All the King's Horses

by LillyoftheAlley

Summary

Nate and Nick return from Far Harbor having solved some problems and created new ones. End-game and Farharbor spoilers, plus another mystery to be solved.

Notes

Hey, all. An angsty first few chapters will equal a mystery down the road, so don't despair if angst and hurt/comfort aren't your thing. But if they ARE your thing, come, wallow with me.
Chapter 1

Ellie Perkins was not a worrier by nature. She was a list-maker, a planner, a doer and an organizer. She preferred working to idleness, and for the first five days Nick and Nate were gone, catch-up work and simple cases took up her time. Missing items, small disputes to be investigated and settled, a little light surveillance filled her days, and her nights were mainly paperwork and filing. A thorough top to bottom surveillance of the Agency took up the next two days. Then a re-working of her filing system, and a review of old cases took the next week and a half. Then winter started to set in, and petty crime took a steady drop in Diamond City, and even out in the settlements.

She wasn't entirely alone, of course. Nat came by, sometimes with Piper and sometimes without, spending her days playing solitaire on the ground or reading old case files or just chatting about news through the Commonwealth. That news never came back with Nick or Nate's names or descriptions attached. Even Piper, who she met for drinks at the Dugout Inn from time to time, had no news to share on that front.

A month in, and Ellie took up playing poker for little candies with Nat. She learned how to take apart and clean Publik Occurances' ancient printing press. She re-read each of the carefully tended books in Nick's collection, from Paradise Lost to the Introductory Guide to Police Field Work she'd given him half on a lark years ago, and he had held like it was something precious, drawing her into a fierce hug.

In the beginning of the second month she pulled out Nick's copy of Much Ado About Nothing—his favorite play—and read it out loud over the Agency's radio frequency. It was an unexpected hit in a land yearning for entertainment, so she made it a regular event. Every night at nine, she sat down at the radio and spent half an hour or so reading from Nick's books.

By the end of the second month, people were sending her things to read, from a half-burned comic that she wrote a heroic end to, to a copy of an almost-racy romance that she happily read. She got letters from Daisy in Goodneighbor, and farmers in places she'd hardly heard of.

And all of this was enough to fill her days.

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Ellie slept at one edge of the pair of mattresses in the upstairs room of the Valentine Detective Agency. Because sleeping in Nick's spot was disrespectful. And sleeping in Nate's spot was a reminder of how new what they had was. And also neither spot was as comfortable as hers, but that was neither here nor there.

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On the sixtieth day, she decided to live normally. She rose, washed her face and hands, combed her hair, and made breakfast for two: what Valentine called Post Apocolyptic Oatmeal with bits of muttfruit cut into it. Did a little light dusting. Moved Nick's chair to the angle he sat it at before dropping into it like a sack of tatos, set out a water glass for Nate.
Then she sat behind her desk, crossed her legs, threaded her fingers together, put on her best secretarial smile, and waited.

For lunch she re-heated the gelatinous lump that was the second breakfast and drank the glass of water.

For dinner she ate nothing at all, too sick to her heart to worry about it. She sat in front of Nick's radio, with the current book (*Jane Eyre*), and stared into the middle distance.

And for the first night in weeks, nine o'clock came and went without a reading. Piper came. Carried on a one-sided conversation that Ellie remembered little of, later.

She went to bed by herself, and slept diagonally across all three spots until the mattresses slid apart and her ass bumped the ground. Then she scooted back into her place, and slept feverishly, dreaming over and over that she heard the door open downstairs and familiar, beloved voices.

She dreamed them home, dreamed them telling a fantastic story of meeting a ghoul whose home had been taken over by sentient mirelurks, dreamed that they'd brought one home as a new secretary so she could go on the road.

Every time she started to wake, she closed her eyes again, and slipped back into the dream. And when the fog of that other life finally burned away in the morning light, she wept for the first time since they left, wept for herself, her boys, and the future that yawned open and empty without them.

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The next three days went by in a blur. She slept too much. Left the radio dialed up loud so it would wake her if her boys tried to radio in. Her hair, when she passed by her mirror, was a rumpled mess, and her eyes were deep hollows.

In the evenings she read on the radio, and tried to keep her heart in it. Tried to leave the aching loneliness upstairs, but of course it poured out the moment she opened her mouth. The third night, she switched off the mouthpiece with a harsh click. “I'm an idiot,” she told the empty room. “What kind of lonely person thinks it's a good idea to read *Jane Eyre*?”

“How stupid,” said Piper, from the door. “But Mr. Rochester sounds like a real piece of work. So I thought you could use some company—” Her knees nearly buckled as a flash of black and tan fur barreled past her toward Ellie.

“Dogmeat!” she cried, and the dog put two feet on her lap and licked her cheeks. “You just like that I’m salty from crying,” she said, and the dog licked the tip of her nose. “I bet you say that to all of Nate's girls.”

“Nate's guy, too,” said Piper wryly. “Which is still weird to say, but if it works for you guys—”

“It does,” said Ellie. “Really well. When they're here. When they aren't...”

“Yeah,” said Piper. “I'm worried, too.” She cleared her throat. “So DM's been mooning around ever since Nate left. And if he stays with me, Nat will never get any work done, and frankly, me neither. Could he...?”

“Oh. Oh! Yes. Who's going to be broken of being a destructive chewer? Dogmeat is! Yes!” She
sunk her hands into the shepherd's ruff of fur and sighed. “You didn't have to do this for me, Piper.”

“Do what? You're doing ME a favor. And him. And clearly I am just helping out a dog who happens to have saved my life a time or two.” She fumbled with the messenger bag on her shoulder. “Got his bowl and his teddy with one eye something for the two of you for dinner. Ta da!” she said, removing an enormous egg. “I figured I'd cook and the three of us could play cards?”

“The three of-?”

“Hey! Are you going to make me stand in the cold all night?” called Nat from outside.

Piper rolled her eyes. “I wanted to make sure you weren't mad about the dog before I let her in. So you didn't feel pressured to be nice about it.”

“Thanks. That's... really thoughtful, actually.”

“Don't thank me too much. I almost had her come in for the same reason,” said Piper with a wink.

Nat pushed the door open. “Hey, Ellie,” she said. “We brought you a dog because Piper thinks you've been alone too much.” She sat down in Nick's chair, and raised an eyebrow at Ellie. “How come you've been pretending not to be home when I stop by?”

“Maybe I was asleep,” said Ellie. “Or just upstairs, and didn't hear you.”

“At four in the afternoon? Psh. Okay.”

“I haven't been sleeping so well at night, kiddo. I'm just worried, I guess.”

Nat hopped up, and spun the egg sitting on the desk, and Ellie watched as it rocked and wobbled to a stop. There was silence for a moment, and Nat heaved a sigh. “Piper thinks they're back in the Commonwealth.”

“Crap,” said Piper.

“What?” breathed Ellie.

“I was going to tell you after dinner,” said Piper, shooting Nat a dirty look that was met by an insouciant smile. “I got the news when I went to Sanctuary. Deacon apparently headed north to collect them a couple of weeks ago and when Preston followed a week later, Kenji Nakano said they'd come back through. Said Deacon spent a few days fiddling with the radio, and then Kenji had to walk them through some repairs to the boat they'd taken—”

“Boat? They went over the ocean?”

“Apparently. But then they headed back toward Boston after they got back and nobody's seen them since.”

“Well,” said Ellie. “Kinda... kinda makes sense that they've been gone so long. If they had to go over the ocean, I mean. And if they got bounced from one emergency to the next, well...”

“I'm sure they're fine,” said Piper soothingly. “Here. I'll make dinner; you keep Nat from scaring anybody's hair white for a few minutes.”

“Hey!”
“If the shoe fits, kiddo,” said Ellie. “Show me whatever diabolical card game the kids are playing in school right now.”

“It's called Creep.”

“Sounds scary.”

“It is the way I play it.”

“Okay,” said Ellie, reluctance tinging her voice. “Deal me in.”

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Piper and Nat left just before midnight, leaving Dogmeat and most of Nat's supply of tiny candies. “Thanks for playing, jerkface,” said Nat, after a solid prod from her sister.

“Call me when they make up a game I didn't play as a kid in Goodneighbor,” said Ellie. She hugged them both, ruffled Nat's hair, and locked up after them, double-checking the locks because Nick would have wanted her to.

Dogmeat lived in her shadow as she turned off the lights, put away the remains of dinner for breakfast the next morning, and did all the little things that closed down the Agency for the night when Nick was away.

But before she turned off the last light, she sat down at her desk and made a note, dated a week and a half away: Day 75, she wrote. Start worrying.

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She woke in the darkest hours when the Agency shuddered in a shockwave that rattled the city. She froze in place, though Dogmeat jumped up from his place curled around her feet and howled along with a distant pack of frightened dogs. Sitting up, she petted him, and as the fog cleared from her brain she pulled on her dress and vest, and shoved her feet in her shoes without lacing them.

Downstairs, she hesitated just a moment before sliding the belt of Nick's spare sidearm holster over her shoulder. Once the heavy revolver was in her hand, she flung open the front door.

She coughed – dust blanketed the city, and the stars in the sky were darkened by the cloud that hung over them. She ducked back in, closing the door, and pulled an ancient filtered mask from the bottom of her desk. Settling it over her face, she hesitated, looking down at the dog. “I'll get you treated if it's radioactive,” she said, her voice muffled. Then, inspired, she took the dog's bandanna and tied it to his collar, draping it over his snout. “Okay,” she said, satisfied, “Let's go.”

Outside, she could hear the city stirring, could hear someone running in the direction of the guard's dugout, feet pounding over hard-packed dirt and rickety boards. Briefly, she considered heading that same way herself. Instead, she headed for someone who might actually be able to help keep her safe instead of stirring the pot.

She ducked inside the Dugout Inn, and practically into Vadim's chest. He closed the door and pulled the mask from her face. “Ellie! Is good you are not out with your boss and his partner, yes? Things explode, and I expect Nate is doing the exploding. Sit! Have a drink and we will see who brings stories as the dust settles. Good, good,” he said, looking down at Dogmeat. “Who is the good dog? Bringing beautiful women to Vadim gets the good dog a drink of water.” He plucked the kerchief off the dog's nose, and Dogmeat's tongue lolled out. “This is good thinking. Go. Sit. I will watch door.”
“Thanks, Vadim,” said Ellie. She gave him a quick hug. “If there's anything I can do to help--”

“Drinking helps, hah! Helps you sleep, helps Vadim pay his butcher's bill and keep lights on in the Inn.” He patted her on the shoulder with one enormous hand. “When there is news, I will tell.”

Ellie paid for a beer – a dark thing, so thick she thought she could stand a spoon up in it – and nursed the drink until it was warm enough that it was disgusting. Then, with a wrinkled nose, she drank the rest of it down and ordered a water.

News trickled in from the city first-- a collapsed walkway, a shack wall down, and then from outside the city. Fires in the distance, buildings on the horizon that were gone, collapsed. And finally, a hole where there used to be city. She kept her face still when she heard where. Stuck around for a while afterward. And then she slunk home with Dogmeat in tow. Once the door was closed and locked behind her, she collapsed backward against it. “Oh Nate,” she whispered. “What have you done?”

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The next week went by in a flash. There was a small influx of people into Diamond City – traders, gossip seekers, and even an envoy from Hancock, come to make sure she, Piper, and Nat were alright, and to ask after Nate and Nick. But with new people came new problems, and Ellie's days filled with sorting out squabbles, trade disagreements, and missing items, Dogmeat by her side.

She left the under-the-arm holster on, and was astonished by the way she got wider berth when she wore a gun over her dress. People were slower to sass her, which she supposed made sense, but was a little disappointing from the point of view of getting to sass back.

The sign stayed lit, and she grew so used to hearing it open and close that she took a moment to look up from her case notes when the door opened.

Ellie froze. She had locked it not half an hour before when the sun went down. She was half on her feet with her hand going for the revolver when she heard “Doll?” and her heart flip-flopped.

He limped around the corner, an arm slung around Nate's shoulder, and who was supporting whom she couldn't have said. Nick's coat was more tattered than when she had last seen it, an acid burn revealing a new almost-white shirt underneath. Other than that, he looked more or less intact, but for a tear on the knee of his trousers that revealed a new tear in his skin.

Nate, on the other hand, looked wretched. His eyes were sunken, his hair unkempt, and there were bandages running from his hand to his shoulder. He wore a pair of jeans, an undershirt, and a leather jacket instead of the vault suit.

“Boys,” she said, and her voice was as soft, as gentle as she could make it. Even so, Nate flinched. “Welcome home.” She palmed the note off the wall, and dropped it into the trash.

“I was just about to start worrying.”
Chapter 2

Ellie tried not to be hurt when she reached for Nate and he shied away. Tried.

“Don't look at me like you don't know me, Nate,” she said. She held out a hand, and after an uncomfortable pause, he took it.

“Sorry, I, uh--” He swallowed and she noticed a wince. “I didn't mean to... to, uh...” He squeezed her hand with his off hand, keeping his bad arm close to his chest. Nick, she noticed, kept an arm around Nate's waist, which seemed to be a large part of what was holding him up.

“Let's get you some water, love.” She gently led him to Nick's chair, and he sat, a slow and ginger process. She crossed the room, and poured him a glass of water from the jug on the filing cabinet. “Here you go.”

“Thanks,” he said, and took it, sipping a little, then putting it on the desk with the tiniest click. But he didn't look up, didn't look her in the eye, and she glanced at Nick, feeling helpless. Of all the reunions she had imagined, one in which Nate was barely responsive had not numbered among them. In fact, most of the reunions she had imagined had Nate and Nick sweeping her off her feet with kisses and whispered promises to never be gone so long again.

Nick's gaze shifted left. Criminals did that, he had told her. Liars. People trying to avoid the truth. And however much he protested that he was more machine than man, Nick's mannerisms were all human. “We're both a little tired and battered, doll. We should get some food in Nate and follow it up with a good night's sleep. Right Nate?”

“...sure,” he said, not lifting his gaze.

“Oh,” she said dumbly. “Right.” She went through the motions of warming cornbread in a pan, then a gravy she'd made for dinner. She put the plate in front of him, and he ate rhythmically without any sign of enjoyment. She wanted to scream. She wanted to scream. She wanted to shake Nick Valentine until facts fell out. She wanted to wrap herself around Nate and never let go. But what she did was help him upstairs, re-dress his burned arm, and take his shoes off while Nick watched, his shoulders tight and his hands stuffed in his pockets. Another tell, she thought, and smoothed Nate's hair back, helping him down to his side of the mattress.

“You need anything else?” she whispered to him, and he shook his head. “Okay. Well. You call me if you need anything, you hear? Anything at all.”

“Nick'll explain,” he said abruptly. “Ellie. I'm sorry. I'm not... I'm sorry I'm a fucking mess. Nick can take care of you.” And with that, he rolled over, hunching his shoulders in, and curling up.

She sat with him until his breathing evened out, petting his back and his hair, trying to confer
strength through her touch. And when he finally slept, she rose, and followed Nick downstairs.

“What the hell happened to him?” she hissed, and Nick blinked. “Nick, he's so... so...”

“Fragile, doll. He's fragile. But he's better now than he was a week ago. He's getting better.” He squeezed her shoulder with his good hand, and drew her close. “A week ago he was... he was bad. He wouldn't even feed himself. Just sat and stared and--” He drew a breath.

“Nick-” she said into his chest. “You're squeezing me awful tight.”

“Sorry,” he said, and kissed the top of her head. “Sorry, doll. I've been so worried about him, and about you. I didn't mean to leave you so long, but we hit a few snags while we were gone. The short version is this: We tracked our missing person, Kasumi, to an island called Far Harbor. It's up north along the coastline, and we barely limped the boat there. Things got complicated. There's a guy, DiMA, running a sort of halfway house for runaway synths, and Kasumi got convinced she's one—and before you ask, I'm still not sure if she is or isn't—and ran away to join the synth circus. But she got concerned about DiMA's intentions, and the political situation on the island was all tied up in a gordian knot, leaving us the fun task of working out a situation that would work for everyone. DiMA's an experimental model, and he'd stored his memories off site because they were too painful to keep in his precious idealistic head.” There was something there—regret? Bitterness? But before she had a chance to ask, he kept talking. “Anyway, we got that all sorted out, and made sure DiMA kept his hands relatively clean in exchange for us getting dirty. And when we went to go home, we started getting radio contact from Deacon, who had to walk us through fixing the boat we'd taken up there with Kenji's help.” He shrugged, an uncomfortable motion, and shook his head.

“I half wish Deacon had never found us. He had a mission from the Railroad. Nate took it. Took a device inside the Institute and destroyed it. Did everything they asked of them, and walked away. It broke something in him, doll, something vital. He hasn't really surfaced until today.”

“This is better,” she said flatly. She searched his face, and though there were no clues behind the golden eyes, she stiffened suddenly. “Shaun.”

“Got it in one, sweetheart,” he said tiredly. “Man tears through the entirety of the commonwealth looking for the boy, finds he's an old man, jaded to suffering and near death, and helps him go a little early along with the rest of the Institute.”

Her hands were over her mouth. Her breath came too fast, too hard. “I think I might throw up,” she gasped, and Nick sat her down with Nate's abandoned glass of water. “Small sips,” he said, stroking her hair. “You can do this. You can help him. We can help him. But we have to not break down on him, we have to not look at him like he's pitiful. Sip, Ellie. You can do this.”

Slowly, her roiling stomach stilled. “Nick. How do I help him?”

“If I knew, I would tell you, doll. I don't think there's some kinda secret switch we can flip, here. I think he needs time to grieve and get his head together. We need to give him the space to do it, but also push a little, make sure he doesn't get stuck. We have to be his roadmap out.”

She searched his eyes. “Nick,” she said on a hunch. “Are you okay?”

“Nah. Not even close, doll. But I'm better off than Nate, and that's a hell of a start.” He bent down and kissed her, and for the first time, his breath wasn't heavy with nicotine.

“Did you quit smoking?” she asked, shocked.
“Ran out three days ago,” he said ruefully. “I don't suppose you—Ah, doll. You're the best,” he said, wrapping his hands around hers as she fished a pack she'd bought him out of his desk.

They went upstairs and out what Nick rather grandly called the balcony. The night air made her shiver, and she drew closer to Nick while he smoked. He wrapped his coat around her shoulders, and together they watched the city close down for the night.

“Was it the right thing to do?” she asked at last.

“Yeah. Doesn't make it hurt less,” said Nick. “I'll never forgive Desdemona for making him press the button himself, like it was some kind of honor. It was the right thing to do for the Commonwealth. Doesn't make it any less vile an act. And Nate knows it. We killed a lot of people who thought they were doing the right thing. Most of them, anyhow.”

“Most monsters do,” she said, and kissed his cheek.

“Yeah. Not sure what the big ol' line that separates them from us is,” said Nick.


“Is that why?” he said. “I figured they programmed me wrong.”

“You, me, Nate, and everyone else with a conscience.” She tucked her face against his shoulder. “I missed you two so much. Every single day, I missed you, boss.”

He dropped his cigarette and pulled her as close as he could. “Doll. Say it again.”

“I missed you,” she mumbled against his chest. “I missed you, boss.”

His chest heaved. “I missed you. Every single day, doll.”

“Missed that voice, too,” she teased. “Said it before, but nobody's got a sexier voice than you.”

“Hm,” he said. “You say that, but we've been listening to you on the radio. And nothing's made us happier than hearing that voice.”

For the first time since they got home, her face broke into a smile. “You were listening! I had hoped you- I wasn't sure it would reach- Ohhh, Nick, I'm so happy.”

“First time we heard you, it was like finding a message in a bottle addressed to us and sealed with a kiss,” he rumbled. “Like finding water in the desert. We heard you finish Much Ado on DiMA's equipment, which is a hell of a lot more sensitive than Nate's pip-boy. We heard bits and pieces after that. A little of a romance novel, and once we got back, Jane Eyre. Interesting choice. Who's your Byronic hero, doll?”


He stiffened. “I'm not feeling like one of the good guys so much lately. Matter of fact, I feel like we've done some pretty low-down things these last few weeks. Things that needed doing. We saved lives in the long run, but...”

“Shh,” she said. “There's plenty of time for all of that later. I know you're a good man. And I'm glad you're home, Nick Valentine. Let's get to bed.”

It was marginally warmer inside, and Ellie gave Nick his coat back. She layered another ancient,
thin blanket on top of Nate, who didn't stir. A few minutes of settling in, and they were close to one another again, snuggled down in the pile of blankets against the encroaching winter. Nick hesitated, so she nudged him toward Nate. “He needs you,” she whispered. “And you need me.”

Nick curled around Nate, and Ellie curled around him, slinging her arm around his waist, and resting her head on the crook of her elbow.

It would be romantic, she thought, to say that it was the first time she’d slept through the night since they left. But as she began to drift off, she felt Nate jerk and cry out in his sleep, and listened in on Nick murmur soothing words to him. She wished Nate were in the middle. Wished she knew what to say or do for him. Strangely, most of all she wished she didn't feel like an eavesdropper in her own bed, privy to something secret and strange.

Sleep was a long time coming.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Cry no more.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Wisps of terrors imagined or remembered still clung to Nate when he woke, like mud from one of Far Harbor’s bogs sticking to his legs, weighing him down more and more as he forced himself forward. Nick had whispered that it got better, that he would help make it better, but grief was a constant weight, a bloodbug on his shoulder, sucking the life out of him as he tried to simply exist. Even sleep was fraught with horror, horrors he had done or believed should be visited on him. His subconscious was not, it seemed, interested in giving him a break even for a little while.

He lifted a hand and scrubbed at his face, and Nick’s arm tightened around him. The warmth of the synthetic man was good in the pre-dawn chill. It felt right and comfortable in a way little did these days. It made sense.

Nate bent his head and kissed the knuckles of Nick’s bare hand. “Gotta get up, Nick. Can’t sleep anymore, anyway.”

“Hm? Oh, right, doll.” The arm lingered for a moment, though, and the weight across his side and chest was too much suddenly, was too constricting.

“Nick?” he prompted, voice a little shaky.

“Sorry.” The arm came away from him, and he scrambled to his feet, disappearing into the small bathroom. When he came out, Nick and Ellie were sitting up in bed.

Ellie smiled at him. “You want breakfast, hon? I’ve got an egg and some more of that cornbread.”

He didn’t. Didn’t want anything to eat, couldn’t even imagine wanting to add food to the heavy rock that seemed to rest in his belly. But, “Sure,” he said. The word came out strangely, though. Nothing he said seemed to sound right in his own head; nothing he did seemed to come naturally. “I’m going to shave. Is that okay?” Why had he asked? Stupid. Stupid to ask as though he needed permission.

But Ellie just rose to her feet, and tugged at the inch or so of beard on his chin, answering as though there were nothing wrong at all with having asked. “Now’s the time before it starts to grow on me.”

“Grew on him like a fungus,” Nick said.

Ellie shot him a look. “Big words from a bald man.”

“I think it’s a good look for me. Saves time from having to shave like blondie, there. Saves me money on haircuts. Looks good with the hat, too.”
Nate opened his mouth, tried to say something, anything. He could flirt or tease or just roll his eyes, anything, anything. But what came out was a little croaking sound, and in the wake of it, he turned and fled again to the bathroom, certain they were staring after him.

* * * * *

“You can do this,” he told his reflection. “Ellie and Nick deserve it.” He took a shuddery breath, shivering in the cold room. “Step one: get some warm water,” he said. “Two: wash. Three: shave. Four: comb hair. Five: brush teeth. Six: get dressed.” It ought to have all been automatic, but he felt so heavy, so slow, and everything took so much thinking and planning. It hardly seemed possible that a few weeks ago he'd rampaged across the Commonwealth and beyond with a rifle and--

The door creaked open, and for a moment, hot anger flooded his chest. Had he been unclear? Had there been any way to take his actions but as a desperate need to escape? Had--

“Oh,” he said. “Hey, boy.” He reached down and scratched Dogmeat's ears, luxuriating in the silky texture, in the little spot of fluffy fur behind them that transitioned into coarser hair. He'd had a dog as a kid, had insisted to Nora that any child of theirs would have a dog once they were old enough. Five. Maybe six or seven. And even though Nora had firmly been in the camp of cat people, she'd agreed that having a pet to take care of taught responsibility, taught empathy, taught--

His chest caught, and he made a keening sound, sliding to the floor. The dog whined, pushing his nose into Nate's armpit, crying his distress. Nate's face crumpled into a grimace of pain, and he drew the dog closer, pulling the animal into his lap. He shook, from somewhere deep within, not a mere tremble of his hands but a violent tremor that left him unable to function.

Slowly, his breathing evened out, and life started to leak back in around the edges. Dogmeat's fur was wet, clumped together in little spikes where his tears had fallen. He wiped at the dog's fur with his sleeve, and was rewarded with a doggy grin. The dog shook himself off and slipped out of the room.

Nate drug himself to his feet, and checked himself in the mirror. He was managing an interesting blend of puffy and sunken, scuffy and wild-eyed.

“Nate?” came Ellie's voice. “I've got a pan of hot water for you. I'll just leave it here.”

“Wait,” he said. “I'll get it.” He opened the door, and took the pot of water from her with his off hand. It steamed gently in the cool air. He watched her face for a moment, looking for—what? Pity, perhaps. Revulsion, most likely. But all he saw there was concern. “Thanks,” he said. “I'm just going to... I'll be down in a few minutes.”


A smile flickered across his face for an instant. Ellie beamed in return. “I've been looking forward to seeing that face,” she teased.

“Funny,” he said. “I haven't.”

The moment he said it, he wished he could take it back. Ellie's good humor melted away in an instant, and she reached out a hand for him. “Nate,” she said cautiously.

“Down in a few,” he said, and retreated back into the bathroom.
He put the pot of water down on the back of the toilet, running a little cold water into the sink with the plug in, and mixing the two. He washed first, his face and unbandaged hand followed by a quick all-over that left him shivering in the cool air. He washed his hair with the cake of soap Ellie kept for her own hair, something gentler than what he would have bought for himself. And then he idly toyed with his safety razor for just long enough to become uncomfortable, just long enough for him to double check with himself on the notion of dying, and decide it wasn't for him.

So he shaved his face instead, struggling with the task without the use of his good hand. After, he pulled on his jeans, and his undershirt, and one of Nick's spare button downs. He was going to need his clothes from Sanctuary. He wasn't putting the damn Vault suit back on, and he wasn't sure he was going to put his armor back on, either. For that matter, he wasn't one hundred per cent sure where his armor was. He did want his gun back, he decided. Being relatively certain one didn't want to die implied owning a weapon in the Commonwealth.

To be fair, he could have handled it better than walking down into the office, still drying off his face, and blurting out, “I'm gonna need my gun.”

Twin pairs of horrified eyes met his.

“Oh God,” said Ellie.

“Nate, let's talk about this,” said Nick.

He stared at them blankly. And then a laugh bubbled up in his throat until it became a giggle, and from there he was utterly gone, laughing helplessly while his lovers fretted. “Oh my God,” he said at last. “I needed that. I just want it because--” he wiped the tears from his eyes again. “Because I don't want to die. That's why I need the gun.”

“Jeeze, Nate,” said Ellie. “Give a girl a heart attack, why don't you?” She crossed the room, and took his hands in hers, somehow wrapping herself in his arms in one of those complicated maneuvers women seemed to find so effortless.

“It's in my desk,” said Nick. “It's a damn mess, too. Gonna clean mine and yours while you two eat breakfast, if you don't mind.”

“Course not,” said Nate. “Thanks.” Ellie left his arms with a little flare of her skirt and a bounce in her step, and he wondered how she seemed to draw energy from him when he hardly had any for himself. He shook his head, dismissing the question, and poured two glasses of water from their pitcher and drew up a chair while Ellie brought the plates.

“Smells good,” he said, and scraped together a smile for her.

He didn't want to eat, but Ellie beamed at him, he resolved to eat if it half-killed him.

To his surprise, the cornbread and eggs were genuinely good, and after a few bites he was voraciously hungry, shoveling in bite after bite as Ellie looked on.

“When you get done, you'll have to tell me about this place you went to up the coast. Was it big? What were the people like there? I've never seen the ocean or an island. Sounds exotic. And you went there on a boat! I've got a couple of sailors, huh?”

“That's us,” deadpanned Nick. “Married to the sea.”

“Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more. Men were deceivers ever, one foot in sea, and one on shore, to one thing constant never,” she said, and Nick smiled.

“That's really something,” he said, and his hands moved over the gun with confidence, popping out
the cylinder to clean it. “Did you write that little ditty?”

Ellie tilted her head and laughed. “Me and my buddy Will,” she said.

“Will? Must be new. You'll have to introduce us.” He took a little brush to the gun, cleaning it with more care and precision in his movements than Nate could imagine being able to muster.

Confusion flickered across her face, and abruptly, Nate's blood ran cold. He recognized that fragment of poetry.

“Will Shakespeare, Nick! Geeze, go out and memorize bits from a play for a guy and what thanks do you get?” she teased.

“Much Ado About Nothing,” prompted Nate, clinging to hope.

But Nick shook his head. “I only know the end we caught the other night.” But his gaze didn't come up from where he worked on the guns.

“Of course you know it,” she insisted. “It's your favorite. You read it to me when I came down sick right after I started with the Agency. Said we weren't going to get any work done, so we could at least get some culture in.”

“Right, right,” said Nick. “Slipped my mind for a minute.”

Ellie, uneasy, stood. Nate could almost hear that organized, analytical mind racing. She knew Nick was lying; she could read the man like a book. But she also knew for a fact that he knew the play and loved it. Her fingers splayed out, and she held up a hand between herself and Nick, half entreaty to promise her everything was alright, half trying to stop an unpleasant future from speeding toward her like a charging brahmin.

“Nicky. Tell me.”

Those golden eyes didn't come up for a long minute, but Nick's hands stilled on the gun. Nate knew the man well enough to know he wasn't stalling, but quietly searching for the words to tell her.

“Do you want me to-?” began Nate, but Nick shook his head.

“No.” He set the gun aside, and wiped his hands on a rag, carefully cleaning under the nails of his good hand, one of a thousand details to which the Institute had paid careful attention while somehow missing the point of humanity all together.

Nick took a deep breath. “You know I'm a prototype,” he said, but it wasn't a question. “What you don't know—what I didn't know until a few weeks ago—is that I was one of two prototypes. Me and DiMA. Same face. Same generation 2.5 body, so far as I know. What wasn't the same was what they stuffed in our heads. Him they gave the capacity to learn and grow and develop a personality on his own. Me they jammed a ready-made one from a human in and hoped for the best.” Those golden eyes flicked down and away, and back up. “Then, being the Institute, they ran tests. Experiments. DiMA kept developing. Me they would wipe, and try a new brain on for size.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Nate saw Ellie's hands, very slowly, come to her face to cover her mouth. But his gaze didn't leave Nick's.

“So DiMA got sick of it. Took matters into his own hands, and busted us out of the Institute. But I'd just had a new person jammed in my head. And maybe DiMA didn't know I had a brand new me, or maybe some of the past personalities had been... biddable. But Nick—I—wasn't. I was
scared, and I fought him. Did some damage to each other. And he fought me off, and left me. Seemed broken up about it, I guess. My memories start after that, though. When I woke up in that scrapheap and figured I'd been thrown out with the trash.” He patted his pockets, but didn't light a cigarette.

“Why--” croaked Ellie. She took a sip of water, the cup coming to her mouth with shaking hands. “Why there? Why not when the the original Nick's memories were added?”

“Funny thing,” said Nick. “I don't think we were ever meant to be out in the world. Or maybe they cut corners. Or maybe the science just wasn't there. But they didn't include enough memory in the old noggin.”

Silence. Ellie's breathing was strained, too quick. Nate knew, he knew and could hardly breathe.

“The longer I live, the more I forget,” said Nick. “Maybe even this goes, too, eventually. Knowing that I'm doomed to forget.” His gaze met theirs, Nate, then Ellie. “I live long enough, I might lose you two to age, or accidents, or one of the thousand horrors the world throws at us. And I thought that was my biggest fear. But I realize now there's something much worse: forgetting you.”

There was a sound, a raw cry that tore from Ellie's throat. Her cheeks were splotchy with red heat, and her hand shook as she raised it.

“You... you listen to me right here and now, Nicholas Valentine. You listen to me! I am never going to let that happen to you. Never, you understand?” Her breath was quicker now, jerky, and her eyes were shiny from fighting back tears. “Over my goddamn dead body is that your fate.”

“Yeah,” said Nick. “That's what I'm afraid of.”

Chapter End Notes

I am firmly of the belief that if Fallout has corn, it also has cornbread.

Also: next chapter is Nick's POV.
Two hours. It took two hours to calm down the normally unflappable Ellie. Two hours in which she didn't do any of the things Nick associated with an upset Ellie—ask smart questions, give an adorable scowl, cut to the heart of the issue—but twisted her hands and cried huge hiccoughing sobs. She held his hands in hers, and pulled him and Nate into her arms, and just when he thought she was almost better, something would start her going again.

It broke his heart. He didn't want to see her with a red snotty nose, or puffy eyes, or slumped shoulders. He wanted to see his girl with a straight back and a fierce set to her jaw, he wanted to see her walk around the Agency with a snap to her step, pulling files and slapping them onto the desk for him to review. He wanted to see her soft and curled against him in bed, wanted to see her in all of her tough, kind, idealistic glory.

* * * *

**The girl sat across the desk from him, legs crossed primly, her hands folded in her lap. He knew her of course, knew everyone in Diamond city to some degree or another. The world was smaller in the days after Armageddon, he reflected. She'd come to Diamond City from Goodneighbor, back before Hancock made the place functioning anarchy, and before that she'd been out in the sticks. She'd been in her early teens, arrived bleeding and skinny from the trip and who knew what else but with enough caps in her pocket that she'd been let in. She'd gotten a few odd jobs, lived at the Dugout Inn for a few months, and started school. None of which had led him to guess her next move might be this.**

“I need a what again?” he asked her, wondering if his hearing was going offline.

“You need a secretary, Mr. Valentine,” said Ellie Perkins. She tapped her fingertip on his desk, and nodded. “I'll prove it. With examples.”

Her surveyed her from her swept-upward hair to her mismatched high heels, raising a brow he didn't exactly have. “With examples,” he repeated. “Alright, kid. Shoot.”

“Case one,” she said. “Six months ago, you had a case in which a man from Goodneighbor returned to the Diamond City area after a three-decade absence. You were asked by his new landlord to prepare a report on him, based on his past behavior and current. In front of your client, you spent the better part of an hour digging through old papers to find out what he'd been kicked out of town for the last time.”

“I, er, keep files. I do. There's a...” He looked around the office, at the piles of paper, boxes of file folders, and half-open drawers. “...system,” he finished weakly.

“Piles aren't a system. Mr. Valentine,” she said. “If you hire me, I'll make sure you or I can find any file in the Agency at a moment's notice.” She took a deep breath. “Second case: Two months ago, you were contracted to rescue a girl from her crazy raider father, Skazz. But first you had to deal with the mother, who was hysterical. It took you half the afternoon to stop her literally clinging to your arm and screaming. Half the city watched it. If I were your secretary I could have taken charge of that woman and you could have gotten to the girl before she got so far away from the city. Two extra days of hunting more or less. I heard you say it yourself.”

“Alright,” he said. “What's your third example.” He already knew. It had happened only the day before.
Her posture softened. “Yesterday you had to deliver real bad news to a girl. She melted down, went absolutely bonkers. You tried to comfort her, and she screamed so loud I heard it at Takahashi’s for you to get your ‘dirty synth hands’ off her.” Ellie’s mouth twisted. “I can comfort people, Mr. Valentine. I can sit them down with some hubflower tea and a kind word and make sure things never get to the point where you’re having to deal with something like that. She didn’t have any right to talk to you that way.”

“Grief does strange things to people,” he said tiredly.

“It does,” she said. “But I can take that off your hands. That’s gotta be worth something.”

“It is.”

“And there’s that radio,” she said suddenly. “You’re out of town, and a case comes in, who’s supposed to use it to call you, huh?”

“So I need a secretary,” he said. “And that’s s’posed to be you.”

“I’m organized, I’m good with people, and I don’t want much for the job,” she said. “I’m a bargain. A steal.”

He eyed her, a little taken aback by her change in tone. “Oh?”

“Room and board,” she said. “That’s all I want.”

“Vadim’s upping the rent at the Dugout, I hear,” he said, and she colored slightly. “Room and board leaves you with nothing but a roof over your head and a full belly.”

“Lotta people got less,” she said.

“Yeah,” he replied. “But I’m not that kinda boss. How about this: Right at first we do room and board plus, say, fifteen caps a week. If you’re half the secretary you say you’ll be, I’ll get freed up to take on a little extra work, and I up that pay based on how the agency is doing.”

Her breath caught. “I-- I’m hired?”

“You’re hired. For the job you just invented out of whole cloth,” he said wryly.

She let out a shaky breath, and stuck out her hand. “Mr. Valentine. You won’t regret this!”

“I believe you,” he said, and shook her slender hand. “And call me Nick.”

* * * *

“Nicky?” Ellie’s hand squeezed his. “You were a million miles away just now.”

“Sorry, doll. Just thinking. ’Bout you. ’Bout the day you came to work for me.” He kissed her forehead, and her face softened.

“I can’t stand it, Nick,” she said. “Can’t stand to think you’re losing your memory, maybe a little every day.”

“No telling how much I’m losing,” he said. “DiMA thinks we were set up to remember everything just about – after all, we were supposed to be learning how to be human. But they never thought
we'd be out on our own, or need to remember so long. Not that they would have cared if they'd known, I suppose."

"Humans are meant to forget," said Nate. "We forget all the time. But we don't have programming randomly deleting information to make room for new memories. Long term and short term memory work a bit differently. DiMA had a way to store his memories--"

"Why isn't that an option?" asked Ellie shrewdly. "You would have brought it up before now if you thought it was."

Nick and Nate shared a look. "He had himself hooked to a bunch of machines," said Nick. "Had vacuum tubes sticking out of his skin. Damn stuff looked fragile as hell. I wouldn't be much of a detective, or frankly much of a lover with DiMA's setup. His brain is protected, but he's kind of a hot house flower now—can't leave home, sits around thinking and planning and conniving ways to force peace on people who don't want it."

"You don't like him," said Ellie. Her brows knitted gently, and he reached out with his good hand to soothe her temple.

"No," said Nick. "Not really. And I don't know how much of a moral edge I've got on him, to tell the truth. I've made some hard choices. But he's run from his choices, stored the memories offsite."

"He's kind of a tit, too," said Nate.

"Also that," said Nick.

"A. Tit." Ellie's voice was flat.

"Sort of aloof and superior and insufferable," said Nate. "You know. A total tit."

Ellie rose, and started to pace, and Nick saw the return of normalcy in her movements, the return of a sense of purpose. "Right. So DiMA has a solution that you can't see yourself ever accepting. What do we have then, that DiMA doesn't?"

"A neon sign." said Nate.

"A nice fedora," said Nick.

"Knowledge of the clitoris," said Nate.

"Pants," said Nick, and Nate snickered. It did something to his old heart, or whatever passed for it, to see Nate laugh again, and this time not at himself, not bitterly.

Ellie scowled. "No, doofus. (I mean, okay, I'm in favor of all of those.) We have the Memory Den."

They were silent. "Well?" she asked anxiously. "Don't you think it's worth a shot? We could ask Dr. Amari, gosh, all sorts of things. She might have a way to store and retrieve memories for you, or selectively delete memories to..."

"To free up space," said Nick. "I see your point, doll, but I've lived two lifetimes or more. Where am I supposed to trim things up? Nick's memories or mine? I don't know how I feel about it."

"I don't love it as a plan," said Ellie. "But my point is, without talking to her, we don't know what she can do. What our options are. And, heck, she might even have options she doesn't even know"
she can do yet. We should go.”

He heard what she was saying. And what she ever so carefully wasn't.

“Nick,” said Nate. “I think we should do it.” There was a little color back in his cheeks, a little sparkle to his eyes. “We could be in Goodneighbor by dark, take a room and see Dr Amari in the morning. Or even by tonight so she can go ahead and start thinking on what she might or might not be able to do to help. She doesn't have to think of something right away even. It could be weeks from now. But we should go ahead and ask as soon as possible.”

Disorganized, thought Nick. Desperate. So carefully not saying anything that might upset him. It was on all of their minds, but none of their lips.

He leaned over and kissed Nate, putting just a little pressure into the motion, just a little nip of his teeth, and Nate's shoulders relaxed as he leaned in. Nick broke the kiss, and leaned forward until their cheeks touched, and the brim of his hat tipped back. Ellie reached out and touched his shoulder. “Nick,” said Nate, and he felt warm breath against the places on his neck that still had sensors. “Please.”

“All right,” he said. “We'll ask her.”

“And leave right away,” said Ellie.

“And leave right away,” confirmed Nick.

Nate disentangled himself from Nick and stood. “I'll get our things,” he said, and took the stairs two at a time.

“You know I'm going,” said Ellie.

“I wouldn't have it any other way,” he said.

She stood, and climbed into his lap, straddling it to settle in against him. “I've missed you for a lotta reasons, Nick Valentine.”

“Oh?” he said blandly. “Like what?”

“Your quick tongue,” she said, and kissed him. “I love a man who's witty.”

“Mmm,” he said. “What else?”

“Also that quick tongue,” she said, and laughed. Her hair fell forward as she leaned in to kiss him again. “I also love a man who's, hmm. Good with his hands.”

He slid a hand up under her vest, cupping the softness of her breast through the thin fabric of her dress, and she arched against his hand. “Nick,” she whispered. “I'm not sure we've got time...”

“I've missed you,” he said, and thumbed her nipple. “Everything about you.”

“Flattery,” she said, and just the tiniest tremor in her voice gave her away.

“I'm an honest man,” he said.

“To a fault,” she said, hitching a leg up against his hip. Her thighs tightened around him, and he groaned.
“Besides. I figure a dame doesn't climb into a guy's lap without, you know. Intent.” Those thighs rubbed against him as she shifted, reaching around him to lace her fingers behind his neck. He slid a hand up her leg and cupped her backside, pulling her closer against him, and she made a little hum of contentment.

“You may be onto something, Mr. Detective.” Her lips brushed his forehead, and with the tip of one finger, she tilted his face toward hers for another kiss, this one more heated than the last.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs, and hesitated halfway down. “Seriously?” said Nate. “I was gone for maybe three minutes, you two.”

“It's been a bit of a dry spell,” said Ellie. “I missed my boys.” But she stood, much to Nick's disappointment.

“Tonight,” promised Nate. “We want to get to Goodneighbor before dark, remember?”

“Hm,” said Nick. “Alright. Because you asked so politely.”

Ellie laughed, and settled her skirt back into place. “Tonight,” she agreed. “No matter what.”

It chilled him to his core when she made promises like that.
“Oh God,” said Ellie. “Is that what I think it is?”

“Supermutant,” said Nate, and sighted down the barrel of his gun. “Nick?”

“Got ya.” With the slightest rustle of his coat, Nick moved into position to send flanking shots at the mutant.

There ought to have been a safer path between the two towns, Ellie thought. Something that a person could run on their own without backup, without fear of being set upon by raiders, supermutants, and starving dogs. She petted Dogmeat absently, then fumbled for Nick's spare gun in the holster under her arm. “Stay,” she whispered.

“On three,” she said, almost not catching the astonished little look that Nate gave her. And on her count, they fired through the windows of the building.

In the street below them, the mutant bellowed his pain and anger, twisting and turning, looking for the source of his injury. Nick and Nate ducked, but she must not have moved quickly enough, for the supermutant started running for the building. “Shit shit shit,” said Nate, and fired again, with Ellie and Nick quickly following suit.

The next seconds were a blur, as footsteps thundered up the staircase, Dogmeat growled, and Ellie shrieked “Get him!” There was the thunderous report of the guns, hers included, as the creature cleared the top of the stairs. Then a blur of black and tan, and Dogmeat was leaping through the air, aimed like an arrow at the mutant's throat.

And with a blood-drowned garble, it was over.

Dogmeat scrambled off the mutant, turned back to her and grinned his doggy grin. Aren't I a good dog? it seemed to say. A gobbet of flesh fell from his muzzle to the floor.

“Good boy,” said Ellie weakly.

Nate clapped a hand on her shoulder. “You did really well, sweetie,” he said, and kissed her cheek.

“I'm going to throw up,” said Ellie.

Nick pressed a bottle into her hands. “Sip,” he said. “Don't swallow quickly. It'll help calm your stomach.” He turned back to the window, surveying the street for surprises.

She took a tiny sip, and choked. It wasn't water in the metal bottle. “Jesus,” she gasped.

“You're doing really well,” said Nate again, this time more encouragingly.

“Clear so far,” said Nick from the window.

“I would like water actually in the future please,” said Ellie, and her voice was hoarser than she would have liked.

out. You're gonna start shaking in a minute. That's okay, too.” But he didn't move from his position next to the window, his shoulder pressed against the wall, ready to fire.

Nate's hands rubbed small circles on her back, and Nick whispered... what, she wasn't sure, but the sound was soothing, and soon the roaring in her ears passed, and Nick eased away from the window. “Looks like he was by himself. We got lucky.”

Ellie stared at the pool of blood surrounding the downed mutant. “Lucky,” she repeated. “Lucky. I guess so.”

They left by the stairs, and Ellie found herself imagining the mutant startling back to life with a roar, its hands grasping her by the ankle and dragging her toward its maw.

“The thing people say about them eating people. That's just a myth, right?”

The two men shared a brief look. “No,” said Nate.

“Oh.” She skirted around the form a little further from its hands, and hurried down the stairs, Nick behind her.

“I was just in a fight,” she said wonderingly. “I'm a secretary.”

“Shh,” said Nick, this time warningly. “Let's keep quiet the rest of the way there. Two blocks, folks.”

“Mm,” said Ellie softly. She didn't put her--Nick's--gun up, though she still shook, and the gun grew heavy in her hand. Was it warm? She thought it was, but maybe it was just her imagination. Guns got hot after being fired, didn't they?

They'd gone almost a whole block before she was pulled back to reality by a sudden noise, and guiltily, she realized her attention had wandered inward. Nate's shoulders tightened, but it was a bird taking flight from where it had been picking through the rubble of a bombed out building.

She let out a shaky breath, and over the next block, her gaze roamed around, checking buildings, rubble, boarded up windows, everything for movement or unexpected forms. But nothing lurked over that last block, and by the end they found themselves half-jogging to get to the gate.

It was only once they were inside that she took a deep breath. She regretted it more or less immediately because Goodneighbor smelled like... well, like Goodneighbor. Like cook fires and chem labs, like freedom and misery and booze and night sweats.

She'd lived here, briefly, a stop on her way from a settlement to Diamond City. It was back before Hancock took over, back before the promise of freedom came with any degree of safety. She'd only lived here briefly, but it had been plenty. Still, she'd heard enough about the changes that she'd been excited to come here last time.

This time she was terrified for reasons that had nothing to do with the harrowing trip, or the city, or her own safety.

“Check in at the Rex first, or head for the doc?” drawled Nick. He lit a cigarette, and she was suddenly irrationally angry with him, angry because he seemed to be taking this so calmly, angry because he didn't seem to believe there was any hope, angry because the mind of her beautiful idealist was being eroded, his past was being eroded, angry because--

She took a deep breath, and said, “Memory Den, first. The Rex doesn't exactly fill up fast from
“Still true,” said Nate. He hitched their bag up on his shoulder, and started walking. There was something in the set of his shoulders that promised pain to anyone who got in his way, and the town seemed to part away in advance of the man who had blazed a path across the Commonwealth in search of his son.

Still, he had time for a kind word for a ghoul who lurked almost apologetically in the entry of the Memory Den, had a moment to tell a woman lounging on a chaise that she was looking lovely as ever. Each tiny conversation was almost reflexive in its briefness. But Ellie was comforted that he still seemed to have that spark in him, that natural and personal way of making other people feel special as he breezed through their lives. It was something so unique to him that she had worried it might break after... after what he'd gone through.

“Nate, your arm!” said the woman Ellie assumed to be Dr. Amari. “What in the world have you done to yourself now?” She carefully turned his hand over and tsked. “If you've treated it and it's still like this, I'll need to take over. I'm glad you came.”

“Amari, we're actually not here for me. And I didn't really... treat it. Much,” said Nate, shifting uncomfortably. “We need to talk about another issue entirely.”

“Why not?” she said, and waved away the question as soon as she asked it. “Well, I'll work while you talk, Nate,” Amari said, and Nate sighed.

“Well, we're here for...” he flinched and trailed off as Amari unwrapped his arm.

“Uhm, I'm sorry, hi.” Ellie stepped forward and nodded a greeting to Dr. Amari. “Hi, I'm--”

“Ellie Perkins. I recognize your voice from the radio at night. Not that I don't love Kent, but it's been a nice change of pace. Even the smutty romance.”

Ellie flushed. “Thank you. I've been... really happy with how that's been going, actually. But we're here about Nick, actually.” She let out a breath as carefully as she had when learning to sight down a gun under Nate and Nick's tutelage.

“The old memory banks seem to be full, doc,” said Nick. He was leaning against the door as casual as ever, and again, Ellie felt a sudden stab of anger.

“Full?” said Dr. Amari. “Oh my.” She popped the end off a syringe, and gave Nate an injection at the crook of his elbow. A second injection at the wrist followed, and next came a salve. “Are you not recording new memories, or are you deleting old ones?”

“Deleting old, as much fun as the other sounds.” He reached down to ruffle Dogmeat's ears. “Took a trip up north, and met a synth same model as me. He realized what was happening, and started storing his memories offsite and expanding his brain into whatever computers were nearby. Now he's hooked to a bunch of machines most of the time, and while that's a solution, it's not...”

“Not feasible if you want to maintain your current life,” she said briskly. She started winding fresh bandages around Nate's arm. “Take better care of that in the future. Now. We'll need to start with a few scans, of course. After that, I'll run a few comparisons with some of your old data. You're quite lucky inasmuch as we have old scans to compare to your current state going back several years. Most people who come in with memory loss have suffered significant neurological damage, and have never been in before.” She picked up a clipboard and scribbled a few notes. “Have a seat,” she said, nodding to one of several pods.
“Do they hurt?” asked Ellie anxiously.

“Hurt?” asked Dr. Amari. “No more than the past hurts in general, I suppose.”

Nick stripped off his coat, and passed it to Nate. “Mind holding that for me, doll? Thanks.” He sat down in the pod, and machinery hummed to life. The glass cover of the pod stayed up, though, to Ellie's relief.

“We're going to start with a baseline scan,” said Dr. Amari. “I need for you to talk, Mr. Valentine. To best gauge the degree of deterioration, I'll need to access older memories, then newer. You can talk about whatever you like, so long as it was relevant to the original Nick Valentine.”

“Easier said than done, doc,” said Nick. “Like someone telling you to say something funny; every joke you know goes out of your head.”

Nate sat down next to the pod, and after a moment's hesitation, Ellie followed suit. “What do you miss most about the old world?” he asked softly. “Not easy stuff like 'security' or 'clean water' okay?”


“Spring,” said Nate. “But if you'd asked me my favorite season then, I would have said Fall. Now it just seems too sad.”

“Hot baths,” said Nick. “How about that? I—the old Nick—did some of my best thinking with a cold drink in a hot bath.”

“Clean sheets after a hot bath. I still get clean but not really... clean clean, you know?”

“Makes sense,” said Nick. “Nothing much is, these days. Office Christmas parties. Pretended I hated them, but I actually liked to see all the guys at the station cut loose a little.”

“Nora hated those,” said Nate, and ducked his head. Ellie froze. She could count on one hand the number of times she'd heard him talk about his wife. “Thought they were a breeding ground for hurt feelings and complaints to HR in the new year. She was picky about food, too, and pot lucks weren't her favorite.”

“More specific,” said Dr. Amari. “These memories are accessing the viable memories only.” She clicked away at a terminal.

“Where'd you go on your last old-world vacation?” asked Nate.

There was a hesitation this time. “I remember... making plans to go to the seaside with Jenny. ...maybe the trip got canceled. Maybe we went and it's gone.” There was something a little tight in his expression, something a old and tired. “Either way, I don't know what happened.”

Amari hmmed. “Better data there. I know it's difficult, but I'll need one more data point.”

Silence. Nate was still beside her, and Ellie resisted the urge to reach out for his hand. “My parents died when I was eight,” she said. “They were... nice. They let someone in to stay for the night and he killed them for their caps and the food in the cabinets.” She licked her lips, nervous. “Tell me about Nick's parents.”

“They were--” said Nick, and fell silent.
“Thank you, Mr. Valentine,” said Amari softly after what seemed to Ellie to be an eternity. “I believe I have everything I need for the moment.”

Nick levered himself out of the pod. “I'll be outside,” he said, and took his coat from Nate in one smooth motion.

“Nick,” said Ellie.

“Shh,” said Nate.

And together they watched Nick go, coat over his arm, hat tipped low over his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Let me know what you're thinking because I feel like Wile E Coyote running off the cliff half the time.
Chapter 6

Ten minutes. They gave Nick ten full minutes to recover, and headed outside to find him. Out of the corner of his eye, Nate saw Ellie lift a hand to her mouth and cover it, her fingertips pressed firmly to her lips. He didn't say anything, though, didn't take her free hand or touch the small of her back. Maybe Nick needed longer without seeing her; maybe he was angry and not just distressed. But they were a team, so he didn't suggest she stay with Dr. Amari. But he didn't reach out to comfort her, either, and told himself it was because his top priority had to be Nick, not because he was angry.

True to his word, Nick leaned against the corner of the building. There were two cigarette butts at his feet, and as Nate watched, Nick rummaged in his pockets again.

“Nick,” said Ellie softly. “I'm sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about,” said Nick, but the words were a little stiff. “Amari got her data point.” He gave up the search for another cigarette, but fiddled with the old lighter.

She took his other hand, the skeletal metal one, in hers. “I love you,” she said desperately. “And I'm scared.”

“Yeah,” said Nick. “I know, Ellie.”

Ellie. Not doll, or sweetheart, or even darlin'. Nate searched Nick's face, but micro-expressions didn't always translate well in synthetic skin, and he found no tells to help him gauge his lover's mood.

“It isn't fair,” she said bitterly.

“Naw,” said Nick. “But what the hell is? I'll tell you what isn't fair: living this long isn't fair and having you two on my side isn't fair. Most people don't get what I've got. I've got a lot. Don't look at me like that. Like I'm dying, because I'm not. I'm living. That's what's so hard.”

Nate's breath was hot in his lungs, his eyes stung; how could he be both hot and cold at the same time? But it was Ellie who broke first, Ellie who made a noise like she was having the life squeezed out of her. “Nicky,” she said. “Nicky.”

“Don't 'Nicky' me, doll.” He leaned in, touching his forehead to hers, and in the same moment, Nate found himself reaching out to touch her, to reassure her, to reassure himself. “You don't have to convince me you love me. Don't have to convince me of a damn thing else. I know. I know.” He kissed her, a brush of lips, and stepped back. Ellie swayed forward, caught up in his gravity. There was a magnetism there, Nate thought. The draw of kindness. It was a quality all of them had to some degree or another, but in Ellie was interwoven with a fierce desire to protect, and in Nate...

Well. He turned out to be ruthless, didn't he? Turned out to be made of something a great deal less pure than Nick's selfless desire to help; turned out to be vicious where Nick was just good.

He knew Nick would never see it that way, and just knowing that Nick wouldn't—couldn't--judge him only shamed him more.
“Do you... do you need a few more minutes?” asked Ellie, and Nate writhed inside in the knowledge that he had made a conscious decision ignore her pain.

“Nah,” said Nick, but he tipped the fedora down a fraction lower, casting his face in shadow. “Let's go see if Amari's got anything.”

* * * * *

She didn't.

They were hardly back in the Memory Den before Irma shooed them out, telling them to give Amari time to work, time to do a bit of research before they bothered her. She told them to come back in three hours.

So they found themselves at loose ends in Goodneighbor. Checking into the Rex took a bare few minutes, finding dinner another few. Nick checked with a few contacts for new leads on cold cases, and Ellie and Daisy talked books with an eye toward future broadcasts on the Agency's frequency.

And all of that took up the first hour and a half.

There came next half an hour of meandering around Goodneighbor, and a solid hour of nursing drinks in sullen silence at the Third Rail. Nick had a few kind words for Magnolia, who had a good set. But there was little else to do other than drink and listen, or drink and sulk. Jokes fell flat, smiles wilted, and Nate's Pip-boy arm sat on the table so they could all watch the minutes tick by.

Finally, Amari's three hours were up, and they made the short trip back to the Memory Den in silence that spoke volumes.

Just a short time ago, Nate was certain he would have had something to say, something to offer, would have had a way to tease Nick out of his brooding, and Ellie out of her funk.

They went down the stairs in silence, as well.

“Come in,” said Amari without looking up from her computer. A good sign—she was intent on her work? Or a bad one, that she didn't want to make eye contact. Nate found himself anxiously examining the Doctor for signs of stress or discomfort.

“Well, Doc?” said Nick. “How's the old noggin' look?”

“Not ideal,” said Amari. “By my calculations you are missing the vast majority of the original Nick's memories. What we had assumed to be an imperfect transfer of data from the scans he underwent may largely be explained by the vanishing memories. If we assume the original Mr. Valentine to be a man in his late thirties or early forties—which seems to be the case—then at the rate of loss you're experiencing, I believe you'll overwrite those memories in the next five to seven years.”

Nick sat, carefully placing his hands on his knees. “Ah,” he said, and that was all.

“Of course, you aren't writing over the data sequentially, so in those five to seven years you will lose approximately another two years worth of experience from the memories since you parted ways with the Institute. The good news is, some—not all—of the data may be recoverable with a
“It works with simple storage devices, but the brain of a synth is much too complex to recover in that manner. Rather, I suspect that during times Nick's mind was idle in rest modes or in diagnostics that there may be fragments remaining from the original memories which can be recovered. Not perfect, but better than nothing.” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “All of which is interesting, but doesn't begin to solve the overall problem: how to protect the integrity of Mr. Valentine's memories moving forward.”

“And?” said Nate, and was startled by the sound of his own voice.

And she shook her head, and Nate's heart broke into a thousand little shards.

“I don't actually see options other than off site storage. There's nowhere to add storage capacity in Mr. Valentine's brain, no way to compress current memories, and no reliable way even to pick and choose ones to delete and ensure that the newly empty space will be given priority in writing new data over old. In short? I am open to suggestions.”

“Oh,” said Nate. And his own voice sounded strange, hollow in his ears. “Well... talk. And in the morning we'll be back with any... with any ideas. Thank you again for your help, Doctor.”

Ellie said something, as did Nick. And the walk out was blurry, fuzzy in his memory even minutes later. But his legs kept working, and air went in and out, and Ellie took his elbow and guided him.

They made it as far as the Third Rail before his strange, narrowed word shattered and sound and light intruded into his consciousness. He wanted to throw up. He wanted to rage and scream, and break the rickety old chairs and tables apart with his hands, wanted to kick and flail. Adrenaline was working its way through his body with nothing to do and nowhere to go.

“Nate? Nate?!” said Ellie. She pushed him gently into a chair, and he looked up at her, blinking.

“I'm tired,” he said.

“Yeah,” said Nick. “Yeah.”

“Let's... let's go back over it,” said Ellie. “Something is going to shake loose on this, I can feel it. We just have to come up with a solution. We're good at that, boys. We can do this.”

“Ellie,” said Nate.

“No. Let's do this, okay?”

“Alright, doll. We'll go down the list of what we know,” said Nick, but he sounded resigned.

She pulled out a pad of paper, slightly tattered in one corner, and in her clear, loopy penmanship, she started with what DiMA had told Nick and Nate, and moved methodically to what they had just learned from Amari. She made marks next to points that were in any doubt, circled the rejected solutions, and underlined issues.

When she was done, she sat back, and stared at the list as though the mere making of it should have forced an answer out of hiding.
“Doll,” said Nick, and his voice was as gentle as ever. “It's going to take more than just a list.” He rubbed little circles on her leg. “But I appreciate it.”

They jumped as a forth chair clunked into place in their little circle.

“Well, well. Was beginning to think you two weren't going to be around any more, then what do I hear? A big explosion! And I thought to myself, well, either Nate has gone off or the Brotherhood is here to kill us all.” Hancock sat straddling the chair backwards, and gave them a quick once-over. “Who died?” he asked.

Nate narrowly avoided answering. Word about the Institute, about Shaun, would make its way to Hancock soon. There was no need for him to throw gasoline on the self-pity bonfire they were circled around.

“Hancock,” acknowledged Nick.

“So we have Nate and Nick, and a hand on a lovely leg, which would make you Ellie. Rumor said you three were a thing, but I wasn't expecting someone so…” he gestured at the pad on the table. “Organized.” He plucked Ellie's hand from the table, and bent over it to kiss it. “Any friend of Nick and Nate's...” he said.

“Do you always sound lascivious?” asked Ellie. “Or is that just for first impressions?”

“Always,” said Nick and Nate in unison.

Hancock shrugged, and released Ellie's hand. “I am what I am,” he said. “Jet?” he asked Ellie. “I'd ask everyone, but I know Nick's not feelin' it, and Nate regards it as appropriate for 'emergencies.'”

“My goodness,” said Ellie. “I've never heard such clear quotation marks around a word before. You must be very proud.” She reached out to flip the notebook over, but Hancock was faster.

“What's the terrible situation du jour?” he asked, and liquid black eyes skimmed the papers. “Huh,” he said after a moment, and almost absently took a hit of Jet. “Sucks,” he said to Nick. “I mean, if my memories disappear, I figure shit, man, drugs! You do enough and weird crap happens.”

“Thanks. You're a fountain of sympathy,” said Nick dryly, making a reach for the pad of paper, but Hancock tipped it just out of Nick's reach.

“Yep,” said Hancock. “Me to a T.” He danced the Jet canister over the back of his fingers. “Weird,” he said.

“What is?” asked Nate.

“That none of you three brains came up with the obvious solution,” said Hancock.

“What would be?” asked Nate frostily.

Hancock flopped the pad of paper back onto the table, and took another hit of Jet. “Pull a Curie, man! Get yourself a fancy gen-3 upgrade and call it a day. You get your brain fixed, and a few other things as well,” he said gesturing at Nick's tattered hand and neck.

“But didn't say anything? It's a no-brainer, if you'll forgive the turn of phrase.” Hancock gestured for new drinks to their table, and Ellie shook her head, expression queasy.
“I’d thought about it... too,” said Nate. “But I didn't want you to feel like I didn't want... As though you were...”

“Me too,” said Ellie, miserably. “But it feels so...”

“Listen to yourselves! The man is losing his mind and you're whining about feelings,” said Hancock. “Save his damn brain, then deal with the consequences. Listen, I've had a body change, same as Nicky here. Kinda sucks, kinda doesn't. But you get used to it. Right?”

“Yeah,” said Nick uneasily.

“What the fuck are you waiting for? Go see the Amari and tell her you want the de-lux big muscles and a nice dick model synth, man! Get over it.”

Ellie stood, and her cheeks were high with color. “Everyone says you're so suave, but you're just... just...”

“Thanks!” said Hancock. Their drinks arrived, and he started on Ellie's first. “Go,” he said shortly. “Somehow I'll manage to make this booze disappear. Get out. Mayor’s orders.”

Nick stood and started for the door, Ellie just ahead of him.

And Nate was certain it was meant to be private, but he didn't miss the instant where Nick clapped his hand on Hancock's shoulder and squeezed a private thanks.

Well, well.

Chapter End Notes

Hope Hancock reads right; never have written him before. <3
“Do you think it'll work?” Nate said as they clattered down the stairs of the memory den, and if it wasn't Nick's imagination, he thought he heard a long, drawn-out sigh from the doc, down below. The suspicion was confirmed when he walked through the door, and found Dr. Amari trying her best to look pleasant, and failing.

“What impossible feat requires my attention now?” she asked. “Mr. Valentine, I'm certainly sympathetic, but I genuinely don't see another option to prevent further memory loss; you are most certainly at the very edge of what is possible for your mind and body.”

“Well, doc,” he said. “That's the thing we were wondering about. If not this body... why not try an upgrade?”

In the seconds that followed, the silence was utter and absolute. He couldn't hear Ellie and Nate breathe.

Finally, Amari let out a shaky breath. “Nineteen percent,” she said.

“I-I'm sorry?” asked Ellie.

“That's the percentage of memory transfers and wipes that fail. That's the percentage of the time I take a synth from a thinking and feeling being to a drooling imbecile. It's a fact that you should know before you make this decision, Mr. Valentine,” she said, and her eyes met his unwaveringly. “The Institute made their synths extremely tamper-resistant. There are multiple levels of failsafes. There is a reasonable chance I would kill you in the attempt.” Her tone softened. “Nick. I consider you a friend. Please don't ask me to do this.”

He pulled up a chair next to her, and took her hands in his. “Chandra,” he said softly. “I knew before I walked in here that there were risks. There wouldn't be bodies to move my memories to if it were a perfect process. But this is no way to live. Before I knew I was losing my mind, I would never have considered this. But I can't lose what little I have left of the original memories. And I can't live knowing every second that I'm becoming less of what I was, that I'm inching closer to forgetting the people closest to me.” Her hands felt cold in his, cold and damp, and he realized she was sweating in the winter air. “I've already forgotten so much. Please.”

She swore, softly and with a depth of feeling he had rarely heard from the composed doctor. “Fine,” she said in a tone of voice Nick associated with women who were very much not fine at all.

“Doc,” he said. “This means a lot to me.”

She shook her hands free of his, and stuffed them in the pockets of her lab coat. “Don't thank me until it's over, Mr. Valentine.” She sighed. “At least this time I'm transferring memories from one Institute created being to another. Unless you have some surprising new fact to throw at me? No? Good.” She rose, pacing. “There are three caretakers I'll need to contact. We shall see who agrees this time. Come back in the morning, and I should have news.”

Ellie took a step toward the doc, but Nick stood, and steered her away. “C'mon, doll. Let's let the good doctor work.”
“Yeah,” said Ellie. “Yeah, sorry.” She turned away, but gave one of his hands a surreptitious squeeze.

Nate fell in behind them, following them up the stairs in silence. Outside, though, he said, “I know it’s early evening, but... can we just turn in early? I'm kinda worn out.”

“You ain't the only one,” said Nick. “Ellie the indefatigable is showin’ a little wear at the edges, too.”

“You know how to charm a gal, Nicky,” she said, but stretched and yawned. “Okay. Point made.”


“Oh,” said Ellie. “Sure. You don't want some company...?”

“Nah. You two do all your getting ready for bed. I'll be along in a few minutes. Wait up for me, hear?”

“Yeah?” she said, brightening.

“Yeah,” he replied, and bent to give her a kiss at the crook of the neck. “Won't be long, doll.” He patted himself down for cigarettes, and smiled when Nate offered a light. “Don't mind if I do,” he said, and inhaled.

He was just around the corner when his shoulders slumped, when he swore and lashed out, kicking the wall of the alley. “It's not goddamn fair,” he rasped.

“Sure isn't,” came a voice from down the way. Hancock stepped forward, out of the deepest shadows, and regarded him for a moment. “Not sure I've ever heard you use top-tier curse words before, Nick.”

“Shut up, John,” he said tiredly, and took a drag on the cigarette.

“Hey, don't blame the messenger, man. I'm just the guy who said what everyone was thinking. Got one of those for me?”

He offered a cigarette silently, and Hancock plucked it from his fingertips. “Thanks.” There were a few moments of quiet while Hancock lit the cigarette, and then he leaned back against the wall. “So you're pissed. Do the loyal sidekicks know? Nevermind. You wouldn't have shed the extra folks before venting if they did. What'd Amari say?”

“Gave me a one in five chance she'd accidentally delete everything between my ears.”

“So you could die. So could any of us, any day. Listen. Let's say, pre-war, you had brain cancer. All the same shit happening with losing your memories. Right?”

“That wasn't me, pre-war. That was the real Nick.”

“Who is no more. But now there's you, with his memory and personality, and as far as I can fucking tell, that makes you him. Anyway. Cancer. So you've got the big C, probably from smoking since you were old enough to work a lighter. And a doc tells you, some risk, but four in five chance you're completely healed. You do it, right?”

“It's not the sa-”

“It's exactly the goddamn same!” Hancock said, jabbing the cigarette at him. “And the only reason
you're acting like a scared kid is Nate and the dame! You've got shit to lose, now. What, are you afraid they can't love a new body with you in it?"

“No, I-"

“Or are you afraid they'll love it more? Are you selling them short, or yourself? Answer me that!”

“Christ!” Nick exploded. “How about you give me a chance to damn answer!” He took a breath—needless, but steadying. “I don't know,” he admitted. “I don't know what's eating me, exactly. I'm just scared. And I'm mad at myself for being scared.”

“Makes sense,” said Hancock. “Let's say you make it through just fine. After that, what's your worst case scenario?”

“That nothing is ever the same.”

“Bad news, then, Nick. Nothing ever stays the same. But it could fucking be better.”

“Better,” he said flatly.

“Give it all a few months to settle down, and I'll bet you one of those two says some sappy thing about this whole business making you all even closer. Probably Nate. That secretary of yours seems pretty fierce.”

“She is that. Not a fan of yours, either.”

“They can't all be winners, Nicky.”

“Just makes me think more of her, John.” The ghoul snickered, and Nick mustered a smile in return, a tired, sad thing. “Listen. I was headed to see Daisy, but you'll do just fine.” He pulled a folded piece of paper out of his pocket, and handed it and a pen to the mayor. “Look this over and sign it, wouldja?”

“Yer askin' for my John Hancock? I'm flattered, but I thought you were taken.” He paused as he read. “Shit, Nick.”

“Yeah. But it's worth doing.”

“Yeah,” he said, and scribbled at the bottom of the page. “I guess so.” He handed the paper back to Nick. “Yer gonna be fine.”

“I like to cover my bases.”

“A pun from a guy who lives in a baseball diamond? Nicky, get the hell out of here and go fuck your lovers or whatever.”

“Hancock?” he said softly.

There was a hesitation before he answered, a softness to his voice that Nick didn't often hear. “Yeah, Nick?”

Nick put a hand on his shoulder, and looked the other man in the eye. “Give back the pen, too.”

A middle finger was his answer, and a laugh that chased him all the way back to the Rex.

The stairs to his room seemed somehow longer and steeper than usual, a nearly insurmountable
challenge to ascend. He paused twice on his way up, paused staring upwards, lost in thought. But when he tapped on the door to his room and stepped inside, the tension vanished under an assault of kisses from Ellie, a flurry, a whirlwind of affection.

Nate, curiously, was nowhere to be seen.

Her lips started under his jaw, kissing what skin was there with persistent passion, pulling him close with her hands on his backside. Those kisses traveled up his chin, to the corner of his mouth, to the tip of his nose. Her eyes crinkled when she smiled and leaned back in to kiss his lips, to kiss him with precision, then with reckless abandon, a little growl rising in her throat as she pressed him backward into the wall. “Doll?” he mumbled, a little taken aback when her attentions refocused on his earlobe.

“Boss. It's been seventy-six days since you made love to me. I know that because I was counting, Nick.” A leg snaked around behind his, and she squealed when he picked her up abruptly, and wrapped those long legs around his waist.

“Seems longer,” he said, mouthing at her jawline. “Seems a hell of a lot longer, matter of fact.”

“You wanting to hear that I sucked his cock?” rasped Nick, and she shivered against him, a fine tremble of desire in her limbs. He turned to press her against the wall, to shove her dress up and out of the way, to run his hand up and under her beautiful, pale thighs. “Wanting to hear that I wrapped my lips around it every night, that I teased and licked and curled my fingers around the shaft the second I could get him alone? You want to hear about all the caresses and midnight fumbling with zippers, about him digging his fingers into my shoulders while he came down my throat?” He let her slide down a little so that he could press against her, give her pressure and warmth where he couldn't offer other things. His groin was rounded, a bulge without features, meant to offer an illusion behind slacks, but it worked well enough to offer her something to rub against, something to satiate the thrrob of desire.

“Holy shit,” she whispered against his shoulder. “Holy shit, Nick... Nick...”

“If you didn't love it, I'd rip that dress right off you,” he said, and his hips rolled with hers. “Free those magnificent breasts from all that damn fabric, doll. God, you're beautiful. So beautiful.”

“Nick,” she gasped. “Fewer clothes, Nick.” Her hands scrabbled against his back as he set her down, nails raking his skin through the threadbare fabric of his ancient oxford shirt. He groaned, still pressing her to the wall, still kissing her as he stripped the dress off over her head. She was delightfully bare under the dress, bare and ready for him. He reached for her again, and she plucked his hands out of the air, wrapping her hands around his wrists. “I meant both of us, Nick.”

“Hm,” was all he said, but she dropped his wrists and danced her fingertips over the buttons of his shirt, ever-so-gently kissing skin bared along the way.

Her breath was warm against his chest, against the skin of his abdomen, lips skimming over the bullet-hole left by a gunner some twenty years before. Every rip and tear, every hole and tatter had been mapped by her lips and fingers, curious, cautious, but unwavering in her exploration. It still astonished him that not one, but two people desired him, two people with such kind and beautiful hearts. Her fingers skimmed the edge of his slacks, dipping just inside the edge of his belt, and he groaned, hips moving against her where she knelt.
Pants and belt fell away, and her lips traced patterns against him and his sensors, patterned so closely after human nerve endings, sang in the wake of those beautiful lips. Her hands pulled him closer, fingers brushing his hipbones, dancing into hollows and over heights. “Boss,” she whispered. “Boss, I've sure missed you and those hands, and that mouth you've got on you.”

His hand found the side of her face, a thumb dragging down the side of her cheek. “Missed the talking, or the kissing, doll?” The hand traveled back, tangling in her hair, and she moaned.

“Both,” gasped Ellie. “Never would have guessed it could be a dirty mouth. Love it.”

He kicked the slacks off of his ankles, and guided Ellie up and onto the bed. “Got a clever tongue,” he said, and bent, kissing the underside of her breast, nipping and sucking his way to her nipple and then leaning in to press her back onto the bed. His coat and shirt hung around them as he leaned over her, pressing against her, rolling his hips, and her legs circled his waist again. “I'll show you how clever if you want, or we can wait for Nate, and you can see for yourself. Doll,” he whispered. “Wrap those legs tight as you can. Love to feel 'em wrapped around me.”

“Give it to me, Nicky. Give it all to me,” she whispered. “Love you. Love you. Nicky, ahhh, come for me baby, come for me-!”

The bed shook. Nails bit into his shoulders, and he pressed, thrusting and rolling his hips, through her gasps and moans, through her giggles as the pleasure of her orgasm gave way to a ticklish afterglow, and finally, finally, pleasure pulsed through him and the world stood still as a system overloaded, rebooted, and did it again. “Christ,” he rasped. “Ellie, god, you beautiful thing.” He picked himself up off her, kissing her breast as he went, and she writhed, overstimulated.

She hummed her happiness, and grabbed his tie, pulling him back down for a kiss. “You're beautiful,” she sighed, and guided him onto the bed. He curled up with her, hands roaming over the softness of her skin, the silk of her hair, and when his hands got too close to her mouth, she kissed and nipped with equal enthusiasm. She burrowed into his arms, and neither stirred much when Nate slipped in a few minutes later, and climbed into bed. Nate brought pleasures of his own, another set of hands, another set of lips, and it was some time before the night grew silent again.

But the silence grew heavy, grew strange with things unsaid, with truths too harsh to utter in the dim glow of the Rex's sign through the window. But under the blankets they grew warm, tired, sated, and eventually they slept, curled against him, curled around him, their hands clasped over his chest as though by the strength of their love alone they could keep him there with them, could hold back the future a few more vital moments.

Chapter End Notes

Hancock seems like the kind of guy who'd steal your fucking pen every damn time.
Ass.
When Ellie opened her eyes, the hotel room was curiously bright. “Snow?” she mumbled against Nick's chest.

“Yeah,” he said softly. “Few hours of it, looked like. I watched it come down past the light from the window.”

It was nice when it snowed, minus the vague sense that radiation poisoning was only a snowball away. It gave the world a clean look. It never lasted, but for those first few golden hours, Ellie imagined it was like the old world – clean, bright, shining. The first snow of the year always filled her with hope. Today it seemed like one more thing to slog through.

Still, she slid out of bed, pulling on her clothes, hopping to get her shoes on, shivering in the cold morning air. As soon as her dress was on, she peered out the window. Goodneighbor had a solid coat of white fluff, already trodden a bit in the streets. Behind her, Nate yawned, and when he sat up, his hair stuck out at strange angles, bedhead having struck him hard.

They got ready in silence, and that was the strangest part of it – there were no jokes, no casual ribs, no squeals at the coldness of the water in the pitcher on the nightstand. Just three solemn people, getting dressed in the warmest clothes they had, ready to step out into the snow and step toward an uncertain future.

Outside, she tried to concentrate on the scrunch, scrunch of snow underfoot, on the swirl of Nick’s coat in the breeze, on Nate’s ridiculously comb-resistant hair, on anything but the fact that this could be her last day with Nick.

And as prepared as she thought she was for this to be the day, she was not prepared for there to be two strangers in the Memory Den.

The first was a woman of perhaps fifty years. She had salt and pepper hair and a bobble on her knit cap. Mismatched gloves were on her hands, and she had hunched in shoulders, as though she feared any moment might bring a blow from an unknown source.

And the second...

The second was a man in jeans and a sweater, and he reclined in a memory lounger, unthinking, unmoving, rarely blinking. The blood drained from her face. This is the man Nick will become.

“Oh,” she said softly. “So soon. I hadn't realized it would be so soon.”

Beside her, Nick came to a stop. She had so rarely seen him uncertain that she almost didn’t recognize the emotion on him. “Doc,” he greeted Amari.
“Mr. Valentine,” she replied. “This is Anna. She is the caretaker who replied to my message. Her ward is Z3-12. He came to me through the Railroad, and the memory implantation failed.”

“Hey,” said Anna shortly. “Listen. You helped out some friends of mine once, Mr. Valentine, which is why I'm willing to help you. But there's a catch. Over the last week, a bunch of the other caretakers have gone off the grid. Totally disappeared. We keep in a little contact, you know? And we report in to Amari and a couple of others. So I think old 12 would have been okay with this, right? I get the impression you're kinda workin' against time here, so here's my request: find out what happened to the other caretakers. Stop whatever's going on. I'm fucking worried sick. Worried for them, real worried for me. I'm headed to ground, whatever happens.”

“Ma'am,” he said. “I'd be happy to look into it even if you weren't here to help save me.”

“Save you from some boneheaded problem the Institute created for you, sounds like. Right. Great.”

Ellie stepped forward, and touched the woman's shoulder. “Thank you,” she said, then bent to grasp the recumbent synth's hand. “Thank you,” she said again. “For saving Nick.”

Anna shifted uncomfortably. “Listen. I got a hidey hole all worked out. You kids knock yourself out. I'll be in touch once the heat is off.” And with that she gave them a quick nod, and disappeared up the stairs.

Ellie looked down at the synth in the lounger. He looked perhaps a little shorter than Nick, and his hand was elegant and fine in hers. They looked like they ought to play a musical instrument, she thought, and laid the hand back across synth's chest. He had curly brown hair, and skin that was somewhere between brown and tan without having seen, she suspected, a bit of sun. He had big hazel eyes and a five o'clock shadow. But his face was blank, and there was no sense of it being a kind face, or a cruel one, or anything, really. It was perfectly neutral in every way.

The longer she looked at it—at him—the more she wanted to revise her opinion. This was not Nick. Not in any appreciable way did he remind her of her lover, excepting a certain slimness at the waist and breadth at the shoulders. He looked too young, younger than her, even, until she noticed fine wrinkles at the corner of the synth's eyes. It was, she decided, an awfully innocent face, not a neutral one. Not the face of her self-depricating, sarcastic, kind-hearted idealistic Nick.

She wanted, more than anything, to run, to flee into Nick's arms, to have him comfort her. If the world was just, it ought to be the other way around. She took a step back, though, and took Nick's hand. On the other side, Nate did the same.

“How...” Nate cleared his throat and tried again. “How long will the procedure take?”

“Anywhere from fifteen minutes to an hour. It may, however, seem a great deal longer.” Amari glanced at her clipboard. “To all of us, frankly. I'm ready to start if the three of you are.”

Nate shuffled his feet, and glanced up at Nick. Ellie twisted to look up at him as well. But he didn't look to them, just ahead at the pod, at the reclining synth. “Yeah,” said Nick. “I reckon I am.”

He took a step forward but she didn't let go of his hand, didn't step forward with him. “Doll,” he said gently.

“I love you,” she whispered. Why was she hoarse? Why couldn't she say it loud and clear? She tried again, and it sounded even more raw, even more tortured. “I love you, Nick.”

“Love you, too, sweetheart.” He squeezed her hand with his metal one, and when he tried to let go, she threaded her fingers through his. “Ellie,” he said gently. “Either we do this or we don't.”
She took a ragged lungful of air, cold even underground with the computers running. “Nicky, you come back to me, you hear?” She hooked a hand behind his head, and looked him in his eyes. They were beautiful. Had she ever told him so? Would it break her heart to tell him now? “You come back,” she said again, and broke her own resolution not to throw herself in his arms for comfort.

He held her (for the last time). He kissed her lips (for the last time). And she inhaled his scent (the last time the last time oh god). “I hear you,” he whispered against her ear.

And then he stepped back, and kissed Nate, whispered something to him, and Nate's hands clenched in Nick's coat. Then he stepped away from him as well, and toward the memory lounger. In mid-stride he paused, and turned back to them. “Need a favor,” he said. And he shrugged out of his coat, and handed it to Nate. His holster and gun came next, and Nate got passed those as well. “El,” he said. “Hang onto this for me.” And he took off his hat and placed it on her head.

“Boss,” she said. The hat was too big for her; it slipped down over her eyes and for a moment Nick disappeared from her gaze. She tilted the hat back, and he nodded sharply.

“Thanks,” he said. “Thanks.”

Then he turned, walked to the memory lounger, and laid back. “Alright, doc,” he called. His eyes closed, and a machine hummed to life. At her side, Nate groped for her hand, and she gave it to him, squeezing too tightly, relieved when he did the same.

“I'm activating the memory lounger, Mr. Valentine,” said Amari. “Initiating the transfer in three... two... one.”

There should have been something more, she thought. A flash of light, a crackle of electricity, something. But there was the softest of sighs from Nick, and then he was still.

Amari's hands clattered over the keyboard, and for several minutes, neither Ellie nor Nate moved or spoke.

“I've got the connection established,” said Amari, and Ellie was relieved that Nate jumped, too. “Everything has gone smoothly so far.” She didn't look up from the keyboard, still typing commands.

“Okay,” said Ellie. The hat slipped low on her forehead again, and she tilted it back with her free hand. “Is he-”

“He's fine so far,” the doctor said tightly. But her hands stilled as a blinking prompt came up on the screen. A quick double tap of a key cleared it, but there was something changed in the doctor's demeanor. Her hands went back to the keyboard, but over and over the same blinking prompt appeared. Amari picked up a microphone, and hooked an earpiece over one ear. “Mr. Valentine, please respond if you can hear me.” A few moments went by. “Please respond, Mr. Valentine.”

“Doctor-” said Nate, but quieted at Amari's wave to shush him.

“Nick,” said Dr. Amari. “All of my instrument readings indicate you can hear me. Please respond.” Seconds that seemed to be an eternity ticked by, measured out by the clock on the doctor's wall. “Dammit.”

“Doctor.” Nate's voice sounded so strange. Through her terror, a thought floated across her mind. Dangerous. He sounded dangerous. It was so strange to think of him that way, even though she knew, intellectually, that he was a very dangerous man indeed.
“I’ve got a data loop,” she said, but didn’t look up. “I tried to break it, but it keeps playing back through again. Something isn’t transferring correctly, and it’s quite early in his memories. His remaining memories, rather. I’m hitting a barrier trying to clear it from Z3-12’s end. When I blanked his memories before and attempted to implant false memories I had a problem that was quite similar. He’s a more recent model, and I’m afraid there may be something in his coding that makes him resistant to data implantation. Alternately, the problem may be on Mr. Valentine’s end. One moment. I need to run a comparison...”

She gave Nate’s hand a squeeze. “Hang on.” She approached Amari’s computer almost cautiously, and placed her hand on the mic, a questioning gesture. Amari glanced at her and nodded. She lifted the mic to her lips, and for a moment, the air seemed to seize in her lungs and nothing came out. Then she whispered, “Nicky.”

There was a shift in the streams of data on Amari’s screen. She couldn’t interpret it, but something changed. “Again,” said Amari tersely. She fumbled at her ear, unhooked the earpiece, and settled it over Ellie’s ear.

“Nicky Valentine,” said Ellie. “You answer me. You're scaring us. Me and Nate, I mean. Please, Nick.” There was nothing but static in her ear, static and her own heartbeat. And in a voice she usually reserved for the bedroom, she breathed, “Boss.”

And distantly, there came an answer, quiet and lost-sounding. “El?”

“Nick!” she said. “Keep talking to me, please, Nick. Respond if you can hear me.” But again, there was only static. “Nick,” she said.

“What did he say?” demanded Amari.

“Just my name,” said Ellie. “Just 'El'? Like he wasn't even sure it was me.”

“Damn,” said Amari. She made a microscopic adjustment to one of the dials on her machines and her hands flew over the keyboard again. “Again.”

“Nick,” she said. “Nicky. Boss. Please, darlin', talk to me.” She strained to hear a response. “I hear-”

“What?” said Nate.

“Breathing,” she said finally. “It sounds like panicked breathing. Nick doesn't breathe like that. Not-”

“Memory,” said Amari. “He's experiencing a memory.” She pointed at an instrument read-out. “Anywhere between a few hours to a few days worth of time, and the transfer is looping...here. It starts to transfer to the generation 3 body, and then the transfer breaks here and begins again.” She gestured for Ellie to return the earpiece, and Ellie shook her head. “We have two possibilities. Either the basic coding for Z3-12 is faulty or intentionally creating a transfer difficulty, or Nick is...resistant in some way.”

“Resistant,” said Nate. “You mean like the Institute created some sort of block against outward transfers?”

“No,” said Amari. “As in Nick himself is forcing... is unable to...” She pursed her lips. “How to put this.”

“He's wallowing,” said Ellie flatly.
“Not how I would have said it. More like a mental block of some sort. It's the sort of thing I see with patients who have experienced severe psychological trauma. The world being what it is, that's most of them.” She cleared the prompt on her screen again, and pinched the bridge of her nose.
“What's worse, we could be experiencing a combination of the two problems. A memory traumatic enough that it's throwing up alerts in Z3's coding, preventing the data from transferring completely.”

Nate swore, and in his hands, Nick's coat crumpled under a white-knuckled grip. “How long can he survive like this?”

“A day, perhaps two. He runs the risk of overheating if kept in this data loop indefinitely. There are things I can do to cool him down, or even to slow the loop if I manage to tease out the right coding, but it's not a permanent solution by any means.”

Had the room grown hotter? Was it her imagination? Ellie set the microphone down on the table, and approached Nick slowly, as though she were afraid of waking him. She laid the back of her hand against his forehead as though he were a feverish child. She couldn't decide if he felt hot to the touch, or not. “I want to-” she said, but Nate spoke over her.

“What if you had more data on the gen 3 coding?” he blurted out. “Would it help? Could you clear the block from Z3's end?”

“Possibly,” she allowed. “It certainly depends on what the data says.”

The coat twisted in his hands again, and Ellie nearly reached out, nearly cried out for him not to hurt one of the few possessions Nick seemed to hold dear. But then his hands relaxed, and he turned the coat so the bottom fell to the floor. “Right,” he said. “Back as soon as I can be.” He turned toward the stairs.

“No,” said Ellie, her voice sharp. “Stop. Explain.”

His posture tightened, and he glanced back over his shoulder. “I pulled... a lot of data off the Institute computers before I blew the place to hell. Holo after holo. And all of those holos are with the Railroad. So I'm going to get that data, and I'm going to come back, and if I have to pry it out of Desdemona's dead hands, I will.” He shrugged Nick's holster on, and buckled it in place. “Love you. Back soon.”

She wanted to tell him what she had planned. She wanted reassurance from him. But all she said was, “Nate—Be careful.” And then, in a very small voice. “I love you.”

“Love you,” he said again, but it was a reflex; his head was already somewhere else, his voice was shaky with adrenaline. Then he was sprinting up the stairs, and was gone.

“You had best sit down,” said Amari after a moment. “This could be a while. I—what are you doing?”

Ellie dropped the earpiece onto Amari's desk, and paused as she climbed into an empty memory lounger. “I'm going to go help Nick,” she said, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. “You said it could be a traumatic memory. So maybe I can help him break through it.”

“Or perhaps you can't, and you're just dragged through whatever he is experiencing,” said Amari.

“Maybe,” said Ellie. “But I'm sure as hell not going to let him do it alone.” She laid down, and Nick's hat tipped low over her face. She plucked it off, and settled it across her chest. “Okay,” she said. “Go ahead.”
“Ms Perkins,” said Amari. “You could end up just as trapped as Nick. This is absurd!”

“But it could help, right?”

“It...could, but-”

“Okay,” said Ellie. “Go ahead, then.”

“I don't believe you're listening to me,” said Amari. “I-”

“Okay,” said Ellie. “I understand. I could die. Please turn on your memory chair. I'd like to see Nick now.”

“You're being a fool.”

“Okay,” said Ellie. “I don't need your respect. I just need to go help Nick now. Please turn on your machine, doctor.”

“For the last time-”

“I've read a term,” said Ellie. “From old world medical stuff. 'Informed consent.' I'm informed. And I consent.”

There was silence. “I don't want to hurt you,” said Dr. Amari.

“I know,” said Ellie softly. “And you didn't want to do this for Nick, either. For what it's worth, I'm sorry to be doing this to you. Please, doctor.” She held her breath.

“...Alright,” said Amari. “Alright.”

Ellie let out her breath. “How long does it take to st--”

And the world went white.

* * * * *

She squints against morning sunlight and

hears/feels the rustling of sheets
bed so soft

behind her a yawn
an arm around her waist
can't move can't think can't breathe
her eyes
open
andtheworldcomesspeedingather

And pops into focus.

She has never seen anything like this in her damn life.
The wall is painted yellow. Yellow! It's like sunshine or, or-- she decides this is probably the color people in old books meant when they said “buttery” because brahmin butter (when there's enough fat content in their milk to even make butter) is pale, off-white. And there's a bookcase next to a window, a bookcase full of beautiful books, no burnt corners or cracked spines, no peeling, flaking covers. Just bright color and clearly printed words, books she's read and (mostly) books she's never heard of. The wood of the bookcase is smooth and glossy, not a bit of chipped varnish, not even any scrapes or dents.

The sheets are are warm and sort of—crisp? They're crisp, she decides, they're weirdly clean and not age-softened or full of holes you can stick a foot through. They smell faintly of Abraxo, but also something brighter, almost like muttfruit flowers.

And every bit of that goes straight out of her head when the arm around her waist tightens, and she looks down to see a very human arm, ever so faintly tan with a slightly paler stripe from a wristwatch, and a dusting of hair. There is warm breath on the back of her neck, and the faint scraping of stubble against her shoulder, and then he shifts and presses a kiss to her jaw, and without meaning to, she is turning, rolling toward him.

The man beside her in bed has grey eyes, kind eyes, with crinkles at the corner, and bags underneath them as though he never quite gets enough sleep. Sandy-brown hair with wings of grey at the temples, cut short on the sides and longer on the top, scuffed out of place by sleep. His nose is a little sharp, his jaw strong and firm, there are lines beside his mouth when he smiles and his lips are--

He kisses her. It's a brief brush of lips, soft and sweet, a good-morning kiss. And it is nothing like kissing her Nick, or even like kissing Nate.

“Mornin', doll,” he rumbles, and the voice is his. Well. Not exactly, but close, so close, just a shade off, like someone doing a really good impression of Nick's voice.

She wants to reach out for him, wants to touch him, run her hands over that face to memorize it with her hands, but she hears herself say, “Morning, baby.”

Baby?

He props himself up on an elbow, and she is briefly distracted by those shoulders and is it disloyal to be wildly attracted to the past version of the man you love? Grey eyes crinkle at the corner when he smiles down at her. “Alarm hasn't gone off yet,” he says.

“Oh?” she replies, and that arch voice is decidedly not Ellie's. It's low, and throaty, and it--

Her brain short circuits when he kisses her again, and this would be a kiss with intent. She arches against him, a rolling, sinuous motion, and unbidden, her hands press against his chest, fingers splayed over the pectoral muscles, and her fingertips curl lightly into pliable, warm, living skin. Her fingernails leave little crescent moon marks, and he groans against her lips. And in an instant, he is on top of her, his hands pressing her wrists next to her head, pillows dimpling under the pressure. With a knee he parts her thighs, and only a nightgown and a pair of pajama pants are between them. She should say stop, she should say funny story, but I'm not actually your lover, I'm your lover from the future diving into your memories to try and save you from your own psyche, but whether she is limited to the words he remembers her saying or she is, herself, unable to say the words, nothing comes out.

He bumps against her sex, hard and warm, and again her body—this other woman's body—betray her, and her hips rise unbidden, and her legs wrap around his waist, pulling him closer. His lips
find her neck, and she wants, so badly, to kiss his. It's a need almost more vital what's happening below her waist; she wants to kiss Nick Valentine's neck, wants to mark it with her teeth and suck it until she pulls the blood to the surface of the skin. She would never tell him, would never dream of telling him, but she has held herself back in so many ways for fear of hurting his already damaged skin, for fear of shaming him, or driving even the slightest of wedges between them. Her legs draw tighter, and he arches his head back, and this time she's sure it's her and not the woman of the past, but she pushes up against him and nips the skin there, sucking at it gently.

A groan comes from some deep part of him, and his lips come to her ear.

"Jenny."

It's like icewater for her soul; her libido shrivels up in an instant, and when the alarm clock goes off, it provides a convenient cover for her gasp.

His forehead bumps hers gently, and he sighs. “Rain check until tonight?”

“Rain check,” she whispers. “Nick—”

“Got a meeting I can't be late for,” he explains, and rolls to the side, freeing her hands. When he sits up on the edge of the bed, she reaches out a hand and strokes the soft skin of his back.

“Meeting with Chambers?” she asks, and again, the words are not her own.

“Yeah.” He rubs his face. “I'm gonna hop in the shower, doll.”

She hears water running. From the next room, Nick calls, “Doll, can you get me a bagel or something to eat on the way?”

“Sure, baby,” she says back, the words coming unbidden. “Tell you what. I'll bring you lunch at the station, since I'm off today.”

He pokes his head out of the bathroom, half-lathered up to shave. “Yeah? It'd be real nice to see ya.”

“Least I can do for my baby,” she says, and his eyes crinkle at the corners.

“We've gotta go over some reports on the Winters case along with a ton of phone transcripts today,” he says. “I feel like this whole thing is about to break wide open.”

“Yeah?” she asks. “Is that when we finally get a vacation, hon?”

He laughs, and on the inside, Ellie screams.

Jenny. Winters.

A traumatic event he can't get past.

Panic rises in her chest, and when he closes the bathroom door, she throws off the covers and stands, staring at herself in the mirror over the vanity. Long dark hair, silky-smooth if out of place from sleep. Pretty eyes, if showing too much white. A heart-shaped face with olive skin. She's lovely. She tries to memorize the face of the woman her lover never got over, never forgot. She's going to die in short order, and if that doesn't just stop her heart in her chest back in the Memory Den, she gets to do it over and over again until something gives.

In the bathroom, Nick Valentine whistles a little tune, and Ellie wonders desperately if this is it, if
this is the last moment he's ever truly happy.

The scene shifts, and he's at the door in a brown suit, putting his hat on his head, picking up a briefcase. “Breakfast,” she says, popping the bagel in his mouth. He grins around it, but she can see on his face that he's already got his head elsewhere. He picks up his briefcase and opens the door.

“Come back to me safe,” she blurts out, and he nods, distracted, and is gone.

Chapter End Notes

Do you like changes in tense? I hope you like changes in tense, because to me it made a weird sense for the memories in the past to take place in the present tense. oh god what if this is a terrible mistake?
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Here goes Nate's chapter. We'll find out some of what happened with the Railroad.

Sorry for the delay - I'm a professional artist, and I've spent the last month moving my studio when I wasn't sick as a dog.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For a few blindingly beautiful moments, it felt good just to run again. To sprint up the stairs of the Memory Den, to ignore calls from Irma and Kent asking if he was alright, to dash out into the cold, bright morning.

Then, of course, Nate hit the snow, and his feet were slowed to a high-stepping jog of a gait, and even that slowed a little as wet, sticky snow clung to his boots, adding weight and turning him clumsier with every step. He was wasn't even out of damn Goodneighbor before he wanted to yell from frustration, wanted to kick the snow like a petulant kid, wanted to send it flying through the air in a glittering spray. “Fucking snow;” he growled, and a ghoul in a tattered pink dress gave him a look that conveyed more disappointment than he could quite process. It irked him more than he wanted to admit, but what the hell was he supposed to do? Stop and explain why he was in a shit mood? Call out that he was on a life-or-death mission as he slogged away?

The gate to Goodneighbor had not, of course, been opened since the snowfall, and a pair of drifters were plugging away at the job with one shovel between them as the other inched the door open. He put his back into it as well, and the moment the gate was open enough for him to squeeze through, he did. Behind him came Dogmeat, absent through most of the morning, but as usual, turning up when he was needed.

It was only once the gate was safely shut behind him again that he realized he was still clutching Nick's coat, and he stared at it in his hands for a moment before slipping it on over his own pitiful jacket. He should have left it with Ellie, shouldn't have put it on and smelled all the little scents that made up Nick—machine oil, cigarettes, gunpowder and old leather—until today. It would be, he decided, totally ridiculous to stand outside of Goodneighbor and cry in the freezing air. So he double-checked his weapons to make sure the coat didn't obstruct his draw on either—his pistol, pulled from Kellogg's corpse months ago, and Nick's handcannon as a backup.

It ought to have been a short and easy run to HQ (not my HQ, he thought, not anymore). All the runs between Goodneighbor and the Church ought to have been easy. And yet he was struggling to recall a single damn trip that had gone according to plan. And with the snow making him a loud, easily spotted, slow moving target, this run didn't inspire hope.

He made it to the halfway point before someone took a potshot at him from a not-so-abandoned building. Chips flew off the brick building to his right, and he forged forward through the snow as quickly as he could, diving behind a rusted-out Corvega. Damn, why had he abandoned his armor? Why had he thought he didn't need it any more? He rose and popped a shot off at a slight movement in a window across the way, smiling grimly when he heard a cry of pain in response. Dogmeat shot across the street, deep snow drifts apparently no match for the long-legged dog. Another shot, but this one caught the Corvega instead of the wall, and--
Nate did his best to sprint away, but the snow, the damn snow, slowed him, and he felt the force of the blast on his back, felt himself be thrown forward. This time the snow was probably what saved him as he was flung like a ragdoll. The snow stung his face as he hit, compacting under him, cushioning him as he hit the street. He was dazed for a moment, by either the blast or the sudden stop at the end, but then he felt something push under him, and he rolled with a groan, gasping for air as his face cleared the snow.

Dogmeat, his jaws still red with blood, grinned at him and barked as Nate sat up, fully exposed in the middle of the street, still out of it enough that he didn't care. The dog nosed him and barked again, and Nate staggered to his feet, reaching out to rub behind the dog's ear with one freezing hand as he did. His pistol was a few feet away, leaving a nearly perfect imprint in the snow from its impact. A few seconds to brush himself off, and he was on his way again, back to moving slowly and taking cover where he could. A cluster of super mutants caused a significant delay as he went wide around them, then newly-fallen rubble lost him time as he found a route over and through it.

At last, he could see the church down the way, looking oddly picturesque with a coating of snow over it. How long had it been? An hour? Two? He wanted to check his pip boy, but it was trapped under the sleeve of Nick's coat. He squinted up at the sky as he walked, checking the position of the sun.

He couldn't have been looking up for more than three steps, but something shifted underfoot, something hidden by the snow, and the ground gave way, sending him toppling forward, grasping wildly for purchase, and getting only a fistful of snow for his efforts. He was falling, still flailing for anything to hold onto and with a clang, he found it with his face, instead.

Pain bloomed in a sharp silvery star pattern in his eyes, and he tumbled to a sudden stop that brought with it a direct transition into unconsciousness.

* * * * *

Persistent and wretched pain was the first thing that wakefulness brought, pain that was without respite or reprieve, pain that blossomed fiery and unbearable with each heartbeat, in tune with his pulse. His face was the worst until he became aware of his leg, which was a legitimate contender for the first place prize in the category of absolute agony.

The next thought that bubbled to the surface was that someone was speaking to him, so softly that he can't make out the words, crooning a soft song while petting his hair. Nate tried to move, tried to crane around and see, but his muscles wouldn't obey.

“Ellie?” he rasped, and the voice went silent for a moment, and the hand tightened in his hair. He whimpered before he could quite stifle the noise.

“Who's she?” said a small voice. It sounded young, girlish, but off somehow. He pried open the one eye that wasn't swollen shut, and crusted blood flaked down his cheek.

The girl who sat over him was a ghoul, but unlike most of them, she looked to be no more than fourteen or so. She still had tufts of blonde hair jutting out from under a summer hat loaded down with ancient fake flowers on one side, and her eyes were huge and black. “Who's Ellie?” she
“My girlfriend—” he began, and without a word, she pressed her thumb into his cheekbone, making the world white with pain.

“I'm sorry,” she said, and her voice rang with absolute sincerity. “I didn't want to hurt you, but you have to know that it's not okay to tell lies, sweetie, okay?” She wiped away blood from his mouth with a cool, damp rag. “Let's try again. I'm Grace. What's your name?”

“Nate,” he managed, and she smiled at him, and pulled a syringe of med-x from the floor beside her. She gave him perhaps a quarter of a dose, and it was enough to take the edge off his pain and make him sleepy, but not much else.

“It's very nice to meet you, Nate,” she said. “I don't get many visitors down here, as I'm sure you can imagine.” She giggled softly, an eerie sound. “But that hole opened up in my ceiling after the explosion a couple of weeks ago, so I covered the hole with, oh, cardboard and rotted wood and things. I knew it had to snow soon.” She touched his nose, and he flinched. “Oh, no. Is that broken, too? You've got a lot of injuries,” she said. “Broken leg. Broke your face bones, too. The zy gomatic,” she said, pronouncing the word slowly. “I looked it up for you in my book.”

“Oh,” he said weakly. “Thank you.” He tried to get his elbows under him to sit up, and discovered his hands were cuffed together.

“Ah-ah-ah,” she said. “You'll hurt yourself, Nate. I had to make sure you didn't hurt yourself again.” She chucked him under the chin. “You boys. You're so reckless. Always going and hurting yourselves.”

“Uh. Grace. Look. I... Do you have a stimpak? I can pay,” he said without much hope.


“Grace,” he said, and tried a quick smile, though the effect must have been gruesome. “If you can set my leg, and give me a stimpak, I sure would like to take you for a drink in Goodneighbor.”

The effect was immediate and her whole posture changed. She leaned forward, leading with her right shoulder, and in anyone other than a ghoul he would have said she was looking down her nose and pursing her lips. “Nate, darling. Are you asking lil ol' me on a date?”

He glanced away and down, biting his lip. “Well. I mean. If you don't think it's too forward, Grace...”

“I don't kiss on the first date,” she warned him, and scooted down toward his leg. His eyes followed her movement, and he blanched at the blood soaking his leg. A compound fracture, made who-knows how much worse when she moved him. She cut the cloth away, and he watched her face instead of looking at the wound.

It was an obvious ploy, but he didn't think Grace was too smart. In fact, he wondered how long she had been down here, how long she'd been lonely, and whether she'd been crazy before the bomb, or if it had come on her afterward as the years of isolation took hold. She was a pitiable thing, frozen in adolescence forever. God. At fourteen he'd been essentially awful, desperate for attention and acceptance, hung up on every aspect of his appearance, on projecting a sense of easy belonging to everyone he met.

Grace smiled at him, a bashful, sweet smile, and his heart broke a little for her. “Grace,” he said. “Honey. I wanna buy you something pretty. As a thank-you for helping me. But we've only just
met--"

She ducked her head, and her chin trembled. “That's... that's so sweet. Anything you decide on would just mean the world to me.” She poured a little antiseptic on a cloth, and laid it aside. “You've got a necklace on,” she said, sitting back on her heels. “You don't have to buy me anything that way.”

“My-” Nausea roiled in his stomach as she reached for his neck. “Grace,” he said, and panic rose in his voice. “Grace, I'd like to get you something special to you, sweetie. Grace-!”

She snapped the leather cord, and examined the necklace. “Wedding rings,” she said flatly. “You're married.”

His breath came quick and hot, and his skin prickled. “No-” he said.

The ghoul’s shaking hand tightened on the cord. “Two gold rings, Nate.” She raised her hand to throw them, and he surged forward, snatching at them with bound hands, and the movement caused something to shift in his head, and vertigo overtook him.

She was sitting over him when his vision cleared, and her face was close, much too close to his.

“I should kill you,” she hissed. “Leading me on. Making me care!”

“She's dead,” he managed.

“Who's dead?”

“My wife,” he said, squinting to try to make her faces resolve into just one image. “She... she died. A man named Kellogg killed her. Shot her in front of me.”

“Why’d you keep the rings?” she demanded, and he searched desperately for something that would placate her need to be special, her fragile ego.

“I knew... I had to hold onto them because one day I'd love again,” he said. “They... they represented knowing I could give away my heart to someone special. Someone...” He grimaced, then gasped in pain. “Someone who could make me whole again.” He lifted his cuffed hands to her, and uncurled his fingers. “It's probably stupid,” he said, and glanced away.

Her arm lowered, and the rings dropped into his hands. “Oh, sweetie,” she said. She closed his hands around the cord and rings, and patted them. “Why didn't you just say?” She opened up a purse that had probably been a sparkly thing two hundred years previous, and withdrew a stimpak with a flourish. “Here we are,” she said, and popped the cover off the needle.

“Grace,” he said, and panic made his voice high and tight. “Gracie, hon, you need to set that bone first, Grace!”

She thumped the side of the syringe to clear any air from the needle, and smiled. “Honey,” she said. “What if I fixed you and you just ran away? Can't have that.” She laid aside the stimpak and picked up the med-x again, popping a vein with practiced ease. He thrashed, pulling away as best he could, but again blackness encroached at the edges of his vision and by the time it cleared, the first hints of muddled euphoria were taking over.

“Now,” she said. “A little extra insurance.” She rummaged in her purse and pulled out a second syringe of med-x, and his one open eye widened.
“No-” he blurted, but she had the needle in within moments, and consciousness started to fade. Behind her, a shadow shifted, a draft making her candles flicker. He blinked, and the shadows went back to normal. “Please,” he said. “Need m' leg. Please, don' do this t'...to me.”

She shook her head. “I have a crutch for you, Nate. I want you sweet and easy to manage. A little thing like me against a big old brute like you? I'd never have a chance.” She kissed his forehead, but he couldn't really feel the pressure of her lips, couldn't feel anything but vague fear and soaring euphoria.

“Now,” she said, straightening. The stimpak in her hand occupied the shredded remains of his consciousness. “Let's see about that leg.”

Light seared his vision, and Grace's hand distorted, the skin glowing as it burned. The stimpak toppled from her fingertips as she shrieked, and distantly, Nate thought he should maybe tuck and roll or... something. But the double dose of Med-x let him get as far as covering his face with his hands, and the plasma gun lit the darkened room again and he counted three, or maybe four shots as the ghoul girl stood and rushed her attacker.

And with the last shot, she was a pile of glowing goo.

Nate squinted his eye, and tried to clear the burning after-image from his gaze. “Heard you might be in a little bit of a bind,” called a voice from the darkness. “A little dog told me.”

“Deacon?” The word came out slurred. He felt drunk, and it distantly occurred to him that he hadn't felt like this since he'd broken his skull open serving in the military.

“You look like crap, Nate,” said the Railroad agent, stepping into the light. “Got your gun?”

“Huh? Naw. She took it offa me.”

“Good,” said Deacon. “Considering last time we talked you threatened to kill the next Railroad agent you met. Gosh, it's been so long! What, three days?”

“s been a weird three days,” he said. “Deacon?”

“Yeah, pal?" Deacon squatted down next to him, kicking the empty med-x syringes to the side.

“Thanks f'r comin'.” His head lolled to the side. “Gotta fin' his gun.”

“Whose gun?” asked Deacon, popping the top back onto the stimpak.

“Nick's.” The world was fuzzy at the edges, and there was a strange rushing sound in his ears. He wanted to shake his head to clear the sound, but the impulse didn't seem to quite make it from his brain to his muscles.

“Why've you got Nick's gun? And for that matter, why're you wearing his coat?”

“Oh,” said Nate. “He's dying, Deac.” His breath caught as the grey crept in at the edges of his vision, and something must have startled Deacon, because he pushed up his sunglasses and reached out to touch Nate's shoulder. “It's my fault, Deacon. It's my fault.” He took a deep breath, but whatever he had been about to say vanished as the world blurred. He heard his name being called, heard the rushing in his ears become as loud as a waterfall, and as easily as water through his fingers, consciousness slipped away.
The world showed itself more gradually this time, more gracefully, without the showy flashes of pain and explosions of light in his head, and Nate drifted for a time, not quite awake and not quite dead.

It seemed sometimes like the only time he got any rest was when he was too hurt to throw himself into danger.

“Dammit, Deacon,” came a voice, and he ever-so-gently tensed in his half-awake fugue.

“That's my name, Des. First name Dammit, last name Deacon. I'm disappointed that we're keeping things formal with my full name.”

“No, Deacon. I'm not doing this with you. Get him out of here.”

“Whaat? Get the recovering hero of the Railroad out of HQ? We should be shining up some kinda medal for the guy.”

Was there an extended silence, or did he slip back into unconsciousness? Either way, it seemed a long time passed before Desdemona answered. “I understand Nate is your friend. But the man's unstable. He threatened to kill every last Railroad agent if he saw any of us again. If Valentine hadn't disarmed him, he might've made a fair start on following through.”

“Des, Des! The guy was out of his gourd at the time. People who've just committed mass murder sometimes get funny that way.”

“Deacon-”

“Listen.” And something changed in Deacon's voice. Some vital Deacon quality bled out of it, leaving it cold. “Listen to me. He jumped through a thousand hoops to earn your trust. He did every rotten thing you told him too, including killing his own son. So let's, just for a moment, assume we owe the guy, and give him a hand.”

Again, consciousness ebbed, and he thought he had missed a reply. But then there was a terse, “You get half an hour. And I want him gone.”

“Cool, boss,” said Deacon, and the usual glib charm was back. “Shoo. He's waking up, and probably doesn't want to see you any more than you want to see him.”

He opened his eyes to a dimly lit room, and Deacon's easy smile. “Hey, Charmer.”

“Don' call me that,” he slurred, and groped for the light on his pip boy. The room, illuminated, was one of the storage areas in Railroad HQ, and he was laying on an ancient cot, half-covered with a blanket. His face ached, his eye was covered with a bandage, and the pain in his leg was a ghost of what it had been.

“Nate, then,” said Deacon. “Listen. Doc put you back together again, more or less reassembled your face, got your leg screwed back on right, put your skull back together. But you've still an eye that might or might not heal and you've got a double dose of Med-x in your system, and you're fucking higher than Hancock right now. And that sucks, because we've gotta get you out of here before Desdemona's bullshit meter runs out. You two aren't pals anymore, if you don't remember.”
“I remember,” he grated.

“Cool. Believe it or not, that little talk wasn't actually staged for your benefit,” said Deacon.

“Maybe not,” said Nate. “But if y' hadn't been okay with me hearin' it, you woulda done it somewhere else.” He pushed himself up on his elbow, and the world swam.

“Whoa, hold on there. You tell me what you need, I'll get it, and then we'll get the hell out of Dodge. Now. What made you come back? It was a hell of an exit you made. Nearly a week of being basically catatonic, then bam! You're going critical mass on everybody but Valentine. Doesn't exactly say 'Back in a few, guys!'” He folded his arms and leaned against the wall.

“Nick's sick,” he said, then closed his eyes to try to get his brain working. “Not sick. He's... injured? Shit. He's in the Mem'ry Den. We were tryin' to get him... get him a new body. Old one... his memories were dis'pearing. Deacon. Help me.”

“Hnn.” The Railroad agent took a moment to consider, and nodded. “You came for the synth data you pulled off the Institute computers. Right?”

“Yeah,” he said, and struggled to sit up. This time, Deacon gave him a hand, pulling him upright and holding his shoulder until the spinning stopped.

“Tinker Tom hasn't even finished unpacking all that data yet. It's gonna take years, considering how densely they coded their information. He thinks the botany alone stuff is going to change the world. Kills me that they kept it all hoarded down there.” He tossed a few things on the bed as he spoke. “I kept your stuff from before. Armor, weapons, bags, so on. I'll help you tote it back, but I swear this is the last time you use me as a pack brahmin. Get dressed. I'll get the data.”

And with that, Deacon was gone. He found a pair of jeans in his bag that wasn't crusted with blood like the discarded pair on the floor, and managed to get them on and buttoned despite legs that felt like rubber. He got what armor he could on, whatever would fit along with Nick's coat and the swelling in his half-healed leg. Even his boot on that foot had to be laced loosely, and when he bent to tie his laces, it was all he could do not to kiss the floor.

He was dressed by the time Deacon came back, and he figured they were pushing the edge of Desdemona's half hour. “Got it?” he said, standing with only a slight stagger.

“Got it,” said Deacon. “All the synth stuff anyway. Tinker Tom is working with Pam on something way over my head, but they hardly noticed me hanging around. Let's split.”

“You gonna get in trouble?”

“Nah. It's not the only copy at this point,” said Deacon with a shrug, holding up the holo between two fingers. “Besides, Desdemona owes me. Did I ever tell you about the time I saved her from a glowing ghoul? No? Good story, remind me sometime.”

“Fulla shit,” said Nate. He reached out for the holo, and Deacon let him have it. But when he tried to grab his bags, Deacon picked them up.

“Nah,” said Deacon. “I got it. One last run, right? The two of us, saving a synth. It'll be like old times. You with your dog, me holding every piece of junk you've picked up.”

HQ went quiet as they walked through, and Nate found himself wondering what, exactly, he had said and done before. His memories were unclear before waking up at the Agency. But former friends avoided his gaze, or watched him leave with carefully neutral expressions.
They left the church again, for the last time, and when Nate saw where the sun was in the sky, he went cold. The screen on his pip boy confirmed it to be almost five. And all the time he laid unconscious, Nick suffered while Ellie waited in terrified suspense.

“You okay?” asked Deacon.

“You okay?” asked Deacon. With a whistle, his dog appeared, and together, they set off toward the setting sun and Goodneighbor.

Chapter End Notes

Never written Deacon before! I'm excited to have him along. Let me know how I did?
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

OH MAN. I'm not dead in the spring tornadoes, nor killed by accursed pollen, nor buried under a mound of sterling silver (you know, my job).

I know it's been a minute. Like, for real. For those of you who are still reading, I'm sorry! Life got complicated and busy. But here it is: chapter ten. Re-reading chapter eight would likely be helpful....

Something was wrong, and it had Nick Valentine edgy. Every hard-won cop's instinct was screaming; every hair on his arms was standing up. He wanted to lock himself in the supply closet, wanted to go home and hunker down, but sheer stubbornness kept him at his desk, pouring over transcripts, adding to the vast pile of notes that he'd condense down into reports, then summaries, then...

He rubbed at his eyes, tried to will the twitch out of the left one, tried to convince himself that the tight feeling in his shoulders was just stress. He tried loosening his tie, something he never did until he was walking up the stairs of his apartment building to go home. He took a quick walk. Paid for a cold Nuka Cola. But every sound, every stupid conversation, the clatter of dozens of typewriters, all of the familiar auditory stuff of his working life grated at him, left his nerves raw and jangled.

“Hey, Val. Got some case notes I want you to take a look at for one of Winter's boys. Thought you might--” Sargent Mitchell's booming voice halted, a temporary reprieve on Nick's senses. “You look like shit, Valentine.”

A few other officers craned their necks around, trying to get a look, but Nick leaned his head down so the brim of his hat shadowed his face. “Thanks, Mitchell. You're a pal.”

“Sorry, sorry. You sick? You look like you haven't slept in a year.”

“Slept just about the normal amount last night,” said Nick. “Woke up just a few minutes before my alarm.” He thought, then, of Jenny, and his eye started twitching again. Her face, so familiar and dear, had seemed strange, and her eyes had looked him over as if she had never seen him before. “Just a headache,” he added.

“Sure,” said Mitchell. He dropped the notes onto Nick's IN pile without slapping it down like usual. “Maybe you oughta take the afternoon off.”

“Dismissed,” said Nick, but softened it in the next instant. “Shoo,” he added.

“YesSIR,” came the reply. But a few minutes later he dropped a glass of water and an asprin on Nick's inbox on top of the case notes.

“Mitchell-”

“Yeah, yeah. You don't know what you'd do without me, Valentine.”

“Thanks, pal,” he said to Mitchell's retreating back. He gulped down the asprin and drank the glass
of water, and for some reason the sensation was almost unfamiliar. He shook the thought away, and drew another file in front of him. Two hours 'til lunch with Jenny.

* * * * * *

She's falling, tumbling, and Nick's day, no different from a hundred others, whizzes past around her, hazy memory making all else insignificant compared to his last moments with Jenny, and what is to come. She sees men and women speaking to him on the street, sees him buy a newspaper on his way to work, sees him give it to a secretary in exchange for a cup of coffee, sees him pouring over file after file on a desk heaped so high with paperwork that it nearly hides a black typewriter. And every instant is precious, because it is one more moment before anguish steals the vitality from Nick's world.

But life speeds by in the blink of an eye, and before she knows it, she has a phone in her hand, and somehow she exists both in the apartment and down at the police station. “Hey, baby,” she says. “Change of plans. My cousin called and said his wife needs help with the kids today. Can I bring you lunch early, or--?”

“Nah,” he says. “I gotta step out of the office for a while anyway to speak with an informant. I'll grab a dog at the corner cart.” He finds his notepad on his desk and jots down EAT FOOD between bookended meetings.

“Mm,” she laughs. “Cart food! I promise dinner will be better than cart food.”

“You don't hafta cook, doll. We could go out for once.”

“Nope,” says. “I'm going to cook for you, and that's final. I'll go to my cousin's, come back, change, scrape whatever goop those kids manage to get on me this time off in the shower, and then I'll go get groceries and have dinner on the stove by the time you get home. How's that sound?”

“Sounds like a plan, doll,” he says, and digs through a stack of reports looking for a transcript of a wiretapped phone conversation. “What're we having for dinner?”

“You're having a surprise, is what you're having.”

“I hate surprises,” they say at the same time, and he chuckles. “Putting my keen powers of observation to work, I'm going to guess it's a surprise because you don't know yet, either?”

“Got it in one, Detective Valentine. How'd I end up with a guy so smart?”

“You must just be lucky. Ah. Here comes the chief. Love you.”

“Love you-” she says, and Ellie finds her voice, manages the words, “Nicky it's me!” But the phone is dead in her hand.

* * * * * *

“For if the bomb that drops on you
Gets your friends and neighbors too,
There'll be nobody left behind to grieve. And we will all go together when we go. What a comforting fact that is to know. Universal bereavement, An inspiring achievement, Yes, we all will go together when we go.”

“Turn that off,” snapped Nick.

A rookie—Bryson-- jumped forward to turn off the holoplayer. “Sorry, Detective. Just thought it was funny and--”

“It's morbid is what it is,” said Nick. He pinched the bridge of his nose, and forced his voice to calmness. “Maybe on your break, kid. And not so near my desk.”

“Sure, sure.” Bryson popped the holo out and pocketed it.

“How's desk jockeying going?” asked O'Toole. He smirked. Kid thought because his big brother was a assistant DA he could get away with anything.

“Temporary, is how it's going, Tool.”

“O'Tool,” said the kid, irked.

“Yeah?” said Nick. “Something keeps making me forget.”

The others snickered, but O'Toole stared daggers at him from behind a fixed smile. “Laugh it up, Valentine. One day-”

Bryson tensed. He was tight with O'Toole, but not a troublemaker.

“One day I'll regret it?” asked Nick easily.

The moment of tension passed, and a strangely genuine smile appeared. “Nah. Forget it.” He waved his hand at Nick and turned away, dismissing him with the gesture. It was disrespect a younger Nick would have taken to heart, would have reacted to. Instead, he merely quirked an eyebrow. An officer on loan didn't need to address every little thing. And hotheads like O'Toole either grew up or learned the hard way sooner or later.

He glanced at his watch. An hour until the end of his shift, an hour until he could spend a few precious moments with Jenny before pulling out his notes and working until he went to bed. It would only be a couple more months, he promised himself. It wouldn't be long until everything went up to the DA, and Winter was apprehended. He just had to stick it out to the bitter end.

* * * * *

Her feet march her down the stairs. Past the street light, just coming on to ease the transition, to assist the crepuscular light that made the street familiar and strange all at once. She's seen this street a thousand and one times since she and Nick moved here in spring--

she has never seen it before and each and every thing is strange and new, beautiful and terrible

--and it never fails to soothe her, how close they are to the water. She's from Nantucket--
the Commonwealth. She's from the long-lost Two Acre settlement, then Goodneighbor, then Diamond city

--and she misses the seaside every day, but the gentle slap of the river makes life in the city almost bearable.

She's making gnocchi for dinner, gnocchi with steaks and a mushroom cream sauce, maybe a fresh salad. The fridge is bare of most of those ingredients. She's pretty sure there's cream, since Nick takes that in his coffee.

Time blurs in the corner shop and--

she has never seen so much food, never imagined so much food in one place. Her family butchered an elderly Brahmin when she was seven, and ate better than she ever thought would be possible, and she still is blown away by the sheer quantity of food these people have

--she leaves with two full shopping bags and a wave from the clerk, a kid named Roger who leaves for college after the new year. She's a block down the street when--

when it happens.

* * * * *

There was perhaps an eighth of a second between the pop-pop of gunshots and the time Nick Valentine's shoes carried him forward at a sprint. He'd read a book once that said that only cops ran toward the sound of gunfire, against all common sense, but it never occurred to him even for one moment not to.

His footsteps echoed in the nearly empty streets, and he tore around the corner, gun out, ready for anything at all except what he is confronted by.

Later, he had to answer questions for the investigating officer's report, and in his numbness he dictated it like he's writing the report himself.

Approximately 7:35 pm heard gunshots in quick succession. Officer drew his sidearm and proceeded toward the sound at a run. Upon arriving, found the victim, Jennifer Lands, supine in the street. GSW to chest and head, suggesting professional shooter. Victim was alive at the time responding officer Valentine found her. Administered basic first aid to no avail. Victim passed away at approximately 7:40 pm, just after ambulances arrived.

“Nick,” Mitchell had/would say/said. “I have to ask. Did she say anything before--?”

* * * * *

Ellie's eyes roll wildly, and she cannot see, cannot focus on the man kneeling over her, cannot comprehend the pain she is in, the wet coldness of her arm, trapped under her. Feels hands on her face, frantic hands. Her foot twitches, jerks, and is still, but she manages to speak again, forces
words out with the last of her air.

“Nicky?” says Ellie/Jenny. “Where’s...? Nick? Nicky? “Don't touch me! Don't- Nicky will find you. Where is- Get... get away! Get away! Don't- don't-”

And then she is cold.

* * * * * *

The paramedic sits with him after. Holds his hand, still sticky with Jenny's blood. Gives him a shot of whiskey out of a flask and lets Nick sit for as long as he likes in the cold streets of Boston. He doesn't weep. Doesn't understand, doesn't quite comprehend that this could be happening to him.

Doesn't really believe that Jenny is gone.

* * * * * *

She squints against soft morning sunlight, yellow and and lovely against the butter-colored walls. Her feet are warm, nestled down into sheets that are clean, dry, and crisp. There is a sigh next to her, and Nick rolls, draping an arm across her waist.

“Jenny,” he whispers, and she breaks out in gooseflesh as the very air of the word chills her skin, ghosting its way deep into her soul.

“Nick.”

How many times has she done this, she wonders. How many times? She should know. Should have kept count. Her hand rises to her chest, then her head, grazing her temple.

It doesn't matter. Today is another day.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Oh man I'm not dead, and I haven't forgotten about this story after all! Sorry for the long delay - I finished my busy season of the year in the craft show biz, and now I'm catching up on some things, this story among them.

The GOOD news is that you get an extra long chapter for your wait, though! :D

Thank you to all the kind commenters for helping keep me focused and reminding me that writing is important, too.

A scant handful of wild dogs. A pack of ferals. One lone scavenger with a hoard of drugs and bullets who lost his life protecting something Nate didn't want to take. For a trip through Boston, it was a damn cakewalk. Nobody tried to make Nate their new boyfriend-for-ever-and-always, nothing exploded, nobody ran up delivering a message that a settlement wanted him to come help build defenses against who even gave a fuck anymore.

Not Nate. Not with Nick on the line.

And, to be fair, he genuinely couldn't have done it without Deacon. The Railroad agent was relatively fresh, and his hands were steady on his weapon, and he was taking down threats before Nate quite registered they were there. He and Dogmeat might have made it back alone. Might. But still. His head swam constantly. His leg was searing pain from his ankle to his hip. He had one working eye, and one bandaged one. But the Med-X high was wearing off by the time they pushed through the gates of Goodneighbor, and Dogmeat sprinted ahead toward the Memory Den.


He was right. It wasn't just the usual assortment of ne'er-do-wells and guards outside the Memory Den. It was... Shit. It was nearly the whole town. His heart started to race when he saw Daisy, when he saw Magnolia actually outside the Third Rail, a decidedly unglamorous army green blanket wrapped around her shoulders, when he saw drifters whose names he knew and who he'd never even met.

“No,” said Nate. “No no no-”

And with energy he didn't know he still had, Nate ran.

Deacon got there before him, of course. Pushed through a crowd packed tightly around the entrance to the Den, revealing Fahrenheit blocking the door, arms crossed.

“Fahrenheit!” said Deacon. “I'd be worried about you looking grim, but I'm pretty sure that's just your face.”

“Funny,” said the bodyguard. “Get him inside. Dog too, I guess. We've already got enough of a commotion out here.”

“No,” said Nate. “No, you tell me. Is Nick--?”
“Nick’s alive,” she said. The assembled crowd was as silent as he had ever heard Goodneighbor. “Get your ass inside. I'll explain.”

There were hands on him. A few pats from people in the crowd, the press of Dogmeat against his leg, and Fahrenheit's hand on his arm, pulling him toward the door.

He wasn't dead. He wasn't dead. Nate wasn't too late.

“Oh my god, Nate. I was afraid you'd be too late,” said Irma. There was a strange moment, where she tried to pull him into her arms to comfort him, or to comfort herself. She was cold. There was snow on the hem of her boudoir-dress...thing.

He yanked away, casting his one good eye about wildly. Wet tracks through the Den. Buckets by the door. The acrid, stinging scent of melted plastic on in the air.

And with a choked yell, he bolted for the stairs. “NICK!”

Two stairs at a time, and each step was agony. Over the roar in his ears, he heard Deacon say something, felt the edge of a desperate grab from Fahrenheit, and why were they trying to stop him?

The smell of burned plastic grew heavier, thicker.

And at the bottom of the stairs he stopped short so quickly that Deacon collided with his back. There was a low whistle from Deacon. “Holeee shit.”

It couldn't be his Nick laid out in the memory lounger with desk fans in front of buckets and tubs of snow, blowing cool air across his inner workings. His Nick with holes burned in his face and chest from the inside out. His Nick with his torso flayed open to expose the parts that made the synth, but none of the parts that made the man.

It couldn't be his Nick who looked so small, so broken.

“Nate. My God. What happened – Never mind that. I take it the presence of Deacon means you got the holo?”

“Yes,” he said, but he couldn't look at her, couldn't take his eyes away from Nick. He fumbled at his pockets, closed numb fingers over the little box that contained every last ounce of his hope, and thrust it in the direction of Amari's voice.

“They're alright, for now,” said Amari.

And the rest of whatever she was going to say disappeared as he whipped his head around. “They?”

And then he saw.

Ellie was in a second memory lounger, cold, wet rags packed with snow draped across her face and chest, but she was still flushed with heat, her chest heaving as she panted for air. Someone had taken off her shoes, her wrappings from her arms, everything but her dress trying to keep her cool. Frozen slush dripped from her hand to the floor and--

_Nora comes out of the cryo-freeze faster than he would have thought, but what the hell did he know about cryogenics? It was a quick thing, a chemical blast undoing the processes that had preserved her poor abused body after Kellogg murdered her. He's persistently aware of the weight of the bastard's gun on his hip, toys with the thought of burying it with her corpse, but who the hell would want to be interred with their murder weapon? Besides, his life has become a series of_
strange alliances and stranger necessities.

She slumps forward, and Preston and Nick move in to help catch her. A slurry of ice and chemicals drips off her face, rolling down her cheek like an enormous tear and hitting the ground with a soft splat.

Christ, he hates the future.

“no no no no no-” His feet seemed infinitely heavy, rooted to the floor in the instant before acting took the place of panic.

Hands settled onto his shoulders. “Doc,” said Deacon. “I get you're busy and all, but if you could explain to Nate what's going on, you might avert a real shitstorm.”

Amari popped the holo into one of her computers at the edge of Nate's vision, and while the thing went through a series of dire warnings about unauthorized access, Amari turned back to him. “The short version is that against stern medical advice, Ms. Perkins went in to help Nick. To that end, I believe she has helped. Typical lounger use ranges twenty to thirty minutes, and intensive use is considered to be under an hour and a half. At three hours the effects are similar to extreme sleep deprivation. Her blood pressure and pulse are high, fever has set in, and she's dehydrated. I was about to give an IV when you arrived-”

“On it,” said Deacon, and went right to Amari's stores without hesitation. Normally Nate would tease him, ask him why he knew where it was; ask him how he'd learned to pop a vein with ease and precision, and enjoy the ride as Deacon came up with outrageous bullshit. Instead his eyes tracked the weathered hands and skinned knuckles as the agent worked.

“And Nick?”

This time Amari hesitated. “Have you ever had a computer overheat and shut down when you tried to make it do more than it was ever meant to?”

“Old tech,” said Deacon, and Nate's hands itched to shake him, make him take it back. “You see it sometimes with some of the earliest gen 2 models that've been left in the field too long – they've just run down or burnt out.”

“He's not old tech--”

“For the purposes of running a memory lounger? He is quite old, indeed.” A few taps at her keyboard, and Amari frowned. “We've been running a transfer that should take half an hour at the most for upwards of eight hours. Frankly? I don't know why Z3-12 is doing as well as he is. Not the tiniest blip in his--” She leaned forward, squinting at something on her screen.

“Doc?” said Deacon, but she shushed him.

“Give me time to read. If one of you will take over keeping them cool-?”

Deacon lead him through it. Handed him rags, helped him wipe down Ellie's face, her arms and legs, blotchy from fever. Deacon kept him moving buckets and fans for Nick, working to find a better arrangement to keep the synth cool.

“Deacon?” he said under his voice. “I need you to do something for me.” He handed him his gun, the backup, then hesitated. Instead of giving the agent Nick's gun, he broke it open, and handed Deacon the ammunition.

“I can hold your shit, man. Happy to, right?”
“If this doesn't work— if they die—”

“You don't wanna go ballistic again. Got-”

“I want you to shoot me.”

The spy's face did not change. There was no furrowing of his brow, no downward turn of his lips. Just stillness. “Like a mercy kill.”

“Yeah.”

“You want me to shoot you. With your own gun.”

“It doesn't have to be my gun.”

“You want me to shoot you with my gun?”

“I don't give a fuck what gun- are you fucking with me?”

Deacon held up his hands. “Not at all. I just want to be clear on what I'm being asked. When my friends ask to be murdered, the devil is really in the details.”

“Give me back my-”

“Nope.”

“Deacon-”

“Nate.”

“Don't-”

“Make light of this? Where's your sense of the absurd, man?” The guns disappeared into Deacon's pockets. “You can have these back at the end of the school year.”

“Prick,” muttered Nate, turning away.

Deacon caught him by the shoulder. “Nate. It's going to be fine. We brought the holo for Amari. It's going to be okay, you know?”

“Deacon?”

“Yeah?”

“You're a fucking liar.”

“There's a parable about my lying ways, I think. Red Riding Hood? Something with a wolf in it, anyway.” Behind the opaque glasses, something in Deacon's attention shifted past Nate. “I think she's found something.”

* * * *

“What is it?”
“Sorry?” she says.

“How?” asks Nick, reaching for the alarm.

“I could have sworn you said something.” Why does this feel so strange? Why does the world feel fresh and new to her? She shakes her head, trying to shed the strange feeling of unreality. It’s as though her eyes aren’t tracking properly, as though the sound and video in a holo aren’t lining up correctly.

“Maybe you need a little more sleep, Jen.” He kisses her temple as he rises, and she watches him head toward the bathroom.

In the mirror, she sees a woman with rich brunette hair. She’s thinking of going lighter, a medium tone. Something keeps making her think lighter hair as she stares in the mirror, trying to remember something… something important she’s supposed to do today.

“C’mon, doc, please. They’re dying in there.”

Ah. That’s what she’s supposed to do.

* * * * *

His fingers wrapped around the mic as Amari coded furiously. Why was he a trained medic? Why was he a grease monkey? Why couldn’t he have been a programmer, able to do more than hack a simple RobCo mainframe. His hands are sweaty around the mic, and he tries to keep his voice even as he speaks. “Ellie, I know you can hear me. I know you’re in there. It's Nate, hon. Amari’s working. Trying to find the right section of code that's going to let the transfer finish. But she says you'll have to work with us, you'll have to help break Nick out of it. I hope you can hear me. I love you. You're so brave, and okay, this was probably the smartest bad idea ever, but...”

Nate swallows, hears the mic transfer it back on the tinny speaker in Amari's equipment. “I can't even believe how mad I am at you and how thankful I am at the same time. I can't lose you both, I—.” His voice sounds so strange, so far away to his own ears. “I'll lose everything if you're gone. And I can't. Can't live without the two of you. Doesn't that sound strange out loud like that? It sounds like total hyperbole, like the kind of thing love-struck teenagers say. But I think I've come up against my limits. And I went past them, and there's something broken in me, and if it weren't for you and Nick, I don't think I could have come back this time. Don't think I'd even want to. So. Come back. For me.”

And in the memory lounger, Ellie draws a sudden, deep breath.

* * * * *

Her eyes roll wildly as darkness closes in at the edges of her vision. “Nick? Nicky!” The words come out of her mouth garbled, by blood and by pain and by a brain that is in the process of shutting down shop and flipping over the Closed sign on the door. And yet something about the experience is intrinsically false, somehow.
It strikes her, abruptly, that every bit of this is conjecture on Nick's part. That he has pieced together in his mind Jenny's last moments so many times that he feels he has lived them. A vivid imagination can take a piece of evidence in the form of an envelope with a scribbled shopping list on the back, the sights and sounds of his own street, and every little detail he knows about Jenny and sew together her evening as though doing so gives him a little more time with her, as though knowing the hows and the wheres could somehow help with the why.

Oh. She takes a deep breath, and opens her eyes. Then she opens them again, and they are standing under the streetlight together.

"Jenny-?" he begins. His handsome face is creased with pain, with anguish, and she watches as confusion irons out some of the wrinkles.

"Ellie," she corrects him. Her hands press around his, wrapping them up as though conferring warmth could possibly be the same in this moment as conferring comfort. Blood, more than could have ever been on his hands, drips where their palms meet. "I'm Ellie. You're at the Memory Den, Nicky. Do you remember?"

"Jenny," he says again. "What're you saying? I can't hear you, doll. It's like we're right by the ocean. How. I thought I saw you shot, down on the street in front of – is this a dream?"

"Not exactly, boss," she says. But he shakes his head. He cannot, or will not, hear her.

She looks down and she is holding his hat in her hands. Ellie holds it out to him, stiff-armed like a child shoving flowers at her mother. "Your hat, Nicky. You gave me your hat to hold."

It's a battered, creased thing, grey as the man himself, and soft with age. He takes it from her, and turns it over in his hands, casting a critical eye over it. "It's old," he says softly.

"The world's gotten old, boss." She nods at the hat. "Put it on."

He can hear her this time, and gingerly settles the hat on his head, flicking the brim into place as expertly as ever. "I'm Ellie," she says.

"Ellie." He tries the name on his tongue, and the subtle not-rightness of the sound sends a jolt of anxiety through her. "Doll," he says. "None of this makes sense."

She reaches for his hand, and rubs her fingers over knuckles that are just a little knobbly. "Boss," she says earnestly. "Do you want the total rundown, or do you want me to sum up?"

"Three sentences or fewer," he says, and there's almost a little humor in it, but his eyes are tight around the corners, and his face is drawn and pale.

"Uhh. Okay, let me think.... One: You don't know me yet, but I'm Ellie, and there's only one other person I'm as close to as you. Two: As you've clearly figured out, this isn't real, but a memory you're experiencing through... well, science. Three: I hooked myself up to the same kind of machine because you got stuck, and instead of just being able to talk to you, I got cast as Jenny."

She looks over at the corner of the street where a puddle of blood is beginning to coagulate. "I'm sorry," she whispers. "I'm so sorry."

"El," he says roughly, and her head snaps toward him again. He's two men, but how is that any different than always? She can see her lover overlaid with the man he used to be, can see them both but neither well, as though they're out of focus. "El, you shouldn't have..."
“You would have,” she says, and it's as gentle and kind as she can make it.

“But I'm-”

“If you say one bad thing about being a synth or not a real man, ohh, Nicky,” she says, and this is probably not how you're supposed to comfort a grieving man who's gone through trauma oh god.

“I was going to say that I'm old. I've lived a long time. You're so young, doll, and...”

“Would being young have stopped you?” she asks hotly. “Would you have gone, 'Well, someone I love is in trouble, but I'll pass on helping because I've got lotta years left in me.'”

He's silent, and she knows she's won the point. Is that even the right thing to do? Argue him down?

“I love you,” she says. “Nate loves you, too. I know you wonder why, but that's the answer right in what I said. We love you because you're a good man.” She takes his hand, and it is both the calloused knobbly-knuckled hand of Nicholas Valentine, the cop, and the bare metal of her lover's hand.

“I was trying to do the right thing,” he says. “I stuck my neck out never thinking that what I had on the line was anything but my own safety. Doing the right thing can be as selfish an act as not. How d'ya reconcile that?”

“You don't.” Her hand tightens on his. “You had a job to do, and you did it. You were acting to protect not just Jenny, but all the other people he might've hurt. You had no way of knowing he'd worked out a deal, boss.”

He closes his eyes. “He'd long-since turned state's evidence. He didn't have to kill her to send a message. He just resented that I was closing in on him. He killed her because he could.”

She's in his head. She feels his anger, his heartbreak, the deep well of his self-loathing. It nearly brings her to her knees, and yet it gives her knowledge as well.

“She never complained about your job. Never tried to get you to quit and do something safer. Never resented the long hours and irregular time off. She talked cases with you over the kitchen table, tried to help you work through dead ends, made cookies for the office Christmas party, and she told everyone, everyone how proud she was of you. When it comes right down to it? She died because of something you both believed in.”

She brushes a lock of hair out of the eyes of a memory. “They say things happen for a reason. I've never noticed that was true, myself. I don't think she died because of you. Or because the future needed you. Or because of random bad luck even. She died because some men are evil, and when an evil man was confronted with a good one, he tried to drag you under. And you just became a sadder, kinder, more empathetic version of who you were. Eddie Winter didn't make you who you are. You made you who you are despite Winter. For Jenny.” She smiles, and it's a half-formed thing, wobbly around the edges. “She wouldn't have wanted you to stop doing what you do, being who you are.”

“No,” he whispers. “She wouldn't have. She would have yelled, thrown a pillow at my head, cussed a blue streak if she'd even thought I was considering quitting.”

“You really loved her, boss. And she loved you. I know it because you know it because I know it because you because you you... y-” her knees collapse under her as the street disappears in static for an instant.
“El?” Alarm spikes in his voice, and she leans forward impulsively and kisses him.

“Something’s wrong,” she says. “Can’t get my head riii.. right. Words are... harder.” She grabs him by the shoulders and spins him toward the blackness, toward a distant sign illuminated by a hanging bulb: CIT APPLIED NEUROSCIENCE

“Nicky?" her voice breaks. “I lo... luhhh...”

“I love you,” he says.

She nods helplessly. “Ni... ick? Go.”

“Something’s wrong, I can't leave you, doll, I-”

“NICK RUN,” she screams, and the world... crashes...
down
around

her.

* * * * *


“She's crashed the memory lounger!” barks Amari. “Or the coding has. But she's out now, and disconnected. Deacon, get her out of those wet things. Her temperature is about to drop abruptly. Bundle her up.”

“Nate, don't freak out, but I'm about to get your girlfriend down to her skivvies.” Deacon lifted Ellie out of the lounger with a grunt. Nearly lost beneath the sound was a tiny moan.

He hesitated a moment, and spoke once more into the mic. “Nick? Come home, baby. Come home.”

And then he was at Ellie's side, touching pale, shivering wet skin and trying his best to warm her with blankets, with his touch, with sheer force of will.

* * * * *

The puddle of yellow light from the streetlamp is getting smaller, the world is getting smaller, hotter, and yet Nick’s feet are frozen to the spot. Behind him, a splatter of blood and grey matter, and in front of him, an uncertain future.
The words in the darkness seem to loom over him. CIT alone is enough to make anyone in the Commonwealth itchy between the shoulder blades.

Run.

Come home.

You killed her, sure as if you pulled the trigger yourself.

She loved you for your work, not despite it.

Come home.

Run.

Run.

Run.

Run.

The light has narrowed to just the area around his feet, and with a cry, Nick Valentine leaps.

* * * * *

Something sparks in Nick's body, and again, there is the acrid smell of burning plastic.

A last sigh rattles through the abused synth's body, and the grey form is still.

And with a gasp, Nick Valentine opens his eyes, a new man.
Nick Valentine took a deep breath, and immediately wished he hadn't.

The scent of burning plastic overwhelmed his senses, of sweat, of old cigarettes, of snow and metal. He retched, struggled to turn, and failed, coughing as new limbs responded sluggishly to his commands. In the end, he managed to twist onto his side with the idea that he might breathe a little easier.

Holy hell. He was breathing, not just drawing air to speak or running a fan in his chest to cool processors. The room came into focus and he was struck by how much more vivid the colors were, how much brighter the lights, and he was dizzied by the lack of metadata running in the background of his thoughts. There was no constant reminder of temperature, of water reserves, of...

"Stay with me Ellie, c'mon, just stay awake for a few minutes and get some water in you, okay, baby?" Nate's voice was pitched high with fear, and in his arms, Ellie sagged limply, her hair plastered to her head with sweat. Nate and Deacon had her arms over their shoulders, walking her a little, and while her feet moved, they did so with the coordination of a dropped bowl of Takahashi's noodles.

"El," he managed. His voice was strange and subtly wrong

Deacon was the only one who heard him. The Railroad agent craned his neck to see Nick and broke into a grin. "Valentine!"

"In the flesh," he said. But his pitiful attempt at a joke seemed bitter in his mouth as Deacon worked the other two into turning, and Nick got a better look at them.

Ellie's head lolled with her chin against her chest, her skin pale but for bright spots of red on her cheeks. Someone had stripped her down to her skirt and ancient bra, and even the wrappings on her arms that hid childhood scars had been stripped.

She looked like hell, and Nate looked worse.

There were bloodstains down his shin, but no damage to his jeans, armor on one leg but not the bloody one. That meant he'd armored up after being injured, found his old stuff with Deacon. He stood stiffly. Bandages held a pad of cloth over one eye, and his entire face was a bloody sunset of red, purple, and blue-black. He wore a hodpodge of armor, and Nick's coat, and his one visible eye was dilated in a way that suggested med-x to Nick.

Deacon, of course, looked as though he'd just tumbled out of bed and into a fancy wig moments ago, fresh as anything. He grinned. "Why the long face, Valentine? Everybody's going to be okay. Just need a little doctoring. Nate's done way worse to himself for much dumber reasons." He whipped a scrap of paper out of his pocket, and passed it to the approaching Doctor Amari.

"Carrington sent his notes on whatever's wrong with Nate, and also his regards. I mean, he would've; if he had regards to send to anyone, they would be for you."

"Flattery will get you so very little, Deacon." Nick watched her eyes flick quickly over the notes. "You should have given these to me before," she said softly.

"Eh," said Deacon. "You seemed a little busy."

"He needs surgery. I'm astonished he's still standing."
Nate's scowl became a wince. “Standing right here, as a matter of fact.”

“Take off that armor,” she commanded. “Nick, help Ellie. Deacon, help Nate. We need to get him into surgery.”

“Now?” asked Nate, and ever so briefly, his gaze met Nick's.

“Right now,” said Amari, and there was a brittle tone to her voice. “Unless you plan on losing an eye.”

Deacon disentangled Ellie and Nate, and had her in Nick's arms a moment later. “You heard the good doctor, Nate-o. Time to get knocked out for face surgery. Trust me, it only hurts for a minute.”

“Liar,” whispered Nate, fumbling with Nick's coat.

Deacon took the coat and draped it over Nick's shoulders. “Here, hold onto that for him so he can give it back to you later; it'll be really sweet. Don't screw it up, lovebirds.”

“Take her upstairs if you can, Mr. Valentine,” said Amari.

“Yeah,” he said. “I can-” But she was already focused on Nate, moving from one emergency to the next seamlessly. He wanted to stay, wanted to find a way to make sure both of them were taken care of, wanted desperately to be what both of them needed.

He would only be in the way.

“Nate!” he called, and the other man turned a glassy-eyed stare toward him as Amari injected him with something. “I'll take care of her, ok?”

“Kay,” he said, voice muzzy. There was a slow blink as whatever Amari gave him started to take hold. “I had to give Deacon your bullets, but I kept your gun and coat. I'm sorry.”

“'s fine. You can tell me about it later,” he said.

It was the wrong thing to say. Nate shuddered, and Amari took him by the arm, leading him to a table. Then Ellie swayed against him, and he turned her away.

He walked her to the stairs, trying his best to ignore the charred husk of his body, trying not to look at the eyes, wide, but no longer glowing soft yellow. He tried to shelter her from seeing it, but of course—of course—she did. She heaved sobs, but no tears marred those red cheeks. Was she too exhausted or too dehydrated to cry? Could that even happen?

He lifted her, and was amazed at how light she was, or how strong he was. He couldn't be sure. But he took the stairs quickly, and at the top found Irma sitting and waiting.

“Nick?” she asked, and it was a question with real uncertainty threaded through it.

“It’s me, doll. I hate to cut the chit-chat short, but El needs water and somewhere to lay her head. Help me out?”

She led him to her room. There was no door, but a fragile satin sheet bedecked with bits and bobs sewn to it—rhinestones and sequins, pretty bits of broken jewelry, a silk ribbon in faded peacock blue. She held it open for him, and let the curtain fall behind him as he carried Ellie through. “There's water on the dresser. I'll be nearby; shout if you need anything.”
He didn't reply, instead laying Ellie down in a half-sitting position against an old bolster pillow. “Drink some water, doll,” he said, bringing the bottle up to half-parted lips. “C'mon, El.”

She never opened her eyes, but she drank. Slowly at first, then with desperation. When she finished one, he gave her another. She was halfway through the third when she turned her face away, grimacing. “That's good, sweetheart,” he said, laying her down slowly, carefully. “One last thing, then you can sleep, okay? You need anything? Too hot or too cold?”


Ice ran through his veins.

_They are tangled up in his memory now, Ellie and Jenny. In those last moments, the two women he's loved, truly loved, are one and the same, dying as hands gone numb desperately try to stop the bleeding. She's already dead, but neither of them can quite admit it._


He swallowed, an autonomic function he wasn't quite ready for, then choked and coughed. “Right here, doll. I'm okay. I'm okay.”

Her hand searched for his, and he gave it to her. A little frown crossed over her face as she drifted toward sleep, and she squeezed his thumb. “Nuh,” she said, and tried to roll over, reaching out in her sleep for a man who didn't exist, who had hardly seemed real even when he did.

He draped his coat over her, and she calmed. Eventually, her breathing evened out, and Nick let out a slow breath. He sat down next to the bed and waited for the future to happen.

* * * * *

Time passed.

He had no idea how much, because there was no internal system to let him know anymore. All the usual senses seemed to be there: he could hear better than the real Nick's memories suggested was normal, and see better as well. Had he needed glasses, perhaps just to read? He thought he'd been a bit young for that at nearly forty. He shook his head, willing the thought away. Now wasn't the time to ruminate on what had been. Now was the time to figure out what happened next.

He looked at his hands first – they seemed on the big side, with long fingers. The best pickpocket he'd ever known had had hands like that. The nails were square and blunt, recently trimmed from the feel of them. Third Gen synths had hair that grew. He assumed it would raise questions in the ones who didn't know they were synths if their hair and nails didn't grow. Did they age? He'd have to ask Amari, or maybe Deacon. Why had the Railroad operative even been downstairs?

Something had gone wrong, that was for damn sure. Ellie had to intercede and Nate had needed to go to the Railroad mere days after threatening each and every one of them, Deacon included. Deacon didn't seem to be holding a grudge, but for some reason that made perfect sense to Nick.

Nick took a deep breath (smells: ice, dry rot, hubflower perfume, sweat) and forced his thoughts into some kind of order. Nate had needed something, really needed something, for him to go back
to the Railroad. What did they have that Nate needed?

Nate had given them a few things recently: an abrupt supply of new synths needing to be relocated, a decisive victory over the Institute, the collection of holos he'd downloaded from the computers before he'd blown the Institute to smithereens...

And there was his answer. Some kind of problem, and a slim hope that the holos would have data that could help ease the transfer of data off of a synth, to another, or resolve some other issue he wasn't even considering.

The steady rise and fall of Ellie's chest soothed him, calmed his fears over her health. She still somehow looked both pale and flushed to him, those spots of color on her cheeks only slightly faded with sleep and water.

He turned his hands over and stared at them. They looked... new. There were no callouses, no cracks in the skin, no dirt under the nails or even a torn cuticle. Two flesh and blood hands, more or less. He rubbed his tattered sweater between his fingertips, worrying the fabric, picking the piled lint from the weave.

Carefully, deliberately, he bit the skin beside his thumbnail, and watched a tiny pearl of blood well up.

“Goddamn,” he whispered.

The sheet over the door was pushed aside, and Deacon stepped in. He plopped himself onto the floor across from Nick, crossing his legs. “Nate's pretty much okay,” he said without preamble. “Final count is a broken leg that Carrington basically healed up enough to get him on his feet, a few busted ribs, a concussion, broken face (the zygomatic, which sounds like a pre-war kitchen gadget to me), and—” Deacon hesitated. “Okay. The eye is not looking great, to be honest. Amari says he's gonna keep it, but he'll likely have somewhere between reduced and no vision in it. Which sucks, but I'm going to get him a fancy new eye patch to wear, and that would cheer me right up.”

He stared at Deacon, trying to make some sense of what he was saying.

“Uh, Nick? Just a friendly reminder, but breathing is no longer optional for you, bud.”

Nick sucked in a quick breath, and forced himself to release it again. “He was just fine this morning, Deacon.”

“Yeah, I know: Mondays'll take it out of you for sure.” He sighed. “Look, I know the transfer procedure isn't perfect, and I'm sure Doc told you that, going in. So you had a known risk: maybe you die. But in that scenario, Nate and Ellie still had each other, right? But they took it on the chin for you, and you look pretty freaked out by that. My advice? Be thankful. They did for you what you would do for them in a heartbeat. Thank them, help 'em get better, but for fuck's sake don't wallow in misery over the whole thing. Don't moan and cry and bitch about how they weren't supposed to get hurt. Just be grateful. Yeah?”

“...Yeah,” said Nick. “Okay.” He filled his lungs slowly, deliberately.

“And, look, Nate is out of surgery, Ellie's catching up her beauty sleep, and they're both on the mend. Everybody lived. The Commonwealth doesn't write happy endings for folks all that often. Go back to Diamond City, do your detective thing, and be disgustingly happy together.”

“After the case,” said Nick. “Otherwise our trail could go cold.”
Brows rose behind the glasses. “Case?” said Deacon.

“Damn,” rasped Nick. “Nate didn't tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“I need to talk to Amari for specifics. But your caretakers are going missing, presumably with their charges.” He watched Deacon's perfectly still face. “You didn't know.”

Deacon reached up to the dresser and pulled down the half-empty bottle of water, and passed it to Nick. “Sure I knew. I was waiting to see what your plans were. And on behalf of the Railroad? We appreciate all the help, especially considering Nate isn't exactly our biggest fan right now. Hey. Have you had anything to drink yet?”

Liar, thought Nick. Aloud, he said, “Nah. Been a little preoccupied.”

“Humor me, man. Take a sip. Fancy Gen 3 bodies still need food, water, and sleep—just not as much as regular humans.”

He twisted the cap off the bottle, and swallowed once to remind himself how before the water even touched his lips.

Chapped lips. Dry throat. And the water soothed that away, hit his tongue clean, fresh, and cold, and the slightest bit sweet. “Oh God,” he gasped, then tipped the bottle back and drank again. It was good.

“You drank in your old body,” said Deacon. “What gives with the blissed-out look?” But there was the barest touch of a smile on his lips.

“Not like this,” said Nick. He tried to take smaller sips, tried to make it last longer, but the bottle was empty before he knew it. “Wasn't the same. This tastes like...”

“Life?” suggested Deacon.

“You sounded like yourself just then, Valentine. Welcome back, detective.” He rummaged in his bag and extracted Nick's hat. “We left the hat in Ellie's lounger. Figured it'd be a little something solid to hold onto, yeah?” The smile withered in an instant, a dizzying change.

“So I've told you all the good news. Here's the bad: Someone double-dosed Nate with Med-x back before I got to him. Amari had to give him two more doses to keep him under for surgery.”

“Shit,” breathed Nick. “How long does she think...?”

“Well, you've basically got two options now that his body's acclimated to it. Keep giving him half-doses and deal with a crabby, but mostly functional Nate for the duration of the case, then get him clean once things die down. Or, I guess you can help him go cold turkey and deal with a shaking, jonesing wreck for the next few days until he detoxes. Doc doesn't have any Addictol. She sent somebody for Daisy's last dose of it a few days ago, too. Basically? In this town of addicts and ne'er-do-wells nobody's going to want to give up a dose of the stuff even if they've got one squirreled away. Not even for Nate.”

“Hancock?” he asked, without much hope.
“Nah. I asked Fahrenheit first, actually. She said nobody in the Mayor's crew is stowing a dose. Stuff's valuable. More of a Diamond City kind of purchase. If your case leads back there, or even up to Sanctuary, odds are, someone's going to be able to help. Also, the further you get away from Goodneighbor, the better the odds that someone would want to help.”

“Not a fan of the town, huh?” Absent-mindedly, he patted where his pockets would been if he'd been wearing his coat. He swore under his breath as Deacon snickered.

“Needing a fix so soon, Val? I guess you can take the man out of the synth... no, that won't work. You can take the man out of his own time, but... fuck it. Want me to see if I can rustle up some for you?”

“I'm thinking of quitting,” he said, and Deacon laughed at him again.

“Liar,” said the agent, climbing to his feet. “Oof. I'm too old for sitting on the floor for long.”

“Yeah? How old is that, exactly?” he asked, rummaging through the pockets of his coat.

“One hundred and twelve,” said the agent. “Plus or minus a few birthdays I'm forgetting. You see, I had this crazy scientist experiment on me when I was younger. Twisted up my DNA but good. She was dynamite in the sack, though, so what can I say?”

“Fulla shit,” said Nick.

His rueful smile lasted as long as it took the satin curtain to stop swinging as Deacon left.

And the room was silent.

* * * * *

Cigarette smoke seeped into her dreams before she was quite awake, a smell that was all Nick to Ellie. He was trying to tell her something, trying to whisper in her ear, but the smoke made her cough so hard that she couldn't hear him. He was hot against her, yellow eyes casting a glow against his skin as he leaned back in. Smoke poured from his open mouth, and the edges of his lips caught, glowing embers burning through his skin like it was ancient paper.

“Doll?” he asked, smoke pouring from his mouth, the golden eyes going slowly dark as he burned away to nothing.

She woke, of course, with a jerk and a gasp. And of course, there was a hand on her shoulder, and of course the hand belonged to the last person in the world she should have jerked away from.

A flash of uncertainty appeared on Nick's face, and was gone. That was new: his face, before, had never handled micro-expressions well. He'd smiled in a slow, deliberate way, as though the motion took effort, and she'd treasured the moments that much more for that.

“Doll?” he asked.

“Sorry,” she said. “Nightmare.”

A guarded quality in his expression faded, and he reached out to smooth her hair back from her face. “How d'ya feel, El?”
“Hung over?” she said. “Yeah. Hung over.”

“Dehydration,” he told her.

Silence hung between them, awkwardness growing in a place there had never been room for it to find purchase before. “Uh,” she said. “How do you, uh. You know. Feel?”

“Dunno,” he said, scratching the back of his head. “Not really sure what normal is, so... okay, I guess? Nothing hurts.”

“Good,” she said. “Good. Um.”

“Yeah,” he said. His voice wasn't too off, she decided. So much of what gave it distinctiveness was the cadence, the accent, and the gentle growly quality. They came through pretty well.

“Can I-?” she asked, reaching out to touch his hair.

“Hm? Oh. Sure,” he said, ducking his head down for her.

She touched the brown curls, and they were surprisingly soft against her fingertips. She wasn't sure what she'd expected. The texture of a cheap wig, maybe? She tugged one gently and released it, letting it spoing back into place. She huffed a tiny laugh. “They're cute,” she said.

“Glad you like it,” he said. “I hadn't really-” He ran his hands through his hair, and ever so briefly, an expression of wonder flickered over his features.

“Is it too weird?” she asked abruptly.

“It's-” he hesitated. “I dunno, doll. I can't really answer that yet. There's a lot to think over, a lot to figure out. I s'pose I'll work it out as we go, won't I?”

“Here,” she said, and took his right hand hers. She raised his knuckles to her lips, and breathed against them gently, then pressed her lips to his fingers, and was gratified when he shivered at her touch.

“You both could have died,” he said, and his voice was choked. “For me. For an old synth. And I-”

“You could have been an old synth or a ghoul or whatever the hell else, and I would love you just as much, Nick, you know-” she said hotly, but he shook his head and squeezed her hand.

“What I'm trying to say isn't that you shouldn't have,” he said. “What I'm saying is that... that I'm humbled. At how much you both love me. It makes a fella feel... hell. I don't have the words for how I feel. Somewhere between terrified and loved. If that makes sense.”

“Nick,” she said softly. Her eyes met his. “You have little gold flecks in your irises,” she said suddenly.

“Doll,” he said. “That's a damn sweet thing to say.” And for just a moment, he looked happier than she thought she'd ever quite seen him. But maybe it was just the increased capacity for expression, she decided.
Then his face fell. “We gotta talk about Nate.”

* * * * *

Nate didn't so much regain consciousness as he swam upward, through murky depths, toward a distant sun shimmering on the surface of the water. When he broke the surface, waves and undertow brought him down again, dragging him back under, taking the little bit of clarity and air he'd fought for.

The lights of the Memory Den came into focus slowly, three fuzzy lights resolving into one. Somewhere, a fan hummed. There was a soft thwip sound from time to time. And beyond that, nothing to grab onto. He felt a vague sense of surprise that he remembered where he was, that he didn't confuse it with waking up to Grace's tender mercy. He didn't confuse it with a week of recuperation with the Railroad where nothing made sense, and new memories never took form, and slowly, slowly, bitter rage built toward a dizzying crescendo.

But where was--?

There was a soft scrape of a chair against the floor, and whispers. “-awake. Let's go check-” Padded footsteps. Heavy eyelids that he hadn't realized were closed opened again, and above him loomed an unfamiliar face. Hazel eyes with the beginnings of crow's feet at the corner. A slightly too-wide mouth set off by a strong jaw. Brown curly hair, and skin that was somewhere between brown and tan.

He closed his eyes tightly, and tears formed. “Nick?” he asked.

“Right here, doll,” said an almost-familiar voice.

Ellie appeared just by Nick's shoulder. “We're both here, hon.”

“You're okay.” His voice surprised him with how weak and raspy it was. His whole face hurt, and it was worse when he spoke. But he said it again. “You're okay, you're okay.”

“We're both okay,” said Ellie. “You did it.”

“I'm a goddamn hero, you know,” he whispered.

Then cried like a newborn baby.

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