moment his fingers begin to trail light, soothing lines along my shoulder blade. I hesitate only an
eye-blink before laying my cheek against his white t-shirt. The heartbeat beneath is loud and strong
and slow and steady. When he speaks, I can hear the half-smile coloring his tone.

“The next time you’re fixing to drop a nuke on the conversation, I’d love a heads up. A wink, a
finger on the nose, some sort of complicated whistle.”

I open my mouth to reply — a witty retort, worthy of our usual banter — but one of the strangled
cries I thought I’d banished sneaks out, and it’s like someone’s bashed open the floodgates with a
trebuchet. Silently and furiously I command them to stop, but the tears are flowing, and every
gulping sob that spills out is made worse by the attempt to hold it in.
In an instant his arm around my waist tightens. His fingers move from my shoulder to tangle themselves in my hair, drawing those tingling, soothing lines across my scalp.

“Baby.” Deacon draws out the vowel like a purr, his voice gentle and low as he leans his cheek against the top of my head. Even through the deluge, I thrill at the word. He’s slipped before, but now it feels different. Intentional. Those fingers comb through my hair, a rhythm to guide his quiet hushing. “Shh. Everything’s okay. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Deacon.” It comes out pathetic, a squeaking, detestable whimper, and he sways a bit, like I’m some infant that needs to be rocked. Maybe I am. I certainly just behaved like a child, in front of Dez, in front of— “I’m s-so ash-sh-sh-shamed.” The words shudder from me in a hoarse whisper and I bury my face in his chest. Warm, solid, supportive. “You must think I’m a m-m-m-monster.”

“C’mon, boss,” he murmurs into my hair, moving his hand to the nape of my neck and slowly stroking, up and down. “No need to insult me. You don’t think I can call a bluff from a mile off?”

“I sh-shouldn’t have said any of that. I’m s-so awful.” I mean it, too. It’s a strange feeling, this guilt. It’s never lurked in the wake of such a grand victory before; now it’s coursing through my bloodstream, seeping into every inch of my body with its poison. “I don’t know how you can stand to even l-look at me.” Much less hold me. Much less run your fingers through my hair like we’re... like we’re lovers.

“You’re not awful, and I happen to like looking at you.” Those fingers in my hair, pressing into the softness of my waist, they’re sending electric currents down all of my nerves. “Maybe you’re a little broken, yeah, but nothing we can’t fix.”

“I would n-never sell us out. I p-promise.”

“I know you wouldn’t, baby. I’m the one who taught you how to lie, remember?” Deacon pulls back, pushing his sunglasses into the thick of his pompadour and tilting my chin upwards with two fingers. It’s a rare glimpse of his eyes. I can barely make out their blue depths in the low light, but they hold me captive nonetheless. “You’re scary when you’re mad, you know that? Remind me to stay on your good side.”

His fingers stray from my chin to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. Such a familiar gesture, but it’s so new. “You know, you didn’t have to risk a coronary episode just for little old me. Dez talks tough, but she’s no Pinky Thompson. I already got her to relent on the banishment thing.”

I frown and he chuckles softly. “But — it’s only been like, ten minutes. How...?”

“I know I tell you to trust no one, but you can trust me sometimes, you know.”

“Is that why you didn’t fight it?” Those blue eyes move back and forth ever so slightly as they gaze down into mine. “I thought you just accepted it. I thought I’d have to — to fight for you, to convince you to stay —” And it had killed me when he hadn’t. I’d felt like I was alone on the battlefield, fighting one Behemoth of a woman.

“Believe me,” he says, and I do, because those naked eyes haven’t left mine and his voice is so low, so intense, “It’s gonna take more than a pink slip from Desdemona to keep me away from you.”

It must be the heat of relief that floods through me. I untuck those wings, looping my arms around his neck. His eyebrows flick in surprise. A rogue butterfly wreaks havoc in my belly as my unarmored breasts and stomach meld to his warmth, all my softer parts yielding to him.
“They took my Nate, they took my Shaun. If — if I lost you too, D, I don’t know what I’d…” I swallow hard, but I don’t break our gaze. I want him to know I mean this, that it trumps all the bile I just spewed at Desdemona. “You’re my best friend. You’re the only one I have out here. I need you, Deacon.”

His heartbeat thunders beneath that signature t-shirt, but his chest is still; he’s stopped breathing. His lips are parted slightly. I’ve never noticed how the lower pouts just a bit.

*Kiss him.*

The thought floats into my mind unbidden, followed by a walloping wave of guilt. *I can’t cheat on Nate* —

But Nate is gone. He’s never, ever coming back. Not even the Institute can resurrect the dead.

And if it’s not another of his famous lies, Deacon’s been protecting me from day one. I felt so alone for so long, but I’ve never really been on my own out here. I always had my friend.

His Adam’s apple bobs. I feel like I’m falling into those blue depths. His eyes — they’re beautiful. Why does he hide them?

Almost like he knows he shouldn’t, Deacon lifts a finger, tracing the fresh split along my lip.

“Looks like you earned yourself a war wound.” I pull it into my mouth, suddenly afraid there’s a river of blood pouring down my chin, and he smiles slightly. The way it touches his eyes… maybe he wears the shades because the world wouldn’t survive that smile full-force.

A word echoes as I look up at him. My friend. *Friend.*

Friends don’t embrace in dark tunnels for extended periods of time.

Friends don’t trail their fingertips so softly around the curve of your ear.

Friends don’t wonder how it might feel if all this damn fabric weren’t in the way.

Glory’s words from earlier tumble through my head and I realize that this line… it’s either my own personal Freedom Trail, or it’s a tripwire.

Because if I’m being perfectly honest, Nate — my husband, father of my child, the man I’m going to avenge — Nate never stoked this particular flame within me. We were comfortable, we were happy, we had two incomes and a cherry red convertible poorly suited to parenthood.

We didn’t have this.

This almost queasy wanting that pools like magma in my lower abdomen and begs me to press myself closer to the surprisingly muscular lines of Deacon’s body.

This fluttering in my heart when I think of the long days he spent watching my back before I ever knew he was there, how much of his life has already been devoted to me.

And whatever this is… we lost eight people because of it. *Even if* Desdemona’s methods are stupid and outdated, I can’t shake the thought.

And if I don’t still my fingers, now tracing light patterns on the back of his neck, this is going to turn into something that could quite possibly nuke the whole goddamn ‘Wealth.
My eyelashes beat rapidly and I duck my head against his chest. It’s the only indulgence I’ll allow myself, to stand here a few moments more, Deacon’s arms tightening around me as I close my eyes and calm myself to the rhythm of his steady heartbeat. Because this —

I’ve braved Alpha Deathclaws and Behemoths, Mirelurk queens and synth armies, and this is still the most terrifying thing I’ve faced thus far.
Chapter Summary

A little bit of travel, a little bit of banter, a mystery half-solved.

She’s shoving a fat roll of bandages into her pack, which is, by any objective account, _way_ too full. It won’t fit. Frustrated, frowning, she upends the whole shebang with a violent shake, Stimpaks and Jet inhalers tumbling across the dust of Somerville Place’s barren soil. A pair of white panties flutter to rest on top of the pile.

I raise an eyebrow above my shades. “I guess packing extra clean undies is a good idea, where we’re going.”

Wanderer’s face is bright as a tato as she snatches them up and tucks them into her lap, out of sight in the crux of her legs. She flashes me a glare, then tosses a bag of Radaway at my face — not gently, I might add.

“Doesn’t matter. No hospitals in the Glowing Sea.” She snorts, sorting through the mess she’s made, carefully selecting certain objects and dropping them in the bag. “Or anywhere else, for that matter.”

“Fun fact: in addition to being the Commonwealth’s number-one most trusted brain surgeon, Doctor Deacon is also well-versed in administering Stimpaks and Radaway. For a fee, of course.”

“Headshots don’t count as brain surgery.”

“Says you.” I eye her over the top of my sunglasses. “You’re in a sarcastic mood this morning. Were our hosts’ generous accommodations not up to your standards, princess?” The homesteaders at Somerville aren’t thriving the way some of Wanderer’s more northern settlements are. Life is harsher this far south, this close to the Deathclaw playground that is the Glowing Sea. I get it. But that doesn’t make the sleeping bags we curled up on last night any more immune to rocks or rain.

Wanderer sinks her face into her hands, groaning. “I don’t want to go back, Deacon.” A brown eye peeks at me through two fingers. “You can still bow out, you know.”

I lower myself to the dirt beside her, wrapping an arm around one knee and leaning in. “Because sending you into the Sea alone was such a great idea last time.”

She frowns and pouts at the jab, but knocks her shoulder back against mine playfully. “‘Alone’ is an alien concept with you around. Creep.”

“You like it.”

“Yeah, I do.” She grins at me and it’s like a punch to the face. She’s fucking dazzling when she shows those pearly whites. My heart plops into my rapidly flipping stomach and I have to drop my gaze, like my hand is suddenly _super_ interesting for some undisclosed reason.

Something shifted between us the last time we were at HQ. Before her catfight with Dez, the times Wanderer and I happened to touch, they were nice. Warm, made me smile, like when I held her
hand on the docks after liberating H2-22.

Now they’re electric.

Like tripping a Tesla Arc every time I brush up against her.

I think the only thing that stopped me that day at HQ, the only thing that kept me from pushing her up against that slimy rock wall and kissing her, from exploring those soft curves that pressed right up against me, was that sad little catch in her voice. *I’m awful.* She didn’t need kissing right then, she needed… holding.

Yeah. That’s what stopped me.

Also the slime.

“Well, boss,” I say, ripping myself from a memory that threatens to damage my sterling reputation if I go any further and decide to stand up in these suddenly-too-tight jeans, “I’m ready to go when you are. Just say the word.”

The Glowing Sea’s not pleasant by any stretch of the imagination, but it is a little less desolate with Deacon at my side.

Instead of a hundred feet behind me, cloaked by one of Tinker Tom’s special Stealth Boys.

We’ve been walking a few hours and have just made it past the tree line. Our conversation has been clipped, subdued. It’s not due to some spat or dip in mood so much as the weight of what we’re about to do. By all rights, the code from this Courser chip should provide enough data for Virgil to work his magic to get us into the Institute. And that is a sombering-as-hell thought.

“Think we’ll luck out again?” I ask, referring to the complete and total lack of fighting I (we) experienced last time.

Deacon unslings his rifle and sights down the scope, sweeping it east to west. I don’t know how he can see anything through the hazmat suit’s visor. “Nope. Radscorps up ahead, ‘bout a hundred yards.”

A few more hills crested and the damn things spot us, diving into the earth like it’s seafoam. Scrambling onto a nearby boulder, I wait, nervously eyeing the ground, my ears straining for any grumblings from the earth.

“Do not let them close in on you,” Deacon warns, two milliseconds before they do. The batch of Psycho Jet I’d cooked up at the chem lab back at Somerville is fresh and potent, and I don’t spare time for a grimace as I stab it down.

They move fast, and by the end my heart is beating wildly in my chest, but we’ve beaten the bugs soundly. Deacon toes one with his boot. “We win. Again.”

“Wasted too many bullets on that fight. We gotta make ‘em last another few days at least.”

Behind the visor and the shades, I can feel Deacon watching as I pick up my discarded chem needle and recap it. Old habits, I guess. “Didn’t they have those PSAs back in the day? About drugs and the wacky awesome lifestyle they promote?”
I sigh, hoping my eye-roll is somehow visible through my suit helmet. “I’m no match for the shit stalking this place. You know I’m dead without it.”

“There was a time I was on a first name basis with chems. It’s better to kiss them goodbye, trust me.”

“I’m sure you were a regular Hancock.”

Deacon’s voice is unusually somber. “I’m not bullshitting you this time, babe. Just promise me, someday, when this is all over and it’s safe to breathe easy, you’ll kick ‘em to the curb.”

“Even the insulin?” It’s my favorite retort whenever he tells me to lay off the chems. Getting stale, but maybe good for a few more laughs.

The man scoffs, hefting his rifle. We’ve reached the point where we keep the safety off and the barrel forward. “Come on.” But then he cocks his head. “How… are you doing on that, by the way?”

I stride past him. There’s a spire in the distance, one that could’ve once belonged to a church but now rests far too low to the ground. Full of ferals, I recall from my last stroll through the Sea, but a decent enough landmark.

“Almost out,” I say, too casually. Deacon knows I hate talking about my disease, so he rarely asks about it. But I’d barely made it out of the Glowing Sea last time, and it wasn’t due to any mutated creatures or radiation poisoning.

“What?” The question cuts through the air, sharp.

“It’s fine, mother. I’m sure Carrington is close to a solution by now.”

“He’s not.” The flat reply makes me wince. “I asked before you firebombed HQ with that temper of yours. Says he’s still a couple months off.”

My heart sinks, and it isn’t because of the doctor’s slow progress. “Well, I’m sure it’ll be okay. If I keep my diet to carrots and meat, I can stretch it out for that long.”

Deacon’s legs are longer than mine, and he catches up with me easily. “We gotta work on strengthening your fibbing muscles. Right now you’re averaging a 4.5 outta 10.”

Damn his insane levels of perception. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Ohhh, and she fudged the dismount. Too bad. The kid had a future.” He stops and grabs my arm to halt me as well, spinning me until my visor aligns with his. “Seriously, Wanderer. You may not care what happens to you, but I do not want to go through that again.”

His expression is still obscured by the visor, but there’s a snag to his words that’s hard to miss. It catches at the part of me that blossomed in the escape tunnel back at HQ, rustles the leaves that unfurl a little further every time we touch. I don’t want to go through that again.

He cares.

And that makes sharing my suspicions with him even harder.

That bottle of insulin Deacon found in Nate’s pod… I know in my heart it isn’t of pre-war origin. It’s absolutely pristine, unlabeled, recognizable only by its distinctive smell and the fact that it
works when I stab a needle full of it into the soft skin of my belly.

There’s a reason Kellogg smashed his way into my Vault and my life. A reason Shaun was ripped away from me. A reason Kellogg and Shaun were stationed in Diamond City like sitting ducks, waiting for Nick and I to stumble upon their home sweet home.

A phrase rings out from where it’s filed in some dusty drawer of my memory, a fragment of my trip into Kellogg’s brain. *Seems obvious now that we were bait for our friend from the Vault. The timing couldn’t have been an accident.*

The Institute. They’re stalking me, luring me, keeping me alive for some reason I’m afraid to even consider. Deacon sometimes tells me I’m the Railroad’s secret weapon, even though I can barely shoot a bottle of Nuka Cola from a fence post without VATS, even though I toe the line of obedience with Dez and my temper has gotten us into trouble more than twice. Thinking of myself as a *weapon*... It sends a chill down my spine that has nothing to do with the radstorm gathering on the horizon.

I’ve been quiet too long; Deacon’s hand slides down my arm, grips my wrist. “Boss. Why aren’t you more worried about this?”

But then a mole rat broodmother launches from the ground to our right, followed shortly by what could only be her brood, and I’m saved from having to reply as they beeline for Deacon’s ankles.

The crazies in the crater aren’t my favorite drinking buddies in the ‘Wealth, but at least the ‘Claws and ferals avoid the weird little settlement they’ve slapped together here. Assuming they haven’t taken up a couple new idols to worship, that is.

“All the comforts of a cult without leaving your irradiated crater. Join the Children of Atom.” Wanderer elbows me in the ribs. She’s right; I should probably cut the crap, given the look Mother Isolde shoots my way.

“May we shelter here for the night, ma’am?” The boss’s voice is way too polite for these creeps, but I suppose it’s all in the interest of survival. Our hazmat suits protect us from the ambient radiation of the Sea, but I don’t trust how well they’ll hold up against the cultists’ gamma guns.

Isolde sniffs at Wanderer sanctimoniously and I try really hard not to roll my eyes. *Oh please, all-powerful hobo lady, grant us sanctuary ’neath the protective awning of your illustrious garbage heap.*

“And I am to understand that you plan to remove this Virgil from his residence southwest of the crater?”

“If all goes well, he’ll be out of your hair in no time.” I can’t suppress a chuckle. The boss lucked out with that turn of phrase; this Child actually has hair to reference.

Mother Isolde inclines her head graciously. “Then you are doing us a favor. His presence is an affront to Atom. You may rest here tonight, so long as you do not interfere with our prayers.”

Wanderer nods, visibly relieved. “Thank you, Mother. You won’t even notice us, promise.” She turns and tugs at my sleeve. “C’mon.”

We hunker down under the metallic ruins of a lean-to, rolling out our sleeping bags across a floor
that’s little more than splinters and dirt.

“Think we can risk a fire?” she asks hopefully.

“Hate to say it, but I don’t trust the look of those vapors coming off the nuclear goo over yonder.” The glowing, sickly green puddle of nuclear waste at the heart of the crater is as misty with strange gases as ever. “Gonna be another chilly night, I guess.”

Wanderer heaves a whining sort of sigh. “These stupid suits leech away all my body heat. And I can’t get comfortable trying to lay down with this dumb helmet jabbing into my neck.”

“Eloquent today, aren’t we?” I smirk at her glare. “Well, we could always pop a few too many Rad-X and sleep in bursts. More side effects, less spinal column misalignment. Your preference?”

She pauses a moment to think, then fishes through her travel pack, producing a weighty brown glass bottle. “If we go Ghoul, you have to be my partner for eternity.”

“Deal.”

Our helmets unseal with a reptilian hiss and we swallow a couple pills each, washing them down with a few gulps of canned water. The Rad-X is potent, sure, but it makes you hungry as all get-out. Sitting on the scant cushioning provided by my sleeping bag, we set to it, cramming our faces with food. In Wanderer’s case, carrots and a can of potted meat do the trick; I don’t envy the diet, not one iota.

She wriggles halfway out of her suit, baring the back of an arm as she flicks the glass vial of insulin and draws a few units. Her eyes meet mine briefly, noting my gaze as she empties the needle into the soft flesh of her arm.

“Just say it.” She recaps the needle, tucks everything away in her pack, and crosses her now-resuited arms.

“You never answered my question.”

“Maybe I don’t want to answer it.” She’s sassier than usual, that’s for sure. But her chin has that defiant lift it gets when her temper begins to kindle, and I find myself stifling my first impulse, which is to lean over and press my lips to hers, loosen up that tightness in her jaw with a soft stroke of my thumb…

Whatever sparked between us in the catacombs sure has my inner teen riled up. I swallow and fix her with a bored stare. She sighs again. “I don’t want to tell you.”

“Why not?” I try not to let the disappointment I feel slip into my voice.

“Because I like that you trust me.”

“Well, now I’m definitely not curious or mistrusting. At all.”

Wanderer flicks me then, right on the forehead. “Ow! What the—”

“I think,” she says slowly, no doubt savoring the tension she’s creating, “that if I were to go back to Sanctuary tomorrow and check Nate’s pod, I’d find a neat little bottle of synthetic hormone waiting for me.”

That stills me a sec. I think back to Dez’s report on the lost shipment. “The Institute sightings.”
Wanderer looks at me sharply. “What are you talking about?”

“Dez described a pattern of Institute sightings before we lost the shipment. The Vault… there’s been Institute activity around Sanctuary recently.”

She nods, unsurprised. “But none of my people hurt or targeted, outside of the shipment. Deacon, I think they’re… I think they’re herding me.”

“Like a sheep or like a sadist?”

She gives this sad sort of smile. “Both, I guess.” Wanderer begins to fumble with the loose fingers of her suit gloves, pinching and twisting the yellow rubber as she speaks. “Think about what we know. The Institute has my little boy. They’re keeping him alive, according to Kellogg, safe and sound if he’s to be believed. They’re tracking our movements, but they haven’t hurt us yet, even though they could take out Sanctuary without a thought. When I ran out of insulin, a perfect new bottle appeared in my hiding place for them. And Doc Weathers magically knew how to treat diabetes, a disease so deadly without insulin therapy, there can’t have been an opportunity to study it in the last 200 years.” Her fingers freeze their fiddling and a note of panic creeps into her voice. “Deacon… you called me a weapon. What if I’m not the Railroad’s weapon?”

She looks so small and scared, tucked up against the cold metal wall of the lean-to, muscles tight and eyes wary. The very idea of betraying us wrecks her, for all her big talk around going to Maxson. A loyal liar, a fierce mother, a tireless ally. Dez has no idea what a jewel we stumbled upon in this one. I shift closer so my shoulder rests against hers, so she knows it’s okay to go on. She leans into me ever so slightly, drawing a breath.

“What if… Deacon, what if they’re keeping me alive to use me? What if they use Shaun as leverage, as a way to get me to do their bidding? What if I’m their weapon, and they want to use me against…?” She stops, her gulp audible. “…you?”

A violent shiver wracks her body and I can’t help myself; I sling an arm around her bowed shoulders and pull her close. My Wanderer. “The fact that you’re even worried about it,” I say, in what I hope is my most comforting and manly tone, “proves that’s not a real possibility.”

She burrows closer, laying her head against my chest, her hair ticklish on my bare neck. I close my eyes behind my shades, savoring the warmth spreading from where her weight rests down through my stomach. Her voice is muffled when she speaks. “You don’t know what I’ll do. I don’t even know what I’ll do. For my baby… for Shaun.”

“You’d never betray us, boss.”

“What would you do if they had your Barbara?”

I know she doesn’t mean to hurt me, that the words cut only because they strike a wound and not because they’re bladed with cruelty. But I wince anyway. “I’d find a way to ride in on a white horse, save my girl, and kick the Institute in the crotch all at the same time.” I rest my chin on top of her head and she snuggles a little closer. Whatever this is between us, some bizarre amalgamation of friendship and crush, I won’t deny that it’s nice. “I’d do it for my Barbara, and I’ll do it for your Shaun. I promise you, Wanderer. And that’s no lie.”

Her shoulders rise and fall gently with the rhythm of her breaths, and she remains silent for a long while. I start to wonder if I’ve said something wrong when she finally speaks.

“Can we just sleep like this for a while?”
My back sort of aches but there’s no way I’m telling her that. Not when she’s got that bone-tired droop to her voice. Not when her body against mine is the only and best source of warmth in this crater full of cancer and kooks. I reach forward to pull her sleeping bag around us. “You bet,” I murmur, and I wrap my free arm across her as she shifts a little closer, imagining that the crackling static around us is nothing more than the chirp of crickets on a summer night, the nuclear glow soft as the light of the moon.

“I’m not a fan of unexpected house guests.”

The bespectacled Super Mutant eyes Deacon with unveiled distaste. I take a subtle step in front of him, pursing my lips. “He’s my partner, not your lunch. Paws off.”

Virgil snorts, clearly offended. “Don’t insult me in my own cave.” He regards the holotape I hold out to him with a glint of what must be hope in his too-small eyes. “I wasn’t sure I’d see you again. You managed to get what you need?”

“No, I just went out for a little stroll, thought I’d stop back and say hi.”

“It’s a good thing your survival and my humanity aren’t at stake. Otherwise, I might be annoyed by your attitude.” He narrows those already tiny eyes. “But fine, I shouldn’t have doubted you’d come back. You did get rid of Kellogg, after all. Not too much of a leap to take down a Courser. How’d you manage to get it decoded?”

I don’t even blink. “Does it matter?”

“No, you’re right. It doesn’t really. The point is that you got it.” The mutant turns to face his worktable, shuffling items around with ungraceful green fingers. “You're not the only one who's been busy.”

He turns, a thick stack of papers grasped between thicker thumbs. He shoves them toward me. “I did the best I could, from memory and things I’ve overheard through the years,” he says gruffly, with a strange mix of shame and pride. “Came up with some schematics for you. Wasn’t easy; these hands are ridiculous. Fine motor skills have gone to shit.”

I can hear Deacon open his mouth to let out some smart-ass comment. My heel falls not particularly gently on the white toe of his Chuck Taylors and I hide a grin as he curses. Virgil seems not to notice. “Here’s the simple explanation: you need to build a device that will hijack the signal the Institute uses to teleport Coursers, and send you instead.”

“Let me get this straight.” We’ve donned our hazmat suits and exited the overgrown green bean’s cave, but before we get any further, I’ve got a bone to pick with the boss. “These plans were designed by a glorified zookeeper? From memory and overheard gossip? And it could vaporize you?”

Wanderer shrugs, probably just to drive me crazy. “It’s our only shot, D.”

“And I can’t go.” I state it, because it’s so unbelievable it’s not even worth questioning.

“Guess not. These plans only seem to account for transporting one person at a time.” She’s irritatingly calm. The panic that had begun to close around my chest when the mutie outlined his plan now has complete and total control of my diaphragm.
“What if you, I don’t know, stand on my shoulders, we get a trench coat and a fedora, and we pull the whole two-kids-one-movie-ticket gag?”

“You want to risk rematerializing with my head on your shoulders?”

“Hey, worse things have happened, right?”

But Wanderer just gives me a dead stare, hefts her rifle, and trudges past me. We’ve got a long way to walk, and I get the feeling that she’s not going to give me an answer I like along the way.

My knees weaken with relief as the dilapidated roofing of Somerville Place swims into view. I practically run the last few hundred feet, Deacon jogging slowly behind me. The Sea has worn us to the bone. Radscorps, charred, bulbous excuses for feral ghouls that are twenty times as strong, mole rats, Deathclaws… it threw everything it had at us on the trek back, like it was some conscious being, like its worst nightmare would be our leaving its borders alive. I shed my detestable hazmat suit as I stumble forward, especially relishing the sight of my helmet tumbling down the rocky hillside.

I collapse next to the water pump, filling the algae-lined old bucket to the brim and drinking deep, then dumping the rest over my head. God, we made it. I’d tried to hold it together for Deacon — even with his eyes shaded by sunglasses and visor both, I could sense the worry entrenched in their depths — but that run has me down to my last ten bullets. It’s a lucky thing caps are useless in the Sea; the nearby grunting and snuffling of a caravan brahmin gives me hope of restocking.

More water. I need more water. I’ve been rationing insulin for at least two weeks, long before Deacon got suspicious, and it’s starting to take its toll. Even my eyeballs feel thirsty. Times like these, I’d kill a man for a glucometer, just to gauge how close to the edge I was coming. But glucometers don’t exist anymore, and my only signal that something’s amiss is my battered, betrayed body.

Another bucket, another deep draught, another impromptu shower. I wish I could absorb the water through my skin, but I know this feeling will only get worse: a thirst you can never slake, an itch you can never scratch.

Funny how that mirrors another aspect of my life right now.

Deacon’s caught up and he’s working on filling his own bucket now. I don’t have the energy for words or banter; I just lay there in the cool mud, blinking water out of my eyes and expending the effort to refocus them, to gauge just which trader has set up shop under the bright red awning—

A grin that would be at home on the face of a plaid-garbed car salesman greets me. “Salutations, toots. Bet you’re glad to see me, eh?”

Doc Weathers. Of course it’s Doc Weathers. I don’t even have the energy for a proper eye-roll as he waggles his eyebrows at me, his combover moving in time like some third-rate handpuppet.

“You’re gonna be real happy with a little somethin’ I picked up on the road. Oh, yes. Doc Weathers don’t disappoint, no he do not.”

And when he produces a pristine vial of clear liquid from his filthy white coat, I could care less whether it came from the Institute or the mystical teat of some magical insulin cow.
Chapter Summary

There are always so many *feelings* to deal with before transferring your molecules straight into the lion's den and possibly vaporizing yourself in the process.

It’s been weeks, and the signal interceptor’s still not finished.

I didn’t expect it to go up in a day. Or even a week. But that bottle of insulin Doc Weathers *just so happened* to stumble upon in the wasteland is starting to run low. While I still harbor a degree of confidence that I’ll find more in the Vault when I need it, relying on magic tricks and extraordinary assumptions for my survival is… tiresome.

And traveling from Somerville Place to HQ to Sanctuary to various med and military sites to Sanctuary to HQ and back again has been exhausting, to say the least.

When I’d stepped back through the door to the crypt for the first time, the pall of discomfort in the air had been palpable. Drummer Boy’s eyes had gone wide, flickering from Dez to me and back again. But the moment I produced Virgil’s holotape, depositing the thing in Desdemona’s shaking hands, it was like I’d finally picked the master lock that bound her trust. I’d proven myself true to the cause, despite those treasonous words spat in haste.

“We’ve spent dozens of years and too many good agents' lives only to discover not a goddamned thing. And now we have the answer.” She’d stared at the orange tape like it was some precious jewel. There was some argument over where to build — Dez and Tom were hell-bent on Mercer Safehouse, as PAM had given the site her omnipotent, data-driven blessing — but my point was sound. Hangman’s Alley was *not* spacious enough to build the signal interceptor. Hell, it could barely handle a trading depot and an outhouse.

And so the last few days we’ve lounged around Sanctuary, waiting on Tom and his ragtag crew of engineers to finish putting together all the pieces of the teleporter. He and Sturges had butted heads on design and implementation at first, only to buddy up once they uncovered a mutual admiration for the early work of one Enrico Fermi — as well as a mutual disdain for his work on the A-bomb.

Months have passed since I thawed, but I still can’t cross the threshold of the rambler I’d shared with Nate and Shaun without my stomach dropping to my shoes. I’d gone in just once since our return, scouring the nursery for anything sentimental or useful after two centuries. Deacon had trailed behind me, curious, and hadn’t asked any questions when I hefted one end of Shaun’s old blue crib and looked at him imploringly.

The little shack I’d constructed as my home base, settled on the lot beside the Rosas’, had been upgraded in my recent absence from the settlement, no doubt thanks to Jun’s nervous hands and Preston’s gentle urging. The gaping holes I’d never finished patching are miraculously filled, the splinters sanded from the floors and swept clean. There are even tattered curtains dressing the windows.

“We can’t have our General’s mansion falling down around her ears,” Preston had said with a warm smile when I’d spied the changes and gasped, clapping my hands. I’d hugged him in thanks,
his arms lingering around my waist a moment after I’d released my own, his eyes roving over my face, drinking in the delight he found there. All the while I could sense Deacon nearby, ruffling Dogmeat’s fur and conspicuously not watching.

I shake my head to loosen the memory and lean into Shaun’s crib, adjusting the worn teddy bear and faded rattle for what must be the hundredth time. It fills a corner of the tiny room, along with a child-sized bed complete with a rocketship-patterned quilt, a dresser adorned with tiny robot models I’d pocketed from across the ‘Wealth, a shelf of funny little bobblehead toys — some Vault-Tec promotion, no doubt — a chest for his treasures, a bookshelf, a reading lamp, and a comfortable old armchair. It’s a room in limbo, hovering somewhere in the nebulous space between infancy and childhood.

The crib, the rattle, the teddy… I ought to throw them out. But somewhere deep within me I cling to the hope that Shaun is still my baby, that Kellogg lied, that his memory was altered as part of some sadistic plot to torment me. For months I’ve been desperately suppressing the maternal instincts that threaten to overwhelm me at times, instincts driven by hormones that still course through my blood. My body feels it even now. The pregnancy, the birth. It’s been centuries, but my womb, my breasts, they grew and nurtured and fed this child mere months ago. I still feel twinges of discomfort in my abdomen now and then, unfamiliar sensations between my legs that were never there until I became a mother. Those first two weeks out of the cryopod had been hellish, my body reacting like it still had a child to feed, and when the milk had finally dried up it was both a relief and a loss.

And these past weeks, as I’ve quietly nourished that little hope, feeding it likely facts and secret dreams, I can feel my body yearning to respond. My womb, lightly aching, like it misses the babe it knew so well. My breasts, heavy and tender, readying themselves. You better not, I warn them silently, glaring at my chest. \textit{I threw out my nursing bra after that first Fallon’s shopping spree.}

My body knows what my mind refuses to admit: that I want nothing more than to hold my baby in my arms again, to lounge in that chair and feed him as I once did, sing him a lullaby as he shifts and rustles in the gentle manner of babies everywhere, the sweet smell of his downy head overwhelming me, as intoxicating as any liquor.

Footsteps saunter down the short hallway behind me and the armchair creaks as someone sits down. \textit{“So this is why you had me lug that thing all the way from Diamond City.”}

The thing in question, a semi-functioning Giddyup Buttercup, stands on rusted yellow legs in the corner. An unexpected chuckle catches against the lump in my throat, coming out thick and strangled. The chair creaks again as Deacon moves beside me, bracing his forearms on the edge of the crib. The old mobile hangs askew above it, missing a rocketship; he taps it with a finger, smiling at the rusty, off-key tune that trickles from its gears.

A flash of memory startles me: another lifetime, standing over this crib with another man, the song floating from the music box pure and clear. For a moment it’s so real it hurts, then it slips away too fast. I grasp at it — perhaps I can pretend just a second longer that I’m not Wanderer but \textit{her}, and this isn’t Deacon but \textit{Nate}, and the tiny mattress cushions a baby instead of an eyeless teddy...

\textit{“We’ll get this fixed by the time he comes home.”} He says it with such confidence. Like he really believes I can bring him back.

\textit{“He’ll probably think it’s stupid. He’s not… he’s probably not even a baby anymore.”}

\textit{“He might be a couple sizes too big for this thing, yeah, but Shaun will always be your baby.”} The way he says Shaun’s name… it’s like he knows him. Deacon’s finger brushes lightly against the
back of my hand. I curl it into a fist.

“He doesn’t even know me.”

“Doesn’t matter. Every kid needs his mama. There’s a reason ‘I want my mommy’ is the number-one whimper of choice for men in trouble the world over.”

“Not a mama like me.” I huff out a laugh. “These days I’m better at changing magazines than diapers.”

“I get the feeling you'll pick it right back up. I don’t know many mothers who could live life as stubbornly as you, my friend.”

His words are warm, but their heat doesn’t permeate the icy fear frosting my heart and gut. “Even if I do get him back,” I say bitterly, knowing how pathetic I sound, how self-pitying, “how can I protect a little kid from this godforsaken world? It’s just me. He doesn’t have a father anymore.”

The words drop into the hollow within me like a penny down a well. I snatch the rattle in my fist and shake it once, violently. Nothing rattles. Of course.

Deacon plucks it from me gently, turning it over in his hands, giving it a little shake as though he expects a different result. “You’re not alone, boss. You got us — the Railroad, me. You and Shaun both. We can’t bring back his dad, but… but we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

He reaches out to tweak the no-longer-there nose of the teddy. “Y’know, this room is exactly why you’re my favorite.” My heart skips a beat. He clasps his hands, looking at the old Unstoppables posters I’ve nailed to the shabby walls, at the Nuka Cola truck and toy car with their flaking paint, the blue rug with rocketships that matches the quilt and the curtains. “You anticipate the worst and prepare for the best. Tell us all not to expect too much, that you’ll probably just blow up with the relay, but in the background you’re hammering together this beautiful little world for us to live in. You make me feel…” He drops his head and wrings his hands, hesitating, like maybe he should keep his next words to himself. “You make me feel the way Barbie always did. Like we have a future.”

I risk a glance at him; he’s wearing one of the Minutemen’s signature militia hats. I’m not a betting woman, but I’d put caps on the fact that he’s got a duster and a pair of leather boots tucked in his pack as well. I tweak the oiled brown brim. “You better take that thing off before Preston sees you. You don’t wanna make him cry.”

“Please. You underestimate me.” He grins and tugs it back into place, striking a pose. “I make a pretty dashing revolutionary, don’tcha think?”

I chuckle, my eyes rolling to the ceiling. “You’re a regular Sam Adams.”

“Sam Adams? Which one was that again? He was handsome, right?”

I laugh. “Not so much.” Just a few minutes with my partner and I’m already feeling lighter, like maybe I can tackle this after all. And even if I fail, maybe…

Maybe I’ll still have something to come back to. “Thanks for listening, D. I just—”

But I’m interrupted by a deep electrical groan that shakes the very foundation beneath us, followed by a staticky crackle and a whoop of joy that unmistakably belongs to Tinker Tom.

“And we are in business!”
A couple days ago Preston had come up to me, Stetson trembling between his hands, and I knew right off the bat that I was in trouble.

“Hey, man. Got a minute?”

He sounded nervous. I guess I took pity on him or something, ‘cause I patted the grassy curb next to me, stubbed out my cigarette, and motioned him to sit. “If it isn’t my old pal Preston. What do ya need?”

Looking relieved, he’d sat, spreading that cheesy Spaghetti Western-looking duster beneath him and twirling the wide-brimmed hat between his fingers. “I’ve been thinking.” Dangerous hobby for a Minuteman, I wanted to say, but I bit my tongue. He really did seem pathetic. “The General’s about to go on a dangerous mission. One she… she might not come back from, if I’m understanding right.”

I’d been avoiding thinking about that with every synapse in my brain, which of course meant I had spent every waking moment obsessing over it. Will she disappear into thin air? Will she explode like a suicer and I’ll be shampooing Wanderer bits out of my pompadour? What if she doesn’t make it? Like, really doesn’t make it? What if she does make it, but the Institute’s better than Nuka-World and she decides to stay? The last time I lost someone had resulted in a textbook shitshow; sleepy old Sanctuary didn’t deserve to experience that special brand of crazy. So I’d kept my lips zipped up tight, like I was listening really hard, like a good little pal.

He’d taken a deep breath. “I want — I need to tell her how I feel before she goes. Just in case it’s my… my last chance. You know? But man, you’re her best friend. And I see how she looks at you sometimes. I just… was wondering if you’d give your blessing.” He’d cleared his throat. So polite. What a guy. “If it isn’t too much to ask.”

My thoughts had scattered like gulls before a mirelurk, until the only one left was a half-formed joke about his laser musket needing cranking. My trusty instincts hinted that maybe I oughta put a pin in that one, though.

My blessing. He wanted my blessing, my blessing, to spill his mushy, obvious guts to my buddy. My boss. My Wanderer.

I’d clenched my teeth so hard they might shatter, but… was she mine?

She was my partner, yeah. My friend, absolutely. But I couldn’t claim her. She wasn’t mine.

Even if she felt like she might be, there in my arms at HQ. Even if, that night in the Glowing Sea, the weight of her head on my chest and the soft gust of her breath warming the skin beneath my t-shirt had made me wonder if maybe she could be mine. Just a little bit. Someday.

But I’d spent too long popping proverbial Stealth Boys, avoiding the thing that’d been stalking me across the Commonwealth for weeks. Because I’ve never been totally comfortable with truth, and this one…

Each time we’ve passed through Sanctuary, I’ve planted a couple seeds. Watered ‘em. Added a little fertilizer here and there. A word to Preston, a nod, making my stupid jokes, nudging and hinting that maybe he should go for it. Part of me assumed — and yeah, with a degree of disappointment — that Wanderer would have to fall into the depths of those chocolate brown eyes that gaze at her with such unfettered adoration. Such love.

The other part of me hoped she would. Because untangling the gnarled, knotted mess of weird shit
Wanderer makes me feel is overwhelming in a way that plotting to take down an evil empire could never be.

I knew if she’d just turn those big brown eyes of hers on someone else for once, maybe I could rip the Band-Aid off in one clean tug, that the pain of losing my pal to another man would be brief and smarting but mostly superficial. Nothing more than the graze of a bullet dodged.

So I’d given Preston my damn blessing. Figured that even if she accepted it, even if she returned his feelings, I’d still just be ripping off a Band-Aid. That it’d be some sign we aren’t meant to be. That my years of research and planning, that Operation Tea Party and Project Wanderer weren’t fated to be some post-apocalyptic fairy tale, hadn’t led me to my —

But now the whole gang’s here, milling around in front of the giant open-air microwave that could very possibly zap her into a million tiny, irrecoverable pieces, and Preston’s holding her hands in his — those hands that had gripped my t-shirt, wet from her tears, while she sobbed in my arms — and he’s saying something I can’t quite catch while looking down into her eyes, those almost-black eyes that I’ve laughed with, brushed teardrops from —

“Cool it, D-man. Now would be a bad time to blow your top.”

Glory’s melodic voice, slightly raspy from an abiding love of cigars and bourbon, slices through the furious haze fogging up my brain.

“I can’t believe they let you out of your cage,” I say without taking my eyes off the pair, meaning it. But I guess HQ has plenty of heavies to keep an eye on it while the big bosses are out on a field trip.

“Dez wanted an escort, and we all know I’m the best we got.” She winks at me, a lock of silver hair bouncing across her brow. “Some advice, D? The costumes are cute, but they don’t hide that steam comin’ outta your ears. Chill. Lovergirl ain’t into it.” Her caramel eyes rove across the unfolding scene, unreadable.

Her words are reassuring.

For about ten seconds.

Until Preston wraps his duster-clad arm around my Wanderer’s waist, drawing her close, and tilts her chin up, and then actually kisses her. Deeply, slowly, like he’s the star of some fucking pre-war soap opera. Her hands raise and despite the hammering in my breast, I prepare to smirk because she’s going to push him off her any second now.

Any second.

But she places them against his cheeks instead.

Some fragile, shadow-dwelling thing inside of me crumbles as I realize she’s kissing him back.

"Ouch. Guess my read on that one was off, huh?"

I fold my arms and look away, trying to ignore the violent thundering in my chest, the breaths that come a touch too fast.

Distraction. I need a distraction.

Crops look good. Gourds seem healthy. Could use a little less watering, but I won’t be the one to
tell Marcy that.

Dogmeat’s happily oblivious, scarfing down the farewell steak Wanderer left in his bowl.

Tom’s fiddling with the console, flicking switches and poking shiny buttons, happier than I’ve ever seen him. Dez is —

Dez is staring at me, a horrible mix of pity and sadness underscoring the “well, I told you so” look on her face.

I repel from her gaze like we’re the north poles of two magnets, but what’s in front of me is no less painful.

Wanderer, stepping toward me hesitantly, her cheeks burning cherry red and her eyes glued to her boots.

I untangle my arms and twist my mouth into a smile I don’t feel. This is all wrong, dammit. This moment shouldn’t have been Preston’s. He hasn’t been here, hasn’t put the work in, the hours on the road, the long nights getting to know her, to learn her stories and her crazy cackling laugh and the little quirky smile she gets when I tease her—

And now she’s about to stick herself like a human fork into this overgrown electrical socket, cobbled together from scrap metal and tech trash, headed straight into the lion’s den to try and get her baby back. And she’s agreed to contact Patriot at the same time, all the while collecting valuable intel and painting a huge white lantern-shaped target on her back.


Preston’s... something.

But when she finally raises her gaze to mine, there’s an ocean of dread sloshing around in there, ready to crash against the breakers and flood down her cheeks. And I just can’t help myself. Whatever crumbled earlier is now trampled to dust.

“Aw, boss.” I say softly, and with the electric snapping coming from the signal interceptor, the words reach her ears alone. I pull her into a hug, stiffer than the few we’ve known before, but she’s warm and impossibly soft, even despite the awkward tension in our muscles. “You got this.”

She doesn’t lay her cheek against my chest this time, doesn’t linger against me like she has before. The sharp pang of disappointment that stabs through me as she pulls back is telling in a way that my swarming, angry jealousy is not. “I’ll... try my best.”

“Guess I told you one last lie, huh?” She’s rejected my half-assed hug, but her hand still clings to mine. My thumb brushes against it lightly. It’s so scarred, so small for all the heavy fates it holds.

She peers up at me, that infamous frown making a cameo on her brow. “What’s that?”

“I told you getting the Courser chip was the last mission we’d run solo.” A joyless chuckle flees my mouth. “Typical Deacon, huh? Even when I’m trying to tell you the God’s honest truth, it’s just another lie. But Tom’s assured me many times, using many big words I don’t understand, just why it’s impossible.” I swallow. “Wish I could be there for you, pal.”

Wanderer offers up this wan little smile. Over her shoulder I see Preston watching us. The man has no stealth, no stealth at all. If she partners up with him after this, it’s gonna be all headshots, all the time. “That thing’ll probably just fry me like a Slocum’s Joe Buzzbite.”
I grin, offering up yet another lie. “You'll be fine, boss. Tinker Tom's devices usually work. If not, uh, can I have your stuff?”

“No. I’m leaving my fortune to Dogmeat.” Desdemona’s begun to tap her foot in impatience, while Tinker Tom’s mutterings are getting increasingly frantic. “Catch you on the flip side?”

“Hasta la vista, baby.”

And then she’s walking away, and even though she’s just a couple feet away, my Wanderer’s as good as gone.

Patriot’s holotape is tucked safely in the inner pocket of my vest. My pack is light now, emptied of all incriminating evidence, only the essentials lurking in its depths. I take a deep, shuddering breath. The signal interceptor is huge. Intimidating in the way that sticking a finger into a light socket is intimidating but times a million, with an equivalent level of stupidity added to the mix.

This moment has felt like a distant point on the horizon for weeks, but it’s suddenly here all too soon. In the next two minutes, my life is going to change as dramatically as it did that October morning in 2077.

I may die. At least Shaun will probably be safe, and Dogmeat taken care of, and Deacon will—Deacon will—

Be alone again.

I refuse to think of it.

Maybe I’ll just rematerialize in some unspecified location, my molecules in disarray, my body ground through a high-tech sieve. Maybe it’ll stick me at the bottom of the ocean. Or in a volcano. Or encase me in rock, and I’ll spend my last minutes suffocating, knowing nobody ever discovered what became of me.

Maybe it’ll work, and I’ll end up in the Institute. And maybe I’ll kill them all the second I lay eyes on them, stain their bright white coats and silence their smooth, cultured voices. Maybe the sight of them will flip the same switch inside me that the UP Deathclaws hit in Deacon. Maybe I kind of hope for that, in some disturbed pocket of my mind.

Maybe I’ll do as Dez asks, and I’ll get into their good graces. Thank them for the thoughtful little gifts they’ve left me, play nice, infiltrate them and drain them for all they’re worth.

Maybe I’ll find my baby and blip the fuck out of there as soon as I do.

Maybe, just maybe, it’ll all work out. And I’ll come back here, in a week’s time perhaps, maybe less, maybe more. And Preston will be waiting for me, expecting — what? His words, his confession, it had all been so damned syrupy sweet, naive and precious in a way that tugged at my heartstrings and made saying no, sorry, I can’t, I don’t feel like a crime against humanity. And then he’d kissed me, and his lips were very, very soft, and it’s been so long since I’ve been kissed that it intrigued me. Did I still know how to kiss? I didn’t even think about it, just moved my lips against his curiously, and then we were doing it, his tongue and taste filling my mouth, and he looked at once so joyful and so desolate, to know I’d be gone. Maybe forever.

The kiss was nice. In another life, another world, I’d have really enjoyed that kiss. Perhaps I’d want to do it again sometime.
But then I’d shot a glance at Deacon, and though those damn sunglasses hid him as expertly as ever, a War and Peace-length novel was written along the thin line of his mouth, the way he turned his head to study Marcy’s prize gourds. It was almost like he… was hurt. The possibility stilled me. But Preston’s kiss — it wasn’t a betrayal, because there was nothing to betray.

Right?

I shake my head. It’s too full, too wild with what ifs and maybes. My brow settles into a frown. Whatever happens after, the first step I need to take is now.

My boots are rubber-soled; some illogical part of me hopes they save me from the snapping blue lines of electricity whipping to and fro from the beam emitter. I step onto the reflector platform, gritting my teeth against the discomforting feeling of millions of bugs crawling across my skin, trying my best to ignore the deep whirring and troublesome clunking of the thing.

Tinker Tom’s shouting above the cacophony. “Stand still! Gotta lock in all those molecules of yours. Hopefully we won’t miss any… There’s only, you know, 60 trillion of them…”

Desdemona steps forward. “Do whatever you can to gain their trust. Lie, tell them what they want to hear. Make up a cover story and sell it.”

Tom’s fingers are a blur at the control console. “C’mon. I think I got it. Establishing lock on the Institute signal.”

She locks eyes with me, and in them I see a trust, a hope that’s dawned anew, unharmed by the damage I’d done before. “Just get all the information you can. About synth. About the Institute’s plans. Find their weaknesses. If we can disable or destroy the Institute, we may have to do it. You jack that holotape into any terminal, and Patriot will make contact. He has to.” Dez nods, a final firm goodbye. “Find a way to save them. Nobody else can.”

“NOW!!” Tinker Tom’s last triumphant shout is lost in a shuddering crack and a blinding flash of white. Floating against its utter blankness, an afterimage is burned into my retinas: Deacon’s dark sunglasses, his perfectly coiffed hair, his mouth wide in the dark o of a desperate scream.

The electricity in the air gathers into a fat blue knot, writhing under the beam emitter like some unnatural snake. It doesn’t feel right. Dez keeps elevating her voice to overcome the industrial thrum of the machine, her last words to Wanderer loud enough to tear against the flesh of her throat.

Tom’s frantic at the console. Something’s wrong.

“Pull the plug,” I hear myself saying. It feels like my body’s separated from my voice, like I’m floating ten feet above the scene, seeing it all unfold in excruciating slow motion. “Pull the goddamn plug, Tom, it’s broken!”

But nobody can hear me over the damn thing’s vibrations. And as Tom’s wild cry cuts through the air, there’s a deafening crack, and a tube’s come free of its mooring, spouting important-looking vapors all over the place, and there’s a blinding flash of light accompanied by a deafening sonic boom, and I launch myself forward because if I can just tackle her off that fucking platform it’s worth vaporizing my liver or whatever—

Everyone’s still rubbing their eyes when my sight comes back, thanks yet again to my trusty shades. It’s too late.
Wanderer’s gone.
Chapter Summary

Separated by thirty stories of Earth's crust and a thick fog of uncertainty, Deacon and Wanderer struggle to work through their problems without their bestie to lean on.

There is, however, a small amount of leaning at the end.

(Abandon all hope, ye who enter here, for thus begins an era of endless fluff)

The ringing in my ears fades before the blinding whiteness does.

I press the heels of my palms to my eye sockets, willing color and shadow back into them. The velvety black of traditional sight loss would be far preferable to this; there’s no hiding from this light. Slowly my world comes back into focus, like an old Polaroid coloring itself into existence.

A bone-deep thrumming surrounds me. I’m in a chamber, dusty yellow light riding the molecules of some drifting vapor — a disinfectant, perhaps. There’s a doorway ahead, the clinical white of fluorescents spilling through, and I immediately drop into a crouch. It’s habit, but futile. Doubtless there are cameras all over the place.

Deep breaths, Wanderer, one at a time. I don’t know when I started referring to myself by my Railroad alias, but it’s been months since I’ve even thought of my pre-war name. The name of Shaun’s mother, the name of Nate’s wife.

The next room is devoid of life. A control terminal for the relay hums contentedly; a chance to plug in Patriot’s holotape, I suppose, but it feels so open; I’m surely being watched. Deacon tells me to trust my instincts. I suddenly, keenly understand what he means when he mutters about how naked he feels in the daylight. The bright fluorescents strip me of any semblance of stealth or privacy.

I move past the terminal, nearing a wide archway opening to another room, when a man’s voice stops me dead in my tracks.

“Hello.”

I don’t breathe, don’t blink, don’t move another muscle. An older man’s voice. Mature, cultured, soft-spoken. Coming over the speakers; he’s elsewhere, watching. Any detail could be the one that preserves my life.

Or identifies the bastard who took my baby from me.

The voice continues.

“I wondered if you’d make it here. You’re quite resourceful.”

So. They have been watching. And closely, by the sound of it. A frantic vision skitters through my mind of every time I’ve sauntered into the Old North Church, every time I’ve climbed through the debris of a fallen building to slip through the back door.
I am known as Father. The Institute is under my guidance. I know why you’re here. I’d like to discuss things with you, face-to-face. Please, step into the elevator.”

Please. Like he’s inviting me to take a seat at tea.

Face to face with the head of the Institute, and I’ve been here a scant three minutes. Fast work as usual, babe. I can almost hear Deacon now.

So I straighten, and I head to the elevator to take the strangest ride of my life.

It’s dead.

The signal interceptor is dead, and she’s gone. Panic detonates like a pulse mine in my chest.

One of the settlement’s children begins to wail, keening through the air like a pre-war siren, and the void of sound created by the sonic boom slowly fills with shocked murmurs.

The hulking machine is dark. Metal plates peel from the sides; cables hang flaccid from the holes. I step onto the empty platform, grasping the two poles that had flanked my partner just moments ago. They’re not even warm.

“Where is she, Tinker?” I intend to growl, but what comes out is the sorry bastard of a shout and a whimper. “Is she okay? She’s okay, right? Because if it looks like a fatal engineering flaw, and it quacks like a fatal engineering flaw…”

Tom gives me an incredulous look, flapping his hands at me like I’m the clueless husbandputtering around the kitchen and ruining his casserole. “Naw, naw, naw. It’s all good, D-man. That was just the beam emitter givin’ us a little fireworks show. Celebrating, you dig? Wanderer’s fine. There’s only a small, twenty percent chance her molecules are all helter-skelter out there in space.”

“Twenty is kind of a lot.”

“Not for this kinda highfalutin tech it ain’t! We built that thing outta scrap and wonderglue, and we got teleportation, baby! Check that one off the list!”

“I don’t give a crap about your list. Where is she? You got vitals on that thing? A tracker? Anything?” Questions I should have asked before, I guess. But I’d been distracted. My heartbeat picks up speed, fists curling and uncurling. Maybe Dez is right, maybe this thing with Wanderer is dangerous.

But then I remember. It’s not a thing anymore, because—

A heavy hand falls on my shoulder with a squeeze. Preston. “She’ll be okay, Deacon. I had Sturges look over the whole operation before they flipped the switch. He’s confident the science was sound.” His voice is deep and smooth. It probably sounds super reassuring to all the plebes from Quincy milling around and nodding sympathetically, but it grates against me. It’s one thing for me or Glory or even Wanderer to criticize the Railroad’s methods, to doubt its capabilities. But for a fucking Minuteman to think his backwater mechanic could hold a candle to Tinker Tom, could look at that signal interceptor and see anything beyond an overgrown can opener—

A twenty percent chance of failure, though. That’s twenty percentage points too high. My face is burning hot, my throat thick as I imagine her never coming back. A world where Project Wanderer is chewed up and spit out by the Institute, same as everything else. My breaths come fast and shallow, and I regard the hand on my shoulder like it’s a radroach. Possibly in need of a good
“Yo, soldier boy. I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Glory’s sauntered over and her voice is even, but her tug on Preston’s sleeve is sharp, the look she flickers toward me wary. She’s read my file, no doubt thanks to sweet-talking PAM. She knows what happened last time.

I stalk to the patio furniture outside Wanderer’s back door, slamming into one of the aluminum-and-plastic chairs. I could care less what Glory knows, or if Preston thinks I’m friendly. There’s a cooler with a lukewarm bottle of Gwinnett Stout inside. Perfect.

A hole yawns open inside me. Everyone else is so damn confident she’s fine. Even Romeo over there, tipping his too-big hat and smiling bravely at everyone like he’s Sheriff Andy fucking Taylor. All of them, even Desdemona, practicing the kind of complacency that invites trouble right to your crumbling catacomb doorstep.

Dogmeat whines, pressing a cold nose into the palm of my hand. I scratch his ruff grudgingly. The pup’s all right. The only kind of company I want right now is the kind that doesn’t flap its yapper.

If there were ever a night to get drunk alone in your unrequited crush’s backyard after she vaporizes into thin air to infiltrate an evil organization’s HQ on a solo mission into the unknown… Yeah. Tonight’s that night.

“I can only imagine what you’ve heard, what you think of us.” The voice serenades me with its velvet gravel as I descend into the depths of the Institute. “I’d like to show you that you may have… the wrong impression.”

The tunnel walls, zebra-striped with bright white bars of light, disappear above me as the elevator clears the ceiling. Through the frosted glass I can make out the vibrant green of growing things, the bustle of people in the middle of work, the busy murmur of life as usual — a regular land of Oz, thirty stories beneath the Earth’s surface. The voice continues its monologue, but I only listen with half an ear; I’m busy committing every detail of what I’m seeing to memory.

The elevator’s doors slide open, whisper-quiet, to reveal yet another bright chrome hallway. The speaker’s voice changes; it’s closer now, like perhaps we’re in the same room. I should be panicking, but it’s familiar in a way I can’t place.

“There’s too much at stake here to risk it all. As you’ve seen, things above are… unstable. I’d like to talk to you about what we can do… for everyone. But that can wait. You are here for a specific, very personal reason.”

My heart leaps into my throat.

“You are here for your son.”

Every process, every firing neuron, every blood cell in my body seems to grind to a halt. I stop, waiting for more, but the voice is done. I square my shoulders. All that’s left is to move forward. To face whatever is at the end of this hallway.

“Oh, so, ‘fess up buddy. When you say you love her. What do you mean?”

The night is cruelly clear, the stars winking and sparkling like pre-war diamonds against the fathomless black. Sanctuary’s settlers have all gone night-night, tucked into their beds save for the folks on patrol. Preston has the evening off for once. He’s lounging in the patio chair beside me,
his smooth brown cheeks aglow with the flickering light of a nearby lantern.

I think we’re at beer number... six. Or is it seven? Wanderer’s stash is already gone, heaven help us, but Preston’s a sneakier bastard than I give him credit for. He keeps a whole variety case of Beantown Brewery originals rigged up in the creek, kept cool by the flowing water.

He takes a long swig, brushing his mouth on his sleeve and flashing me a grin. “Man. I can’t tell you how good it is to have a drinking buddy for once. Can’t let Mama near the stuff, and Jun and Marcy… they keep to themselves. Even Sturges likes to keep his mind sharp for his projects. Been a long time.”

Sunset had slathered the world in an orange glaze when Preston meandered over to me, swinging his arms casually, like I hadn’t blown him off just a couple hours earlier. But by then I was deep into my buzz and feeling sorta generous. So Preston has a thing for Wanderer. So he acted on it. Can I really blame the guy?

I may be a smartass, but I’m not heartless. I’ll toss the guy a bone and let him wax poetic about the girl. He probably needs someone to talk to, after all. Probably doesn’t have another person in the whole wide ‘Wealth that understands.

I’m magnanimous as hell.

“You didn’t—” the rolling thunder of a stifled burp interrupts me, “—answer my question, bud.”

He shakes his head, peering into his bottle as though the answer were hidden in the bubbles. “I never expected to fall in love with my commanding officer.”

Fall in love. “Yeah.” It slips out before I can stop it, ’cause I’m well on my way to Tanked Town and I’ve got a can of red paint there with my alias on it. Preston doesn’t seem to notice, or maybe he takes it as support and not solidarity. Not much gets through that ten-gallon— But I put the brakes on that thought. Seven beers and one disappeared Vault dweller later, and I think we’ve actually… bonded.

“Everytime I see her crossing that bridge into Sanctuary, it’s like the first time all over again. Love at first sight. I know it sounds ridiculous, but... I get this— this warm feeling in my stomach, butterflies, you know? And it’s all I can do not to just— just pull her into my arms and— and kiss her.” The Minuteman smiles, cheeks pinkening like a teen girl at the prom. And I take a long pull at my bottle, because I know exactly what he means.

But Preston knows how it feels. Another long draught and a grimace, and the bottle’s empty.

“She really did save my life. Just by caring, by making me care. One hell of a General. One hell of a woman.” He drains his own bottle, cracking a new one on the edge of the table. I accept with a nod as he offers it to me, then cracks his own. “How ‘bout you, man?”

I give a hard blink. It’s getting tough to focus. “Whatcha mean?”

Preston eyes me and I don’t think I like the gleam settled in those brown irises. “Come on. I know you’re a spy and all, but you sure haven’t kept this secret under wraps.” The Minuteman leans forward, raising one eyebrow and bracing his elbows on his knees. He points the neck of his beer at me accusingly. “You love her too, man. Don’t deny it.”

The signal interceptor is limned by faint moonbeams, casting a weak shadow across us. I think of the soft lines of her mouth against Preston’s, the way her fingers had lifted to trail along his jaw, surprised, maybe even... happy.
“Doesn’t matter.” Half the bottle’s gone with my next chug. I can feel myself getting sad; I should go to bed. Sad-drunk Deacon is a sight nobody deserves to witness, not even a Minuteman.

“Of course it does. Everyone sees the way you two look at each other.”

You two. I raise an eyebrow in silent question.

“Yeah, you heard me. The way she looks at you sometimes, man… I’m ashamed to say it’s been known to make me jealous. If I didn’t know better…”

I straighten in my seat, world spinning a little with the motion. “What?”

“I’d almost say she’s in love with you, too.”

The dizzy wheeling strikes again, but I can’t pin it all on tonight’s bender. “I’m not in love with her.” And then, “She kissed you, pal. I’d put caps on that being the first one since her husband. First kiss in two centuries… that’s nothing to sneeze at, my friend. Or during, either, I guess. Hmm. Gross.”

“Hmm.” He doesn’t sound mad, exactly. Maybe just a little down. “I may have met her first, but you’ve spent a lot of time together. You want to call off that blessing, no hard feelings.”

She’s in love with you, too.

I tighten my muscles against whatever’s blooming in my abdomen. If I were smart I’d throw some proverbial herbicide on it now, nip it right in the blossom.

But hey, I’ve never claimed to be smart. Just stealthy. And handsome, depending on the face.

“Nah. Hell, she wouldn’t choose me anyway. She’s got some weird fetish for you macho military types. Maybe it’s the uniform. Or the dumb hats. Uh, no offense.”

Preston grins, white teeth glinting bright as the moon above. “All right, man. Long as you don’t snipe me a couple months down the line, when I’m down on one knee.”

I grin back, clinking my half-drunk bottle against his, but it’s just another mask to hide behind.

Bright yellow stripes are the only decoration adorning the walls. The color edges everything, as though the people here suspect that there should be yellow in the world, as if their very eyes crave a reminder of the sun. All I see, though, is the color of wasps and yellow jackets, of poisonous things warning away predators, their very essence screaming that killing them will be a real bitch.

The hall twists and turns. Another elevator, ascending now. The door slides open to reveal a wall of blinking red and yellow lights, and to the right—

To the right—

I stumble forward, my knees jelly, and I fall against the glass prison that holds—

“...Shaun?”

He’s exactly as he was in Kellogg’s memory. Not a baby. Not a baby, but… God, he looks like Nate, just like those old photographs my mother-in-law forced me to flip through on a summer’s eve all those years ago. His brows are the exact same shape, his lips have the same slight pout and Cupid’s bow. But the eyes… those brown-black eyes are all mine.
“Huh? ...Yes, I’m Shaun.”

And here he is, trapped, like it’s the most normal thing in the world, gazing at me quizzically, like I’m the odd one with my palms pressed flat to the glass and hot sudden tears tracking lines down my cheeks.

I didn’t expect this to happen so soon. I didn’t expect… this.

“Shaun? Oh my god, it’s really… it’s really you…”

“Who are you?”

He doesn’t even know me. Words muttered above an empty crib, a prophecy manifesting before my eyes.

There’s not much of my heart left to break. The words that were never meant to pass his lips only crack it a little further. “Shaun, it’s me. I’m… I’m your mom.”

A note of panic enters his voice and he frowns, looking over his shoulder nervously. That frown… that’s my frown darkening his round little face. “Father! What’s going on? What’s happening?”

“Shaun, are you okay? You’re not hurt, are you?” His distress yanks at me. If I could just hold him. He’d have to know his mother, his soul would know—

“What’s going on? Father? Father!” I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the glass: a crazed, wild-eyed woman, rifle slung across my back, skin and clothing caked with filth, hair stringy, weeping, pressing myself so close to the glass I might be trying to melt right through it.

Part of me is impressed with his self-control. If I were him, I’d’ve fainted by now.

The other part, though, is desperate for him to acknowledge me in the way I’d always dreamed he would. And that part is made significantly more powerful by the adrenaline coursing through my veins.

“Shhhhh. I-it’ll be okay, Shaun. Mommy’s here now.”

“I don’t know you! Go away! Father! Father, help me! There’s someone here! Help me!”

Every kid wants his mama, no matter what age.

Not a mama like me.

I choke on the sob that surges at the raw fear in his voice. Never in a thousand years did I imagine that I’d scare him, my baby, the little boy I carried within me for nine long months and a few excruciating weeks more, who I nursed at my breast and hummed to sleep and nurtured such big dreams for.

“Please, Shaun… I’m your mother… talk to me! Just open the door...”

“Father? Father, help me! She’s trying to take me!”

My palms flat against the glass walls of the tiny jail, I slide downward, grimy streaks marking the trail of my despair.

“Father, help! Help me!”
His desperate wailing continues as a door behind him slides open and an older man — gentleman, if I care about accuracy, because he’s well-groomed and his posture is elegant, his steps graceful — pads into the room, frowning at my little boy’s cries.

“Shaun… S9-23, recall code Cirrus.”

I know those letters, those words. What they mean. My lungs seize in my chest.

“Fascinating… though disappointing. The child’s responses were not at all what I anticipated.” He sighs, his snowy beard ruffling on the exhale. “He’s a prototype, you understand. We’re only just now beginning to explore the effects of extreme emotional stimuli.”

I turn an incredulous, tear-stained face to the stranger standing there so boldly, so vulgar in his clean white lab coat, rising to my feet before I’m even aware I’m moving. He holds up a hand, as if that soft-looking, pale-fingered thing could possibly stop me.

“Please, try and keep an open mind. I recognize that you are… emotional, and that your journey here has been fraught with challenges. Let’s start anew. I am Father. Welcome to the Institute.”

All of Desdemona’s warnings, all of her counsel flies out the intake vent. Making friends, playing nice… all I want right now is a Napalmer and a full tank of gas as the grief and rage stoke under my skin.

The Institute thinks I’m just another experiment. They don’t realize they’re toying with a dangerous fucking woman. My blood is so roiling, so volatile it could be nitroglycerin pumping through the valves of my heart. “I could kill you. Right here, right now.”

“Yes.” The calm evenness of his tone stills my anger, if only for a moment. “Yes, you could. And I would be powerless to stop you.” The old man spreads his hands wide, placatingly.

“I want answers, asshole. Now.”

There’s a disapproving glint in his watery brown eyes. I’ve seen that look before. It used to fill Nate’s gaze when I would curse. “Under the circumstances, I will forgive your… vulgarity.” He clears his throat. “But I need you to realize that this… situation is far more complicated than you could imagine. You have traveled very far, and suffered a great deal, to find your son. Well, your tenacity and dedication have been rewarded.”

My eyes shoot over his shoulder, to the empty room beyond. The scientists. The two in the white lab coats, accompanying Kellogg in the Vault…

He’s a prototype, you understand.

A sudden certainty fills me, a burgeoning joy that sweeps wildly through my gut and my heart. Any second now they’ll step into view, my baby in their arms, as safe and sound, as gurgling and happy as he was the October morning he was ripped from me.

But the old man flings his next words like a bucket of ice water on the last flicker of hope I know I’ll ever feel.

“It’s good to finally meet you, after all this time. It’s me. I am Shaun. I am… your son.”

“There you are. I need that screwdriver, it’s the only one with a flat — oh.”
Sturges’ exasperation dissipates as he turns the corner into Shaun’s future room. I’ve made a huge mess. Screws, nuts, and random pieces of wood I can’t find a use for litter the floor, and it’s pure serendipity that I thought to lay down a tarp, ‘cause I knocked over the paint almost immediately after cracking the lid.

The screwdriver I’d swiped in a classic sleight-of-hand trick, carefully extracting it from one of Sturges’ numerous pockets. I lower it from the newest rocketship hanging at an awkward angle from the crib’s mobile, half-affixed. “Sorry, pal, I just found it laying around. Thought it was fair game.”

The mechanic adjusts the goggles atop his square head, shoving his fists deep in those easily infiltrated pockets. Why must there be so many pockets? And why overalls? Uh, 2053 called, they want their onesies back.

His stare lingers on the crib, bright and clean with new paint, missing rungs replaced and the music box newly oiled. “I, uh, guess it can wait. Just make sure you return it when you’re done, all right?”

I nod, waving him off. “You got it, bud.”

It’s been a week with no sign of Wanderer, and my idle hands and creeping anxiety needed an outlet, so here I am. Chainsmoke another pack of cigs and I’m headed straight for ghoul territory, or at least my lungs are.

Footsteps creak back down the hallway. “Sturge, my man, I said I’d bring it back when I finish—”

“It’s me, agent.”

Desdemona sounds all business, as usual. I wonder if the old girl’s ever taken a chill pill in her life, and where I can get her a bottle. She surveys my work, nodding approvingly. “This is very… sweet of you, Deacon.”

Dez has always had a soft spot for little ones. I guess my distraction isn’t such a big deal when it involves a kid. “Can’t have the little dude coming home to a messy room, right? I mean, he’s practically a prince. Heir to the throne of the big, bad General of the Minutemen. Heh. What’s up, Dez?”

“I came to let you know we’re heading back to HQ tonight. I didn’t realize that you were in the middle of a… project, though. You’re welcome to follow in the next day or two once you finish.”

I’m sure she thinks she’s being gracious, but that’s one big, bold hell no. “Dez, I’m not going anywhere until Wanderer shows.”

Her mouth thins to a line. “Agent, we’ve talked about this. Distractions are—”

“Sometimes necessary.” I hijack her sentence, holding her gaze. It’s not often that I challenge the Railroad’s top brass. Only when it matters. “Listen, Dez. This isn’t some lie I’m spinning so I can sneak out of third period to grab milkshakes with my steady.” It kind of is. “When Wanderer zaps back into our lives, we have no idea what state she’ll be in. If the Institute’s slipped something into her water, turned her into a zombie or a supersoldier or something. And if she has details to share, two brains sponging up that sweet, sweet intel will hold it better than one.”

Poor Dez has never been good at calling my bluffs. But one thing she does know: the best lies are always mixed with two parts truth. And so she relents, uncrossing her stubborn arms and nodding once. “All right, Deacon. You’ve convinced me. Just keep your wits sharp. The Institute has
capabilities we can’t even dream up, and they aren’t bound by any set of morals I know of. The Wanderer that returns to you may not be the woman you know.”

A thumbs up and a wave and she’s gone, but the sinkhole in my stomach only widens. The two unspoken words at the end of her sentence drop like coins to its bottom. I grit my teeth, tightening a screw.

She’ll come back to me. She has to.

The days blend into weeks and the weeks begin to stack, an endlessly tall pile of days that look the same from one to the other: white walls, white halls, chrome tools, chrome people.

Something about this place drains me. I feel like a memory of myself, faded and inaccurate. It reminds me of the first few weeks of Shaun’s life, when I had no will to leave my bed.

I ignore Father’s summons, at first. Spend my days wandering the colorless halls like a ghost, floating between departments and terminals, meandering away from conversations mid-sentence. When I finally appear at his table for lunch, he seems surprised, yet pleased. Our conversation is as colorless as the rest of this place, though every so often he lets something slip, a slash of bright red or sterile chrome underlining his words.

This man, this… monster… I grew him inside of me. I think about what I’ve unleashed on the world. Of the tanks I discovered in the FEV lab.

My womb aches and I imagine that it’s grieving, but it’s just my cycle. The commissary is full of supplies I haven’t had access to for months. Feels like Christmas.

By week three, Desdemona’s objectives are largely complete. I’ve begun to cry myself to sleep most nights. I miss Dogmeat. I miss Deacon. I awaken clutching for him, seeking the warmth that’s never curled more than an arm’s length away, but my palm meets only air and the cold white panels of my quarters.

When I decide to leave, I don’t say goodbye.

She didn’t even say goodbye.

It bothers him that it bothers him so much. He ought to be detached, to view this as the learning opportunity it is. The data collected from her interaction with S9-23 is already bearing fascinating fruit: not only from the child synth, but the vitals and brainwave data collected from the woman herself.

He tried not to take offense at the significant delta between her reaction to the synth and his own revelation. But what is science, if it is not honest? Examining the data hurt. The glint of fire that had been extinguished at his words — I am Shaun — is mere anecdote, true, but somehow that doesn’t make it any less upsetting.

It is foolish, he supposes, to have expected anything different. This feeling of disappointment, of depression, is a direct result of basing expectations on unfounded assumptions. But… to feel the arms of his mother around him, his own real, living, breathing mother, just once… He had wanted that. In a way, this entire years-long experiment, all the destroyed synth units, the scientists lost to surface expeditions, Kellogg’s ultimate sacrifice — it had all been in service to that secret need of his.
Father taps the end of his pencil against his lips, staring at the monitor before him. The Old World suburb of Sanctuary Hills had been fitted with monitoring systems years before his mother ever emerged from the Vault. Perhaps watching her isn’t the best use of his time, but he doubts many will begrudge an old, sick man his one indulgence.

“Stop that, you mongrel!”

The German Shepherd is writhing in the dust of the garden, grinding freshly turned soil into his fur. It’s like some new-age interpretive dance expressing... like... the joy of freedom. Or something. I plant my hands on my hips, scolding the dog in my best disappointed mom voice.

“I slaved away all morning giving you a bath. Do you want another one?”

Dogmeat rights himself with a flip that would’ve made me laugh if my jeans weren’t soaked and covered in fur. He tilts his head, whining lightly.

“That’s right, you cocky bastard. Get over here. It’s back under the pump for you, my friend.” But the mutt turns tail and heads for the hills, my morning’s work all for naught.

It’s been over three weeks with no sign of Wanderer, and I might be going stir crazy.

So far I’ve deep cleaned the house: beaten the rugs, swept, scrubbed, restocked the fridge, spot-cleaned the upholstery, alphabetized the magazines. I’ve spruced up Shaun’s room as best I can, tilled and seeded the garden, installed a couple jury-rigged flower boxes outside the windows, painted the doors, taught the settlement kids poker, bathed Dogmeat at least four times, and gotten drunk with Preston every night he’s not on patrol.

Anything I can do to keep my mind off this god-awful waiting.

We’d talked timelines. Estimates. A couple days, a week maybe if the intel was good. But almost a month? Fear stabs through me. I just don’t think she could be gone, truly gone, without feeling it.

Sigh. Maybe laundry’s the next thing on my to-dos. After wrestling with the mutt all morning, my clothes are peak Commonwealth chic. A furtive sniff toward my underarm tells me that maybe a bath wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world, either. Fumbling with the knot on the apron I found in Wanderer’s kitchen, I head for the house.

I only make it a couple steps when I swear I hear the signal interceptor crackle.

I listen hard, cocking my head. I’ve been burned before: Preston’s stupid ham radio, Dogmeat’s jingling collar, someone chomping on Potato Crisps.

But the next time it happens, the lights on the long-dead console flash with a dull glow. And when it happens again, an arc of blue snaps across the beam emitter.

Weak. But real.

There are two new settings on my Pip-Boy: the glucometer nested within the Stats screen, and the teleporter on the map.

Its weight hasn’t changed, but it feels heavier on my arm. This thing has been with me every step of the way. Without it, I would have withered like a feral, locked in the Vault. Without it, I would have been killed by the first mole rat that burst from the earth gunning for my throat. The idea that
the Institute’s touched it, infected it, is yet another thing to mourn.

But it’s my ticket back, and as I center the bright green crosshairs on Sanctuary, hope that’s been suppressed for almost a month buoys up inside me. Home.

The flash is silent this time, no boom, no wailing kids.

Just a bright sheet of white transforming everything into nothing, and when it fades—

She’s there.

She’s there, she’s there, she’s there, she’s there.

In the space of a breath I take her in: the unfamiliar white jumpsuit, slashed with blue; the worn travel bag slung over a shoulder; her hair, shining under the afternoon sun, wavier than I remember; her hands, cleaner than I’ve ever seen, grasping for a handhold as she stumbles—

My legs are moving before my brain sends the signal. God only knows what the Institute’s done to her. She’s disoriented, falling forward—

But my timing’s better this time around. I catch her. She’s warm under my touch, warm and real and here. Before I know it my arm’s wrapped around her waist, steadying her against feet slipping on the slick metal of the reflector platform. Her face tilts up towards mine, that pretty face I’ve never missed for longer than a day, and those brown-black eyes are moving back and forth as they scan me, lips parted slightly, dazed. Suddenly I can’t stand the thought of one more goddamn thing getting between us — not the Institute, not Preston, not even the thin plastic UV lenses of my shades — and I tear them off like they’re red hot, like they’ve disrespected my mother.

For all that we pieced it together from scrap and good luck, Tinker’s signal interceptor had made for a smooth trip. The Courser chip in my Pip-Boy, in contrast, is like riding a mechanical bull on the high seas in the middle of a radstorm.

The flash is less blinding this time, but I barely notice as my legs slam painfully against the reflector platform and I bite my tongue, hard. The coppery tang of blood fills my mouth and the shock of the impact reverberates through me, turning my knees to jelly. I wobble like the head on one of those damn Vault-Tec figurines; it feels as though I’m trying to regain my balance while standing on a spinning top.

Clinical white fades into the buttery yellow of the sun, while the silence of the in-between world of molecular travel gives way to the music of insects whirring and birds chirping, dogs panting and vendors haggling.

And with a lurch that has nothing to do with vertigo, I realize I’m home.

Those weeks in the Institute, those long nights fighting to fall asleep against the glaring white of the walls and the aching, gnawing loneliness, I never believed Father would let me leave.

The world’s spinning slows and begins to steady, colors forming shapes and shapes forming familiar people and things. The Rosas’ shabby rambler, the doghouse, the garden, a man—

Slender, his white t-shirt wet at the hem, his jeans spotted with mud, dirtier and dearer than anything I’ve beheld in almost a month, my brain still too addled to wonder at the ruffled orange apron circling his waist. The sunglasses are as obscuring as ever but the lines of his face say it all:
surprise, concern, and something else, a nameless emotion so desperate and honest I can barely believe it’s beaming out from my Deacon—

I don’t even realize I’m falling until he catches me.

I’m weak as a kitten, and I’m not sure if it’s the effect of the relay or the blue of his eyes as he tears the shades away. They clatter against the metal of the platform, forgotten, as his gaze roves over me, meeting my eyes, lingering on my lips. I’m keenly aware of his arm bounding my waist, of the tendons and hard muscles that shift and quiver against me.

Deacon’s free hand follows the curve of my hip, my shoulder blade, down my arms and back again, a trail of tingling goosebumps marking its path. The line we’ve balked at and teased for so long is obliterated in the wake of that hand as it wanders across my ribs, my stomach; every muscle in my body seems to clench and relax at once, and something that’s been coiled tight within me the past few weeks begins to loosen under the touch of a human who cares about me. When he crooks a finger and traces the line of my jaw, I lean into it like a cat. And when he draws a gentle thumb across my lower lip, I try to answer the only question he could possibly be asking with that look in his eyes.

“It’s me,” I say, and it comes out halfway, less than a whisper. “It’s me, I promise—”

But I can’t finish, because his calloused hand, the hand of a farmer and a killer, firm and tender, has cupped the apple of my cheek and his mouth has found mine. And everything else melts away as my existence centers on this moment, on the lips that move against mine so softly, so insistently, the barest sliver of his tongue tasting me, pulling something from me that he needs, filling an empty space I only just discovered. Deacon’s fingers comb into my hair, sliding through it like silk, my swirling thoughts forming something that feels like gratitude for the creature comforts at the Institute. He’s still playing with a lock as he pulls away reluctantly, twisting and tugging it lightly as he quirks that infamous half-smile at me.

“Wanderer,” he says, voice low and serious, and for a moment I do forget my real name because the way those lips form the sounds of my alias sends a spear of heat through my abdomen, “There isn’t a timeline that exists where I wouldn’t know you.”

This has gotta be a dream.

Maybe Mama Murphy replaced my cigs with some of her wacky tabacky. Maybe I slipped and hit my head giving that dumb dog his thirtieth bath this week. Maybe I’m still at the Memory Den and Irma’s had me plugged in so long that I’ve run out of memories and dipped into the realm of pure imagination.

But no. I can feel Wanderer’s whole body pressed up against mine, her lord have mercy soft stomach and her oh god even softer breasts, her arms still trembling with weakness but thrown around me…

I try not to think about what I’ve just done, because it’s just about the most illogical choice I could’ve made. PAM would positively short-circuit if she factored this into her equations. Glory would whack me upside the head. Dez I could see going either way: trying to kick me out again, or rolling her eyes behind a smile she couldn’t quite hide.

But my Wanderer is right here in my arms, right where she belongs, and I’ve just kissed her like I’ve ached to for months. Maybe I’ll lose her for it. Maybe I’ve scared her, or maybe it wasn’t as good as Preston, or maybe any goddamn number of things.
I don’t care. Instinct rarely lets me down. And God, the way she’s looking up at me, lashes fluttering, her face naked and open under the yellow light of the sun…

But then her eyebrows meet in a sad little parley on her forehead, and those dark lashes are suddenly holding back more water than the Hoover back west, and it blows open some long-suffering dam inside me.

Whatever happened in the Institute, I know it wasn’t good. She’s alone — no kiddo. Something went sideways, and I wasn’t there.

I wasn’t there.

The past few weeks have been like the drying drawback of the tide before a tsunami, and the wave has rolled up silent and slow behind me. It looms, ready to crash right out of my eyes, and I’m looking up into Deacon’s blues and they’re wet, because—

Because he missed me—

Because he sees I came back alone—

Because maybe my disaster is signaling his own—

Those blue eyes swim as they connect with mine, and I finally overflow when he ducks his head into the warm nook between my jaw and shoulder, something that can’t be a sob tearing from his throat. My arms tighten around his neck and I find myself drawing my nails across his bare scalp lightly, soothingly, as if I think I’m actually capable of comforting someone, taking care of them.

Deacon pulls back, strands of my hair clinging to his stubble; I brush it free and my hand lingers, fingering the angle of his jawbone. His eyes are still watery as he tries to reform that half-smile and fails.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers, the words chipped and frail even as the steel vise of his arms tightens around me. His Adam’s apple bobs. “I’m sorry, baby.”

Baby. I can’t remember when he first began slipping, but something about the word strikes a chord in me. It’s so familiar, so casual, yet at once protective and intimate. Baby. Like I’m something to be cherished, protected. Loved.

Three-plus weeks wilting under the Institute’s false white lights has sapped me, but here, in the arms of the man who’s proven time and time again that he cares about me — me, not my DNA, not some psychological experiment, not an idea or an expectation but me — the color begins to creep back in. Starting, I think, with the bright pink flush tinting my cheeks.

She hasn’t said anything yet. I’ll give it two more minutes before I start to worry.

But when she does, she makes herself as tall as possible, whispering her words into my ear with the voice of a broken girl, not the mommy lost in time or the hardened killer who charges into battle high on psycho jet. The heat of her breath sends shivers down my spine and the plea in her voice — thick with sadness and just maybe a hint of desire — catches at the same instinct that compels me to annihilate every bloodbug and raider and feral that dares to look at her cross-eyed.

“Will you kiss me again?”
I can’t deny the woman a damned thing. Before I catch her lips with mine for the second time, before I run my tongue along her bottom lip with my own selfish request, before I bury my hand in that too-silky hair and elicit a soft whimper that’s definitely gonna keep me up thinking tonight, I make sure to hold her gaze a moment.

Because this, this is our truth. And maybe it’ll only burn bright for a second, like a flare shot into the noon sky, but we’ll have our goddamn shot, and I want her to know it’s the farthest thing from bullshit. That this is something she can — no, something we can believe in, something that the Institute can’t ever, ever take away.
Chapter Summary

Wanderer bitterly confronts the fact that her baby isn't a baby, and D-man is there to make it all better. Kind of. In a way.

“Uh, don’t take this the wrong way, boss, but you smell amazing.”

It may be a little too soon for me to turn the bullshitting on full blast, but I gotta do something to get that look off her face. So I’m relieved when Wanderer sheds the soul-shredding expression she’s worn since zapping back into the ‘Wealth and gives me the sarcastic look she’s famous for.

“All I want to share one of the Institute’s most powerfully guarded secrets with you: internal plumbing, body wash, and Artificial Fragrance Number Five.”

“Yeah, but like, sure, you smelled all right before. Now I want to pour you into a glass jar, light you up, and relax with a glass of wine after a long day at the office.”

“Well, don’t take this the wrong way, Deacon, but you smell like wet dog.” Fair, fair. Not nice, but I’ll let it slide. “And do I want to ask why you’re wearing my apron?”

“Where else would I keep my ladle?” I say, flourishing a wooden spoon from the apron’s pocket. I’d tucked it there after lunch. Wanderer laughs and I revel in it. If all my missions from here on out were devoted to that sound, you’d have no argument from me. None at all.

Somehow, after that deliciously long second kiss, we’d untangled ourselves and separated, Wanderer once again steady on her feet. While it had seemed an appropriate “hello-and-welcome-back-from-your-dangerous-trip-into-our-arch-enemies’-den-of-evil” response at the time, a crowd had begun to form. And I’m no Magnolia. Keep me outta the limelight.

She’s kneeling in the dust, ruffling the fur of an over-excited and minimally clean Dogmeat. She spares a glance my way as she stands again. “Should we debrief?”

“Gosh, boss, I don’t know. That’s moving a little fast for me.”

It takes approximately three seconds for the joke to sink in and the blush to hit her face. Wanderer swats my arm in mock anger. “You cad.” She grimaces, gesturing at her outfit. “I’d at least like to change before we get into it.”

I nod. “Yeah. Y’know, For all the baths I gave Dogmeat this week, he didn’t give me one. Can you believe it?”

She rolls her eyes. “Meet me back here in an hour?”

“You got it.”
The first thing I do after the door clicks shut behind me is shed the too-clean white jumpsuit from the Institute.

The second thing I do is throw myself on the old red couch with a groan and bury my face in my arms.

What am I doing?

The Commonwealth lacks many things I need. Insulin, tampons, fresh coffee. But what I need the most right now is a fucking therapist.

Somehow I kept it together after the shock and awe of defrosting. I kept it together when I met my first deathclaw. I kept it together through mirelurk kings and super mutants, through lies and double-dealings, through Kellogg and the Memory Den and every other strange obstacle the ‘Wealth has thrown my way.

This might be what breaks me, though. The cyclone of conflicting, nauseating feelings careening between my mind and stomach is too much.

I still haven’t let myself consider what it means to have come home empty-handed. The situation circles me, demanding my attention, but I turn my back on it each time it creeps back into my line of sight.

I’ll think of it another day. Tomorrow, maybe. Next week.

And now there’s this. Deacon. And Preston. And how, at thirty years old and living in a post-apocalyptic nightmare, I’ve suddenly been thrust into what’s setting itself up to be a teen drama worthy of the silver screen.

Just thinking about Deacon’s kiss makes me crazy; I flip to my side, curling my bare knees to my chest in an effort to waylay the delicious warmth spreading all the way to my fingers and toes. I don’t know what compelled him to do it, but after three weeks of culture shock, huddling in the white tunnels of that buzzing hive, wrapped in a fog of depression…

It was exactly what I needed.

It had been so different from Preston’s. His kiss had been safe, interesting, something that might convince me to answer a call for a second date. Deacon’s, though… It had tasted of danger and shadows, laughter and sarcasm. It had a tugging, insistent undercurrent of wanting, promising to show me things I’d never known, even as a married woman. And there was a moment as his tongue was gliding across mine, sensual and slow, when I felt us teeter on the cusp of friendship and something more, and then his fingers tangled in my hair to tug ever so slightly… and I knew we’d fallen over. A small and sudden dread had intertwined with the heat spearing up through my core; perhaps our easy camaraderie was more fragile than a kiss. Perhaps I was paying for this moment of indulgence, of sweet respite, with something infinitely more valuable.

Then Deacon told me I smelled like a scented candle and brandished a random wooden spoon at me, and I knew we were safe.

And that’s almost worse, because now I’ve been laying on this couch sighing for ten full minutes, leaving only fifty until I have to face him again and talk about espionage and sabotage and intel, all the while staring at that ever-so-slightly-pouty lower lip and wondering how it would feel against my throat.

Taking a deep breath I sit up — and stop. Something’s off. I sniff again.
The old sofa smells so... *clean.*

I look around. The rough-hewn wood floors lack a certain *je ne sais pas* that could very well be a layer of filth. The pantry shelves overflow with Sugar Bombs, InstaMash, Cram, and myriad other sundries. The few dishes I have gleam, neatly arranged in their cupboard. Even my collection of *Live & Love* seems neater.

Come to think of it, the ragtag garden I’d started outside weeks ago is well-tended, a tidy little fence edging the fresh-tilled soil, and the paint on the front door seems brighter than I remember...

I grin to myself as I pad upstairs to change, grateful for the new curtains drawn against the outside world. *Deacon’s been busy. Maybe I oughta skip town more often.* The thought’s levity surprises me. I should be a mess right now, but the man has a way of drawing me away from the darkness, for all the time he spends in it.

My smile fades as I round the corner of the landing.

Shaun’s nursery.

*Just don’t look.* My own room is steps away, where a fresh outfit and at least thirty more minutes of daydreaming awaits.

But some hateful impulse propels me forward into the cramped little room and forces me to draw back the raggedy rocketship curtains. A shaft of afternoon sunlight spills through, bathing the scene in brightness.

I take it in.

Most of the rust has been scrubbed from the Giddyup Buttercup in the corner, its original yellow hide revealed in full. The posters have been fitted into homemade frames and straightened on the walls, and the bed is populated by a teddy complete with nose and eyes, a stuffed purple sloth, a Jangles, a purple alien with a single large eye, and two clean, fluffy white pillows. I run a finger along the edge of the dusted and polished metal chest, daring to lift its lid; inside are blocks, rocketships, a Blast Radius set... I snatch my hand away as if burned, the lid slamming shut.

And then I notice the crib.

Bright blue, repainted and re-runged, the mobile straightened and hung properly. Where he dug up a third rocketship, I have no idea, but I tap it with a shaking hand. It spins easily, a soft tune trickling pure and sweet from the newly oiled gears, the three ships chasing one another in an endless race.

*We’ll get this fixed by the time he comes home.*

Deacon. He did this — days of work, tedious and thankless — for Shaun. For the baby or the child he earnestly believed I’d bring back with me. A child he’d never met. A child that doesn’t exist.

And all at once, it’s just too much.

For weeks I’ve been suppressing it, forcing it down like bile rising in my throat, keeping quiet and behaved within the white walls of the Institute when all I wanted to do from the moment I laid eyes on Father, on Shaun’s slumped-over form, was—

SCREAM.
And suddenly my arms are sweeping the robot models from their home on the dresser. My bare foot slams against the metal chest and something in my toe cracks, but the thing spills across the blue patterned rug with a gratifying crash, toys tumbling all over. I rip posters from the wall and dash them to the floor, yank open the dresser drawers and upend them, kick over the stupid yellow horse and grunt as its head skew at an odd angle. Not even the mattress escapes unscathed: I tear off the faded quilt, punt the stupid toys against the wall, and snatch the thing off its frame. The violent storm raging in my heart tells me to destroy it, to rip it in half, but of course I can’t, and the impotence of it drains those stormwaters like I’ve pulled the plug at the bottom of the ocean.

Chest heaving, I survey the room that’s now fit for no child. No child, because that’s what I have.

It’s a disaster.

A creeping sense of guilt begins to steal over me, because my partner worked so goddamn hard to make it nice for me. For my baby.

I didn’t touch the crib, though. I couldn’t.

I’d only just finished toweling myself off when I hear her shriek.

“For the love of—already?” You’d think the Institute would have something better to do than harass us less than an hour after Wanderer got back. “No rest for the weary—”

For a brief second panic sets in as I get lost in my t-shirt, but then my head finds the right hole and I sprint the fuck out of the settlement’s ramshackle community bath and straight for Casa de Wanderer.

I’m halfway up the rickety wood stairs before it hits me that I don’t even have my gun. Goddamn it. Fine. I’ll strangle a Courser to death if I have to, just to keep it away from—

But there are no sounds of struggle. No gunshots, no grunting, no nothing, except maybe — I strain my ears, because it’s never good to burst onto a scene unprepared — maybe something that sounds like…

Like a scene I probably shouldn’t burst in on. Something private, and not in the fun way.

When I see the kid’s room, that confirms it.

It’s trashed to hell, like a particularly sadistic raider with mommy issues broke in and hit the motherlode, no pun intended. Clicking my tongue, I step gingerly over the piles of broken robot models and blocks. I still don’t know what went wrong or why she came back after so long without a kid in tow, but seeing this room… it must’ve set her off.

The strangled noises that definitely don’t belong to a Courser are still coming from behind the closed door to Wanderer’s room. Probably best not to intrude. Not yet, at least.

I set to work, straightening the now-crooked poster frames, righting the metal toy chest, re-folding the tiny baby clothes Wanderer’s quietly gathered over the past few months. It must’ve been tough to amass even this small collection; all the radiation and hopelessness kinda turns people off of having kids, one way or another.

Folding the last onesie, I hesitate a sec before placing it in the drawer, fingering the soft cloth, the
itty-bitty buttons, remembering a time when I’d started a collection of my own. How it felt the moment I knew it was all for nothing.

Things seem to have quieted down. I slide the dresser drawer closed and move to Wanderer’s bedroom door, listening a moment before knocking lightly with one finger.

A seriously congested sniff confirms that she’s not dead at the Institute’s hand, at least. “Who is it?”

“Just me, boss.”

Silence. Then: “Cobe ind.”

Wanderer’s curled up on the bed around the green glow of her Pip-Boy, looking for all the world like a kicked mongrel. Shoulders quivering, whimpering — if she had a tail, it’d be tucked between her legs. Bare legs, because she’s…

I blink. She’s just in her underwear.

“I know the Institute’s modern and all, but your fashion choice there, that takes some chutzpah.” A crocheted throw — Mama Murphy’s handiwork, no doubt — lays folded at the end of the bed. With a shake and a flourish I settle it around her, ignoring the fact that it’s practically see-through, that my fingers brush her thigh as I tuck it in. “Seriously, you’re not cold?”

The bed springs creak as I ease myself onto the edge behind her. Comforting half-naked grieving mothers was never part of my job description before, so I can’t say if I’m any good at it. But I have lots of extra-special feelings for this particular mother, and so I lay a hand on her shoulder. Shoulders are safe. Definitely not a no-no zone.

Cool, lightly textured with goosebumps between the ridges of her scars. Peering over, I can see that her gaze is focused squarely on the screen of the Pip-Boy, the holotape player popped open to reveal a sliver of orange.

“If you’re going for the high score on Pipfall, don’t bother. I’ve been the reigning champ since I was fifteen.”

Wanderer is silent, save for a few poorly muffled sniffles. I shift uncomfortably; does she even want me here? Should I let go of her shoulder? Hop off the bed and take my intrusive ass somewhere else?

“Listen, I’m sorry, Wanderer. I just— I can go, if you want to be alone.”

When she speaks, her voice is clearer, though her ns and ms still have a stubbed, stuffy sound to them. “No. I don’t want to be alone ever again.”

Glimpses of bare skin flash between the loops and holes in the crocheted blanket. I swallow hard, thinking of super mutants and grandmas and rabid mole rats. “Well, there’s no law that says you have to be the Lone Wanderer. You could totally make a name for yourself as, like, the Super-Pretty-and-Popular-Everyone-Wants-to-Eat-at-Her-Lunch-Table Wanderer.”

She turns to face me. That lower lip that has a tendency to jut when she’s sad, flying in the face of all her battlefield badassery, is out in full force, quivering even as she bites it. But she can’t trick the trickster: a corner of her mouth twitches as she fights off a smile.

I tap the Pip-Boy now resting on her stomach, trying to ignore the way the blanket’s fallen open
with her movement, the curve of her breasts barely restrained by her bra. Scars criss-cross even the
delicate skin of her bosom. “What’s this? You got dirt on the Institute, or did Preston make you a
mixtape?”

That gets her. Wanderer snorts and shoots me a look, evaporating at least a couple of tears in the
process. But the moment flashes by quick as it came as she toys with the holotape jammed in the
Pip-Boy, sliding its switch back and forth with barely audible clicks.

“It’s from Nate.”

“Nate? Like, Nate Nate?” The words stick in my throat; why am I suddenly nervous? “Like your
husband, Nate?”

“He made it before the… before. Codsworth kept it all these years and gave it to me when I first
left the Vault. I never listened to it, though.”

Wanderer’s cheek is striped with lines from where it pressed against the pillow, a few strands of
hair sticking to her wet skin. I smooth them away without thinking. “Why not?”

“I dunno. At first, it was too fresh. To me, he’d only just died, and…” She takes a shuddering
breath. “Then I… back when I found the Railroad’s holotape, after the Memory Den and finding
out about Kellogg… I spent the night at the Rexford, and I realized how stupid and pointless it was
to mourn someone in a world where everyone dies too soon. I told myself I let him go.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. “And did you?”

A wry, joyless smile twists her lips. “I thought I did. Hell, that was the night I got too tipsy with
Hancock and thought I might try to forget him another way.”

“Yeah… let’s change the subject. I happen to like my lunch right where it is, at the bottom of my
stomach.”

Wanderer raises her eyebrows. “Wow. I thought you were over being a bigot.”

“Please. It’s not gross because he’s a ghoul. It’s gross because he’s a junkie, and a playboy, and
that red frock coat hasn’t been to a dry cleaner in ages, and—” I can feel a blush creeping up my
neck, “—and because you deserve better.”

“Do I?” She gazes up at me with interest, the only trace left of her sadness a red nose and some
puffiness around those dark brown eyes. “Who’s better, then?”

not the one laying here with an arm around his scantily clad General.

“Oh, Strong then Preston. Glad to see you have your priorities straight.” She shifts then, avoiding
my gaze as she presses herself more fully against me. Like she’s calling my bluff. She slides her
Pip-Boy-clad forearm across my stomach and lays her cheek against my chest, unaware or maybe
just ignoring that her mostly bare breasts are practically spilling from that too-small second-hand
bra, right up against my ribs. Bless you and your woefully inadequate inventory, Becky Fallon.

“Based on your recent exploits, I’m guessing you put the Minuteman before the super mutant?” I
don’t know why I’m prodding, other than the fact that Wanderer is closer and warmer and less
clothed than ever before, and we were tangling tongues not a full hour ago, and there’s a part of me
that’s terrified it didn’t mean a damn thing to her. A part that remembers her fingers trailing down
Preston’s cheek and makes me feel like I just took a hit of Fury.
“My priorities go… super mutant, robot, detective, merc, Minuteman, mayor, spy.”

“If that’s in ascending order, that’s pretty disturbing, boss.”

“You know it’s not.”

What’s really disturbing is how this woman makes my heart palpitate like I’m in the middle of a cardiac episode. “Wait. Hancock’s right behind me? What can I do to solidify my lead in this race? Are caltrops considered fighting dirty, or…”

“No need for sabotage. You’re pretty far ahead.”

“Should I be worried that you even included the mutie and the bot?”

“Depends on what you’re into, I guess.” Wanderer pokes at the Pip-Boy display idly, fidgeting with the knobs and dials. “Would it be weird if—”

“If you’re going where I think you’re going, yeah. I’m not that kinda guy.”

“Oh my god. No.” I flinch and grin as she pokes my rib. “Would it be weird if you… listened with me?”

Her question has a tinge of worry to the lilt, like there’s any way in hell I’ll say no. Over the past couple minutes I’ve managed to pull her back from the edge, but she’s slipping again, that holotape glaring bright and orange on the horizon.

“Not at all.” I hug her closer, my lips pressing to her hair, because we’ve already kissed and she chose to snuggle up to me so it must be fine, even though a tiny stab of fear cools some of the warmth in my belly. “Want me to pop some popcorn, or…”

“Oh-uh. Just, um…” Wanderer ducks her face against me, suddenly shy. “Just hold me, please? Like this?”

*Just hold me.* Her voice is so small. It hits me then: she’s never had a chance to grieve. After Barbara… After Barbie, I had time. Hours and hours of empty time to fill up with whatever emotion was flavor of the week: sorrow, regret, frustration. Then the Railroad found me, gave me purpose, helped me direct all those hours toward something worthy. But Wanderer, she’s been on go from the start. The Railroad found her, too. And the Minutemen. And random caravaneers, myriad settlers, homesteaders with tragic backstories, even a wounded dog once. Her time has belonged to every other person in the goddamn ‘Wealth since she first popped the cap on that Vault.

The least I can do is give her this. Time. Time to finally grieve. And if she wants it, to not be alone.

“You got it, amiga.” I flick the holotape player closed and depress the *play* button. Wanderer tenses beside me as the first sounds trickle from the speakers, and I suddenly wonder if this is a good idea after all.

*Feedback whines and crackles, followed by the giggling of an infant.***

“Oops! Ha, ha, ha! No, no, no, little fingers away… ah, there we go. Just say it. Right there. Right there, go ahead. Ah, ha ha! Yay!”

His voice is deep. Deeper than mine, probably. The kind befitting a macho military guy. But there’s this kindness to it, too. You can *hear* how much this guy loves his kid, imagine him holding
the little guy up to the recorder. It’s sweet. And it twists at something in my stomach, hearing my Wanderer’s husband. Her son.

The baby burbles and Wanderer’s nails dig into me. This is gonna be rough, I can tell. Her lungs expand with a mighty intake of breath and I kiss the top of her head again, leaving my lips there as we listen, breathing in the fresh-flowers scent of her hair.

“Hi, honey! Listen, I don’t think Shaun and I need to tell you how great of a mother you are… but, we’re going to anyway.”

Something that isn’t the boss’s fist clutches at my heart. For all that I’ve looked the man in his frozen face, for all the times I’ve heard my Wanderer swear vengeance on his name, he never seemed really… real.

Nate. The man, the myth, the legend. Who had loved the woman curled up so tight against me, hiding under that crocheted throw like it’s a suit of power armor. Who had married her. Made a baby with her.

I shouldn’t be jealous of a dead man. Pretty sure that’s right up there with speaking ill of him and robbing his grave. Which, technically, I’m also guilty of.

“You are kind, and loving, and—” The baby coos, a wet, bubbling laugh, “—and funny! Ha, ha! That’s right. And… patient. So patient. Patience of a saint, as your mother used to say.”

Wanderer chokes, a long shake convulsing her tightly wound body, and it’s instinct that makes me hold her tighter, move my lips to her temple, and speak low against her skin. “Shh-shh, it’s okay. You’re okay.” I stroke her hair and she seems to unwind ever so slightly.

“Look, with Shaun, and us being all at home together, it’s been an amazing year. But even so, I know our best days are yet to come.” Shaun babbles happily in the background. “There will be changes, sure. Things we’ll need to adjust to. I’ll rejoin the civilian workforce. You’ll shake the dust off your law degree…”

That’s right. Before the Big One, there’d been a war. Nate had been a decorated war hero. Like me, Wanderer’s used to being alone. To toughing it out, lying about the hard stuff. She’s shaking in the crook of my arm, but she’s not crying.

“But everything we do, no matter how hard… we do it for our family.”

I wonder what they were like together. How he treated her. If she ever laid against him the way she’s tucked up against me now, if she clutched him like a shield against her pain.

“Now say goodbye, Shaun… Bye bye? Say buh-bye?” The baby giggles, a beautiful sound, rare in the ‘Wealth these days. “Bye honey! We love you.”

The holotape cuts off with a click.

The way she’s breathing — quick and choppy, like the air is catching against a lump in her throat — I can tell she’s pouring all her effort into holding back the flood.

It’s a recipe for a nervous breakdown, and it’s not healthy. I’ll be damned if my Wanderer doesn’t get her chance to grieve.
Hearing his voice again, the little cooing noises that Shaun had just been learning to make before it was all taken away... It’s a cliche, but I feel like my heart has been wrenched from my chest, thrown to the ground, and stomped flat. It hurts. It physically hurts, and part of me wonders if I’m not having an attack. My soul feels ten feet above my body, the world a strange, surreal diorama I’m merely a piece of.

Maybe I’m dying.

Maybe I don’t care if I am.

But there’s a voice, low and sweet, murmuring somewhere above me, pulling me back. Deacon.

“Just cry.” His rough palm passes along my bare arm, along my bare shoulder, along my bare back, rubbing slow, soothing circles. That soft voice urges in time with the strokes of his hand. “Just cry. It’s like throwing up: you’ll feel better afterward. I promise.”

But I hold back. Because if I cry—

If I start, if I unlock the door I chained back at the Rexford all those many weeks ago, I may never stop.

“Just let it out. I’m here.” He is here. Warm, and strong, and so gentle as he strokes my hair, my back, my shoulder. Deacon. Always protecting me from the shit the Commonwealth throws at me. Always interjecting himself between me and my inevitable doom, leaving his nice, shady comfort zone to clean up my messes.

He’s the only safety I know. My home base. My best buddy. I melt closer to him, throwing the blanket back because it’s just another barrier and I’m so goddamn tired of things standing in my way. When he takes my chin between two fingers and lifts my face, looks into my eyes, and places a kiss on my forehead, it’s like the sweet, satisfying click of a bobby pin breaking a master lock.

I cry.

I talk while she cries. Partly because I’ve got a million things running through my brain and a couple need to leak out before my head explodes. And partly because if I don’t keep my mouth busy I’ll just keep kissing her, maybe all over. Instinct is finally failing me, and switching on the backup generators isn’t helping.

“He’s got your number, all right,” I say, pulling the blanket she’s thrown back over the both of us. Right now, Wanderer’s mostly bare body is just one more vulnerability, tempting as it was mere minutes ago, and that vulnerability is shivering despite the afternoon’s sun. “You are kind”—” I kiss her forehead, “—and loving”—” I kiss her temple, “—and funny”—” my lips find her cheek, tasting its salt, “—and patient. Most of the time.” I tilt her chin ever so slightly, kissing away a tear sliding down the tip of her nose. “You were a wonderful mother to Shaun. And a spectacular wife to Nate.” Little whimpering breaths escape her lips as she blinks up at me from under wet lashes. The waterworks just won’t quit, but it’s better this way. Cupping her cheek, I kiss the corner of her lips. “And you’re the best friend I’ve ever had. I must’ve been an actual, honest-to-God saint in a past life, to deserve the chance to know you.” I only hesitate a second, my gaze roving over her flushed, sad, pretty face, before claiming her mouth with mine. Softly, slowly, I kiss her, and it’s even better than the first time because it’s intentional rather than desperate, because the tide of sweet, aching emotion rising up through me urges me to take my time as I suck lightly at that
jutting lower lip, slipping my tongue along hers and telling her truths I can’t speak aloud. God. I can’t even *think* them.

“You made them really happy.” I brush my fingers through her hair, speaking against the crown of her head. “You tend to have that effect on people.”

A particularly violent sob wracks through her. “Sweetheart,” I croon low, a word I haven’t used in about a million years and at least three separate lifetimes. She whimpers again. “Baby.”

For a long time we lay like that, until the sun changes position and the shadows grow long, until the floodwaters finally ebb and her trembling fades away, me just murmuring quiet platitudes into her hair.

“I’m sorry you didn’t find him, babe. You deserved to. More than anything.” Maybe it’s a bad idea to bring it up, but it’s definitely the elephant in the trashed room, and if I don’t say anything now I might not get the chance again. Wanderer doesn’t reveal the cracks in her armor often.

“I did find him.” It’s the first coherent thing she’s said in a while, but I still shake my head like I heard wrong.

“I found Shaun.” She says it flatly, emotionlessly. Not a good sign.

I don’t want to ask because the answer is plastered on her face plain as day, but— “Is he…?”

Wanderer pulls herself up to lean against the headboard next to me, rubbing the salt and water from her cheeks, then tugs my arm closer around her shoulders. Her fingers twist and tangle around mine as she speaks. “Right after I got there, they led me to a room. They knew who I was. They’ve been watching this whole time. They expected me.” She shudders. “In the room was a… a jail cell, sort of, made of glass. And Shaun was in there.”

I close my hand into a fist around her fretting fingers. “I’m afraid to ask.”

“He didn’t recognize me. I scared the shit out of him. It—” here her face crumples, but she draws a ragged breath and composes herself before going on, “—it broke my heart. He started calling for his father, screaming and crying. And this old man walks in then, and he *deactivates* him.”

Everything whirling inside of me stills. “Wait. ‘Deactivates’? Shaun’s a—he’s a synth? A child synth?” It’s unheard of. Dez is going to flip her pancakes over the news. If the Institute starts stealing people’s kids, replacing them… We’re going to have an even tougher job out there.

But Wanderer shakes her head. “It wasn’t Shaun. And the synth was just a prototype. Only one of its kind. It was all a test to them, Deacon, an *experiment* to see how he reacted to *extreme emotional stimuli*... It h-broke my fucking h-heart to see my baby again, and to see that fear in his eyes, and then to hear that—that _monster_ call it a ‘disappointing result’—”

Something cold steals over me as she speaks. Wanderer’s stirring up all kinds of uncomfortable things today, thoughts and feelings long forgotten in their dormancy. Psychological torture isn’t something you can subject my partner to and expect to come out unscathed. “Here’s an idea. Why don’t you describe this ‘monster’ in detail, and I’ll pay him an extra special visit when the wheels on this molecular transport bus get to turning?”

The laugh she barks out doesn’t have a speck of mirth to it. “Sure thing. He’s about sixty years old, white hair, white beard, pensive scientist type. Carrington but with manners. Oh, and he’s got Nate’s mouth and nose, but the eyes are all mine.”
I blink. “I like to think I’m a savvy guy, but I have no idea what you’re getting at, Wanderer.”

“It wasn’t five minutes or even a decade between Kellogg’s break-in and getting out of cryo. It was sixty goddamned years.” She yanks viciously at a loose thread in the blanket, the collection of knots and loops collapsing into a hole. “Shaun is an old man, twice my age. He calls himself Father. He’s the — god, Deacon. He’s the fucking leader of the Institute.”

It hits me like a hot sack of bottle caps.

The leader of the Institute.

Wanderer’s son. Shaun. The one thing driving her to come this far, the thing that inspired her to join up with the Railroad, to travel with me—

My fist balls around a corner of the throw. I knew it. I knew my hunch about the Vault was right, that Project Wanderer wasn’t a pipe dream or a waste of time, despite Carrington’s snide remarks and Desdemona’s approving-yet-doubtful commentary.

But something new’s entered into the equation. I’d known that Wanderer would be the ticket to taking down the Institute, known it deep in my core, a truth I’d never dare lie about. From day one the plan has been to get her on our side, and that part had been easier than I’d ever thought possible. She’s never looked twice at the Brotherhood despite their annoyingly obvious attempts at recruiting, vertibirds sliding into our battles at the most inopportune times. She leads the Minutemen like they’re a lost puppy that followed her home: training them, using their settlements to further our agenda, finding sympathetic ears and strengthening our safety net across the entire Wealth. I’d worried it was too good to be true. Too easy.

Her son. The leader of the Institute.

And she… a quick calculation in my head, one I’ve never really bothered to think about before. She’s privy to a lot of sensitive intel. Safehouses. Names and identities of agents. Timelines, plans. She doesn’t have everything — not even Dez has everything — but if she were to turn, if her alliance were to shift…

The damage would be fucking catastrophic.

It’s a lot to process, even for me. I’ve been quiet too long, because Wanderer peers at me, her baby brows bright and narrow. “Why aren’t you saying anything?”

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. I can’t tell her — my best friend, the one person I’ve begun to trust since my Barbara — that there’s suddenly a future unfolding before us where it’s she and I, versus instead of and, an Unstoppables plotline gone horribly awry. No convenient lies are coming to mind either, though.

She frowns, pulling back, leaning on one arm. “You think… you think I’m going to work for them because of this? That I’m some double agent?” Her lower lip quivers. “You don’t trust me?”

Screw it. If you can’t tell the truth and you can’t lie, there’s only one thing left to do. So I pull her chin up and catch those trembling lips with mine, firm and sure this time, a surge of something I won’t name swelling through me. She sinks back into my chest with a sigh that hums through my mouth. “I trust you,” I breathe, rasping like I’ve been matching Glory cig for cig. I kiss her again, more softly. “I trust you. But I would be one poor Railroad agent if I didn’t consider the ramifications. You know that, baby.”

An empty ache pulses through me when she turns her face from mine. We’ve gotten in tiffs before,
but it’s never affected me like this. Wanderer’s a chem and I’m jonesing for a fix. “I can’t believe you think there’s any possibility I’d ever join them. After all they’ve done to me—”

“I don’t think that. But if it’s true, and Shaun is the big boss of the Institute, well… I’d greatly prefer it if you stayed on our side. You know that. For, uh… for a couple reasons.” I hesitate, then pull her fingers to my lips, kissing their tips gently. “He’s your son, though. I can’t pretend to know what that’s like. Love does… funny things to people.”

I’m pissing her off, I can tell. There’s a miniature lightning storm flashing in those black-brown eyes, and the cool air of the oncoming night fills the space where her body was just pressed against mine. She’s pulled back, staring at me hard, but I don’t look away.

This is just a taste of what I’m getting myself into. Why it’s so dangerous. As her glare deepens, her words drift through my mind.

I work with the Railroad. Not for the Railroad.

I don’t answer to you. I answer to me.

So this is what it feels like when an immovable object meets an unstoppable force. I really hope she never decides to turn on us, and it’s as much to stop the ulcer forming in my gut as it is because kissing her is so gosh-darn fun.

But then her lashes flutter and she lowers her gaze, and her shoulders slump as she exhales, like she’s deflated. “Well, you don’t have anything to worry about, then. Shaun definitely doesn’t love me.” Wanderer frowns. “And I don’t love him.”

The dullness, the hopelessness in her voice plucks at my heartstrings like a two-cap busker on the street corner. Nudging her nose with mine, I find her mouth again, hoping it’s enough of a reassurance, because my words… What I have to say isn’t what she needs to hear right about now.

“Hey,” Deacon murmurs as we break for air, a hint of husk to his voice making me shiver, “You’re pretty fun to kiss.”

True to form, Deacon’s been wearing those infernal sunglasses this whole time. I pluck them off, because this is one of those instances where I can’t just guess what’s going on in that head of his. “Is this… going to change things?”

The sun’s slipped below the horizon and the shadows of my bedroom have deepened; a shaft of darkness falls across his face, obscuring his eyes as surely as the shades. “Hmm. I might be more careful about brushing my teeth from now on.”

“D. I’m serious.”

“So am I. You know, I am really gonna miss garlic bread. Drummer Boy’s homemade spaghetti and mole rat meatballs just won’t be the same without it.”

I can’t help but smile as I tickle his ribs. “Deacon…”

He seems to weigh something as he gazes at me. “I think it has to change things.” He smooths the fine hairs at my temple; even his fingertips are weather-roughened. If he never stopped, I think I’d die happy. “But not in a bad way. At least, I don’t think it’s a bad thing. Do… do you?”

His words come a little too quickly, like he’s nervous. My smile widens and I lean up to plant a
kiss on his cheek; the sharp nip of his stubble against my lips is delicious. “I think it’s a good thing. A good distraction.”

“A distraction, huh? Yeah, I guess you’re pretty distracting.” But there’s something underlying his words, something that almost sounds like disappointment. He clears his throat and shifts on the bed, pulling more of Mama Murphy’s throw around him against the nocturnal chill. “I told Dez I’d grill you for intel the minute you zapped back. It was the only way she’d let me stay. But... do you even wanna talk about it, Wanderer? We’ll have to, eventually, but it can wait. No harm in that right now.”

“Who knows when they’ll decide I know too much and should be terminated?” I’m mostly joking, but his arm around me tightens. “Kellogg, he was enhanced. Some special tech to make him live longer, because the Institute needed him for all their dirty work. So yeah. Like I said, it wasn’t ten years that went by between when they stole Shaun and murdered Nate. It was sixty.” Saying the words out loud makes them finally feel real. “They took him for his DNA. Something about it being pre-war, undamaged. They needed it to make better synths. The Gen-3s. That’s why they call him Father, he’s — all the synths, they’re — part of him.”

Deacon’s quiet for so long after I finish speaking that I’m afraid I’ve said something catastrophic, that he’s suddenly reconsidering everything, that maybe my son being the Director is a dealbreaker after all—

“So does that make you Grandma?”

I blink.

“Because that would at least explain those panties—”

Something like a squawk escapes me and I dive under the throw, cheeks hot and pink. I’d been aware of my state of dress — or lack thereof — but it had seemed secondary to the dizzying tornado of grief and distress and attraction that had swept over and through me the past few hours. Besides, I’d always been comfortable around Deacon; it just hadn’t seemed like an issue.

Until he made fun of my underwear.

“I kid, I kid.”

Wanderer peels a corner of the blanket down, her eyes narrowing at me distrustfully.

“I mean, I don’t even think those can be classified as panties. If I’ve got my Jane Austen lore right, ‘bloomers’ might be more accurate—”

“Deacon!” But I know she’s not really appalled; she bites her lip to ward away a smile. “I thought about it the whole time I was there. That the synths are all part of me. Family, almost. And I realized how... I’m sorry, this is so corny. How grateful I am that the Railroad found me. That... you found me.”

With her words, every unspoken fear about her turning dissolves into nothingness. Project Wanderer. The code name I’d chosen on a whim, inspired by good ol’ Dion’s catchy number-one hit, suddenly means so much more.

Man, I’m a good spy. Next time I’m at HQ, I’m definitely gunning for a raise.

“Lemme clue you in on some classified intel: I’m pretty happy I found you, too.” When I kiss her
again, she tastes both salty and sweet, and her lips part for me like she’s been waiting for this.

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I don’t love him.

He starts as the pencil in his grasp snaps. He looks at it in dismay a moment before tossing it in the wastebasket. Waste, indeed. Wood is difficult to come by so far underground; the trees kept here are for phytoremediation and peaceful ambience, not lumber.

Though the optics captured only the siding of a poorly constructed cabin, it was for the best. Based on the audio streaming through the feed — the soft voices, the sighs, the long silences — it wasn’t a visual he was interested in viewing.

Mother had been in contact with the organization responsible for so many of his disappearing units. The Railroad. It was old information, and largely uninteresting — he had been confident that she would be easy to turn once they finally met. She was, after all, his mother. Her sole purpose since he’d ordered the cryostasis release had been to find him, and to avenge his father.

It had been gratifying these past months, watching her fight for him. Risk herself for him again and again, say his name with such conviction, such devotion. There had been no doubt in his heart that she would eventually join him here underground, where life was clean and safe and made good sense. It was more than mere emotion driving his conclusion: all evidence pointed to her inevitable induction into the Institute.

Upon her return, though, when that man — that Railroad radical, designation Deacon, though Ayo hadn’t been able to unearth much more information beyond an alias and a title — when that man had put his filthy, unworthy hands on Mother and kissed her…

He closes his eyes, inhaling deep through his nostrils and counting. Though his father had perished at the hands of that imbecilic Kellogg six decades before, to Mother it had been a few months at most. That she holds no respect for the man, that she’s moved on so quickly—

Was she not the woman he thought her to be?

Had the irradiated aboveground world poisoned her so swiftly?

No. He can’t give up on her, not yet. Not when so much has been invested into this project. Not when he’s so invested.

He would discover a way to remove this obstacle. It would simply require some careful thought and meticulous planning. Certainly Dr. Ayo would jump at the chance to contribute to such a project, and he ought to “throw the man a bone,” as they say, given all the criticism he’d endured recently.

I don’t love him.

Jabbing a button, the terminal goes black with a snap that satisfies none of the emotions roiling under his skin.

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Clearing out the Coastal Cottage had been a tricky job, but his Minutemen were tough as nails. A swell of pride warms Preston’s chest to think of them, how bravely they’d taken down the
deathclaws nesting in the area, how they’d faced the nearby mirelurk queen without batting their eyes at the danger.

It feels like forever since he’s been back in the northwest territories, but it’s only been about three weeks. Preston hadn’t wanted to leave — it made his chest ache to think of missing the General’s return — but when the call for help came over the radio, he knew what he had to do. Duty didn’t wait for matters of the heart. The General, she cares about him — he smiles, thinking of her hands on his cheeks — but she doesn’t let that stop her from fulfilling her duty.

He had wanted to make her proud. So he’d answered the call, gathered a small militia, and set out for the coast.

Sanctuary’s humble wood bridge is within sight now; he can hear the burbling of the creek, the barking of the settlement’s dogs. Over the long trek he’d shed his troupe of Minutemen one by one until it was just him left walking the path back home, but he was fine with it. It gave him time to think, and there was no one to ask why the blush crept across his cheeks, why he smiled to himself and hummed Billie Holiday’s *Easy Living*.

Jun’s on duty at the guard post, nervously shifting his pipe pistol in his grip. A smile lights up his face as he sees Preston round the bend and he waves excitedly.

“Hey, Jun! How have things been? Kept it together while I was gone?” Seeing the Quincy refugee safe and sound is a relief. Preston can never quite shake the feeling that they need his protection, even here in quiet old Sanctuary.

“Preston, she’s back!”

His heart buoys into his throat; he must have misheard. “Who’s back? You don’t mean—”

“The General! She’s back! She’s at home, and she’s safe, and—”

But Preston’s already running. His General has come back home to him, and the first thing he’s going to do is sweep her up in his arms and kiss her soundly.

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